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Russia and Iran: An Anti-Western Alliance?

ABBAS MILANI

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

Gulf region, a pivotal area for control of the world's supply of oil and gas. On the other hand, from Harry Truman to Jimmy Carter, every US administration declared categorically that it would, even at the risk of a new world war, keep the Soviets from Iran and the Persian Gulf. Not surprisingly, Iran was where the first battle of the cold war was fought.

At the end of the Second World War, British and American forces occupying Iran left the country, as had been stipulated at the 1943 allied conference in Tehran. But the Soviet Red Army refused to leave. Moreover, by then Josef Stalin had ordered the creation of separatist movements in the Iranian regions of Kurdistan and Azerbaijan. As recently declassified documents of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union have revealed, early in its occupation of Iran the Soviet Union covertly sent a team of experts to explore for gas and oil in Iran's northern provinces. They found surprisingly large reservoirs of both. It was then that Stalin decided to promote and manipulate the separatist movements as a bargaining chip with the Iranian government. He would end his crucial support for these movements in return for the rights to explore for oil and gas in Iran's northern provinces.

As a result of a complicated set of circumstances, including a purported nuclear ultimatum issued to the Russians by Truman, Stalin's gambit failed. By the time the Red Army finally left Iran in 1946, the cold war was in full swing. Although the Soviets did not receive the oil concessions they craved, the politics of energy has since then been a constant element in Russo-Iranian relations.

BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST

The end of the Second World War had another profound impact on Russia's relations with Iran. It occasioned the introduction of a new element into the equation: American influence.

For much of the twentieth century, Iran's relations with its northern neighbor existed in the shadow of an infamous article in a 1921 treaty between the two countries. Article Five of the treaty stipulated that if Iran ever became a base of anti-Soviet activities, the Soviet government would have the right to enter Iran and preemptively eliminate the threat. Article Five was, in reality, a tool for the "Finlandization" of Iran—an attempt to intimidate the country into "friendship" with the Soviets and away from becoming a base of anti-Russian activities. Even today, long after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of monarchy in Iran, and the de facto abrogation of the 1921 treaty, lingering effects of this Finlandization can be discerned in the behavior and expectations of both Russian and Iranian officials.

Starting in the 1940s, however, the scope and nature of US influence in Iran and the Middle East changed, and as might be expected, this affected the Russo-Iranian relationship. The change became particularly profound after 1955, when Iran decided to give up its 200-year-old claim of neutrality and joined the anti-Soviet, pro-Western Baghdad Pact (later renamed the Central Treaty Organization, or CENTO). The Soviet Union was not happy, and thus began a decade of intense ideological war between Moscow and Tehran.

The two countries have begun talking about creating an OPEC-like cartel of gas-producing countries of the world.

By then the Soviet Union could count on the help of Iran's Tudeh Party in this campaign. The Tudeh (Mass) Party—so named to avoid the title of Communist, which might conjure controversy in Islamic Iran—was created in the wake of the Soviet occupation of Iran in 1941. It became easily the most powerful and best organized political party in Iran's modern history. The shared sensibilities between Bolshevism and Shiism facilitated this ideological influence. The party also remained, for half a century, an always-faithful handmaiden of Soviet policy in Iran.

The ideological battle between Iran and the Soviet Union ended only in 1965, when Iran signed a major new economic pact with the Soviet Union. In return for Iranian gas, the Soviets promised to build Iran a much-coveted steel mill. For the Shah, who ruled Iran at the time, a steel mill was the most important symbol of progress and modernity. While Western countries were unwilling to help with the project, the Soviet Union was more than eager to oblige. (A quarter of a century later, when the new Islamic regime that had replaced the Shah saw a nuclear program as the symbol of national power—and, for the regime, a key tool of survival—once again Western countries refused to participate in the project. Once again, Russia was happy to help.)

Soon after the 1965 pact was signed, Iran became home to more than 8,000 Soviet advisers

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.

Geopolitics, energy, and modernity are at the center of this troubled alliance.

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.

Iraq's Saddam Hussein had long been a close ally of the Soviet Union. In 1980, when he attacked Iran and plunged their two countries into a bloody, eight-year war, Moscow—still keen on trying to benefit from the Islamic Republic's anti-Americanism—was left in a precarious bind. The Kremlin partially solved it by offering military support to both Iraq and Iran. But a particularly violent turn of events in that brutal war turned out to be a bonanza for the Russians.

THE NUCLEAR CONNECTION

When Iraq used chemical weapons against Iran, beginning in 1984, and when the world, including the United Nations and the United States, failed to seriously punish Hussein for this transgression, the regime in Tehran decided to develop a nuclear program. When the mullahs had first came to power, Ayatollah Khomeini had waxed eloquent against the nuclear activities begun by the Shah. Iran, the Ayatollah insisted, had no need for a nuclear program. The Shah had spent billions of dollars on a frivolous reactor in the southern city of Bushehr because he was a "lackey of Western imperialists."

Now Tehran was keen on quickly revitalizing its abandoned nuclear program. But Western countries—particularly Germany, which had begun building the Bushehr reactor—were unwilling, under pressure from Washington, to contribute to the Islamic Republic's nuclear ambitions. Soviet Russia, in contrast, was more than willing. It was a repeat of the steel mill saga of 1965.

Initially, Russia's interest in undertaking the job of finishing Iran's nuclear reactor was driven by the need for foreign currency and jobs for scientists and technicians. More recently, as the price of oil has increased, and as an oil- and gas-rich Putinized Russia has been able to afford a more assertive foreign policy, the desire to stand up to the United States—and to use Iran's nuclear program as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the West—has been the driving force behind Russia's willingness to help Iran develop its nuclear capabilities.

US attempts to deter Russia from helping Iran have included everything from a de facto offer of a bribe (revenue equal to what the Russians stand to make from Iran's nuclear program) to the passage, in 2000, of the Iran Nonproliferation Act. Section Six of this act required that the United States stop any payments to the Russians in connection with the international space station unless the president could determine that the Russians had helped in efforts to prevent Iran from developing weapons of mass destruction or ballistic and cruise missiles. But Moscow has not succumbed to either temptations or threats. In fact, for several years, while the Islamic Republic of Iran was engaged in negotiations with the European Union and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on the fate of Iran's nuclear enrichment program, it was Russia (usually helped by China) that successfully blocked development of a joint policy and the passage of a United Nations resolution against Iran.

For a while, Iran and Russia promised a solution to the nuclear standoff through what came to be called "the Russian solution." Under the proposed plan, Russia and Iran would create, in Russia, a consortium for the enrichment of uranium and provide Iran with the fuel it needed for its reactors. The Russian solution used creative ambiguity to leave some of the thorniest issues—like whether Iranian scientists would be involved in the enrichment process—for the future. Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic used the time it bought with Russia's help to learn about the enrichment process. As a result, some experts, including the head of the IAEA, now declare that Iran has passed the "point of no return," where even an attack on the nuclear infrastructure will not seriously derail Iran's ability to get the bomb.

Ultimately, the extent of the Islamic Republic's secret nuclear program, its eventual refusal to accept the Russian solution, and its intransigence in negotiations with the UN made it untenable for Russia to continue defending Iran. In December 2005 the Russians undertook a new policy. They joined other members of the UN Security Council to pass a resolution that asked Iran to suspend its enrichment activities or face a series of escalating sanctions. More important, Russia used the excuse of Iran's late payment of some fees to announce earlier this year that the Bushehr nuclear reactor (scheduled to begin operation in late 2007) would not be operational until 2008.

The delayed date was important not just as a symbolic nod toward helping the West. Attacking a fully operational nuclear reactor courts the danger of a lethal fallout of radioactive material. The window of opportunity for a "safe" attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, in other words, depends on the date the Russians finish their work and the reactors are turned on. A delayed date extends that window until some time in 2008. It is also a measure of Russia's complicated, sometimes contradictory, always opportunistic policies in Iran

that, more or less concurrent with the announced delay, Moscow also announced the sale of $700 million worth of sophisticated antiaircraft 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 Republic 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 petropolitics. 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. ■