

PEACE AND SECURITY

# RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE

## The Iran Nuclear Price Tag

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The invasion of Ukraine reduced Russia's *ability* and *willingness* to support the Iran nuclear deal's restoration. Russia's position negatively affects the already dim prospects for a JCPOA revival in 2023.



In becoming more reliant on Iran for economic and battle-field support, Moscow has lost leverage over Tehran in the nuclear talks. War in Ukraine has also made Moscow less willing to insulate cooperation on nuclear issues from its broader stand-off with the West.



As long as it is fighting in Ukraine, Russia will likely view Iran's pursuit of nuclear threshold status as serving its interests—even though it could pose a strategic headache for Russia in the long term.



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## INTRODUCTION

This article investigates how Moscow's approach towards the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), changed due to Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. It argues that the invasion marked an important inflection point in Russian diplomacy on the nuclear accord. Throughout 2021, Russia had presented itself as an active proponent of a restored JCPOA – mediating between relevant parties, averting a breakdown in Iran's relations with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on several occasions, and even publicly reprimanding Iran over breaches or delays in returning to the negotiating table. Its invasion of Ukraine led Russia to decrease its support for a restored deal, though Moscow continued to profess commitment to the JCPOA as a matter of public rhetoric. As Russia – sanctioned and isolated by the West – became more reliant on Iran for battlefield support, it showed less *ability* and *willingness* to criticize Iran, or to push for meaningful progress in the nuclear talks. Since October 2022, Tehran's crackdown on peaceful domestic protests and Russia's intensifying reliance on Iranian battlefield support have further consolidated the Russian-Iranian partnership, diminished Russia's desire to compartmentalize nuclear diplomacy from its confrontation with the West, and lowered the prospects for a JCPOA revival in 2023.

## BEFORE THE INVASION OF UKRAINE: RUSSIA AND THE JCPOA IN 2021

In January 2021, the Biden administration entered office intent on restoring the JCPOA – some 2.5 years after former U.S. President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the deal – and commenced intensive diplomatic efforts towards that end. Between April and June 2021 six rounds of negotiations were conducted in Vienna. Over time, the parties adopted a working group format to delve into specific dimensions related to the restoration of the nuclear deal.<sup>1</sup> The election of Ebrahim Raisi to the Iranian presidency in June 2021 caused a hiatus in the Vienna negotiations, which only ended in December 2021 – two months prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Throughout 2021, Iran took several steps to reduce its compliance with provisions under the JCPOA, building on prior decisions it had taken in that regard after May 2019.<sup>2</sup> Those

actions included the production of uranium metal, the enrichment of uranium to 60 per cent purity, an increase in the number of installed centrifuges, and further increases in the stockpile of enriched uranium. Meanwhile, the IAEA grew increasingly concerned about access to ensure the continuity of knowledge regarding nuclear activities in Iran. Although Iran suspended the implementation of the IAEA's Additional Protocol in February 2021,<sup>3</sup> it agreed with the agency to continue to implement its Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement and negotiated several temporary "bilateral technical understandings" with the IAEA.<sup>4</sup> That said, Iran removed cameras from its Karaj centrifuge assembly facility in June 2021, alleging that an attack had damaged the machines. The ensuing dispute was only resolved in December 2021, when Iran permitted the reinstallation of the cameras, although without granting the IAEA immediate access to the recordings.

Throughout the period leading up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, two parallel yet counter-veiling dynamics thus characterized international efforts aimed at restoring the JCPOA: intensive diplomacy in the nuclear talks on the one hand, and further Iranian breaches of the JCPOA amid a continuation of U.S. sanctions on the other. Against this backdrop, Moscow worked hard to avert a breakdown in Iran-IAEA relations, driven by an apparent desire to see the JCPOA restored. Moscow was also willing to insulate the nuclear talks from its growing confrontation with the West. Finally, Russian officials criticized Iran openly on more than one occasion regarding its successive breaches of the nuclear accord and perceived "foot-dragging" in the JCPOA talks.

## ACTIVE MEDIATION AND CRISIS DIPLOMACY

Amid intensified diplomacy on the Iran nuclear dossier undertaken by the Biden administration, Russia – and in particular Russia's Permanent Representative to the IAEA and International Organizations in Vienna, Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov – emerged as a central advocate of a restored nuclear deal.<sup>5</sup> Ambassador Ulyanov played a highly active role in keeping the nuclear talks on track, including by frequently engaging the Iranian and U.S. negotiators bilaterally. On several occasions, Russian diplomacy was instrumental in averting a collapse of the Vienna talks – according to the *International Crisis Group's* Ali Vaez "a half dozen times" in

1 In the spring of 2021, three different working groups were created in the talks aimed at restoring the JCPOA: the first on the issue of lifting sanctions, the second on nuclear issues, and the third on practical arrangements for the implementation of a restored nuclear deal. "Third working group on US-Iran nuclear deal meets for first time in Vienna: Diplomat," *Alarabiya News*, April 28, 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/04/28/Third-working-group-on-US-Iran-nuclear-deal-meets-for-first-time-in-Vienna-Diplomat>.

2 Iran began to incrementally reduce its compliance with the JCPOA in May 2019, one year after the Trump administration's withdrawal from the deal. For a detailed list of Iranian breaches between May 2019 and December 2020, see: "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action at a Glance", *Arms Control Association*, Fact Sheets and Briefs, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>.

3 The Additional Protocol is not a stand-alone agreement, but rather a protocol to a safeguards agreement that provides additional tools for verification. In particular, it significantly increases the IAEA's ability to verify the peaceful use of all nuclear material and the absence of undeclared nuclear materials in States with comprehensive safeguards agreements. See: <https://www.iaea.org/topics/additional-protocol>.

4 "Joint Statement by the Vice President of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Head of the AEOL and the Director General of the IAEA", International Atomic Energy Agency, February 21, 2022, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/pressreleases/joint-statement-by-the-vice-president-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-and-head-of-the-aeoi-and-the-director-general-of-the-iaea>.

5 Colum Lynch, "The Iran Nuclear Talks' Breakout Player", *Foreign Policy*, January 26, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/26/russia-iran-nuclear-negotiator/>.

the second half of 2021 alone.<sup>6</sup> For example, Ambassador Ulyanov reportedly mediated a solution regulating access for IAEA inspectors to the Karaj facility in December 2021, which then allowed for the resumption of talks in Vienna later that month. Three months prior, a “last minute deal” in September on IAEA verification activities in Iran was also facilitated by Russia.<sup>7</sup>

## INSULATING THE JCPOA FROM BROADER CONFLICT WITH THE WEST

Russia’s active mediation benefitted from a readiness to insulate the Iran nuclear talks from the broader deterioration in its relations with the West. Over the course of 2021, contacts between Moscow and Western capitals remained tense, notwithstanding a summit meeting in Geneva between Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin in June that elicited some cautious hope, *inter alia* by setting in motion a U.S.-Russian Strategic Stability Dialogue. As Russia put forward extensive demands for “security guarantees” from the United States in November, however, whatever optimism had prevailed after the Geneva summit quickly dissipated. Still, U.S. officials continued to praise their interactions with Russian counterparts on the Iran nuclear dossier as constructive.<sup>8</sup> Ambassador Ulyanov similarly applauded his dialogue with U.S. officials on the JCPOA, calling it “intensive” and “useful”,<sup>9</sup> “businesslike”,<sup>10</sup> and characterizing Washington’s approach as “pragmatic” and indicative of a “unity of purpose” with Russia.<sup>11</sup> He also emphasized the compartmentalization of the Iran dossier, confirming that contentious issues like Ukraine were not being raised in the nuclear talks.<sup>12</sup>

6 Ibid.

7 “IAEA and Iran reach agreement to avert nuclear deal crisis”, *Al Jazeera*, September 12, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/12/iaea-and-iran-reach-agreement-to-avert-nuclear-deal-crisis>. Writing for the Russian daily newspaper *Kommersant*, Elena Chernenko and Marianna Belenkaya confirmed the role played by Russia in brokering the deal: “Rossiya sdelala khod MAGATE”, (in Russian) *Kommersant*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4985924>.

8 See, for instance: Tweet by U.S. Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley, September 9, 2021, <https://twitter.com/usenvoyiran/status/1435970882363666433?s=27>.

9 Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, December 29, 2021, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1476277535449178112](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1476277535449178112).

10 Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, May 10, 2021, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1391753525789614087](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1391753525789614087).

11 “Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov in interview with the *Kommersant* newspaper: ‘My impression is that we’ve covered 90 per cent of the path’”, (translated into English) *Kommersant*, July 11, 2021, [https://viennamission.mid.ru/en\\_GB/news/-/asset\\_publisher/xlMX0AWSOqs0/content/interv-u-postoannogo-predstavitela-rossijskoj-federacii-pri-mezdunarodnyh-organizaciah-v-vene-m-i-ul-anov-izdanii-kommersant-?inheritRedirect=false&redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fviennamission.mid.ru%3A443%2Fen\\_GB%2Fnews%3Fp\\_p\\_id%3D101\\_INSTANCE\\_xlMX0AWSOqs0%26p\\_p\\_lifecycle%3D0%26p\\_p\\_state%3Dnormal%26p\\_p\\_mode%3Dview%26p\\_p\\_col\\_id%3D\\_118\\_INSTANCE\\_BfAIYlFocXs\\_\\_column-2%26p\\_p\\_col\\_count%3D1](https://viennamission.mid.ru/en_GB/news/-/asset_publisher/xlMX0AWSOqs0/content/interv-u-postoannogo-predstavitela-rossijskoj-federacii-pri-mezdunarodnyh-organizaciah-v-vene-m-i-ul-anov-izdanii-kommersant-?inheritRedirect=false&redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fviennamission.mid.ru%3A443%2Fen_GB%2Fnews%3Fp_p_id%3D101_INSTANCE_xlMX0AWSOqs0%26p_p_lifecycle%3D0%26p_p_state%3Dnormal%26p_p_mode%3Dview%26p_p_col_id%3D_118_INSTANCE_BfAIYlFocXs__column-2%26p_p_col_count%3D1).

12 Colum Lynch, “The Iran Nuclear Talks’ Breakout Player”, *Foreign Policy*, 26.1.2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/26/russia-iran-nuclear-negotiator/>.

## RUSSIA’S MESSAGING VIS-À-VIS IRAN: IMPATIENCE AND CALLS FOR RESTRAINT

In addition to insulating the nuclear talks from its tensions with the West, Russia displayed a willingness to criticize Iranian activities and rhetoric. Such criticism appears to have been indicative of a concern that Tehran might end up sabotaging the JCPOA negotiations beyond repair, as well as growing apprehensions regarding just how far the Iranian nuclear program had advanced.

In February 2021, once the IAEA had revealed Iran’s production of uranium metal, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov urged Tehran “to show restraint and a responsible approach.”<sup>13</sup> Around the same time, Iran suspended the implementation of the Additional Protocol, which prompted Ambassador Ulyanov to publicly express his “hope that the suspension will not last long and provisional application of this important verification tool will resume soon.”<sup>14</sup> Two months later, the Iranian leadership chose to announce that it had started to enrich uranium to 60 per cent on the same day that Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Tehran. Ambassador Ulyanov was restrained in his criticism of the Iranian move, stating that those responsible for a recent “act of sabotage” at Iran’s Natanz facility had not fully appreciated the “likely significant side effects” of such action, clearly referring to Iran’s enrichment-related announcement.<sup>15</sup> The Russian foreign minister himself remained silent on the Natanz incident during his joint press conference with his Iranian counterpart, which must have displeased his hosts. In the Russian expert community, meanwhile, Iran’s decision to enrich to 60 per cent was characterized by some as “perhaps the most drastic step” taken by Tehran in the recent past.<sup>16</sup> Amid subsequent tensions between Iran and the IAEA regarding agency access to nuclear facilities in the country, Ambassador Ulyanov cautiously admonished Iran to ensure the preservation of video material recorded by the agency’s cameras in order “to avoid problems in the future.”<sup>17</sup>

Speaking to *Kommersant* correspondent Elena Chernenko in July 2021, the ambassador delivered his perhaps clearest admonishment of the Iranians, reflecting on Tehran’s enrichment to 60 per cent and production of uranium metal: “As a rule, when we commented on Tehran’s stepping away from the nuclear deal’s provisions, we used the word ‘regret’. But now it seems there are reasons for concern. Iran seems to be

13 “France, Russia urge restraint as Iran produces uranium metal”, *Al Jazeera*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/11/russia-urges-restraint-as-iran-starts-uranium-metal-production>.

14 Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, February 23, 2021, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1364303690052620289](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1364303690052620289).

15 “Iranskie tsentrifugy”, (in Russian) *Kommersant*, April 13, 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4771805#id2040410>.

16 Ibid.

17 Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, July 3, 2021, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1411294411724632070](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1411294411724632070).

going too far.”<sup>18</sup> Such Russian critique, while usually expressed cautiously, adopted a mocking undertone on occasion, for instance when Ambassador Ulyanov criticized what Russia perceived as Iran dragging its feet over the resumption of the nuclear talks in the fall of 2021. Responding to an Iranian foreign ministry statement in late October that the talks would resume “soon”, Ambassador Ulyanov tweeted: “‘Soon’. Does anybody know what it can mean in practical terms?”<sup>19</sup> When the nuclear talks in Vienna finally resumed in December 2021, Ambassador Ulyanov called the pause “protracted” and cautioned that the talks “can’t last forever”: “There is the obvious need to speed up the process.”<sup>20</sup> A few weeks later, Russia reportedly pressed Iran to consider an interim deal that would have involved limited sanctions relief in exchange for some restrictions on its nuclear program.<sup>21</sup>

Russia’s intermittent, publicly aired irritation with Iran appears to have been prompted by growing concerns – held at least among Russian officials and experts dealing with nuclear arms control and non-proliferation – over the irreversibility of some of Iran’s nuclear advances and Tehran edging closer towards nuclear threshold status.<sup>22</sup> Ambassador Ulyanov’s contention that “Iran seems to be going too far” was echoed privately by Russian arms control experts on several occasions in 2021, with one noting to the author in November of that year that Russia had come to view Iran as a “bigger problem than the United States” when it came to efforts to restore the JCPOA.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, the combination of highly active Russian mediation and occasional criticism addressed at Tehran did not go unnoticed among Iran’s political class, with some voices accusing Ambassador Ulyanov of playing an unconstructive role. Such allegations prompted the Russian embassy in Tehran to issue a statement in support of Ambassador Ulyanov,<sup>24</sup> and the latter to characterize allegations about Russia “dominating” the Vienna talks as “flattering but nonsense.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov in an interview with *Kommersant* newspaper: “My impression is that we’ve covered 90 per cent of the path.” In a further example of Russian criticism of Iran, Ambassador Ulyanov stated in December 2021 that reports of uranium enrichment at Iran’s Fordow facility caused concern and that Tehran must bring its nuclear program into compliance with the JCPOA. “Russia in Review, Nov. 24-Dec. 3, 2021”, *Russia Matters*, <https://russiamatters.org/news/russia-review/russia-review-nov-24-dec-3-2021>.

<sup>19</sup> Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, October 23, 2021, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1451968841001709575](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1451968841001709575).

<sup>20</sup> Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, November 27, 2021, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1464651820849143808](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1464651820849143808).

<sup>21</sup> “Russia proposed interim nuclear deal to Iran, with U.S. knowledge, sources say”, *NBC News*, January 22, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/russia-proposed-interim-nuclear-deal-iran-us-knowledge-sources-say-rcna13039>.

<sup>22</sup> A nuclear threshold status, or nuclear latency, denotes a condition in which a country is assumed to be able to arm itself with nuclear weapons in a short period of time.

<sup>23</sup> Conversations by the author with unnamed Russian experts on nuclear non-proliferation, September and November 2021.

<sup>24</sup> “Posol’stvo RF oproverglo zavavljeniya o destruktivnoi roli Rossii po yadernoi sdelke s Iranom”, (in Russian) *Tass*, February 13, 2022, <https://tass.ru/politika/13695565>.

<sup>25</sup> Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, March 9, 2022, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1501517613993762817](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1501517613993762817).

Throughout this period, Russian officials clearly sought to avoid generating an impression of significant difference with Iran. After the release of an interview with then Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in April 2021, for instance, in which the latter charged that Russia had sought to prevent the JCPOA in 2015, Russia’s public reaction was measured.<sup>26</sup> Russian officials also did not spare the United States of criticism in the context of the nuclear talks. Still, a willingness to criticize Iran and urge it to show restraint was a noteworthy feature of Russia’s approach towards the JCPOA between January 2021 and February 2022.

## CHANGING PRIORITIES: RUSSIA AND THE JCPOA AFTER THE INVASION OF UKRAINE

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to noteworthy shifts in this Russian approach. Though the U.S. government, responding to Russia’s invasion by suspending bilateral engagement on a range of issues, exempted talks on the JCPOA from its guidance, the war caused a five-months break in in-person negotiations involving all parties. The emergence of new and old stumbling blocks – chiefly Iranian demands for the United States to change the designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, guarantees regarding the longevity and reliability of U.S. sanctions relief, and an Iranian insistence that the IAEA settle outstanding questions concerning Iran’s past activities at undeclared sites – further complicated diplomacy.<sup>27</sup> A push by the European Union to elicit agreement on a “final text” for a restored nuclear deal eventually failed in the late summer of 2022 amid continued Iranian resistance. In response, U.S. officials declared in late September that the talks had “hit a wall”. Secretary of State Antony Blinken lamented that “Iran has continued to try to add extraneous issues to the negotiation that we’re simply not going to say yes to”, adding: “I don’t see any prospects in the very near term (...) to bring this to a conclusion.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova stated: “We know very well all those who would like to manipulate with them [relations between Russia and Iran] to the detriment of Russia’s interests and its centuries-old ties with Iran. On the whole, we invariably rely on Tehran’s official stance that has been expressed more than once (...) Our friend, the Islamic Republic of Iran, is apparently living through no easy times. For this reason, any media outbreaks, in our opinion, must be looked at through the lens of these circumstances.” “In relations with Iran Russia relies on Tehran’s official statements, says Zakharova”, *Tass*, April 29, 2021, <https://tass.com/politics/1284965>. Former Russian ambassador to Iran Alexander Maryasov described the suggestion that Russia did not want the JCPOA to be concluded as “surprising” but noted that Zarif’s comments were reflective of an internal Iranian political struggle. “Glava MID Irana obvinil Rossiyu v iranskikh problemakh”, (in Russian) *Kommersant*, April 26, 2021, [https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4792182?from=main\\_10](https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4792182?from=main_10).

<sup>27</sup> “Is Restoring the Iran Nuclear Deal Still Possible?”, International Crisis Group, September 12, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/b87-middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/restoring-iran-nuclear-deal-still>.

<sup>28</sup> “Efforts to revive Iran nuclear deal have ‘hit a wall’—U.S. official,” *Reuters*, September 23, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/efforts-revive-iran-nuclear-deal-have-hit-wall-us-official-2022-09-22/>; “Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Rus-

In the period between February and September 2022, Russia reduced its active support for a restored nuclear deal, notwithstanding its continued commitment to the JCPOA as a matter of public rhetoric. As Russia became more reliant on Iran for support, its approach shifted towards less compartmentalization of the nuclear talks from tensions with the West, a reduced ability and willingness to criticize or put pressure on Iran, and – apparently – less concern over Iran’s pursuit of nuclear threshold status.

## THE END OF COMPARTMENTALIZATION

Although the United States, halting bilateral engagement with Russia on a range of issues after February 24, exempted the Iran nuclear talks from that decision, Russia’s war in Ukraine affected the dossier. On March 5, Foreign Minister Lavrov stated for the first time that Western sanctions imposed against Russia over the war in Ukraine had become a stumbling block for the nuclear deal, warning that Russian national interests would have to be taken into account. Lavrov proceeded to demand a written guarantee from the United States that Russia’s trade, investment, and military-technical cooperation with Iran would not be hindered in any way by such sanctions.<sup>29</sup>

The United States, which was quick to respond that new Russia-related sanctions are unrelated to the JCPOA, was not the only one to be dismayed. Iranian officials reportedly called Russia’s move “not constructive” for the Vienna talks.<sup>30</sup> The former head of Iran’s central bank was outspoken in his assessment, characterizing Russia’s request for guarantees as “nothing but sabotage and ransom”, considering that financial transactions between Iran and Russia are carried out through the national currencies and hence not affected by U.S. sanctions.<sup>31</sup> Current Iranian officials were more cautious in their commentary, with the foreign minister stressing that Iran would not allow any “external factor” to affect its “national interest in the Vienna talks”.<sup>32</sup> Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh added that Iran was still waiting to hear the details regarding Russia’s request through diplomatic channels and that “Russia’s approach to reaching an agreement in

Vienna has been constructive to date”.<sup>33</sup> Still, on the same day, Iran’s envoy to the Vienna talks returned to Tehran for consultations.

Russia then presented a non-paper to the European Union, setting out its demands for written guarantees.<sup>34</sup> Ambassador Ulyanov insisted publicly that “all our trade and economic relations with Iran should be exempt from all current and future EU/US sanctions”.<sup>35</sup> By March 15, however, when the Russian and Iranian foreign ministers appeared at a joint press conference in Moscow, any hints of disagreement or irritation had dissipated. Lavrov appeared to walk back the earlier Russian demands by clarifying that his country already had “received written guarantees. They are included in the text of the agreement itself on the resumption of the JCPOA on the Iranian nuclear program”.<sup>36</sup>

Notwithstanding the softening in Russia’s position after 10 days of uncertainty, the episode “stole the momentum” – according to the International Crisis Group – in reaching a final agreement, which had been within reach by March.<sup>37</sup> It created a perception in Western capitals that Moscow was no longer committed to compartmentalizing the nuclear talks from its tensions with the West.<sup>38</sup> Such a perception might well have been amplified by subsequent statements made by Russian officials themselves: In a Twitter exchange with *The Wall Street Journal’s* Laurence Norman, for instance, Ambassador Ulyanov conceded in early May 2022 that “under different circumstances Russia, probably, could have provided its good offices to the two sides to finalize agreement on (the) JCPOA. But not now”.<sup>39</sup>

sia’s War in Ukraine, U.S.-China Relations, the Iran nuclear deal and more”, *CBS News*, September 25 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/secretary-of-state-antony-blinken-60-minutes-interview-2022-09-25/?ftag=CNM-00-10aab5j&linkId=182983793&fbclid=IwAR1in9M87OYzhf0SDIZJtsSVki08WSDZ9FpX-NggSR4Szs5ZHxRLhHghB-8k>.

<sup>29</sup> “Russia’s demand for US guarantees may hit nuclear talks, Iran official says”, *Reuters*, March 5, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-nuclear-official-kamlavandi-says-god-will-ing-there-will-be-an-understanding-2022-03-05/>.

<sup>30</sup> “Iranian official says Russia could harm nuclear talks by linking sanctions against it to deal”, *RFE/RL*, March 5, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-iaea-grossi-visit/31737358.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Tweet by Diako Hosseini, March 6, 2022, <https://twitter.com/DiakoH/status/1500379049599852544>.

<sup>32</sup> Tweet by Sara Massoumi, March 7, 2022, <https://twitter.com/Sara-Massoumi/status/1500790275047886850>.

<sup>33</sup> Tweet by Abas Aslani, March 7, 2022, <https://twitter.com/AbasAslani/status/1500764099491377153>.

<sup>34</sup> According to reporting by *The Wall Street Journal’s* Laurence Norman, Ambassador Ulyanov initially presented a paper containing elements that did not go as far as Foreign Minister Lavrov’s public remarks implied. A few days later, the ambassador then presented an updated non-paper which broadened Moscow’s sanctions guarantee demands in the direction that Lavrov spoke of, including a demand to protect Russian trade with Iran from Western sanctions. Tweet by Laurence Norman, March 9, 2022, <https://twitter.com/laurnorman/status/1501580370671812613>.

<sup>35</sup> Tweet by Abas Aslani, March 9, 2022, <https://twitter.com/JasonMBrodsky/status/1501658511264174082>.

<sup>36</sup> Barak Ravid, “Lavrov says Russia received ‘written guarantees’ over Iran deal”, *Axios*, March 15, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/03/15/lavrov-russia-iran-deal-guarantees>.

<sup>37</sup> “Is Restoring the Iran Nuclear Deal Still Possible?” International Crisis Group, September 12, 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/b87-middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/restoring-iran-nuclear-deal-still>.

<sup>38</sup> As one senior EU official noted to *Politico*, “When you are so close to the finish line and you are stopped by something that is not related to the negotiation, it’s a frustration.” “Iran nuclear talks close to collapse over Russian demands”, *Politico*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/iran-nuclear-talks-close-to-collapse-over-russian-demands/>.

<sup>39</sup> Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, May 13, 2022, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1525095444178784257](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1525095444178784257).

## NEW INTERMEDIARIES STEP UP

The emergence of new intermediaries in the summer of 2022 should be viewed within this context of decreasing trust in Russia as an impartial mediator eager to see the JCPOA being restored. Qatar signaled its interest in greater involvement when its foreign minister visited Moscow in mid-March to discuss both Ukraine and the Iran nuclear dossier. On June 27 and 28, Doha hosted talks between Iran and the United States, mediated by the European Union. Once the Doha talks ended without tangible results, EU diplomats stepped up efforts to mediate an Iranian-U.S. agreement on a “final text” for restoring the JCPOA.

In this context, Russian officials occasionally appeared irritated at what they perceived as attempts by other actors to dominate the Iran dossier. Just weeks into the Ukraine war, amid rumors that Iran and the United States could settle on an interim deal without Russian participation, Russian officials and media were quick to dismiss such ideas.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the European Union’s attempts to facilitate agreement on a “final text” in August prompted Ambassador Ulyanov to point out that Brussels was exceeding its mandate in posing an ultimatum to the Iranian side: “The Joint Commission of the JCPOA,” Ambassador Ulyanov contended, “didn’t authorise the EU Coordinator to make statements like that”.<sup>41</sup>

### “NO ULTIMATUMS”

Moreover, Russia approached the JCPOA’s restoration with less urgency, compared to the pre-February 2022 period. Although there was no shortage of bilateral Russian-Iranian engagement after February, and although Russia continued to participate actively in the Vienna negotiations, Russian statements emerging after such meetings lacked the signs of impatience and concern that Moscow had telegraphed in the fall of 2021.

On August 25, for instance, after Iran had requested additional time to consider the “final text”, Ambassador Ulyanov commented that “any new drafting suggestions objectively protract the Vienna talks”, which “may be regrettable, but participants have the right to ask for changes to the text in

accordance with normal practice of multilateral diplomacy. We must be patient”.<sup>42</sup> Once Iran submitted its considerations regarding the “final text”, reintroducing the previously-dropped insistence that the IAEA’s investigation into its past activities be closed, Russia’s reaction was again forgiving of Iran. Ambassador Ulyanov argued: “It seems that Iranian suggestions aren’t over-ambitious and can be accommodated provided there is the necessary political will.”<sup>43</sup> Whereas a year earlier, Russian officials had subtly criticized Iran for dragging its feet over resuming negotiations, they now characterized Iranian demands on text changes – considered by Washington to move the talks “backwards” – as “accommodable”.<sup>44</sup>

Russia’s shielding of Iran also extended to the IAEA Board of Governors. Escalation over the Iran dossier in June 2022 resulted in 30 board members voting in favor of a resolution – vetoed by Russia – which called on Iran to fully cooperate with the agency’s investigation into undeclared sites. Subsequent to the vote, Iran proceeded to disconnect several IAEA cameras installed at nuclear sites, prompting no protests or even expressions of concern by Russia. Instead, Russian officials blamed the board resolution for undermining the “continuation of Iran’s normal engagement with the IAEA on outstanding issues”.<sup>45</sup>

### IT’S THE ECONOMY, STUPID?

In the months following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the argument that Moscow might obstruct the JCPOA’s restoration for economic reasons gained traction quickly and widely. Given the efforts by Western states to impose unprecedented sanctions on Russia and wean themselves off Russian oil and gas, so the argument went, Russia would fear that the lifting of sanctions on the Iranian economy would facilitate Tehran’s export of hydrocarbons, suppress energy prices, and potentially heighten Iranian competition with Russia for export markets. Foreign Minister Lavrov himself fueled this reading of Russian motivations when he lamented in March 2022 that the United States appeared eager to quickly restore the JCPOA “if only to punish Russia”.<sup>46</sup>

The contention that Western states pursued a restored nuclear deal with heightened urgency primarily in order to hurt Russia’s economy was also debated across Russia’s expert

<sup>40</sup> On March 14, 2022, when the Iranian foreign minister visited Moscow, spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh rejected the idea of a new nuclear agreement, or an interim one, without Russia. This was welcomed by Ambassador Ulyanov, who wrote in a tweet: “Clear position. No ambiguities. No room for speculations.” Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, March 14, 2022, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1503151854074486788](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1503151854074486788).

<sup>41</sup> “EU puts forward ‘final’ text to resurrect Iran nuclear deal”, *Reuters*, August 8, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-nuclear-negotiators-return-tehran-vienna-irna-2022-08-08/>; Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, August 11, 2022, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1557731609272430596](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1557731609272430596). Ulyanov similarly criticised the European Union for exaggerating its role in an interview with *Izvestia* on August 31: “Yadernye chastnosti: Iran i SShA v shage ot vosstanovleniya SVPD”, (in Russian) *Izvestia*, August 31, 2022, <https://iz.ru/1387584/elmar-bainazarov/iadernye-chastnosti-iran-i-ssh-a-v-shage-ot-vosstanovleniya-svpd>.

<sup>42</sup> Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, August 25, 2022, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1562826903601291265](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1562826903601291265).

<sup>43</sup> Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, September 2, 2022, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1565711763705831426](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1565711763705831426).

<sup>44</sup> “Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Russia’s war in Ukraine, U.S.-China relations, the Iran nuclear deal and more.” Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, September 2, 2022, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1565711763705831426](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1565711763705831426).

<sup>45</sup> “MAGATE lishili zreniya”, (in Russian) *Kommersant*, June 10, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5396194>.

<sup>46</sup> “Lavrov o vozmozhnom vykhode na rynek iranskoj nefiti posle realizatsii SVPD: shkurnykh interesov ne presleduem, druzei ne predaem”, (in Russian) *Swissinfo.ch*, March 19, 2022.



community in the spring and summer of 2022.<sup>47</sup> Voices in Russia preferring “to first put a mask on the Russian economy rather than aid Iran’s energy exports” do exist, one Russian observer acknowledged in August, and their opinions are heeded by the government, yet the Kremlin still “puts a premium on the non-proliferation regime and increasingly friendly ties with Iran”.<sup>48</sup> As a matter of official rhetoric, Russian diplomats quickly abandoned Minister Lavrov’s lamentation in March, instead emphasizing that a restored nuclear deal would not entail negative economic repercussions for Russia. On August 12, for instance, Ambassador Ulyanov explained that Iran was already selling its oil despite U.S. sanctions and that any additional oil sales would not materially affect the global market.<sup>49</sup>

On the basis of open-source information, it is difficult to assess the precise extent to which concerns over energy prices affected Russia’s approach towards the nuclear talks. What can be argued with greater certainty is that Russia’s enhanced reliance on Iran for economic (and, over time, battlefield support) likely affected its nuclear diplomacy: Shunned by Western capitals, Russia intensified its engagement with Iran, which culminated in President Putin’s visit to Tehran in the summer of 2022. Meeting his Iranian counterpart again on the sidelines of a Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting in Uzbekistan in mid-September, President Putin contended that Russian-Iranian bilateral trade had increased by 30 per cent over the first five months of 2022 alone.<sup>50</sup> According to Foreign Minister Lavrov, Iran shared lessons from its experience of “surviving sanctions” with Russia, solidifying an image of both countries as “brothers in arms” in withstanding punitive Western measures.<sup>51</sup> The two countries also announced progress on several energy projects in the Iranian upstream and downstream sector as well as swap deals and liquid natural gas production that had long been stalled.<sup>52</sup>

Admittedly, past plans to strengthen economic ties have often failed to live up to the rhetoric, and recent increases in bilateral trade have been driven mostly by Russian exports of agricultural products.<sup>53</sup> The structure of the Russian and Iranian economies, particularly their competition in hydrocarbons, also fundamentally limits the prospects for growing interdependence. Still, with both countries facing strained circumstances, these recent economic steps should not be dismissed. They likely reduced Russia’s *ability* and *willingness* to exert pressure on Iran within the context of the nuclear talks. The fact that the JCPOA’s existence was in continued limbo precluded sanctions relief for Tehran – and that such relief would likely have further strengthened Iran’s position vis-à-vis a beleaguered Russia – might have played into the Kremlin’s calculations as well.

In the period between February and September 2022, Russia and Iran also laid the foundations for enhanced military-defense cooperation. In July, the United States alleged that Russia was turning to Iran to provide it with weapons-capable drones for the war against Ukraine.<sup>54</sup> As will be detailed in the next section, Russia’s dependence on Iranian battlefield support has intensified since October 2022, coinciding with escalating Western military support for Ukraine and Iran’s own crackdown on protests inside the country. These developments, while leading to a de-prioritization of the nuclear deal among Western states, combined to further entrench the Russian-Iranian partnership and rendered the prospects of JCPOA restoration even more remote.

## IRAN’S CRACKDOWN ON PROTESTS AND DRONE SUPPLIES TO MOSCOW: RUSSIA AND THE JCPOA SINCE OCTOBER 2022

### SHIFTING U.S. AND EUROPEAN PRIORITIES

Iran’s violent crackdown on peaceful protests following the death of Jina Mahsa Amini on 16 September 2022, following her detention by the morality police, caused Western states to deprioritize efforts to restore the JCPOA. Since those efforts had, at any rate, “hit a wall” by late September, the United States contended in mid-October that reviving the nuclear deal was “not its focus right now”.<sup>55</sup> Robert Malley, the State Department’s special envoy to Iran, clarified that “nothing’s happening on the nuclear

47 “Kak vozobnovlenie iranskoj yadernoi sdelki skazhetsya na Rossii,” (in Russian) *RBC.ru*, August 17, 2022, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/17/08/2022/62fb9e839a794763d825e002>.

48 Adlan Margojev, “A Russian perspective on Iran’s final offer for a nuclear deal”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, August 18, 2022, <https://thebulletin.org/2022/08/a-russian-perspective-on-irans-final-offer-for-a-nuclear-deal/>.

49 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Interv’yu Postoyannogo predstavatelya Rossii pri mezhdunarodnykh organizatsiyakh v Vene M. I. Ul’yanova gazete ‘Izvestiya’, 12 avgusta 2022 goda”, (in Russian) August 12, 2022, [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1826005/](https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1826005/).

50 “Putin, Raisi agree to further cooperation on sidelines of SCO”, *Al Mayadeen English*, September 15, 2022, <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/putin-raisi-agree-to-further-cooperation-on-sidelines-of-sco>.

51 “Vrag ne proimet”, (in Russian) *Kommersant*, June 23, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5424324>.

52 “V Irane zayavili, chto RF planiruet razrabotat’ shest’ neftyanyh mestorozhdeniy v respublike”, (in Russian) *Tass*, October 9, 2022, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/16000517>; “Russia, Iran Plan Joint Energy Projects, Oil-Gas Swap Deal”, *Caspian News*, October 8, 2022, <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/russia-iran-plan-joint-energy-projects-oil-gas-swap-deal-2022-10-8-0/>; “Iran and Russia’s Gazprom sign primary deal for energy cooperation”, *Reuters*, July 19, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/iran-russias-gazprom-sign-primary-deal-energy-cooperation-2022-07-19/>.

53 Henry Rome, “Iran & Russia: Growing Economic Competition”, *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute of Peace, July 18, 2022, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/jul/18/iran-russia-growing-economic-competition>.

54 “Russian officials visited Iran to view drones, says U.S. official”, *Reuters*, July 16, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-officials-visited-iran-view-drones-says-us-official-2022-07-16/>.

55 “U.S. says Iran nuclear deal is ‘not our focus right now’”, *Reuters*, October 13, 2022, [https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-says-iran-nuclear-deal-is-not-our-focus-right-now-2022-10-12/?mkt\\_tok=ODEzLVhZVS00MjIAAAGHcgNovQj1s\\_YuhQJoKysi\\_dwSeyU2pPwvjVG6n6wplcBmNMC-mwxUUoCaGIL5hCpYcVbUm-cgbPF2tCZbPuS17UWVj2KbSII0FEZx\\_tA](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-says-iran-nuclear-deal-is-not-our-focus-right-now-2022-10-12/?mkt_tok=ODEzLVhZVS00MjIAAAGHcgNovQj1s_YuhQJoKysi_dwSeyU2pPwvjVG6n6wplcBmNMC-mwxUUoCaGIL5hCpYcVbUm-cgbPF2tCZbPuS17UWVj2KbSII0FEZx_tA).

deal so we're not going to (...) waste our time on it".<sup>56</sup> Starting in October, the United States and the European Union also imposed sanctions on Iranian officials over the crackdown on protests and human rights abuses on several occasions.<sup>57</sup> Though some observers expected that efforts to revive the JCPOA might resume after the U.S. midterm elections held in early November 2022, such hopes would prove ill-founded.<sup>58</sup>

Since October 2022, the declining focus on the JCPOA has also been a function of growing Western concerns over intensified Russian-Iranian military-defense cooperation. In mid-October, U.S. officials sounded the alarm that Iran had secretly agreed to send not only attack drones but also surface-to-surface missiles to Russia and that Iranian personnel were assisting Russia "on the ground" in Crimea.<sup>59</sup> Supported by its Western allies, Washington took the charge to the United Nations Security Council and imposed additional sanctions against the Islamic Republic over its weapons deliveries.<sup>60</sup> Although Western officials continued to state that they had not yet seen evidence of Iranian missile transfers to Russia, they accused Iran of helping Russia build its own drones. They also warned that Moscow might well provide Tehran with an "unprecedented level" of military support in exchange, including helicopters, air defense systems, and Su-35 fighter jets.<sup>61</sup>

By early January 2023, per Ukrainian official estimates, Russia had used approximately 660 Iranian-made Shahed drones against Ukraine, while maintaining a contract with Iran for a total of 1,750 drones and presumably awaiting de-

livery of a new batch of 300 drones.<sup>62</sup> Since Western states have alleged that Iran's supply of the unmanned aerial vehicles violates UN Security Council Resolution 2231 – which endorsed the JCPOA – the nuclear deal's fate has now become inextricably linked to Iran's new arms trade with Russia. In December 2022, the UN Secretary-General's semi-annual report on Resolution 2231 fell short of offering conclusions regarding the compatibility of Iranian practices with the resolution, even though Western states had alleged Iranian non-compliance in written correspondence and requested an investigation.<sup>63</sup> According to some reporting, Russia put pressure on the Secretary-General not to order a probe, threatening to otherwise withdraw its cooperation on other issues relating to Ukraine.<sup>64</sup>

## RUSSIA DOUBLES DOWN IN DEFENSE OF IRAN

Meanwhile, diplomacy related to the nuclear dossier has slowed down since October. In mid-November, the IAEA's Board of Governors passed a second resolution – again vetoed by Russia – calling on Iran to cooperate with the agency's investigation into undeclared sites. Although Tehran increased its enrichment of uranium at the Fordow site to 60 per cent in response,<sup>65</sup> Iranian officials continued to engage with the IAEA and the European Union's chief diplomat, Josep Borrell, on the nuclear dossier through November and December 2022. Since these meetings failed to produce any tangible results, however, pessimism continued to prevail in Western capitals at the beginning of 2023 regarding the prospects for a restored deal.<sup>66</sup>

Against this backdrop of lukewarm nuclear diplomacy, Russia's position has consisted of claiming that JCPOA restoration was being held up exclusively by the West's "erroneous" policy of linking allegations over Iranian drone exports to Resolution 2231. With Western states focused on the Iranian protests and the drone dossier, Russian officials have repeatedly asserted that a nuclear deal was actually "within reach" and "literally one step from the finish line", assuming "political will" in Western capitals – in short, that the ball was "in the West's court".<sup>67</sup> There is no mention in

<sup>56</sup> "Carnegie Connects: Nukes, Protests, and Iran with Robert Malley", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 31, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/31/carnegie-connects-nukes-protests-and-iran-with-robert-malley-event-7967>.

<sup>57</sup> See for example: "US targets Iranian officials with new wave of sanctions", *Al Monitor*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/10/us-targets-iranian-officials-new-wave-sanctions>; "EU, UK sanction dozens of Iranian officials over rights abuses", *Al Jazeera*, 14.11.2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/14/eu-uk-sanction-dozens-of-iranian-officials-over-rights-abuses>.

<sup>58</sup> "With US elections over, new run at Iran nuclear deal is possible", *Al Monitor*, November 11, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/us-elections-over-new-run-iran-nuclear-deal-possible#ixzz7kwt07nGK>.

<sup>59</sup> "Iran plans to send missiles, drones to Russia for Ukraine war, officials say", *The Washington Post*, October 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/10/16/iran-russia-missiles-ukraine/>; "White House says Iran helping Russia 'on the ground' in Crimea", *Al Jazeera*, October 20, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/20/white-house-says-iran-helping-russia-on-the-ground-in-crimea>.

<sup>60</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury press release, "Treasury Targets Actors Involved in Production and Transfer of Iranian Unmanned Aerial Vehicles to Russia for Use in Ukraine", November 15, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1104>.

<sup>61</sup> "Iran will help Russia build drones for Ukraine war, Western officials say", *The Washington Post*, November 19, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/11/19/russia-iran-drones-secret-deal/>; "Russia-Iran military partnership 'unprecedented' and growing, officials say", *The Washington Post*, December 9, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/12/09/russia-iran-drone-missile/>.

<sup>62</sup> "Russia Is Struggling to Replenish Missile Stocks, Ukraine Says", *The New York Times*, January 4, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2023/01/04/world/russia-ukraine-news?smid=url-share#lacking-precision-missiles-russia-is-increasing-its-use-of-drones-ukraine-says>.

<sup>63</sup> "Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015) – Fourteenth report of the Secretary-General", S/2022/912, December 12, 2022, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF-CF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2022\\_912.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF-CF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2022_912.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Amid Russian pressure, UN report skirts question on Iran drones", *Axios*, December 14, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/12/14/un-report-iran-drones-russia-ukraine>.

<sup>65</sup> "Iran boosts uranium enrichment in response to IAEA resolution", *Al Jazeera*, November 22, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/22/iran-boosts-uranium-enrichment-in-response-to-iaea-resolution>.

<sup>66</sup> Laura Rozen, "State: 'Improbable' Iran offers deal revival", *Diplomatic.substack*, January 10, 2023, <https://diplomatic.substack.com/p/state-improbable-iran-offers-deal>.

<sup>67</sup> Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, October 18, 2022, [https://twitter.com/amb\\_ulyanov/status/158213184413250764](https://twitter.com/amb_ulyanov/status/158213184413250764)

Russian statements of Iran's own obstruction of an agreement on the "final text" in September. Moscow has also defended Iran's decision to increase the enrichment of uranium in November 2022 as a "predictable" response to the United States and the E3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) "escalating" at the IAEA Board of Governors, characterizing the board resolution as a "deliberate provocation".<sup>68</sup> Russia's proclivity for unreservedly shielding Iran, already on display between February and September 2022, has thus continued since October. If anything, it has acquired an additional dimension with the Russian efforts to prevent Tehran's censure for non-compliance with Resolution 2231.

Since the fall of 2022, the robustness of Western battlefield support for Kyiv has also likely fueled an ever-growing reluctance in the Kremlin to compartmentalize cooperation on nuclear non-proliferation with Western states. In several milestones, the United States and Western allies escalated the provision of advanced weaponry to Ukrainian forces, starting with the U.S. HIMARS precision rocket launchers in the summer of 2022, and most recently extending to a Patriot missile battery, mobile armor, and tanks.<sup>69</sup> In response, Russia has signaled a reduced willingness to continue "business as usual" on nuclear arms control and non-proliferation with Washington, indefinitely postponing a session of the New START Bilateral Consultative Commission that had been scheduled for early December 2022.<sup>70</sup> Given heightened confrontation with the West, some Russian political commentators argued that Moscow can "no longer act in line with American non-proliferation approaches towards Iran and North Korea".<sup>71</sup> Amid a realization that Western states will not yield in their support for Ukraine, Russia's willingness to compartmentalize cooperation on the Iran nuclear dossier has hit rock bottom.

## CONCLUSION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had a dramatic impact on the country's approach towards the JCPOA. After the invasion, Russia ceased to push for meaningful and timely progress in the nuclear talks, or to insulate them from broader geopolitical tensions. Its growing reliance on Iran for economic and battlefield support reduced the Kremlin's *ability* and *willingness* to criticize Iran, let alone nudge the country towards accepting a deal. This is by no means to suggest that Russia's changing approach into the spring and summer of 2022 was the only or decisive determinant preventing the restoration of the nuclear deal, but rather to contend that it was one among several important factors.<sup>72</sup> Since October 2022, Tehran's crackdown on domestic protests and Russia's intensifying reliance on Iranian drones have combined to pose additional, formidable obstacles to the JCPOA's restoration.

Russia appears to have calculated that a JCPOA in indefinite limbo might serve its interests best while it continues to wage war against Ukraine: Economically, sanctions against Tehran would remain in place, mitigating against a further strengthening of Tehran's position vis-à-vis Moscow, while Russian-Iranian trade would still continue to grow. Politically, Moscow would be able to count the Islamic Republic firmly on its side in the broader geopolitical confrontation with the West, even amid uncertainty over the JCPOA's fate. Having solidified its relations with Tehran, and given the ascendancy of the hardliners in Iran in recent years, Russia likely calculated that the future of the JCPOA would be immaterial to what are, in any event, negligible prospects for a rapprochement between Tehran and Washington.<sup>73</sup>

In light of unprecedented Russian-Iranian cooperation, some observers have recently cautioned that Moscow might not only obstruct the JCPOA's restoration, but even actively support Iran's nuclear program – now, or in the future.<sup>74</sup> For

8?s=27; Tweet by the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the International Organizations in Vienna, November 28, 2022, [https://twitter.com/mission\\_rf/status/1597181637141598210?s=27](https://twitter.com/mission_rf/status/1597181637141598210?s=27); Tweet by the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the International Organizations in Vienna, November 29, 2022, [https://twitter.com/mission\\_rf/status/1597722360614117377](https://twitter.com/mission_rf/status/1597722360614117377); "Vladimir Ermakov: zima ne tol'ko za oknom, no i v otnosheniyakh s SShA", (in Russian) *Ria Novosti*, November 30, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20221130/ermakov-1835175164.html>; Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, January 2, 2023, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1609890761276792837](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1609890761276792837).

68 "Vladimir Ermakov: zima ne tol'ko za oknom, no i v otnosheniyakh s SShA." Tweet by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov, November 16, 2022, [https://twitter.com/Amb\\_Ulyanov/status/1592932630148046849](https://twitter.com/Amb_Ulyanov/status/1592932630148046849); "Interview by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov on the TV Channel *Rossiya 24*", (in Russian), November 18, 2022, available at: <https://t.me/ViennaMissionRu/2057>.

69 "U.S. and Germany will send armored combat vehicles to Ukraine", *The Washington Post*, January 5, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/01/04/ukraine-bradley-fight-ing-vehicle/>.

70 "Vladimir Ermakov: zima ne tol'ko za oknom, no i v otnosheniyakh s SShA."

71 Dmitri Trenin, "The special military operation in Ukraine as a turning point in the foreign policy of modern Russia", (in Russian) *Russia in Global Affairs*, November 30, 2022, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/perelomnaya-tochka/>.

72 Other factors have included: a deadlock between Tehran and Washington on key issues; the anticipation of U.S. midterm elections narrowing space for progress; pressure on the United States by third actors (Israel); perceptions of the regional situation (for instance, Iran, satisfied by tentative steps towards regional de-escalation given bilateral Iranian-Saudi talks, might have concluded that discord with the West amid a failure to restore the JCPOA and détente in the region can go hand in hand).

73 Russian officials have been historically anxious that Iran's alignment with Moscow is purely opportunistic and will give way to rapprochement with the West, once the moment appears ripe to Tehran. Clément Therme, "Iran and Russia: A Tactical Entente", in Stephanie Cronin (ed.), *Iranian-Russian Encounters: Empires and Revolutions Since 1800*, Routledge, Abingdon, UK, 2013.

74 Such allegations were made by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in October 2022 and reportedly also by Israeli officials. "Ukraine's Zelenskyy to Haaretz: 'Isn't It Time for Israel to Choose Sides? The Democratic World, or Russian Terror?'" *Haaretz Democracy Conference*, October 24, 2022, full speech by President Zelenskyy available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-10-24/ty-article/premium/watch-now-zelenskyy-speech-at-haaretz-democracy-conference/00000184-0a3f-d764-ade7-6fbfaa970000>; CNN also reported in November 2022 that U.S. intelligence officials believe Iran is seeking Russia's help with its nuclear program. "Exclusive: Iran is seeking Russia's help to bolster its nuclear program, US intel officials believe," *CNN*, November 4, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/04/politics/iran-russia-nuclear-program/index.html>.

several reasons, however, it appears doubtful that Russia would go so far as to directly support Iran in building a nuclear weapon: First, Russia will likely come out of the war in Ukraine with its conventional capabilities significantly weakened, which will compel it to enhance its reliance on its strategic and non-strategic nuclear arsenals. Assuming that nuclear weapons will become *more* important to Russia in the future, it is unlikely to welcome other actors – even partners – owning such weapons. Second, Iran's possession of nuclear weapons would further augment Tehran's already-improved bargaining position vis-à-vis Russia, which would not be in Moscow's interest. Third, in light of widespread perceptions of greater Russian-Iranian alignment, Moscow will probably remain keen to signal a continued even-handedness between Iran and other regional actors – Israel, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, and Turkey – with which it pursues important economic and political interests. Fourth, while the current regime in Tehran is friendly to Moscow, Russia needs to at least account for the possibility of unprecedented protests and domestic instability in Iran resulting in regime change – if not now, then over the medium term. With a new regime in power in Iran, relations with Russia could fundamentally change, in which case Iran's possession of nuclear weapons could prove a strategic nightmare for Moscow. Finally, Iran's pursuit of nuclear threshold status is entirely sufficient to serve Moscow's purpose amid its confrontation with the West, since it generates uncertainty in the Middle East and thus reduces the United States' bandwidth to focus on China and Russia.

While these considerations should preclude Russia's active support for an Iranian nuclear weapon, it is not inconceivable that the Kremlin – consumed by the management of the war in Ukraine – has not yet taken a strategic decision as to how far it is willing to go in supporting Iran, or how much leeway to give to Russian domestic actors who may assist Iran's nuclear enterprise. Indeed, it cannot be excluded that Russian scientists might conduct unsanctioned activities that benefit Iran's nuclear program, as has occurred in the past.<sup>75</sup> The demands of the Ukraine campaign may well have relegated a sober cost-benefit assessment of Iran's nuclear hedge to the place of second-order priority. Although Russian diplomats viewed Iran's progress towards nuclear threshold status with concern in 2021, as illustrated in this chapter, the Kremlin might currently place a premium on Iran's partnership with Russia and on the utility of Iran's nuclear hedge in serving Russia's broader geopolitical aims.

At the time of writing, the obstacles to restoring the JCPOA seem formidable: As of early 2023, the situation in Iran remains volatile, Russia's reliance on Iran for battlefield support in Ukraine continues, and Israel's new government has announced its intention to revert to openly opposing the

nuclear deal.<sup>76</sup> In late January, the IAEA estimated that Iran now has enough highly enriched uranium to build “several nuclear weapons” if it chooses.<sup>77</sup> If this was not enough, the standoff over Iran's compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 2231 is set to escalate over the coming months, with a provision restricting Iranian exports of short-range ballistic missiles expiring in October 2023. Assuming continued concerns over Iranian weapons supplies to Russia and a lack of momentum on the JCPOA, Western states may well seek to “snap back” UN sanctions against Iran before October – an effort that would not just reinstate the expired UN arms embargo, but also rescind the October 2023 expiration of missile-related provisions.<sup>78</sup> Russia will be adamantly against such a move, just as it opposed the Trump administration's effort to unilaterally trigger snapback ahead of the expiration of the conventional arms embargo in October 2020 (a move that was not supported by the Europeans). If Russia had a craving for intensified military-defense cooperation back then, it now has a much more insatiable appetite. Should the E3 and Washington join forces in triggering snapback before October, it is highly doubtful that Moscow would press Tehran for a moderate response, given its poor track record when it comes to leaning on Iran over the past year. Any Iranian escalatory steps – on enrichment, engagement with IAEA inspectors, or in other areas – might then well sound the death knell for a nuclear accord that has been barely on life support for months.

<sup>75</sup> “Russian scientist Vyacheslav Danilenko's aid to Iran offers peek at nuclear program”, *The Washington Post*, November 13, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russian-scientist-vyacheslav-danilenkos-aid-to-iran-offers-peek-at-nuclear-program/2011/11/12/gIQAeuiCJN\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russian-scientist-vyacheslav-danilenkos-aid-to-iran-offers-peek-at-nuclear-program/2011/11/12/gIQAeuiCJN_story.html).

<sup>76</sup> “Netanyahu says he'll revert to 'openly' opposing Iran deal, names security cabinet”, *The Times of Israel*, January 3, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-warns-iran-deal-still-possible-vows-to-revert-to-openly-opposing-it/>.

<sup>77</sup> “Analysis: Stakes rise as Iran can fuel 'several' atom bombs”, *AP News*, January 26, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-iran-politics-government-mahmoud-ahmadinejad-6acdb64d36fcbe05b3ee725d8a585d96>.

<sup>78</sup> Henry Rome and Louis Dugit-Gros, “Snapback Sanctions on Iran: More Bark Than Bite?”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 25, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/snapback-sanctions-iran-more-bark-bite>.

## APPENDIX

### RUSSIA AND THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR DOSSIER IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Over the past two decades, Russia's approach towards the Iranian nuclear dossier has aimed at striking a balance between cooperating with Iran, including on the peaceful use of nuclear energy, and supporting international efforts aimed at reducing the risks of nuclear proliferation. In adopting this approach, Russia has pursued the triple objectives of ensuring economic cooperation with Iran, balancing U.S. influence in the Middle East region, and preventing regional instability, which Moscow believed would ensue if Iran were to develop a nuclear weapon. While Russian companies were engaged in open and at times "rogue" nuclear cooperation with Iranian entities during the 1990s, evidence of Tehran violating its obligations under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 2002 strengthened Moscow's resolve to support international efforts to seek a diplomatic solution.<sup>79</sup>

In the early 2000s, Russia partnered with the European Union (EU) to elicit Iranian implementation of the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) Additional Protocol, which granted the agency expanded rights of access to information and locations in Iran.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, in February 2005, Russia signed an agreement according to which it would supply low-enriched uranium (LEU) fuel for Iran's Bushehr reactor (and repatriate any spent fuel from it), to preclude its diversion for non-peaceful purposes. When Iran, following the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency later that year, began producing uranium hexafluoride at its Isfahan facility, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (the "E3") suspended negotiations with Tehran. Shortly thereafter, the IAEA adopted a resolution finding Iran in noncompliance with its Safeguards Agreement, paving the way for a referral of the Iranian nuclear dossier to the UN Security Council in February 2006.<sup>81</sup> While Russia supported this action, it continued to hope that its offers of enriching uranium to commercial grade for Tehran on Russian soil would allay Western fears that the uranium could be used for a covert weapons program.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Vladimir A. Orlov and Alexander Vinnikov, "The Great Guessing Game: Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Issue", *The Washington Quarterly*, 28:2, Spring 2005, pp. 49–66, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1162/0163660053295185>.

<sup>80</sup> The Additional Protocol is not a stand-alone agreement, but rather a protocol to a safeguards agreement that provides additional tools for verification. In particular, it significantly increases the IAEA's ability to verify the peaceful use of all nuclear material and the absence of undeclared nuclear materials in States with comprehensive safeguards agreements. See: <https://www.iaea.org/topics/additional-protocol>.

<sup>81</sup> In February 4, 2006, a special meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors referred Iran to the UN Security Council, adopting a resolution that deemed it "necessary for Iran to" suspend its enrichment-related activities, reconsider the construction of the Arak heavy-water reactor, ratify the additional protocol to its Safeguards Agreement, and fully cooperate with the agency's investigation.

<sup>82</sup> "Iran and Russia Agree to Nuclear Deal", *Der Spiegel*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/uranium-enrichment-iran-and-russia-agree-to-nuclear-deal-a-403425.html>.

In the years that followed, Russia never vetoed, yet sought to limit the scope of UN Security Council resolutions adopted on the Iranian nuclear dossier, to ensure that they would not affect the Iranian energy or financial sectors. Resolutions 1696, 1737, 1747, 1803, and 1929, to varying degrees, blocked trade in sensitive nuclear material, froze financial assets of persons and entities involved in proliferation-sensitive nuclear activities, banned exports of arms to Iran, and encouraged scrutiny of the dealings of Iranian banks.<sup>83</sup> In 2015, Russia became signatory to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which placed significant restrictions on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for serious sanctions relief.<sup>84</sup>

Throughout this period, Russia's approach towards the Iranian dossier had three key features: First, Russia argued that Iran had the right to use nuclear energy but that the international community needed to ensure the program's peaceful nature, which could be achieved only under IAEA oversight. Second, Moscow supported sanctions as a tool of statecraft reluctantly – including out of fear that they may be used against Russia itself<sup>85</sup> – therefore maintaining that they can be legitimate only if adopted by the UN Security Council. Russia routinely sought to soften or limit sanctions imposed vis-à-vis Iran, including to protect its own economic interests with Tehran. Finally, the Russian leadership – starting in the early 1990s, and leading up to the JCPOA – appears to have been less concerned than Israel and the United States about the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program and, as a matter of public policy, continued to state that it had no evidence that Iran was in pursuit of a nuclear weapon.<sup>86</sup>

When President Donald Trump announced in May 2018 that the United States would end its participation in the JCPOA, characterizing it as "one of the worst and most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered

<sup>83</sup> For a detailed discussion on Russia's position in the lead-up to the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1929 in June 2010, see: Hanna Notte, "UN Security Council Resolution 1929 on Iran: US-Russian Cooperation and the Quest for Diffuse Reciprocity", in: Sarah Bidgood and William C. Potter (eds.), *End of an Era: The United States, Russia, and Nuclear Nonproliferation*, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, August 2021.

<sup>84</sup> "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action", Vienna, July 14, 2015, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/122460/full-text-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal.pdf>.

<sup>85</sup> Hanna Notte, "Russian-American Cooperation in the Middle East: An Analysis of Moscow's Interests, Leverage, and Strategies of Linkage", PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2017.

<sup>86</sup> Russia did not so much doubt the Iranian intention to develop capability in nuclear technology, but rather believed the Iranians did not have the expertise to weaponize their programme. Russian non-proliferation experts contended that Iran's ability to militarize its nuclear programme had been exaggerated by other actors in the international community, who conflated an ability to develop bomb fuel with an ability to weaponize it (build a bomb of a deliverable size). That said, there was no firm consensus on this issue among Russia's arms control expert community, with some analysts warning that Russia underestimated Iran's nuclear weapons potential. Notte, "Russian-American Cooperation in the Middle East."

into”,<sup>87</sup> Russia criticized the decision and vowed diplomatic efforts to preserve the deal. The Trump administration’s decision aggrieved Moscow for two reasons in particular: First, it touched a raw nerve in Moscow over the integrity of existing UN Security Council resolutions and the “P5+1” process, participation in which the Russian government has viewed as indicative of its great power status. The U.S. abandonment of a UN Security Council-endorsed agreement was also taken in Moscow as affirmation of what Russian diplomats have mockingly called the “rules-based international order”, implying an order in which the United States (re-)invents “rules” as it sees fit.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, Moscow backed Tehran in arguing that raising issues originally considered “extraneous to the JCPOA by mutual agreement” – such as Iran’s proxy activities and missile programme, which featured prominently in the Trump administration’s list of grievances cited vis-à-vis Iran – was impermissible.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, while Russia agreed with Western powers in opposing Iran developing nuclear weapons, it differed in its assessment of Iran’s regional policies. Rejecting the view that Iran “is the cause of the region’s problems, in Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and other countries” as a matter of principle, Russia has also simply had limited leverage over Iran’s regional conduct.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>87</sup> The White House, “President Donald J. Trump is Ending United States Participation in an Unacceptable Iran Deal”, May 8, 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/>.

<sup>88</sup> Sergey V. Lavrov, “Statement at the 74th Session of the UN General Assembly”, September 27, 2019, [http://statements.unmeetings.org/GA74/RU\\_EN.pdf](http://statements.unmeetings.org/GA74/RU_EN.pdf).

<sup>89</sup> Islamic Republic of Iran, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Statement by Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran Before the United Nations Security Council”, June 30, 2020, <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/600996/Statement-by-Minister-of-Foreign-Affairs-of-the-Islamic-Republic-of-Iran-Before-the-United-Nations-Security-Council>.

<sup>90</sup> Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, “Remarks and answers to questions at the Primakov Readings international forum”, Moscow, May 30, 2018. Hanna Notte and Hamidreza Azizi, “Can Russia Help Biden Get a Comprehensive Agreement With Iran?”, *The National Interest*, January 19, 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/can-russia-help-biden-get-comprehensive-agreement-iran-176662>. Other factors underpinning Russia’s reluctance to criticise Iran’s regional policies include Russian-Iranian mutual dependence in Syria, as well as Russia’s desire not to antagonize Tehran due to the latter’s role in Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Caspian Sea.

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# RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE

## The Iran Nuclear Price Tag



Russia's invasion of Ukraine had a dramatic impact on the country's approach towards the JCPOA. After February 2022, Russia ceased to push for meaningful progress in the nuclear talks, or to insulate them from broader geopolitical tensions. Its growing reliance on Iran for economic and battlefield support reduced the Kremlin's *ability* and *willingness* to criticize Iran over breaches or delays in returning to the negotiating table, let alone nudge the country towards accepting a nuclear deal. Since October, Tehran's crackdown on peaceful domestic protests and Russia's growing dependence on Iranian combat drones have combined to pose additional, formidable obstacles to the JCPOA's restoration.



Russia appears to calculate that a JCPOA in indefinite limbo serves its interests best while it continues to wage war against Ukraine: Economically, sanctions against Tehran will remain in place, mitigating against a further strengthening of Iran's improved bargaining position vis-à-vis Moscow, while Russian-Iranian trade will still grow. Politically, Iran's pursuit of nuclear threshold status will generate uncertainty in the Middle East, consuming Western bandwidth and resources. Viewing itself in a long-term and all-encompassing confrontation with the West, the Kremlin currently appears to place a premium on Iran's partnership with Russia and on the utility of Iran's nuclear threshold status—discarding its potential negative strategic implications for Russia.



As of early 2023, the obstacles to restoring the JCPOA seem formidable: The situation in Iran remains volatile, Russia's reliance on Iran for battlefield support in Ukraine is set to continue, and the standoff over Iran's compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 2231 may well escalate over coming months. Absent diplomatic progress, Western states may seek to »snap back« UN sanctions against Iran before October, when a provision restricting Iranian exports of short-range ballistic missiles expires. This would sound the death knell for the nuclear accord and likely close the door to any meaningful nuclear negotiations for a significant period of time.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

<https://www.fes.de/referat-naher-mittlerer-osten-und-nordafrika>