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Iran–Russia relations
and their impact on European
and international security

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Russia

A map of the Middle East region. The landmasses are shown in light gray with white outlines for country borders. The sea is a light blue. Three countries are highlighted: Russia is a dark blue area at the top; Iran is a large pink area in the center; and Israel is a small teal area on the left. The word 'Russia' is written in white on the dark blue area. The word 'Iran' is written in white on the pink area. The word 'Israel' is written in white on the teal area.

Israel

Iran

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union. It seeks to examine developments in their relations, including the advantages and challenges they face. Based on this analysis, the implications of the newly enhanced relations between Iran and Russia since Russia began its war against Ukraine will be discussed. The analysts of this paper recommend a series of measures to address this challenge, including deepening intelligence sharing for better awareness of strategic moves by Iran and Russia, investing in technology to counter advanced Russian and Iranian unmanned capabilities, and addressing propaganda systems in cyberspace.

Iran's military support of Moscow is a direct result of the identity of the current regime in Iran and their joint decision to respond to Western sanctions imposed on both countries, leading to closer relations between them. However, the cooperation between these two states is not just tactical. Even if it reflects international diplomatic circumstances that brought them closer together, it is a strategic choice by the parties to significantly strengthen their relations. This development substantially improves the military force buildup and security capabilities of both states and, most importantly, poses an increased security threat to Israel, Germany, and all of Europe.

Germany and Israel naturally have different perspectives on these two states. Germany sees Russia's invasion of Ukraine as its primary threat due to its military implications for NATO member states, the severe refugee problem it created in Europe, the impact on the economies of European states, particularly in energy and food, and, above all, the concern that Putin may decide to use nuclear weapons in a worst-case scenario. Israel, in contrast, sees Iran as the primary threat to its national security and views its advanced nuclear program as a potential existential threat. At the same time, Israel officially maintains security relations with Moscow, primarily to coordinate Israel Air Force aerial activity in Syrian airspace.

The special link created between Moscow and Tehran in the context of the war in Ukraine creates new threats and common interests between Israel and Germany. The agreement signed between Israel and Germany for the sale of the Arrow-3 system indicates the willingness of the two states to enhance security cooperation, given the new threats that have recently emerged, with the Iranian–Russian axis being the most significant.

2. The History of Iran–Russia Relations

The relations between Iran and Russia/the Soviet Union have fluctuated over the years, which can be attributed to the different character of the regimes and their exploitation of geopolitical opportunities, which is particularly true for Russia and its predecessor, the Soviet Union.

The tense relations between the Russian and Persian Empires in the 19th century as well as the Soviet Union's invasion of northern Iran during the Second World War are distant historical memories, yet they still linger in the minds of the Iranian leadership until today. During the time of the Shah, relations continued to be tense, primarily due to his close alliance with the United States. The Shah purchased advanced weapons systems from the United States¹ and allowed them to operate within Iran to track developments in the Soviet Union. With the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, its leaders declared a foreign policy of “neither East, nor West”² as a sign of Iran's desire to maintain independence in all aspects of foreign relations.

For its part, the Soviet Union had an ambivalent attitude to the Islamic Republic. It was concerned about the establishment of a fundamentalist Islamic religious state on its borders, which could negatively influence its stability, due to its sizable Muslim minority, particularly in its “Islamic” republics. These concerns only increased following the vicious elimination of the Iranian Communist Party after the revolution.

In contrast, the Soviet Union saw the removal of the American presence from Iran and the humiliation Washington experienced with the takeover of the American Embassy and the holding of diplomats hostage as positive developments. The expulsion of the Shah, America's ally, and the absence of US military experts and advisers in Iran, who had previously focused on gathering intelligence information about Russia, were important achievements for Moscow. These served as a counterweight to the other negative consequences of the Iranian revolution.

During the early years of the Islamic Republic, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan (1979–1989) and conducted a prolonged war against the mujahideen there, Iran supported and supplied arms to the mujahideen, primarily in the Herat Province, which has a sizable Shiite minority, and took in many Afghan refugees.³ At the same time, during the years of the Iran–Iraq War, despite Soviet claims of neutrality, Moscow continued to supply Iraq with weapons in accordance with the treaty of friendship between the two states.

Alongside distant historical memories, the Iranians were also aware of Russia's conduct against them when it supported

imposing Security Council sanctions on Tehran regarding its nuclear program. They were also deeply disappointed by the numerous delays in the supplying of the S-300 aerial defense system because of pressure exerted by Jerusalem and Washington.⁴ Likewise, Iran was frustrated by Russia's failure to limit Israel's actions in Syria, particularly concerning the bombing of Iranian arms delivered to Syria and Lebanon in the “campaign between the wars.” Iran strongly felt that Russia viewed its relations with Iran as a means of pressuring the West to advance critical Russian interests. From the Iranian perspective, all these factors created a glass ceiling that limited Iran's willingness to deepen its relations with Russia.

Three main developments paved the way for improved relations between the two states. The first was the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The second was the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which led to the establishment of independent states in Central Asia and the Caucasus, creating a “barrier zone” between Iran and Russia and eliminating their common land border. The third was Iran's acute need for advanced weaponry that it was unable to procure from the West, leading Tehran to appeal to Russia. Russia's economy was in poor shape and its weapons industry cash-strapped, so the Kremlin was happy to meet Tehran's needs.⁵ Russia's fading concerns about Iran's trying to “export the revolution” to the Muslim republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus also contributed to the countries drawing closer. Even the Russian regime's harsh war in Chechnya did not prevent Iran from helping Russia gain observer status in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in 2005.⁶

The person who promoted Iranian–Russian relations the most was President Putin himself. In 2001 he signed a cooperation agreement with Iran's leader, Khamenei, under which Russia accelerated its sales of military equipment to Iran. The decision of German companies to depart the nuclear reactor project at Bushehr⁷ opened the door for the entry of the Russian company, Rosatom, to that project⁸, which became operational in 2010, and today Russia is advancing the construction of two additional units.

¹ US military involvement. (1979). *Race & Class*, 21(1), 91–96. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/030639687902100109>

² “Khomeini: ‘We Shall Confront the World with Our Ideology,’” *Middle East Report 88* (June 1980).

³ The U.S. and Iran in Afghanistan: Policy Gone Awry. (2008). *Audit of the Conventional Wisdom*, 8-15. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/93911/Audit_10_08_Rubin.pdf

⁴ Russia Completes S-300 Delivery to Iran. (2016). *Arms Control Association*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2016-11/news-briefs/russia-completes-s-300-delivery-iran>

⁵ Russia-Iran Arms Trade. 2006. *Council on Foreign Relations, Backgrounder*. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russia-iran-arms-trade>

⁶ Analysis of Russia's Status as an Observer in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. 2020. *International Conference Proceedings*. https://www.academia.edu/45205792/Analysis_of_Russias_Status_as_an_Observer_in_the_Organisation_of_Islamic_Cooperation

⁷ Iran's New Nuclear Power Plant to be Closely Monitored. 2010. *Voice of America News, Middle East*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/irans-new-nuclear-power-plant-to-be-closely-monitored-106463938/175435.html>

⁸ Russian Arms and Technology Transfers to Iran: Policy Challenges for the United States. 2001. *Arms Control*

⁸ Russian Arms and Technology Transfers to Iran: Policy Challenges for the United States. 2001. *Arms Control Association*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2001-03/iran-nuclear-briefs/russian-arms-technology-transfers-iranpolicy-challenges-united>

3. A New Phase in Relations—Military Cooperation in Combat in Syria

In the context of extensive cooperation over many years, the two states entered a new phase of military cooperation, with the aim of supporting Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, in the civil war and the fight against ISIS. Beginning in 2015, after a series of defeats raised concerns in Russia and Iran that Assad could lose the war, the two states made a strategic decision to save his regime through unprecedented military cooperation.⁹ The decision was made following a visit by the Quds Force commander to Moscow, where he expressed concerns about the collapse of the Assad regime.

At the center of the collaboration between the two states in Syria was Russian aerial support, along with Iranian and Hezbollah forces working with the Wagner Group to reclaim territories from the Syrian rebels and restore control to the Syrian Army. This cooperation significantly changed the dynamics on the battlefield, halted the advances of the rebel groups led by ISIS, and strengthened Assad's control in key regions. It ultimately prevented the complete collapse of Assad's regime and allowed him to maintain power in Syria.

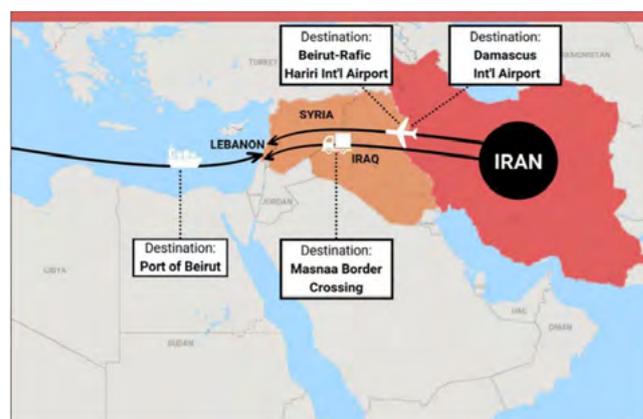
Additionally, Assad's continued rule in Syria served the critical security interests of both Russia and Iran. Russia maintained and expanded its access to the Mediterranean Sea via the naval base at Tartus, while Iran built a military stronghold in Syria, to facilitate the transfer of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah in Lebanon and created a direct threat to Israel through the military buildup and the involvement of Shiite militias it brought to Syria, as well as the formation of local militias¹⁰.

However, despite their cooperation in Syria, Russia and Iran faced significant disagreements on various issues. First and foremost was the freedom Russia granted Israel to attack Iranian weaponry and infrastructure targets in Syria. The future of Syria also proved contentious, as both Iran and Russia sought to increase their economic influence in the country and sometimes competed over its resources. Initially, Iran was upset about not being included in the Astana meetings discussing Syria's political future. The talks started in 2017, with the Russian government trying to broker a deal between the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition. After drawing closer to Moscow, Iran's inclusion in the Forum resolved this issue.

The unique and unprecedented military relationship between Russia and Iran in the Syrian context did not emerge out of nowhere. The two states share mutual interests, especially their hostility toward the West, particularly the United States, which has provided a platform for strengthening their strategic relations. Despite occasional disputes, their shared interests outweigh their differences. Their cooperation in Syria

undoubtedly advanced their bilateral relations and the bonds between their security establishments, laying the groundwork for the subsequent events during Russia's war in Ukraine over the past two years.

Iran's methods to transfer weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon



Source: Map depicted in news reporting YNet news on Israel's ambassador speaking to the United Nations. Danny Dannon showed this map at a Security Council's meeting in July 2019

3.1. Strategic Interests

In the context of the extensive military and security cooperation between Russia and Iran, which has been ongoing since the start of the war in Ukraine, it is important to note that their shared interests extend beyond the conflict. While the war has been a determining factor in shaping their security relations, their cooperation has broader objectives.

For example, Russia's Maritime Doctrine, published in July 2022¹¹, explicitly mentions Iran in relation to Russia's priorities in the Indian Ocean and its ambition to become a "great maritime power." The doctrine identifies Iran, along with India, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia as key states with which Russia needs to develop relations to fulfill its maritime goals. The doctrine explicitly refers to Russia's objective of gaining maritime status in the Persian Gulf. It is worth noting that Russia, Iran, and China have also conducted joint naval exercises in recent years to highlight their shared interests in the region and Iran's desire to align with a coalition of global powers.

Moreover, Russia's new Maritime Doctrine reaffirms the special status of Syria in its plans to establish itself as a great maritime power. Therefore, cooperating with Iran is crucial in

⁹ What has Russia gained from five years of fighting in Syria? 2020. *Al Jazeera, Features*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/10/1/what-has-russia-gained-from-five-years-of-fighting-in-syria>

¹⁰ Israel's ambassador to U.N. says Iran arms Hezbollah through 'civilian channels'. 2019. *Yetnet news*. <https://www.yetnetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5556202,00.html>

¹¹ 2022 Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation translated and analyzed by the US Naval War College: <https://usnwc.edu/Research-and-Wargaming/Research-Centers/Russia-Maritime-Studies-Institute>

maintaining the Assad regime. Recent statements from Russian and Iranian leaders opposing the presence of American forces in eastern Syria may also indicate closer cooperation between Moscow and Tehran against US troops in Syria. The Pentagon has publicly accused Russia and Iran of joint efforts to counter the US presence in northeastern Syria¹².

In the Iranian political sphere, a series of domestic changes that preceded the war in Ukraine paved the way for deepening cooperation with Russia. This includes the decision by the Supreme Leader Khamenei to facilitate the election of Ebrahim Raisi as the current president, as well as the strengthening of the status of the Revolutionary Guards. Over the years, the Revolutionary Guards have maintained a relationship with the Russian military establishment, and it is no coincidence that Suleimani, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, traveled to Moscow to meet with President Putin, to seek his assistance in preserving the Syrian president's rule.¹³ The strategic choice defined by President Raisi as "Look East" expressed a decision made by Iran's senior leadership and reflected the skepticism that Iran could advance relations with West, particularly in terms of economic ties.

It is therefore not surprising that from the outset of the campaign in Ukraine, Iran officially supported Russia's opposition to NATO's expansion, which was one of Russia's pretexts for its attack on Ukraine. The Iranian supreme leader reiterated this support during President Putin's visit to Iran in July 2022¹⁴ (which was Putin's first visit outside of the former Soviet republics since the Russian invasion of Ukraine). In addition, Western sanctions imposed on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine put the two states "in the same camp" of those suffering from the impact of sanctions and created an important basis for economic cooperation between them.

Iran has faced a long line of sanctions for many years and has developed expertise in bypassing them through shell companies it established, as well as using dual-purpose goods. Many commercial delegations traveled back and forth between the states when Russia sought Iranian guidance on how to cope with sanctions.¹⁵ The two states also decided to establish a Russian bank in Iran¹⁶, and to use their national currencies in lieu of the dollar. The two states are also "fighting" over the Chinese market, and it appears that Beijing is taking advantage of their positions under sanctions to purchase oil from them at a reduced rate that harms their income.

Whether Iran and Russia will upgrade their relations through a formal document that defines them as "strategic relations," specifically addressing issues such as weapons supplies and perhaps even security guarantees that Iran would seek, remains an open question. It is known that they have discussed such a possibility. The analysts of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) responsible for this paper believe this issue is problematic for Russia, given its strong interests with the Gulf states, which it continues to develop, among other things. The issue will become more significant if Saudi Arabia and the United States establish a defense pact, currently under discussion.¹⁷ On this matter, it is worth mentioning the statement made by the head of Russia's Security Council when his Iranian counterpart visited Moscow on January 24, 2024, according to which the two states had completed the process of formulating a long-term cooperation agreement that would elevate relations between them to a new level.¹⁸

3.2. Military Cooperation since the Beginning of the Russian War against Ukraine

Iran's strategic decision to stand alongside Russia in its war against Ukraine has brought relations between the two states to a new and more significant level over the past two years. Iran has become an essential weapons supplier for Russia in the field of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which Moscow lacked significantly, thereby allowing Russia to continue its war of attrition against Ukraine.

Since the summer of 2022, and at the request of the Russian leadership, Iran has been supplying Moscow with mass-produced, inexpensive UAVs, which have the capability to fly at low altitudes and cover a range of hundreds of kilometers. These are primarily the Shahed-131 or Shahed-136 drones, which have proven effective in Russia's attacks against large targets such as energy infrastructure. Additionally, Russia is in the process of establishing, with the support of Iran, its own UAV factory, with plans to manufacture at least 6,000 drones a year in the coming years.¹⁹ This is all in addition to the supply of ammunition, artillery shells, and, in the future, probably medium range missiles. Most of the supply shipments are carried out through governmental airlines and some via the Caspian Sea. The Shahed drones fill a critical gap for Russia, which cannot manufacture inexpensive combat drones, despite its efforts to develop a local drone industry.

¹² Iran, Russia, and the Syrian Regime are coordinating to expel US forces from Syria. 2023. *ISW Press, Institute for the Study of War, Critical Threats Project, American Enterprise Institute*. <https://understandingwar.org/background/iran-russia-and-syrian-regime-are-coordinating-expel-us-forces-syria>

¹³ Qassem Soleimani: Moscow's Syria Decision – Myth and Reality. 2020. *Institute for National Strategic Studies National Defense University*. <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2074132/qassem-soleimani-moscows-syria-decision-myth-and-reality/>

¹⁴ Putin to visit Tehran amid Iranian drone acquisition allegations. 2022. *Euronews*. <https://www.euronews.com/2022/07/12/putin-to-visit-tehran-amid-iranian-drone-acquisition-allegations>

¹⁵ Developing Bad Habits. What Russia Might Learn from Iran's Sanctions Evasion. *RUSI Occasional Paper, June 2023. ISSN 2397-0286*. <https://static.rusi.org/developing-bad-habits-what-russia-might-learn-from-irans-sanctions-evasion.pdf>

¹⁶ Russia And Iran Extend Sanction-Busting Trade Ties Using Local Currencies And Banks. 2023. *Forbes, Business*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2023/05/19/russia-and-iran-extend-sanction-busting-trade-ties-using-local-currencies-and-banks/?sh=37020ce06073>

¹⁷ Saudi Arabia pushes for U.S. defence pact ahead of presidential election. 2024. *Reuters, Middle East*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-pushes-us-defence-pact-ahead-presidential-election-2024-02-02/>

¹⁸ Iran and Russia Enter A New Level of Military Cooperation. 2024. *Stimson Commentary, Pivotal Places Middle East & North Africa Program. Middle East Perspectives Project*. <https://www.stimson.org/2024/iran-and-russia-enter-a-new-level-of-military-cooperation/>

¹⁹ Inside the Russian effort to build 6,000 attack drones with Iran's help. Leaked documents show that Moscow is progressing toward its goal of mass-producing UAVs it could use to pummel Ukrainian cities. 2023. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2023/08/17/russia-iran-drone-shahed-alabuga/>

On the issue of ballistic missiles supply, according to several Western sources, Iran is already involved in the delivery of some 400 ballistic missiles from the Fateh-110 family, such as Zolfaghar, capable of short ranges of 300 to 700 kilometers. Iran now feels confident in supplying missiles after the limitations that the Security Council imposed on missile supplies in Resolution 2231 expired in October 2023. Other intelligence indications suggest the delivery of the missiles has not started due to pressure from the US on Iran. In any case these developments have **shifted the balance of power between Russia and Iran, moving from patron and client to a more equal relationship, with Russia becoming increasingly dependent on Iran.**

The past few months have shown that arms flow not only from Iran to Russia, but also in the opposite direction. Developments in relations between Moscow and Tehran indicate that Russia not only pays for the assistance it receives from Iran with money but also by advancing Iran's capabilities in various security fields:

- Arms sales: According to an announcement by the Iranians themselves, Iran is expecting to purchase Sukhoi Su-35 planes soon. Iran is already preparing an underground base for the arrival of the planes and is training its personnel in Russia. Additionally, there are future weapons deals between the two countries on the horizon, including Russia's potential sale of the S-400 aerial defense system to Iran, although this is likely to happen in the longer term, given Russia's own needs for these systems.
- It also **appears that Russia has sent military equipment to Iran that was originally from the United States or NATO and was captured on the battlefield in Ukraine.** According to American sources, **Tehran will try to reverse engineer these systems**, such as the Javelin, an advanced American-made anti-tank missile, either for development or to improve its weapons and/or to learn how to counter American and NATO systems.²⁰ The main reason behind Russia's decision to provide Iran with weapons it seized remains unclear. It could be considered a form of repayment, or a strategy for Russia to gain insight into how to handle such weapons by analyzing their weaknesses. The Iranian military industry has demonstrated its expertise in reverse engineering and manufacturing its own weaponry based on Western arms. In any case, this development enhances Iran's ability to deal with weaponry that Israel may also have.
- **Russian-Iranian cooperation in space may also be advancing significantly, and it should be cause for concern.** Russia has already helped Iran to launch remote-sensing satellites (Khayyam) and has discussed the transfer of additional technologies for planning and manufacturing remote-sensing satellites.²¹ In this manner, Russia is helping Iran narrow the significant gaps in its satellite capabilities.
- It is important to note that Russia and Iran are also developing close relations in areas that were previously considered taboo, as evidenced by their strengthening cooperation on cyber defense. It is true that they already signed a cyber defense pact back in 2015,²² but in the past few years, according to various reports, Russia has committed to sending Tehran advanced cyber tools that will improve its defensive capabilities and allow it to enhance its offensive capabilities. Cooperation between the two countries was visible in a few recent events. For example, an aggressive Iranian cyber operation against Albania²³ also aligned with Russian interests against Albania, which recently began accession talks with the EU. In April 2023, on the Iranian Quds Day (Jerusalem Day), Iran carried out cyberattacks against Israeli websites, while a Russian group carried out parallel activities. Russia has also transferred advanced interception equipment to Iranian intelligence and systems for censoring content on social networks to help Iran address its growing domestic crisis following sustained protests against the regime in various locations across Iran.²⁴
- At the same time, Iran continues to promote negotiations with China and Russia for the purchase of rocket fuel and a chemical component used in the propulsion of ballistic missiles. In general, Russia has significant potential to help Iran expand its missile arsenal, including cruise missiles and missiles with a range of over 10,000 kilometers.
- In the nuclear field as well, analysts of INSS assess that due to the war in Ukraine and the veiled threats by Putin himself to use nuclear weapons, Russia may be less concerned with preventing nuclear proliferation. It is worth noting that Russian assistance to Iran in this area primarily includes diplomatic support for Iran's activities that violates the Iran nuclear deal and its ongoing argument with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) over past violations of its commitments under the Treaty of Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). In this regard, past assessments that considered Russia an opponent of proliferation, should be reexamined, and also within this framework, any Iranian move that involved progress toward achieving nuclear weapons. With the new strategic circumstances, and the de-

²⁰ Iranian engineers working around the clock to reverse engineer Javelin. 2024. *Conflict Field Notes*. <https://www.conflictfieldnotes.com/p/iranian-engineers-working-around>

²¹ Russian rocket successfully puts Iranian satellite into orbit. 2024. *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-iran-satellite-space-launch-vostochny-roskosmos-60e877149748b46a63c597c7e3714be0>

²² Russia-Iran cooperation poses challenges for US cyber strategy, global norms. 2021. *C4ISR Net*. <https://www.c4isrnet.com/thought-leadership/2021/02/08/russia-iran-cooperation-poses-challenges-for-us-cyber-strategy-global-norms/>;

Iran, Russia Agree on Cyber-Defense Cooperation: Official. 2015. *Tasnim News Agency*. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2015/06/13/768309/iran-russia-agree-on-cyber-defense-cooperation-official>

²³ Iranian State Actors Conduct Cyber Operations Against the Government of Albania. 2022. *Cyber Security and Infrastructure Agency, Cybersecurity Advisory*. <https://www.cisa.gov/news-events/cybersecurity-advisories/aa22-264a>

²⁴ Report: Russia Provides Iran With Digital Surveillance Capabilities. 2023. *Iran Wire, Technology*. <https://iranwire.com/en/technology/115074-report-russia-provides-iran-with-digital-surveillance-capabilities/>

veloping relations between the two countries, Moscow's inclusive and accepting positions should be taken into account should Iran decide to advance toward nuclear weapons. There is concern that knowledge and assistance from parties within the Russian nuclear system will reach Iran, perhaps with the Russian regime turning a blind eye.

Closer security cooperation with Russia is a significant accomplishment for Iran. First and foremost, Iran feels that its status in the international community has been elevated by the fact that Russia, a military power, needs Iranian military assistance. Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, even boasted of Iran's military achievements and related to its drone industry as a source of "national pride."

Strategically, **Iran perceives the Russian involvement in Ukraine as part of a larger struggle for a new global order.** A Russian victory in Ukraine would be seen as a defeat for the United States—the "Great Satan" as Tehran refers to it—and such a victory would contribute to Iran's interests. In addition, Iran takes pride in being a country whose arms sales are in high demand, particularly drones, which gained recognition and value through Russia's use of them in the war in Ukraine.

Enhanced relations between Iran and Russia align with Tehran's perception of itself as a regional super-power and a global player. This view is also manifested in Iran's policies in other fields, where only a small number of states worldwide compete, such as space and cyber, and in its increased maritime strength, which led it to send naval vessels into the Atlantic Ocean.²⁵

Russia has supported and assisted Iran in gaining membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and, in January 2024, in BRICS, both regarded as important international diplomatic achievements by Tehran.

3.3. Relations in the Context of the War in Gaza

After Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and despite the atrocities and kidnapping of many civilians, Russia explicitly stood alongside Hamas and refrained from condemning it. According to Putin's narrative, the war between Israel and Hamas is part of Russia's struggle against American global hegemony. He even declared that "on the Ukrainian front the fate of Russia will be decided, the fate of the entire world will be decided and that of the Palestinian people."²⁶ After the war broke out, Russia's relations with Hamas became closer, and Hamas delegations met with senior Russian officials in

Moscow and other locations. A senior Hamas official, Abu Marzouk, said that "Russia is the closest friend of Hamas," and the movement published a thank you letter to Russia and Putin for their support. The Russian senior leadership aspires to play a larger role in the Palestinian arena, and in late February 2024 a gathering of most Palestinian factions was convened in Russia to formulate a common stance.²⁷ Furthermore, Russia promoted several initiatives at the Security Council regarding a ceasefire and the situation in Gaza, while completely ignoring Hamas's crimes against Israel. In one speech, Russia's ambassador to the UN even rejected Israel's right to self-defense.²⁸ Russian support for Hamas is not limited to the diplomatic arena alone, and there are reports of Russian weaponry in Hamas hands, including anti-tank missiles, surface-to-air missiles, and more, which were apparently sent by Iran while Russia turned a blind eye.

Russia's alignment with Iran and its "axis of resistance" in the Middle East is important because they divert the global attention away from the war in Ukraine, as many have claimed. Furthermore, Russia sees the ongoing war with Israel as another way to weaken the status of the United States in the region. Russia has increased its diplomatic support for Hamas and the Houthis in the UN Security Council²⁹, offered military aid to other groups, and allowed greater freedom of action for groups supported by Iran in Syria.

There are even unverified reports that Russia transferred Pantsir aerial defense systems to Hezbollah and increased electronic interference from its Khmeimim base in Syria. Moscow hopes that if the Americans decide to withdraw forces from Iraq and Syria as a result of the attacks they are facing, it will be a major strategic achievement for Russia in the Middle East. And if that does not happen, they hope that the US entanglement will harm President Biden, who is seen as instrumental in providing Western assistance to Ukraine, in the upcoming presidential elections. The bottom line is that support for the Iranian "axis of resistance" in the Middle East serves a common Russian and Iranian interest. First and foremost, this support aims to undermine the American influence in the region, especially its attempt to create a bloc of pro-American Arab Sunni states in which Israel would be integrated. The alignment of interests between Russia and Iran regarding the ongoing war of Iran's proxies reflects a shared understanding of the event's broad geopolitical and strategic implications. It should be considered that both countries have significant interests in preventing a failure of Iran and its proxies, and they are likely to attempt to disrupt any potential "day after" arrangement led by the United States.

Regarding Israel, it should be noted that despite its harsh anti-Israel rhetoric, Russia has not intervened in Israel's attacks

²⁵ Iran promises to send warships to Gulf of Mexico, Atlantic Ocean. Iranian navy Rear Adm. Hossein Khanzadi promised to "wave the flag of our country in the Gulf of Mexico." 2017. *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iran-promises-send-warships-gulf-mexico-atlantic-ocean-n823596>; Iran says its naval vessels have reached the Atlantic for the first time. 2021. *CNN World*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/11/middleeast/iran-navy-atlantic-intl/index.html>

²⁶ Why Putin thinks war with Ukraine is like the Israel-Palestine conflict. 2023. *The Spectator*. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/putin-is-on-a-mission-to-liken-russia-to-palestine/>

²⁷ Hamas, other Palestinian groups stress 'unity' in Moscow. 2024. *Arab News*. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2469401/middle-east>

²⁸ Israel Has No Right to Self-Defense as 'Occupier,' Russia Says. 2023. *The Moscow Times*. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/11/02/israel-has-no-right-to-self-defense-as-occupier-russia-says-a82971>

²⁹ Russia condemns US and UK for 'irresponsible' strikes on Yemen. 2024. *Reuters, World*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-requests-un-security-council-meeting-after-us-britain-strike-yemen-2024-01-12/>

Russia and China strike deal with Houthis to ensure ship safety: Bloomberg. 2024. *Politico EU*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-china-struck-deal-yemen-houthi-rebels-ship-safety/>

in Syria. This stance may reflect Russia's desire to maintain relations with Israel and thereby influence Israeli policy on Ukraine. It may also suggest a concern that Israel's military moves in this important war could harm Russian assets that might impair its activity against Iran and Hezbollah in Syria. In this context, it is interesting to examine how Iranian leaders view these relations and the interests at play. An opinion piece published in the Tehran Times in January 2024 noted that

given the conflictual geopolitics in recent years, Russia should draw closer to Iran—as an independent state with a unique geopolitical situation—to safeguard its interests.³⁰ In practice, **Iran is Russia's only geopolitical breathing space.**

³⁰ Hamas deputy leader al-Arouri martyred in Israeli drone attack on Beirut. 2024. *The Tehran Times*. <https://media.mehrnews.com/d/2024/01/03/0/4801857.pdf?ts=1704229126712>

4. Expectations for the Future

Most experts believe that Iran and Russia will continue and even strengthen their cooperation in the coming years due to their shared interests. The nature of their relations and the level of commitment, particularly that of Russia to Iran, are the only questions. Some view the relations as a matter of convenience due to the isolation of both states. Supporters of this stance believe that Moscow does not see Tehran as an equal partner like China, and that, because Russia sees the world through the prism of the war in Ukraine and the struggle with the United States, once these circumstances change, Russia's relations with Iran may also change.

In any case, this reality is unlikely to change quickly; therefore, those who hold this view agree that the relations between the two countries will increase in the coming years. The two countries understand that despite their challenges, they are “in the same camp” of Western sanctions and diplomatic isolation from the United States and Europe. Therefore, they need one another and can achieve significant results by strengthening their cooperation. Accordingly, analysts at INSS understand that the cooperation between them is not tactical but rather the result of a strategic decision made by both sides to substantially further their relations.

These developments in the Iran–Russia relations directly affect Iranian conventional force buildup and will contribute to the strengthening of Iran's battlefield capabilities. This ranges from Syria and Lebanon to the Gulf, as well as its ability to defend itself from future attacks on its nuclear facilities. At the same time, this cooperation dramatically improves Russia's UAV and ballistic missile capabilities, which will strengthen Putin's ability to draw out the war, as he himself has stated.

Despite the close relations between Iran and Russia, there are still political disputes between them, such as Russia's surprising support for the United Arab Emirates regarding the sovereignty of the three islands in the Gulf (Greater and Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa)³¹, the struggle between the states on oil sales to China, and their different stances on the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict. Nonetheless, given that the two countries have few options, they find ways to overcome these disputes and promote their wide-ranging and deep mutual interests.

Russia's and Iran's growing interdependence is a significant concern for Israel and Europe. Although the countries are already cooperating in various fields, their cooperation has not yet reached its full potential, especially in the military sphere. As Russia becomes increasingly reliant on Iran, it is likely to provide more assistance to Iran in areas that are highly problematic for Israel and Europe. This will heighten the threat from Iran. Of particular note are the areas of conventional force buildup, Russian support in building hypersonic missiles for Iran, offensive cyber capabilities, cooperation in space, and more. This is in addition to their enhanced diplomatic coordination and expanded economic cooperation aimed at evading Western sanctions and strengthening their geopolitical standing.

Moreover, greater cooperation between Iran and Russia in the campaign in Ukraine will cause Iran to send additional weaponry, such as precision-guided missiles and additional types of drones, for Russian use in Ukraine. Iranian assistance in enhancing Russian capabilities to manufacture such weapons themselves may dramatically increase Russia's military capacity in the campaign in Ukraine, thus endangering European interests in this context.

Given the assessment of this paper that Russia and Iran are likely to strengthen their relations in the future, it is critical for Germany and Israel to develop a shared working plan aimed at weakening their relations and diminishing their joint power. In this context, it is important to note that weakening one can affect the other. Analysts at INSS assess that Iran is the weaker party in this relationship, as its economic situation is worse and domestic tensions between the public and the regime are extremely high.

The first stage should be raising awareness among European states about the multifaceted threat posed by Iran. This extends beyond the context of the campaign in Ukraine and Iran's contribution to Russia's military capability. Iran continues to undermine stability in Europe through terrorist activities that target not only Jewish and Israeli interests but also Iranian exiles suspected of supporting the Iranian opposition, including journalists residing outside of Iran. Additionally, Iran operates cultural centers in Europe that serve as loci of activity against governments and engages in influence and public opinion operations via social media networks.

³¹ Russia Upsets Iran Over UAE Persian Gulf Islands Stance. 2023. *Middle East Briefing*. <https://www.middleeastbriefing.com/news/russia-upsets-iran-over-uae-persian-gulf-islands-stance/>

5. Looking Ahead – conclusion and recommendations

It is necessary to adopt an assertive approach to changing the strategic direction that Russia and Iran are heading toward, as both countries are contributing to the destabilization of Europe and the Middle East—Iran, through its military buildup and its militia proxies, and Russia, through its political power in the Security Council and willingness to challenge NATO and Europe.

The analysts of this paper suggest to:

- Deepen military and intelligence cooperation between Israel and Germany to counterbalance the level of cooperation between Tehran and Moscow
- Develop mutual technological capabilities to undermine any advancements resulting from Russian–Iranian military cooperation. This includes finding new ways to handle advanced Russian/Iranian UAVs and improving defense against Iranian missiles that may be deployed in the Ukrainian battlefield
- Address Russian propaganda systems in cyber, including influence operations
- Coordinate a diplomatic campaign between Israel and Germany to prevent Iran from becoming a leading weapons exporter. The success of its drones on the battlefield in Ukraine may encourage Iran to expand its drone sales worldwide, especially with the lifting of the arms embargo (which could undermine the stability of many regions)
- Coordinate efforts to exert pressure on countries, such as the Gulf states, that fear Iran’s conventional force buildup to encourage Moscow to reduce its ties with Iran
- Cooperate with international organizations to increase diplomatic pressure on both Iran and Russia
- Hold Iran accountable for its involvement in the bloodshed in Ukraine, potentially by adding the Revolutionary Guards to the list of terrorist organizations, downgrading diplomatic relations with Iran, and more
- Recognize and jointly address the aspirations of Moscow and Tehran to form alliances in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, known as the “Global South”
- Strengthen the voices within Iran of those who oppose Iran’s alignment with Russia, as many Iranians have reservations about this alliance
- Work together to raise awareness among other states in the region about the dangers of enhanced relations between Tehran and Moscow. The relations between Russia and Iran not only threaten Israel or Germany but additional states in the region (for example, Saudi Arabia, which works to coordinate oil prices with Moscow)

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