



# Russia Policy Monitor No. 2625

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**Related Categories:** Arms Control and Proliferation; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Islamic Extremism; Military Innovation; Science and Technology; Terrorism; NATO; Iran; Middle East; Russia; Ukraine

## RUSSIA AND IRAN: A BURGEONING MILITARY ALLIANCE

Since the start of Russia's war on Ukraine more than two years ago, Moscow's long-running strategic partnership with the Islamic Republic of Iran has undergone a sea change. In prior years, the Kremlin had been the indisputable senior partner in the relationship, using its political clout and diplomatic cachet to lessen Iran's international isolation and dilute Western sanctions imposed on Tehran for its support for terrorism and pursuit of a nuclear capability. Since February of 2022, however, the balance in the relationship has shifted appreciably, with Iran's clerical regime emerging as a crucial source of support for a Russia whose military has consistently struggled on the Ukrainian battlefield.

At the heart of this revamped partnership, U.S. officials say, is a steady stream of Iranian "attack drones" and associated know-how that has flowed from Tehran to Moscow. In its recent assessment to Congress, the United States Central Command highlighted that collaboration between the two countries has expanded into a "nascent military partnership" entailing the Iranian provision to Russia of at least 1,000 attack drones and "dozens" of multipurpose UAVs to date.

The military dimension of the relationship "really started when [Russia] asked for them to provide the one-way attack UAS, specifically the Shahed-136," CENTCOM chief Gen. Michael "Eric" Kurilla recently laid out for the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee. Iran "started providing complete systems, and they built an actual factory in Russia, and those same Shahed-136 — a very capable system — are now going at a rate of over 100 a week from Russia into Ukraine." (C4isr.net, March 27, 2024)

## TAJIK NATIONALS LINKED TO ISIS TERROR IN MOSCOW

Prior to the March 22nd Islamist massacre at Moscow's Crocus City Hall, both Iran and the United States provided Russia with intelligence warnings about a possible terrorist attack. The Islamic State took responsibility for the attack, which claimed the lives of at least 144 individuals, and the terror group's Afghan wing, known as ISIS-K, has been linked to the attack, as well as to an earlier one carried out against Iran. Tajik nationals have been found to have been involved in both incidents, highlighting ISIS-K's aggressive recruitment tactics in the Central Asian nation of Tajikistan. (Reuters, April 1, 2024)

## MOUNTING NUCLEAR THREATS AGAINST NATO

In multiple recent broadcasts, pro-Kremlin Russian propagandist and television host Vladimir Solovyov has openly suggested that Russia launch nuclear strikes on two NATO members, the UK and France. Solovyov's proposals reflect a recurring theme in Russian discourse since the start of the Ukraine war, with Russian authorities — or their political fellow-travelers — seeking to use harsh nuclear rhetoric and strategic brinksmanship to compel changes in the support for Ukraine being provided by NATO member states. Russian President Vladimir Putin himself has repeatedly affirmed Russia's readiness to use nuclear weapons in defense of its "territorial integrity," and Solovyov's remarks are of a piece with official Kremlin messaging. They coincide with escalating tensions between Russia and NATO, and follow French President Emmanuel Macron's remarks regarding possible direct NATO involvement in Ukraine. (Newsweek, April 1, 2024)

## A DEEPER RUSSIAN FOOTPRINT IN SYRIA

Russia may be deeply involved in Ukraine, but the Kremlin is also simultaneously expanding its strategic footprint in another theater: Syria. Syrian opposition news outlet *Enab Baladi* reports that the Russian military has erected a new military police post near the Golan Heights, proximate to the buffer zone separating Israeli and Syrian forces. News regarding the new installation, Russia's third this year alone, was provided by Major General Yury Popov, Deputy Chief of the Russian Center for Reconciliation of the Opposing Parties in Syria. Popov stated that the move was part of Russian efforts to oversee the situation along the so called "Bravo Line" and ensure a preservation of the ceasefire agreement between Syria and Israel. (*Enab Baladi*, April 2, 2024)

[EDITORS' NOTE: The new installation, news of which has also appeared in Russian news agency TASS, represents a reinvestment of Russian resources and attention in the Syrian front. Over the past two years, the withdrawal of Russian forces from southern Syria, as Kremlin attention turned to Ukraine, enabled Iranian militias to occupy the area, leading to regular Israeli airstrikes on Syrian territory. Amid heightened regional tensions, Moscow appears concerned that the spreading disorder could embroil the Assad regime in Damascus as well, thereby potentially invalidating the investments Russia has made there to date.]