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Iran's Military Assistance to Russia: Goals and Consequences

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After six months from the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, when the Russian army, along with failing to fulfil its military objectives, was running low on certain types of weapons, the Islamic Republic of Iran lent it a helping hand by selling it several hundred unmanned aerial vehicles, including the so-called "Kamikaze" combat drones, thus taking the Russian side in the war and once again openly opposing the West. Where, previously, Iran had mainly interfered in armed conflicts across the Middle East, by providing military assistance to Russia, it has now gone beyond the boundaries of the region and sought to resolve the fate of a war in Europe.

What foreign policy, military-strategic, or other goals does Iran pursue by supporting Russia's military aggression against Ukraine? And what are the existing as well as plausible future consequences of this move? This article will try to answer these questions. However, first it is necessary to briefly describe what Iran's military assistance has been to Russia so far.

Iranian arms supply to Russia

The exact number of weapons transferred to Russia by Iran is not publicly known. However, the statements of individual officials and the information spread in the mass media give us an approximate picture.

A week before Russian President Vladimir Putin's official visit to Iran in July 2022, the US announced that Iran was planning to supply Russia with unmanned aerial vehicles that Russia would use for combat purposes in Ukraine.¹ This was probably one of the main issues discussed by Putin at the meetings in Tehran with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.²

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky informed the leaders of the G7 that Russia ordered a total of 2,400 combat drones from Iran.³ According to reports in the British media, Russia purchased the first batch of UAVs from Iran on August 20 for 140 million Euros: namely, 100 "Shahed-136" "Kamikaze" combat drones, 60 "Shahed-131" "Kamikaze" combat drones and 6 "Mohajer-6" intelligence-combat drones, which were transported from Iran to Russia by a

¹ White House, Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, July 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2022/07/12/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan/>

² Nasser Karimi and Vladimir Isachenkov, "Putin, in Tehran, gets strong support from Iran over Ukraine," *AP News*, July 20, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-syria-iran-289c3422c8980e7650dbde2c326d248a>

³ "Zelensky calls on G7 to provide air defense systems, as Russia ordered 2,400 'Shaheds'," *Ukrinform*, October 11, 2022, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/3591162-zelensky-calls-on-g7-to-provide-air-defense-systems-as-russia-ordered-2400-shaheds.html>

Russian cargo plane. Also, negotiations were held on the purchase of an additional batch of UAVs worth 200 million Euros.⁴ On November 1, the American media, based on a government source, reported that Iran was also planning to supply ballistic missiles to Russia.⁵

Russia has been using Iranian UAVs in Ukraine since September 2022 – mainly to destroy the country’s energy and civilian infrastructure.⁶ In order to cover for the Iranian involvement, Russia tries to present these drones as its own production, and for that purpose it makes Russian inscriptions on them (for example, instead of “Shahed-131” “Герань-1” and instead of “Shahed-136” – “Герань-2”).⁷ According to Western intelligence agencies, through another agreement reached with Iran, Russia is to start manufacturing these UAVs on its territory, and for that purpose it is buying their designs and key components.⁸

Ukrainian air defenses destroy an average of two-thirds of Iranian drones launched into the battlefield, but about one-third of them reach their targets.⁹ According to President Zelensky, as a result of this “energy terrorism”, Russia has seriously damaged 40% of Ukraine's energy infrastructure.¹⁰ According to the Ukrainian Air Force, from September to mid-November, Russia used 400 Iranian “Shahed-136” combat drones against Ukraine,¹¹ which indicates that since August 20, Russia had received another batch of drones from Iran.

Despite the repeated denials of the transfer of weapons, on November 5, the Iranian government finally admitted that it had supplied Russia with a small number of combat drones

⁴ Deborah Haynes, “Russia flew in €140m in cash and captured Western weapons to Iran in return for deadly drones, source claims,” *Sky News*, November 9, 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/russia-gave-eur140m-and-captured-western-weapons-to-iran-in-return-for-deadly-drones-source-claims-12741742>

⁵ Kylie Atwood, “Iran is preparing to send additional weapons, including ballistic missiles, to Russia to use in Ukraine, Western officials say,” *CNN*, November 1, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/01/politics/iran-missiles-russia/index.html>

⁶ “Ukraine shoots down Iranian-made drone used by Russia - defense ministry,” *Reuters*, September 13, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-shoots-down-iranian-made-drone-used-by-russia-defence-ministry-2022-09-13/>

⁷ Francesco Salesio Schiavi, “Assessing Russian Use of Iranian Drones in Ukraine: Facts and Implications,” Italian Institute for International Political Studies, October 26, 2022, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/assessing-russian-use-iranian-drones-ukraine-facts-and-implications-36520>

⁸ Joby Warrick, Souad Mekhennet and Ellen Nakashima, “Iran will help Russia build drones for Ukraine war, Western officials say,” *Washington Post*, November 19, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/11/19/russia-iran-drones-secret-deal/>

⁹ “One-third of Shaheds reach their targets, drone terror may last a long time,” *Ukrainska Pravda*, October 24, 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/10/24/7373182/>

¹⁰ President of Ukraine, “Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with the European Commissioner for Energy,” November 1, 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/volodimir-zelenskij-zustrivsy-a-z-yevrokomisarom-z-pitan-ener-78841>

¹¹ “РФ применила против Украины более 400 иранских дронов,” *Gazeta.ua*, November 9, 2022, https://gazeta.ua/ru/articles/np/_rf-primenila-protiv-ukrainy-bolee-400-iranskih-dronov/1119967

before the war, but denied the intention to deliver ballistic missiles to Russia.¹² In response, the US Special Representative for Iran Robert Malley said that Iran had supplied Russia with not a limited number but dozens of combat drones, and not before the war, but in the summer of this year, and had even sent military personnel into the Russian occupied territory of Ukraine to help the Russians fly this equipment.¹³ Previously, the US National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby also spoke about the presence of Iranian military instructors in Ukraine, namely in occupied Crimea,¹⁴ and the Secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council Oleksiy Danilov later confirmed the news about their deaths.¹⁵

On November 9, the Secretary of Russia's Security Council Nikolai Patrushev arrived in Tehran to meet with his colleague, the Secretary of Iran's High Council of National Security Ali Shamkhani.¹⁶ It is likely that the purpose of the visit was to accelerate the delivery of a new batch of UAVs and the first batch of ballistic missiles. It is so far unknown how successful Patrushev's visit was. Iranian ballistic missiles have not yet appeared on the battlefield in Ukraine, and the use of Iranian drones has decreased since the second half of November. According to the UK Ministry of Defense's November 23 Defense Intelligence update, Russia has likely very nearly exhausted its current stock of Iranian drones, but will probably seek resupply.¹⁷

It is clear that, with the help of Iranian combat drones, the Russian armed forces have temporarily reinvigorated their military campaign in Ukraine and have caused significant damage to Ukraine's critical infrastructure. They have also cut back the use of Russian-made ballistic and cruise missiles, the stock of which has been significantly reduced, and forced the Ukrainians to spend the anti-aircraft missiles received from the West. This move was also economically beneficial for Russia, because purchasing Iranian drones is much cheaper than

¹² Adam Pourahmadi and Sophie Tanno, "Iran acknowledges providing drones to Russia before Moscow's invasion of Ukraine," *CNN*, November 5, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/05/middleeast/iran-drones-russia-intl>

¹³ Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley (@USEnvoyIran), Twitter post, November 5, 2022, https://twitter.com/USEnvoyIran/status/1588941673761214464?s=20&t=siJWts-yOa9aaTelO_PNcg

¹⁴ White House, On-the-Record Press Gaggle by NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby, October 20, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/10/20/on-the-record-press-gaggle-by-nsc-coordinator-for-strategic-communications-john-kirby/>

¹⁵ Julian Borger, "Iranian advisers killed aiding Russians in Crimea, says Kyiv," *Guardian*, November 24, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/24/iranian-military-advisers-killed-aiding-moscow-in-crimea-kyiv>

¹⁶ "Secretary of Russia National Security Council arrives in Tehran," *Islamic Republic News Agency*, November 9, 2022, <https://en.irna.ir/news/84936790/Secretary-of-Russia-National-Security-Council-arrives-in-Tehran>

¹⁷ Ministry of Defense (@DefenceHQ), "Latest Defense Intelligence update on the situation in Ukraine – 23 November, 2022," Twitter post, November 23, 2022, <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1595308425906647040?s=20&t=o81rP9jvtCt9LO27mHzNqQ>

producing Russian missiles (for example, the “Shahed-136” costs 20-30 thousand USD, while the price of Russian missiles starts from several million and goes up to 13 million USD).¹⁸ That is why Russia needs to continue buying Iranian weapons or their components. However, it is not clear whether Iran will be able to fully meet Russia's demand, especially in the short term. And the time factor is very important for Russia in this case.

Goals of Iran's military assistance to Russia

By providing military support for Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Iran is trying to achieve several goals.

First, Iran's longest-term and global goal is to weaken the US in the international arena, as Iran considers the US its enemy. Since the US and its European allies are helping Ukraine, Iran is marching against them by supporting Russia, and is trying to play a role in ushering in the end of “American hegemony” and the establishment of a multipolar world. In addition, it is also responding to the actions of the US in recent years, in particular, the sanctions reimposed by the US after withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) in 2018, and the assassination of Major General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, in Iraq in 2020.¹⁹

Iran's second, also long-term, albeit regional goal is to achieve its own hegemony in the Middle East. By contributing to the escalation of Russia's military aggression in Ukraine, Iran hopes that the attention of the US will be focused on Ukraine, and that it will no longer be able to adequately address problems in the Middle East, in turn creating an opening for Iran to gain advantage over its main regional rival, Saudi Arabia, and to take more aggressive steps against Israel. Many American experts consider this goal to be a priority for Iran.²⁰

The third goal, which is directly related to the first two, is the development of Iran's nuclear program and, ultimately, the creation of a nuclear weapon. It is logical that, in exchange for military assistance, Tehran wants to receive from Moscow the materials, expertise and

¹⁸ Igor Kossov, “How Russia uses Iranian drones to try to overwhelm Ukraine's air defense,” *Kyiv Independent*, October 24, 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/national/russias-gambit-to-exhaust-ukraines-air-defense-with-iranian-kamikaze-drones>

¹⁹ Karen DeYoung, “Iran's Raisi attacks US ‘hegemony’ and ‘militarism’,” *Washington Post*, September 21, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/09/21/raisi-un-condemn-us-israel/>

²⁰ John Hardie and Benham Ben Taleblu, “Iran Is Now at War with Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, October 26, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/26/iran-ukraine-russia-war-drones-missiles-military-advisors-middle-east-nuclear/>

technology necessary for the production of nuclear weapons.²¹ However, the extent to which Russian President Vladimir Putin dares to go in this regard will depend on various factors, including the volume of Iran's military aid and the effectiveness of Iranian arms on the battlefield.

Iran's fourth goal, which is also related to the aforementioned ones, is to take a “respectable” place, along with Russia and China, in the global anti-American/anti-Western coalition. Although Tehran agrees to play the role of a junior partner in this “axis”, at the same time, it tries to raise its value as an ally in order to get the maximum benefit from that coalition. A formal Moscow-Beijing-Tehran military alliance does not yet exist, but Iran wants to join the political and economic associations formed under the leadership of Russia and China. In 2021, the process of accession of Iran to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was initiated, which will be finalized in April 2023. In June 2020, Iran applied for BRICS membership and is also negotiating a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union to replace the 2018 interim preferential trade agreement.²² Iran fully shares Russia's antagonism towards NATO expansion and Putin's interpretation of the reasons for the Russia-Ukraine war, which Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has publicly acknowledged.²³

Iran's fifth goal is to increase its conventional military power, in this case through the development of its military industry. On the one hand, Iran is testing its UAVs in actual combat operations and gathering knowledge for their further improvement; on the other hand, Iran is receiving models of Western weapons captured by Russia in Ukraine, which enables it to study them and manufacture analogues. According to the British media, as part of the Russia-Iran drone deal, Russia delivered to Iran samples of British NLAW anti-tank missiles,

²¹ Natasha Bertrand, “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>

²² John Hardie and Benham Ben Taleblu, “Iran Is Now at War with Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, October 26, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/26/iran-ukraine-russia-war-drones-missiles-military-advisors-middle-east-nuclear/>; Parisa Hafezi, “Iran to join Asian security body led by Russia, China,” *Reuters*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-signs-memorandum-joining-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-tass-2022-09-15/>; “Iran applies to join BRICS group of emerging countries,” *Al Jazeera*, June 28, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/6/28/iran-applies-to-join-brics-group-of-emerging-countries>; Eurasian Economic Commission, “Negotiations on establishing EAEU-Iran free trade area on track,” September 29, 2022, <https://eec.eaeunion.org/en/news/peregovory-po-sozdaniyu-zony-svobodnoy-torgovli-mezhdu-eaes-i-iranom-prodvigayutsya-uspeshno/>

²³ Steve Rosenberg, “Russia's Putin finds keen ally in rare trip to Iran,” *BBC News*, July 20, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-62234183>

US Javelin anti-tank missiles, and Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.²⁴ According to British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace, these missiles do not contain cutting-edge technology,²⁵ but gaining access to them appears to be important for Iran's military industry nonetheless.

Iran's sixth goal is to make an economic profit. As one of the most heavily sanctioned states in the world, the Islamic Republic of Iran is in vital need of bypassing international sanctions, and developing trade and economic relations with Russia, China, and other countries, especially after the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and imposition of a new round of sanctions. The production and export of unmanned aerial vehicles brings economic benefits to Iran. In addition, Iranian drones have made a name for themselves around the world, and, mainly due to their low price, the demand for them in the international arms market may increase – largely from other sanctioned regimes and non-state actors, which will contribute to the further expansion of the Iranian drone industry.²⁶ This form of cooperation with Russia – with neither country conforming to the sanctions imposed on them by the West – is favorable for Iran. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi even expressed hope that such cooperation could neutralize the effects of the American sanctions.²⁷ In exchange for cooperation in the military field, Iran also expects Russia to help in the development of the energy sector, as, due to the Western sanctions, Iran suffers from a lack of modern technology needed for gas extraction and transportation. The Russian President's visit to Tehran coincided with the signing of a memorandum between the National Iranian Oil Company and the Russian state-owned energy corporation Gazprom, through which Russia undertook the responsibility to invest 40 billion US dollars to develop two gas and six oil fields in Iran, as well as liquefied natural gas and gas pipeline projects.²⁸

Thus, by supplying arms to Russia, Iran is trying to achieve several foreign policy, military-strategic, and economic goals at the same time. However, what consequences will this bring

²⁴ Deborah Haynes, "Russia flew in €140m in cash and captured Western weapons to Iran in return for deadly drones, source claims," *Sky News*, November 9, 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/russia-gave-eur140m-and-captured-western-weapons-to-iran-in-return-for-deadly-drones-source-claims-12741742>

²⁵ Deborah Haynes, "UK missiles captured by Russia for Iran 'do not contain cutting-edge technology'," *Sky News*, November 11, 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/uk-missiles-captured-by-russia-for-iran-do-not-contain-cutting-edge-technology-12743890>

²⁶ Steven Feldstein, "The Larger Geopolitical Shift Behind Iran's Drone Sales to Russia," Commentary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 26, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/26/larger-geopolitical-shift-behind-iran-s-drone-sales-to-russia-pub-88268>

²⁷ Maryam Sinaee, "Iran Says Determined to Boost Ties with Russia 'At All Levels'," *Iran International*, September 16, 2022, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202209160361>

²⁸ "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/>

to the Islamic Republic are not yet completely clear. At this point, only a few of those results are evident.

Consequences of Iran's military assistance to Russia

Despite giving a new impetus to the Russian military aggression in Ukraine, it is clear that so far, the Iranian weapons have failed to tip the scale of the war in Russia's favor. Although Ukraine's energy infrastructure was badly damaged, which will cause serious problems for the country in the winter, Ukraine is successfully continuing to resist Russia and has even regained lost territories – for example, the Ukrainian armed forces managed to retake the important administrative center, the city of Kherson, under intense bombardment with Iranian drones by Russia.

Since Iran's bet on Russia's military victory did not pay off, it can be said that the Islamic Republic has not yet achieved any significant success on the path towards its long-term foreign policy goals: the US global influence has not weakened, nor has Iran strengthened its positions in the Middle East; Russia has not yet provided Iran with the kind of assistance that would enable it to produce nuclear weapons, and a formal Russia-China-Iran alliance has yet to be formed.

Although Iran's energy sector and military industry have received some economic benefits from cooperation with Russia, it is still premature to judge the magnitude of the country's economic profit, as Russia has not yet fulfilled all of its investment obligations, and the damage of the new sanctions introduced by the West may offset those benefits. On September 8 and November 15, the US added to the list of sanctions Iranian companies and individuals involved in the production of unmanned aerial vehicles and their supply to Russia.²⁹ On October 20, the European Union and the United Kingdom made similar decisions.³⁰ From September 16, additional Western sanctions were imposed on the high-ranking officials of the Iranian government who were responsible for the violent suppression of mass demonstrations that

²⁹ US Department of Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Iranian Persons Involved in Production of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and Weapon Shipment to Russia," Press Release, September 8, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0940>; US Department of Treasury, "Treasury Targets Actors Involved in Production and Transfer of Iranian Unmanned Aerial Vehicles to Russia for Use in Ukraine," Press Release, November 15, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1104>

³⁰ "EU, UK Announce Sanctions over Iran's Drone Deliveries to Russia," *Radio Free Europe - Radio Liberty*, October 20, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-sanctions-iran-drone-exports-russia/32093051.html>

began over the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian woman arrested by the so-called “morality police”.³¹

Experts tend to have divergent opinions regarding the effectiveness of international sanctions against Iran. This applies not only to the existing Western sanctions, but also to the UN sanctions which were operational before the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement and may be reactivated if the negotiations on restoring this agreement are terminated. The negotiations in Vienna, ongoing since 2021, were already facing serious obstacles, and after August 2022, against the backdrop of Iran's support for Russia's military aggression, they were suspended.³² The US asserts that reviving the Iran nuclear deal is “not [its] focus right now”³³ and that talks have reached an impasse.³⁴ The position of the US, as well as that of France and Great Britain, is that by supplying weapons to Russia, Iran is violating the UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which was adopted on the basis of the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement and prohibits Iran from transferring certain types of weapons to other countries.³⁵ This may become the basis for restoring the international sanctions regime on Iran that existed before 2015.

Some experts speculate that reimposing international sanctions through the “snapback” mechanism will cause marginal or even mere symbolic damage to Iran's economy, and will actually encourage Tehran to take more radical steps.³⁶ Others believe that in the current situation, with Iran's aggressive behavior unchanged, the restoration of pre-2015 sanctions is the only right decision, as this would increase international pressure on Iran; otherwise Iran

³¹ David Gritten, “Mahsa Amini: Protests over woman’s death claim more lives in Iran,” *BBC News*, September 21, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62986057>; U.S. Department of Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Iran’s Morality Police and Senior Security Officials for Violence Against Protesters and the Death of Mahsa Amini,” Press Release, September 22, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0969>; U.S. Department of Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Iranian Leaders Responsible for Internet Shutdown and Violent Crackdown on Peaceful Protests,” Press Release, October 6, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0994>; U.S. Department of Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Iranian Officials and Entities Responsible for Ongoing Crackdown on Protests and Internet Censorship,” Press Release, October 26, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1048>; Leyla Khodabakhshi, “Iran protests: How countries are punishing the morality police,” *BBC News*, October 26, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63374266>

³² Maziar Motamedi, “Will alleged drone sales to Russia impact Iran’s nuclear deal?” *Al Jazeera*, October 24, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/24/could-iran-alleged-drone-sales-to-russia-impact-the-nuclear-deal>

³³ US Department of State, Press Briefing - October 12, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-october-12-2022/>

³⁴ “VOA Interview: John Kirby,” *Voice of America*, October 14, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/voa-interview-john-kirby/6790607.html>

³⁵ US Department of State, Press Briefing - October 17, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-october-17-2022/>

³⁶ Henry Rome and Louis Dugit-Gros, “Snapback Sanctions on Iran: More Bark Than Bite?” *PolicyWatch* 3663, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/snapback-sanctions-iran-more-bark-bite>

will fortify its economy, quash the popular uprisings, and reach the nuclear threshold.³⁷ Moreover, the revival of the Iran nuclear deal would be followed by the cancellation of the sanctions imposed on Iran since 2018, which will be completely inadequate in this situation and will enable Iran's further cooperation with Russia in the fields of military and nuclear energy within the international legal framework.³⁸

It is clear that the Iranian government's recent actions, both abroad and at home, make it impossible for the US to return to negotiations on restoring the Iran nuclear agreement. As a result, US-Iran relations are again taking the form of open confrontation. US President Joe Biden reiterates that he will never allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons,³⁹ but the chances of solving this issue through diplomacy are gradually decreasing. Iran's nuclear program is still moving forward – with or without the nuclear deal. In November, in response to a critical resolution passed by the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iran demonstratively ramped up its uranium enrichment, including at a new nuclear facility located on a hard-to-reach military base.⁴⁰ According to various calculations, if desired, Iran will be able to produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon within just a few months. Russia's help is needed to speed up this process; however, according to the US Intelligence, there is still no indication that Russia has made any contribution to the development of Iran's nuclear program since receiving the drones.⁴¹

In this dangerous situation, undermining Iran's nuclear plans is becoming a national security priority for the United States, as is supporting the popular protests in Iran and interrupting the supply chain of Iranian weapons to Russia.⁴² Furthermore, Iran's actions are prompting the US to pay more attention to the Middle East and form an anti-Iranian coalition with the

³⁷ Richard Goldberg and Andrea Stricker, "If Europe Wants to Sanction Iran, It Knows What to Do," *Foreign Policy*, November 10, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/10/iran-protests-ukraine-russia-war-weapons-sanctions-europe-nuclear-deal-united-nations-security-council/>

³⁸ John Hardie and Benham Ben Taleblu, "Iran Is Now at War with Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, October 26, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/26/iran-ukraine-russia-war-drones-missiles-military-advisors-middle-east-nuclear/>

³⁹ "US will never allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon, Biden tells Israel's Lapid," *Reuters*, August 31, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-israels-lapid-speak-amid-discussions-possible-iran-nuclear-deal-2022-08-31/>

⁴⁰ Maziar Motamedi, "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>

⁴¹ Natasha Bertrand, "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>

⁴² David E. Sanger, "United States Enters a New Era of Direct Confrontation with Iran," *New York Times*, November 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/24/us/politics/iran-protests-ukraine-nuclear-enrichment.html?smid=url-share>

participation of Israel and the Persian Gulf states.⁴³ Among the foreign policy objectives set by the US in this direction may be the expansion of the “Abraham Accords” signed in 2020 between Israel and the four Arab states, and the achievement of a similar agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia,⁴⁴ as well as the strengthening of military cooperation with Saudi Arabia – notwithstanding the problems in bilateral relations, and the October 5 decision by OPEC+ to cut oil production by 2 million barrels per day, which brought economic profit to Russia through increasing the global oil prices.⁴⁵ The US response to Iran’s current support of Russia's military aggression in Ukraine and its use of excessive force against popular protests is still in the process of being formulated, and we should expect new decisions by the US on Iran in the near future.

Thus, despite providing military aid to Russia, Iran failed to ensure Russian victory and Ukrainian defeat in the war, which, as perceived by the Islamic Republic’s leadership, would have amounted to the defeat of the US and the collective West. Iran also failed to increase its influence in the Middle East and, although it received some economic benefits, Iran now faces additional and tougher Western sanctions as well as the suspension of talks on reviving the nuclear deal. Iran's nuclear ambitions have not been tempered, but whether Moscow will help Tehran build nuclear weapons, that is, whether there a deal between Iran and Russia, provisionally titled “drones for nukes”, is not yet clear.

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⁴³ John Hardie and Benham Ben Taleblu, “Iran Is Now at War with Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, October 26, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/26/iran-ukraine-russia-war-drones-missiles-military-advisors-middle-east-nuclear/>

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