Ten reasons why Iran doesn’t trust Russia

As western companies prepare for the lifting of financial and economic sanctions imposed on Iran by the US as retaliation for their development of a nuclear program, Russia is also exploring its possibilities of participating in developing and modernising Iran's economy. It would seem that Teheran should be quick to accommodate Moscow, who has always looked favourably towards the possibility of developing comprehensive ties with Iran both in terms of trade as well as in the military and technical industries. Oddly enough, however, there does not seem to be any hurry from the Iranian side. On the contrary, it is noticeable that Teheran is primarily looking towards the west, mostly the countries of the European Union. Moreover, statements akin to “Iran should not depend on Russia as a beneficial and reliable partner” seem to be floating around as well. Naturally, all of this poses the question of why Moscow is seeing such treatment, especially since it has never sided with the sanctions imposed against the regime, unlike the west. To fully understand the issue, it is necessary to see what the experts are saying in various political circles both in Iran and in the Middle Eastern countries, while also exploring what is unofficially being said by numerous representatives from Iran’s trade, economic and political communities.

It is, of course, possible to examine the issue even from a historical perspective, attempting to explain the origin of this distrust through old arguments from the times of Griboyedov or even the presence of Soviet troops in the northern part of Iran during the Second World War. But to do this would be quite a stretch. After all, taking Germany as an example, it instigated two world wars which affected Russia the most, as the country lost millions of lives and suffered crippling destruction of its economy and infrastructure, not to mention the atrocities committed by the fascists against the Soviet civilian population. However, if we look at the present, the majority of Russians do not harbour any animosity towards the Germans. Moreover, Germany is Russia’s main trading partner, hundreds of thousands of Russians live in Germany, tens of thousands of Germans work in Russia, and the spirit of partnership and mutual sympathy permeates all spheres of the Russo-German partnership, even including cultural and humanitarian topics.

This means that the crux of the matter lies elsewhere, somewhere closer historically, and is resting on Teheran’s current attitude towards Russia politically and economically. This is why the author endeavours to explain this phenomenon on the basis of what can be found in the latest political science studies, media publications and opinions held within the Iranian political and economic communities.

1. After the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran, fearing that Khomeini’s ideas would spread to its Muslim regions and Afghanistan (where Russian troops were stationed at this point), Moscow practically offered unanimous support for the stance held by the US, the west as a whole and the most conservative sections of the Arab world in the shape of Saudi Arabia and other Arab monarchies, and even many republic Arab regimes, who were fearing the spread of Islamic sentiment. The USSR de facto sided with Iraq, who instigated an 8-year war against Iran that claimed the lives of over a million people. Baghdad regularly received the latest soviet weapons, whose shipments were generously paid by the conservative Arab monarchies, primarily Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

2. After the end of the Iranian-Iraqi War in 1988, Moscow was energetically restoring the Iraqi war machine by continuing to send large shipments of weapons to Baghdad. Even Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 did not especially affect the nature of the Russo-Iraqi relations. After Saddam Hussein’s defeat in that war, Russia
retained friendly relations with his regime and comprehensively fought to lift the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council against Iraq for its aggression against a sovereign nation. Meanwhile, Teheran also could not forget that both Moscow and Washington did not condemn Saddam Hussein for his violent suppression of a Shiite uprising in the country’s southern provinces in February–March of 1991, when the Iraqi army crushed the civilian population with tanks and defiled Shiite holy grounds in Najaf and Karbala, cracking down on imams and other Shiite leaders who managed to find shelter in these cities. After this incident, Saddam Hussein’s regime would repeatedly crack down on Shiite unrest, physically destroying their spiritual leaders, including the imam Mustafa Sadr, and executing Shiite protesters in the southern suburbs of Baghdad in the spring of 1998. Meanwhile, Moscow worked in every way to lift the embargo off Iraq, ignoring the gross human rights violations in that country. At the same time, Russian companies practically stepped over each other in their fight for oil and supply agreements with Iraq as part of the UN humanitarian program, all the while ignoring normal trade relations with Iran. This is why various circles started to think that Russian companies are interested in nothing but money.

3. Iran welcomed the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 by way of the American military aggression against this country, although it was not pleased with the US occupation of the country for 8 years. Meanwhile, Teheran was mildly bewildered at the fact that after the “friendly” regime left, Russian companies were quick to return to the Iraqi market, eager to partner with the new government and occupational structures all for the sake of profits. Teheran began to progressively piece together an image of Russia and Russian companies where they are both only interested in profits, even if those are connected with unscrupulousness politically. At the same time, however, the Iranians understood that Moscow is not automatically confined to an American leash.

4. The gradual development of trade and economic relations between Iran and Russia, which includes the construction of the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant and the beginning of the partnership in the energy sector, including the oil and gas industry, was constantly accompanied by Moscow’s glances towards periodic outcries from Washington. This gave the impression that Russian companies were ready to work in Iran only with the “go-ahead” from the Americans. Teheran repeatedly voiced its frustration at Russia for stalling the development of military and technological partnerships while also refraining from shipping the latest weapons, especially the S-300 air defence system and several types of offensive weapons, even though they are not subject to any existing international conventions. The Iranians noticed that several Russian banks hurried to abandon financial ties with Iranian partners at the risk of falling under the effect of unilateral sanctions being introduced absolutely illegitimately by the US. With an approach like this, Iran could not count on full cooperation with Russia.

5. Furthermore, Moscow’s restraint on the issue of protecting its ally Baghdad, whose loss caused great damages to Russian interests in the Middle East, evoked the idea that closer relations with Moscow would not give Teheran much in situations like this. “Russia will not come to our aid even if we, as a friendly nation, suffer aggression,” was the widespread stereotype among the Iranian leadership.

6. Iran did not understand why during negotiations on the nuclear program, at the end of the day, Russia almost always sided with the western stance on the issue. Even more questions arose after Moscow practically “swallowed” the enactment of international sanctions against Iran by the US and its allies due to stalling and arguments during the negotiating process related to Teheran’s nuclear portfolio, especially since this was done through the UN Security Council where Moscow has the right of veto. Even while suffering losses and cutting off its possibilities to make a handsome profit from economic projects with the Iranians, Russia still followed in the footsteps of the western stance on Iran. At the same time, Teheran saw how forcefully the Americans act while protecting their economic and trade interests, disregarding the views of other countries, even those who are important players on the global arena. In all honesty, here the Iranians simply did not understand Russia, seeing it either as weak or as willing to submit to the west due to its overall political orientation towards that part of the world.

7. Moscow’s advances towards the Arab countries of the Persian gulf, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar between 2006 and 2012, in exchange for Riyadh’s promise to purchase Russian weapons en masse and to invest billions of dollars into the Russian economy. This was the time when Moscow made concessions to the west with respect to the Iranian nuclear program and froze implementing the S-300 agreement, while slowing down the temps for constructing the nuclear power plant in Bushehr. Yet Saudi Arabia did not purchase the promised weapons while Qatar did not invest the $10 billion into the Russian economy. However, Teheran still harboured ill will towards Moscow because of this incident.

8. The Arab Spring that began in 2011 caused even more alarm in Iran with respect to Russia. Especially the story with Libya, where Russian losses from the toppling of the friendly Gaddafi regime amounted to tens of billions of dollars. Teheran did not understand why Moscow allowed the UN Security Council to pass anti-Libyan resolutions at the expense of its own interests, especially since these resolutions gave the US, NATO and the Wahhabi monarchies international justification for barbarically destroying the Libyan nation while brutally killing its leader. The Iranians did not believe the subsequent public justifications provided by Russia to the effect that
Moscow did not foresee such brutality on the part of its western “partners” who ruthlessly “deceived” and used the Security Council resolution to brutally bomb all of the most important facilities in the Gaddafi regime. The Iranians also did not understand Russia’s stance with respect to the events in Egypt, where Islamists took power by force and almost plunged the country into a catastrophe. Many people in Teheran began to imagine what would happen to Iran if the US and Israel together with Saudi Arabia pressured Moscow so that it would swallow the idea of bombing the Iranian nuclear facilities? The Iranians could no longer count on Russian aid, be it military aid or even moral or political support. And to think that these attacks were already being prepared in 2011-2012. Only the protracted war in Syria, the armed conflict in Iraq and the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan during an advance by the Taliban did not allow the US and their allies an opportunity to make war on multiple fronts simultaneously.

Moscow’s stubbornness in Syria, where Assad’s regime was able to persist only with Russian aid both in a military sense and through blocking all anti-Syrian draft resolutions in the UN Security Council, as well as through various political maneuvers, somewhat improved Russia’s image in the eyes of the Iranians. Especially since Iran also stood up to defend Damascus. Moscow’s actions on the Ukrainian issue, especially with respect to Crimea, further solidified Iranian opinion that today’s Russia is still able to stand up for its interests, even if this leads to tense confrontations with the West. Yet many questions still remain, especially with respect to how Moscow will act in the event that the situation surrounding Iran worsens. Particularly since Russia’s slow reaction to the latest events in Iraq once again gave a bad impression to the Iranians, although, in the end, Teheran understood Moscow’s readiness to support Baghdad in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant as this is in line with Russian interests in Iraq and allows the country to maintain the situation in Syria while also standing in the way of Saudi Arabia’s US-assisted hostile expansion against Iran and the Shiites in general.

9. There are also doubts of a purely economic nature. Firstly, this is an issue of whether Russia is able to provide Iran with modern technologies, including in the hydrocarbon sector, for quickly expanding their production and export. Or are they available only in the west? Secondly, is Russia ready to make large investments into the Iranian economy which are so important and necessary at the initial stages as well as to provide large sums of credit if necessary? Thirdly, Iranians are worried about the talks and articles on the expansive corruption in Russian companies who are working with the external market.

10. Finally, there are also various political and geostrategic issues. Teheran wants to be sure that Moscow is ready to create a serious partnership with China, India and, in time, with Iran to counteract the aggressive policies of the west and the conservative Arab regimes. For this, Teheran would like to have a proper place within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and other like structures such as BRICS. The events in Ukraine seemingly evidence this as well. But the Iranians are overly cautious to make a final decision right now. To make their decision, they need time and solid proof that Moscow is seriously ready to act.

At the same time, it should also be noted that all of the abovementioned information relates not only to how Iran sees Russia, but also how Russia is seen by other large Eastern countries, including the Arab countries. Although there is yet another aspect to the present issue: can Russia trust Teheran and those who claim they are ready to build a strategic partnership with Russia? Or are all of these empty words while in reality they are still looking towards the west? After all, Moscow, for example, has full rights to ask Iran and its Arab friends “Which economies have you invested your oil money into and are presently investing into while at the same time asking Russia for aid, especially military aid?” After all, Iran deposited its oil revenue not into Russian banks, but into western ones. This is why Iranian assets ended up being frozen. Russia also remembers well how the Arabs, while beseeching for military aid against Israel and receiving it, still invested all of their assets with western banks and preferred to hand profitable contracts over to western companies. Moscow has full rights to ask Teheran “How ready are you to partner with us if many of your people sincerely look towards the west?” Particularly since Teheran is, inexplicably, ready to partner with the western countries who enacted sanctions against Teheran at the behest of the Americans. Moscow was not the one who initiated these. This is why Teheran needs to distrust them and not Moscow, especially after President Putin voiced his stance with respect to Syria, Iraq and Ukraine.

It would appear that answers to all of these questions will soon be brought to light. The nature of these responses will affect the future political and economic world order at a time when the US currently clings on to its slipping global reign and role of global policeman, destroying whole countries with its actions as is happening in Ukraine, Iraq and Syria.
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