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## Russia and Iran: An Anti-Western Alliance?

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For more than two centuries, Russia has never been far from the center of Iranian politics—often as a colonial foe, sometimes as a convenient ally against a common enemy. Although the two countries throughout this period have experienced a wide range of forms of government—from czarist despotism and Stalinist totalitarianism in Russia to Oriental despotism and Islamic theocracy in Iran—the focus of the countries’ relations has remained surprisingly constant. Modernity, geopolitical hegemony, and energy have been the three pivotal elements of Russia’s long, complicated relationship with Iran.

Modernity and its corollaries—democracy, rationalism, and the rule of law—over the past two centuries have been the epochal challenges facing both Iran and Russia. In fact, many of modernity’s formative ideas first came to Iran through Russia (in part because of the two countries’ proximity, and in part because of Iran’s deep cultural ties with the Caucasian states that had been part of Persia until the nineteenth century).

In Russia, however, as scholars such as Isaiah Berlin have explained, modern political ideas were transubstantiated into a millenarian and ultimately despotic vision. The hitherto tragic failure of modernity in both Russia and Iran—most evident in both countries’ inability to develop a sustainable democratic polity—is at least partially a consequence of this warping trajectory. Cultural pathologies in each country have determined this trajectory, of course. But a certain affinity in social sensibilities, and a consanguinity of the body politic, have facilitated Russia’s ideological influence in Iran.

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Indeed, as paradigms of politics, social life, and ideology, Russian Orthodox Christianity, Bolshevism, and the Shiite version of Islam that has helped shape Iranian culture and society for more than a millennium share many crucial characteristics. All three ideologies are messianic. All three claim a monopoly of truth. All three posit absolute power in the hands of a minority who are privy to this truth. All three pin their hopes of salvation on that minority. All three place both spiritual and political power in the same hands. And all three consider the individual a mere tool of History, or of God.

Even today, Russian President Vladimir Putin’s desire to dismantle what remains of democracy and replace it with a jingoist, messianic, Slavic concoction—“Russian democracy”—makes him and his Russia an ideal ally, and role model, for Iran’s pseudo-totalitarian antimodern regime.

### HEGEMONIC DESIGNS

Geopolitics and the desire for hegemony constitute another of the connective threads in Russia-Iran relations. In the dusk of the nineteenth century, Russia’s colonial aspirations in Iran, the vagaries of the “Big Game” among competing imperial powers, and England’s anxieties about keeping India—the jewel of the crown—safe from Russian hegemonic ambitions, all had the effect of turning Iran into a so-called buffer state, enabling it to preserve at least its nominal independence. In the dawn of the twenty-first century, Russia’s new hegemonic ambitions—and its desires to confront, embarrass, or even weaken the United States and the West—have enabled the Islamic Republic of Iran to better advance its own Islamist hegemonic designs.

During much of the time in between, and for as long as the cold war lasted, Iran was one of the key battlegrounds. On one hand, the Soviet Union was keen on expanding its influence into the Persian

and technicians. The KGB station in Tehran was considerably enlarged, not so much for espionage as for controlling the Soviet citizens who lived and worked in Iran.

### MOSCOW AND THE ISLAMISTS

The fall of the Shah and the rise of the Islamic regime in Iran began a new phase in relations between the two countries. The Islamic Revolution had sometimes contradictory consequences for the Soviet Union. In the short run, the revolution and its anti-Americanism were a bonanza for the Soviets. Pro-Soviet radicals in Iran, led by the Tudeh Party, fanned the flames of this incipient anti-Americanism by aggressively supporting and prolonging the occupation of the American Embassy in Tehran. It was also the Tudeh Party, and its ideological apparatchiks, that articulated the “Marxist” interpretation of the Islamic Revolution as a “progressive, anti-imperialist” movement.

Indeed, the Tudeh Party supported every excess of the new regime as “revolutionary violence.” Eventually, however, that violence was directed at the Tudeh Party itself. The party’s entire leadership was arrested. A few were executed. Others were forced into televised “confessions” reminiscent of the Moscow show trials that came to symbolize Stalin’s reign of terror.

Even stranger than the Tudeh Party’s unrequited love for their “Islamic revolutionary comrades” was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s message to Moscow, delivered not long after Mikhail Gorbachev’s rise to power. In a glitzy Kremlin hall, where hundreds of mirrors created an illusion of light, an Iranian delegation, headed by a turbaned mullah, had come to pay respect to the Russian Communist Party’s new leader. The Soviet delegation was led by Gorbachev himself. As he and his comrades stood mute and motionless, the head of the Iranian delegation began to read the message sent by the leader of the Islamic Revolution. Lest the message lose any of its sacred magic, the Iranian delegation insisted on reading it in its original language—Khomeini’s peculiar Persian, interlaced heavily with Arabic.

In his message, the Ayatollah spoke of the corrupt materialism of Marxist ideology, as well as the crude commercialism of the capitalist ethos. He predicted the imminent fall of the Soviet Union, unless Gorbachev agreed to send some

of the leading cadres of the Communist Party to Iran—specifically to the holy city of Qom—where they might learn and adopt Shiite ideas about governance and economy, and salvation and sin.

Gorbachev, of course, failed to heed the advice, and when the Soviet Union did fall, relations between Russia and Iran changed again. Actually, it would be far from hyperbole to suggest that the rise of Islamists in Iran contributed, albeit indirectly, to this fall. From archives of the Soviet Communist Party’s Politburo, we now know that the Soviet decision to invade and occupy Afghanistan was connected to the fall of the Shah in 1979. The Soviets, it turns out, assumed that with the ouster of the Shah, America would lose an important ally, as well as its crucial listening stations in Iran—stations that incidentally monitored much of the Soviet Union’s nuclear activities. As a result, the Soviets calculated, Washington would try to compensate for these losses by establishing a new base of influence in Afghanistan. The invasion

of Afghanistan was for the Soviets a preemptive action.

Without the Soviet invasion, there might well have never been an Osama bin Laden and his

international network of jihadists. The invasion of Afghanistan had a domino effect, with reverberations as far away as the World Trade Center in New York on 9-11. More immediately, however, the invasion put Iran and the Soviet Union on a collision course.

Iran became, before long, a chief ally and a crucial source of support for the Islamist forces—the now famous mujahideen—fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The same forces also enjoyed the generous support of the CIA. Moreover, Iran became home to more than 2 million Afghan refugees. More recently, Iran was uncharacteristically helpful in America’s invasion of Afghanistan after 9-11, the dismantling of the Taliban regime, and the installment of the government of Hamid Karzai. In short, Russia’s invasion had placed Iran in a position to become one of the key players in Afghanistan. For its part, Iran had helped the Afghans—and the Americans—reveal the Red Army’s clay feet and convert Afghanistan into the Soviet Union’s Vietnam.

Soviet meddling in Afghanistan was not the only source of contention between Moscow and Tehran.

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that, more or less concurrent with the announced delay, Moscow also announced the sale of \$700 million worth of sophisticated anti-aircraft missile technology to Tehran.

Russia's action on Bushehr surprised the leaders of the Islamic Republic. Iran had hoped that the possibility of big financial gains—estimated to reach potentially \$10 billion a year from the sale of military and industrial hardware as well as the nuclear reactor business—would be enough to entice Russia to maintain its support for the regime's nuclear ambitions. When Russia joined the UN resolution, some in Iran talked of "betrayal," while others insisted that big powers like Russia have interests, not friends or principles.

### THE "ASIA LOOK"

Nuclear power is not the only element of the new relationship between Iran and Russia. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, new possibilities and challenges have emerged for both countries. For one thing, the disappearance of the godless Marxist regime has made it easier for Iran's Islamist leaders to expand ties with the Russian government, which is now conveniently devoutly religious.

For another, the newly independent Central Asian states—some of which, until the early nineteenth century, had been part of Iran—have become an arena of increased economic, ideological, religious, and even linguistic competition. This has had a curious effect on the Russo-Iranian relationship. The players in the Central Asian competition include Iran (which supports a radical version of Shiism, and hopes to thwart US efforts to isolate the Islamic regime), Turkey (which advocates pan-Turkism as a political force, and Turkish as a language), Saudi Arabia (which promotes the Wahhabi version of Islam), the United States (which is attempting to isolate both Iran and Russia and expand its influence in the region), and China (which hopes to increase its access to Central Asia's oil and gas, and is not, as a rising global power, averse to bringing more states into its orbit)—as well as Russia (which wants to regain some of its erstwhile power).

Russia and Iran are especially interested in a US attempt to build a pipeline that would connect Central Asian gas fields to Europe. The pipeline would end the Russian monopoly hold on Europe's gas markets—a monopoly hold that Putin has been increasingly willing to use for political purposes. Furthermore, US plans for the pipeline stipulate that it bypass Iran. As a result, the Islamic Repub-

lic and Russia have become inadvertent allies in averting the construction of this pipeline. The two countries have even begun talking about creating, together with Algeria, an OPEC-like cartel of gas-producing countries of the world.

The continued tension between Iran and the United States has led, in Iran, to the emergence of what is called the "Asia Look." This is founded on the idea of building, through Pakistan and India, a pipeline that would connect the oil and gas supplies of Iran and the Persian Gulf with the apparently infinite demand for them in China. Such a monumental project would require the participation not just of Pakistan, India, and China, but also of Russia.

If it is constructed, this pipeline could profoundly change the balance of forces between Russia, India, and China on one hand, and the West on the other. It could also help bring about a historic change in Iran culturally and economically—including in Iran's 500-year-old Western orientation. For most of these 500 years, modernity, much of it along the lines of the Western European model, was the coveted paradigm, accepted by every regime and ruler in Iran. The "Asia Look" would refocus that gaze on a return to the "authentic Islamic self."

### PERSIA AND THE LAND OF GOG

In the past few years, much has been written about the dynamics of the new alliance between Iran and Russia. The alliance has been attributed to everything from the Machiavellian mandate of uniting with the enemy of your enemy to the exigencies of political economy, particularly petro-politics. Some have even used Biblical prophecies to explain the contours of Iran's relations with Russia. The Book of Ezekiel, some say, predicts that the land of Gog (Russia) and Persia would become allies before the coming of the apocalypse. But something far more mundane than Biblical prophecy seems to lie at the heart of the complicated Russo-Iranian relationship.

Early in the twentieth century, when foes of modernity and democracy in Iran, led by the recalcitrant Ayatollah Fazlollah Nouri, used the banner of a strident interpretation of Islam to roll back a nascent constitutional movement, their chief ally in their quest to regain power was czarist Russia. Today, a century later, the new Islamist foes of modernity are using the banner of an eerily similar version of Islam, and once again they are relying on Russia in their quest to retain power. And once again, geopolitics, energy, and modernity are at the center of this troubled alliance. ■