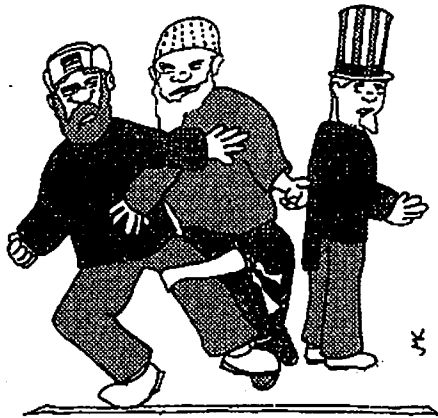


Unfaithful ALLIES



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Since the closing months of 2000, Russia and Iran have dramatically increased their collaboration in several areas. Last November, the Russian government announced it would no longer abide by the 1995 agreement between then U.S. Vice President Al Gore and then Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin in which Moscow pledged to halt further arms sales to Tehran.¹ Various sources indicated that Russia might sell Iran advanced surface-to-air missiles, ground attack aircraft, helicopters, tanks, and spare parts for the Russian-built weapons Iran already

possessed.² Moscow has also reportedly renewed its aid to Iran's atomic energy program, which many in the West fear could assist Tehran in developing nuclear weapons.³ In March 2001, Iranian President Mohammed Khatami visited Russia where he and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a bilateral cooperation pact.⁴ And these moves, sources in both countries intimate, are just the beginning of what each see as a long-term partnership.

The prospect that Russian help may put Iran in a better position to acquire nuclear weapons is especially frightening. An Iran fortified with Russian weapons is likely to act in a more hostile fashion toward American allies and interests in the region. In addition, increased Russian cooperation with Iran is part of a broader pattern of increased Russian cooperation with other anti-American governments, including those of China, North Korea, Iraq, and Libya.⁵ It is hardly surprising

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that increased Russian-Iranian cooperation, especially in the military and nuclear realms, has become a source, "of great concern to the United States," as a U.S. State Department spokesman stated.⁶

Part of the motivation for this Moscow-Tehran partnership is a shared desire to limit the influence of the United States and its allies (especially Turkey) in the former Soviet republics of both the Caucasus and Central Asia. But there are other motivations for Russian-Iranian cooperation besides shared anti-American aims. Tehran has not supported the Chechen rebels seeking secession from Russia while Moscow has not supported Azeri or other secessionist groups in Iran.⁷ Each seems to fear that the success of secessionists in the other country would only encourage their own secessionist movements.

Furthermore, Moscow and Tehran are cooperating to contain the Taliban—the radical Islamic movement that has captured most of Afghanistan. Each country has reason to fear the virulently anti-Russian as well as anti-Shia (the branch of Islam to which the Iranian leadership and most—but not all—Iranians adhere), Sunni-fundamentalist Taliban. Both also seek to stem the flow of narcotics coming out of Afghanistan into Iran and the former USSR. It is this sort of Russian-Iranian cooperation that Russian commentators claim does not

hurt the West but benefits it.⁸

Despite these shared interests, there are some important differences between Moscow and Tehran. Foremost is the disputed ownership of the

Caspian Sea's vast petroleum reserves. The three newly independent republics of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan—off whose coasts much of the petroleum lies—argue that the Caspian should be divided on a territorial basis, like other seas. By contrast, Iran (which apparently has very little petroleum lying off its Caspian coast)

argues that this body of water is not a sea, but a lake, and thus its resources should be divided equally among the states bordering it, as with other lakes. The Russian government originally supported the Iranian argument. But when substantial petroleum deposits were found off its own Caspian coast, Moscow switched its position. Iran continues to insist that since there are now five states bordering the Caspian, it is entitled to 20 percent of its resources. The other Caspian states disagree.⁹ The fear is that unless all five states can come to a mutual agreement on this issue, potential Western partners will not risk the capital (of which none of the Caspian states possesses enough) needed to bring Caspian oil to market.

Moreover, although Moscow is pursuing friendlier relations with Tehran, it is simultaneously pursuing

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increased cooperation with the government of President Saddam Hussein in Iraq.¹⁰ Likewise, while Moscow is sympathetic to the Arab side in the Arab-Israeli dispute, it is not implacably anti-Israeli like Tehran. Moscow may have initially courted Israel in the Gorbachev era as a way to improve relations with the United States, yet relatively warm Russian-Israeli ties have survived the recent downturn in Russian-American relations.¹¹ Finally, there are indications that Moscow and Tehran are competing for influence in Tajikistan—the one former Soviet Central Asian republic where the predominant language, Tajik, is akin to Farsi.¹²

How serious is this new Russian-Iranian partnership? Are Moscow and Tehran sufficiently determined to pursue their joint interests that they will be able to overcome the differences between them? Or will these differences prove to be obstacles to anything but limited cooperation between them?

Some indication about the strength of their partnership can be obtained by examining how Russians and Iranians themselves assess its prospects. There is not a single Russian or a single Iranian view about this issue. Despite the persistence of government control and self-censorship in Iran and their revival in Russia, the press in both countries expresses a variety of viewpoints ranging from conservative to reformist. What follows here is an overview summary and analysis of how the emerging Moscow-Tehran partnership is viewed by Russian reformists, Russian conservatives, Iranian reformists, and Iranian

conservatives.

Russian Reformists

Russian reformists see partnership with the West as being in Moscow's best interests. The West has the ability to provide Russia with greater amounts of aid and investment than can be obtained from selling arms or nuclear know-how to Iran and other states hostile toward Washington. Furthermore, Russian reformers want Russia to become part of the West politically as well as economically.¹³ In particular, the reformists desire a strategic partnership with the United States.¹⁴

Russian reformers may not like some American foreign policies, such as the expansion of NATO or the bombing of Serbia, but they do not view them as a threat to Russia. Even if the United States posed a danger, however, one leading reformist—Sergei Rogov, the director Moscow's USA and Canada Institute—has warned that "anti-American forces would not prove to be worthwhile allies in any renewed Russian confrontation with America and the West."¹⁵ Indeed, many reformers have increasingly come to believe that their main opponent in the future is not the West but China.¹⁶

Not only do most reformers regard Iran as a country that cannot or will not assist Russia should it ever need its help,¹⁷ some even fear that the weapons Moscow sells to Tehran will someday be used against Russia. For Russian reformers, the benefits associated with a Russian-Iranian partnership are far outweighed by its costs.¹⁸

That being said, however, Russian reformers often see Moscow moving closer to Tehran as a way to get Washington to pay more attention to Moscow. As one journalist stated in a December 2000 article on Russian-Iranian relations: "The past several years have shown that you get more from the Americans precisely when you take a hard-line position."¹⁹ Thus, any move by the reformers toward a Russian-Iranian partnership is attractive only as a tactical ploy to improve Russian-American relations and not as an end in itself. Should the Russian reformers ever regain power, they can be expected to de-emphasize partnership with Tehran. At present, however, it is not the reformers who have power in Russia but the conservatives.

Russian Conservatives

Most Russian conservatives do not value Western-style democracy. Many do not want to see the development of a free market. Others who do want a free-market economy believe that an authoritarian government could promote capitalism more successfully than a democratic one in Russia. But whatever their political and economic predilections, almost all Russian conservatives want more than anything else to re-establish Russia as a great power in the eyes of the rest of the world.

Russian conservatives identify the United States as their country's principal adversary. They still feel genuinely threatened by the expansion of NATO as well as the U.S.-led NATO bombardment of Serbia. Russian conservatives worry that since the United

States succeeded in forcing a Serbian withdrawal from Kosovo, maybe it will try to force a Russian withdrawal from Chechnya—and succeed there too. The nightmare vision for Russian conservatives is that Chechen secession will lead to the unraveling of the entire Russian Federation.²⁰

To prevent this, Russian conservatives want Moscow to rebuild their country's military strength. They realize, however, that Russia's economic woes will not allow this to occur any time soon, but even a weak Russia can ally with other governments opposed to American hegemony. If Russia could put together and lead an alliance of several anti-American governments (such as China, India, and Iran), Moscow would go a long way toward re-establishing its importance in the world.²¹

Russian conservatives, therefore, see Russian-Iranian partnership, especially in the military realm, as something advantageous to Moscow. Although fearful of rising Islamic fundamentalist opposition in the former USSR, they do not see Iran as abetting it. They understand that Iran's Shiite, Farsi-speaking rulers have little in common with the largely Sunni, Turkic Muslims who live in Russia and most of Central Asia. While American conservatives regard Iran as a threat, Russian conservatives regard it as a relatively rich but weak country and hence an ideal ally.²²

Far from worrying, like Russian reformers, about the negative American reaction to increased Russian-Iranian cooperation, Russian conservatives appear to take delight in Washington's discomfiture over it. It is precisely those

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aspects of Russian-Iranian cooperation which bother Washington the most—the sale of arms and nuclear know-how—which Russian conservatives wish to increase further.

Yet while Russian conservatives value Iran as an ally against the United States, they do not value it highly enough to forego pursuing certain policies which Tehran disapproves

Although Russian reformers do not regard Iran as a potential threat to Moscow, they also do not see Iran as a country willing or able to assist Russia should it ever need help.

of—such as selling arms to Iraq.²³ Russian conservatives have also shown little inclination so far to accommodate Tehran's demand for a 20 percent share of the Caspian Sea's petroleum resources.²⁴

In addition, while Russian conservatives see Iran as an ally against the United States, they do not want to see Russian-American relations deteriorate into a new Cold War. As one of the leading Russian foreign policy conservatives, Karen Brutents wrote, "what we need is to keep open the possibility of choice in the international arena without actually making a choice."²⁵

Since Moscow lost the previous Cold War when it was strong, conservatives have no illusions that Russia can win a new one now when it is weak. Like Russian reformers, Russian conservatives see a growing partnership with Tehran as a way to get Washington to take Moscow more seriously.

But while Russian conservatives want Moscow to have the freedom to maneuver between Washington on the one hand and anti-American governments like Tehran on the other, they do not really want the Iranians to have this same freedom. Indeed, Russian conservatives fear that the Iranian government (whether the present revolutionary regime or a possible post-revolutionary one) will seize whatever opportunity arises for Tehran to improve its ties with the United States. Once an Iranian-American rapprochement does occur, they fear, Tehran will have little further need for or interest in partnership with Moscow.²⁶

Iranian Reformers

The improvement in Iranian-American relations that Russian conservatives fear is exactly what Iranian reformers are seeking. What Iranian reformers want more than anything else is democratization and they believe that improving Iranian-American relations is the best way to bring about that goal. However, Iranian reformers understand that this improvement will not occur until Washington and Tehran are able to resolve their many differences.

For example, Washington objects to Iranian support for terrorism (i.e., Israel's armed opponents such as Hezbollah in Lebanon), Iranian opposition to the American-sponsored Arab-Israeli peace process, and Iranian efforts to obtain weapons of mass destruction. Tehran wants the United States to release Iranian assets frozen by Washington since the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran in 1979, to remove Iran from the State Department's list of countries declared to be supporting terrorism, and to end economic sanctions. Tehran also demands that Washington cease interfering in Iran's internal affairs and withdraw its military forces from the Persian Gulf.²⁷

The problem Iranian reformers face is that any attempt that they might be willing to make to accommodate Washington would not only be blocked by Iranian conservatives, but would be seized upon by them to marginalize, oust, or imprison the reformers proposing them.²⁸ For despite the electoral victory of the Iranian reformers, Iranian conservatives have been able to make use of continued Iranian-American hostility to retain considerable control over Iran and have no interest in seeing Iran progress toward democratization.²⁹

Accordingly, what Iranian reformers want is for Washington to soften its conditions for improving ties as well as to meet some of the conditions posed by Tehran.³⁰ They hope such actions would serve to undercut their conservative opponents. Washington, however, has been unwilling to move very far in this direction. The administration of former U.S. President Bill Clinton ended the ban on importing certain



Iranian products, but not Iran's most important one—oil. Indeed, with the passage of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act of 1996, American sanctions against the Iranian petroleum sector became even tougher.³¹

Given the current political situation, Iranian reformers hope to induce Washington to accommodate their wishes through partnership with Russia. Like Russian reformers, Iranian reformers seem to believe that America only makes concessions to countries that pose a serious threat to its interests. This belief was undoubtedly reinforced when Washington offered a generous aid package to North Korea in response to its acquisition of nuclear weapons. If Iran by itself does not threaten the United States sufficiently to induce Washington to make concessions, they apparently hope that an Iran allied with Russia will. Indeed, it has been rumored in the Middle East that the administration of U.S. President George Bush has begun a "secret dialogue" with Iran.³²

For Iranian reformers, then, partnership with Russia is valuable mainly as a tactical ploy to improve

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relations with the West and not as an end in itself. But while stronger than their Russian counterparts, Iranian reformers have less say over Tehran's foreign policy than do Iranian conservatives.

Iranian Conservatives

Iranian conservatives do not wish to see rapprochement between Washington and Tehran. In their eyes, American hostility toward Tehran combined with U.S. support for Israel make Washington Iran's principal enemy.³³ Iranian conservatives blame Washington for the 1980 attack by Hussein that launched the Iran-Iraq war. They see Washington as being "behind" Afghanistan's virulently anti-Shia Taliban.³⁴ They even believe Iranian reformers are American agents.³⁵ Not surprisingly, Iranian conservatives do not view the United States as a country with which it is possible to have good relations.

Unlike their reform-minded counterparts, Iranian conservatives do not view partnership with Russia as merely a tactical ploy to improve relations with America. They want it to be a long-term, strategic partnership instead. They view Russia as a source of sophisticated military hardware, especially after Putin's late 2000 withdrawal from the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement. Further, the Iranian conservatives are keenly attracted to Putin's call for an anti-American, anti-NATO counter-alliance.³⁶ Of the four groups discussed here, it is the Iranian conservatives who seem the most enthusiastic about the desirability of and potential for Russian-Iranian

strategic partnership.³⁷

Despite this, Iranian conservatives generally have a negative and suspicious view of Russia. Even in the few months leading up to Khatami's March 2001 visit to Russia, the conservative press in Iran was especially critical of Moscow. Conservative commentators note that relations between Moscow and Tehran were traditionally poor right up to the time that the USSR collapsed. Furthermore, they view the anti-American Russian conservatives as unreliable allies, citing Yugoslavia as the proof. As stated in a December 2000 article (bluntly titled, "Russia Is Not Trustworthy"):

Russia will never sacrifice her own national interests in order to safeguard other countries' security. A study of Russian relations with Yugoslavia during the past few years will clearly prove this point. Yugoslavia was one of Russia's traditional allies and was very close to Moscow. Nevertheless, Russia left Yugoslavia alone in its war with NATO, and was not prepared to sacrifice her own national interests in order to assist Belgrade.³⁸

While Iranian conservatives have little sympathy for Yugoslavia, the implication of their analysis is clear: If Moscow could abandon these other allies, it could abandon Tehran too.

Iranian conservatives also criticize Russia over its stance to divide the Caspian Sea's petroleum resources, to cooperate with Israel, and to maintain its positive relationship with Iraq.³⁹ Although the Iranian government has largely ignored Moscow's efforts to prevent Chechen secession, Iranian conservative commentators have roundly condemned Moscow for its oppression

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of Muslims in Russia.⁴⁰ The Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran radio station in Mashad has been highly critical of Russian policy in former Soviet Central Asia and expressed sympathy for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.⁴¹ The fact that this station broadcasts in Uzbek as well as in Farsi suggests that the conservatives who run it are attempting to propagate an anti-Russian viewpoint in Central Asia. Finally, some Iranian commentators have expressed the suspicion that Moscow is only cooperating with Tehran in order to get better terms from Washington, and thus is not truly interested in a long-term strategic partnership with Iran.⁴²

This indicates that the Iranian conservatives who distrust the United States also distrust Russia. While they would like to see a strategic partnership develop between Moscow and Tehran, they understand that there are many important differences between the two countries, which place definite limitations on how far their partnership can proceed.

Conclusion

This examination of how reformers and conservatives in both Russia and Iran view the relationship between their two countries suggests that the potential for Moscow-Tehran partnership has serious limitations. Reformers in both countries see Russian-Iranian partnership as a tactic for improving their countries' relations with the United States and not as an end in itself. Conservatives on both sides would like to see their partnership develop into an anti-American alliance,

but they have not shown a willingness to accommodate or trust the other side sufficiently to bring this about. Russian conservatives are not willing to accommodate Iranian demands for sharing the Caspian Sea's petroleum resources or to forego improving relations with Iran's foes in both Iraq and Israel. And while Iranian conservatives are happy to cooperate with Russia wherever possible, they recognize that there are many differences between the two countries and are extremely skeptical about Russia's reliability as an ally.

If anything, Russians and Iranians of all stripes seem to recognize that their partnership is more a commercial arrangement than a military-political alliance. Iran is one of only a few countries both willing and able to buy arms and nuclear know-how from cash-strapped Russia. Russia is one of only a few countries willing and able to sell these goods to Iran's relatively wealthy but isolated regime. It is doubtful, though, whether their trade relationship can deepen into an alliance.

The Iranians know that Moscow will sell arms to anyone willing to buy them, including Tehran's opponents. The United Arab Emirates, which has been embroiled in a territorial dispute with Iran over three islands in the Persian Gulf since 1971, is a major buyer of Russian weapons.⁴³ More ominously, Iranians are aware that Russia is selling weapons to their Iraqi foes despite UN sanctions against Baghdad and that these sales will undoubtedly increase dramatically whenever the sanctions are lifted.⁴⁴ Similarly, the Russians are aware that Iran will not limit itself to purchasing arms from

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- [13] V. Kremeniuk, "Russia and the West: Seeking the Right Distance," *International Affairs (Moscow)* 46:6 (2000): 65-74.
- [14] Sergei Rogov, "Russia and the United States at the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century [I]," *Russian Social Science Review* 40:3 (May-June 1999): 28-33.
- [15] Rogov, "Russia and the United States," p.47.
- [16] See, for example, *ibid.*, and Aleksandr Chudodeyev, "Russians and Chinese Are Once Again Brothers Forever—Moscow-Beijing Rapprochement Worries Pentagon and Russian 'Patriots,'" *Sevodnya*, 11 January 2001, p. 4 in CDPSP, 7 February 2001, p.18.
- [17] "In today's world, anti-American forces (the Serbs, Iran, etc.) are more likely to become a burden on Russia, and they will certainly not alter the balance of power in Moscow's favor." Rogov, "Russia and the United States," p.47
- [18] Patrick E. Tyler, "Russians Question Wisdom of their Coziness with Iran," *New York Times*, 16 March 2001 (internet edition).
- [19] Dmitry Kosyrev, "Russian-Iranian Alliance?" *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 8 December 2000, pp.1,6 in CDPSP, 3 January 2001, p.22.
- [20] See, for example, Boris Nikolin, "The Threat from the Caucasus," *Russian Social Science Review* 39:4 (July-August 1998), pp.46-56.
- [21] See, for example, Karen Brutents, "In Search of Pax Americana (II)," *Russian Social Science Review* 41:3 (May-June 2000): 76-82.
- [22] These points were made in an excellent but as yet unpublished study of Russian attitudes toward Iran: John W. Parker, "Persian Themes: Russia and Iran in Tajikistan and Beyond," 18 October 2000.
- [23] Jessica Berry, "Iraqis Step Up Secret Russian Weapons Trade," *Sunday Telegraph*, 25 February 2001 (internet version).
- [24] Indeed, they seem to assume that the Iranian government will eventually accept the Russian government viewpoint: "Iran is vacillating for now and is still trying to uphold the principle of dividing the sea up into equal sectors...However, it can already be sensed that our Iranian colleagues are starting to heed Russia's arguments." Vladimir Kucherenko, "How Many Ideas in Iranian Field," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 12 March 2001, pp.1,7 in FBIS-NES-2001-0312.
- [25] Brutents, "In Search of Pax Americana," p.79.
- [26] According to Konstantin Makiyenko, deputy director of the Strategies and Technologies Analysis Center in Moscow, "Russia ought to 'work quickly' on the Iranian market—'there exists a serious risk that it will close down' because Iran is ruled by 'a regime that is not very secure and may be replaced by a pro-Western one'..." *Moscow Interfax in English*, 10 March 2001 in FBIS-SOV-2001-0310.
- [27] For a succinct Iranian discussion of Iranian-American differences, see "The Bush Administration and Tehran-Washington Relations (part 2)," *Siyasat*, 3 February 2001, p.3 in FBIS-NES-2001-0304.
- [28] Anderson, "Iran Throwing Off Its Isolation."
- [29] Farhang Rajaee, "A Thermidor of 'Islamic Yuppies'? Conflict and Compromise in Iran's Politics," *Middle East Journal* 53:2 (Spring 1999): pp.217-31; Farideh Farhi, "The 'Third Republic' and the Changing Dynamics of Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran," paper presented at the International Studies Association annual meeting, Los Angeles, 14-18 March 2000; and John Ward Anderson, "Iran Throwing Off Its Isolation," *Washington Post*, 31 March 2001, p. A18.
- [30] One such commentator argued that

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it would not take much effort on America's part to restore ties to Iran: "We are not asking a great deal from the United States. All that we demand from the United States is that she accepts that we are an entity that wishes to live in an independent and proud environment."

Interview with Dr. Piruz Mojtahedzadeh, "Iran and America, What Is Desirable and What Is Not," Mobin, 8 January 2001, pp.1,3 in FBIS-NES 2001-0126.

[31] For a discussion of ILSA, see Zbigniew Brzezinski et al., *Differentiated Containment: U.S. Policy toward Iran and Iraq* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1997).

[32] Ali Nuri Zadah, "New U.S. Administration Opened Secret Channel for Dialogue with Iran," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 7 March 2001, p.4 in FBIS-NES-2001-0307.

[33] See, for example, "The Bush Administration and Tehran-Washington Relations," *Siyasat*, 3 February 2001.

[34] See, for example, "Russia in Support of America's ad hoc Policy in Afghanistan," *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, 28 November 2000, p.16 in FBIS-NES-2000-1212.

[35] See, for example, the interview with Jalal'eddin Farsi, "They Want to Get Khatami Off the Train of Reforms!" *Jam-e Jam*, 12 December 2000, p.8 in FBIS-NES-2001-0103.

[36] See, for example, *Tehran Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1*, 13 March 2001, 1030 GMT in FBIS-NES-2001-0313.

[37] See, for example, "Russia and Iran: From Friendship to Strategic Partnership," *Abrar*, 10 September 2000, p.62 in FBIS-NES-2000-1117; and "The Sky's the Limit in Tehran-Moscow Bilateral, Regional Cooperation," *Tehran Times* (internet version), 13 March 2001 in FBIS-NES-2001-0313.

[38] *Jam-e Haftah*, 9 December 2000, p.3 in FBIS-NES-2001-0105.

[39] Mohammad Reza Sarmast, "Iraq Thinks Beyond Sanctions," *Abrar*, 20 December 2000, pp.1,3 in FBIS-NES-2001-0210; Mahmud Sadri, "Relations between Iran and Russia: Bright Spots and Dark Spots," *Hamshahri*, 11 March 2001, p.2 in FBIS-NES-2001-0327.

[40] "Genocide of Muslims in Chechnya!" *Jomhuri-ye Islami*, November 14, 1999, pp. 1, 2, 14 in FBIS-NES-1999-1221. For more on Iranian policy toward the Chechen conflict, see A. William Samii, "Iran and Chechnya: Realpolitik at Work," *Middle East Policy* 8:1 (March 2001): 48-57.

[41] See, for example, *Mashad Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Uzbek*, 5 March 2001, 1500 GMT in FBIS-NES-2001-0306.

[42] Gholamreza Mohammadi, "A Review of Influential Factors in Iran-Russia Relations," *resalat*, 16 September 2000, p.11 in FBIS-NES-2000-1231.

[43] Antonenko, "Russia's Military Involvement in the Middle East."

[44] Sarmast, "Iraq Thinks Beyond Sanctions."