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Moscow and Tehran appear to have developed a mutually beneficial relationship, largely driven by the mutually adversarial relationship each state has with the United States, but this study introduces an alternative explanation. Namely, that the Russia-Iran relationship is more one-sided and exploitative in favor of Russia than commonly understood because if rapprochement between Iran and the West were to occur, it would remove a major pillar holding up the legitimacy of Russia in the Middle East alongside a support base utilized to undermine America's global hegemonic position. Iran would also prove capable of competing with Russia in the hydrocarbon export and transportation markets, a key economic threat to Russia's own political economy. Although both states have substantive ideological differences with the United States, Russia gains more from Iran's rivalry with the United States than the reverse, suggesting that Russia benefits more from the status quo position than Iran. By analyzing coinciding interests of Russia and Iran, including Syria, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, United States sanctions, the Caspian Sea, and the pending China-Iran Deal, this thesis analyzes the exploitation driven by Russia onto Iran.

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United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
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Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068

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Russia and Iran: A Toxic Relationship

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AUTHOR:

Major Leslie A. Harkness

AY 2020-21

MMS Mentor Team and Oral Defense Committee Member:


Dr. Amin Tarzi, PhD

Approved: 

Date: 20210428

MMS Mentor Team and Oral Defense Committee Member:

Dr. Yuval Weber, PhD

Approved: 

Date: April 28, 2021

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Preface

The Middle East has always been my main area of interest, and since great power competition is the hot topic in military studies, I chose to focus on a Middle Eastern state from a great power perspective. I had originally selected a different topic concerning Iran, but while conducting research the dynamics of the Russia-Iran relationship were brought to my attention and I could not ignore them. Many scholars have captured the Iran-Russia relationship in various lights; I have simply attempted to capture it in another. In order to resolve conflict, interests need to be understood and I believe this paper helps reveal some of the more evasive or hidden interests on the part of Russia.

I would like to thank Dr. Amin Tarzi PhD, the Director of Middle Eastern Studies at Marine Corps University, for his continuous support and guidance throughout the writing process. I'd also like to acknowledge the Krulak Scholarship Program at Marine Corps University, led by Dr. Yuval Weber PhD, for its substantial assistance in garnering resources and providing a foundation for understanding great power competition.

Executive Summary

Title: Russia and Iran: A Toxic Relationship

Author: Major Leslie A Harkness, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: Iran has the ability to rival Russia economically and upon normalization of its relationship with the United States and its allies, deal a critical blow to Moscow's desire to project power in a region beyond their own. This thesis argues that the potential cooperation between Iran and the United States poses a critical threat to Russia's great power strategy and explains Russian efforts to keep Iran in its pariah status in the region and on the world stage.

Discussion: This study examines the sources and outcomes of the Russo-Iranian bilateral relationship, both as it stands now, and in a scenario exploring rapprochement between Iran and the larger Western alliance. Moscow and Tehran appear to have developed a mutually beneficial relationship, largely driven by the mutually adversarial relationship each state has with the United States, but this study introduces an alternative explanation. Namely, that the Russia-Iran relationship is more one-sided and exploitative in favor of Russia than commonly understood because if rapprochement between Iran and the West were to occur, it would remove a major pillar holding up the legitimacy of Russia in the Middle East alongside a support base utilized to undermine America's global hegemonic position. Iran would also prove capable of competing with Russia in the hydrocarbon export and transportation markets, a key economic threat to Russia's own political economy. Although both states have substantive ideological differences with the United States, Russia gains more from Iran's rivalry with the United States than the reverse, suggesting that Russia benefits more from the status quo position than Iran. By analyzing coinciding interests of Russia and Iran, including Syria, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, United States sanctions, the Caspian Sea, and the new China-Iran deal, this thesis analyzes the exploitation driven by Russia onto Iran.

Conclusion: To maintain its support base, its legitimacy as a great power challenger to the United States, and to prevent the rise of an economic rival, Russia will continue to encourage and support Iran's belligerent behavior and ensure there is no rapprochement between Iran and the west.

Introduction

Iran has consistently been caught between great powers in competition since the early 1900s and that trend continues today. After the Second World War, this was especially true of the competition between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and later Russia; Iran shares a complicated history with both countries. When evaluating the purely historical background of the bilateral relationships between each of these countries, one would be inclined to question why Iran is closer with Russia than the United States. Leading up to the 21st Century, one could be persuaded to believe that Iran would more likely be partners with the United States instead of Russia. The United States has never tried to seize or occupy any part of Iran, unlike Russia. Also, prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's relations with the United States and Western nations were very good. Since 1979, Iran has burned political bridges with many Western countries along with much of the Middle East.¹ Relations with the United States in particular have been steadily deteriorating since the Islamic Revolution and it would appear the old adage, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" could be applied to the conception of congenial relations between Iran and Russia. But which country has more to gain from that partnership, Russia or Iran? At first glance, Iran is a pariah in the Middle East that is lucky to have a great power befriend it. A deep review of the realities would suggest that Iran is a nation with tremendous potential, limited only by a regime whose contempt toward Western power, influence, and the international liberal order keep it from normalization and rapprochement, a contempt that is reinforced and nurtured by its Russian alliance. Iran has the ability to rival Russia economically and upon normalization of its relationship with the United States and its allies, deal a critical blow to Moscow's desire to project power in a region beyond

their own. This potential for cooperation between Iran and the United States poses a critical threat to Russia's great power strategy and explains Russian efforts to keep Iran in its pariah status in the region and on the world stage.

Why does Russia want Iran to remain a pariah?

A Struggle for Legitimacy and Hegemony

The United States has been the world hegemonic power since the end of the Cold War, but today Russia and China are challenging its position. The 2018 National Defense Strategy lists China and Russia as the number one threats to the United States, challenging its hegemonic position in the world. They are followed by the "rogue regimes" of Iran and North Korea.ⁱⁱ

China, Russia, Iran and North Korea are not allies, but they do have bilateral working relationships with each other based on mutual interests. Iran and Russia's bilateral relationship is one of the strongest among these four states and on the surface appears to be based on mutual interests; especially in challenging the United States on political, economic and military fronts.ⁱⁱⁱ

But, strategically Russia's utilization of the relationship is more subversive in nature. The public appearance of support and assistance is not the same as physical assistance. Russia exploits Iran in order to gain legitimacy and further cement itself as a world power broker. Additionally, having Iran act as a constant thorn in the side of the United States forces a shift of focus and acts as a distraction from Russian actions.

Economic survival

Russia is considered a major world power and rival to the West, mainly due to its geopolitical status and technologically advanced and sizeable military with the largest nuclear weapons arsenal. Economically, Russia has a fairly stable economy but it cannot compete with states such as China and the United States which are the economic power houses of the world. Russia capitalizes on the resources and internal means that it has to maintain and build its economy. The largest and most valuable Russian resources are hydrocarbons. The oil and natural gas markets consistently make up more than 30% of Russia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).^{iv} Russia needs to exploit these resources to the fullest extent by maintaining its current markets and expanding where possible. But Russia is not the only state that has these goals; Iran has similar ambitions and resources which would make it a potential competitor in a vital market they both need.

Russia is currently second only to the United States as the largest producer of crude oil and natural gas in the world, but while the United States uses all of the oil it produces and still requires additional imports, Russia consumes only about one third of the oil it produces and exports the rest, providing the Kremlin with much needed hard currency and diplomatic levers.^v And though Russia is second in production of these resources, it has the largest proven natural gas reserves and sixth largest crude oil reserves in the world (see Tables 1 and 2). These abundant resources have the capacity to continue supporting the Russian economy in the future. To accomplish this, Russia must ensure its hold on to its vital export markets, which has been an ongoing struggle for the state. Its markets consist of most Eastern and Central European countries, most of whom are solely reliant on Russia for gas and oil; China is also a large purchaser of Russian oil and gas.^{vi} Russia needs to keep potential competitors out of these

markets even though these European nations would prefer to diversify their energy portfolios so as to not be completely reliant on Russia for these resources.^{vii}

Table 1: Natural Gas Statistics	
Natural Gas Production 2019 ^{viii}	Largest Natural Gas Reserves 2019 ^{ix}
1. United States	1. Russia
2. Russia	2. Iran
3. Iran	3. Qatar
4. Canada	4. Turkmenistan
5. China	5. United States
Table 2: Crude Oil Statistics	
Crude Oil Production 2019 ^x	Largest Crude Oil Reserves 2019 ^{xi}
1. United States	1. Venezuela
2. Russia	2. Saudi Arabia
3. Saudi Arabia	3. Canada
4. Canada	4. Iran
5. Iraq	5. Iraq
6. China	6. Russia
7. United Arab Emirates	7. Kuwait
8. Brazil	8. United Arab Emirates
9. Kuwait	9. United States
10. Iran	10. Libya

Russia's near monopoly on the oil and gas exports into Eastern and Central Europe has given it a choke point in diplomatic relations and negotiations with these countries. For example, in winter of 2009, during a dispute with Ukraine, Russia turned off the supply of natural gas to Europe that passed through Ukraine via pipelines which carried approximately

eighty percent of the Russian natural gas exports to Europe. By turning off its gas supply to Ukraine, Russia caused a shortage of natural gas to a number of European countries in the dead of winter.^{xii} Of course there was debate over who caused the conflict, Russia or Ukraine, but Russia ultimately was the one who turned off the faucet. This incident indicated that Russia was perhaps not reliable enough to provide such a vital resource to such a large portion of Europe. Also, this realization worried European states that Russia could be willing to use its supplier position for diplomatic or economic coercion. Since then, many of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe have been searching for alternative energy producers. Perhaps Iran is not a complete replacement for Russia gas, but at the very least it is an additional energy supplier that can diversify their portfolios and share the European energy market with Russia. Since Russia is highly dependent on the capital generated from their hydrocarbon resources, losing even part of the European market could severely hurt their economy and political leverages. Europe has yet to find a realistic solution to their energy dilemma; however, entry of Iran as a stable and non-coercive state into global hydrocarbons production and transportation could offer a partial solution.

Currently, Iran is projected to have the fourth largest proved reserves of crude oil and second largest reserves of natural gas in the world. However, due to the sanctions imposed by the United States and European Union over the past two decades, there was an underinvestment, and consequentially, underdevelopment of the supporting infrastructure needed to produce these resources.^{xiii} Therefore, even though Iran has been proven to possess the fourth largest reserves of crude oil and second largest natural gas reserves in the world, they are only tenth in oil production and third in natural gas production (see Tables 1 and 2). Iran's main export region is Asia, but if Iran were to normalize relations with the West, its abundant resources could augment

or replace Russian oil and gas in parts of Europe.^{xiv} Iran possesses larger proven oil reserves than Russia and is second only to Russia in natural gas reserves. The economic opportunity and returns on investment that Iran is capable of producing would be very appealing to vast numbers of states and investors. But as long as Iran is the Middle Eastern pariah and enemy of the United States, building the kind of rapport needed with United States allies is extremely difficult. Relations between Iran and United States would need to improve and move towards normalization, a course of action which could be devastating to Russia.

Production and exportation of its oil and natural gas are not Russia's only concern. Transportation of these resources is also extremely important to Russia. Russia's pipelines run mainly into Eastern Europe and Central Europe, with some flowing into Central Asia. Russia dominates the oil and gas transportation pipelines in Europe and Central Asia^{xv} (see Figure 1). The few not dominated by Russia are shorter in length, passing through a minimal number of countries, and they are most importantly, not located in Europe. Any past attempts to establish alternative transportation methods of oil and gas into Europe, or the construction of southern pipelines by other countries, have been countered or redirected by Russia either directly or indirectly whenever possible. Pipeline plans, such as the Nabucco Pipeline had been proposed to reduce European reliance on Russia for natural gas, but it has never come to fruition.^{xvi} Russia is also currently backing the construction of the Iran-Iraq-Syria Pipeline as a counter to the Turkey-Qatar Pipeline, which is backed by the United States.^{xvii} Even if the pipelines being proposed do not run through Russia or contain Russian hydrocarbons, Russian investments still give Russia a degree of control over the transportation market. Therefore, a Russian backed pipeline would only tighten Russia's grip as the main supplier and transporter of oil and gas to Europe.

Figure 1: Major Pipelines^{xviii}



Map of oil and gas pipelines from Russia (credit: U.S. Energy Information Administration)

As stated, Iran has the resources to potentially counter Russian supplies, but it is severely lacking infrastructure. But what it lacks in infrastructure, it makes up for in investment opportunities. The economic opportunity and returns on investment that Iran is capable of producing are difficult to ignore. With Western backing, additional production infrastructure and pipelines could easily be constructed to augment those in existence, along with other transportation methods, for the exportation of energy sources. These would be pipelines not controlled by Russia, transporting hydrocarbons not produced by Russia into to Europe. Pipelines are not the only option for Iran either. Since Iran has direct access to the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, transportation via ship is another possibility. Iranian ports like Sirri Island and Chabahar are invaluable in this regard (see Figure 2). Pipelines maybe more ideal long term,

but cargo ships are an immediate solution that can easily be utilized in the interim. This diversification of transportation and immediate transportation solution is something the United States and European Union would prefer in order to counter Russia's monopoly of energy in Eastern and Central Europe.

Figure 2: Iran's Oil Structure with Ports ^{xix}



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration, IHS Markit Midstream Database (via IHSM EDIN).

How has Russia been achieving its goal?

This section will discuss a number of instances with reactions and effects over the past several years that demonstrate the subversive nature of the Russian and Iranian relationship.

Russia has become skilled and efficient at controlling narratives to highlight its support for Iran

while at the same time, diverting attention away from obvious advantages gained by Iran's misfortune. Sometimes this misfortune is directly caused by Russia and at other times it is due to Russia hedging bets against Iran. Russia will always put itself and its great power agenda first and foremost in any situation, that has remained consistent.

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

Russian academic Nikolay Kozhanov, an expert on Russian policy in the Middle East as well as the Iranian economy and international relations, in his analysis of the Iran-Russia relationship has written, "The Russian government opposes Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons, believing that such a development would drastically change the balance of power in the region, and not in Moscow's favor."^{xx} Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons could lead to a nuclear arms race in the Middle East and Central Asia which would bring instability to the region. It made sense for Russia to join the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and China in convincing Iran to sign the JCPOA to slow down and limit its nuclear development program.^{xxi} Russia was on the rise as a great power and the major role it played in negotiating, developing, and implementing the JCPOA aligned with Russian interests. Russia's participation yielded positive effects for its own great power agenda. First, it warmed the Russian relationship with Western powers; second, it demonstrated Russia's ability to act as a successful broker on the world stage; and third, the agreement limited Iran's ability to develop nuclear weapons while simultaneously strengthening its own relationship with Iran.

After the United States pulled out of the JCPOA in 2018, all other signature parties expressed their concern and dismay.^{xxii} However, the JCPOA's success and subsequent failure was a win-win for Russia. The failure of the agreement to be upheld by either the United States

or Iran, would have expectedly pushed the wedge between both countries deeper and created more hostility. This was clearly the effect after the United States pulled out of the agreement in 2018 and Iran gradually began violating the terms of the agreement. Since the United States abandoned the agreement and reenacted sanctions against Iran, relations between the two countries have drastically deteriorated, to Russia's benefit. Russian interests have been consistently advanced throughout the entire JCPOA affair. Russia received praise for its actions in brokering the JCPOA and it strengthened its relationship with Iran and the other signature parties of the agreement, further solidifying its position as a great power. Subsequently, Russia watched the United States destroy any progress it had made in rapprochement with Iran which damaged its relationships with its western allies and further undermined its hegemonic position in the world. As of April 23, 2021, the United States and Iran were meeting in Vienna to resume indirect talks concerning the revival of the JCPOA; this was mainly due to the Biden Administration's support of the 2015 JCPOA. Tehran had refused to speak directly with Washington concerning nuclear issues, which only further displayed the distrust between the two countries. The dialogue between the United States and Iran is developing to a degree and some progress is being made, but it is still a delicate situation that cannot be resolved quickly.^{xxiii} It will take time to make forward progress, but there is no guarantee it will yield positive results in the end; therefore, currently Iran remains alienated to Western powers, the United States in particular, and Russia still appears to be a major benefactor.

Clearly Iranian development of nuclear weapons is not in the best interest of any of the major stakeholders, not even Iran's close partners such as Russia, which like the other JCPOA signatory parties, is still faced with the dilemma of Iranian nuclear weapons development post disintegration of the JCPOA. However, this dilemma is not as concerning for Russia as it is to

other states and regional actors. It seems to be frequently ignored that the JCPOA had an expiration date, and therefore, the agreement was more a delaying action than a viable long-term solution to the Iranian nuclear development issue. Russia's past actions and roles in Iranian nuclear development should not be ignored or disregarded. The ability of Iran to produce nuclear weapons has always concerned Russia. In the years leading up to the 2015 JCPOA, Russia had been taking subtle steps to hinder Iran in the development of nuclear weapons. It delayed the construction of nuclear power plants in Bushehr, caveated deals to ensure Iran did not possess the materials to develop weapons of mass destruction or their delivery capabilities, and even denied conventional weapons licensing purchases.^{xxiv} It is not difficult to predict that Moscow might continue down that same path in the future. It is also very likely that as long as Russia maintains close ties with Iran, it will have the ability to monitor and influence Iranian nuclear development and use it to Russia's advantage.

United States Sanctions

Following its exit from the JCPOA, the United States sanctions hit the Iranian oil industry hard. Many of Iran's Asian oil customers, like Japan and South Korea, have close ties with the United States and are unwilling to risk damaging their relationships to deal with Iran. As of October 2019, oil exports were down 80 percent.^{xxv} Natural gas exports were not directly targeted by United States sanctions; however, financial transactions that facilitate the sales are heavily scrutinized which has led to a gradual decrease in Iranian natural gas exports as well.^{xxvi} Russia spoke out publicly against United States sanctions and pledged its support to Iran. The Russian Foreign Ministry stated it was, "taking appropriate measures on a national level to

protect trade and economic cooperation with Iran.”^{xxvii} But actions speak louder than words and Russian follow-on actions did not mirror their words.

Following US sanctions on Iran, additional oil production was needed from other oil producing countries to make up for the loss of Iranian oil exports and keep oil prices stable. Though not a member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Russia has a partnership with the organization and bilateral relationships with many countries that comprise the organization. The mission of the OPEC is to coordinate and unify the petroleum policies of its member countries and ensure the stabilization of oil markets. Following United States sanctions against Iran, Saudi Arabia and Russia came to an agreement to increase oil production to compensate for the loss of Iranian contributions. This was in the best interests of Russia and Saudi Arabia, but it was not in the best interests of Iran. Saudi Arabia views Iran as its biggest threat in the region; therefore, Saudi Arabia had no problem increasing oil production at the behest of the United States and to build extra capital. Russia, however, is considered one of Iran’s biggest political supporters and security partners. Russia did not have to increase production so easily and willingly. Russia could have let oil prices rise due to the Iranian deficit in the market; this could have ensured the United States sanctions on Iran were felt by consumers world wide, but it did not. Russia saw an opportunity to advance its relationships with both Saudi Arabia and the United States, lower domestic fuel prices that were hurting the regime’s popularity, and gain more geopolitical power in the oil market. This was also a unique opportunity to drive the wedge deeper, not just between Iran and the United States, but also between Iran and Saudi Arabia.^{xxviii} By keeping tensions high between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Russia could influence regional politics as well as Saudi and OPEC oil production. Russia did

not hesitate to capitalize on these opportunities to further its own national interests at the expense of Iran.

Caspian Sea Dispute

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the status of the Caspian Sea has been debated among its five littoral states: Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran. Whether or not the Caspian is a “sea” or a “lake” is debated, mainly due to resources that exist in the basin of this body of water. Out of the five littoral states, Iran is the only one not a member of the former Soviet Union. The last treaty in existence prior to the independence of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan was from 1940 and it referred to the Caspian Sea as the “Soviet and Iranian Sea,” with no mention of basin division or exploration, just navigation.^{xxix} Expectedly so, the independence of the three former Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, would bring the Caspian Sea status into question as all five states question their rights to the resource rich basin.

Iran had been firm in its position that the Caspian basin should be divided equally, as it owns the least amount of shoreline. Categorizing the Caspian as a lake would support this position. States with larger shorelines, like Kazakhstan, stand to lose from this position as they own the largest share of shoreline. Russia had been fairly silent on its position concerning the status of the basin division in the past, but it had been adamantly against the littoral states having access to its Volga-Don Canal that would allow other littoral states more access to the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea. Russia had vested interest in the Caspian resources like everyone else, but its attention was diverted to other aspects concerning the Caspian. Russia does not currently need the additional hydrocarbon resources located in the basin as much as the other littoral states

so it actually stood to gain more by keeping the Caspian in a contested status. The more oil and gas obtained by the Caspian states, the more they were posed to creep into Russia's hydrocarbon markets. In addition, and potentially more important than the basin resources, was avoidance of transportation routes for hydrocarbons through the Caspian to Europe. The Trans-Caspian Pipeline (TCP) was originally pursued by Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan back in 1999-2000 to transport gas through the Caspian and Azerbaijan to Europe.^{xxx} Russia successfully blocked the pipeline initially and the follow-on attempts to resurrect it. The main justification utilized by Russia to block the TCP were environmental effects and the contested status of the Caspian basin. This argument also allowed Russia to prevent similar projects from being initiated up until 2018.

The Caspian Convention of 2018 helped the littoral states move forward and further solve the Caspian dilemma. The five littoral states at the Caspian Convention agreed that the Caspian was neither a lake nor sea, but an "intercontinental body of water." This rejection of the Caspian as a sea ensured the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas did not apply, so there were no EEZs, and territorial waters and fishing boundaries could be extended. It was also agreed upon that only the littoral states will be allowed to have military naval access to the Caspian; this guarantees that Russia will remain the naval power on the Caspian. A surprising concession made by Russia was allowing for pipelines to be built as long as those whose territories they pass through agree to it.^{xxxi} This leaves the possibility for projects like TCP to be resurrected again. That being said, the environmental stipulations still apply and though Russia was given credit for making this major concession, Russia is much more powerful than it was 15-20 years ago with more political clout and means to stop projects it deems a threat from any of the littoral states. Overall, Russia was the big winner of the deal and Iran the loser. Russia was able to exploit

Iran's need to keep the United States and other non-littoral countries out of the Caspian Sea in order to remain the dominant naval power on the Caspian, and as a means to get Iranian consensus on territorial waters and fishing boundaries. Since Iran has the shortest amount of coastline on the Caspian, it received the least amount of surface territory in the agreement. The question of the basin division has not been agreed upon and will likely take years to solve, thereby keeping the additional hydrocarbons located there out of the market for the foreseeable future.

Conflict in Syria

From a geopolitical perspective, the Caspian Sea would be an obvious area of interest to Iran as it borders the country, but a not so obvious area of interest is Syria. Russia and Iran have mutual interests in Syria, namely ensuring President Bashar al-Assad remains in power. Syria is the only country outside of the former Soviet Union that has a Russian military base, hence the reason Moscow was quick to aid Assad.^{xxxii} Iran sees Syria as a vital strategic partner in the Middle East. Syria serves as a connector between Lebanon, where Iranian backed Hezbollah operates, and Shia dominant Iran and Iraq. It is necessary for Iran to maintain supply lines to Hezbollah in Lebanon so it can continue to operate as a deterrent and defense in depth against Israel. Syria is not a Shia dominant country like Iran and Iraq, but it does have an Alawite minority (non-Sunni) leader in power that has accommodated Iran's activities in the past. Additionally, Syria shares a border with Israel. Though Iran has one front open against Israel in Lebanon it has used this opportunity to open a second front, from which Iranian backed groups, like the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC), can launch additional attacks on Israel.

Though they have different reasons for participation in the conflict, the Russia and Iran military partnership in Syria has tipped the conflict in favor President Assad.

As long as there is still fighting in Syria, Russia and Iran need each other militarily. That being said, Iranian backed groups cannot seem to resist the opportunity to exploit the second front on the Israel-Syrian border. One of the Middle East relationships Russia has been cultivating over the years is with Israel. Russia had attempted to de-escalate the tensions between Israel and Iran in Syria, mainly because they were already fighting one war and did not want Russian forces caught in the crossfire. When that proved futile, Russia simply deconflicted Israeli attacks and counter-attacks on Iranian forces in order to ensure their own forces were not hit.^{xxxiii} Why is Russia so willing to allow another state to attack or counter-attack a military partner in the middle of an active conflict? Israel and Russia may have an amiable relationship, but they are not technically military allies or strategic partners. In contrast, Israel is perhaps the United States' closest partner. Russia prefers to take on the role of mediator in regional disputes, or at least maintain neutrality. Taking sides in disputes, especially in the Middle East where history and ideology fuel the contempt on both sides, could only hurt Russia's position in the Middle East as a non-ideological great power and unbiased broker.^{xxxiv} Also, Russia and Iran are not technically military allies, therefore Russia has no obligation to aid the Iranians.^{xxxv} But it could also be that Russia needs Iran and Israel to remain hostile. Convincing both Iran and Israel to enter into a cease fire on any front could be a step towards de-escalation and reduction in overall hostilities, which over time could help lead to normalization between the two countries. And a step towards normalization with Israel is potentially a step toward normalization with the United States and the rest of the Western world; this would not align with Russia's great power agenda.

Reconstruction in Syria has the potential to earn long-term strategic footholds in the country as well as economic opportunities for Iran and Russia. Russia has been improving its bilateral and multilateral relationships with Middle Eastern countries over the past decade. In contrast, Iran has been alienating them with its antagonistic behavior and ongoing conflict with Israel and the United States. Russia has been positioning itself over the past decade to act as a power broker in world affairs, particularly in the Middle East and even Africa^{xxxvi}, and intends to use this position to justify taking the lead on reconstruction effort in Syria.^{xxxvii} As long as Iran is involved in open conflict on the Syrian borders with Israel and remains alienated from potential investors, it would not be seen as a legitimate reconstruction leader. This has allowed Russia to push Iran both politically and economically to the sidelines and ensure it is forced to take a back seat to Russian lead reconstruction efforts. This position further legitimizes Russian presence in the Middle East.

Chinese Intervention

Iran has been in search of relief and that relief may have come in the form of China, with whom Russia also has a strong bilateral relationship. China and Iran have recently signed an agreement that would ensure an economic and security partnership over the next 25 years.^{xxxviii} It is unclear which version of the agreement was signed, but according to one leaked version, the agreement would include the discounted purchase of oil, investment in energy production infrastructures, and the potential for access to the Iranian ports of Jask and Chabahar^{xxxix} (see Figure 2). This particular deal, as it stands, has positive provisions for Iran as a relief mechanism, which begs the question: would Iran have seriously considered the deal if United States sanctions were not being imposed on it? Providing China oil at a heavily discounted price

and allowing China the opportunity to invest in infrastructure lends China a degree of control within the country economically and politically.^{xi} Iranians do not like foreign powers operating in their country, as seen when the Russia utilization of an Iranian military base for air operations in Syria was cut short due to public outcry.^{xli} Chinese entering the country could be met with opposition by the Iranian population, but it is too early to tell if that is the case.^{xlii}

For China the deal is beneficial, but not simple. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are two of China's biggest trading partners in the Middle East, and the agreement could affect their bilateral relationships. Russia, though an outside party, also stands to benefit from this agreement. 1. If Iran is committed to providing discounted oil to China, Iran will likely be transporting the oil via ship, not pipeline. This allows Russia to maintain control over all major pipelines into Europe and Asia. 2. This trade deal will divert Iran's attention away from Europe, another potential trading partner, should United States sanctions be lifted. In addition, as of December 2019, a new natural gas pipeline was activated connecting China and Russia, making Russia one of the lead natural gas exporters to China ahead of Turkmenistan.^{xliii} Whatever loss of Russian oil exports to China may or may not occur, have already been made up in natural gas exports. 3. The closer Iran is to China, the closer it is to Russia, and the further it is from the United States and its Western allies. It is difficult to deny that a China-Iran deal is good for Russia. The bilateral and multilateral partnerships between China, Russia, and Iran are growing and continuing to undermine the United States' position as a world hegemonic power.

In 2019 Russia, China, and Iran conducted a trilateral naval exercise in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman. This was the first naval exercise Russia and Iran had conducted outside of the Caspian Sea and the first naval exercise Iran has conducted with two major world powers.^{xliv} It not only demonstrated their military cooperation and integration, but also these major powers

support for Iran in the Persian Gulf due to the ongoing hostility between Iran and the United States on the seas. This kind of support for Iran simply reinforces its hostile behavior towards the United States and now three out of the four powers named in the 2018 United States National Defense Strategy as the largest threats to United States power and influence are growing closer, while the United States continues to alienate itself from them. In addition to keeping Iran away from the United States, the deal would be keeping Iran down and under the thumb of China, a Russian partner. With a China-Iran deal having been signed it will be interesting to see how the dynamics between the United States and these three states plays out over time, though clearly the current winners appear to be China and Russia.

Brokering and Wedging

Russia has demonstrated its desire to maintain diplomatic and political relationships with other countries in the Middle East, as well as western powers. It wants to expand its influence, and at the same time act as a wedge between the United States and its allies.^{xlv} Iran is the pariah of the Middle East, with only a few friendly relationships and political bridges still intact. Russia can exploit its position and legitimize it further by acting as a conduit between Iran and other regional players, with which it has contentious relationships such as Israel or Saudi Arabia. There are three effects to Russia playing this role. First, Russia looks like a “team player” by helping other countries get past their contentious relationships. As long as Iran remains the unfriendly belligerent in the region, other nations will turn to Russia to act as a broker rather than attempting to communicate directly. This will only deepen Russian ties to countries in the region and lend its presence legitimacy. Second, Russia gets to shape and control the narrative in the conversation. It’s essentially like playing “whisper down the lane” with Russia as the

middleman. Third, it helps keep an arm's length between the United States, its allies, and Iran. This ensures there will be no rapprochement between Iran and the United States without Russian influence and involvement.

Conclusion

Russia and Iran's relationship appears to be based on mutual contempt for the United States' hegemonic position in the world, along with the United States' perceived desire to force liberal ideals and Western culture upon other states. But that is a very idealistic assumption and there is more to a relationship than simply idealism; there must be some tangible benefits to maintain a relationship that has associated costs. The benefits of the relationship for Iran appear to be in its shared mutual interests with Russia. However, it has been demonstrated above that those shared mutual interests benefit Russia more when they undercut Iran politically and economically, leaving it unable to compete with Russia in any capacity. If Iran were able to shed its perception as a pariah and move towards normalization with the west and other states in the Middle East, Russia would lose its support base in the Middle East and gain an economic rival. Therefore, to maintain its support base, its legitimacy as a great power challenger to the United States, and to prevent the rise of an economic rival, Russia will continue to encourage and support Iran's belligerent behavior and ensure there is no rapprochement between Iran and the West.

Epilogue

Within two days of completing this master's thesis, a three hour-long audiotape was leaked in which Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif is discussing issues related to internal power struggles that have influenced Iran's domestic and international policies. The discussions, ostensibly for internal archives but leaked by unidentified sources, includes a number of assertions made by Zarif that have created waves across Iran and the international community, but one aspect in particular is pertinent to this thesis. In the recording, Zarif claimed that Iranian Major General Qassim Soleimani, the former Commander of Quds forces within the IRGC, was working with Russia to undermine the JCPOA. Zarif goes so far as to claim that Russia wants to prevent Iranian normalization with the West, as such a rapprochement would not be in Moscow's best interests.^{xlvi} These assertions simply reinforce the primary focus of this thesis – Moscow's policies to preserve Iran in its status quo and support its own interests and major power agendas. Based on these recordings, a follow-up study to this thesis would be to study the broader Iranian perspective as it relates to Russian actions discussed in this particular thesis. There are obviously people in the Iranian government and military who would work with Russia to undermine diplomatic progress toward normalization between Iran and the West, but there are also those who would want to see their country become independent of Russia.

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