

Russia Seeks Closer Cooperation with Iran

Yaron Gamburg and Arkady Mil-Man | No. 1913 | November 11, 2024

Frequent discussions in recent weeks between senior Russian and Iranian officials indicate a tightening of strategic ties between the two countries. From Russia's perspective, the war in Ukraine and the military confrontations involving Israel represent interconnected elements in military, economic, and diplomatic spheres. Thus, Russia's reliance on Iranian arms supplies amid its prolonged war in Ukraine underscores its attentiveness to Iran's military and strategic needs. At the same time, the extent of Russian support for Iran directly depends on the level of American involvement in Israel's conflict with Iran and its proxies.

In recent weeks, formal contacts between senior Russian and Iranian officials have increased. Russian National Security Council Secretary and former Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Tehran on September 18, where he met with his Iranian counterpart and President Masoud Pezeshkian—marking his second visit in two months. On September 30, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin visited the Iranian capital and met with several senior officials, including President Pezeshkian. Russian President Vladimir Putin was scheduled to meet with Iran's president at the end of October during a BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia (Iran joined BRICS in early 2024), but their first official meeting was moved up to October 11 at an international forum in Turkmenistan honoring a local poet. On October 23, during the BRICS summit, Putin met Pezeshkian again.

These discussions reflect Russia's desire to accelerate its rapprochement with Iran, emphasizing military and strategic cooperation, as shared interests currently overshadow past grievances between the countries. In the background, Russia is concerned about Pezeshkian's intentions to negotiate a new nuclear agreement with the West and secure the removal of sanctions on Iran. Russia aims to frame this upgraded relationship through a new "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" agreement, likely to be signed soon after two years of discussions. A sign of this development is a presidential decree issued by Putin on September 18, instructing the Russian Foreign Ministry to promote the signing of the agreement at the highest level. Most details of the agreement are still unknown to the public, but Russian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Andrey Rudenko has already called it a "historic agreement." During the October 23 meeting, Putin and Pezeshkian reiterated their willingness to advance the signing of the agreement as soon as possible. There are likely similarities between the Russian–Iranian agreement and the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" agreement signed between Russia and North Korea in June 2024, under

which the two countries committed to providing military assistance to one another in the event of aggression against them.

Even without the emerging agreement, the scope of the strategic partnership between Russia and Iran today is unprecedented and should cause deep concern in both Western capitals and Jerusalem. The strengthening of security ties between the two countries, including its expansion into new areas, Iran's role as a significant arms supplier to Russia, and the promotion of the strategic "North–South Transport Corridor" project all indicate a [shift in the balance of relations](#) between the countries, moving from asymmetric (with Russia in a senior partner position) to a more equal and symmetrical relationship.

For Russia, the main reason for enhancing military cooperation with Iran is the challenges faced by the Russian military on the Ukrainian front. At the forefront of Iranian assistance has been the supply of an estimated 8,000 drones to the Russian army. Iran has also helped establish an independent drone manufacturing plant in Yelabuga, Russia. Media reports indicate that due to a shortage of local workers, Russia has recently been recruiting young female workers from African countries, who are reportedly employed in exploitative conditions at this plant.

In September of this year, another troubling development was reported: the transfer of hundreds of short-range ballistic missiles from Iran to Russia. After US Secretary of State Antony Blinken accused Iran of transferring these missiles to Russia, four countries—the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and France—announced new sanctions against Iran, including against the national airline Iran Air, which was responsible for transporting the missiles to Russia. Furthermore, Iran has supplied Russia with large quantities of ammunition and munitions, including artillery shells, anti-tank missiles, firearms, mortars, and glide bombs.

Russia's increasing reliance on Iranian assistance also arises from the need to reduce the costs of the war in Ukraine by using simpler systems, particularly Iranian drones. Additionally, the supply of short-range Iranian ballistic missiles helps address Russia's shortage of this type of weaponry. In Russia's race to secure resources (both material and human) to sustain its war machine in Ukraine, Iran is playing an increasingly important role, which explains Moscow's willingness to heed the requests of its Iranian ally.

Regarding Russian assistance to Iran, several steps or actions are currently in various stages of implementation. Iran seeks advanced Russian weapons, particularly air defense systems and fighter jets. For five years, Iran has been attempting to obtain Russian consent for the supply of the advanced S-400 air defense system. About two months ago, reports—although not yet confirmed—indicated the beginning of the [supply of components](#) for advanced Russian air defense systems. The issue of

supplying SU-35 fighter jets remains unclear, but training for Iranian pilots is progressing in both Russia and Iran, using YAK-130 training aircraft supplied to Tehran last year. While Iran is still waiting for Russia to fulfill its promises regarding missile defense systems and fighter jets, Russian support is already evident in advancing Iran's capabilities in electronic warfare, ballistic missile technologies, and space cooperation.

Regarding nuclear cooperation, frequent contacts continue between the nuclear agencies of both countries. The [involvement of Iranian scientists](#) in projects at the Kurchatov Institute of Atomic Energy raises suspicions about potential Russian assistance in this field. Russian experts widely believe that the Russian government does not want a nuclear-armed Iran and will not assist in advancing Iran's nuclear program. At the same time, Russia's current behavior suggests a willingness to cooperate with Iran on this matter and even to support it in increasing its nuclear threshold status, along with diplomatic support for recognition of Iran's status in this regard, including in discussions with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). From the Kremlin's perspective, this policy could bolster Russia's influence over Iran's nuclear program while also increasing the ambiguity surrounding the program as an additional means of pressuring the West, in alignment with President Putin's strategy.

Russian support also extends to Iran's proxies in the region—Hezbollah and the Houthis. Since 2022, Russia has maintained regular intelligence exchanges with Hezbollah and supplied the group with anti-ship missiles. After the events of October 7 and the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas, this cooperation intensified. US media reported in November 2023 that the Wagner Group, operating on behalf of the Kremlin in Syria, was expected to supply Hezbollah with air defense systems, although it is unclear if this plan was implemented. According to Iranian media, an Israeli air force base at Mount Meron was attacked with a Russian-made anti-tank missile, reportedly supplied to Hezbollah by Iran and Syria. Furthermore, amid Israeli airstrikes in Syria, the [Khmeimim air base](#) has become a hub for transferring Iranian weapons to Syria and Lebanon. Since the start of the war in Lebanon (Operation Northern Arrows) on September 19, 2024, the IDF has discovered large quantities of modern Russian weapons in Hezbollah's tunnels. Meanwhile, the [Houthis have received support](#) from Russian GRU (military intelligence) advisers, and Russia is reportedly interested in supplying them with anti-ship missiles. In early October, reports surfaced of a missile transfer deal brokered by Viktor Bout, a Russian citizen released from an American prison in a US–Russia prisoner swap. According to an October 24 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, Russia provided satellite images to Houthi rebels through members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards stationed in Yemen. The Houthis used this information for missile and drone attacks against Western ships in the Red Sea.

While waiting for Israel's response to the Iranian missile strike against it on October 1, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov issued a stern warning to Israel on October 17, advising it not to consider, even hypothetically, an attack on Iran's nuclear sites. Meanwhile, on October 18, President Putin expressed a willingness to mediate between Iran and Israel to "find compromises . . . and eventually halt the ongoing exchange of blows." These statements reflect Russia's desire to protect its ally from Israeli attacks, amid coordination between the Israeli government and the American administration. From Russia's perspective, damage to Iran and its proxies is tolerable as long as it remains limited and does not trigger a regional war or destabilize the Ayatollah regime. Following Israel's strike on Iran on the night of October 26, [the Russian Foreign Ministry responded](#), stating, "Russia calls on all parties to exercise restraint and prevent developments according to a catastrophic scenario."

Nearly two years and eight months since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and a year since Israel's war in Gaza began, both wars represent, from Russia's perspective, a set of interlinked dynamics in the military, economic, and diplomatic spheres. The war in Ukraine has intensified the confrontation between Russia and the West, driving Russia to strengthen ties with countries that share its animosity toward the West, particularly Iran and North Korea. Both trends—the distancing of Russia from Israel and its growing closeness to Iran—have been reinforced by the war in Ukraine and the urgent needs of the Russian military to sustain it. Furthermore, the flare-up in the Middle East, where Israel, a US ally, is increasingly entangled in a prolonged war of attrition, aligns with Russia's interest in diverting American and European resources away from the Ukrainian theater. Thus, unless an extreme development changes this situation, Russia is likely to continue supporting Iran and its proxies while benefiting from them. The level and extent of this support depend directly on the degree of US involvement in the war between Israel and Iran and its proxies—the greater the American involvement, the more Russia is expected to increase its involvement.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg