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THE ROLE OF IRAN IN RUSSIA’S WAR IN UKRAINE: THE IMPACT ON MEDITERRANEAN SECURITY

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a watershed event in international politics. From the onset of the war itself, many observers have been debating that the war would sooner or later transform the current international order. The role of Iran in this regard deserves the special attention. Iran represents the unique case of the country which established itself as one of Russia’s most important partners on the international stage. It is the one of the very few countries in the world to provide Moscow with weapons during the war, and whose official talking points on the war in Ukraine are nearly identical to those of Russian Federation.

At the initial stage of the war, Tehran sought to maintain official neutrality and its position was notably cautious. In March 2022 at the emergency session of the UN General Assembly, Iran abstained from voting on a resolution deploring the Russian invasion of Ukraine and urging the immediate withdrawal of its troops. The Islamic Republic did not recognize the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics. It has refused to recognize the validity of the Kremlin’s “referendum” that annexed four regions in eastern Ukraine. Eight years after the annexation of Crimea by Russia, Iran still does not recognize that region as part of the Russian Federation [4].

Later, despite the continued emphasis on “neutrality” in the war, Iran’s official rhetoric has been shifting toward supporting Russia. In a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in July 2022, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei endorsed Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a preventive measure: “... in the case of Ukraine, if you did not take the initiative, the other side would have caused the war with its own initiative” [7].

The close coordination between Moscow and Tehran exhibited today is a relatively new phenomenon. Iranians share negative historical memory of Russian policy toward Iran during colonial era as well as throughout the Cold War. Even ten to fifteen years ago, Moscow and Tehran remained suspicious of one another. Beginning in 2011, the two countries deepened their collaboration through their mutual commitment to the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

The war in Ukraine has created the new international dynamics, which have served to elevate relationship between Russia and Iran to the level of informal strategic partnership or so called “alliance out of necessity”. There are three major reasons for this development.

The first one is strategic calculations. Today, both Russia and Iran face political isolation from the US and Europe and both seek to create a new international order in which Washington plays a significantly diminished role. In addition to this, expanding cooperation with Russia (as well as with China) totally corresponds to “Look to the East” policy, which has been pursued by the Iranian leadership over the past few years in response to its increasing isolation.

Domestic developments in both countries are not less important. The desire for closer relations between Moscow and Tehran is based on growing authoritarianism in domestic politics of both countries and the danger of social unrest. Unlike Europe, which has always been critical of the human rights situation in Iran, Russia is ruled by authoritarian government and is seen as reliable partners for the Islamic Republic.

Finally, Moscow and Tehran are the subjects of extensive Western sanctions, and both are interested in coping with sanctions and international isolation.

The combination of the factors mentioned above, has caused Iran to effectively side with Russia in what the Iranian leaders perceive to be not just a war on Ukraine, but one against the West. And although Tehran officially denies providing supplying weapons to Moscow – or supporting the Russian invasion in general – the evidence of Iran’s indirect involvement is undeniable.

This involvement is manifested first of all in the dispatch of Iranian drones to Russia, which destroy civilian infrastructure throughout Ukraine. The supply of Iranian kamikaze drones is very important factor for the Russian military system. As for today, at least 1600 “Shahed” drones have al-

ready been used by Moscow against Ukraine. In addition to this, there is an agreement between countries to build a drone factory in Russia able to manufacture at least 6,000 drones of various models in the coming years [5]. It is also possible that Iran will supply Russia with its locally manufactured ballistic missiles. This Iranian policy led the Ukrainian government to remove the Iranian ambassador's accreditation and downgrade relations with the Islamic Republic.

In exchange for military support of Moscow, Tehran has also benefited from Russian help in several ways. Iran will receive Russian conventional weapons, including Su-35 jets, along with missile systems, air defence systems, and helicopters. Tehran is also seeking nuclear assistance from Moscow, which could help the Iranians advance their nuclear program [3].

Along with military cooperation, the countries are investing significant efforts in tightening their economic cooperation. The trade between the two countries doubled last year. Russia had invested \$2.76 billion in Iran last year, becoming Tehran's largest foreign investor. The National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) and Russia's Gazprom signed a \$40 billion agreement to upgrade Iran's oil and gas sectors [6]. Moscow and Tehran are working together on multiple fronts, facilitating bilateral trade and business, expediting the completion of transit routes (including the North-South Transit Corridor and its Caspian Sea component), and linking their banking systems to facilitate financial transactions.

In 2022 a record number of meetings between senior Russian officials and their Iranian counterparts took place. During the visit to Moscow on March 29 2023, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Adollahian announced that both sides are finalizing the new 20-year strategic cooperation agreement, a document that will replace a similar deal signed in 2001 [2]. These tightened relations indicate that the cooperation between the two countries is not just tactical. Rather, it reflects a strategic decision by both sides.

In general, the war in Ukraine and the growing hostilities between the West and Russia have served to advance Iranian national interests. First of all, the war is keeping NATO focused on Russia rather than Iran, giving the Islamic Republic room for maneuver. Beyond Moscow and Tehran's bilateral relation, Iran's role in the war has helped the Islamic Republic to establish itself as a recognized drone power. Today Iran is

attracting potential new customers to its drone industry – particularly “rogue states” sanctioned by the West.

Iran’s decision to support Russia during its invasion of Ukraine has led to certain material gain, but it has also added to the government’s legitimacy crisis at home. The expanding partnership with Moscow has been met with a primarily negative reaction from the Iranian public, which has historically been very sensitive to Russia’s role in the country. Public opinion polls highlighted poor support for Moscow’s position, and Russia’s image in Iran has suffered significantly since February 24, 2022 [1]. As such, among other aspects, the war in Ukraine also reflects a wide gap between the priorities of the government and those of the Iranian public.

The growing alliance between Iran and Russia represents risks and challenges for Mediterranean and international security. The greatest of these is the deterioration of Iran’s ties with the European Union and its individual member states. By supporting Russia, which many in Europe view as an existential threat, Tehran has become a real danger in the eyes of many EU capitals.

Today, European allies more eager to support a tougher line towards Iran. In an effort to halt drone proliferation, in December 2022 the EU imposed sanctions designed to stop the European export of drone components to Iran. The same reaction came from Washington. The United States imposed additional sanctions on Iranians and Iranian companies that have been involved in building and designing the drones, as well as companies involved in their transport to Russia. Both European and American statesmen see the strengthening of the Russo-Iranian partnership as a significant danger to global security [8].

Second, Iran’s military support of Moscow has eliminated any prospects for reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Iran continues the rapid acceleration of uranium enrichment, while the international community’s ability to monitor the Iranian nuclear project is limited. With talks stalled, Tehran have enough time to advance key areas of its nuclear program that are essential for weaponization if it makes a political decision to go for a nuclear bomb in the future.

Finally, in parallel to the development of its nuclear capacity, Iran has continued its provocative and destabilizing role in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. It continues to deploy and equip its militias in Syria,

Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. Tehran is also increasing its financial support to Palestinian terrorist groups, such as Islamic Jihad.

In the short term, it seems as the United States and Europe can do little to stop Moscow and Tehran from developing closer ties. As long as the West builds on its pressure campaign against Russia and Iran, Moscow and Tehran are likely to pursue further integration as a collective response. On the other hand, Tehran–Moscow relations lack social support and depend heavily on the viability of the ruling regimes in both countries. Therefore, any fundamental political change in Iran or Russia would most likely effect the future of their alliance.

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