



## **Russia-Iran Defense Cooperation: Past and Present**

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### **Abstract**

It has always been critical for scholars and researchers to find points of mutual concern and facts about defense cooperation between Russia and Iran. This study aims to find out the intensity of historical defense cooperation between USSR (later Russia) and Iran. Further, it seeks to answer whether both countries have had either strategic partnership or just find each other to face common threat at some fronts. This study generally follows a chronological approach for achieving its aim and answering the question of the study. It finds that both countries remain ally at some military fronts, such as repulsion of multidimensional influence of US and NATO countries from Middle East and general resistance to West. Besides this mutualism, Iran buys Russian defense technology and uses its relative global power to get out from diplomatic isolations, international trade restrictions and arms embargoes. Despite having a number of defense engagements, historical Russia-Iran relations are neither strategic nor as deep as the world recognizes. Russia finds Iran as its regional ally rather than a strategic partner. Therefore, it neither wants to lose Iran nor prefers to equip it with strategic weapons. Consequently, Russia-Iran defense cooperation faces occasional instability at all.

**Keywords:** Soviet Union, Russia, Iran, Defense Cooperation, Strategic Partnership.

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## Rusya-İran Savunma İşbirliği: Geçmişi ve Bugünü

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### Öz

Rusya ile İran arasındaki karşılıklı savunma çıkarlarını ve askeri işbirliği noktalarını bulmak konunun araştırmacıları için her zaman kritik önemde olmuştur. Bu çalışmanın amacı SSCB (daha sonra Rusya) ve İran arasındaki tarihsel savunma ortaklığının yoğunluğunu ortaya çıkarmaktır. Bunun yanında çalışma, iki ülkenin stratejik bir ortaklığı olup olmadığı veya ortak bir tehdide karşı mücadelede birbirlerini kullanıp kullanmadıkları sorularını yanıtlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Genel amaca ulaşmak ve araştırma sorularını cevaplandırmak üzere kronolojik bir yaklaşım izlenmektedir. Çalışma, Rusya ve İran'ın, Ortadoğu'daki ABD ve NATO ülkelerinin çok boyutlu etkisini kısıtlama ve genel olarak Batı'ya karşı aynı cephede olma gibi bazı meseleleri çözmede müttefik olduklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Buna ek olarak İran, Rus savunma ekipmanlarını satın alarak diplomatik izolasyondan ve uluslararası ekonomik yaptırımlardan ve silah ambargosundan kurtulmak için Rusya'nın küresel gücünü kullanmaktadır. İki ülke arasında mevcut pek çok anlaşmaya rağmen, Rusya-İran arasındaki tarihsel ilişkiler ne stratejik ne de görüldüğü gibi derindir. Rusya, İran'ı stratejik bir ortaktan ziyade bölgesel bir müttefiki olarak görmektedir. Bundan dolayı, ne İran ile olan bağının kopmasını istemekte ne de onu stratejik silahlarla donatmayı tercih etmektedir. Neticede, Rusya ve İran'ın işbirliği, genel olarak istikrarsızlıkla karşı karşıya kalmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sovyetler Birliği, Rusya, İran, Savunma İşbirliği, Stratejik Ortaklık

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## **1. Introduction**

It has always been critical for scholars and researchers to find points of mutual concern and nodes of defense cooperation between Russia and Iran, where both countries have different racial origins, languages, cultures, religions and political ideologies required for statecraft and public policy. Besides these differences, Russia is one of the biggest suppliers of natural gas, while Iran competes her as the second in the international Energy market, which makes them the biggest rivals as gas suppliers.

It is very complex to define the defense relationship between the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (Russia) and pre and post-revolution Iran because Iran remained a satellite state of the United States for containing Socialism/Communism in the region, but post-revolution Iran approached Soviet Union for fulfilling its national interest. At the same time, it presented a resolution at the forum of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) for building a strategic and effective response against Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979). Subsequently, the Soviets decided to go with Iraq during Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Right after the war, Ruhollah Khomeini wrote a letter to Soviet leader Gorbachov for coinciding their mutual national interests. Then, Iranian President Rafsanjani visited Moscow for reiteration and translation of target interests through initiating multi-forum dialogue and signing agreements. Since that visit, both countries have been working to protect some of their relative bilateral, regional and global interests at almost all forums. Among various nodes of partnership, meeting the defense needs of Iran are priority in their bilateral cooperation. Despite very cohesive relationships, they do not have any strategic partnership clearly documented in agreements.

This paper aims to find out the intensity of historical defense partnership between the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (later Russia) and Iran. Further, it finds the answer whether both countries have had either strategic partnership or just find each other to face common threat at some fronts. The study generally follows a chronological approach for achieving its aim and answering the question under discussion.

## **2. Pre-Revolution Iran-Soviet Relations**

With respect to their cultural origins, Russians mostly belong to European Slavic and Christian Orthodoxy, but Iranians mostly belong to Persian-

Asian Origin and Shiite Islam. Politically, Russia is being governed by Secular rule, but “Vilayat Faqih” is administering Iran. The Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was governed by atheistic Socialist/ Communist rule after Bolshevik Revolution (1917), but Iran was governed by the Kingship model and supported by capitalist and democratic bloc of the West. Both countries established their diplomatic relationships during early 1920s, when they signed agreement (1921) for recognition of their right over Caspian Sea. Despite mutual understanding, USSR often intervened in Iranian territory (mostly bordering cities of Iran) and annexed it. Consequently, Iran saw Russia as an aggressive state.<sup>1</sup>

Later, Iranian defense leadership took interest in Soviet ammunition and equipment, when the Soviet Union used Iran as a bridge during World War II, but American strategic partnership with Iran prohibited it from buying Soviet weapons, unless or until Iran signed various development projects with Soviet companies during 1960s.<sup>2</sup>

This opportunity opened new doors for defense cooperation between the two countries. Iran bought 300 armored personnel carrier vehicles (BTR-60 and 270 BTR-50), anti-aircraft guns (122mm), and other important small and medium defense equipment from USSR. There must be a question, why did Iran approach the Soviet Union despite being American ally? Among several reasons, three factors remained significant. First, American defense equipment was much costly and coming from a further distance than Soviet Union’s equipment as comparatively cheap and available at the doorstep of Iran. Second, Iranian establishment could not afford an intolerable covert and relatively overt Soviet support to Tudeh Party (ideologically Communist party in Iran) in against Shah’s regime. Further, the Soviet Union supported Kurdish groups for threatening the territorial integrity of Iran. Therefore, Iran wanted to either dismantle this existential threat or to lessen its momentum at all. Third, Iran wanted to show its significance to America, which was ignoring it continuously while being closer to its competent Arab countries particularly with Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Sazhin, “Historical Relations of Iran and Russia”, *Sputnik*, December 29, 2016, accessed December 12, 2017, <https://ir.sputniknews.com/opinion/201612292103407/>.

<sup>2</sup> Amin Partow, “naghshe taslihoti rusi dar sazmane defo’i cumhuri islomi Iran,” *IRAS*, October 15, 2012, accessed December 12, <http://www.iras.ir/fa/doc/note/116/%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B4->.

<sup>3</sup> Despite being American allies, Iran and KSA were conflicting with each other for influencing oil prices and controlling Gulf.

In spite of a green signal for the two countries to cooperate, Iran could not sustain its defense relations with USSR. Among several reasons, six factors remained dominant. First, the Soviets continued its multidimensional support to Tudeh Party, which posed a very powerful opposition posture against the Shah of Iran.<sup>4</sup> Second, America could not afford a protracted dependence of its strategic ally, Iran, on its archrival Soviet Union. Third, Shah also wanted to remain cohesive with America rather to go in Warsaw bloc. Fourth, American Middle Eastern allies also could not afford Soviet's influence in the region as they were facing it in Yemen, Syria, Egypt and to some extent in Iraq. Fifth, Iran could not afford cancellation of a very prestigious US deal titled "Atom for Peace".<sup>5</sup> This offer was much attractive for Iran against of already available offers of short and medium arms supply from America. Sixth, the Soviets continued their support to Kurdish militant and political groups for getting independence from Iran.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Iran could not afford the Soviet's protracted double standard policy, which could lead Iran toward either dismemberment or threat to its national security or long-term internal political instability.

Iranian regime remained in this vicious cycle until the revolution took place in Iran in 1979. It was the year, when the Soviet Union sent its forces, heavy artillery and air force in Afghanistan. Now, there was a high intensity conflict in a Muslim country at the doorstep of Iran. Subsequently, Iranian spiritual and supreme leader Ruhollah Khomeini, who had anti-imperialist feelings, once declared that America was worse than England, and England was worse than America, but the Soviet Union was worse than both England and America. Therefore, Iran would not get benefit from any power.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Irina Fedorova, "Politika SSHA v Irane v kontse 40-kh nachale 50-kh godov XX veka." "IRAN: istoriya i sovremennosti." ed. Lyudmila Kulagina and Mamedova Nina (Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2014), 98.

<sup>5</sup> Ariana Rowberry, "Sixty Years of Atoms for Peace and Iran's Nuclear Program," *The Brookings Institution*, December 18, 2013, accessed December 13, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2013/12/18/sixty-years-of-atoms-for-peace-and-irans-nuclear-program/>.

<sup>6</sup> Dzhamilya Kochoyan, "Iranskiye kurdy: istoriya i sovremennosti," *Voyennoye Obozreniye*, May 10, 2016, accessed February 05, 2018, <https://topwar.ru/94939-iranskiye-kurdy-istoriya-i-sovremennost.html>.

<sup>7</sup> "Farmayeshate Emam Khomeini darbarei Amrika," *Fars News Agency*, June 10, 2016, accessed February 15, 2018, <http://www.farsnews.com/news/13950321000570/>.

### 3. Post-Revolution Iran-Soviet (Later Russia) Relations

In February 1979, Ruhollah Khomeini completely overthrew the Shah regime. He called Muhammad Reza Shah Pehlevi as a “Dog” of the United States of America.<sup>8</sup> He further criticized England, US and USSR. He claimed himself as being anti-imperialist and called the Iranian revolution as independent from Western and Eastern philosophies, but a pure Islamic democratic concept.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, USSR sent its armed forces in Afghanistan and started a very ruthless war in the region. As a result, Ruhollah Khomeini called for armed struggle against USSR in Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> During the Cold War, it was a great chance for USSR to reproach the isolated and needy country Iran,<sup>11</sup> when anti-American sentiment was at its peak during revolution, but its intervention in Afghanistan blocked this door. It did not end here. Therefore, Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) dragged the Soviet Union to balance its opposition with Iran by supporting Iraq mostly militarily.<sup>12</sup> Although, both Iran and Iraq faced a high number of casualties, war fatigue and collateral damage, but Iran comparatively annexed considerable Russian supplied ammunition reserves of Iraq. This factor also played a role that Iran reproached USSR at the end of 1980s.

It was a tricky moment for Iran and the Soviet Union that both wars (Iran-Iraq war & Afghan Jihad against Soviet) were over in the end of 1980s, but Islamic revolution, national anti-imperial sentiment, American Embassy crisis and Iran-Iraq war contributed to Iranian isolation. Similarly, the Soviet Union was about to collapse. Therefore, both countries faced isolation not only at the regional level, but also at the global level. Although the

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<sup>8</sup> “Farmayeshate Emam Khomeini darbarei Amrika,” *Fars News Agency*.

<sup>9</sup> It must be noted that some companions/obedient students of Ruhollah Khomeini highjacked the diplomatic staff of American Embassy at Tehran. Consequently, both countries faced highest diplomatic challenge of the time. Farideh Sharifi, “na sharghi na gharbi asl bunyodain siyasete khoreji,” *Kayhan* February 04, 2017, <http://kayhan.ir/fa/news/96984>.

<sup>10</sup> Mehdi Rahmati, “Iran-Russia Relations during Iran-Iraq War (Regarding Afghanistan).” *The Center for Holy Defense Documentation and Research Article 5*. Volume 9. Issue 34 (2010): 80.

<sup>11</sup> Lionel Beehner, “Russia-Iran Arms Trade,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 01, 2006, accessed February 25, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/background/russia-iran-arms-trade>.

<sup>12</sup> Rahmati, “Iran-Russia Relations”, 86.

collapse of the Soviet Union gave birth to the resilient Russian Federation, Iran faced unprecedented crises. Therefore, its economy and defense sectors were seeking powerful injections from bigger powers. It firstly sought only USSR (later Russia) for taking her out from the quagmires of internal and external crises. Very clearly, it was not unilateral, but Soviet's stakes were also equally involved in this process, because it was about to be dismembered and it was also in search of new allies. Subsequently, both countries found their new basis for cooperation.

Very significantly, it started with Ruhollah Khomeini, who wrote a letter to Gorbachov as a goodwill gesture.<sup>13</sup> Then, Rafsanjani visited Moscow in 1989, who signed a number of agreements including defense deals with USSR. They agreed for arms trade and diffusion of defense technology from the Soviet Union to Iran. Among deals of 15 billion dollars, 2 billion dollars were sanctioned for only arms trade.<sup>14</sup> It included 20 Mig-29 fighter jets, four Mig-29-UB combat-training fighter jets, 12 SU-24-MK frontline bombers, two S-200-Vega-E long-range air defense systems and much more.<sup>15</sup>

It might be helpful here to mention that USSR (later Russia in 1990s) faced huge economic crisis, disintegration of territorial integrity, border conflicts, rise of nationalist and sub-nationalist movements for independence from USSR (and later from Russian influence), and many challenges to its status of being a great power. Finally, USSR had to be dissolved and a new state of Russia had to declare a democratic power rather than a socialist or communist country. It had to take economic reforms for resolving the internal political crises, recognizing the European superiority, and influencing not only in Eastern Europe, but also in Balkan countries and to some extent in Middle Eastern, Caucasian and Central Asian countries. These issues constituted the foreign policy thinking of Russian leadership for exploiting

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<sup>13</sup> Jahangir Karimi, "negohe be payame emam khomeyni be gorbachov va vokuneshha va tahlelhai an pas az se dahe." IRAS. Desember 11, 2016, 21. accessed Desember 25, 2017. <http://www.iras.ir/fa/doc/article/2687/> .

<sup>14</sup> Jahangir Karimi, "Iran-Russia Strategic Partnership at the New Stage: What Could We Propose to Each Other?" *Russia-Iran Partnership: An Overview and Prospects for the Future*. Ed. Igor Ivanov, *Russian International Affairs Council and Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies*, (2017): 27.

<sup>15</sup> "Chronology of Iran-Russia Relationship," *PIR Centre*, 2009, accessed Desember 12, 2017, [http://www.pircenter.org/kosdata/page\\_doc/p1307\\_1.pdf](http://www.pircenter.org/kosdata/page_doc/p1307_1.pdf) .

the potential and sentiment of anti-American and anti-European countries for restoring its influence in the target regions and becoming a big power again. Among those countries, Russia saw Iran as its partner for manifestation of its opposition against aggressive Western powers.<sup>16</sup>

Subsequently, high political and diplomatic officials visited their counterparts in Moscow and Tehran very frequently. At that time, USSR needed investment at home and anxiously sought clients of its exports. It found Iran as a potential and sustainable client of its defense equipment. It must be noted that Iran captured a larger cache of arms of Iraqi forces during Iran-Iraq war. This factor also contributed to Iran's dependency on Russia for the upgradation of Soviet arms and reinforcement of new consignments of arms. Subsequently, Iran did hurry for fulfilling its futuristic army's needs. It bought Soviet/Russian weapons of 0.5 billion dollars each year till 1996.<sup>17</sup> It was approximately a 3 billion dollar deal between Iran and Russia. In this period, Iran bought 40 Mig-29 fighter jets, 20 Mig-29-UB combat-training fighter jets and 12 SU-24-MK frontline bombers; two S-200-Vega-E long-range air defense systems, 444 R-27-R and 576 R-60 air-launched missiles for upgrading and strengthening its air force.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, it bought three diesel electric submarines (DEPL-877-ECM) for empowering its naval forces. Likewise, Iran bought 120 BMP-2 infantry vehicles, 800 ATGM-9M111 anti-tank guided missiles, 122 T-72-M1 tanks, and a number of various small and medium arms from Russia. Besides these deals, Iran imported the parts of 1500 BMP-2 infantry vehicles and 1000 T-72-M1 tanks along with their licenses for equipping its defense industry at home.<sup>19</sup> It is important to note that Russia was also committed (1992) to building Iranian capacity for producing nuclear energy. This was a symbol of strong relations.

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<sup>16</sup> Nikita Filin and Ravandi-Fadai Lanu and A. Burova, "An overview of contemporary Russian-Iranian Relations." *Vestnik RUDN, International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2016): 681.

<sup>17</sup> "Iran-Rossiia: otsenka voyenno-tekhnicheskogo sotrudnichestva dvukh stran za period s 1990 goda po nastoyashcheye vremya," *Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade*, February 16, 2016, accessed February 02, 2018, <http://armstrade.org/includes/periodics/news/2016/0216/105533562/detail.shtml>.

<sup>18</sup> "Iran-Rossiia" *Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade*.

<sup>19</sup> "Iran-Rossiia" *Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade*.



Analysts frequently mention that Iran gives priority to its defense relationships while engaging trade with Russia (also earlier with USSR). Therefore, it is a very impressive indicator that Iran is the third buyer of Russian defense equipment and other defense related capabilities after hegemonic powers of Asia i.e. China and India. It might be helpful to take the analysis of scholars who believe that the Soviet Union did not seek Iran as Soviet ally or did not focus to make Iran a regional power, but Soviet Union relatively sought Iran as a client for its (Soviet) defense equipment. This is evidenced by the fact that Soviet did not supply any high number of strategic or competitive defense equipment to Iran.

Further, Russia took benefit of Iran through exploiting its social, cultural and emotional ties with the governments and people of Caucasian and Central Asian regions right after the collapse of USSR. Despite being a revolutionary Islamic state, Iran did not respect or give favor to the right of self-determination and will of the people of Chechenia and Azerbaijan. It favored Russian allied communist and anti-Islamic forces in other countries where the local population was fighting for freedom and complete removal of political residue of the Soviet Union. Further, Iran preferred to go with Russia for determining the area of influence of shareholders at Caspian Sea. Here, Iran confidently remained on the side of Russia again. Therefore, analysts believe that Russia silently used Iran as a horse in the region for fulfilling its own imperial interests, but Iran preferred silence for building its military capacity for intervening or exporting revolution in Arab countries.<sup>20</sup>

Despite mutual fruitful relationships, Russian political leadership fell in the American trap, when Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin secretly agreed with American Vice President for cutting-off Russian conventional arms deals with Iran. Later, this secret agreement became famous as Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement (1995). This development not only put an arms embargo at Iran, but poor economy holder Russia also lost equal to four billion dollar arms deal with Iran. This status quo remained stable until 2000.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> M. Arunova. "Islamskaya revolyutsiya i rossiysko-iranskiye otnosheniya." in Sbornik Blizhniy Vostok i Sovremennosti, vipusk 21, ed. Arunova M. and Filonik A, 175-186, (Institut izucheniya Izrailiya i Blizhnego Vostoka, Moscow 2004).179.

<sup>21</sup> Dmitriy Gornostayev and Igor Korotchenko, "Sdelka Gor-Chernomyrdin: ushcherb Rossii - chetyre milliarda?" October 19, 2000, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, accessed February 25, 2018, [http://www.ng.ru/world/2000-10-19/1\\_deal.html](http://www.ng.ru/world/2000-10-19/1_deal.html) .

#### 4. Russia-Iran Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

In 2000, Vladimir Putin became the President of Russia and exposed the secret deal i.e. Gore-Chernomyrdin (1995). Later, he immediately canceled it.<sup>22</sup> It was a revolutionary step for both Iran and Russia. Therefore, this development triggered a new era of bilateral defense cooperation. Next year (2001), Iranian President and Defense Minister visited Moscow and signed further defense deals with Russia. This was the time, when Iranian leadership showed its activism for modernization and strengthening their armed forces through training, exchange of strategic information and equipping them with modern and at least regionally competitive arms. This program was called defense vision of Iran for 2001-2025.<sup>23</sup> During their visit to Moscow, the Prime Minister and Defense Minister of Iran expressed their will to engage Russia for execution of their target defense plans on ground.

Further, Russian-built Iranian nuclear facilities were about to be completed and US and its European allies (including Israel) threatened Iran for demolishing its nuclear facilities as Israel did with Iraqi nuclear power plant in 1980. The international community called Iranian nuclear efforts as motivations for developing nuclear weapons,<sup>24</sup> but Iran responded that its nuclear energy program is not a violation of its ratification of Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) and commitments with the safeguards of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Despite clarifications, Iranian nuclear energy program faced critique at all diplomatic forums. Furthermore, American invasion of its immediate neighboring countries (Afghanistan & Iraq) were also clear signal and threat to Iran for reversing its defense plans particularly nuclear program, but Iran smartly harnessed the Russian diplomatic and defense potential for averting US (and to some extent Israeli) threat of invading Iran.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> John M. Broder, "Russia Ending Deal on Arms Negotiated by Gore," *New York Times*, November 23, 2000, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/23/world/russia-ending-deal-on-arms-negotiated-by-gore.html> .

<sup>23</sup> "Iran-Rossiia" *Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade*.

<sup>24</sup> Shreeya Sinha and Susan Campbell Beachy, "Timeline on Iran's Nuclear Program," April 2, 2015, accessed February 02, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/11/20/world/middleeast/Iran-nuclear-timeline.html> .

<sup>25</sup> "Voyenno-Tekhnicheskoye Sotrudnichestvo Irana i Rossii. Dosiye," *TASS*, January 19, 2015, accessed February 02, 2018, <http://tass.ru/info/1707163> .

From 2002-2005, Iran bought 36 MI-171 and MI-171-SH multirole helicopters. Further, it bought modern 3 MI-17V-5 helicopters. In addition of these machines, it bought 6 SU-25-UBK attack jets from Russia. Furthermore, it bought spare parts and other necessary devices for upgradation of its old Mig-29 and SU-24-MK fighter jets. During this period, both Russian and Iranian defense ministers frequently visited each other and reiterated their defense engagements.<sup>26</sup>

Iran took serious the credible threat of Israel and America to its nuclear facilities. Therefore, it bought 29 TOR-M1 anti-aircraft air defense system from Russia in time. It is significant to be mentioned that Russia prepared 12 of those mobile delivery vehicles just for Iran, which were not bound on tanks, but on different kinds of carriers or vehicles. In addition, 1200 9M331 missiles were also made part of this deal, which cost 1.4 billion dollars.<sup>27</sup> According to a Russian defense export industry Rosoboronexport, Iran became one of the biggest Russian arms importer countries, which bought 5.4% defense exports of Russia of almost 2 billion dollars during 2000-2007. Consequently, 85% Iranian weapons were either bought or prepared by Russian defense industries.<sup>28</sup>

Iran speeded up its missile development program and signed a deal (2006 and 2007) for buying anti-ballistic missile defense system from Russia. Subsequently, Israel and its Western allies put a question mark on such a big deal. In spite of foreign pressure, Iran continued working on its 25-year plan for strengthening its national defense. Further, it established workshops and service centers for upgradation and maintenance of MiG-29 and SU24-MK at home. Similarly, it established educational and training academies for provision of training of T-72S tanks to its cadets and engineers. Furthermore, Iran bought 200 V-84MS engines for Zulfikar Tank along with their licenses for production at local Iranian defense industries. Moreover, Russia upgraded its 3 877ECM sub-marines in Iranian shipyard.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the above mentioned joint ventures, Russians took part in the Space program of Iran too.

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<sup>26</sup> "Voyenno-Tekhnicheskoye Sotrudnichestvo Irana i Rossii," *TASS*.

<sup>27</sup> "Iran-Rossiia" *Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade*.

<sup>28</sup> "Voyenno-Tekhnicheskoye Sotrudnichestvo Irana i Rossii," *TASS*.

<sup>29</sup> "Iran-Rossiia" *Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade*.

It is useful to mention here that Iran requested Russia to sell its S-300 air defense system to Iran. Firstly, Russia agreed to provide it in 2005 and Iran paid 800 million dollars to Russia in 2007 for buying 40 launchers of S-300 air defense system.<sup>30</sup> However, Russia did not provide the system until United Nations Security Council passed a resolution and sanctioned Iranian nuclear program. Subsequently, Russian President Medvedev suspended this deal. Finally, 5+1 formula awarded relaxations to Iran in 2015 and lifted the international sanctions on the country. Further, both Iran and Russia agreed on Syrian issue. Therefore, Russia did not have any hurdle or hesitation to equip Iran with S-300 system in 2016.<sup>31</sup>

In February 2016, Iranian Minister of Defense Hussein Dehghan visited Moscow and proposed for a big arms deal. It includes SU35, SU30SM and YK-130 aircrafts; MI-8 and MI-17 attack helicopters; highly advanced T-90 tank; modern air defense systems; and relevant defense technologies. Despite his great effort for materializing the defense partnership with Russia, the proposal was declined by his Russian counterparts.<sup>32</sup> The reason behind this refusal is Russian commitment with UNSC resolution for imposing relative arms embargo on Iran until 2020.<sup>33</sup> Later, Iranian Ambassador to Moscow interpreted this development as Russian hesitation for transferring defense technology to Iran that had been embargoed at UNSC.<sup>34</sup> Despite holding international pressure, Russia sold anti-ballistic missile defense system S-300-PMU-2 to Iran in 2017. In February 2017, the President of Rostekh (Russian defense export complex) revealed that Russia does not plan to sell any other strategic weapons to Iran.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> "Iran-Russia relations, Cooperation in post neighborhood period." *Journal of Central Asian and Caucasian Studies*, Article 1, Volume 14, Issue 61 (2009): 17.

<sup>31</sup> "Voyenno-Tekhnicheskoye Sotrudnichestvo Irana i Rossii," *TASS*.

<sup>32</sup> Ivan Safronov and Elena Chernenko, "Iran pritsenivayetsya k rossiyskomu voyenpromu," *Kommersant*, December 19, 2017, accessed February 02, 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2917271> .

<sup>33</sup> Oleg Konnov, "Iran posle otmeny sanktsiy. Perspektivy dlya rossiyskikh kompaniy," *Herbert Smith Freehills*, February 10, 2016, accessed February 05, 2018, <https://events.vedomosti.ru/media/materials/material-7e59dd87-0a98-4133-985a-61aaabb9fbca/download> .

<sup>34</sup> Levan Dzhangaryan, "Zapadnyye SMI podogrevali gradus pri vnutrennikh protestakh v Irane," *TASS*, February 11, 2018, accessed February 26, 2018, <http://tass.ru/opinions/interviews/4947832> .

<sup>35</sup> Mikhail Malayev, "Voyenno-tekhnicheskoye sotrudnichestvo Rossii i Irana," *Kommersant* March 17, 2017, accessed February 12, 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3254056> .

## **5. Why Does Iran Remain Important for Russia?**

It is a very important question why Iran remains important for Russia. It has several inter-dependent reasons. Iran is encircled with energy reserves and conflict zones. Therefore, it attracts the attention of regional and global powers. Historically, Iran remained under the influence of Britain, Russia and America particularly after WWI. Further, post-revolution regime claimed that it does not want to be part of neither East nor West, but to just follow Islam, but international isolation pushed Iran to find some support at global level. Therefore, it found the Soviet Union for target cause. Subsequently, Ayatollah Khomeini wrote a letter to Mikhail Gorbachov. Then, Rafsanjani's visit to Moscow built very close bilateral relationship between the two countries. Later, dissolution of the Soviet Union gave an opportunity to both countries to upgrade their bilateral relationship from mutual to regional level and then relatively at global level. Some indicators of this relationship can be observed when Iran compromised on the stance of freedom movements at Caucasia (Azerbaijan and Chechenia) and Central Asia, including post-Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Despite Islamic identity and religious political ideology, Iran condemned the revolutionary and democratic change in those countries for strengthening and transferring the influence and political heritage of USSR to Russia during 1990s. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, both Russia and Iran found themselves as target of opposition to America and its European allies. Therefore, their partnership evolved from regional to global level.<sup>36</sup>

## **6. Influential Factors on Russia-Iran Defense Cooperation**

Foreign policy of states remains under the influence of their internal and external determinants including the influence and cooperation with other states. Middle powers often operate in the boundaries defined by big powers. Therefore, some scholars believe that defense capabilities and geostrategic movements of such states remain under monitoring of big powers.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Jahangir Karimi. "Iran-Russia Strategic", 28.

<sup>37</sup> Ozan Örmeci, "Prof. Dr. Baskın Oran'a Göre Türk Dış Politikasının Kuramsal Çerçevesi ve OBD Kavramı, *Uluslararası Politika Akademisi*," Şubat 16, 2017, accessed February 02, 2018, <http://politikaakademisi.org/2017/02/16/prof-dr-baskin-orana-gore-turk-dis-politikasinin-kuramsal-cercevesi-ve-obd-kavrami/>.

Iran is a regional power in the Middle East. Further, being a middle power, it is not among exceptions. It is located at a very strategic location in the world. On one side, it is located between oil and gas rich regions, such as; Central Asia, Caucasia and Gulf. On the other side, it is located in between conflict-ridden neighbors, such as Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Syria and Iraq. Since 1979, it possesses imperial designs in the region for grabbing energy resources of the regional countries through insisting to resolve their issues with its spectacle. Similarly, Russian agitation from American unipolar world contributed for reducing the distance between Iran and Russia. Researchers have accumulated following key factors as described by experts about Iranian and Russian worldview for their common issues.

### **6.1 America and NATO Factor**

Geopolitical motivations behind progress in Iranian influence in the Middle East attracted the attention of global powers. Subsequently, regionally competing powers also contributed to make it significant at international arena.<sup>38</sup> Historically, the American and Russian struggle for influencing Iran is not new, but it started far earlier than revolution (1979). Before America, England and Russia remained in competition to contain each other in Afghanistan. Therefore, these countries harnessed the potential of Iran and British Indian colonial establishment for the target cause until World War II.<sup>39</sup> During this period, Russia ruled on a larger territory of Iran. Then, England transferred its legacy of influencing Iran to America. Therefore, Iranian Shah remained loyal to America and made Iran a dependent country on American defense industries during the Cold War. At the same time, it played its role as one of the frontline states against Socialism/Communism. This situation remained until revolution (1979) in Iran that toppled the regime of American puppet i.e. Shah of Iran.<sup>40</sup> Further, revolutionaries took reactionary steps against America. Consequently, America put arms and trade embargoes on Iran. It was put in American blacklist too.

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<sup>38</sup> Türel Yılmaz and Mehmet Şahin, “Ortadoğu Siyasetinde İran” (Ankara: Barış Kitabevi, 2011), 144.

<sup>39</sup> Irina, “Politika SSHA”, 96.

<sup>40</sup> Dmitri Trenin and Alexey Malashenko. “Iran: a View from Moscow.” *Carnegie endowment for international Peace*, (2010): 19-20.

Until the dismemberment of USSR, America pushed Iran towards isolation in the international arena. Even Russia left Iran isolated during 1990s. Further, the event of 9/11 and American invasion of Afghanistan & Iraq left a very bad impact on Iranian security perception. Iran was in fear of being the next target of America in the near future, because the US and Europe were recognizing it as a terror supporting state.<sup>41</sup>

These wars not only extended the role of NATO forces, but also gave opportunities to America to use the airbases of Russian satellite states of Central Asia. Consequently, this led Russia to approach Iran to relatively contain NATO and American influence in the region. Conversely, Russia faced a very hard blow from the West at Georgia and Ukraine. Therefore, Russia sought anti-West allies in the target regions, among which multiregional identity possessing Iran was a sustainable option. During his speech at Munich (2007), Putin challenged the existence and far extended role of NATO.<sup>42</sup> In 2008, Russian Foreign Policy doctrine declared the existence and role of NATO as a clear threat to Russian interests.<sup>43</sup>

During the period of Medvedev, America again successfully isolated Iran from Russia with a promise to make Russia as part of World Trade Organization (WTO), but America did not fulfill its promise. Finally, the next Russian President Putin attracted Iran again and made a promise for selling it the S-300 air defense system. This resulted in a strong reaction from America and its allies (particularly Israel). One of the members of the Committee for Foreign Affairs of Russian Parliament (Duma) described this situation as; We (Russia) lost 800 million dollars of defense deal with Iran and paid a huge fine of four billion dollars to her. In spite of receiving thanks from West, we faced their intervention at Ukraine and finally ejection of Russia from Great 8 (G8). According to World Arms Trade Analysis Center, Russia lost 13 billion dollar deals with Iran in that short period of

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<sup>41</sup> Yılmaz and Şahin, “Ortadoğu”, 172.  
Kemal İnat, “ABD-İran İlişkilerinin Ortadoğu ve Türkiye’ye Etkileri”, SETA Perspektif, Sayı 85, (Aralık 2014). 5.

<sup>42</sup> Speech and discussion of Vladimir Putin at the Munich Conference on Security Policy Issues, *Kremlin*, February 10, 2007, accessed February 12, 2018, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

<sup>43</sup> “The Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation,” *Kremlin* July 15, 2008, accessed February 02, 2018, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/785>.



time. Therefore, both countries reproached each other for relative common defense against US and NATO's designs for target regions.<sup>44</sup>

## **6.2 Iranian Nuclear Factor**

In 1957, the USA was convinced that Iranian leadership is anti-Soviet. Therefore, it offered Iran to be a part of its *Atoms for Peace* program. This was the start of Iranian nuclear energy program like other US allies. Next year (1958), Iran joined International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA). Then, it accepted the terms and conditions of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 and signed it in 1970.<sup>45</sup> It was unfortunate for Iran that its nuclear facilities were destroyed during Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), but it did not leave the project, and sought help for reconstruction of those facilities in 1992. Firstly, it approached China, but it could not help of that level which was suitable for Iran. Then, Iran approached Russia and signed an agreement in 1997. Surprisingly, the Iranian religious leaders called it a peaceful nuclear program, which was working for energy purposes only.<sup>46</sup> It is very difficult to understand that Iran was working on its nuclear program for getting only nuclear energy rather than producing nuclear weapons while having huge reserves of petroleum and natural gas.

Besides being ambitious for the nuclear program, Iranian revolutionary leadership really started threatening the West and Israel. Subsequently, these powers found Iranian nuclear energy program as a potential threat to their national security. Consequently, they started containing and isolating Iran not only within the region, but also in the international system. Despite Russian help, Iran had to start negotiations (2002-2006) with Germany, France and Britain for opening a dialogue on critical issues including nuclear program. These countries could not stop Iran from its aggressive nuclear designs. Consequently, IAEA handed over an Iranian file to the

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<sup>44</sup> "Iran-Rossiya" Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade.

<sup>45</sup> "Yadernaya programma Irana (Iran's nuclear program)," *RIA-Novosti*, November 09, 2013, accessed December 12, 2017, <https://ria.ru/spravka/20131109/975687825.html#ixzz33tCd8j58>.

<sup>46</sup> "Bunyonhai mintaqai dar zarrurate bahragiri az enerjii hastei," *Iran and Nuclear Technology*, accessed February 02, 2018, [http://www.irannuclear.net/?page\\_id=55](http://www.irannuclear.net/?page_id=55).



United Nations Security Council (UNSC).<sup>47</sup> It exposed the Iranian nuclear fissile material production capacity. Then, the circle of negotiating countries was broadened in 2006. Now, it included five permanent members of UNSC and one additional member i.e. Germany. This led negotiations with Iran from 2006 to 2015.

During this period, UNSC passed a resolution against Iran. It sanctioned Iranian needs of nuclear fissile material and imposed an arms embargo on its conventional arms deals. This led Russian President Medvedev to impose complete arms embargo on Iran.<sup>48</sup> Further, Russia refused to give Iran money in return for the promised arms deals. Consequently, Iran approached the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for reimbursement of its defense deal with Russia. Hence, Russia paid \$4 billion back to Iran.<sup>49</sup> Later, some reports exposed that actually the US put pressure on Russia for its defense disengagements with Iran.<sup>50</sup> Contrary to these sanctions, the US and the European powers promised Russia to assure its position in the World Trade Organization (WTO), but it did not happen.<sup>51</sup> They not only refused Russia as part of WTO, but also expelled it from Great-8 (G-8) and evacuated Ukraine from Russian influence. Further, it lost an \$800 million defense deal while refusing Iran for providing S300 missiles.<sup>52</sup>

It was again a good luck for Iran that the new term of President Putin (2012) again lifted all embargoes and started a new era of defense engagements with Iran. Both countries started finding their common views on armed intervention in Syria; peace process in Afghanistan; Iranian inclusion in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); pressurizing US for evacuation from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan; and balancing the Iranian relationships with Azerbaijan and Armenia. In fact, both countries established

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<sup>47</sup> "Chronology of Key Events," *International Atomic Energy Agency*, accessed December 22, 2017, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/iran/chronology-of-key-events>.

<sup>48</sup> "Iran-Rossiia" *Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade*.

<sup>49</sup> "RF mozhnet lishit' Tegeran podderzhki, yesli isk po S-300 ne otzovut," *RIA-Novosti*, December 22, 2017, accessed February 02, 2018, <https://ria.ru/world/20120810/720325568.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Nikita Filin and Ravandi-Fadai Lanu and A. Burova, "An overview", 681.

<sup>51</sup> Nikita Filin and Ravandi-Fadai Lanu and A. Burova, "An overview", 681.

<sup>52</sup> Aleksey Pushkov, "Razmeshcheniye v Irane S-300 ne mozhnet ugrozhat' bezopasnosti Izrailya," *TASS*, April 15, 2015, accessed December 20, 2017, <http://tass.ru/politika/1906601>.

their symbiotic relationship, but Iran always remained relatively needier for Russia for harnessing the Russian diplomatic influence at highly prestigious international forums particularly at UNSC. Finally, Iran achieved its nuclear deal in 2015, but US President Donald Trump canceled the Iranian nuclear deal in 2018, but its European allies and other signatories including Russia showed restraint and confirmed their commitment for complying with the agreement.<sup>53</sup>

### 6.3 Israel Factor

Revolutionary leadership of Iran defines Israel as a Small Satan after America.<sup>54</sup> Further, the radical statements of Iranian President Ahmadinejad influenced the opinion of its people against Jewish Zionism and Israel. Now, the public supports this radical stance for erasing Israel from the world map. Subsequently, Iran exported Russian ammunition to Hezbollah during the Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006. Resultantly, this war contributed to the Iran-Israel rivalry more than earlier.

On the Russian side, Israel became a lucky country for receiving almost 1 million Russian Jewish (in the post-Soviet period) who migrated to Israel and found the new and cohesive basis for relations between Russia and Israel.<sup>55</sup> Further, a large number of them were engineers and experts from the key defense industries of Russia (and USSR). Therefore, they made Israeli defense industries even more competent in some areas comparing to Russia. Now, Russia became relatively dependent on some defense technologies of Israel. This added a great value in Israel-Russian relations. Further,

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<sup>53</sup> Simon Tisdall, "Europe must make Trump pay for wrecking the Iran nuclear deal," *The Guardian*, May 09, 2018, accessed August 07, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/09/europe-trump-wreck-iran-nuclear-deal-cancel-visit-sanctions> .

Henry Meyer and İlia Arkhipov, "Russia Urges Trump-Putin Summit after U.S. Rebuff of Iran Deal," *Bloomberg*, May 09, 2018, accessed August 05, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-09/russia-urges-trump-putin-summit-after-u-s-rebuff-of-iran-deal> .

<sup>54</sup> "Agar İsrail dast be hemoqat zanad İran anra nabud khohad kard," *Iranian Students' News Agency* (İSNA), September 20, 2017, accessed February 02, 2018, <https://www.isna.ir/news/96062917333/> .

<sup>55</sup> Tor Arne Andreassen, "Za neskol'kikh let v Izrail' iz Sovetskogo Soyuzu pribyl 1 million yevreyev," *İNOSMİ*, September 19, 2017, accessed February 02, 2018, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20170919/240314493.html> .

Putin made his historical statement in favor of Israel that Russia would not go against Israel in the Middle East.<sup>56</sup> Despite his commitments with Israel, Putin signed a deal and delivered the Tor-M1 anti-ballistic missile defense system to Iran. This raised several concerns of Israel on Iran. Although Iran is dependent on Russia in terms of getting defense technology, but Russia needs Israel not only for getting some strategic weapons, but also for using its potential for influencing the regional countries and normalizing its strategic security perspective with the West. Therefore, Israeli-Russian relations always supersede Russia-Iran cooperation.

Moreover, Israel and Iran always remain in multidimensional overt and covert military antagonism. Recently (May 2018) Israel engaged several Iranian counterforce targets in a low intensity conflict at Syrian front. Iran also responded Israel, but passively. Analysts frequently warn any low or high intensity conflict between Iran and Israel in the near future.<sup>57</sup>

#### **6.4 Iran as a Regional Power**

The Administration of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on revolutionary ideology that has a firm commitment to work for creation of a universal Islamic government through exporting the revolution.<sup>58</sup> Further, it envisions to unite the Muslims of the world against suppression and Western imperialism. Therefore, Iran seeks its role at regional level, where it supports Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and other regional militant organizations in the Middle East. Conversely, Arab countries found Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to give punch to Iran in the Gulf, but post-Khomeini period gave a chance to Iran to have relatively peaceful relationships with GCC countries except its controversial role in the Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Qatar crisis, but it did not give extraordinary benefit to Iran. On the other

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<sup>56</sup> Yelena Yegorova, "Na vstreche s Putinyim po Sirii Netan'yakhu ochen' volnovalsya," *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, September 21, 2015, accessed February 02, 2018, <http://www.mk.ru/politics/2015/09/21/na-vstreche-s-putinyim-po-sirii-netanyakhu-ochen-silno-volnovalsya.html> .

<sup>57</sup> Holmes Oliver and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Fears grow as Israel and Iran edge closer to conflict," *The Guardian* May 10, 2018, accessed August 07, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/10/israel-has-hit-nearly-all-iranian-infrastructure-in-syria-military-claims> .

<sup>58</sup> Yılmaz and Şahin, "Ortadoğu", 143.

hand, Iran got relaxation in the start of 21<sup>st</sup> century, when US invaded both Afghanistan and Iraq that finally weakened Taliban and finished Saddam's relative influence in the region. Further, the arrival of Putin gave more support to the Iranian national interests, when it became part of SCO and entered into Syria (including Iraq) with relatively common goals with Russia.

## **7. Paradoxes in Russia-Iran Defense Relations**

For many decades, both countries have been on the same page on multiple bilateral and multilateral issues, which emerged at regional and global levels. Therefore, scholars and analysts mostly perceive their close defense engagements as strategic cooperation. Therefore, it is necessary here to review their partnership and level of association in the defense sector.

How and why do states form alliance or strategic relationships with each other? There are many reasons for these collective security arrangements. Among those factors, states define their preferences for national security, balance of power, balance of threat and achieving common goals with the friendly or like-minded states.<sup>59</sup> In the international system, strategic partnerships are seen as the highest elements of association between states. Therefore, building strategic relationships is not a new thing. It has a long history, but Cold War between the US and USSR and their agreed extended nuclear deterrence for allied states made this concept significant. Later, the state of unipolar world further increased the significance of building strategic relationships with the relevant states.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, the revival of Russian role in the international system and serious efforts for finding and reviving its strategic partnership with some relevant states also contributed in it. Even, its political leadership used the term "strategic partnership" with multiple states, but actually, it never has been translated in accordance with the declaratory posture. It signed and declared strategic partnership with China, India, Algeria, Vietnam, Mongolia, South Africa and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Is Iran as strategic partner of Rus-

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<sup>59</sup> Tayyar Arı, "Uluslararası İlişkiler ve Dış Politika", (İstanbul: MKM Yayıncılık, 2011): 309.

<sup>60</sup> Le The Mau, "Identifying strategic partnership in globalization and international integration era," *National Defense Journal*, September 13, 2016, accessed February 02, 2018, <http://tapchiqptd.vn/en/research-and-discussion/identifying-strategic-partnership-inglobalization-and-international-integration-era/9297.html> .

sia as the mentioned states are? Despite having common views between the highest political, diplomatic and military leadership of both countries such as; containment and resistance to expansion of NATO, relative mutual understanding on Syrian problem and regional conflicts in the Middle East and Caucasia, agreement on Caspian Sea, agreement on natural gas exploration and selling it in the international market etc. does not declare strategic partnership. What were the reasons of it?

Both countries share five hundred years of historically bitter relationships. During this period, both states observed many antagonistic historical events where Iran lost Caucasian region during Russia-Persia wars. Therefore, Iran perceives Russia as an oppressor state.<sup>61</sup> Further, Russia invaded Iran during WWI and WWII and partially annexed a part of Iranian territory. Therefore, Iran sees Russia as an aggressor state.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, USSR and Russia supported political movements (mainly Tudeh Communist Party) and sub-nationalist movements (mainly Iranian Kurds) in Iran. Therefore, Iran perceives Russia as a destabilizing factor.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and supported Iraq during Iran-Iraq war.<sup>64</sup> It means it directly tried to destabilize Iran from the soil of both immediate neighboring countries.<sup>65</sup> In addition, Russia signed Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement (1995) with US and declined its defense relationships with Iran. A similar policy of disengagement was also implemented during the period of President Medvedev. Very realistically, Iran trusts the commitments of President Putin more than any other leader in Russia.

In spite of this historical antagonism, the future vision and principles of policies of both states are not only different sometimes, but also antagonistic to each other. Among many nodes of disengagements, a brief note on some issues are given as follows;

- Iranian supreme religious leadership wants revival of independence of Muslim countries from Western colonial and imperial interests. It

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<sup>61</sup> E. Orlov, "Rossiya i Iran v XX veke osnovnyye etapy vzaimootnosheniy" in Iran: Islam i Vlast' ed. Mamedova Nina i Mekhdi Sanai, (Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences RAN, 2001), 194-198.

<sup>62</sup> E. Orlov, "Rossiya i Iran", 194-198.

<sup>63</sup> Irina, "Politika SSHA", 98.

<sup>64</sup> Mehdi, "Iran-Russia Relations", 80, 86.

<sup>65</sup> Mehdi, "Iran-Russia Relations", 80, 86.

wants to unite Muslims across the world with its own perspective.<sup>66</sup> Conversely, Russia is a secular state. Further, it not only intervenes in Muslim countries in the Middle East, Central Asia and Caucasia, but also engages the West in this tension for its own imperial interests. Resultantly, Iran neither recognizes it as a strategic partner nor a reliable ally for all times.<sup>67</sup>

- Iran shares its significant and radical antagonism with the West, but Russia relatively engages the West for its national interest. Further, sometimes both blocs mutually and conditionally serve each other's interests.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, this indicates permanent mistrust between Iran and Russia.
- Russian refusal to Iran for not providing agreed timely consignments of S-300 anti-ballistic missiles/air defense system (in 2007 and 2010) and further threatening Iran for isolating it in the international system during severe crises, also tested their levels of defense cooperation and intensity of mutual trust.<sup>69</sup>
- Both countries have different visions and goals in the current crisis in Syria, where Russia may continue its intervention in Syria with or without President Assad or by making it a secular state, but Iran conditioned continuation of President Assad and persistence of Shiite regime in Syria.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Iran considers Israel as a threat to its national security, but Russian leadership is committed not to hurt Israeli interests in the Middle East at any cost. Even Russia did not object on Israeli airstrikes on counterforce and counter-value targets of Syria and Iran at Syrian front.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Yılmaz and Şahin. "Ortadoğu", 143.

<sup>67</sup> Mehdi Zakarian, "Hedj keshvare mutehide stratejike ma nest," *İRNA*, November 01, 2017, accessed February 02, 2018, <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/82715447>.

<sup>68</sup> "Iran-Russia relations: Cooperation in post neighborhood period", *International Institute for Caspian Sea Studies*, 3.

<sup>69</sup> "RF mozhet lishit' Tegeran podderzhki, yesli isk po S-300 ne otzovut," *RIA-Novosti*.

<sup>70</sup> Vladimir Sazhin, "Iran-Russia Strategic Partnership at the New Stage: What Could We Propose to Each Other?" in *Russia-Iran Partnership: An Overview and Prospects for the Future*, ed. Igor Ivanov, (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council and Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies, 2017), 18.

<sup>71</sup> Yelena Yegorova, "Na vstreche".

- Iran, Russia and Qatar established Organization of Gas Exporting Countries (OGEC) that is very similar to Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). At this forum, Iran voted Qatar for establishing its head office there. This made Russia angry because of Iranian ignorance to Russia for hosting OGEC head office at Moscow, because Russia believes that the performance of OGEC can be disturbed in the presence of American defense Central Command (CENTCOM) at Qatar, but Iran is satisfied with the target development.<sup>72</sup>

## **8. Conclusion**

Despite having a number of defense engagements, Russia-Iran defense relations are neither strategic nor as deep as the world recognizes. Russia finds Iran as its regional ally in the Middle East rather than a strategic partner. It neither wants to lose it nor does it prefer to equip it militarily at such a level, which may make it a rogue state in the spectacle of the West. Iran needs advanced Russian technology, but Russia sometimes refuses and sometimes delays it while providing strategic defense technology to Iran. In fact, Iran depends on Russian technology because it imported 85% Russian weapons for its defense forces. Therefore, Russia easily takes advantage of Iran's dependence on its defense equipment.

This paper further concludes that Russia and Iran possess mostly different national interests and long-term objectives, but sometimes both countries adopt similar and cohesive means to achieve those goals. Both have harnessed and mostly take advantage of their relationships with other countries for achieving their so-called national, but actually imperial objectives. Among many factors, the protracted rule of revolutionary regime in Iran and Putin's vision for having cohesive defense relationships with Iran contributed significantly.

With respect to strategic goals, Russia may agree with the West in the Middle East, if the West offers what Russia needs (lifting encirclement of Russia by NATO designs, resolution of Ukrainian crisis and recognition

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<sup>72</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov. "Iranian and Russian Views on the Situation in the Middle East: How Do We See the Future of the Region?" in *Russia-Iran Partnership: An Overview and Prospects for the Future*, ed. Igor Ivanov (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council and Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies, 2017), 64.

of Crimea as integral part of Russia, lifting embargoes from Russia, peace in Syria, continuation of Iranian nuclear deal etc.), but Iran does not have any option. It wants the continuation of President Assad, Iranian military bases, and de-escalation of Israel in Syria. Further, it needs extension of Iran Nuclear Deal (2015) by all stakeholders including the US. Furthermore, it does not want to change its policy of exporting revolution in the Middle East; and resisting the West, Israel and monarchs in the Gulf. This study also finds that the level of cohesion between Russian and Iranian defense engagements are inversely proportional to the level of engagements between Russia and the West. For example, in 1995, Russia had signed Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement with the US and declined its defense relationships with Iran. Russia once again silently agreed with the US and did not provide S300 missiles in 2007 (until 2015). Furthermore, President Medvedev had put complete arms embargo on Iran under the US and European pressure. However, Putin lifted the arms embargo on Iran in 2000 and 2015 and gave Iran S300 ballistic missile defense system in 2015, ignoring the West.

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