



Iran: Supreme Leader Advisor Lauds Russian Strategic Ties

OE Watch Commentary: Over the course of the last decade, Iran-Russia relations have undergone an unprecedented rapprochement. For much of Iranian history, after all, Iranians have viewed Russia with distrust if not disdain. Prior to the nineteenth century, successive shahs and dynasties looked down upon Russia as backward and uncouth. As the Russian Empire became a growing military power in the nineteenth century, resentment brewed, especially after the Russian army seized what is now Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia from Iranian control and later encroached upon Iranian claims in what is now Turkmenistan. In 1907, Russia and Great Britain formally divided Iran into spheres of influence and as Iranians struggled for some semblance of constitutional democracy, it was the tsar in St. Petersburg who sought to stymie their efforts.

So far as most Iranians were concerned, the Soviet Union was not much better. Soviet policies were just as exploitative as Tsarist Russian policies before them, and Soviet imperial interests manifested in support for Kurdish and Azerbaijani separatism further imperiled Iranian sovereignty and independence. In the first months of the Islamic Revolution, revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini railed against both the United States and the Soviet Union and promised a foreign policy independent from both Cold War rivals.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, however, has actively courted Iran. After the nuclear accident at Chernobyl and the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian nuclear industry had difficulty competing against industry giants in the United States and Europe and so began to pursue business in places like Iran, which Western companies by law or decision chose to avoid. Russia's atomic energy company took over work to construct Iran's Bushehr nuclear plant and, at various times, has promised to build several new reactors. As Russo-Iranian relations tightened, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei swept previous animosity toward Moscow under the rug in order to better counter the West and its regional proxies despite residual animosity toward Russia on the part of ordinary Iranians (see "Iran-Russia Relations," *OE Watch*, July 2016).

It is in this context that the excerpted interview with the conservative *Mehr News Agency* by Ali Akbar Velayati, post-revolutionary Iran's longest serving foreign minister (1981-1997) and the current chief foreign affairs advisor to Khamenei, is of interest. Velayati hails the "growing and strategic ties" with Russia. The interview comes after Russia vetoed a UN Security Council Resolution, sponsored by the United States and the United Kingdom, which sought to sanction Iranian violations of an arms embargo placed upon Houthi insurgents in Yemen. While Velayati's comments touched on a broader array of foreign relationships, his praise for Iran's growing ties with Russia seem designed to counter those who say that such ties risk too much. Rather, he implies that Russia's willingness to defend Iran at the United Nations justifies Khamenei's strategy. The danger moving forward would be if an assumption or reality of Russian protection leads the Islamic Republic to believe itself immune to the consequences of its support for insurgency across the Middle East. In such a case, Iranian weapons transfers and sponsorship of insurgency could quickly get worse. **End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)**



Ali Akbar Velayati, the Supreme Leader's Advisor on Foreign Affairs.

Source: Khamenei.ir, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/photo-album?id=29319>, CC 4.0.

“What Russia has shown...is the growing strategic relationship between the two countries.”

Source: “Veto-ye Qata’nameh ‘Aliyeh Iran Namayanegar Ravabat-e Rahbaradi Iran va Rusiyeh Ast” (“The veto of the resolution against Iran represents the strategic relationship between Iran and Russia”), *Mehr News Agency*, 28 February 2018. <https://goo.gl/9sEg1b>

The international affairs advisor to the Supreme Leader said that by vetoing this resolution, Russia has shown the growing relations and strategic ties. According to the Mehr correspondent, Ali Akbar Velayati, international affairs advisor to the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, in a meeting with Syria’s Minister of Religious Endowments Muhammad Abdul-Sattar, reportedly said, “We had a very good and important meeting with Syrian religious scholars and it was very good and important and we both believed that the nation and state of Syria and Iran had strategic relations which allowed them to survive against the common enemy of the Americans and Zionists, and this victory could not have been achieved but for the struggle of the warriors of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and every place where the Muslims would be free....”

And, in response to a question regarding the British government’s efforts in the Security Council against Iran and Yemen, he stated: British policy has a negative impact on the Iranian people, and it [British actions] were not contrary to our expectations. What Russia has shown in the veto of this resolution is the growing strategic relationship between the two countries.