

Vladimir Putin and the Shiite Axis

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Russia's military alliance with Iran is all about keeping Assad in power and America on its back foot, and even a short-lived partnership can do long-term damage to U.S. interests.

On Aug. 16, Russian bombers took off from Shahid Nojeh air base near the Iranian city of Hamadan reportedly to [bomb](#) Islamic State targets in Syria. The fact that the Russian air force had based planes inside Iran was not only a surprise to American diplomats -- it was news to many Iranian officials as well. While State Department spokesman Mark Toner [said](#) the Russian action may have violated a UN Security Council resolution, 20 Iranian legislators demanded a closed session of parliament to discuss why Iran had allowed foreign forces to base themselves in the country for the first time since World War II.

Against the backdrop of outrage in Tehran, Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan [accused](#) Moscow of "ungentlemanly" behavior in publicizing Russia's use of the base, [denied](#) reports citing Russian officials that Moscow and Tehran had signed an agreement for Russia to use the base, and announced that Iran would no longer allow Russian bombers to fly from the airstrip. In an apparent attempt to save face, Russian Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov [said](#) the Russian planes had "successfully" completed their mission and returned to Russia.

This may have seemed a brief hiccup in an otherwise solid alliance between Russia and Iran. But it's worth remembering that it's the romance, not the strife, that is the aberration. Never in the countries' hundreds of years of dealing with each other have they [cooperated](#) so closely. It's America's misfortune that Moscow and Tehran have just recently discovered that there is vast overlap in their interests in the Middle East -- not least, in opposing U.S. interests there.

CONVERGENCE OF INTERESTS

Russia and Iran have traditionally been suspicious of each other. Although there has been occasional cooperation, relations have usually vacillated between direct rivalry and veiled competition. At times, the two countries have descended into armed conflict: They fought two wars in the 19th century, and Russian forces occupied lands the Iranian shah considered his own in what is now Turkmenistan. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Soviet forces sponsored separatist movements, first in the northern Iranian province of Gilan on the Caspian Sea and, in the wake of World War II, in both Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. The 1946 Azerbaijan crisis -- the first real crisis of the Cold War -- was sparked by Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin's refusal to withdraw the Red Army from Iran in 1946, where it had been stationed during World War II in order to help secure a supply route.

The seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran after the Iranian revolution might have symbolized revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's animosity toward the United States, but his distrust of the Soviet Union was just as deep. "Neither East nor West but Islamic republic" became a defining slogan of Iranian revolutionaries.

But with Khomeini's death in 1989, some Iranian officials sought to improve ties with Moscow. Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani even traveled to Moscow to explore rapprochement. By the end of the 1990s, Russia had emerged as Iran's main conventional arms supplier and began assisting in its nuclear program.

When Vladimir Putin rose to power in 2000, the relationship grew even warmer. The arms trade between the two countries expanded even further, and the Kremlin's diplomats vocally supported Iran's nuclear program as a peaceful endeavor and worked diligently to dilute sanctions on Tehran. High-level meetings of the countries' top officials are now almost routine: Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Iran in January 2015, and Putin visited in November -- the first visits by Putin and a Russian defense minister in a decade. Putin and his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani, have met several times since then, as have their ministers and aides. This summer, Putin called for Iran's admission into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, something he had never done for any Arab state.

ANTI-WESTERN ALLIANCE

Some of the motivation for this warming of ties may have been economic, as Russian military and nuclear industries saw Iran as an increasingly lucrative market. But Moscow and Tehran have also been brought together

by a growing number of shared political interests. Both countries are concerned about the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal. Both fear the rise of Sunni extremism, which for Russia is connected to the historic instability in the North Caucasus region that goes back to the war with Chechnya, when Moscow's abusive policies radicalized what began as a secular separatist struggle. Russia and Iran also [see possibilities](#) for growing cooperation in Eurasia; for example, three years ago, Russian and Iranian officials discussed the idea of Tehran joining the Moscow-led Customs Union, which aims to counterbalance the European Union.

The Syrian crisis has taken Russia-Iran cooperation to new heights. The war-torn country has become the perfect place for both regimes to check U.S. influence in the Middle East and expand their own power in the region. Putin especially wants to promote himself as a great world leader and cynically uses talk of anti-terrorism cooperation in Syria to advance this goal, even as he failed to target the Islamic State with any consistency and in some cases may even have strengthened it.

From Putin's paranoid perspective, support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is the same as supporting his own grip on power. The Russian president believes that the West orchestrated the "color revolutions" in Eastern Europe and other anti-regime protests in the Middle East and Russia. If he does not reduce Western influence, he believes, the West will oust him. Iran also needs Moscow's help to prop up its client and wants to obtain more Russian weapons.

Putin says he is friends with everyone in the Middle East, but, in reality, his policies favor the "Shiite axis" in the region. Russian experts and officials [claim](#) that Iran is a potentially "secular" force to counter Sunni Islamists. Indeed, Moscow has designated the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State as terrorist organizations -- but not the Shiite Islamist Hezbollah. Meanwhile, the Russian media trumpet the country's alliance with Iran and the public acknowledgment of Russian forces based there.

Putin is a cynical pragmatist. Even as he courts Iran and the Syrian regime, for example, he has also worked to improve relations with Turkey and Israel. Yet the Middle East's Shiite powers tend to be more anti-Western than the Sunni bloc -- an alliance with them aligns with Putin's goal of countering the West and positioning himself as the leader of a great power.

DAMAGE TO U.S. INTERESTS

Iran's decision to cut off Russia's use of Shahid Nojeh air base was most likely due to a domestic political backlash. In any case, the anger was not about Moscow's use of the base, but about Russia's decision to publicize it.

Moscow and Tehran are therefore likely to continue cooperation. There is an alliance of dictatorships, and dictators can put their differences aside when it suits their interests.

Still, this doesn't mean their alliance is built to last. Putin may think he can continue to successfully balance the Arab world's rival Sunni and Shiite powers on one hand and Iran and Israel on the other, but the Middle East is volatile and unpredictable. Iranian officials' cynicism that Putin will throw Tehran under the bus when it suits his short-term interests and anti-Russian sentiments among ordinary Iranians will continue to undercut long-term ties.

But a short-term alliance can do long-term damage to U.S. interests, and tactical victories can add up to a strategy. U.S. and European officials should not underestimate Putin's Middle Eastern ambitions or the challenges that his growing anti-Western alliance in the region presents.

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