

PEACE AND SECURITY

CLOSE BUT COMPLICATED

Iran-Russia Relations in the Middle East
Amid the War in Ukraine

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February 2023



Russia's war in Ukraine has ushered in a new phase of military cooperation between Tehran and Moscow, unprecedented in the history of their bilateral relationship.



In the economic field, however, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf continue to offer a better alternative to Moscow.



The war is expected to highlight common interests between Tehran and Moscow, but a strategic partnership or regional alliance between the two states remains elusive.

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's decision to intervene militarily in Syria in September 2015 ushered in a new phase of Moscow's post-Soviet Middle East policy. The Russian intervention and the subsequent partnership between Iran and Russia in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad also indicated a new era in Iranian-Russian relations. For the first time in contemporary history, Iran and Russia joined forces and formed a coalition to secure their shared interests in the Middle East. Beyond Syria, the two states have put forward more or less similar ideas about security multilateralism in the region, particularly in the Persian Gulf. Although unlike Tehran, Moscow does not insist that the United States should "leave" the region, they both agree on the necessity of establishing a more inclusive and multilateral order in the Middle East—to the effect of limiting Washington's influence. At the same time, Tehran and Moscow have diverging views on some crucial issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Yemen crisis, and the Kurdish issue. Even in Syria, as major military conflicts began to subside in 2018, signs of economic and political competition between the two partners started to appear.

The Ukraine crisis, however, has already become a new turning point in Iran-Russia relations. Despite adopting an officially neutral position and emphasising the need to stop violence in Ukraine, Tehran has increasingly supported the Russian narrative on the war in Ukraine, blaming the West for instigating the crisis. At the same time, Iranian leaders see the growing confrontation between Russia and the West as an opportunity to attract Moscow's attention and develop ties with Russia. Also, the two countries' officials speak of their determination to elevate relations to the level of "strategic partnership".¹ The new developments are set to affect not only the bilateral Iranian-Russian ties but also their relationship in different regions, particularly the Middle East.

This paper presents a three-level framework to study the areas of convergence and divergence between the Iranian and Russian approaches to the Middle East and how the war in Ukraine has started to affect Iran-Russia relations in the region. At the first level, issues related to or driven by great power politics will be examined, particularly the Iranian and Russian reactions to the United States in the Middle East. The second level deals with intra-regional dynamics, including regional rivalries, competing ideas for security multilateralism, and issues related to terrorism and separatism. The third level focuses on country-specific issues, where the Iranian and Russian attitudes towards Syria, Israel, and Yemen have a determining impact on their overall bilateral relationship. Against this backdrop, the paper argues that Russia and Iran have three sets of common, parallel, and contradictory interests in the Middle East. The war in Ukraine is expected to further highlight the common interests between the two sides. However, a strategic partnership or regional alliance between Tehran and Moscow remains elusive.

IRAN AND RUSSIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THREE AREAS OF ENGAGEMENT

Since well before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Iran-Russia relations in the Middle East have been ongoing at three distinct but interconnected areas. The first level pertains to the evolving U.S. role in the region, which has, over the past few years, led to more or less similar opportunities and challenges for Tehran and Moscow. There has been a common perception among Iranian² and Russian³ policymakers that the U.S. has been redefining its role and downgrading its direct engagement in the region. They also believe that the evolving U.S. role in the Middle East will eventually change the traditionally American-led regional order. As a result, both have tried to step in and take the initiative to shape the new order in line with their interests.

In 2019, Russia put forward the concept of "collective security in the Persian Gulf",⁴ which included ideas for resolving disputes and promoting cooperation between the countries of the region. The document also envisaged a role for Russia and other global powers as observer members in a potential regional framework. Iran has generally welcomed the Russian initiative, but at the same time, Iranian leaders have also put forward their own ideas. The Hormuz Peace Endeavor⁵ (HOPE), presented in 2019 by former President Hassan Rouhani at the United Nations General Assembly, was based on the idea of multilateral security cooperation. Neither of these ideas has been put into action yet, partly due to the changing regional and international dynamics following Donald Trump's election as president in the U.S. in 2016, and partly as a result of stark disagreements and conflicting security approaches of the Rouhani administration and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).⁶ Still, these proposals represent similarities between the Iranian and Russian views of a potential post-U.S. order in the Middle East. Just like Rouhani, President Ebrahim Raisi argues⁷ that, "Only the regional countries can determine the fate of the region". The Raisi administration has also put forward the so-called "neighbourhood policy" as its approach to the re-

1 "Russia, Iran wrapping up work on new strategic partnership deal, says Putin", *Tass*, September 15, 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1508011>

2 "America's withdrawal from the region does not mean that the Middle East will reach a relative level of security" (in Persian), *ISNA*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.isna.ir/news/1400050503209/>

3 "More like an escape: Putin weighs aftermath of US-led coalition's hasty Afghan exit", *Tass*, September 17, 2021, <https://tass.com/world/1338887>

4 Andrei Baklanov, "Security in the Gulf Area: Russia's New Initiative", Valdai Discussion Club, August 6, 2019, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/security-in-the-gulf-area-russia-s-new-initiative/>

5 Nicole Grajewski, "Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavor and the future of Persian Gulf security" European Leadership Network, July 7, 2020 <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/irans-hormuz-peace-endeavor-and-the-future-of-persian-gulf-security/>

6 Hamidreza Azizi, "A Radical Iran: Implications for the Persian Gulf and the Levant", in: David Jalilvand and Achim Vogt (eds.), *Radicalization during the Rouhani Years: Iran's Political Shifts and their Implications*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, March 2021, available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/17699.pdf>

7 "The full text of Ebrahim Raisi's speech at the United Nations" (in Persian), IRNA, September 21, 2022, <http://www.ensafnews.com/371747>

gional order in the Middle East, underlining⁸ dialogue and multilateral cooperation between the regional states. In practice, however, Raisi's interpretation of dialogue and cooperation represents substantial differences from Rouhani's approach, as the former seems to believe that dialogue would be meaningful only from a position of power, essentially reflecting the IRGC's view of the matter.

The U.S., for its part, has tried to balance its reduced engagement in the Middle East by promoting closer cooperation between its regional allies, trying to contain the increasing influence of adversaries such as Russia and Iran. In Syria, where Iran and Russia have worked hand in hand to support the Assad government, Washington has continued to support⁹ the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Stationed in the east and northeast of Syria, the SDF has become an obstacle to Assad and his allies trying to restore Damascus' control over the entire Syrian territory. Indeed, Tehran and Moscow have had their own contacts with the Syrian Kurds. However, the Iranian and Russian approaches to the Kurds in Syria have been primarily transactional, aimed at counterbalancing the U.S. role in Syria's northeast and, at times, preventing¹⁰ further Turkish advances in the Kurdish-controlled territories of Syria. At the same time, Washington has encouraged the Arab states of the Persian Gulf to build a partnership with Israel in the context of the Abraham Accords.¹¹ From Tehran's point of view,¹² this latter move, i.e., bringing Iran's adversaries together, is a blatant attempt to form an anti-Iran front in the region.

For Russia, which in turn has tried to establish friendly relations with Arab states and Israel, being excluded from the diplomatic processes leading to the Abraham Accords has been a sign of Washington's disregard for Moscow's regional role. Besides, the U.S. moves in this area could potentially shift the balance of power in the Middle East to Iran's detriment and to the benefit of the Arab-Israeli axis. This would also challenge a core principle of Russia's Middle East policy, i.e., Moscow's longstanding desire to maintain¹³ the regional balance of power between Iran and its rivals. As such, it could be said that although Iran and Russia have different reasons to worry about the U.S.-backed

Arab-Israeli partnership and Tehran's threat perception of this emerging axis is much higher, both countries see it as a challenge to their interests.

This brings us to the second level, i.e., the regional security environment and its implications for Iran-Russia relations. At this level, three issues of regional rivalries, separatist movements, and terrorism can be discussed. As mentioned earlier, Russian leaders seem to believe that their economic and geopolitical interests in the Middle East are best preserved when there is a balance of power between the Iran-led axis (or the so-called "Resistance Axis" that also includes non-state actors in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen) on the one hand, and Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE on the other hand, as well as the Turkish-Qatari axis. In this vein, while enjoying a close military partnership with Iran in Syria, Russia has sold the S-400¹⁴ missile defence systems to Turkey, and not to Iran. Moscow has also discussed¹⁵ the idea of developing military cooperation with the Saudis.

On the contrary, having been a party to those regional rivalries that Russia is trying to avoid, Iran has been actively trying to gain the upper hand in the competition for power and influence in the Middle East. Iran particularly sees the growing partnership between its Arab neighbours and Israel as a direct threat to its national interests and security. Therefore, as far as Iran is concerned, the issue of regional rivalries is closely tied to the notions of *survival*, *national security*, as well as *regional influence*. What is vital for Russia, however, is to preserve its economic profits (commercial cooperation and arms sales) and political interests (enhancing diplomatic clout, especially among Washington's traditional Arab allies) amidst growing regional fault lines.

In the same way, the Iranian and Russian views of separatist movements in the Middle East have been different in some important respects. In September 2017, Russia showed a relatively mild reaction¹⁶ to the failed independence referendum of the Iraqi Kurdistan, continuing its economic interactions with Erbil even at the height of the crisis between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Similarly, Russia has never opposed the Syrian Kurds' demand for autonomy. In contrast, Kurdish separatism has always been a red line¹⁷ for Iran, not only because Iran itself hosts a sizable Kurdish minority but also out of the fear that the Iranian influence in Syria and Iraq might be compromised as a result.

8 "The second step in Iran's neighborhood policy is to promote regional cooperation" (in Persian), Mehr News Agency, August 28, 2022, <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/5574680>

9 "Washington on the spot as its Syrian Kurd allies are drawn into PKK-KDP fight", *Al-Monitor*, December 16, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/12/washington-syrian-kurdish-allies-sdf-pkk-kdp-fight-iraq.html>

10 Hamidreza Azizi, "How Iran sees Turkey's plan for a new military operation in Syria", Middle East Institute, July 1, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-iran-sees-turkeys-plan-new-military-operation-syria>

11 United States Department of State, "The Abraham Accords", <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>

12 "Israel's Peace Deals Are a Strategic Nightmare for Iran", *Foreign Policy*, September 14, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/14/israels-peace-deals-are-a-strategic-nightmare-for-iran/>

13 Konstantin Truevtshev, "Russia's New Middle East Strategy: Countries and Focal Points", Valdai Discussion Club, February 21, 2022, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/russia-s-new-middle-east-strategy/>

14 "Turkey could buy 2nd S-400 unit from Russia: SSB's Demir", *Daily Sabah*, April 27, 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/turkey-could-buy-2nd-s-400-unit-from-russia-ssbs-demir>

15 "Saudis Sign Military Cooperation Agreement With Russia", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/saudi-russia-arms-weapons-/31425164.html>

16 "Russia becomes Iraq Kurds' top funder, quiet about independence vote", *Reuters*, September 20, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum-russi-idUSKCN1BV1IH>

17 Sarwar Abdullah, "Why is Iran Against the Independence Referendum?", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 22, 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/why-iran-against-independence-referendum>

The only regional issue on which Tehran and Moscow have been in full agreement is the necessity of fighting Sunni extremism and radical terrorism. Since 2015, this issue has been a crucial aspect of regional cooperation between Iran and Russia, reflected in their joint operations¹⁸ against the so-called Islamic State (IS/ISIS) and other extremist groups in Syria. Generally speaking, Iran, a Muslim and Middle Eastern country, and Russia, a neighbour to the region and with a sizable Muslim minority, have always been sensitive to the threat of extremist terrorism close to their borders.

Finally, the third level of analysis deals with the Iranian and Russian approaches towards individual countries in the Middle East, especially regional flashpoints like Syria, Yemen, and Palestine. At this level, the two countries' partnership in Syria has been the most apparent manifestation of their close cooperation. However, at least over the last four years, there has been growing competition¹⁹ between Tehran and Moscow for more significant economic, political, and security influence in Syria.²⁰ Also, Moscow has never shown a serious reaction²¹ to frequent Israeli attacks against Iranian and Iran-backed positions in Syria. In 2018, in an agreement²² with Israel and Jordan, Russia even promised to keep Iran-backed militias away from Syria's southern borders.

In Yemen, the Iranian and Russian approaches have been even more divergent. Iran's policy has been to fully support the Houthi rebels against the Saudi-led coalition, which has been attacking Yemen since 2015. Russia²³, however, has since refrained from providing any support for the Houthis so as not to jeopardise its cordial relations with Saudi Arabia. Russia's main aim here has been to move a key U.S. ally in the Middle East away from Washington, while sticking to its policy of non-alignment with competing regional blocs in the Middle East. On the Palestinian issue, the positions of Iran and Russia have been in complete contradiction—albeit not confrontation—with each other. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has refused to recognise the state of Israel while supporting Palestinian militias in their fight against the Israelis. At the same time, referring to the

UN-endorsed “two-state solution”, Moscow has tried, from time to time, to mediate and facilitate an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. In 2017, in a move²⁴ that caused resentment in Iran, Moscow recognised West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Regarding Lebanon and Iraq, the two other countries where Iran has geopolitical and security interests, Russia's policy has been based on pursuing normal relations with the two governments while also maintaining good working relations²⁵ with powerful non-state actors like the Lebanese Hezbollah. Therefore, there has been no significant cooperation or conflict of interests between Tehran and Moscow in those countries and they can be categorised as areas where the two countries have parallel interests.

IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Based on the above categorisation, the Russian and Iranian approaches towards the U.S. role in the Middle East show the strongest resemblance, while there has been less convergence on intra-regional topics and even less on country-specific issues. The unprecedented confrontation between Russia and the West over Ukraine, on the one hand, and the failure—at least so far—of efforts to revive the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, on the other hand, have already strengthened anti-Westernism in both countries' foreign policies. In a similar way, the two sides have once again opted for more cooperation, instead of competition, in Syria. However, on other issues, Iranian and Russian approaches remain divergent.

U.S. President Joe Biden's trip²⁶ to the Middle East in July 2022 and his visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia worried Tehran and Moscow alike, as it was interpreted as an attempt by Washington to reassume an active role in the region. Biden himself said²⁷ clearly that the U.S. “will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia, or Iran”. The first joint reaction from Iran and Russia to the development came during the trilateral Iranian-Russian-Turkish summit²⁸ in Tehran in August 2022, held within the framework of the Astana process. At the summit, the leaders of the three countries emphasised the need to develop bilateral and multilateral cooperation while criticising the role of the U.S., especially in Syria.

18 Nikolay Kozhanov, “Russian-Iranian Relations through the Prism of the Syrian Crisis”, in *Insight Turkey* (Vol. 19, No. 4, Fall 2017), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26300560>

19 Nicole Grajewski, “The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 17, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-russian-and-iranian-cooperation-syria>

20 Hamidreza Azizi, “The Impact of the Ukraine War on Iran-Russia Relations in Syria”, Al-Sharq Strategic Research, June 17, 2022, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2022/06/17/iran-russia-relations-in-syria/>

21 “Russia ‘tolerates’ Israeli strikes in Syria, but has little appetite to restrain Iran”, *Middle East Eye*, December 31, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-russia-tolerates-israel-air-raids-little-appetite-restrain-iran>

22 “US said wary of Israel-Russia deal to remove Iranians from southern Syria”, *The Times of Israel*, June 2, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-said-wary-of-israel-russia-deal-to-remove-iranians-from-southern-syria/>

23 Samuel Ramani, “Can Russia play a role in ending the Yemeni civil war?”, Middle East Institute, August 12, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/can-russia-play-role-ending-yemeni-civil-war>

24 “Russia: West Jerusalem is capital of Israel”, *Middle East Monitor*, April 7, 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170407-russia-west-jerusalem-is-capital-of-israel/>

25 “What's next for Russia's relations with Hezbollah?”, *Al-Monitor*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/03/whats-next-russias-relations-hezbollah>

26 Sanam Vakil, “Biden's Middle East trip shows the long game is his aim”, Chatham House, July 19, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/bidens-middle-east-trip-shows-long-game-his-aim>

27 “US will not leave vacuum in Mideast to Russia, China: Biden”, *Anadolu Agency*, July 16, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/us-will-not-leave-vacuum-in-mideast-to-russia-china-biden/2638462>

28 “7th Summit of the Astana Peace Process in Tehran: Implications for the Syrian Crisis”, *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, July 27, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/7th-summit-of-the-astana-peace-process-in-tehran-implications-for-the-syrian-crisis/>

In order to secure more support from Iran on the Ukraine war, Russian officials have also expressed more verbal support for Tehran's stance vis-à-vis Washington. For instance, the Russian ambassador to Tehran, Levon Dzhagaryan, claimed²⁹ that Biden's Middle East trip had been aimed at forming an "anti-Iranian front", calling it "absolutely unacceptable". More importantly, on July 31, 2022, Russia's new maritime doctrine was approved, which, among other things, lists³⁰ Russia's interests in the Persian Gulf and emphasises cooperation with "Russia's allied and partner countries" in the maritime sphere. Although the notion of an "alliance" between Tehran and Moscow is rather far-fetched, Moscow is expected to pursue closer cooperation with Tehran in the Persian Gulf in order to establish a maritime balance of power against the West. But even in this case, Moscow is careful to also mention Saudi Arabia as another target country to expand maritime relations, so that its new approach to the Persian Gulf would not be mistaken for an outright alignment with Tehran.

That being said, when it comes to regional rivalries, Russia still has good reasons not to support Iran against its rivals beyond a certain point. In fact, Russia is now even more interested in developing close and friendly relations with the Arab states of the Middle East, some of which are Iran's fierce rivals. For Moscow, it is essential to prevent the Arabs from supporting the Western pressure against Russia. The more countries that take a neutral stance on the Ukraine war, the easier it is for Russia to argue that the Western plans to impose diplomatic isolation on Moscow have failed. By winning the support of Arab countries or at least keeping them neutral, Russia is also trying to prevent a potential restoration of America's regional leadership. From an economic point of view, Russia needs to develop trade relations with and attract investment from the wealthy Persian Gulf states in order to mitigate the negative impacts of the Western sanctions. At the same time, those same countries are Russia's potential competitors in the global energy market, and therefore, Russia is worried that they could take its place in supplying energy to Europe. Indeed, there was already a fair amount of cooperation between Russia and Saudi Arabia in the OPEC+ format from time to time. But the cooperation seems to have been strengthening over the past few months, since the start of the war in Ukraine.

In this vein, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov paid an official visit to Riyadh at the end of May, where he hailed Russian-Saudi cooperation, especially in regulating³¹ the global energy market. Besides, as mentioned before, Russia's maritime doctrine mentions Saudi Arabia, along with

Iran, as one of the countries with which Russia should expand relations to secure its maritime interests. Russia's strategy in managing relations with Arab countries has been more or less successful so far, as the Arab states of the Persian Gulf have not shown any sign of willingness to downgrade relations with Russia—despite U.S. calls for the contrary. In fact, Saudi Arabia decided to support the OPEC+ decision to cut oil production, a move that caused the U.S. to warn that "there will be consequences"³² for Washington-Riyadh relations. In any case, Russia's ultimate success in securing a neutral stance from the Arab states in the Russia-West confrontation requires Moscow's neutrality in the rivalry between Iran and its Arab neighbours.

This delicate balancing act by Moscow has already revealed its impact on the third level of Iran-Russia relations, i.e., their approaches towards individual regional countries. On February 28, 2022, Moscow voted³³ in favour of a UN Security Council resolution extending the arms embargo against the Yemeni Houthis. One year earlier, Moscow had abstained³⁴ from a similar resolution. The case of Syria has been somewhat different, as there are signs of increased cooperation³⁵ on the ground between Iran and Russia, while the pre-Ukraine war competition has, at least temporarily, taken a back seat. Since Russian military policymakers are primarily focused on their war in Ukraine, Russia currently does not have the capacity to maintain an active military role in Syria as well. For this reason, the Russian armed forces have reportedly evacuated some of their bases in central and eastern Syria, handing them over to Iranian and Hezbollah forces. Also, Tehran and Moscow seem to have agreed to increase pressure on the U.S. troops stationed in eastern Syria to force them to leave the Syrian territory. Over the past few months, Iran-backed militias have carried out several attacks³⁶ against American positions east of the Euphrates. In at least one case,³⁷ in early August 2022, Russia also targeted U.S.-backed Syrian rebels in the same area. However, even in Syria, the cooperation between Iran and Russia has its limits. Moscow continues to remain silent in

29 "Biden's goal of forming an anti-Iranian coalition is unacceptable" (in Persian), *Mehr News Agency*, July 13, 2022, <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/5537523>

30 "Will Russia's new naval doctrine transform cooperation with Iran?", *Amwaj.media*, August 19, 2022, <https://amwaj.media/article/what-russia-s-new-naval-doctrine-says-about-tehran-moscow-relations>

31 "On visit to Saudi Arabia, Lavrov hails OPEC+ cooperation", *The Arab Weekly*, June 1, 2022, <https://the arabweekly.com/visit-saudi-arabia-lavrov-hails-opec-cooperation>

32 "Saudi Arabia, United States clash over reason for OPEC+ oil cut", *Reuters*, October 13, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/saudi-arabia-rejects-statements-critical-opec-oil-cut-2022-10-12/>

33 "UN Security Council extends Yemen arms embargo to all Houthis", *Al Jazeera*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/28/un-security-council-extends-yemen-arms-embargo-to-all-houthis>

34 "Explained: The implications of UN's recognition of Houthis as terrorists", *TRT World*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/explained-the-implications-of-un-s-recognition-of-houthis-as-terrorists-55276>

35 Hamidreza Azizi, "The Impact of the Ukraine War on Iran-Russia Relations in Syria", *Al-Sharq Strategic Research*, June 17, 2022, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2022/06/17/iran-russia-relations-in-syria/>

36 "Rockets strike near base holding US troops in Syria without causing injuries", *CNN*, August 16, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/08/16/politics/rockets-syria-us-troops/index.html>

37 "Pentagon Confirms Russian Strike Targeting Syria Rebels With Ties to U.S.", *Newsweek*, August 5, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/pentagon-confirms-russian-strike-targeting-syria-rebels-ties-us-1731294>

the face of Israeli attacks against Iran's positions, which have increased³⁸ since the start of the Ukraine war. This also means that Russia's position towards the other regional flashpoint involving Israel, i.e., the Palestinian issue, will not change either. It's no secret that Russia's relations with Israel are rather strained³⁹ over the latter's support for Ukraine. But Moscow still does not want this support to grow and, for example, lead to the delivery of advanced Israeli missile defence systems to Ukraine. As such, Russia is expected to stick to a cautious policy towards Israel, both in Syria and on the Palestinian issue.

CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, anti-Americanism has become the main feature of Iran-Russia relations in the Middle East. This has primarily translated into rather similar ideas for security multilateralism in the region. This feature has, indeed, been an integral part of the Islamic Republic's identity and the primary driver of Iran's foreign and regional policy for more than four decades. But it has a different meaning in the context of Russian foreign policy and is primarily a side effect of Moscow's broader confrontation with the West in the international arena. In any case, Tehran and Moscow have more synergy now than they have ever had in the past when it comes to opposing the U.S. role in the Middle East. But when it comes to the methods for achieving this common goal, the Iranian and Russian approaches reflect fundamental differences that act as a brake on the development of a close partnership between the two. For Russia, maintaining close ties with America's traditional partners, i.e., the Arab states of the Persian Gulf and Israel, is considered a way to undermine Washington's role in the region. In contrast, Iran is involved in security, geopolitical, and also ideological conflict with those states, causing Tehran to follow a different path. For the foreseeable future, Syria will remain the most important arena for the Iran-Russia partnership. Otherwise, one can argue that the foundations of Iran-Russia relations in the Middle East have remained largely intact since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This is mostly due to the fact that Moscow is continuing to try to maintain a balance in its relations with Iran and other regional states.

However, as the war in Ukraine continues, there are signs that Russia's ability to pursue a balanced Middle East strategy has begun to decline. The war has already ushered in a new phase of military cooperation between Tehran and Moscow, unprecedented in the history of their bilateral relationship. Russia has extensively used Iran-made drones to attack Ukraine's military and civilian infrastructures. Also,

there is speculation that Iran may also provide ballistic missiles to Russia to compensate for its declining stockpile of missiles. This could happen even before the JCPOA-related ban on Iran's arms export expires in October, particularly if the JCPOA continues to become irrelevant and the parties conclude that the deal cannot be restored. In turn, Moscow is expected⁴⁰ to provide dozens of Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets to Iran. Advanced air defence systems, missile systems, and helicopters are among the other items the Russians are said to have agreed to sell to Iran. If that materialises, then this elevated military cooperation between Moscow and Tehran may be viewed as a threat by Iran's regional rivals, leading them to take countermeasures. Considering the Arab and Israeli interest in maintaining their own balancing strategy between Russia and the West, a fundamental shift in their relations with Moscow appears unlikely. However, Russia's role in the region, by and large, stands to be affected by the emerging equations. That being said, the eventual impact on the Russian Middle East policy will depend, on the one hand, on how long the war in Ukraine lasts and, on the other hand, on whether the Arab states and Israel can present Moscow with alternatives that would be beneficial enough to convince the Kremlin to reconsider its growing ties with Tehran. But in any case, the new partnership between Tehran and Russia is expected to be limited to the military-security sphere. In the economic field, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf continue to offer a better alternative to Moscow. As such, a broader regional alliance or strategic partnership between Tehran and Moscow will continue to be out of reach.

³⁸ "Israeli Attacks Squeeze Iranian Aerial Supplies to Syria, Sources Say", *Voice of America (VOA)*, September 2, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/israeli-attacks-squeeze-iranian-aerial-supplies-to-syria-sources-say/6728735.html>

³⁹ "Russia hits out at Israel's stance on Ukraine conflict", *Middle East Online*, July 26, 2022, <https://middle-east-online.com/en/russia-hits-out-israel%E2%80%99s-stance-ukraine-conflict>

⁴⁰ "Iran to Receive Russian Sukhoi Su-35 Jets in Spring: MP", *Tasnim News Agency*, January 15, 2023, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2023/01/15/2837209/iran-to-receive-russian-sukhoi-su-35-jets-in-spring-mp>

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CLOSE BUT COMPLICATED

Iran-Russia Relations in the Middle East Amid the War in Ukraine



The Ukraine crisis, however, has already become a new turning point in Iran-Russia relations. The war and its consequences are set to affect not only the bilateral Iranian-Russian ties but also their relationship in different regions, particularly the Middle East.



This paper presents a three-level framework to study the areas of convergence and divergence between the Iranian and Russian approaches to the Middle East and how the war in Ukraine has started to affect Iran-Russia relations in the region. It also argues that Russia and Iran have three sets of common, parallel, and contradictory interests in the Middle East. The war in Ukraine is expected to further highlight the common interests between the two sides.



The eventual impact of the current trend in the Russian Middle East policy will depend, on the one hand, on how long the war in Ukraine lasts and, on the other hand, on whether the Arab states and Israel can present Moscow with alternatives that would be beneficial enough to convince the Kremlin to reconsider its growing ties with Tehran. But in any case, the new partnership between Tehran and Russia is expected to be limited to the military-security sphere. In the economic field, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf continue to offer a better alternative to Moscow. As such, a broader regional alliance or strategic partnership between Tehran and Moscow will continue to be out of reach.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

<https://www.fes.de/referat-naher-mittlerer-osten-und-nordafrika>