

Making Iran's Support for Russia More Costly

by [Henry Rome \(/experts/henry-rome\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

To foster doubts about the wisdom of deepening the relationship, Washington should stoke longstanding Iranian skepticism toward Russia and work with Europe to sanction additional entities involved in the drone program.

Tehran's relationship with Moscow has expanded substantially since the invasion of Ukraine, from weapons deliveries to a flurry of political and trade delegations traversing both capitals. This evolution has led to murmurs of concern inside Iran, with some fearing that the government made a significant error by throwing its lot in with an untrustworthy Russian partner. Although these voices have so far been isolated, Western governments should feed this doubt as part of their **strategy to curb (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/28/us/politics/iran-drones-russia-ukraine.html>)** Iran's military aid.

From Friction to Support

Russia and Iran have had turbulent relations for much of the past 500 years, fueling deep mistrust among many Iranians today. In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, Russia and Persia fought multiple wars, while the twentieth century saw Moscow repeatedly meddling in Iran's affairs (e.g., opposing its constitutional revolution; supporting secessionist and communist movements; occupying its territory). Relations began improving in the late 1980s, but friction persisted over various issues, including Moscow's differing ambitions in Syria, its desire to balance relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia, its support for UN Security Council resolutions against Iran, and its slow pace in expanding commercial and energy ties.

Yet Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered a tightening of ties. Facing diplomatic isolation and battlefield weakness, Moscow needed political and military support, while Tehran apparently saw an opportunity to make itself indispensable to the world's biggest nuclear power and reap economic, technological, political, and military rewards. Despite their historical mistrust, Russia is now more important to Tehran than it was even a decade ago, when Iranian leaders still sought to improve ties with the West. Siding with Moscow at its time of need also likely made

strategic sense to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in terms of advancing his “[look to the East \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-one-step-closer-sco-membership\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-one-step-closer-sco-membership)” strategy.

The recent intensification has both covert and overt components. Tehran has become Moscow’s most important military supplier, with Iranian drones repeatedly being used against Ukrainian cities and energy infrastructure. According to Western governments, Tehran has also deployed personnel to Crimea to train Russian soldiers in operating these drones. Both parties have tried to keep this assistance a secret, with Tehran denying that it has provided drones during the war (though international pressure did compel it to claim that it had sold such systems to Russia—in 2021). The Iranians may also have reached an agreement to manufacture drones in Russia and [sell short-range ballistic missiles \(https://www.axios.com/2022/12/12/ukraine-war-russia-missiles-iran-limit\)](https://www.axios.com/2022/12/12/ukraine-war-russia-missiles-iran-limit) to its military. Moscow’s compensation to Tehran is [less clear \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deepening-russia-iran-relationship-should-worry-israel\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deepening-russia-iran-relationship-should-worry-israel) at this point.

Talk of commercial cooperation has increased during the war as well. The two governments [have focused \(https://otaghiranonline.ir/news/44620/%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%87%D9%85%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B4-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%87-%DA%86%D9%87-%DA%AF%D8%B0%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%9F\)](https://otaghiranonline.ir/news/44620/%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%87%D9%85%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B4-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%87-%DA%86%D9%87-%DA%AF%D8%B0%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%9F) on expanding trade, improving transportation links, accelerating energy cooperation, and establishing adequate banking infrastructure. In July, they signed \$40 billion worth of energy-related deals—though many of these projects will face potentially insurmountable implementation challenges. In November, the Iran Chamber of Commerce hosted a [delegation \(https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/700118\)](https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/700118) of 120 Russian businesspeople—billed as the largest in decades—and held a high-profile conference to discuss expanding ties and lowering barriers. Iran likewise sent [commercial delegations \(https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/476014/Russia-eager-for-expanding-trade-ties-with-Iran\)](https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/476014/Russia-eager-for-expanding-trade-ties-with-Iran) to Moscow, and their banking officials have held [frequent meetings \(https://www.ibena.ir/fa/news/142199/%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B1%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D9%81%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84-%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%85%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%A7%DB%8C%DA%AF%D8%B2%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7-%D9%87%DB%8C%D8%A6%D8%AA-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%87\)](https://www.ibena.ir/fa/news/142199/%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B1%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D9%81%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84-%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%85%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%A7%DB%8C%DA%AF%D8%B2%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7-%D9%87%DB%8C%D8%A6%D8%AA-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%87). Bilateral trade may have increased somewhat as a result, though the Iranian and Russian customs agencies differ on the scale of the increase. Beyond that, no major changes have emerged from this slew of announcements, and the two countries continue to [compete economically \(https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/jul/18/iran-russia-growing-economic-competition\)](https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/jul/18/iran-russia-growing-economic-competition) in commodity markets.

Diplomatically, the tightening in relations has been marked by frequent meetings between senior officials. Most notably, President Vladimir Putin visited Iran in July and met with Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi, [one of his first international trips \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russia-and-iran-keep-growing-closer\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russia-and-iran-keep-growing-closer) since the invasion. He has also met with Raisi two other times during the war.

Criticism Has Grown, Modestly

Even as officials across the Iranian system engage with their Russian counterparts in an apparent “whole of government” approach, some internal criticism [has emerged \(https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/drone-sales-to-russia-spark-a-debate-in-iran/\)](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/drone-sales-to-russia-spark-a-debate-in-iran/). Although this dissent remains modest to date and limited to figures outside the hardline faction that currently runs the

country, it presents an opportunity that the West could exploit.

In November, a group of thirty-five former Iranian diplomats characterized (<https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1690910/%D9%87%D8%B4%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%BE%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%82-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B0%D8%A7%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D9%86%D8%AA%DB%8C%D8%AC%D9%87-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%DA%A9%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B1>) support for Russia’s Ukraine invasion as a “grave mistake,” especially considering that Iran bills itself as a “standard bearer against arrogance and supporting oppressed and suppressed people in the remotest parts of the world.” The statement also implied that Moscow was engaging in “duplicitous behavior,” from continuing talks with Washington to selling advanced weapons and collaborating in energy markets with Iranian rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Another former diplomat, Mohammad Sadr, argued (<https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/708137/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%B6%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%87-%D9%85%D9%87%D9%84%DA%A9%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D9%85%D9%88%D9%82%D8%B9%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%A8%DB%8C%D9%86%E2%80%8C%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%84%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B2%D8%AF-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%A7-%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%A7-%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%DA%AF%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%B9%DA%A9%D8%B3%E2%80%8C%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B8%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%B3%E2%80%8C%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%87%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C-%DA%86%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%DB%8C%D9%85>) that Russia has dealt a “fatal blow” to Iran’s international standing by using its drones against Ukraine.

Other figures offered more direct criticism (<https://agsiw.org/bad-company-iranian-commentators-on-putin/>) of Russia’s credibility. Hossein Alaei—a former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy who has taken controversial positions (https://www.rferl.org/a/iran_hossein_alaei_irgc_attacks/24452969.html) in the past—argued (<http://www.ensafnews.com/377758/>) that Moscow sought to drag Tehran into the war from the beginning, both to hold Iranian foreign policy “hostage” and to relieve its own isolation. Similarly, Nematollah Izadi, Tehran’s former ambassador to Moscow, suggested ([https://www.ilna.ir/%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%B4-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-3/1294729-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%B1-%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%88%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%BA%D9%84%D9%88%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%81%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%B3%DA%A9%D9%88-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4%DB%8C%D9%85-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B4-%D9%BE%D9%87%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%BE%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-](https://www.ilna.ir/%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%B4-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-3/1294729-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%B1-%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%88%DA%A9%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%BA%D9%84%D9%88%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%81%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%B3%DA%A9%D9%88-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4%DB%8C%D9%85-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B4-%D9%BE%D9%87%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%BE%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%B4%D8%AA%DB%8C%D9%85)) that Russia has

<http://www.ensafnews.com/376419/>) by the moderate conservative lawmaker Heshmatollah Falahat Pisheh, former chairman of the parliament’s National Security and Foreign Policy Committee.

Alaei and Falahat Pisheh also accused Russia of intentionally leaking details about the drone shipments to the media, reminiscent of a past episode of bilateral tension touched off by Russian boasting. In 2016, Moscow publicized an arrangement whereby Tehran had [secretly permitted \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russia-uses-iranian-air-base-two-essays-0\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russia-uses-iranian-air-base-two-essays-0) Russian bombers to use an Iranian air base to strike targets in Syria. The revelation triggered public outrage in Iran, spurring the regime to criticize Moscow and cancel the agreement after less than a week. Although there is no evidence that Russia has actually leaked details this time, Iranian concerns about Moscow’s trustworthiness appear deeply entrenched.

Doubts about commercial ties have been voiced as well. Although Iran’s business community recognizes the opportunities offered by Russia’s large consumer market and newfound international isolation, suspicions have emerged about how far Moscow is willing to go. In November, the Tehran Chamber of Commerce [published a report \(https://donya-e-egtesad.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-4/3914122-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%88\)](https://donya-e-egtesad.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-4/3914122-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%88) urging officials to seek more strategic opportunities for partnership with Russia, such as further developing the International North-South Transport Corridor and Chabahar port. Yet it recommended developing these ties quietly, out of the media spotlight and in ways that would not get tied up with Western sanctions on Russia. It also noted that Tehran should not allow Russia “to use the ‘Iran card’ in international fora.” And in a [separate report \(https://otaghiranonline.ir/UFiles/Docs/2022/12/20/Doc20221220120025517.pdf\)](https://otaghiranonline.ir/UFiles/Docs/2022/12/20/Doc20221220120025517.pdf) published in December, the Iran Chamber of Commerce criticized the government’s policy of prioritizing relations with Asia (namely Russia and China), stating that “neither the West nor the East can replace one another in Iran’s economic diplomacy.”

Policy Recommendations

To exacerbate these latent tensions, the United States should focus on emphasizing two points: that Tehran faces escalating costs for its alignment with Moscow, and that Russia may eventually betray Iran. The main goal of such efforts should be to deter or reduce Iran’s arms transfers.

First, Washington should adjust its messaging. Although Western officials [have already noted \(https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east-stories/1671271786-cia-russia-forming-full-fledged-military-partnership-with-iran-including-in-mideast\)](https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east-stories/1671271786-cia-russia-forming-full-fledged-military-partnership-with-iran-including-in-mideast) the dangers of the expanding relationship and applied new sanctions and political pressure on Tehran, U.S. talking points should also emphasize the potential for friction and mistrust between the two partners. For example, disclosing details about their secret deals and/or their hesitations about each other may generate the most intense reaction in Tehran. Washington should consider declassifying such information [to the extent \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-02-15/reveal-or-not-reveal\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-02-15/reveal-or-not-reveal) that it is substantiated and that the risks of disclosure are outweighed by the possible benefits. Officials should also emphasize how Iran and Russia are still competing intensively on the economic front, as a way to raise doubts about whether deepening the relationship is worth it.

Second, Washington should publicize some of the information that Western allies are learning about Iranian drone capabilities in Ukraine—including how they were built, how they perform in battle, and how they can be intercepted.

In doing so, officials should underscore how these lessons are advancing the work that the United States and its regional partners are doing to **strengthen defenses** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-irans-drones-ukraine-mean-future-war>) in the Middle East.

Third, Washington should **impose a greater economic cost** (<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3728456-how-to-hold-iran-accountable-for-supporting-russias-war/>) on Tehran for supporting Russia, thereby showing Iranians that such assistance is hurting them, not helping them. Although the U.S. government has already imposed some sanctions in response to drone shipments, it should go further by attempting to depress the revenue that Tehran earns from energy sales. In doing so, it could point out that **every barrel of Iranian oil** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-oil-exports-are-vulnerable-sanctions>) smuggled and sold helps to fuel Russia's war in Ukraine.

Finally, Washington should encourage the European Union and Britain to impose new sanctions on Iranian entities involved in the drone program—especially those already sanctioned under weapons of mass destruction authorities, since those sanctions are **set to be lifted** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/snapback-sanctions-iran-more-bark-bite>) in October under UN Security Council Resolution 2231. Potential entities to be targeted include the IRGC, the Aerospace Industries Organization, the Iran Aircraft Manufacturing Industries, the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics, Fajr Aviation Composite Industries, Yas Air (renamed Pouya Air), and Pars Aviation Services. European governments **have already** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-eu-sanctions-indicate-more-willingness-hold-tehran-accountable>) imposed similarly layered sanctions and should do so again. Washington should also urge the EU and Britain to add the IRGC to their lists of terrorist organizations, as **London is reportedly considering** (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-64156965>).

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RECOMMENDED



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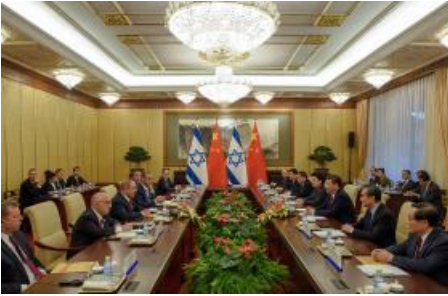
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