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Iran's Resistance Front Policy in the Strategic Calculations of the Russian Federation

Abstract. One of the most important pillars of Iran's geopolitical activities in the region and beyond is the Axis of Resistance concept. It creates opportunities to expand Tehran's influence and power as well as counter-balance its enemies as far from its borders as possible. However, this confrontational policy in the region is not carried out in a political vacuum. It impacts not only regional actors, but also the world's leading powers. Russia is one of them. The primary objective of this article is to analyse Russia's approach towards Iran's Resistance Front policy. To achieve this, the paper will touch upon several crucial elements, including the Iranian concept of the Resistance Front, the historical perspective of Russia's approach to Iran (after the Cold War), and limitations of the Kremlin's support to Tehran's policy.

Keywords: Iran, Russia, foreign policy, security, Resistance Front, Axis of Resistance

Polityka irańskiego Frontu Oporu w strategicznych kalkulacjach Federacji Rosyjskiej

Streszczenie. Jednym z najważniejszych filarów geopolitycznych działań Iranu w regionie i poza nim jest koncepcja Osi Oporu. Stwarza ona możliwości rozszerzania wpływów i potęgi Teheranu oraz równoważenia jego wrogów jak najdalej od jego granic. Ta konfrontacyjna polityka w regionie nie jest jednak prowadzona w politycznej próżni. Ma ona wpływ nie tylko na podmioty regionalne, ale także na wiodące światowe mocarstwa. Rosja jest jednym z nich. Głównym celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza podejścia Rosji do polityki irańskiego Frontu Oporu. Aby to osiągnąć, artykuł poruszy kilka kluczowych elementów, w tym irańską koncepcję Frontu Oporu, historyczną perspektywę podejścia Rosji do Iranu (po zimnej wojnie) oraz ograniczenia wsparcia Kremla dla polityki Teheranu.

Słowa kluczowe: Iran, Rosja, polityka zagraniczna, bezpieczeństwo, Front Oporu, Oś Oporu

Introduction

One of the key components of Iran's contemporary geopolitical strategy is known as the "Axis of Resistance". This policy has been negatively perceived by the Western powers and contributed to more regional tensions, including deepening sectarian divisions. However, it also allowed Iran to expand its presence externally. This aligns closely with the realist school of International Relations, which claims that the primary goal of every nation is to increase its power, even if it comes at the expense of other international actors. Simultaneously, this long-term and relatively comprehensive policy also serves a defensive dimension. Tehran gains valuable tools to counterbalance its adversaries and endeavours to maintain a buffer zone around its borders.

However, Iran's active and assertive policy does not occur in a political vacuum. It affects, either directly or indirectly, not only regional actors, but also certain powers that, like Iran, are revisionist states seeking to dismantle Pax Americana and establish a new paradigm (Hicks, Dalton, 2017). Russia – a former global power that has never accepted its international degradation – is a good example. Under the rule of Vladimir Putin, it has been seeking a restoration of its influence, including the Middle East, where the Russians have become more active in recent years.

The primary objective of this paper is to examine and analyse Russia's approach towards Iran's Resistance Front policy. It is based on the assumption that Russia supports Iran's Resistance Front only partially. As for the Kremlin, relations

with Tehran are part of a broader regional policy. In other words, Russia strives to act flexibly and pursue a multi-vector policy. Excessive support for Iran would undermine Russian foreign and security policy goals. Undoubtedly, the relations between Iran and Russia are a significant issue in contemporary international relations, security, diplomacy, and military studies. They are also a crucial element of one of the most important case studies, namely the rivalry in the Middle East and the tensions between Iran and the West, primarily with the United States.

This article will touch upon several crucial elements, including the Iranian concept of the Resistance Front, the historical perspective of Russia's approach to Iran (after the Cold War), and the limitations of the Kremlin's support of Tehran's policy. Several research questions will be addressed, such as the extent to which Moscow's ambitions in the region align with Tehran's plans, whether the Kremlin perceives Iran's Resistance Front policy as a threat, challenge, or opportunity, and whether Russia is truly interested in supporting Iran's activities.

The Resistance Front policy

Before analysing key elements, i.e. Russia's approach towards Iran's policy, it is essential to briefly explain the Resistance Front policy. It can be derived from Islam and the Palestinian philosophy of resistance (*moqawemat*) against evil and injustice, and an associated concept of non-negotiable sovereignty. Both Ruhollah Khomeini's and Ali Khamenei's demand for resistance against oppression (also in a political sphere) placed upon Iranians is inspired by Imam Husain and his resistance against Caliph Yazid. Khamenei associates it with the Greater Jihad, which he defines as a state where one does "not follow others in matters of politics, economy, culture, and art" (*We Are in an Asymmetric War*, 2016).

Politically, the official narrative emphasises, in alignment with the principles laid out by Imam Khomeini, that non-Muslim states should not hold sway over Muslim societies. A pragmatic outcome of this approach is Iran's strong rejection of any form of external interference in the internal affairs of Muslim countries. This also applies to any involvement of foreign forces, mainly the United States, which, according to apologists of the Islamic Republic, obstructs the formation of a regional (thus solely Muslim) collective security system (see: Amirahmadian, 2016: 1). However, any military presence of friendly powers – such as Russia's – is met with significant reluctance.

In this official narrative, the United States is portrayed as an embodiment of evil and a source of many woes for both Iran and the Middle East. As stated during a sermon at the Imam Husain Mosque in Mashhad, "The Islamic Republic not only liberated Iran from American control but also inspired other countries with the spirit of resistance and courage. Today, people in many countries within the

region and beyond chant ‘Death to America’ and burn American flags. The Iranian people have shown them that they can resist” (*Islamic Republic Has Destroyed Enemy*, 2016; *Ayatollah Khamenei elaborates on 6 key points*, 2018). Economically, the Iranian authorities have been promoting the concept of “the economy of resistance”, which, according to an official narrative, includes self-reliance and enduring hardships in the face of pressure from “arrogant powers” seeking to suppress the Islamic Republic.

Iranian decision-makers argue that the United States is no longer a hegemon and the world has become multipolar in recent years. Nevertheless, the Islamic Republic is still at war (Zimmt, 2023). As argued by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Iran is “in the midst of a major battle, on one side stands the Islamic Republic, and on the other side is an extensive and powerful front of enemies” (*We are in the midst*, 2018). This front mainly includes the United States, Israel, and some Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This policy manifests in assertive actions against what is perceived as the “Western-Arab-Zionist front” (*Safar-e se ruze*, 2017). It encompasses various elements, including Iran’s regional policies and Tehran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

The Resistance Front consists of various participants, all of whom are pro-Iranian and receive support from Tehran. The linchpin of this cooperation is Syria, which was referred to as the “golden link in the chain of resistance against Israel” by former Foreign Minister and senior adviser to the Supreme Leader, Ali Akbar Velayati (*Velayati Sees Syria*, 2012). Likewise, General Qasem Soleimani, back then the commander of Al-Quds Force, referred to Syria as the “bridge in the resistance front... Any intelligent person should understand that defeat in the war [*in Syria*] means defeat for all of us” (*Daesh dar عراق*, 2016). During Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency (2005–2013), Venezuela was also part of the “Resistance Front”. It includes numerous paramilitary and political organisations in the Middle East, primarily in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Palestine, but there are also reports of its presence in Africa. These groups serve as a confirmation of a well-known saying that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”. While Western perspectives often categorise them as terrorist organisations, Iran and its supporters see them as fighters against “global arrogance”, champions of justice, and advocates for oppressed people.

This concept has a geopolitical rationale behind it. As indicated earlier, according to political realism in International Relations, a pursuit of enhancing its own power is a natural and inherent aspect of every state’s instinct, especially in the Middle East, where distrust, hostility, and perpetual rivalry prevail. Therefore, having a presence in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq is rational from security and defence perspectives. General Yahya Rahim Safavi, who was a commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (1997–2007), rightly noted that the Iranian river of “Shalamche is no longer our defence line. Instead, this line now runs in southern Lebanon against Israel. Our defence lines are currently spread along the

Mediterranean coast, reaching the top of Israel” (*Omq-e defa'-ye*, 2014). The Iranian approach is not exceptional. The concept of expanding lines of defence as far from one's borders was a strategy pursued by NATO during the Cold War. Now we are witnessing a similar strategy carried out by China in the Indo-Pacific region. In the case of Iran, this forward defence serves as a protective sheath for the viable centre, which is the regime in Tehran. This concept has also been used to shield Iran's influence in critical places, such as Syria. With presence in Lebanon, Iran gains a tool to exert pressure, at least partially, on two of the Islamic Republic's enemies: Israel (directly) and the United States (indirectly, as Israel's ally).

Russia towards Iran after the Cold War

Iran has such abundant yet complex and difficult relations with few countries worldwide as it does with Russia. The common history of both nations is marked by periods of closed cooperation, including against a common enemy – Ottoman Turkey – but also by many violent wars. The 20th century was a difficult period, in which Russia was dominant. Examples include the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) and the Gilan crisis (1945–1946).

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union wanted – through the Tudeh Party – to increase its influence in Iran in order to gain access to the Persian Gulf and undermine the Western sphere of influence. A communist *coup d'état* that would turn Iran into an anti-American and pro-Soviet state, agreeing to host Soviet military bases on its coast, was a negative scenario for the authorities in both the United States and Tehran. Unfortunately for Moscow, during the Cold War, Iran maintained relatively cool relations with the Soviet Union – friendly, but at a safe distance. According to the Shah, “The more active Iran's contacts with the USSR, the less chance the Soviet Union would support subversive movements in Iran” (Parker, 2009: 5).

After the Cold War, the Islamic Republic welcomed the words of Russian Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev (1990–1996), who expressed Moscow's eagerness to establish a “strategic partnership” with Iran (Harris, 1995: 41). Tehran looked for a partner with global influence that could serve as a counterbalance to the United States and as leverage to undermine Pax Americana in the Middle East. Russia, which has not pursued any regime change in Tehran, was perceived as one of the best candidates for such a role, if not the best.

Cooperation was established quickly. As early as 1992, Russia became a significant supplier of weapons, including submarines and tanks, as well as spare parts. Additionally, after the end of the Cold War, Russia actively supported Iran's nuclear programme. As early as 2000, Vladimir Putin unilaterally cancelled the Russian-American agreement from 1995 and allowed Russian companies to

export more arms to Iran. Nevertheless, any attempts by Iran in the last 20 years to secure consistent and strong support from Moscow failed. The Kremlin engaged in cooperation with Tehran on select matters, always taking care to prevent any adverse effects on its relations with the West or with Middle Eastern partners. As a result, arms deliveries, as mentioned later (notably the issues with the S-300 air/missile defence system), were occasionally halted, while the nuclear programme faced challenges, leading to mutual accusations between the two sides.

Iran with its anti-Western policy and rhetoric soon became more significant for Russia and Putin, who at some point became more “determined to reverse the humiliating decade of the 1990s, guarantee Russia’s territorial integrity and restore Russia’s role as a great power” (Stent, 2014: 78). This shift occurred concurrently with a deterioration of relations between Russia and the United States, leading to a more assertive and imperialistic policy under Putin, who even compared the foreign policy of the United States to that of the Third Reich (Kramer, 2007). Very soon, “channels of communications – particularly those that were out of public sight and had never been extensive at the best of times – had narrowed, and acrimonious public megaphone diplomacy was on the rise” (Stent, 2014: 136). In 2007, Russia suspended its participation in the CFE (the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe), causing relations to sink to a dangerously low level. This created an opportunity for Iran to gain importance in the Kremlin’s strategic calculations as Russia sought ways to weaken the West. In the same year, Vladimir Putin visited Tehran, marking the first visit of a Kremlin leader since Joseph Stalin in 1943. This visit was primarily a tactical move by Russia, which wanted to use the “Iranian card” as leverage against the United States.

Within the same logic, in 2007, Iran was also allowed to purchase the S-300 system, but was not able to complete the deal anytime soon. Russia opted to improve its relations with the West under Obama’s “Reset” policy and, as a result, Iran’s significance waned. In 2010, President Dmitry Medvedev signed a decree banning arms deliveries to Iran (including the S-300 missile system), and consented to UN sanctions. This was met with significant dissatisfaction in Tehran. Consequently, Iran brought suit against Russia in a Swiss court, while, in response, Moscow threatened Tehran to withdraw its diplomatic support for Tehran. However, both nations eventually managed to mend their relations. It is not coincidental that this occurred when Russia’s relations with the West, primarily with the United States, deteriorated once again.

A decision to rebuild ties was made in Moscow, not Tehran, as the latter consistently desired close relations. Iran has a limited number of state allies, so having good relations with a relatively powerful country such as Russia was very significant. To some extent, Russia can serve as leverage against the United States, be a supplier of military equipment, and provide certain technologies, both military and civilian (including nuclear). Without Russia, Iran’s nuclear programme (despite some problems) would not have been as successful. Part of the progress

was attributed to completing the first Russian-built nuclear reactor (in Bushehr) in 2012, which finally reached its full capacity.

Iran in Russian calculations after the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring, which erupted in late 2010 and rapidly transformed the region's geopolitical landscape, served as a crucial catalyst for the strengthening of bilateral cooperation. As noted by an Iranian scholar, this event was seen in Tehran as a grassroots, social protest by Muslims against pro-Western, authoritarian regimes in the region (Haji-Yousefi, 2019: 506). The turmoil of the Arab Spring gave birth to new axes of cooperation, while conflicts raging in the region "sucked in" various regional powers, including Iran, who faced an opportunity to put its concept of the Resistance Front into practical testing. This political and social phenomenon also impacted Russia – on the one hand, it created a window of opportunity, but on the other, it threatened Moscow's position at that time. The future of the Assad family in Syria, a long-standing ally of the Kremlin, became uncertain, while as a result of NATO intervention, Russians lost their influence in Libya. Iran, with its regional ambitions and expanding network of partners in the region, quickly became much more attractive to Russia.

New regional dynamics brought Iran and Moscow closer together, as both nations recognised a shared objective: to safeguard the existing positions, to expand into new territories, and to enhance their influence and power. Additionally, both perceived the Arab Spring as "a US-inspired phenomenon, which posed a potential threat to both their own internal stability and their geopolitical positions in the Middle East. Both feared that the Arab Spring could lead to a strengthening of the United States in the region or the activation of radical Sunni movements" (Rodkiewicz, 2020). A critical condition to achieve these goals was to support and save Bashar Al-Assad, the President of Syria, whom Ali Jafari referred to as the "frontline of the Islamic revolution" and an example of "one of the greatest failures of our enemies, led by America and Israel" (*Tamas-ha-ye miyan-e*, 2016). Qatar-based Russian expert and scholar Nikolay Kozhanov rightly noted that "the geostrategic factor seriously favoured for strengthening the Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria. For Tehran, the beginning of Moscow's military involvement in Syrian affairs finally gave the Iranian authorities what they had been looking for the last decade: a solid political and military base for the development of bilateral relations" (Kozhanov, 2019: 451).

A milestone was reached in 2015 when Russia decided to directly intervene in the conflict and tilt the balance of power in favour of Al-Assad, and, consequently, in favour of Iran as well. As Iran provided ground forces and controlled various militias, they became a tactical yet crucial partner for Russia, which relied

on aerial operations. Tehran warmly embraced Russia's decision to intervene. Velayati used the opportunity to signal that the Iranian authorities were determined to pursue "lasting and long-term cooperation" with Moscow: "Russian efforts to resolve the Syrian issue are entirely coordinated with Iran. In the past, there have been instances where Russia and Iran held differing opinions on certain matters, but ultimately, both nations have managed to reach agreements here as well" (*Velayati: Asad khatt-e*, 2015). General Soleimani became a frequent guest in Moscow at that time, facilitating an "exchange of information" between Russia and Iran regarding Syria. Iran even took an equally unusual and controversial step¹ – in August 2016, it allowed the Russians to deploy its Tu-22M3 and Su-34 bombers, used to attack targets in Syria, in the Shahid Nojeh Air Base in the northwestern province of Hamedan.² Within several months, the IRNA – which is an official news agency of the Islamic Republic – announced with satisfaction that "a resistance front" of Iran, Syria, and Russia was "bearing fruits" (*Iran, Syria, Russia, resistance front*, 2017).

However, Russia's decision to step in and assist Iran was not motivated by an altruistic desire to support the Resistance Front. Instead, Russia pursued its objectives, which included neutralising potential Western expansion in Syria and combating Sunni jihadism in the country to prevent it from inspiring Russian jihadists, especially in the Caucasus region. Russia also aimed to act as a mediator and enhance its influence, not only in the Middle East but also in the Mediterranean Sea. Furthermore, Iran once again became a valuable leverage for the Kremlin in its deteriorating relations with the West. These relations had been strained by various factors, most notably Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the subsequent illegal annexation of Crimea.

In 2021, it was revealed that Russia, Iran, and Syria established a joint centre intending to secure a flow of oil, wheat, and other materials to Syria via the Mediterranean Sea. It was agreed that the Iranian ships – previously attacked by the Israeli Navy – would be protected by the Russian naval forces operating in the region ("*تالقان*" 2021). Again, the Russian decision was a result of Russia's pursuit of its own goals, which included a desire to increase permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea. To achieve it, Russia had to (1) seize Ukrainian

1 In response, a group of twenty parliamentarians called for a closed-door session of the Majlis (Iran's parliament) to discuss this matter (*Darqkhasht-e bist namayande*, 2016). This issue returned in a public discourse in April 2018, when the government denied that the Russian had requested access to their military facilities (*Esteqrar-e havapeyma*, 2018).

2 The first time Russians used that base was in 2015. At that time, Su-34 fighter/bomber and Il-76 transport aircraft were spotted there in satellite images. The agreement with Russia from August 2016 was indirectly confirmed by the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Shamkhani, who stated the following: "A cooperation between Tehran and Moscow in the fight against terrorism in Syria is strategic. We exchanged resources and facilities on this matter" (*Top Security Official Indirectly*, 2016).

naval facilities in the Black Sea (which was done after the 2014 invasion) – since this is the shortest connection to the Mediterranean Sea – and (2) secure strategic footholds in Syria. For such an ambitious and long-term strategy, Iran was a crucial partner. At the same time, the decision to protect Iranian ships allowed Russia to pose as a security provider and a significant player in the region.

The significance of Iran increased further after 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale aggression against Ukraine and very soon became bogged down in the war. As a result, the Kremlin, “pressured by the West (...) openly shifted toward Asia and the Islamic Republic” (Avdaliani, 2023). Russia began receiving Iranian military equipment. Iran transferred unknown quantities of drones, including the Shahed-136 UAVs, which have been used to attack multiple civilian and military targets. The list also reportedly includes artillery shells and various ammunition (Czulda, 2022), but there is a space for its expansion to include personal gear, medical equipment, light arms, tactical vehicles, rocket and missile artillery systems, and anti-tank weapons. As noted by Emil Avdaliani, “In many ways, the present alignment is exceptional; such cooperation has not been seen since the late 16th century when both Russia and Persia feared the expanding Ottoman Empire” (Avdaliani, 2023).

The limits of Russian support

The Kremlin is well aware that it shares many interests with the Islamic Republic. From the Russian perspective, Iran remains a valuable partner – friendly, relatively stable, predictable, and eager for cooperation. The Islamic Republic also wields significant influence in regions “critical to Russia’s security: the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Caspian region (...) Russia views cooperation with Iran as an essential component of maintaining stability along its southern frontier” (Reardon, 2014: 195). What is more, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a fiercely anti-Western country, particularly anti-American. Tehran’s stance is highly beneficial to Russia – particularly now that the West is involved in a new “Cold War” with Moscow, while Russia is interested in intentionally stirring tensions. In other words, Russia views Iran as a valuable asset and a tool to strengthen its bargaining position with the West, particularly the United States (Rodkiewicz, 2020). In this equation, Iran can serve not only as leverage but also as a buffer, safeguarding Russia’s backyard, mainly the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia, from any Western penetration. As long as Iran maintains its presence in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, these countries are unlikely to be penetrated by the United States or its partners, which also aligns with the Russian interests. For example, when Russia vacated some of its facilities in Syria and moved some of its units to Ukraine, these bases were taken over by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

Owing to a partnership with Iran, Russia got an opportunity to increase its presence in those countries. Maintaining good relations with Tehran gives Russia positive references among regional militias. As reported, “Russia engages with Hashd al-Shaabi (or Popular Mobilisation Forces) in Iraq on security challenges, defends Hezbollah from terrorism allegations, and holds negotiations with the Houthis on ending the Yemen war” (Ramani, 2021). Regarding Lebanon, good ties with Hezbollah – labelled by the Kremlin as a “legitimate socio-political force” (*Russia says Hezbollah*, 2015), were crucial for Russian companies in terms of getting access to the local energy sector (Mroue, 2023). It is likely that as Russia has expanded its presence in Africa in recent years, it may have also used assistance from Iranians, who have cultivated a network of contacts there. However, further research is needed on this subject.

Nonetheless, there are some serious deficiencies, too. Cooperation with Iran has a limited military significance for Russia – although both countries conduct joint exercises, their armed forces are not operationally integrated. From the Kremlin’s perspective, Iran’s presence in the Caspian Sea waters is not of great importance, as Russia also controls this area. The same holds true for a relatively insignificant (from Russia’s perspective) access that Iran has to the Persian Gulf. Moscow’s ideal scenario would involve having access to Iranian bases near the Strait of Hormuz, but due to several factors, including Iranian legal constraints, this is not feasible. Furthermore, when it comes to Middle Eastern countries, it is challenging to argue that Russia has attained a significant position owing to Iran. Much closer relations which have developed in recent years with states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia are a result of Russian diplomacy efforts and an alignment of national interests rather than an outcome of Iranian support. In other words, overestimating Iran’s value in Russia’s regional policy would be a mistake.

Russia’s collaboration with Iran has always had its limitations. It remains more of a pragmatic arrangement, riddled with various challenges and impediments, rather than a fully-fledged strategic partnership or a truly profound alliance, which is understood as a formal agreement that pledges the states to co-operate militarily (Dufield, Michota, Miller, 2008: 293). This has been evident in Syria, where Iran has been trying to establish a Shiite axis with Iraq, Syria, and Hezbollah. President Bashar al-Assad plays a pivotal role in this vision, while Moscow wanted to establish its own presence, extend its influence in the Middle East, and diminish Western dominance in the region. In this scenario, al-Assad has never been indispensable. Iran is undoubtedly aware that Russia intends to strengthen its position in Syria without setting a collision course with Tehran. Nevertheless, Moscow is striving to assume a more prominent role within the Iranian-Russian partnership – a fact underscored in the Mediterranean region, where both actors have increased their presence in recent years. Iran has successfully secured control of a strategic section of the container port in Latakia, thereby bolstering its capacity for power projection in the Mediterranean Sea and advancing

its economic initiatives. However, this development was met with resistance from Russia, which had opposed a plan of converting the Tartus port into an Iranian military base as early as 2011.³ In June 2018, Russians deployed their troops near Al-Kusayr in western Syria, close to the border with Lebanon. This move was not well-received by both Iran and Hezbollah (*Syria: Deployment of Russian Forces*, 2018). Economic competition and the fact that more contracts were awarded to Russian companies than Iranian ones was also reported (Therme, 2022).

Differences that determine the extent of Russia's support for Iranian policy are also evident in a broader perspective. Iran's foreign policy calculations, including its concept of the Resistance Front, are built on the assumption that regional security should not be guaranteed by external powers. Tehran staunchly opposes any foreign military intervention in the region, whereas Russia introduced its concept of collective security in the Persian Gulf back in the 1990s, reiterating it in 2021. This concept emphasises Moscow's insistence on "recognising the interests of non-regional players" (Kozhanov, 2022; see also: *Otvety na voprosy Ministra*, 2021). Although officially Tehran endorsed Russia's "more inclusive" approach (*Zarif Rusiyeh va Chinra*, 2019) and compared it to its own HOPE (Hormuz Peace Endeavour) initiative, and is keen to see any idea undermining a dominant position of the United States in the Persian Gulf, it does not want to have another broker in regional affairs (*Zarif: Be yek mantaqe-ye*, 2020). Furthermore, the Russian concept envisions cooperation among all countries in the Middle East and North Africa, including Israel. This stands in stark contrast to Iran's approach and the underlying principles of its Resistance Front.

Political and military support that Moscow provides to Iran is very limited, despite official declarations of close and friendly bilateral relations. For instance, the Kremlin does not support Iran and its Resistance Front strongly enough to provide Tehran with used military equipment for free. Donations of surplus hardware are common in cases of warm ties between a major power and its weaker partner, but such gestures have not occurred between Russia and Iran. Additionally, commercial transactions between these two are also very limited and problematic. For example, it has been reported that the Iranians have been unable to obtain RD-33 engines and spare parts for its MiG-29s since at least 2013 (Nadimi, 2016). In 2016, both states failed to agree on details of a future sale of T-90 tanks to Iran. The same story was repeated in 2023 with Su-35 jets – a deal was first officially confirmed, but later some delays have been reported. No deliveries were carried

3 The main reasons for Russian reluctance include, firstly, the loss of Moscow's dominant position in Syria, including exclusive control over the Syrian coast. Secondly, it might have complicated Russian-Israeli relations and, due to Israeli-Iranian tensions, increased a risk for Russian forces in Syria.

out as of late September 2023, despite earlier reports that they would commence by mid-2023.⁴

At the political level, it is evident that Russia offers limited support and regards Iran more as a subject rather than a partner. For example, Russia's backing for Iran's nuclear programme is far from being comprehensive and unconditional. In 2003, Russia was among the states that exerted pressure on Iran to suspend nuclear enrichment. When the United States withdrew from the JCPoA in 2018, "Russia has become a major advocate of maintaining it, and has undertaken active diplomatic efforts to persuade its Western European signatories to resume economic relations with Iran – in defiance of the American sanctions" (Rodkiewicz, 2020). Partially, Russia's actions were sincere. Breaking a US-led anti-Iranian bloc and limiting the effectiveness of US economic sanctions would be a significant accomplishment for Russia, as it would undermine American prestige. At the same time, Russia positioned itself as a concerned, impartial, and reliable mediator, who respects international agreements and always seeks peaceful resolutions (the same applies to Russia's efforts at that time to promote a new security architecture in the Persian Gulf).

On the other hand, Russia has additional motives. The Kremlin has valid reasons for not endorsing the revival of the JCPoA. This hypothesis was reiterated by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who expressed his disappointment that the Russians had never backed the Iran Deal and had "unsuccessfully attempted to derail talks three times" (*No one in Iran can figure*, 2021). Similarly, Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, selected as the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy in 2018, expressed a similar sentiment, warning that "Iranians have often been a toy in Russian politics" (*Falahat Pisheh Namayandeh-ye Majles*, 2016). The Nuclear Deal opened new opportunities for Tehran to export and develop its energy infrastructure. Iran has ambitions to become a regional transport hub, connecting various regions, including Asia and Europe. One such example is the INSTC (International North–South Transport Corridor), which was established in 2000 in collaboration with India and Russia.

However, the situation changed significantly when the United States withdrew in 2018 and re-imposed some sanctions. President Trump forced all countries to choose between trading with Iran or with the United States. States importing crude oil from Iran had to find another provider. Russia, whose national budget heavily relies (72%) on revenues from natural gas and crude oil (Kardaś, 2023), and who does not want to see any emerging competitors, increased its attractiveness as a supplier. Relatively severe international sanctions on Iran prevent Tehran

4 It is worth adding that the UN arms embargo expired in October 2020. It was partially imposed in 2010 and amended five years later.

from emerging as a substantial exporter of crude oil. The same holds for natural gas. Iran possesses the potential to become a significant natural gas exporter, which could challenge Russia's dominant position as the current world's largest exporter. Furthermore, the lack of access to Iranian energy resources might, in the long term, weaken European sanctions against Russia. For now, the Russians have achieved export successes at Iran's expense, notably in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Türkiye. Iran was compelled to "cut its own gas prices to compete with Russia's discounts" (Taslimi, 2022).

While the JCPOA would not have resolved all of Iran's issues – it was not a magic wand – it could have potentially increased the Islamic Republic's independence and bolstered its political and economic activity. This, in turn, would have provided Iran with more resources to pursue its Resistance Front policy. Admittedly, it might have also escalated tensions with the Americans and Europeans, but it offered a chance for rapprochement with the West. In such a scenario, Russian economic influence in Iran could have diminished or even disappeared. Western companies generally possess greater financial resources for investment and can offer more advanced technologies compared to their Russian counterparts (the evident shortcomings in Russia's economic and technological portfolio are particularly evident in Russian-African relations). It is neither coincidental nor surprising that, following the implementation of the JCPOA, numerous business agreements worth billions of dollars were swiftly announced between Iran and Western companies. However, with the eventual derailment of the JCPOA, most of these agreements were either frozen or cancelled. In fact, "Russia did not benefit much economically during the initial post-JCPOA period" – between 2015–2018 Russian export to Iran was worth "barely more" than 5 billion USD. It was roughly 2.5% of the 210 billion USD in goods exported to the Islamic Republic during this period (Mahmoudian, Cafiero, 2021). Now, without a functional JCPOA, Iran is left with no alternative but to prioritise its relationships with non-European partners, including Russia, which lacks any incentive to promote reconciliation between the Islamic Republic and the West.

In this context, an intriguing yet unanswered question is whether Iran will ultimately succeed in attaining full membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), established in 2015 and comprised of Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Armenia. Tehran has formally declared its intention to join this organisation, but thus far, it has only managed to secure a free trade agreement, which was signed in 2023 after long negotiations. However, full membership remains a vague plan for the future, despite President Putin openly expressing his desire for Iran to join the organisation as early as 2016 (*Iran Will Soon Join*, 2023). If Russia genuinely wanted Iran to become a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, the negotiation process and full membership would likely be a mere formality.

Divergent interests – as seen, for example, in a competition for a leading position in an energy market – are not the only explanation for clear limitations

in Russian support for Iranian policy. It can be, at least to some degree, also explained by Russia's broader strategic perspective and a need to consider its relations with other leading actors in the region. This not only applies to Syria, where – despite bilateral warm relations – “Tehran has long been worried about a potential ‘grand bargain’ between Moscow and Washington over Syria at the expense of Iran’s interests” (Mejidyar, 2017). Regarding a broader context – while Iran’s list of political, military, and economic partners is very limited – Russia has been making efforts to establish strong ties with numerous states in the region, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Egypt, and Libya. Russia rightly believes that having good relations with several regional powers is the only way to increase its regional position and influence.

Qatar-based Russian expert and scholar Nikolay Kozhanov rightly noted that “the Russian diplomacy in the Middle East is based on the principle of balancing between different states as long as they are ready to deal with Moscow. Despite the current political turmoil in the region, the Kremlin, so far, is very successful in maintaining relatively good relations with the key players of the Middle East” (Kozhanov, 2019: 462). This is partially a result of disappointment among certain Arab states with the United States’ policy, which, when signing the Iran Deal, “insufficiently took into account concerns of both Israel and the Arab Gulf monarchies in the Persian Gulf” (Czulda, 2021).

The Russian goal of avoiding direct involvement in regional disputes and tensions is one of the most significant factors that limit Moscow’s support for Iran’s Resistance Front. Tehran cannot expect that Moscow would provide more substantial support at the expense of Russia’s own interests. A good example of Russia pursuing its own goals is its endorsement of the demands of the United Arab Emirates regarding three islands in the Persian Gulf, which Iran has controlled since 1971. A joint diplomatic statement of Russia and the GCC states, which was released in July 2023, undoubtedly served to improve Russia’s position in the Arab monarchies, but at the same time, it was a blow to Iran. In response, the Islamic Republic summoned the Russian ambassador and called on Moscow to revise its statement (Iordache, 2023). This is a small price for the opportunity to foster improved relations with the Persian Gulf monarchies and to pursue a vision of expanding Russia’s economic engagement with the United Arab Emirates, which in 2022 rose by 68% to 9 billion USD (Katz, 2023).

Another example of Russia’s delicate balancing act is the relatively limited arms deliveries to Iran. While these could potentially enhance Russia’s standing in Tehran, they would also be viewed unfavourably by Arab nations and Israel (Russia has been trying to sell its weapons to Middle Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE). In recent years, the Kremlin has cultivated strong ties with the latter, which, paradoxically, is a staunch adversary of the Islamic Republic. Although this might appear contradictory at first glance, in practice, it reflects classic *Realpolitik* – the art of balancing among diverse actors to achieve

one's objectives. Despite Russia's relations with Iran, Vladimir Putin was able to establish cordial ties with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Despite this, the Kremlin showed no objections to engaging with Hamas (Nahia, 2022). This has been a constant and characteristic element of Russia's policy under Putin's rule – the Kremlin has always been looking for a “fertile ground” that could be used to enhance its position.

In the light of this pragmatic approach, Iran's Resistance Front, particularly its presence in Syria, amplifies Moscow's influence over Israel. Iran's involvement in Syria not only helped preserve President Al-Assad's regime, but also posed a substantial challenge to Israel. The positive rapport between Russia and Iran allows the Kremlin to present itself as a player capable of influencing the Iranians and limiting their anti-Israeli endeavours. In a sense, Israel finds itself in a position where it must maintain good relations with Moscow, indirectly viewing Russia as a provider of security. Russia has skilfully leveraged this advantage over Israel. In January 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov openly assured “dear Israeli colleagues” that Syria would not become a battleground for the conflict between Israel and Iran (*Russia will not allow Syria*, 2021). However, despite the Russia–Iran ties, Moscow did not shield the Iranian forces and pro-Tehran militias from Israeli airstrikes. For instance, in 2019, reports indicated that Russia greenlit Israeli airstrikes on a Hashd al-Shaabi military facility near Baghdad (Hamidi, 2019).

Conclusions

Russia's approach towards Iran and its Resistance Front policy has evolved over time, not due to changes in Iran's policies (which have remained largely consistent since the Islamic Revolution in 1979) or Iran's attitude towards Russia (as Tehran consistently seeks close ties with the Kremlin), but primarily because of the cyclical shifts in Russia's priorities, including its relations with the West. These relations resemble a sine wave since 1991 (Czulda, 2013: 165–182). In other words, Russia's relations with Iran are a derivative of its relations with other states, which are deemed more crucial to the Russians. This primarily involves the United States, while in the regional perspective, the list includes Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. In this context, Iran's Resistance Front philosophy is sometimes regarded by the Kremlin as an opportunity and from time to time as an obstacle.

Iran has never been the most important – and certainly not the sole – partner for Russia, and it is highly unlikely to become so in the future. Close relations with Iran undoubtedly bring certain benefits, but they also create undeniable costs that Russia is not willing to bear. This includes difficulties in relations with

economically more attractive Arab countries. An illustration of this cost-benefit analysis is the fact that in a crucial matter for Iran, namely its nuclear programme, Moscow did not support Tehran, and, in fact, it supported the UNSC resolutions against Iran six times between 2006 and 2010 (Azizi, 2023). Arms deliveries, including the S-300 system, were also suspended, leading to a cooling of bilateral relations.

Regarding the West, when Russia had good relations, Moscow's cooperation with Iran was rather limited. However, in times of strained ties, especially after 2022, collaboration with Tehran, including the military dimension, became much more important to Russia. During this period, Iran became a significant counterbalance to the West and was additionally viewed as a means to establish alternative trade markets and transit networks. Nevertheless, the Kremlin is not genuinely interested in allowing Iran to become too powerful and influential, as this could potentially lead to the rebuilding of economic ties with the West at the expense of Russian companies. The Russian approach is thus not based on mutual trust and a true partnership but, rather, on tactical cooperation between two internally similar autocratic entities that occasionally identify areas for collaboration. Simultaneously, in economic terms, "Russia and Iran are competitors, not partners, by default" (Batmanghelidj, 2022). This is especially applicable to the energy sector, where both states vie for the same customers.

Currently, both countries are once again in a phase of close relations. In addition to symbolic gestures, such as courtesy visits of warships and numerous memorandums of understanding, there are also concrete political and economic commitments as well as particular actions. Among these, high-level visits and agreements, such as the one in January 2021 regarding "information security," should be mentioned. Furthermore, in 2022, both countries pledged to negotiate a new 20-year strategic cooperation agreement, intended to replace the one signed in 2001.

However, it is important to emphasise that this does not imply unwavering the Kremlin's support for all Iranian actions carried out under the banner of the Resistance Front. Additionally, in the military sphere, which is currently particularly significant, cooperation remains relatively limited. The most notable outcome is a transfer of the aforementioned Shahed-136 UAVs, with reports indicating their production in Russia. It is worth noting that these drones are technologically rather rudimentary in design. One of the most prominent examples of tightening cooperation is the delivery of Yak-130 light combat trainer jets (24 in total) as well as a deal for 24 Su-35SE aircraft and Mi-28NE assault helicopters (18) that are yet to be handed over.

Given the current international situation, an attempt to further strengthen bilateral cooperation is highly likely. This stems from several reasons, including Iran's failure to improve relations with the West (marked by the actual death of the JCPOA), the election of Ibrahim Raisi as president in 2021 (who has embraced the

'Look East Policy' and sought alternative trade partners), and the drastic deterioration of relations between Russia and the West. As aptly noted by Alex Vatanka, currently, both states are the "most sanctioned countries on earth" (*Iran & Russia*, 2023). This pushes them towards increased cooperation, a goal that Tehran and Moscow both declare. Furthermore, Russia now aligns even more with Tehran's vision of a post-Pax-Americana world. They are also becoming increasingly similar internally – two anachronistic autocratic regimes that share a common concern for their survival while grappling with mounting problems. The Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine (2022) and its consequences, including Western sanctions, compel Moscow to place greater focus on non-European partners, such as Iran. Additionally, what further solidifies bilateral relations and enhances Iran's importance in Russia's policy is the Kremlin's need to acquire more weaponry and ammunition.

Does the currently increased political and military attractiveness of Iran in Moscow's eyes lead to a more favourable approach of Russia towards the Resistance Front? For the time being, there is no evidence to suggest that a heightened significance of Iran, due to the full-scale war in Ukraine and a challenging situation faced by the Kremlin, has increased Russia's support for the Iranian regional concept and Tehran's policy in general. Even now, when the relations are deeper than before, Russia prioritises its own interests, including actions aimed at countering the West. A good illustration of this perspective can be found in the candid words of Mikhail Ulyanov – Russian permanent representative to the nuclear negotiations – who said that "Russia could have helped push JCPOA over the finish line", but it will not do it – regardless of Iran's position – due to the Russian-US "proxy war" (Taslimi, 2022).

Iran still lacks the potential to become a more significant partner, not to mention to balance other regional countries that remain very important to Russia, and perhaps even more so, given Russia's economic challenges. There is no solid reason to believe that a hitherto weak economic cooperation, with just roughly 4 billion USD annually in bilateral trade (Batmanghelidj, 2022), could suddenly flourish, and that both countries will establish efficient banking channels. Iran is a financially-constrained partner grappling with severe economic issues and mounting debts to Russia. It is true that Iran, with its population of approximately 89 million people, represents a potentially lucrative market. However, for now, it remains merely a potential market. Among Russia's neighbouring countries, including Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Belarus, Iran has the lowest export share. Russia accounts for only 5% of Iran's foreign trade volume, while Iran's share of Russia's foreign trade is only 6%. The same source pointed out that due to international sanctions, trade between Russia and Iran experienced a decreasing trend between 2011–2018 (Halalkhor, Rad, 2021). In comparison, "according to unofficial estimates, the Arab monarchies' total investments in Russia have reached around 25 billion USD" (Rodkiewicz, 2021).

It is not coincidental that over the past 30 years, both countries have managed to complete only a single flagship project – the Bushehr nuclear plant. Despite its actual and symbolic significance, even this project encountered serious challenges, including technical shutdowns and unpaid debts by Iran. The same scepticism currently applies to the INSTC project, sometimes seen as a factor that would bring these two players closer in the coming years. However, it was unveiled more than 20 years ago. Regional infrastructure projects, such as railways, are mostly subject to delays. The fact that both countries, particularly Iran, face financial difficulties and that geopolitical reasons threaten the implementation of investments such as the construction of a 162 km railway connection between Iran's Rasht and Azerbaijan's Astara does not inspire optimism about the success of a project presented as strategically significant. This is the case despite Putin's pledge to provide 1.7 billion USD for the mentioned railway connection (*Russia and Iran ink deal*, 2023).

In summary, the Kremlin largely supports Iran and its concept of the Resistance Front against the West – especially now that Russia has strained relations with the United States and Europe. However, this support is situational, based on a transactional approach, and is a result of Moscow's current calculations as it strives to balance between various actors in the Middle East. These calculations define the limits of the Russian support for Tehran. There is no reason to assume that getting closer and more entangled with an isolated regional state plagued by significant economic problems and unpaid debts will become more attractive to the Kremlin than it currently is.

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