

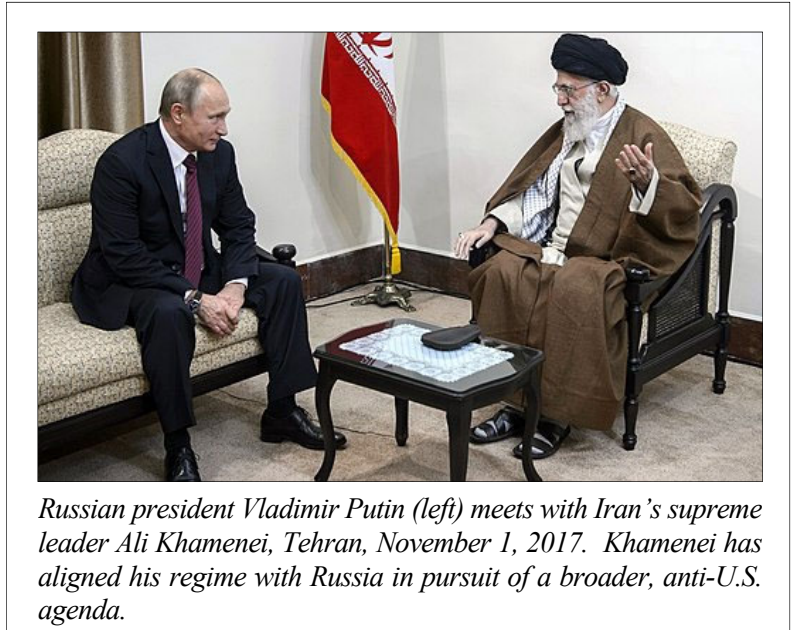
Whither Iran?

Why the Russia-Iran Alliance Will Backfire

by Michael Rubin

For all its talk of leading a “resistance front,” the Islamic Republic of Iran has historically had few allies. When Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini led his revolutionaries, “Neither East nor West but Islamic Republic” was a foundational slogan of the Islamic Revolution. Khomeini also described the United States and Russia as being “two blades of the same scissors.”¹ He meant it: While the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran symbolized the Islamic Republic’s hostility toward the United States and its European allies, Khomeini was equally distrustful of the Soviet Union and its eastern bloc satellites. Iran’s isolation was cemented when every Arab state with the exception of Syria sided with Iraq during their 1980-88 war. Tehran’s ties with Damascus have remained tight, but Syria’s influence is limited inside the Middle East and its diplomatic weight is nonexistent outside it. The Iranian authorities sought to cultivate African states and were able to purchase the occasional vote on an international body, but Tehran’s declining resources limited its success.

Today, that isolation is over. Whereas Khomeini was wary lest Moscow take advantage of Iran’s vulnerability, Ali Khamenei, who succeeded him in 1989, took the risk to align with Russia in pursuit of a broader, anti-U.S. agenda. In this, he found success. But, the question for Iranians is, at what cost?



Russian president Vladimir Putin (left) meets with Iran’s supreme leader Ali Khamenei, Tehran, November 1, 2017. Khamenei has aligned his regime with Russia in pursuit of a broader, anti-U.S. agenda.

¹ Sadullah Zarei, interview, “Russiyeh-e Putin Qabel Etemad Ast,” Javan Online, [Oct. 18, 2015](#).

Distrust Centuries in the Making

Iranian leaders were aware of Russia by the fifteenth century as many European traders, seeking to bypass the Ottoman Empire on their overland journeys into Asia, traveled to Persia via Moscow.² Iranians worried little about their distant neighbors to the north: they viewed Russians as illiterate and cultureless peasants and worried more about Uzbeks and the independent khanates of the Central Asian steppes, which occasionally raided into Iran. The Russians were equally uninterested in the Persians. Russian tsar Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725) withdrew Russian troops from the Caspian coast, believing Iranian forces posed little threat.

Such neglect would be short-lived. In 1796, Catherine the Great (r. 1762-96) sent a 50,000-strong force into the North Caucasus, which at that time was part of Iran. Her death gave Iran a reprieve and saved it from what might have been a far greater conquest.

As the Russians conquered more territory in Asia, British leaders grew increasingly concerned about the security of India and, by extension, Iran, which had become the only power separating Russia from India. It was this fear that led London to first dispatch an ambassador to the shah's court in 1800. Both the Russians and the French soon followed suit.

It was not long before disputes between Moscow and Tehran resumed. Between 1804 and 1813, Iranian and Russian forces fought repeatedly in the Caucasus. The campaigns drained the shah's treasury and, in the end, the Russians forced him to cede much of what today is the Republic of Azerbaijan and

eastern Georgia. Resentment simmered, and in 1826, the Iranians attacked Russia to regain what the shah had lost. The gamble failed and, in the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchai, the shah ceded much of Armenia. For Iranians, these were not some peripheral territories but rather part of the heartland and the territory over which the crown prince would serve as governor. In 1829, an Iranian mob sacked the Russian embassy in Tehran, slaughtering its thirty-seven Russian diplomats.³ Russia became a favorite bogeyman for both nationalists and clergy, and Russians in Iran suffered occasional mob violence over subsequent decades.⁴

Still, the Russian government saw commerce as a source of influence and encouraged businessmen to move to Iran. Russian leaders, like their British competitors, also sought to further their leverage with debt traps: Both powers would tempt the shah with loans to fund his profligate lifestyle but then call in their extortionate terms, the expense of which the shah would often pass to his subjects. This led to a pattern in which the Russian rulers often successfully wooed the shah while Iranian public opinion continued to harden against them.

Twentieth-century Unrest

The twentieth century's first decade was a time of upheaval in both Russia and Iran. First, the Japanese defeated Russia in war, ending Moscow's image of invincibility. Then, first in St. Petersburg and then across Iran, revolutionaries successfully won parliamentary constraints on monarchies. In Iran, Muzaffar ad-Din Shah conceded to a

² Josafa Barbaro and Ambrogio Contarini, *Travels to Tana and Persia*, Lord Stanley of Alderley, ed., William Thomas and S.A. Roy, trans. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1873).

³ Laurence Kelly, *Diplomacy and Murder in Tehran* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), pp. 187-94.

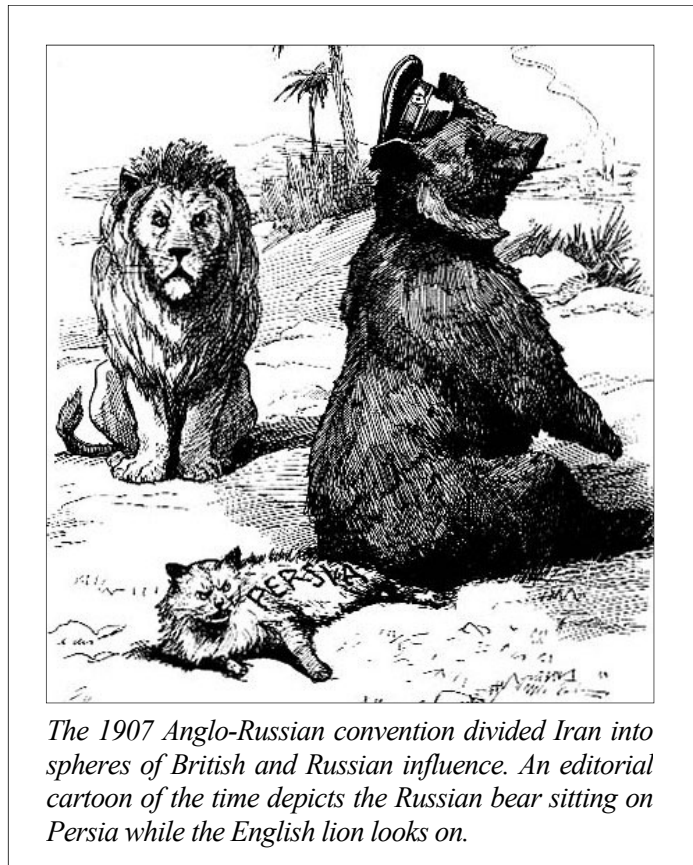
⁴ Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 82-3.

constitution just five days before his death. His successor, Mohammed Ali Shah, was unhappy to see what he believed to be his birthright diluted before he could even take power. He quickly turned to Russia where Tsar Nicholas II also sought to preserve his traditional powers.

As the shah worked to consolidate power and roll back reforms, the Russian government worked to cement its position in Iran. Mohammed Ali Shah continued the practice of tax farming and office selling, so Russian officials used their resources to ensure pro-Russian candidates won advantageous positions, much to the chagrin of more liberal Iranian nationalists in Tehran's new parliament.⁵

The Russians were blatant in their disrespect of Iranian sovereignty. On August 31, 1907, they shocked Tehran when they, alongside their British competitors, unveiled the Anglo-Russian convention, which effectively divided Iran into spheres of influence. While Iranians remained angry at both parties for the affront, Britain's main strategic interest at the time was its telegraph lines across southern Iran, and so it ceded most major Iranian population centers to Russian control. Here, the Russians chafed the population more, using proxies and pressure to force closure of Iran's nascent civil society groups and secret societies and to impose broader censorship on Iran's exploding newspaper scene.

Even the affront of Russia's secret agreement to divide Iran into different spheres did not break Mohammed Ali Shah's



The 1907 Anglo-Russian convention divided Iran into spheres of British and Russian influence. An editorial cartoon of the time depicts the Russian bear sitting on Persia while the English lion looks on.

tilt toward Russia. His ambitions were too great and so, in December 1907, he made his move against the Iranian Constitutionalists. His guards—and a detachment of Russian-trained Persian Cossacks—surrounded the parliament. Parliament's supporters resisted and soon Iran was on the brink of civil war. As far as most Iranians were concerned, there were two sides: nationalists and Russian-backed Iranian autocrats. That perception largely remains unchanged today. Fighting erupted in July 1909 and, within two weeks, it was over. The shah and his retinue fled first to the Russian embassy and then to Russia itself. The nationalists put Ahmad, the shah's 12-year-old son, on the throne. Still, Mohammed Ali Shah did not give up. Two years later and, again with Russian support, he invaded Iran from the north. He failed, but

⁵ Earl of Minto, Viceroy of India, to the India Office, Viceroy's Camp, Apr. 15, 1907, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, File 4108, FO 371/305.

the episode cemented Russia's reputation inside Iran as hostile to Iranian sovereignty.

During World War I, Russian forces drove south from the Caspian Sea reaching as far south as Qom. By 1917, British and Russian forces had occupied most of Iran, leaving Mohammed Ali Shah as a titular leader. Grievance went beyond bruised pride. During World War I, Iran lost more than 20 percent of its population to disease, famine, and violence.

The Bolshevik Revolution did not change the uneven power dynamic. In 1921, the Soviet authorities imposed a new treaty on Iran in which Moscow renounced earlier agreements and forgave Russian loans but also reserved the right to intervene should Iran host forces intent on interfering in the Soviet Union. The Soviet authorities interpreted this literally and, within weeks, Moscow demanded that Tehran expel all Germans. Joseph Stalin would repeatedly cite the treaty to justify Soviet ultimatums. Indeed, Stalin used the 1921 Treaty to justify invading Iran two decades later. The Soviets were not alone in this—British and subsequently U.S. forces took part—but the Red Army was alone in refusing to leave Iranian territory when World War II ended. Not only did Iranian Azerbaijan become the focal point of the first Cold War crisis, but Moscow also sought to encourage and support Kurdish separatism in the Mahabad Republic in northwestern Iran. This was high among the reasons why Tehran tripled its defense budget in the next decade and joined the Baghdad Pact.⁶ The direct military threat the Iranians felt from across their 1,100-

The Soviets refused to leave Iranian territory following World War II and supported Kurdish separatism in Iran during the Cold War.

mile border with the Soviet Union loomed large in public consciousness through the remainder of the Cold War. This is why, even as Ayatollah Khomeini railed against “The Great Satan” America during the 1979 Islamic Revolution, his suspicions and those of his followers remained just as deep toward the Soviet Union.⁷

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Reconsidering Russia

While Khomeini did not waiver on his connection to Russia throughout the Iran-Iraq war despite the isolation Tehran faced, toward the end of his life, he signaled Iran's need not to treat the Soviet Union with the same enmity as the regime did the United States. In May 2009, Hassan Rouhani, at the time a former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and a member of the Assembly of Experts, spoke at a roundtable on “Iran, Russia, and the West.”⁸ While critical of Moscow's posture toward Iran prior to the Islamic Revolution, he suggested then-parliamentary speaker Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's 1989 visit to Moscow had laid the foundation for a new partnership.⁹

Ali Khamenei, Khomeini's successor as supreme leader, continued Tehran's quiet outreach justified on shared enmity with the Russians toward Washington and on economic opportunism. Some Iranians raised questions about inherent ideological compromise,

⁶ Mark Gasriowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 112.

⁷ For another view, see, Daniel Pipes, “Fundamentalist Muslims Between America and Russia,” *Foreign Affairs*, [Summer 1986](#).

⁸ *Aftab News* (Tehran), [May 19, 2016](#).

⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, [June 21, 1989](#).

but regime officials tried to explain this away. In 2012, for example, a website affiliated with the supreme leader denied any parallels between the Palestinian plight and Muslim minorities in Russia or China. The difference, it said, was that Israel was alone in having “confiscated” Palestinian lands.¹⁰ Other outlets acknowledged the problem but assured critics that Tehran continued to provide “emotional support” for the Chechens.¹¹

That same year, however, Rafsanjani—by then a senior statesman—threw cold water on the comfort some Iranian officials felt about their anti-U.S. alliance with Russia even if he was credited with its revival. In an interview, he noted the constraints Russia felt from U.S. pressure and acknowledged, “Like Western countries, Russia is also concerned about Iran becoming a power by acquiring nuclear weapons.”¹² As president, however, Rouhani disagreed, arguing both that the growing U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and the Caucasus and U.S. human rights advocacy provoked Russia enough to cause it to put other concerns aside.¹³



Russian soldiers stand watch over Afghans during the Soviet invasion, December 1979. Former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani claimed that the invasion “left a bad memory of Russians in Iranians’ minds.”

Other officials were less sure. In 2014, Behrouz Nemati, a conservative who represents Tehran in parliament, said that the history of Russo-Iranian relations demonstrates a tendency toward Russian subterfuge and warned Iranian leaders to be careful “shaking Russia’s hand.”¹⁴

In contrast to Rouhani, Rafsanjani suggested that Afghanistan remained a source of distrust between Tehran and Moscow rather than a catalyst for tighter ties. “The Soviet Union’s record on invading Afghanistan left a bad memory of Russians in Iranians’ minds,” he explained. “It is too often overlooked that the Islamic Republic’s relationship with Russia was formed in such an environment.”¹⁵ Sadegh Kharrazi, Iran’s former ambassador to France, also cast doubt on a Russian gamble. “Historically, there is a national distrust in Iranians’ nature against

¹⁰ “Alet ‘Adam Muzagha’giri dar Barabar Chin va Rusiyeh beh Dalil Koshtar Musalmanan Chin va Chechen,” Student’s Query, Porsemani.ir (website associated with Khamenei’s office), [Dec. 31, 2012](#).

¹¹ “Aya Hamayat Iran va Musulmanan Yeksan Ast?” *Quds Online* (Tehran), [Apr. 27, 2016](#).

¹² Hashemi Rafsanjani, interview, “Shakal-e Mojavad-e Ravabat-e Iran va Russiyeh bar Mobana-ye Entekhab-e Estrategik Tehran Nabudeh Ast,” Iran-Russia Studies Institution, Tehran, [Jan. 29, 2012](#).

¹³ *Aftab News*, [May 19, 2016](#).

¹⁴ Iranian Students’ News Agency (ISNA, Tehran), [Sept. 15, 2014](#).

¹⁵ Rafsanjani, [Jan. 29, 2012](#).

Russia. We haven't been harmed by Americans like we have been by Russians," he argued.¹⁶ This appears to be a common attitude among some senior Iranian diplomats. Ali Khorram, a former Iranian ambassador to China, wrote that Russia was not trustworthy. "The Russians are good to Iran as long as it is in their interest," he explained, but "as soon as Americans and Western countries [court Russia], [the Russians] will turn their back to their commitments to the Islamic Republic of Iran. ... History has shown whenever we have relied on them [Russians], they have immediately abandoned us," he added.¹⁷

One Iranian diplomat argued, "The Russians are good to Iran as long as it is in their interest."

While Khamenei and later Rouhani may have been eager for ties to Moscow, Russia's historical baggage in Iran continued to intrude. Both countries supported the same side in the Syrian civil war, and yet, when a Russian ship launched cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea into Syria that overflowed Iranian territory, even sympathetic Iranians such as senior members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) reacted with outrage.¹⁸

Other Russian actions have antagonized ordinary Iranians. After Moscow provided its Iranian counterpart with technology to jam Persian-language broadcasts from diaspora stations, ordinary Iranians reacted with vitriol. Internet commentary submitted to the conservative daily *Asr-e Iran* webpage on the story included comments such as, "May God

give Russia Death," "Russia is the biggest jerk," and "the Russian embassy is a nest of spies."¹⁹ Outside the constraints of the official press, Iranian bloggers

let loose, questioning the value of alignment with a declining economic power and the stability of any alliance with Russia.²⁰ An Iranian doctoral student in Moscow, meanwhile, observed—correctly—that the Kremlin always acted in its own national interest, but Iranian proponents of the alliance somehow expected the Russians to act in Tehran's national interest instead.²¹

Can Trade Overcome Distrust?

While Washington and its Middle Eastern allies may worry primarily about Russia-Iran military ties, the trade relationship between the two countries could potentially be broader. Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia entered a deep, multi-year recession. At the time, Tehran was already heavily sanctioned and, after a series of executive orders issued by President Bill Clinton, soon became more so. Both Tehran and Moscow, however, found an outlet in the other. In 1995, for example, Russia's Atomstroyexport became the chief contractor for the Bushehr nuclear program at a time when few countries wanted Russian nuclear assistance given the stigma of the Chernobyl

¹⁶ Sadegh Kharrazi, "Rusiyeh va Iran Motahedan-e Istrategik Nistand," *irdiplomacy.ir* (Tehran), [Nov. 6, 2012](#).

¹⁷ Tabnak News Agency (Tehran), [Jan. 18, 2015](#).

¹⁸ Iranian Labor News Agency (ILNA, Tehran), [Nov. 17, 2015](#).

¹⁹ *Asr-e Iran* (Tehran), [Oct. 26, 2011](#).

²⁰ "Divangi-ha-ye beh Jihan Asib Mirisand," Free1. Mihanblog.com, [Dec. 8, 2015](#); Jahangir Heidari, "Tahlili bar Monesabat Jomhhuri Islami Iran va Rusiyeh," *Andisheh-haye Zhiopolitik*, [Oct. 24, 2015](#)

²¹ Ahmad Vakhshiteh, "'Ashq-e Rasha Nabayad Tarsid," *EnsafNews* (Tehran), [Apr. 5, 2016](#).

disaster, and Iranian contracts were toxic for Western firms.

Still, initial optimism in Tehran that Russian trade might salvage Iran's economy quickly faded. In 2012, Rafsanjani explained,

In the past quarter century ... Iran and Russia have never been able to set and create a visible trade partnership. The most important commodity [oil] that Iran has to offer other countries is not attractive to the Russians, and many Russians commodities and technologies have always been the lowest priority for the Iranian side.²²

Russian exports to Iran decreased by nearly two thirds, from \$3.4 billion to \$1.2 billion, between 2010 and 2013, while Iranian exports to Russia grew only modestly and remained under \$500 million.²³ Nor did either country's non-military trade with the other increase appreciably over the next decade.²⁴

Even the arms trade did not fully reassure those in the Iranian government unsure about whether to trust Moscow. In 2007, Tehran agreed to purchase the S-300 system for \$800 million. Prior to the development of the S-400, the S-300 was still Russia's premier anti-aircraft missile system, and so the announcement of the deal was a high stakes affair. Soon, however, Iranians



Shortly after the signing of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), Moscow agreed to license the manufacture of Russian tanks inside Iran. Russia and Iran also now hold joint military exercises.

who expressed doubt about Russia's reliability felt vindicated: Moscow suspended the sale under international pressure. The dispute carried on for another eight years with the Iranian government demanding a \$4 billion breach of contract penalty against Russia's Rosoboronexport. And while Tehran dropped the suit in 2015 when Rosoboronexport finally delivered the hardware, cynicism and doubt remained.²⁵

Ironically, it was the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), President Barack Obama's signature Iran nuclear deal, that breathed new life into the Russia-Iran arms trade. In order to reach agreement, Obama agreed not only to end prohibitions on Iran's military trade but also to provide a windfall for Tehran in terms of sanctions relief and enabling foreign investment. It was not long, for example, before Moscow agreed to license the manufacture of Russian tanks inside Iran.²⁶ The two countries likewise

²² Rafsanjani, [Jan. 29, 2012](#).

²³ Mark Katz, "Iran and Russia," *Iran Primer*, U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C., Aug. 2015.

²⁴ "Russia/Iran," Observatory of Economic Complexity, MIT Media Lab, Cambridge, Mass.

²⁵ *The Moscow Times*, [Nov. 9, 2015](#); *BBC News*, [Apr. 17, 2016](#).

²⁶ ILNA, [Apr. 30, 2016](#).

appear to be cooperating in the cyber sphere with drones, and, despite Russian president Vladimir Putin's denials, with satellites as well.²⁷ That appears to be the tip of the iceberg.²⁸ Russia and Iran also increasingly hold joint military exercises, sometimes with Chinese participation.²⁹ The IRGC also frequently participates in Russia's annual military games.³⁰

For Khamenei, hatred of the United States trumps animosity toward Russia.

Will the Russian-Iranian Alliance Last?

For Khamenei, hatred of the United States trumps animosity toward Russia. In November 2015, he visited Moscow for the first time in more than a decade, nominally to attend a summit for gas-exporting countries. After a meeting with his Russian counterpart, Khamenei declared, "America's long-term scheme for the region is detrimental to all nations and countries, particularly Iran and Russia, and it should be thwarted through vigilance and closer interaction." He praised Putin for "neutralizing [Washington's] policy." Putin was also affable. "We regard you as a trustworthy and reliable ally in the

region and the world," he told Khamenei.³¹ Putin also looks to the future; he was the first world leader to call Ebrahim Raisi upon his win in the June 2021 presidential elections, a

victory that many observers believe confirm his frontrunner status to replace Khamenei upon the aging supreme leader's death.³²

Still, centuries of Iranian distrust and hostility do not easily dissipate. Perhaps this is why, in June 2021, the Russian and Iranian foreign ministries agreed to waive visas.³³ Few countries allow Iranians such access, and the decline of the Iranian rial makes it increasingly expensive for those that do. But a desire to bolster tourism may not be the only basis for the agreement. There is likely hope at a more senior level that enabling Iranians and Russians to meet and mix might breakdown the hostility that overshadows Iranian public opinion of Russia and its aims.

While the JCPOA helped reinforce Khamenei's flailing attempt to build a Russia-Iran strategic alliance, the drive by both Tehran and Moscow's dictatorial regimes to cement an anti-U.S. alliance will backfire. Decades of official Islamic Republic hostility to the United States have not eroded and, indeed, likely may have encouraged a general friendliness by the Iranian public toward America. To try to push Russia upon the public will likely accelerate that trend while Moscow's close association with an increasingly unpopular Khamenei and Raisi

²⁷ Omree Wechsler, "[The Iran-Russia Cyber Agreement](#) and U.S. Strategy in the Middle East," Council on Foreign Relations, Mar. 15, 2021; *Defapress* (Tehran), [June 27, 2021](#); *The Washington Post*, [June 10, 2021](#).

²⁸ Paul Goble, "[Moscow and Tehran Dramatically Expanding Economic and Security Cooperation](#)," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, Washington, D.C., June 3, 2021.

²⁹ Reuters, [Dec. 27, 2019](#); *Aljazeera* TV (Doha), [Feb. 16, 2021](#).

³⁰ Tasnim News Agency (Tehran), [July 27, 2016](#).

³¹ "Ayatollah Khamenei: [US Plotting to Dominate West Asia](#)," Leader.ir, Tehran, Nov. 23, 2015.

³² Samuel Ramani, "[Russian-Iranian relations](#) under Raisi and possible post-Khamenei scenarios," Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C., July 7, 2021.

³³ Tasnim News Agency, [June 7, 2021](#).

will reinforce Iranian public hostility toward Russia for decades to come. The nature of dictatorship, however, means that in the short-term, such sentiments will not affect policy as both Tehran and Moscow work to erode the post-World War II liberal order and U.S. dominance on the regional and global stage.

Michael Rubin is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a senior editor at the *Middle East Quarterly*. He is grateful for the support of the U.S. Army's Foreign Military Studies Office in conducting the research for this article.

