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Allied against the West

In the shadows of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, Iran and Russia are growing ever closer

Russia and Iran currently appear to be pulling firmly in the same direction in terms of foreign policy; 'What has caused humanity's suffering is unilateralism and an unjust global order, one manifestation of which can be seen in Gaza today.' These were the words of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi during a meeting with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, on 7 December.

The content of the statement, coupled with its context – an Iranian-Russian summit in Moscow – succinctly summarises how the war in Gaza has shifted Iran's perspective toward Russia as a steadfast partner in its stance against Israel and on the war, underpinned by shared viewpoints on major international topics. Though Putin did not explicitly endorse Raisi's comments, he did not disappoint his visitor either, pointing out the mutual comprehension between the two states on regional issues, including the Gaza conflict, as one of the topics of bilateral negotiations.

A shared vision on Gaza

The Raisi-Putin meeting, marking the most significant diplomatic engagement between Iran and Russia concerning Gaza since the start of the war, was not an isolated event. Since shortly after the war's outset, the issue has consistently featured in phone discussions and in-person meetings among the two countries' officials.

Beyond this bilateral framework, the shared stance on the Gaza issue has also been articulated in multilateral settings where both Iran and Russia are present. The most notable instance was the trilateral 'Astana format' meeting between Iran, Russia and Turkey. While the forum is primarily focused on Syria, the three parties emphasised the significance of preventing the expansion of the armed confrontation in Gaza and the involvement of other regional states in the conflict. They also 'expressed deep concern over the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and stressed the need to end Israeli brutal onslaught against the Palestinians and send

humanitarian aid to Gaza'.

The growing convergence between Iran and Russia on the Gaza issue is also evident in the official narratives promoted by each country separately; a convergence that has been apparent since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Iran's support for it, attributing international problems and crises to the detrimental role of the West, notably the United States. Iran and Russia have labelled Western responses to the Gaza conflict as hypocritical, juxtaposing them with Western actions in other global conflicts, especially in Ukraine. This narrative aims to spotlight perceived inconsistencies and biases in Western foreign policies. Both governments also advocate for regional solutions to regional problems, contesting Western interventions in the Middle East.

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Indeed, the alignment in narratives and perceptions between Iran and Russia transcends the immediate context of the war in Gaza. It is part of a broader strategy aimed at transforming the global order into a more multipolar structure, wherein Western dominance is contested and alternative power centres, such as Iran and Russia, assume a more pronounced role. Concurrently, the negative impact of Western influence is blamed for the inefficacy of international institutions, including the United Nations, in ending the war in Gaza.

This aspect also appears to have broader implications. The Astana talks on Syria demonstrate the commitment of Iran and Russia, along with Turkey, which has equally criticised the Western response to the Gaza war, to establishing alternative platforms for conflict resolution and international cooperation. In essence, the focus on Gaza in the final statement of the Astana meeting signifies that Iran, Russia and Turkey intend to extend their trilateral cooperation in Syria, which was partly also replicated in the South Caucasus after the latest war between Azerbaijan and Armenia (within the framework known as 3+3), to a wider Middle Eastern context. Following Syria and the South Caucasus, Gaza may also emerge as a venue for the trilateral cooperation of Tehran, Moscow and Ankara – despite differences in positions – to manifest.

In any case, as many analysts anticipated from the onset of the Gaza war, Russia has sought to leverage the conflict as an opportunity to extend its outreach to the Global South, particularly to Muslim countries critical of Israel's actions in Gaza. In this context, Russia's relations with the Islamic

Republic have been notably influenced. On the one hand, the Islamic Republic, as a principal supporter of Hamas and Israel's foremost adversary, seizes any opportunity to broaden international support for its ally and to weaken Israel's position. On the other hand, for the leaders of the Islamic Republic, Russia's stance is an affirmation that their decision to back Moscow in the Ukraine conflict was judicious.

A nuclear-armed Iran?

The spillover of the Gaza war into other areas in the Middle East and the engagement of Iran's proxies and non-state allies in the 'axis of resistance', from the Houthis in Yemen to Iraqi militias, has introduced an additional layer to the already complex Iran-West dynamics. Western powers, particularly the United States and Britain, increasingly attribute responsibility to Iran for the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and the operations of Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria. Indeed, following the expansion of Iran's nuclear programme, Tehran's support for Moscow in the Ukraine war and the suppression of the 2022 popular protests in Iran, the Gaza war has now added a new problem to Iran's relations with the West. At the same time, these developments have dimmed the prospects for reviving the Iran nuclear deal or achieving a new agreement between Iran and the US. Under these circumstances, Iran is expected to gravitate more toward its Eastern partners, namely Russia and China.

The war in Gaza has also laid bare the limitations of Iran's asymmetric warfare strategy utilising proxies and non-state partners. American strikes in Yemen on one side and in Iraq and Syria on the other, although not having reinstated deterrence as Washington had hoped, have revealed that Iran's network of non-state allies and proxies is quite vulnerable. Meanwhile, the continuation of Israeli military operations against Hamas has significantly impaired the military capabilities of this Palestinian militia. Some analysts speculate that this might incline Iran toward developing nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrent.

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An alternative, or perhaps complementary, strategy could be forming a military alliance with friendly powers like Russia and China. Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali-Akbar Ahmadian's visit to Moscow and the heightened emphasis from both sides on finalising a long-term strategic cooperation agreement should be viewed in this context. Concurrently, reports have emerged suggesting that Iran has finally decided to provide Russia with ballistic missiles. Russia has also acquired a

new model of Iranian drones, Shahed 238. All these indications show that both sides, driven by their practical needs as well as long-term strategic outlooks, are increasingly inclined to forge a robust military partnership.

In fact, even if Iran decides to pursue nuclear weapons, it needs to secure Russia's support. Thus, fostering relations with Russia remains crucial. Currently, there's no concrete evidence suggesting that Russia would endorse a nuclear-armed Iran. However, it's not entirely implausible, depending on future Russia-West relations.

The above factors have reinforced Iran's reliance on Russia as a strategic partner. Concurrently, it appears that Russia-Israel relations are approaching a point of no return. Indeed, it remains vital for Russia that Israel not support Ukraine. But at least in the short term, Israel must prioritise its own security needs amid the war in Gaza and appears incapable of providing substantial security assistance abroad. Furthermore, Russia is now relatively confident in its achievements in Ukraine. However, this does not imply that Russia desires a complete overhaul of its relations with Israel; rather, it simply perceives less necessity for Israel and believes it now has the upper hand in this relationship.

Yet, factors exist that could challenge the transformation of the Iran-Russia partnership into a steadfast alliance. Most notably, Russia's ambition to cultivate relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf to attract investment and for diplomatic manoeuvring is significant enough that Russia was prepared to endorse the UAE's stance on three islands in the Persian Gulf disputed between Iran and the UAE, eliciting unprecedented criticism of Moscow in Iran, even among top officials. Ultimately, Russia was compelled to reaffirm its commitment to Iran's territorial integrity. Currently, the improvement in Tehran's relations with Arab capitals, partly facilitated by the Gaza war, may simplify Russia's task of balancing its relations with both sides of the Persian Gulf. However, there's no assurance that this approach will remain viable in the long term.



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