

Can Trump Break Up the Russian-Iranian Alliance?

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Feb 6, 2017

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Articles & Testimony

One of the president's biggest early foreign policy tests will be navigating the aftermath of the nuclear deal, which brought the Islamic Republic even further into Russia's orbit.

Russia and Iran are currently engaged in unprecedented cooperation (http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/OEWWatch/201607/201607_OEW.pdf). Never in 500 years has the leadership of the two countries been so close. Despite deeply rooted mistrust and a long history as rivals, a number of common interests have brought Russia and Iran together. First among them is the mutual geostrategic goal of zero-sum opposition to the West, especially the United States.

Russian-Iranian cooperation may be short-lived. But in the meantime it can inflict lasting damage to U.S. interests. It is going to be difficult to drive a wedge between Russia and Iran in the short-term, but there are certain things the new Trump administration could do to that end.

To understand the close ties between Russia and Iran, it's important to understand the complicated history between the two countries.

The Grand Duchy of Muscovy, the precursor of the modern Russian state, and Iran, then called Persia, opened official relations in 1521. Trade was the main reason for the relationship; both countries looked down on each other as inferior, and thus gave little thought to expanding ties. Tsarist Russia, which succeeded the Muscovy in 1547, and then the Russian Empire that Peter the Great proclaimed in 1721, soon began to expand south and southeast into Central Asia and the Caucasus. This is when Russian and Persian interests first clashed. In 1796, Catherine the Great sent troops into the Iranian North Caucasus, and only her death that year may have prevented a full-scale Russian invasion.

In the 19th century, Russia and Iran fought two wars, in 1804-1813 and 1826-1828. Iran lost both and ceded to

Russia parts of what are now Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, and Turkmenistan. The wars took a serious financial toll on Iran and anti-Russian sentiment rose on both religious grounds and resentment of the high cost of the war effort. In February 1829, a mob murdered Russian ambassador Alexander Griboyedov with his staff in Tehran. Griboyedov had helped negotiate the Treaty of Turkmenchay, which ended the war in 1828 on what the Iranians saw as humiliating terms. A Russian envoy would not be murdered by foreign nationals in a foreign country again until **2016 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/12/22/a-russian-ambassador-was-murdered-the-apology-came-in-the-shape-of-a-huge-diamond/?utm_term=.b5cc03ee8710)**.

Despite these tensions, commercial and political interests brought Russia and Iran together in the early 1900s. The Kremlin wanted to pull Iran into its sphere of influence and the Iranian shah needed money, which he began borrowing from Russia either at exorbitant rates or with political strings attached. The Iranian public, of course, bore the cost. This opened a rift between the Iranian government's attitude toward Russia and that of its people -- one that remains to this day.

After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Soviet forces sponsored separatist movements in Iranian territory, first in the northern Iranian province of Gilan on the Caspian Sea and later in both Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. In 1946, Soviet leader Josef Stalin sparked the first real crisis of the Cold War when he briefly refused to withdraw the Red Army from Iran in 1946. To this day, Iranians speak resentfully of the Soviet occupation. Iranian revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini disdained both the U.S. and the Soviet Union. His defining slogan was "Neither East nor West but Islamic Republic."

While the Iranian public remained distrustful of Russia, with the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, as well as Khomeini's death and the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, some Iranian officials sought to improve ties with Moscow on pragmatic grounds. Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani even traveled to Moscow. But the Kremlin worried that Iran might export its radical ideology to Russia's large Muslim population or foment unrest in the Caucasus and Central Asia in order to influence Moscow -- after all, this is the traditional Kremlin approach. Yet Tehran sided with Moscow during Chechnya's separatist struggles in the early 1990s. Iran also helped Moscow end Tajikistan's 1992-1997 civil war. By the end of the '90s, despite remaining differences, Russia had emerged as Iran's main conventional arms supplier and began assisting in its nuclear program.

When Vladimir Putin rose to power in Russia in 2000, he began the process of returning to the Middle East. To do so, he worked with everyone in the region, friend and foe alike. Russia's relationship with Iran was part of this effort.

The strategy grew out of Putin's antagonism toward the West and its democratic values. He viewed Russia's foreign policy as a zero-sum game against the West and acted accordingly. He had several reasons to pursue improved ties with Iran, but his desire to reduce Western influence and pull Iran closer to Russia overrode all others. As Prof. Mark Katz of George Mason University **wrote (<http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-russia>)**, Putin worried that then-Iranian President Mohammad Khatami's "dialogue of civilizations" would bring Iran closer to the U.S. -- and thus out of Russia's sphere of influence.

In October 2000, soon after taking office, Putin publicly repealed the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin pact, which limited Russia's sale of conventional arms to Iran. Press reports **indicated (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB971819748452949326>)** that in practice the agreement gave Russia "a free pass to sell conventional weapons to Iran" until 1999, but the public cancellation of the deal sent a message that Putin wanted closer cooperation with the Islamic Republic.

Putin also sought to improve ties with Iran for economic reasons. Iran was a lucrative market for Russia's military and the arms trade and nuclear cooperation continued to expand. In addition, the two countries shared a strong opposition to Sunni Islamism. A tough stance against terrorism helped propel Putin into power in March 2000 after a

series of apartment bombings shook Moscow and several other cities in September 1999. Putin immediately blamed the Chechens and declared a second war on Chechnya, though much evidence suggests Putin and his main intelligence service, the FSB, may have orchestrated the attacks. In any case, Moscow's human rights abuses in the first Chechen war had already **transformed (<https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/220-the-north-caucasus-the-challenges-of-integration-i-ethnicity-and-conflict.pdf>)** the secular Chechen separatist cause into a radical Islamist one.

The majority of Russia's Muslims are Sunni and countering Sunni extremism was among Putin's official policies from the very beginning. Shia Iran shared this concern. Indeed, Russian experts and officials claim that Iran is a potentially "secular" force that can help counter Sunni Islamism. This has led to a double standard on Sunni versus Shia terrorism. In February 2003, for example, Russia's Supreme Court declared the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, while Shia Hezbollah received no such designation. Though in practice Putin was just as willing to work with Sunni Islamists as anyone else, he took a different stance domestically.

Of course, difficulties remained in the Russia-Iran relationship. Since 2006, Moscow has sought to dilute sanctions against Iran. For its part, Iran would have preferred Russia did not support sanctions at all. Tehran also felt snubbed when, under pressure from the U.S. and Israel, Moscow froze the sale of S-300 air defense missiles to Iran in 2010.

In 2013, however, Russian-Iranian cooperation rose to an entirely new level as the two countries' political interests converged more than ever before.

In 2012, Putin began a third presidential term amidst massive protests against him and his United Russia party. Putin launched a domestic crackdown and blamed the U.S. State Department for "**giving a signal (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxmUFTTF9MQ>)**" to protestors to take to the streets. He could not even fathom the possibility that people could protest independently. Fear that domestic protest can break out anywhere, anytime now guides much of his domestic policy, which goes hand-in-hand with his foreign policy. In Russia the line between the two is blurred to a degree that is hard to imagine in the West.

Putin believes that the West is behind all protests in the post-Soviet sphere and the Middle East, and that he is next. This is one of the main reasons why he has supported the Assad regime in Syria at all costs. This in turn brought Moscow especially close to Tehran. Putin believes he is in a stronger position to confront the West in the Middle East if he is allied with Iran.

Russia also emerged as a strong voice in the P5+1 group that negotiated the nuclear deal with Iran, especially in the context of Western retreat from the Middle East. Putin pursued his own self-interest in regard to the talks: A deal with Iran would open more possibilities for cooperation. On the one hand, Russia would prefer a non-nuclear Iran; it hardly needed convincing to participate in talks to curb Tehran's nuclear program. On the other hand, Moscow felt less threatened by the program than the West, and ultimately puts its desire to counter the West above all. It may make little sense from a Western perspective, but Moscow often ignores real threats and elevates imaginary ones -- hence its obsession with a perceived threat from NATO.

Russia and Iran also shared a concern about the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan following President Obama's plans to draw down U.S. troops by 2014. Ironically, Putin wanted the U.S. to remain in Afghanistan more than the U.S. wanted to -- albeit on Putin's terms. Russia and Iran were impacted by narco-trafficking coming out of Afghanistan and viewed the Taliban, which is traditionally both anti-Shia and anti-Russian, as a potential enemy.

In spring 2013, according to Russian sources, Russian and Iranian officials **discussed (<http://www.nakanune.ru/articles/17576>)** the idea of Tehran joining the Moscow-led Eurasian Customs Union at a seminar in Tehran titled "Iran and Regional Cooperation in Eurasia." Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi attended the event and reportedly spoke of Iran's usefulness to the development and expansion of Eurasianism --

Putin's alternative vision to Western liberalism. The Customs Union in particular, and the Eurasian Economic Union that followed it in 2014, are part of Putin's effort to counterbalance the European Union. This may have been just talk, but that the conversation took place at all is significant. Putin never offered to allow any Arab country to join the Customs Union, and Iran was never part of the Soviet Union, as were the other member countries.

In March 2014, Moscow annexed Crimea and began destabilizing activities in Eastern Ukraine. The U.S. and Europe imposed sanctions on Russia in response. U.S.-Russian relations plunged to the lowest levels since the Cold War, intensifying Putin's need for anti-Western allies. Iran fit that role perfectly. That America's allies are traditionally Sunni only adds to Iran's appeal.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Iran in January 2015 and Putin visited (<http://www.rbc.ru/politics/24/11/2015/565392859a79473ddebd9d1a>) in November -- the first such visits in at least a decade. After they met, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei praised (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iran-russia-idUSKBN0TC1M520151123>) Putin for "neutralizing Washington's plots." Putin again brought up the issue of Iranian cooperation with the Customs Union, offered a \$5 billion line of credit, and discussed expansion of bilateral trade. He also highlighted (<http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2015/nov/23/putin-tehran-discuss-syria-boost-ties>) Iran's positive role as a "trustworthy and reliable ally," demonstrating once again his true priority of pulling Iran into his sphere of influence. Indeed, Russian Middle East expert Georgiy Mirsky wrote (http://echo.msk.ru/blog/georgiy_mirsky/1524898-echo/) in his blog on the liberal website Echo Moskvy, "Several years ago, I heard from the lips of one MIA [Ministry of Internal Affairs] employee such reasoning: 'For us, a pro-American Iran is worse than a nuclear Iran.'" Putin and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani have met several times since 2015, as have their ministers and aides. Subsequent high-level meetings followed and are now almost routine.

As negotiations on the nuclear deal gained traction, the Kremlin highlighted Russia's indispensable role in them. When the agreement was signed in July 2015, Putin praised (<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49957>) the deal and emphasized Russia's participation in the process, while the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs tweeted (https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/620906964080422912) that the accord was "based on the approach articulated by President Vladimir Putin." The ink had barely dried on the accord when Putin lifted the freeze on the S-300 sale and deliveries began in April 2015, despite Israel's concerns. In June 2016, Putin called (<https://rg.ru/2016/06/24/putin-prizval-priniat-iran-v-shos.html>) for Iran's admission to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, something -- just as with the Customs Union -- he had never done for any Arab state.

In August 2016, Moscow took the world -- and many in Iran -- by surprise when it reportedly used Iran's Hamadan airbase to bomb targets in Syria. The last time a foreign power had based itself in Iran was during World War II. Russian media was awash with praise for Russia-Iran anti-terrorism cooperation. In the context of public outrage in Iran, Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan accused (http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/23/world/middleeast/iran-russia-syria.html?_r=0) Moscow of "ungentlemanly" behavior for publicizing its use of the base. Nonetheless, Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani said (http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2016/11/30/Russia-gets-permission-to-use-Irans-Hamadan-air-base-for-Syria-airstrikes/8251480520159/) only days afterwards that "The flights [of Russian warplanes] haven't been suspended. Iran and Russia are allies in the fight against terrorism," though the Hamedan air base, he claimed, was only "used for refueling."

The following month, Putin said (<https://ria.ru/economy/20160905/1476118270.html>) that it would be "just" if Iran reached pre-sanctions level of oil production. In November, he began discussing a \$10 billion arms deal (<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/11/15/us-officials-concerned-as-iran-russia-plan-10-billion-arms-deal.html>). In late December, discussions on Iranian admission to the Customs Union continued. A number of Russian sources reported (<https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2221151.html>) that Iran hopes to move closer to the

Union and **[benefit \(https://riafan.ru/588299-iran-hochet-razvivat-svobodnuyu-torgovlyu-s-evrazes\)](https://riafan.ru/588299-iran-hochet-razvivat-svobodnuyu-torgovlyu-s-evrazes)** from free trade with its members. In the same month, Rouhani travelled to Armenia -- a Customs Union member -- ostensibly to improve ties, and signed a number of agreements. It was Rouhani's first visit to Armenia as president. The traditionally more liberal-oriented press outlet *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* **[suggested \(http://www.ng.ru/cis/2016-12-21/7_6890_armenia.html\)](http://www.ng.ru/cis/2016-12-21/7_6890_armenia.html)** that Armenia might tie Iran to the Customs Union. While it remains unclear whether this will happen, it is significant that the issue remains on the table.

When it comes to the Iranian view of Russia, sources **[report \(https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2166073.html\)](https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2166073.html)** that the two countries agree on terrorism-related issues and Iran sees Russia's policies in Syria as "wise." Recently, Russian press outlet *Izvestiya* **[wrote \(http://izvestia.ru/news/657805\)](http://izvestia.ru/news/657805)** that, reflecting on the past year, it was Russia that always spoke out for lifting sanctions and maintained dialogue with Tehran. Iranian cinema made its way into Europe, the article claims, because it was widely shown at Russian film festivals. The article concludes, "Dialogue between the two countries has not been interrupted even for a minute. And it is this fact that gives reason for optimism -- whatever the complexities may be, Russia and Iran will find a reason for friendship."

At the moment, it is going to be difficult to drive a wedge between Russia and Iran. Too many interests hold them together and they are likely to continue to put historical mistrust aside even as Tehran's persistent and historically-justified fears that Moscow will throw Iran under the bus continue to undermine the relationship.

From Moscow's perspective, the U.S. has been and will continue to be an enemy, no matter how hard any U.S. president tries to improve relations. Putin needs the U.S. as an enemy to justify domestic problems at home and he sees the current geopolitical order, anchored by the U.S., as disadvantaging him. Nothing short of a rearrangement of that order will satisfy Putin. Nobel Prize-winning author and journalist Svetlana Alexievich **[observed \(http://www.rferl.org/a/svetlana-alexievich-nobel-literature-prize-syria-ukraine-putin-militarism/28034091.html\)](http://www.rferl.org/a/svetlana-alexievich-nobel-literature-prize-syria-ukraine-putin-militarism/28034091.html)** in October 2015 that Russians "are people of war. We don't have any other history. Either we were preparing for war or we were fighting one. And so all of this militarism has pushed all of our psychological buttons at once." Putin needs allies who share this worldview.

President Trump expressed two contradictory policies during his campaign: being tough on Iran and improving relations with Russia. These two goals are incompatible because Putin wants a partnership with Trump in Syria, but Syria is where Putin is most closely allied with Iran. In order to push Iran and Russia apart, Trump needs to resolve this contradiction. The recent Syria peace talks in Kazakhstan only brought Russia and Iran **[closer together \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syria-deal-draws-iran-into-alliance-with-russia-and-turkey/2017/01/24/5336057c-e199-11e6-a419-eefe8eff0835_story.html?utm_term=.35015d2595e5\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syria-deal-draws-iran-into-alliance-with-russia-and-turkey/2017/01/24/5336057c-e199-11e6-a419-eefe8eff0835_story.html?utm_term=.35015d2595e5)**, if anything, given their pledge to fight "jointly" against ISIS and al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. This development will also make it even more difficult for Trump to ally with Russia on Syria.

So far, Putin has succeeded in balancing Israeli and Sunni interests with its growing relationship with Iran. But it is unclear how long Putin can sustain this policy. Certainly, Putin did not hesitate to discount Israel's interests when it came to selling S-300 weapons to Iran. Indeed, it is not in Israel's interest for Putin to continue supporting Bashar al-Assad and thereby expand Iran's influence in the Middle East. The Trump administration could encourage and support U.S. allies like Israel in order to make it more difficult for Putin to maintain his balance of good relations with all sides. It should also step up security cooperation with its allies to demonstrate that it is still committed to the region.

In the long term, Russia and Iran diverge somewhat on Syria. Iran perceives Syria as within its sphere of influence, which is not very different from how Putin views the former Soviet Union countries that he does not consider real states. Iran is interested in **[exacerbating \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-latest-ceasefire-will-not-change-hezbollahs-role-in-syria\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-latest-ceasefire-will-not-change-hezbollahs-role-in-syria)** sectarian divisions in Syria so that the Assad regime becomes

an Iranian client-state with no independent decision-making. Iran is also closer to Assad himself than Putin, who simply wants Assad or someone else like him to ensure his interests in Syria. He cares more about how he can leverage Syria in his relations with the West than Syria itself. At the same time, Putin also increasingly perceives the Middle East as falling within the Russian sphere of influence, albeit differently than Iran. Historically, Moscow always looked for buffer zones out of its sense of insecurity, and this is precisely how it feels now.

The Trump administration could emphasize to Putin that Russian and Iranian interests in Syria are bound to clash in the future, and therefore an alliance with Iran can only go so far. But most of all, the U.S. needs to be present in the region and regain its leadership position. Putin preys on weakness and has perceived the U.S. as weak for years. He stepped into a vacuum in the Middle East, especially in Syria, that was created by America's absence. By taking an active role in the region, the U.S. would limit Putin's influence, including his alliance with Iran.

Anna Borshchevskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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