

How Russia Enabled Iran to Go Nuclear

On Sunday, Israel's Hadashot News Company reported on a new Russian plan to help Iran skirt the looming U.S. sanctions on its oil program. According to the report, which was based off a document compiled by the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Iran will ship its crude oil to Russia for refining via the Caspian Sea. Russia will then export the oil all over the world and reward Iran with a variety of economic benefits.

The cooperation between Russia and Iran is an attempt to work around United States sanctions on Iranian oil that are scheduled to take effect on November 4, 2018. The aforementioned sanctions were first announced by the U.S. State Department in June and are an attempt by the Trump administration to ratchet up the pressure on Iran in order to force them to renegotiate the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

The looming sanctions are powerful and direct. Not only do they bar foreign nations from importing Iranian oil shipments, they have an additional round of secondary sanctions banning companies that flout the initial sanctions from doing business with the United States. Once the sanctions hit, foreign nations will have to choose between doing business with Iran and accessing the lucrative U.S. economy.

In putting Iran's oil exports in the crosshairs, the U.S. aims to target Iran's main moneymaker. Iran exports 2 million barrels of crude oil a day, making it the third largest oil producer in OPEC. With its main source of income cut off, Iran's already-tottering economy will come closer to collapsing, something which many analysts say will bring the masses into the streets and possibly topple the regime.

That's why Russia's reported mechanism assisting Iran is so perplexing. Russia has always said that it seeks to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. In helping Iran avoid U.S. sanctions, Russia is now mitigating one of the strongest factors that can force Iran to renegotiate what many say is a heavily flawed nuclear deal.

Russia also does not need Iranian oil for economic reasons. Russia is an energy

powerhouse. With one of the largest petroleum reserves in the world, the eight largest oil reserves and as one of the world's biggest oil producers, it makes no sense fiscally for Russia to be assisting the Islamic Republic.

Upon closer look, however, the international community shouldn't be surprised. A look into the past shows that almost everything Iran has done in its multi-decade effort for atomic weaponry has been either directly or indirectly aided by Russia.

The first of Russia's many contributions to the Iranian nuclear effort was its agreement to build nuclear reactors for the Islamic Republic, providing it with the most basic qualification for a nation aspiring to acquire atomic weapons. Most prominent of this effort is Russia's role in building Iran's first nuclear power plant in Bushehr. Construction on the twin-reactor power plant had been started by the Shah in 1974 and was contracted out to be built by the German Siemens AG and AEG-Telefunken corporations. However, both companies pulled out of the project after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, when missed payments piled up and the site fell into disrepair after being pounded by Iraqi airstrikes during the Iran-Iraq war. Due to Iran's international isolation, Germany refused to authorize the plant's reconstruction and Russia was the only country willing to openly build a power plant for the rogue state: Russian corporation Atomstroyexport signed a contract authorizing them to resume work on the site in 1995.

The deal was plagued by both international opposition and technical breakdowns, leading to skyrocketing costs. While the agreement between Russia and Iran in 1995 was for an \$800 million project, by 2002 the budget had risen to \$2.7 billion. The United States was ardently opposed to Iran gaining a nuclear power plant and leaned on Russia to halt the project, which Russia agreed to do, until the United States changed its stance in 2005 following Iranian claims that all nuclear fuel would be transferred to Russia. Bushehr was finally completed in 2010 and is one of Iran's key nuclear sites. It is allowing Iran to enrich uranium along with its other reactors at Arak and Chalus, and its enrichment plants at Natanz and Fordow.

Russia's nuclear contributions to Iran is not limited to its building the Bushehr plant. In 2016, President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia will sell Iran another eight nuclear power plants, dramatically stepping up Russia's role in the Iranian nuclear program. Should the power plants actually come to fruition, they will significantly propel the Islamic Republic's nuclear capabilities forward and

would likely become a difficulty for the international community to monitor.

While Russia has actively built nuclear infrastructure, it also turned a blind eye to the rampant leakage of nuclear material and trained personnel from within its borders to Iran. With the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, tens of thousands of trained nuclear personnel suddenly found themselves out of work. Furthermore, the fledgling Russian Federation was not adequately prepared to introduce any meaningful oversight on the country's nuclear material, technology, and scientists. For example, as Ronen Bergman related in his book "The Point of No Return," Israeli agents from the Mossad espionage agency found a warehouse in a disused Russian nuclear facility that was bursting with heavy water, uranium, and other sensitive material. The storage facility was protected by a single padlock and its elderly guard was constantly inebriated. While the international community pressed Russia to ensure that fully-built nuclear weapons did not end up in the wrong hands, it was unable to initiate a similar effort in regards to its technology and human capital.

The results were catastrophic to anyone concerned about nuclear proliferation. As researcher David Hoffman chronicled in his book "The Dead Hand," Russian scientists simply hawked their know-how to the highest bidders, which were generally Iran and North Korea. Immediately following the Soviet Union's dissolution, Iran rushed to take advantage of the loose material, idle weapons experts, and general chaos. According to Hoffman, "Iran opened a special office in Tehran's embassy in Moscow to search for and acquire weapons technology." Top nuclear scientists were suddenly fielding attractive offers to move to Tehran and school a new generation of Iranian nuclear scientists.

Iran invested similar resources in persuading Russian long-range missile experts to join its ranks. Long-range ballistic missiles are a vital delivery system for a nuclear weapon and ensures that a nation has the proper delivery mechanism for the bomb that can turn it into a strategic threat. Hundreds of experts took Iran up on its offer, leading Iran to have "more scientists and engineers from the former Soviet Union than they knew what to do with." Iran also formed an educational partnership with the renowned Moscow Aviation Institute, a world-class research center centered on developing missile technology. From the mid-90s and onwards, Iran started flooding the Institute with its most promising graduates so that they would gain the knowledge which was lacking in Tehran. Additionally, according to some estimates, Russian nuclear scientists filled virtually every

single senior technical post in Iran's nuclear establishment. For example, the United Nation's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) watchdog said in a 2011 report that Vyacheslav Danilenko, a Russia nuclear expert with 50 years of experience, had built a "high explosives detonation system" for Iran and was the guiding hand behind the entire Atomic project.

Iran also did everything in its power to obtain loose fissile material. "We knew that Iran was all over Central Asia and the Caucasus with their purchasing agents," said former U.S. Department of Defense official Jeff Star. A U.S. diplomat recalled to Hoffman how while visiting a Russian nuclear facility in 1996, he "noticed a shipment of beryllium, which is used as a neutral reflector in an atomic bomb, packed in crates. Stenciled on the side was an address: Tehran, Iran. Apparently, a paperwork glitch was the only thing that had kept the shipment from being sent."

Russia's response was to turn a blind eye to the entire endeavor. Despite occasional promises to crack down on the rampant nuclear proliferation, Russia did very little to stop it, hindered by its depleted economy and ineffective government as well as its geopolitical calculations that saw Iran as an effective antidote to the United States. In fact, former U.S. Department of State special advisor for nonproliferation and arms control Robert Einhorn told the Senate that Russia has "extensive cooperation" with Tehran regarding transfers of technology and scientists, which "has accelerated in the last few years." Einhorn added that "much of this assistance involves technologies with direct application to the production of weapons-grade fissile materials...and could significantly shorten the time Iran would need to acquire weapons-usable fissile material."

Russia's assistance to Iran in regard to its nuclear program extended well beyond nuclear technology and ballistic missiles. One step that advanced Iran's nuclear ambitions considerably was its decision to sell the S-300 anti-missile defense system to Iran in 2014. The Russian S-300 is widely regarded as one of the world's most effective anti-aircraft systems. Boasting accuracy of up to 150 kilometers and an ability to detect planes and jets up to twice that distance, the S-300 can neutralize hostile aircraft, ballistic missiles, and UAVs. Because of those cited reasons, Putin froze his original plan to give the S-300 system to Iran after the deal was first announced in 2010.

Iran's receiving the S-300 gave its nuclear program a major boost because it can

potentially neutralize an Israeli air strike on its nuclear facilities, similar to Israel's attacks on the Iraqi and Syria reactors in 1981 and 2007. Despite assurances by senior Israelis officials, such as the statement by former Israeli Air Force commander Amir Eshel calling the S-300 "a significant but not insurmountable challenge," the air defense system significantly complicates Israel's attack capabilities, both militarily and diplomatically.

A key component to an air assault is taking out the opposing side's missile defense, yet Russia has made it abundantly clear that it will not tolerate Israeli military action against the expensive S-300 system. For example, Russia recently gave Syrian President Bashar al-Assad the S-300 after the Syrians mistakenly shot down a Russian military jet in September following an Israeli air strike in Latakia and warned Israel not to consider bombing the missile system. Taken it as a given that Russia will not allow Israel to bomb Iran's S-300 batteries, the decision to transfer it put a major dent in any planned Israeli air assault on Iran's nuclear facilities.

It is important to reiterate that not all of the aforementioned actions stem from a conscious Russian decision to equip Iran with nuclear weapons. Many observers attribute the decisions mentioned above to a mixture of geopolitical and economic factors; for example, Russia sold nuclear reactors and the S-300 to Tehran in part for the economic windfall such weapons deals brought. Russia's failure to prevent rampant defections by its top scientists to Iran in the 1990s was a result of incompetence and corruption. However, it is an incontrovertible fact that all of these actions taken together have drastically furthered Iran's nuclear program.

On July 14, 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was signed in a festive ceremony in Vienna. The product of lengthy negotiations between Iran and a formidable coalition consisting of China, France, Russia, England, the United States, Germany, and the European Union, the accords removed sanctions on Iran in exchange for the freezing of Iran's nuclear program. In a statement following the signing, Russian President Vladimir Putin implied that the accords were signed in order to avert the spectacle of a nuclear Iran. "We are certain that the world heaved a sigh of relief today," said Putin. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov concurred, saying that the JCPOA "will favorably affect the general situation in the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf."

The flowery platitudes masked the characteristic Russian cynicism. Without

Russia, Iran would never be on the cusp today of obtaining the most destructive weapon known to mankind, and almost everything Iran has done in its multi-decade effort for atomic weaponry has been either directly or indirectly aided by Russia.

Source: <https://www.opslens.com/2018/10/19/how-russia-enabled-iran-to-go-nuclear/>

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