

Why Putin Won't Come to Iran's Rescue Against Israel

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

Jun 28, 2025

Also published in National Security Journal

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

Anna Borshchevskaya is the Harold Grinspoon Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



Articles & Testimony

Although Tehran's current vulnerability presents important opportunities to counter Russia's strategic ambitions, Moscow has long retained its influence in the region by purposefully avoiding overcommitment to any one partner.

Thus far, Moscow has done [little to help Iran \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kremlin-rejects-charge-it-did-little-help-iran-2025-06-24/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kremlin-rejects-charge-it-did-little-help-iran-2025-06-24/) beyond rhetorical [condemnations of Israel \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/russia-says-israels-attack-iran-was-unprovoked-illegal-2025-06-13/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/russia-says-israels-attack-iran-was-unprovoked-illegal-2025-06-13/) and the US and offers to mediate. Russian President [Vladimir Putin \(https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/putin-might-finally-want-peace-with-ukraine/\)](https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/putin-might-finally-want-peace-with-ukraine/) empowered [Iran \(https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/irans-military-isnt-waving-the-white-flag-just-yet/\)](https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/irans-military-isnt-waving-the-white-flag-just-yet/) and its proxies across the Middle East for years.

Still, he chose not to come to Iran's rescue during the [Israeli military campaign \(https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/israel-iran-conflict-us-trump-06-26-25-intl-hnk\)](https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/israel-iran-conflict-us-trump-06-26-25-intl-hnk) and [targeted US strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities \(https://www.npr.org/2025/06/23/nx-s1-5441791/takeaways-us-airstrikes-iran-nuclear-trump\)](https://www.npr.org/2025/06/23/nx-s1-5441791/takeaways-us-airstrikes-iran-nuclear-trump). His response is consistent with how the Kremlin views partnerships: prioritizing its own needs and avoiding over-commitment to anyone. Moscow will likely stick to this approach as events continue to unfold in the Middle East.

Vladimir Putin comes from a [KGB circle \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-15047823\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-15047823) that learned from the strategic failure of the Soviet Union. One key lesson from this failure was over-investment in any relationship. Russia's agreement with Iran is not a mutual defense treaty, a [point \(https://x.com/tass_agency/status/1935461698342629713?t=BqjDy_GicvvL31pnGXyKBA&s=03\)](https://x.com/tass_agency/status/1935461698342629713?t=BqjDy_GicvvL31pnGXyKBA&s=03) Putin himself made on June 18. Many commentators were quick to point out earlier that Russia and Iran have a signed [strategic partnership \(https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/iran-parliament-approves-strategic-pact-\)](https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/iran-parliament-approves-strategic-pact-)

[with-russia-2025-05-21/](#)), but unlike the [NATO treaty](#)

(https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.htm), the agreement has no mutual defense clause.

Observers who have tracked the course of Russia's relationship with Iran for decades understand this agreement as one of many arrangements that allow Russia to utilize Iran to further its interests while avoiding liability and involvement in Iran's more provocative [regional actions](#) (<https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/iran-seems-destined-to-have-icbms-tipped-with-nuclear-weapons/>).

When Moscow intervened militarily in the [Syrian civil war](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-strategic-success-syria-and-future-moscows-middle-east-policy>) in late 2015—Russia's first expeditionary push outside the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War—it had done so only after the Syrian regime formally asked for assistance and Tehran convinced Putin that [Assad](#) (<https://www.understandingwar.org/report/assad-regime>) was in danger of falling. There were no indications that the United States would intervene in Syria to block Moscow's efforts.

At the time, US President Barack Obama said Russia would find itself in a quagmire—meaning [Russia](#) (<https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/u-s-ukraine-minerals-deal-dead-russia-captures-key-lithium-deposit/>) would have to overinvest its resources and would find itself overextended. However, Russia's Syria intervention was designed precisely to avoid overextension while mitigating domestic political risk and blowback, a point I explain in detail in my [book](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/putins-war-syria-russian-foreign-policy-and-price-americas-absence>).

Moscow stuck to this principle of avoiding overextension to the very end of Assad's fall last December. Rather than continue to invest in the Assad regime, [no longer](#) (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/dec/17/bashar-al-assad-syria-russia-moscow-putin-middle-east>) paying the same dividends for the Kremlin as it used to, Moscow decided to cut its losses and let him fall. To be sure, Assad's fall was a loss for Russia, but Moscow is prioritizing its war on Ukraine. Assad's loss is one the Kremlin could afford, given the extensive diplomatic, economic, military, and informational influence it had built in the region thanks to its position in Syria; nor did Russia leave [Syria](#) (<https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/irans-irgc-how-powerful-is-it/>) entirely.

There are a number of obvious benefits for Russia in the ongoing crisis that I, along with many, have [already](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/key-outside-actors-iran-israel-showdown-compilation-washington-institute>) pointed out (<https://gulfiif.org/risks-and-rewards-for-russia-in-the-israel-iran-conflict/>): distraction from Ukraine (indeed, Moscow's campaign there has only intensified since June 13), potential rise in oil prices that help fuel Moscow's war effort there, and the strategic aim to maintain good ties with all actors in the Middle East, including the Gulf states and [Israel](#) (<https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/f-35i-adir-israel-has-a-stealth-fighter-jet-built-for-an-iran-war/>).

Putin would not be upset if the Iranian nuclear program were set back because it would only strengthen Russia's position vis-a-vis Iran. Russia has supported [Iran's nuclear program](#) (<https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/iran-might-end-up-building-nuclear-weapons-afterall/>) since the mid-1990s by providing technical assistance and building nuclear power plants. Russia's nuclear agency Rosatom built Iran's Bushehr nuclear reactor.

Unlike the fall of Syria's Assad, regime collapse in Tehran would seriously damage Russia's strategic position in the Middle East—and broader geostrategic designs. But that has not happened. Tehran is weakened but has few supporters to turn to, so Moscow and Tehran are not headed for a split. Russia would have alienated Arab states and Israel if it had done more to support Iran. Russia no longer needs Iran for drone technology to support its war in Ukraine, and the military-industrial base of Russia and Iran will continue to cooperate. At the same time, the rest of the region will still want to purchase [Russian weapons](#) (<https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/russias-su-57-felon->

[stealth-fighter-wont-save-iran/](#).

Western analysts may describe Russia's behavior as short-term tactical opportunism, but avoiding overcommitment to partners is what allows Russia to retain its position in the long term. Fundamentally, Moscow's goals haven't changed, nor have they been deterred. Moscow still wants to remake the world order with itself at the center. It requires China and Iran to accomplish these goals, and they have not yet lost either. It may continue playing a double game by trying to have it both ways: supporting Iran but not enough to sacrifice relationships with other key states.

Still, a weakened regime in **[Tehran \(https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/the-iran-nuclear-weapons-threat-is-far-from-obliterated/\)](https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/the-iran-nuclear-weapons-threat-is-far-from-obliterated/)** is a significant setback for Russia, and the West needs to capitalize on this moment. It could highlight Russia's failure to help Iran as part of a broader informational narrative that Russia's alternative to a liberal world order is a losing one, one where few would be safe.

It could highlight past examples of Russia's failure to support its allies. For instance, over the last several years, Armenia has distanced itself from Russia, as Yerevan repeatedly felt let down by Moscow's inability to fulfill its military commitments to Armenia, which are stronger than those between Russia and Iran, to begin with.

In a world where Moscow invades **[Ukraine \(https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/russia-is-averaging-over-1000-drone-launches-a-week-against-ukraine/\)](https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/russia-is-averaging-over-1000-drone-launches-a-week-against-ukraine/)**, turns it into the largest war since World War II, and periodically blackmails the West to scare it into doing less to support Ukraine by showing everyone Russia's nuclear scowl, another illiberal regime backed by a nuclear deterrent would be more dangerous for everyone. If Iran were to possess a nuclear weapon, it would increase the likelihood of that regime staying in power and, together with Russia and **[China \(https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/chinas-j-10ce-fighter-explained-in-1-word/\)](https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/chinas-j-10ce-fighter-explained-in-1-word/)**, forming a trans-Asian arc of countries that can mutually support each other in their campaigns against the liberal world order.

For all its efforts to avoid overextension, the Kremlin could not prevent itself from overextending in **[Ukraine \(https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/china-is-stealing-russias-battlefield-secrets-in-ukraine/\)](https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/china-is-stealing-russias-battlefield-secrets-in-ukraine/)**—here, Moscow's imperial impetus overrode restraint. Ukraine is the one place where Russia is bogged down. Moscow is engaged in a long game against the liberal free world. It is prepared to pay a high price for winning. The liberal free world should be committed to the same.

Anna Borshchevskaya is the Harold Grinspoon Senior Fellow in The Washington Institute's Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Program on Great Power Competition and the Middle East. This article was originally published on the National Security Journal website (<https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/why-putin-wont-come-to-irans-rescue-against-israel/>). ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

After the "Hammer": Postwar Opportunities and Risks for U.S. Policy in the Middle East

Jun 30, 2025

◆
Robert Satloff,
Mona Yacoubian,
Richard Nephew

(/policy-analysis/after-hammer-postwar-opportunities-and-risks-us-policy-middle-east)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran on Day 13: Gauging Regime Choices and Public Attitudes After the War

July 2, 2025, starting at 11:00 a.m. EDT (1500 GMT)

◆
Holly Dagues,
Roya Boroumand,
Norman Roule

(/policy-analysis/iran-day-13-gauging-regime-choices-and-public-attitudes-after-war)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Redefining and Strengthening the U.S.-Iraq Relationship Through Energy and Security

Jun 27, 2025

◆
Noam Raydan,
Devorah Margolin

(/policy-analysis/redefining-and-strengthening-us-iraq-relationship-through-energy-and-security)

TOPICS

Great Power Competition (/policy-analysis/great-power-competition)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)