
ISLAM IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES

VLADIMIR KIRICHENKO. RUSSIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RF SPECIAL MILITARY
OPERATION IN UKRAINE

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the impact of the Special Military Operation in Ukraine on relations between Iran and the Russian Federation. Tehran was sympathetic to Russia's launch of a special military operation in Ukraine. Iran's position can be explained by the fact that Ukraine is not a direct neighbor of Iran, economic relations between the two states are poorly developed, while the Iranian authorities consider Russia a strategic partner. Cooperation between Russia and Iran countries covers energy, military and trade spheres. The development of relations between Iran and the Russian Federation is of particular importance in connection with the international sanctions imposed on both countries.

Official Tehran's reaction to Russia's launch of the Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine was balanced and restrained. On February 24, 2022, after it began, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi had a telephone conversation. During the conversation, the Iranian President expressed his understanding of Russian security concerns due to the destabilizing actions of the US and NATO in the world.¹

Iran's position can be explained by the fact that Ukraine is not a direct neighbor of Iran, economic relations between the two countries are poorly developed and are not of particular interest to Tehran. In turn, Russia is increasingly becoming a strategic partner. Apparently, Iran perceives the events in Ukraine as a hybrid war between Russia and NATO.

However, Iran refused to recognize Crimea, Donbass, Kherson and Zaporozhye regions as Russian. This was probably due to fears of getting new sanctions from the West.² Iran has been under Western sanctions for more than forty years. For decades, Tehran has accused Washington of meddling in internal affairs, supporting Israel, and deploying military bases in the Persian Gulf. Tehran considers these bases as bridgeheads against the Islamic Republic.³

The situation escalated even more in 2019 after the US imposed sanctions against the top leadership of Iran, including Ayatollah Khamenei, as well as the recognition of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)⁴ as a "terrorist organization". The extreme point of the deterioration of relations between the countries was the liquidation by the American intelligence services of the head of the Iranian elite Qods⁵ detachment, General Qasem Soleimani, in Iraq in 2020.⁶ Therefore, the interaction of Iran with the Russian Federation in various fields can be considered by the West as support for Russia, including Russia's SMO in Ukraine.

In 2022, the trade turnover between Russia and Iran increased by 15 per cent and amounted to \$4.6 billion, the cooperation between the two countries covers the energy, military and trade spheres.⁷

The main export items from Russia to Iran in the first half of 2022 were: agricultural products (92 per cent of the supply value), cereals (67 per cent), fats and oils (24 per cent). Russia imported from Iran food and agricultural raw materials, as well as chemical products. It should be noted that Iran increased the export of industrial products to Russia by 30 per cent (pumps, machine tools for metalworking, auto parts, and so on).⁸

At the end of May 2022, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak agreed in Tehran with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Mokhber to merge Shetab and Mir payment systems. The meeting also discussed the intention to create a Russian-Iranian oil and gas hub. At the same time, Russian energy carriers would go to Northern Iran, and Iranian ones would be exported to the Asia-Pacific region.⁹

In the context of Western sanctions, the development of the North-South transport corridor connecting Russia, Iran and India¹⁰ has become of great importance for Russia. The length of the route is 7200 km. It runs from the port of Nava Sheva (Mumbai, India) to St. Petersburg through Iran. Transportation of goods will be carried out using sea, river and rail transport. In July 2022, the Iranian fleet successfully completed a trial route from India to Russia and back.¹¹ On May 17, 2023, a Russian-Iranian agreement was signed on the construction of a section of the railway between the Iranian cities of Rasht and Astara, which will become part of the North-South corridor.¹²

The importance of relations between Russia and Iran for both countries is also evidenced by the fact that the Russian President made his second foreign visit after the start of the SMO to Tehran in June 2022. It should be noted that during the visit of V.V. Putin, the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) and Gazprom signed a memorandum on energy projects worth about \$40 billion. This includes the development of two gas fields (Kish and North Pars) and six oil fields.¹³ At the same time, the Russian President took part in the summit of the "Astana Troika", which took place in Tehran.

This platform, created in 2017 to develop measures to normalize the situation in Syria, unites Russia, Iran and Turkey.¹⁴

Military cooperation between Iran and Russia also continues. In early 2023, it became known that Iran would buy Russian Su-35 fighter jets.¹⁵ There is a version about the use by Russia in Ukraine of Iranian drones Shahed-136 and others. The Russian side claims that in fact Russian Geran-2 and other domestically produced drones are used. According to Western media citing Iranian sources, Tehran has announced its readiness to supply Russia with surface-to-surface missiles of the Fateh and Zolfagar types. The supply agreement was reached during the visit of the Iranian delegation to Moscow on October 8, 2022.¹⁶ At the same time, Iran officially denies the supply of weapons to Russia. Such cooperation between Russia and Iran is very likely, but it makes no sense for either side to make it public.

Rumors about the supply of Iranian drones to Russia caused a hysterical reaction from the leadership of Ukraine. On December 17, 2022, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry called Iran an “accomplice in Russia’s military aggression”. Kyiv called on the Islamic Republic to immediately stop the supply of weapons to Russia under the threat of “severe responsibility”.¹⁷

In March 2023, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky imposed new sanctions against 141 legal entities. This time, in addition to Russian companies, the sanctions list included enterprises from Iran and the United Arab Emirates. In particular, Kalashnikov Concern JSC, Almaz-Antey Air and Space Defense Concern JSC, Iranian companies Mahan Airlines, UAV companies Shahed Aviation Industries Research Centre and Paravar Pars Company and others fell under the sanctions. Sanctions are imposed for a period of ten years, among other things, provide for the freezing of assets, restricting trade operations, stopping the fulfillment of economic and financial obligations, imposing a ban on the transfer of technology, intellectual property rights, etc.¹⁸ For its part, Washington has also imposed export restrictions against the Iranian companies

mentioned above, mainly for production of drones that US authorities believe are being used by Russia in Ukraine.¹⁹

In March 2023, US media reported that the Russian armed forces, as a result of a special military operation, were able to seize some of the American and other Western weapons previously transferred to Ukraine. Furthermore, the Russian military then transferred part of the captured weapons to Iran. According to the American press, this was done in order for the arms factories in the Islamic Republic to try to create similar weapons of their own production based on American designs.²⁰ It has been argued that the weapons transferred may have included anti-tank and man-portable air defense systems.²¹

In November 2022, Mikhail Podolyak, adviser to the head of Vladimir Zelensky's office, called for strikes against Iran, explaining this precisely by the supply of Iranian drones to Russia. Responding to these accusations, Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian stated that the drones were indeed handed over to Russia even before the start of the special operation in Ukraine.²²

On the night of January 29, 2023, a drone attack took place on the Iranian military production complex in Isfahan. Later, explosions occurred at several more military-industrial facilities of the Islamic Republic.²³ The Wall Street Journal, citing American officials, said Israel was behind the attacks.²⁴ After that, adviser to the head of Zelensky's office, Mikhail Podolyak, published a post on Twitter, which, in particular, he said: "The explosive night in Iran is the production of drones and shells, oil refineries. Ukraine warned you."²⁵

The Iranian Foreign Ministry considered this Ukrainian statement "consent with the involvement of this country in the attacks on the industrial complex" in Isfahan.²⁶ After that, the Ambassador of Ukraine was called "on the carpet" to the Iranian Foreign Ministry.

It should be noted that the situation in Ukraine may have a negative impact on the Iranian nuclear deal. The next round of

negotiations that took place in September 2021 reached an impasse. Iran is interested in continuing the dialogue on the nuclear deal, but is unlikely to agree to its resumption on the terms offered by the United States. The removal of sanctions from Iran can greatly contribute to the restoration and development of the country's economy. However, after the events of 2022, the parties are unlikely to come to a compromise. The fact is that the West is still confident that Iran is supplying Russia with military drones of its own production for use as part of a special military operation.²⁷

The Ukrainian crisis has launched a new phase of international polarization. Sweden and Finland join NATO. Russia and China are expanding the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, which is considered NATO's most prominent competitor in the East. In this regard, it is important that in November 2022, Iran submitted an Application to join the BRICS.²⁸

Russia played a key role in Iran's admission to the SCO.²⁹ In November 2022, the Mejlis of Iran by a majority vote approved a bill on the accession of the Islamic Republic to the SCO. Iran's entry into the organization takes place against the backdrop of a growing interest among the member countries of the organization in the creation of new mechanisms of international politics aimed at forming a system of relations that is not oriented towards the West.³⁰

In April 2023, it became known that Saudi Arabia joined the SCO as a partner.³¹ It should be noted that this happened against the background of the emerging thaw in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Improved relations between Tehran and Riyadh contributed to the return of Syria (an ally of Iran) to the League of Arab States.

Previously, the US Middle East policy was built on the irreconcilable enmity of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia – the oldest and most reliable ally of the Americans – began to move away from the influence of the United States. The

establishment of friendly relations between Iran and China was largely facilitated by the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Russia. A big role in this was played by the fact that Saudi Arabia is not involved in the Americans' attempts to limit oil prices. In this matter, the kingdom acted together with Russia, contributing to their rise.³²

At the same time, Iran and Russia actively contribute to the improvement of relations between Turkey and Syria, as well as Syria and other countries of the region. Thus, in April 2023, the delegations of Turkey, Syria and Iran, headed by deputy foreign ministers, gathered in Moscow for technical consultations on the possible restoration of diplomatic relations between Ankara and Damascus. The next meeting on Turkish-Syrian issues was held on May 10, 2023 in Moscow. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said that it was constructive and Turkey is set to continue the dialogue.³³ In May 2023, Syria returned to the Arab League. This event, in fact, is a project of Riyadh, which it carried out in close coordination with Damascus, despite the rejection of this step by Washington³⁴. The visit of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Syria on May 3, 2023, is the first visit by an Iranian head of state in the last ten years, and confirms the close relationship that exists between Syria and Iran.³⁵

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From the very beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011, V.V. Putin supported the Syrian leader in every possible way. Russia supplied Bashar al-Assad with weapons, protected him in the UN Security Council, and also kept the Syrian army and economy afloat. Direct military assistance to Syria by the Russian armed forces was of no small importance for Bashar al-Assad himself.³⁷

In recent years, Russia's authority in the Middle East has grown, while the United States is losing its position in the region

due to many domestic political problems. However, it is too early to say that the US will leave the Middle East.

In March 2023, Iranian leader Ayatollah Khamenei delivered a speech in which he touched on some important foreign policy issues, including the situation in Ukraine. Khamenei reaffirmed Iran's position on the war in Ukraine, saying that Western claims about Iran's involvement in the war are false. The Iranian leader also said that the US was responsible for starting the war in Ukraine, which arose from US efforts to expand NATO to the East.³⁸

On May 21, 2023, the G7³⁹ summit ended in Hiroshima (Japan), marked by anti-Russian and anti-Iranian statements by the heads of participating countries. Later, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani strongly rejected the G7 leaders' claims regarding Iran's nuclear program and providing Russia with unmanned aerial vehicles for use in the war in Ukraine. "As we have repeatedly said, the Islamic Republic of Iran never supplied drones to Russia during the Ukrainian crisis and continues to push for a political solution to the crisis," an Iranian official said.⁴⁰

In the summer of 2023, an agreement between Russia and Iran on visa-free group travel should come into force. The document will give citizens of both countries the opportunity to visit another state for tourism purposes in groups of up to 50 people for a period of no more than 15 days without issuing a visa.⁴¹

On May 29, 2023, the Ukrainian parliament supported a draft resolution on the imposition of sanctions against Iran for a period of 50 years. The draft resolution was submitted to the Verkhovna Rada by President Volodymyr Zelensky. The sanctions include a complete ban on trade operations with Iran, a halt in the transit of resources, flights and transportation on the territory of Ukraine, a ban on the withdrawal of capital by Iranian residents from Ukraine, and so on.⁴²

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After the start of a special military operation in Ukraine, Russia and Iran stepped up cooperation. It is of particular importance in connection with the international sanctions imposed on both countries. In fact, both countries are currently opposed to the West.

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OLGA BIBIKOVA. PROBLEMS OF LEBANON, SYRIA AND JORDAN AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF FOREIGN POLICY CHANGES IN THE REGION

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Abstract. Until recently, when considering the position of the Arab countries in relation to Russia, it was necessary to take into account their ties with the United States. Today the situation has changed. At the same time, the “Arab street” is predictably supporting Russia. The formation of a more independent view of the ruling elites on what is happening in Ukraine has become a new factor in Middle East politics. A comparative analysis of the policies of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan makes it possible to understand the factors that influenced the development of the positions of these countries regarding the SMO.