

# THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND ITS IMPACT ON RUSSIA- IRAN RELATIONS

## SUMMARY OF A 'MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE' WEBINAR 26 MAY 2022



### OVERVIEW

A webinar hosted by the Middle East Institute in Washington and moderated by Abdolrasool Divsallar (*Non-resident Scholar at MEI*), examined the impact of the war in Ukraine on Iran-Russia relations. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has had profound consequences for politics across the Middle East, and this has also been especially true for Russia-Iran relations and security ties.

While Tehran initially accepted Moscow's rationale for the invasion and attempted to show its political support in the United Nations General Assembly, it has, nonetheless, remained cautious about fully backing the war, even as it seeks to benefit from resulting trade and security opportunities. For its part, however, Moscow initially emerged as a 'spoiler' in the ongoing attempts to revive the JCPOA.

### SUMMARY OF COMMENTS MADE BY THE PANELLISTS

#### 1. **ALEX VATANKA** (*Director of Iran Program and Senior Fellow at MEI*)

- Although the Russian Deputy Prime Minister, Alexander Novak had been in Tehran last week and despite comments made by the Iranian Oil Minister, Jamal Owji about the future prospects of cooperation in energy related matters between Russia and Iran, it was difficult to point to anything that might be construed as a 'strategic' in the relationship between the two countries the past 3 months.
- In the past though many big deals had been announced especially in Petro-chemicals and the like, most Russian companies had previously withdrawn in the aftermath of Trump's policy of 'Maximum Pressures', irrespective of the fact that in Iran, both the Supreme Leader and the IRGC hierarchy are the biggest advocates of Russia.
- It is precisely because of this tilt on the part of the Supreme Leader towards Russia that there has been very little talk of Iranian gas exports to Europe.

- However, given that both countries are now sanctioned may in some ways bring Iran and Russia closer together.
- In the current atmosphere, it is hard pointing to any kind of meaningful cooperation between Iran and Russia at a time when there is clear competition between the two oil exporting countries (especially for the oil market in China).
- At this time, with protesting people cursing the Islamic government in the streets on a daily basis, Iranian priorities indicate that they should take Russia out and deal directly with the US to move forward and as the Iranian Foreign Minister has recently said “try and broaden the conversation”.

## **2. VALI NASR** (*Professor of Middle East Studies at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies*)

- It has to be borne in mind that the ongoing situation is still a moving picture because we are still going through the Ukraine war in phases.
- While there is sympathy at the top for Russia in Iran, in a year that marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Iran that resulted in large chunks of Iranian territory being annexed by Russia, the feeling on the ground and amongst ordinary Iranians is very much anti-Russian.
- Moreover, the game recently played by Russia in Vienna during the JCPOA talks was also viewed negatively by the Iranian Deep State.
- What is also unclear from an Iranian perspective at this time is whether Russia will still be a ‘balancer’ in terms of Iran-US/EU relations or will it become essentially marginal – with Iranian having to revert even more to China in its role as the balancer.
- However, the so-called ‘Axis of Resistance’ has now been strengthened with the addition of Russia given Russia’s default position following the war. But it remains to be seen as to what the final Russian footprint in the Middle East (especially in Syria) is going to be once the dust settles in the ongoing war.
- Finally, while Russia wants to signal to Iran that they are a major power and as such relevant to Iran, it is a fact that the Iranians have not been impressed by the performance of the Russian military in Ukraine.
- With the belief that the US is likely to reduce its commitments

in the Middle East, Russia is anxious for its ties with Iran not to adversely affect its relationship with Saudi Arabia, Turkey or Israel bearing in mind that all these three states have tried to steer a neutral role in the ongoing war in Ukraine.

- At the same time, with the ongoing sanctions on Russian oil and gas, Russia is aware that in Iran-EU ties, the balance has now shifted in favour of Iran because of Europe's desperate need for replacing the energy that has been cut off from Russia.
- This issue of dealing with Russia in the context of the JCPOA, however, is dealt with separately in the US as opposed to the way Russia is treated in the war in Ukraine.
- The fact that the JCPOA seems in trouble has raised fears of rising oil and gas prices if an agreement is not reached and if Iranian oil and gas does not come into the international markets.

### **3. MARK KATZ** (*Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University*)

- Russia is concerned that Iran is not shy about trying to take advantage of things (e.g., Syria) while Russia is otherwise engaged in Ukraine .
- From its perspective, Russia is also not unhappy about the Iran-US standoff in the JCPOA talks.
- For Russia, any US-Iran rapprochement is the fear because it might induce greater investment in the Iranian oil and gas sector.
- Russia is also concerned that Iran should not gain the upper hand in Syria (concerns about Iran-Israel issues in Syria might also adversely affect its interests).
- However, at the same time that Russia is not currently in a position of supplying arms to Iran, it takes solace at the fact that Iran-US impasse is likely to continue for the indefinite future.
- For Russia at this time the priority is with short term concerns.
- They want the Islamic Republic to remain at odds with the US but not with Gulf Arabs or Israel (something that could push those countries even more towards the US).
- The structure and system of the Islamic Republic is increasing looking like a role model for Putin to follow – i.e., a system that is dominated by an “orthodox fundamentalist regime”.

- It is a fact that at this time, anti-Westernism unites both Russia and Iran despite their cultural difference (e.g., very few Russian tourists go to Iran as opposed to Turkey or Israel). Indeed, Russians have complained about working conditions in Iran that requires head cover for women and no alcohol especially for the men.

