

RUSSIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS IN THE OBAMA ERA

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The Obama administration came into office seeking to improve U.S. relations with both Iran and Russia. However, neither Tehran nor Moscow has responded favorably toward the new administration's initiatives. Yet, while Tehran and Moscow continue to distrust Washington, they also distrust each other.

This paper will focus on how Moscow and Tehran have regarded each other since the Obama administration took office in January 2009. In order to do this, though, something first must be said about how Russia and Iran have reacted toward the Obama administration's overtures, since this forms an important part of the backdrop of how Moscow and Tehran have related to each other.

Space does not permit a detailed account of how the Obama administration sought to improve relations with both Tehran and Moscow. Suffice it to say that disappointment has been the result in both instances. Three obstacles have hindered the achievement of the new president's goals: Iran's reaction, Russia's reaction and the unforeseen (by the Obama administration) consequences of attempting to improve U.S. relations with both countries simultaneously.

ADMINISTRATION OVERTURES

The Obama administration signaled early on that it was far more interested in resolving the nuclear issue with Tehran than in promoting democratization and human rights in Iran. Its reaction in June 2009 to protests by the Green Movement over the Islamic government's announcement that Ahmadinejad had been re-elected by an overwhelming majority was quite muted.

The Iranian leadership, however, has claimed and may well believe that the Green Movement has been orchestrated by the United States.¹ And if Washington can do this without having even a diplomatic presence in Iran, what could it do if normal relations were re-established? The Obama administration's efforts to improve relations at the very moment that opposition to the regime flared up appears highly suspicious to the hardliners in Tehran.

As for Russia, it has gained enormously from Iranian-American hostility. The United States has blocked Iran from serving as a corridor for Caspian Basin oil and gas, and has actively discouraged Europe from developing and buying gas from Iran. As a result, Russia has benefited from more Azeri and Central Asian oil and gas flowing through pipelines into Russia (thus allowing Moscow to both reap transit rev-

enue and exercise political leverage) than would have occurred had Iranian routes been available. Further, Russian business interests have been able to gain opportunities for trade with and investment in Iran that they might not have obtained had they had to compete with American and other Western business. These advantages, of course, could be lost if and when an Iranian-American rapprochement occurs.

In November 2009, the renowned Russian scholar of international affairs, Georgiy Mirskiy, who believes that Russia and the West have a common interest in working together to prevent Tehran from obtaining nuclear weapons, described how Russian suspicion of the United States vis-à-vis Iran prevented this:

“If the United States becomes reconciled with Iran, it will be bad for us, and the Americans will push us out of Iranian economic space. A nuclear Iran is better for us than a pro-American one.”

In the first place is the legacy of the Soviet mentality with its built-in mechanism that ensures maintaining a constant level of hostility and suspicion toward everything Western, and especially American. “Why should we try to persuade Iran together with the Americans? It would be advantageous for them, and why should we let Washington lead us by the nose, especially since the main disputed issues have not been decided — the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) and others. To allow the Americans to score points is not in our interests.” Secondly, strange as it may seem, these kinds of opinions can also be heard: “If the United States becomes reconciled with Iran, it will be bad for us, and the Americans will push

us out of Iranian economic space. A nuclear Iran is better for us than a pro-American one.” And, in fact, overall it appears that many of our politicians are convinced of one thing: a demonstration of solidarity with the West will do nothing for our leadership in terms of mobilizing the population on the basis of an upsurge of patriotism.²

Finally, the Obama administration’s efforts to improve relations with both Russia and Iran have been unsuccessful, in part,

because they were made simultaneously. Tehran saw U.S. claims of wanting to improve relations as belied by American efforts to get Russia to toughen its position to-

ward Iran on the nuclear issue. Similarly, Moscow saw the Obama administration’s call for Moscow to “help us” with Iran as highly suspicious. Essentially, Moscow saw Washington as asking Russia to worsen its relations with Iran over the nuclear issue to better position the United States to later improve its own relations with Iran, thereby damaging Russian interests.

Underlying these views of the Obama administration’s “nefarious aims” in both Moscow and Tehran is their deep suspicion of one another, and their fear that the other might “sell out” to America at their expense.

RUSSIAN-IRANIAN DIFFERENCES

Iran, as is well known, has had many disputes with and grievances toward the United States. But Iran’s disputes with and grievances toward Russia are, if anything,

much greater and certainly more longstanding. Historical grievances that Iranians have against Russia include the loss of territory to the Tsarist Empire in the early nineteenth century, the division of Iran into spheres of influence by the Russian and British empires, Tsarist intervention to quell Iran's constitutional revolution in the first decade of the twentieth century, Soviet support for secession in northwestern Iran after both World War I and World War II, the occupation of Iran by the USSR and United Kingdom during World War II, and Soviet support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War.

Russian-Iranian relations improved in the 1990s, but there are still many outstanding differences between them, including those over Putin's proposals for a joint U.S.-Russian missile-defense system directed toward Iran, the division of the Caspian Sea, repeated Russian delays in completing the Bushehr nuclear reactor, Russian delays in supplying S-300 air-defense missile systems, and different approaches to resolving the Iranian nuclear issue. Russian-Iranian differences since the advent of the Obama administration include the following:

- *Putin's Proposed Alternative to the U.S. Deployment of BMD in Eastern Europe:* In May 2009, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov reiterated Putin's proposal that, instead of deploying ballistic-missile defenses (BMD) to Eastern Europe (which Moscow believes would be aimed at Russia and not Iran as the Bush administration claimed), the United States and Russia instead create a joint missile-defense system using facilities in Armavir, Russia, and Gabala, Azerbaijan.³ Just as when Putin first came up with this proposal in June 2007, though, Tehran was not pleased by Moscow's willingness to cooperate with Washington in a BMD plan that would be unambiguously

aimed at Iran.⁴ (U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates responded positively in June 2009,⁵ but — perhaps because of negative Iranian reaction — Moscow seems to have backed away from this proposal.)

- *The Caspian Sea:* Iran and Russia (more or less in conjunction with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) have argued over how to divide the Caspian Sea (which they all border) ever since the breakup of the Soviet Union. The history of this dispute is too long and tortured to describe here. Suffice it to say that Russia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are willing to grant Iran a 13 percent share of the Caspian (a percentage corresponding to its part of the shoreline), while Iran demands that each of the five littoral states receive a 20 percent share. And, of course, there appear to be significant petroleum reserves in the disputed area. Officials from the five governments have occasionally met to resolve the dispute but have never been able to do so. In September 2009, Moscow organized a meeting in Kazakhstan for all the Caspian littoral countries except Iran. Despite the Russian Foreign Ministry's insistence to the contrary, this resulted in heightening Iranian fears that Russia, along with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, were seeking to make decisions about the Caspian without Iranian participation.⁶

- *The Bushehr Nuclear Reactor:* After a decade of delays in completing a nuclear reactor for Iran at Bushehr, the head of Rosatom (the Russian state atomic-energy corporation) Sergei Kiriyenko, assured Tehran in February 2009 that the reactor would be "launched" by the end of 2009.⁷ In November 2009, however, the Russian energy minister announced that, due to "technical reasons," the reactor could not

be completed by the date promised, but that it would be ready at the beginning of 2010. The Russian foreign minister insisted that the delay was not linked to the negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, but that “strictly technical questions” needed to be resolved.⁸ Rosatom officials later indicated that the completion of the reactor would not occur at the beginning of 2010, but “closer to” the Persian New Year in March 2010.⁹

The Iranian press reacted furiously, citing this as yet another instance of Russian duplicity and unreliability.¹⁰ March 2010 came and went,

though, without the reactor’s being started up. In April 2010, Kiriyenko stated that the launch would occur in August 2010.¹¹

• *S-300 Air-Defense Systems*: Under a contract signed by Moscow and Tehran, Russia was supposed to deliver S-300 missile-defense systems to Iran by mid-2009.¹² Russia, citing “technical matters,” has not yet delivered them.¹³ With Israeli politicians and officials openly discussing the possibility of an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities in the hope of preventing Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons, Tehran has been eager to obtain Russian S-300s — to degrade, and perhaps even deter — such an attack. Tehran, then, has been frustrated at Russia’s delay in delivering the S-300s, especially since Israel has been urging Moscow not to deliver them.

Indeed, some Iranian observers see the delay as due to Israeli influence in Moscow. As an unattributed commentary in the strongly conservative Tehran daily *Javan* thundered:

Tehran has been frustrated at Russia’s delay in delivering the S-300 [air-defense systems], especially since Israel has been urging Moscow not to deliver them.

[N]othing can calm the uncontrolled business hunger of Russians. In Shahirvar of this year [23 August-22 September] Binyamin Netanyahu, the prime minister of the Zionist regime, made a trip to Moscow in which he asked the Russians to refrain from selling the S-300 defense system to Iran. Before that, in August, Shimon Peres also traveled to Russia and asked Dmitri Medvedev to refrain from selling

these missiles to Iran. After meeting Medvedev in the Kremlin, Peres came to correspondents and said, “The Russian president has

promised me not to sell S-300 missiles to Iran.” Russian officials have never denied that statement, but it is said that the Russian party has sent a message to the Israelis saying that the Israelis had to give them the money for them not to sell the missiles to Iran.¹⁴

The commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, Major General Mohammad Ali Jaafari, claimed the delay in delivery of the S-300s “is due to the U.S. and Israeli pressure on Moscow.”¹⁵ The deputy coordinator of Iranian air defense, Mohammad Hasan Mansurian, even warned that Tehran “can complain to international authorities and sue Russia for failing to carry out its commitment.”¹⁶ It is highly doubtful, needless to say, that such a course of action would yield much. What these and other statements reveal, though, is not only that Tehran feels more vulnerable to attack without the S-300s it expected to have already been delivered, but also that such an attack is more likely to be effective.

● *The Iranian Nuclear File:* During the summer of 2009, Russia worked with the other permanent members of the UN Security Council (the United States, the United Kingdom, France and China) plus Germany (often referred to as the P5+1) to accommodate the Iranian demand for medical-grade (higher than commercial-grade but lower than weapons-grade) uranium while at the same time reducing the international community's concerns about Iran's acquisition of weapons-grade uranium. The plan that the P5+1 came up with was for Iran to turn over most of its stockpile of low-enriched uranium (commercial grade) for further enrichment to medical grade in Russia, final fabrication in France and return to Iran. Removing Tehran's low-enriched uranium from Iran would mean that it could not be further enriched to weapons grade there. But, while Tehran at first seemed to signal a willingness to accept this proposal,¹⁷ it later backtracked, insisting on receiving medical-grade uranium from abroad before giving up any of its commercial-grade uranium, and only turning over part of its stockpile for further enrichment while keeping part inside Iran.¹⁸

Russian delays in completing Bushehr and delivering the S-300s were cited in the Iranian press as reasons that Tehran should not trust Moscow to further enrich its low-enriched-uranium stockpile and return it in a timely manner (if at all).¹⁹ Iran's retaining any substantial quantity of low-enriched uranium, of course, was exactly what the P5+1 wanted to avoid due to their concern about proliferation. Both in September and again in November 2009, Russian President Medvedev indicated that further sanctions against Iran may be implemented.²⁰ In late November 2009, the Board of Governors of the International

Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) passed (with Russian and Chinese support) a resolution censuring Iran for not disclosing that it was building a uranium-enrichment facility near Qom and calling upon Iran to comply with the P5+1's proposal.²¹ The Iranian press heatedly denounced both Russia and China for their "betrayal."

Yet, despite Medvedev's statement and Russia's vote in favor of the IAEA Board of Governors resolution against Iran, Moscow also took steps to reassure Tehran that any additional Security Council sanctions against Iran would be limited. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, for example, made several statements about how any new sanctions should be guided exclusively by the aim of strengthening the nonproliferation regime "rather than by any other agendas."²² Ahmadinejad, though, abruptly changed course in early February 2010, stating that there was "no problem" for Iran to accept the IAEA deal that he had earlier rejected.²³ Whether Iran actually accepts it or not, this move allows Moscow and Beijing to credibly argue that further sanctions are not needed at this time because Tehran is now cooperating with the IAEA. While some Russian politicians reacted negatively to Ahmadinejad's surprise announcement later in February 2010 that Iran would further enrich its own commercial-grade uranium to medical grade, Interfax's recognition that China was still calling for stepped-up diplomatic efforts suggested that Moscow could talk about increased sanctions against Iran without having to follow through on them.²⁴

● *The Rise of Anti-Russian Sentiment in Iran:* Unlike Western governments, Moscow congratulated Ahmadinejad on his re-election as president shortly after it

was officially declared in June 2009. In addition to carrying out protests in Iran against what were widely believed to be falsified election results, the Green Movement frequently denounced Russia during its demonstrations.²⁵ While registering its objection to Moscow's recognizing the re-election of Ahmadinejad as legitimate, and noting the long history of poor Russian-Iranian relations, the Green Movement sought to identify Ahmadinejad with a country that most Iranians regard negatively. Indeed, in November 2009, the conservative Iranian weekly *Siyasat-e Ruz* noted that even a Russian news agency (RIA Novosti) conducted a poll showing that 93.5 percent of Iranians have a negative opinion of Russia.²⁶ Moscow sought to indicate its evenhandedness by calling for the election issue to be resolved on the basis of Iranian law (thereby slightly distancing Moscow from Ahmadinejad but calling for a solution highly likely to result in the validation of his re-election).²⁷ Senator Mikhail Margelov, chairman of the Committee on International Affairs of the Federation Council (the upper house of the Russian legislature), made clear that Moscow feared a "color revolution" in Iran that would bring to power a pro-American, anti-Russian regime in Tehran.²⁸ But since the opposition is anti-Russian, Moscow had little choice but to stick with the increasingly beleaguered Tehran regime.

Moscow, then, was especially unhappy when, in December 2009, Ahmadinejad began calling for Russia to pay compensation to Iran for the Soviet occupation of the northern half of the country during World War II.²⁹ Ahmadinejad may have done this because he sensed that he was perceived in Iran as being too friendly toward Russia and thus wanted to distance himself from

it. This was a subject, though, that Moscow did not even want to discuss. Moscow does not see itself as owing anyone for any actions that it took in conjunction with defeating the Nazis, and it does not want to set a precedent for providing compensation to any other countries — such as those in the Baltics and Eastern Europe — that the Soviets occupied for far longer.

- *Other:* In December 2009, the former head of the Secretariat of Iran's High Council of Marine Industries complained that Russia had not built three 63,000-ton ships that Iran had ordered for use in the Caspian. In addition, he also complained that, despite Russian-Iranian efforts to construct a North-South transit corridor from Iran through the Caucasus to Russia (and points beyond), Dagestan (a Russian autonomous republic in the Northern Caucasus just east of Chechnya) was not allowing non-CIS trucks to drive across its territory. He attributed this to a Russian desire "to be the only country that could demonstrate its power in the region."³⁰

In early March 2010, Tehran ordered all Russian commercial pilots working in Iran to leave the country within two months. Iranian sources blamed Russian pilots for a number of plane accidents. Others, though, saw the move as stemming from Iranian frustration with Russian non-completion of the Bushehr nuclear reactor and non-delivery of the S-300s.³¹

CONCLUSION

The Obama administration's efforts to improve relations with Tehran have so far proven unsuccessful, as have its hopes of getting Moscow to fully cooperate with Washington on the Iranian nuclear issue. Russian-Iranian relations, however, remain

as fraught with difficulties as ever. Indeed, although it may have been an unintended consequence, the Obama administration's effort to improve U.S. relations with both Russia and Iran has, if anything, served to

heighten the distrust between Moscow and Tehran. Whether or not this was a contributing factor, however, Russian-Iranian mutual distrust does not seem likely to dissipate any time soon.

N.B. Unless otherwise noted, all articles were accessed via World News Connection <http://wnc.fedworld.gov/>.

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³ Mikhail Zygar, "Russia Is Retargeting Missile Defense," *Kommersant*, May 12, 2009, p. 7 (*Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 61, No. 19, May 11-17, 2009, pp. 15-16).

⁴ "Iran Much Sensitive to Putin's Offer to U.S.," Fars News Agency, June 21, 2007; and Masud Jafarshoar, "The U.S. Missile Defense Shield in Europe, from Beginning to End," *Jomhuri-ye Eslami* Online, October 18, 2009.

⁵ Vladimir Solovyov, "U.S. Missile Defense Sets Its Sights on Russia," *Kommersant*, June 11, 2009, p. 1 (*Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 61, No. 23, June 8-14, 2009, pp. 17-18).

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⁷ "Russia Says Iran's Bushehr Nuclear Plant to Be Launched on Schedule," ITAR-TASS, February 5, 2009.

⁸ "No Political Link between Iran Nuke Issue and Bushehr NPP—Lavrov," ITAR-TASS, November 17, 2009.

⁹ "Russian Energy Minister Leaving for Visit to Iran," ITAR-TASS, November 28, 2009.

¹⁰ See, for example, "Russia Official's Remarks on Bushehr Are Odd," Mehr News Agency, November 16, 2009; "Iran Radio: 'Russia's Epic Inability to Keep Promise' Delays Power Plant," Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran Radio 1, November 16, 2009; and "Iran MP Calls for Russia to Abide by Commitments on Bushehr N-plant," Iranian Students News Agency, November 17, 2009.

¹¹ "Bushehr Plant to Come on Stream in August: Russian Contractor," *Tehran Times*, April 17, 2010, http://www.tehrantimes.com/Index_view.asp?code=217633.

¹² "Russia Six Months Late in Delivering S-300 Missiles to Iran: General," Mehr News Agency, November 13, 2009.

¹³ See, for example, "S-300 Complexes Delivery to Iran Postponed for Technical Reasons," ITAR-TASS, February 4, 2010.

¹⁴ "Kremlin's Unwound Harmonica for Iran," *Javan*, November 20, 2009.

¹⁵ "U.S., Israel Responsible for Delay in S-300 Missile Delivery by Russia," IRNA, November 25, 2009.

¹⁶ "Air Force Official Urges Iran to 'Sue' Russia over Delayed S-300 Delivery," E'temad Online, November 28, 2009.

¹⁷ Glenn Kessler, "Iranian Officials Accept Draft Deal on Uranium Transfer," *The Washington Post*, October 22, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/21/AR2009102100636.html>.

¹⁸ Andrew Tully, "U.S. Faces Difficult Decisions after Iran Rejects UN Nuclear Plan," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 19, 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/US_Faces_Difficult_Decisions_After_Iran_Rejects_UN_Nuclear_Plan_/1882001.html.

¹⁹ "Russia's failure to fulfill its commitments in the Bushehr nuclear power plant project raises serious questions about whether Iran should send its stockpile of low-enriched uranium it has accumulated over the years to Russia, because there is no guarantee that once Russia receives Iran's uranium, it will deliver the 20 percent enriched uranium," quoted from "Russia Official's Remarks on Bushehr Are Odd," Mehr News Agency, November 16, 2009.

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