

## An Emerging Russian–Iranian Alliance?

By Mark N. Katz

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Since the breakup of the USSR at the end of 1991 Russian–Iranian ties have become remarkably cooperative in a number of areas. Instead of trying to promote Islamic revolution in Azerbaijan and Central Asia, Tehran has maintained basically good relations with these apparatchik regimes of the former Soviet republics and has acquiesced in Russian efforts to retain its influence in them. Despite American warnings of hostile Iranian intentions, Russia has sold large quantities of arms and a nuclear reactor to Tehran.

Russian–Iranian cooperation has increased to such an extent that some observers see an emerging alliance(1). Underlying this increased cooperation are several convergent interests which make such an alliance a real possibility. One of these interests is economic. Russia wants to increase its hard current export earnings, but has few opportunities for doing so. Iran wants to buy arms and nuclear reactors, but is unable to get these from the West due to American pressure on its allies. It is not surprising, then, that Russia has been eager to sell Iran—a country which can pay in hard currency—goods which Iran cannot obtain from the West.

But in addition to the economic realm, Russian and Iranian interests converge in a number of broader political areas. Since its 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran has pursued an anti–American foreign policy. With the rise of nationalist sentiment in Russia, Moscow's foreign policy has also grown increasingly anti–American. While Russian–American relations have not become nearly as hostile as Iranian–American relations, Moscow and Tehran do share one important common interest vis–à–vis the US: neither wishes to see American influence grow in the Caucasus or Central Asia. Nor do Russia and Iran wish to see the influence of Turkey—with its linguistic and cultural links to Azerbaijan, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—grow in these regions either. Further, Russia and Iran are both multiethnic states which seek to forestall all secessionist movements within their respective borders from gaining ground.

These convergent interests have led Russia and Iran to pursue mutually supportive policies in several areas. Supporting actions similar to those applied in other former Soviet republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia, Moscow has sought to keep Azerbaijan dependent on it by pressing Baku to accept a Russian troop presence, and preventing Azerbaijan from exporting oil unless Russia receives a large share of the revenue. In the ongoing Azeri-Armenian conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow has tilted toward Armenia—which has accepted a Russian troop presence. The possibility that Moscow could increase its support for Armenia—which already occupies a significant portion of Azeri territory—provides an additional means for Moscow to deter Baku from pursuing policies which Russia does not favor.

Russia's policy of keeping Azerbaijan weak and impoverished serves Iranian interests perfectly. What is now independent Azerbaijan is the northern part of a larger area where Azeris predominate, the southern part is in Iran, and more Azeris live there than in the north. The independence of what was "Soviet Azerbaijan" has already led to an upsurge of nationalist feeling among Azeris to the south who seek secession from Iran and unification with the north.<sup>(2)</sup> Although difficult to gauge just how powerful this movement is among Iranian-Azeris, it does not seem to be particularly strong at present obviously, though, it is something that the Iranian government wants to discourage.

The authorities in Tehran fully understand that Iranian Azeris would be far more attracted to a peaceful, prosperous, democratic Azerbaijan than a war-torn, poverty-stricken, dictatorial one. Thus, Tehran has a strong incentive to acquiesce in Moscow's efforts to keep Azerbaijan poor and weak. Despite the religious links between Iran and Azerbaijan (both are predominantly Shia), Tehran has pursued an "even-handed" approach to the Azeri-Armenian conflict that in fact favors Christian Armenia since Iran has done little to induce Armenia to withdraw from Azeri territory. Nor was Tehran unhappy to see the democratically-elected pan-Azeri nationalist Elchibey overthrown by the former communist leader Aliiev, whose policies are thuggish domestically but circumspect vis-à-vis Iran and the "Greater Azerbaijan" issue.

Similarly, the Iranian government has had relatively little to say concerning Russia's brutal use of force in Chechnya. Iran's silence may seem somewhat surprising, considering that the Chechen issue is a case of non-Muslims suppressing Muslims.<sup>(3)</sup> But whatever concerns Tehran

may have about this issue appear to be overshadowed by the common Russian-Iranian interest in preventing secession. Tehran may reasonably fear that Iranian support for Chechen secession from Russia could result in Russian support for secession by the Azeris, Kurds and others from Iran.

Finally, Tehran did nothing to help the democratic/Islamic government that briefly came to power in Tajikistan in 1992. Nor has Iran done much to assist the increasingly radicalized Islamic opposition to the Soviet-style apparatchik regime that was restored to power and kept in place with the help of Russian and Uzbek armed forces. While not uncritical of Moscow's use of force, Tehran has, at Russia's urging, attempted to mediate between the Tajik government and these opposition, Iran seemed to go beyond "even-handedness" in this dispute when, in July 1995, Iranian President Rafsanjani welcomed Tajik President Rakhmonov to participate in bilateral talks in Tehran. At that time, Iran agreed to provide a US\$10 million loan to Tajikistan. These events are worrisome to the Tajik opposition since they appear to signal, as the Central Asia Monitor put it, "that Iran is drifting towards support for the neo-Communist Tajik government."(4)

It may seem especially surprising that Iran would not avail itself of the opportunity to support Islamic revolutionaries, especially in Tajikistan—the one former Soviet republic in which, like Iran, Farsi is the predominant language. Tajikistan, though, provides yet another instance of converging Russian and Iranian interests. It is obvious why Russia opposes the Islamic forces in Tajikistan. Moscow fears that if it is successful there, Islamic revolution could sweep not only through Central Asia, but also through the Muslim regions of the Russian Federation. But why would Iran not support, if not actually oppose, Islamic revolution in this region?

It is well understood that Iran promotes Islamic revolution in other countries. What is less well understood is that Iran has become unenthusiastic about Islamic revolutionaries who do not recognize Iranian leadership. Following Saddam Hussein's defeat in Kuwait, Iran did nothing to assist the Shia uprising in southern Iraq—which was led by an Iraqi Ayatollah who had been a rival of Khomeini. In addition, Iran has had difficult relations with the fundamentalist regime that came to power in Afghanistan in 1992. The Iranian leaders appear to have concluded that, at present, it makes little sense for Tehran to support the Islamic

opposition in Tajikistan when 1) this would alienate Russia: 2) the Islamic opposition appears to have little prospect for success there; and 3) Iran would not necessarily gain an ally even if a Tajik-Islamic regime did somehow come to power.

A Russian-Iranian alliance, whether formal or tacit, would hardly be beneficial to America and the West, much less to the people of the Caucasus and Central Asia. The US, however, may be able to do little to prevent Moscow and Tehran from increasing their cooperation with each other if both are determined to do so. Washington had hoped that stating its objections to Moscow's selling of arms to Iran and assisting its nuclear reactor program would persuade the Yeltsin government to abandon these projects in order to avoid damaging Russian-American ties. But these American efforts only resulted in increased Russian nationalist resentment of America for treating Moscow as an inferior. Complying with American preferences vis-a-vis Iran would have only provided an opportunity for Yeltsin's domestic opponents to criticize him for "caving in" to Washington. and so he went ahead with the deals. It is difficult to imagine that a Russian president even more nationalistic than Yeltsin—who might well emerge from the June 1996 presidential elections—would be more willing to refrain from cooperation with Iran for the sake of preserving good relations with the US.

Some observers have suggested that a friendlier American policy toward Iran might serve to dissuade Tehran from allying with Moscow against Western interests. But, however appealing such a policy might be to some. American foreign policy specialists, it would be virtually impossible for Washington to pursue given the present American domestic political climate with regard to Iran—which forced the Clinton Administration to tighten economic sanctions against Iran in 1995 not so much because it wanted to itself but to prevent the Republican Congress from imposing even harsher measures. The domestic political constituency in the US in favor of improving relations with Iran is pitifully weak and small compared to the constituency which opposes such a policy. This does not seem likely to change any time soon.

Yet even if Washington was willing to improve relations with Tehran, it is not clear that Tehran could be willing to respond in kind. "American offers to hold discussions with Iran I have repeatedly been made in print, at public meetings, and in private," according to Patrick Clawson, an Iranian specialist at the National Defense University. But, he pointed out,

"Tehran adamantly refuses to reciprocate."(8) The current Iranian leadership apparently does not perceive its interests being served through friendlier ties with the US.

Yet while America may be unable or unwilling to prevent increasing Russian–Iranian cooperation, there is reason to believe that a full–fledged alliance between Moscow and Tehran either could not develop or, if it did, endure for very long. Although Russian and Iranian interests converge in several important areas, they diverge (actually or potentially) in others.

One area in which their interests already diverge is the pipeline issue, Tehran would benefit handsomely if pipelines carrying Azeri and Central Asian oil and natural gas ran south through Iranian territory, Moscow though, seeks to monopolize the export of petroleum resources from these countries through insisting that they be shipped via much longer Russian pipeline routes, Allowing Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakstan to export a significant, quantity of their oil and gas via Iran would permit these countries to gain the economic independence from Russia which Moscow seeks to prevent, But Moscow's unwillingness to share with Iran the potential pipeline revenue from the Caucasus and Central Asia will not serve to endear even an overtly anti–American Russia to Tehran.

Russia's attitude toward the pipeline is indicative of, in Tehran's view, a larger problem in Russian–Iranian relations. Just as Russia's willingness to sell arms and nuclear reactors to Iran showed that Moscow was unwilling to forego ties to Tehran for the sake of maintaining good relations with the US, other actions Moscow has taken indicate that Russia is unwilling to forego ties to Iran's adversaries for the sake of maintaining good relations with Tehran. Russia has actively pursued improved ties with Iran's pro–American opponent. Saudi Arabia, as well as the other conservative monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula. More ominous from Iran's point of view is the increased cooperation between Russia and Iraq. This cooperation includes a number of economic agreements scheduled to be implemented once the UN Security Council sanctions against Iraq stemming from the 1990–91 Gulf conflict are removed.(9) Of course, a more nationalistic Russian government might choose to implement these agreements before this if ties between Washington and Moscow deteriorate (Baghdad would certainly not object). Though such a move might be intended by Moscow to harm American interests, its immediate impact could well be to revive Iranian perceptions of an Iraqi threat.

In addition, Moscow genuinely fears the possibility of Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Russia. As the case of Tajikistan demonstrates, Islamic revolutionaries can sustain an insurgency against a Russian-backed dictatorship even without Iranian assistance. It is possible that Islamic insurgency might spread to other predominantly Muslim regions of the former USSR. Indeed, Russian assistance to apparatchik regimes which suppress democratic opposition forces may ultimately serve to legitimize and strengthen the anti-democratic Islamic opposition in the long run. But any increase in Islamic fundamentalist opposition against them is likely to be seen by Moscow not as stemming from its own support for unpopular apparatchik regimes, but from Iran even though Tehran might not be involved at all. And while Iran may provide as little support to Islamic rebels elsewhere in the former USSR as it has to those in Tajikistan. Tehran is unlikely to do much to help Moscow suppress them either since this would damage Iran's claims to be the leader of the Islamic fundamentalist revolutionary movement. Even if Tehran does not support it, any increase in Islamic fundamentalist activity in the former USSR is likely to lead to a deterioration of Russian-Iranian relations.

Finally, Russian-Iranian cooperation appears to be highly vulnerable to domestic politics in both countries. Although extremely unlikely at present, a more pro-Western regime in either Russia or Iran would not be willing to risk poor relations with the US by cooperating with the other against it. On the other hand, a more radical regime in Tehran would be far less likely to observe the self-restraint that the present Iranian regime has exercised with regard to the Caucasus and Central Asia, but might vigorously seek to export Islamic revolution there instead, thereby threatening Russia. And a more nationalistic Russian regime—a scenario which appears more likely at present—might aggressively seek to restore Russian influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Indeed, Russian pursuit of such aims might lead not only to greater Iranian support for Islamic revolution in this region in order to prevent Moscow from achieving its goals, but also—and more importantly—to the conditions that might allow Islamic revolutionaries to flourish there. Of course, if Iran felt really threatened by the actions of a nationalist Russia, it might be willing to take what would be for it the even more radical step of repairing its relations with the US.

One of the primary bases of increased Russian-Iranian cooperation is the growing convergence of the more and more anti-American strain in

Russia's nationalist foreign policy with Tehran's long-established hostility toward the US. This is especially worrisome for Washington, DC. not only because this Russian-Iranian cooperation threatens American interests, but also because there appears to be little that the US can do to prevent it from developing further. It is doubtful, however, that a full-fledged Russian Iranian alliance will emerge, or could be sustained for very long, due to the actual or potential differences between Moscow and Tehran on several issues of vital concern to them both as well as the vulnerability of such an alliance to domestic politics in both countries.

#### References:

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