

Russian-Iranian Military-Technical Cooperation

By Stephanie Brophy
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On January 23, 2007 Russia confirmed the delivery of 29 Tor-M1 air defense missile systems to Iran.¹ The \$700 million contract was signed at the end of 2005. Iranian service men trained in Russia will operate the Tor-M1 systems.² On February 7, 2007, amidst two days of war games, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards successfully test fired the defense missile system.³ The Tor-M1 missile is intended to defend against anti-radar and anti-cruise missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, gliding air bombs, airplanes, and helicopters; including those equipped with stealth technology. Moscow and Tehran assert that the missiles are strictly for defensive purposes and that the sanctions imposed by United Nations Resolution 1737 do not apply to conventional arms transfers.⁴ Igor Ivanov, Secretary of Russia's Security Council, stated, "Armaments we export are intended exclusively for defense. This applies to Iran. These are not offensive weapons, and they neither pose any threat to neighbors, nor can they destabilize the situation in the region."⁵ For Iran, Russia is a valuable source of military technology that Western states have declined to provide.

Russia defends its sale of anti-aircraft defenses to Iran, and protests the U.S. sanctions on companies doing so. In January 2007 the U.S. government approved economic sanctions against the Russian government's official arms dealer, Rosboronexport, the Tula Instrument-Making Design Bureau and the Kolomna Machine-Building Design Bureau for selling missiles and weapon goods to Iran and Syria. The sanctions ban the companies from doing business with U.S. companies for two years. Ariel Cohen of the Heritage Foundation argues that Moscow has two strategic goals in maintaining a military relationship with Iran. The first goal is to keep its own military-industrial complex solvent. The second goal is to build a coalition in Eurasia to counterbalance U.S. military superiority.⁶ Brenda Schaffer, author of *Partners in Need: The Strategic Relationship of Russia and Iran* believes there are three main reasons for Russian-Iranian cooperation: 1) to prevent U.S. hegemony in world affairs, 2) to maintain a "multi-polar" world, and 3) to undermine U.S. efforts to sideline or boycott either of them.

Russian-Iranian military-technical cooperation is not a recent phenomenon. Russia has sold Iran numerous major weapons systems (including tanks, air-to-air missiles, and combat aircraft) since 1992 (though the initial deals were struck in the late 1980s). As part of an agreement with the United States, Russia halted its advanced weapons sales to Iran between

¹ Tor-M1 is a tactical all weather air defense missile that can detect and identify up to 48 targets simultaneously. It has the capability to *attack* two targets simultaneously. It has a range of 7.2 -12 miles. The Tor-M1 is manufactured by the electromechanical plant Kupol in Izhevsk, Russia.

² "Iranian Parallels." *Defense and Security*. December 1, 2006.

³ Pouladi, Farhad. "Iran Test-Fires Russian Air Defence Missiles." *Agent France-Presse*. February 7, 2008.

⁴ U.N. Resolution 1737, unanimously adopted on December 23, 2006, imposes restrictions on Iran's trade in sensitive nuclear materials and technology. Res. 1737 can be seen at <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/681/42/PDF/N0668142.pdf?OpenElement>

⁵ "Ivanov Defends Russian Arms Sales to Iran." *United Press International*. January 31, 2007.

⁶ Cohen, Ariel. "Countering Russian-Iranian Military Cooperation." April 5, 2001 at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/BG1425.cfm>

1995 and 2000. In 2000, after a visit to Iran by then Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev, the two sides stated that they were prepared to exchange information on security threats and military doctrine, and to begin an era of military-technical cooperation.⁷ At the 2000 press conference they also stated that Iranian military officers would train at Russian academies. The dollar figures are instructive. Between 1998 and 2001 official Russian arms sales to Iran totaled \$300 million. Between 2002 and 2005 the number skyrocketed to \$1.7 billion.

Russia has also armed the Iranian Navy. Iran has three submarines of Project 887EKM that were supplied by Russia in 1992, in June 1993 and in November 1996. In the summer of 2005 it was reported that Russia would repair and modernize the Iranian project 887EKM. It was expected that all the major components that already exceeded their life expectancy would be replaced. In addition, the new anti-ship missile complex Club-S was to be installed on these submarines.⁸ The Club-S missile system can be launched from standard torpedo tubes, from a depth of 130 feet, cruise autonomously along a selected flight trajectory and, at a speed of 240 miles per second, at an altitude of 70 feet, and when approaching the target, drops to a sea skimming level of 20 - 30 feet. The missile is equipped with an 880 pound warhead. The submarine repairs were to take place in both Russia and Iran. It was also reported that Russia was to deliver a patrol cutter to the Iranian Navy.⁹ Subsequently, in April 2006 the Iranians claimed to have tested a high speed torpedo capable of destroying warships or submarines.

A Congressional Research Service report, released October 23, 2006 stated that in addition to the 29 Tor-M1 defense systems, Russia agreed to upgrade Iran's Su-24 and Mig-29 aircraft. They also agreed to upgrade Iran's T-72 main battle tanks. The report stated, "As the U.S. focuses increasing attention on Iran's efforts to enhance its nuclear as well as conventional military capabilities, major arms transfers to Iran continue to be a matter of concern."¹⁰

Russia, however, has not made all weapons systems available to Iran. They have refused to sell the Iranians the S-300 air defense missile systems.¹¹ The S-300SP missile is a more powerful long range missile than the Tor-M1. It can intercept enemy aircraft from 90-180 miles away. Some argue that the mitigating factor in the Russian refusal to sell this higher grade system to the Iranians is to prevent further tarnishing their international reputation. The \$700 million dollar Tor-M1 contract already elicited international condemnation.

The Belarusians, however, signed a contract with Russia in 2005 for an unspecified number of the most advanced version of the S-300SP missiles. At the time of the contract signing, the Belarusian Defense Ministry stated that the purchase was for the purpose of raising

⁷ Abdo, Geneive. "Military and Technical Cooperation Pledged: Russia Renounces Ban on Arms Sales to Iran." *International Herald Tribune*. December 29, 2000.

⁸ "Russia will Equip Iranian Subs With Missiles." *Kommersant*. July 4, 2005.

⁹ "Rossija i Iran podpisali kontrakt na postavku rossijskih ViVT na summu bolee 1 mlrd doll," ARMS-TASS 02.12.2005.

¹⁰ CRS Report RL 33696. "Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 1998-2005." at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RL33696.pdf>

¹¹ "Rossija ne provodila peregovorov s Iranom o prodazhe S-300," *Soobshhenie RIA Novosti*

the effectiveness of the Belarusian air defense and Air Force, and the unified air defense of all the CIS countries.¹² Delivery is supposed to have occurred last year, 2006.

Belarus is believed to have agreed to transfer the missiles to Iran. In January 2007, a memorandum of understanding on defense cooperation was signed between Belarus and Iran. The Belarusian Defense Ministry stated that the cooperation between the two countries was in line with international law, and that it does not violate the sanctions imposed against Iran by UN Resolution 1737. On January 21, 2007, Belarusian Defense Minister Leonid Maltsev arrived in Tehran for a two day visit. He met with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Defense Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar. Issues of international security, prospects for bilateral cooperation, and experience in forming national defense forces were discussed. They agreed on reciprocal visits by expert delegations, military and technical cooperation, interaction in staff training, and consultations at the level of defense ministers. The Belarusian Defense Ministry stated, "The development of bilateral contacts with Iran in the military sphere is being realized by the Belarusian side on the basis of its national interests and in strict accordance with the current norms of international law."¹³ However, some argue that Moscow is using Belarus as an arms trade proxy.¹⁴

Elevating Iran's air defense capabilities significantly alters any U.S. military engagement. And Russia continues to provide Iran with arms that do just that. Iranian possession of the S-300SP missile defense system would pose a greater challenge to United States combat strikes. If Russia were to overtly sell the longer range, higher power S-300 system to Iran, tensions would undoubtedly increase not insignificantly between Moscow and Washington. In this light it is plausible that Belarus is the intermediary in the transfer.

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¹² "Belarus Hunts Terrorists on its Border with the Baltic Countries." *Kommersant*. September 27, 2005 at http://www.kommersant.com/tree.asp?rubric=2&node=12&doc_id=612388

¹³ "Belarus Vows to Increase Military Cooperation with Iran." *Associated Press*. January 24, 2007.

¹⁴ To see one such argument visit: "Lukashenka Courts Tehran." *Jane's Intelligence Digest*. April 15, 2006 at <http://www.militaryphotos.net/forums/showthread.php?t=78445>