



Russia gets its first drones from Iran as the two countries strengthen ties

Description

RUSSIA: Sharing a common enemy in the U.S., Moscow is looking to Tehran for help. But there are technical issues with the first Iranian drones it has received, U.S. officials said.

Russia has picked up the first batch of [Iranian](#) drones for its war in Ukraine but it has run into technical problems in the initial tests of the unmanned aircraft, U.S. officials said Tuesday.

Facing a protracted war in Ukraine and a wall of Western sanctions, Russia is turning to Iran to bolster its military and keep its economy afloat, as both countries' interests converge.

Barred from importing Western technology and with China wary of openly breaching U.S. sanctions, Russia has sought out drones from Iran to fill a major gap in its arsenal, as the Russian military has failed to develop combat drones able to strike targets behind enemy lines.

Russian cargo planes loaded up Mohajer-6 and Shahed-series unmanned aerial vehicles over several days this month at an Iranian airfield and then ferried the drones to Russia, three U.S. officials told NBC News. The delivery is part of Russia's plans to import "hundreds" of drones from Iran, they said.

U.S. officials, however, said the drones transferred to Russia have already experienced "numerous failures," though they did not offer more details about the nature of the technical problems.

The [Washington Post first reported](#) on the drone shipment and subsequent technical difficulties.



The Iranian U.N. mission and the Russian Embassy in Washington did not respond to a request for comment.

The partnership between Russia and Iran has been building for more than a decade but it has accelerated since Russia invaded Ukraine in February, with Tehran providing armed drones to Russia and Moscow launching an Iranian satellite, according to U.S. officials.

The trend has raised concerns in Washington and elsewhere, though it remains unclear whether the partnership will evolve into a full-fledged alliance or alter Moscow's relatively friendly relations with Iran's foes in the region, including Israel, former U.S. officials and experts said.

Although Russian and Iranian military and intelligence officers have worked closely together in Syria in support of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, Iran's decision to provide weapons to Russia for a war in another region is unprecedented, said John Brennan, a former director of the CIA.

"That's new. I haven't seen Iran provide that to Russia before. We're talking about significant support," said Brennan, who is also a senior NBC News and MSNBC national security analyst.

Russia earlier this month launched an Iranian satellite into orbit, which Western officials believe could be used for possible intelligence gathering in Ukraine or elsewhere. Iran denied that was the case and said the satellite would be used for scientific research related to agriculture.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered a wave of economic sanctions from Washington and its European allies, placing Moscow in a position similar to Iran, which for years has been shut out of Western economies and the international financial system. Since the war began, Iran has become the top purchaser of Russia's grain, and the two countries have announced agreements to bolster trade, including a \$40 billion deal to enlist Russian help to develop Iran's gas fields.

Both countries share a common foe and a shared goal of circumventing financial and other sanctions, with Iran accumulating years of experience trying to undercut U.S. measures. With Moscow and Tehran essentially barred from the SWIFT international bank messaging system, the two countries have agreed to use domestic messaging services as an alternative, according to Iranian media.

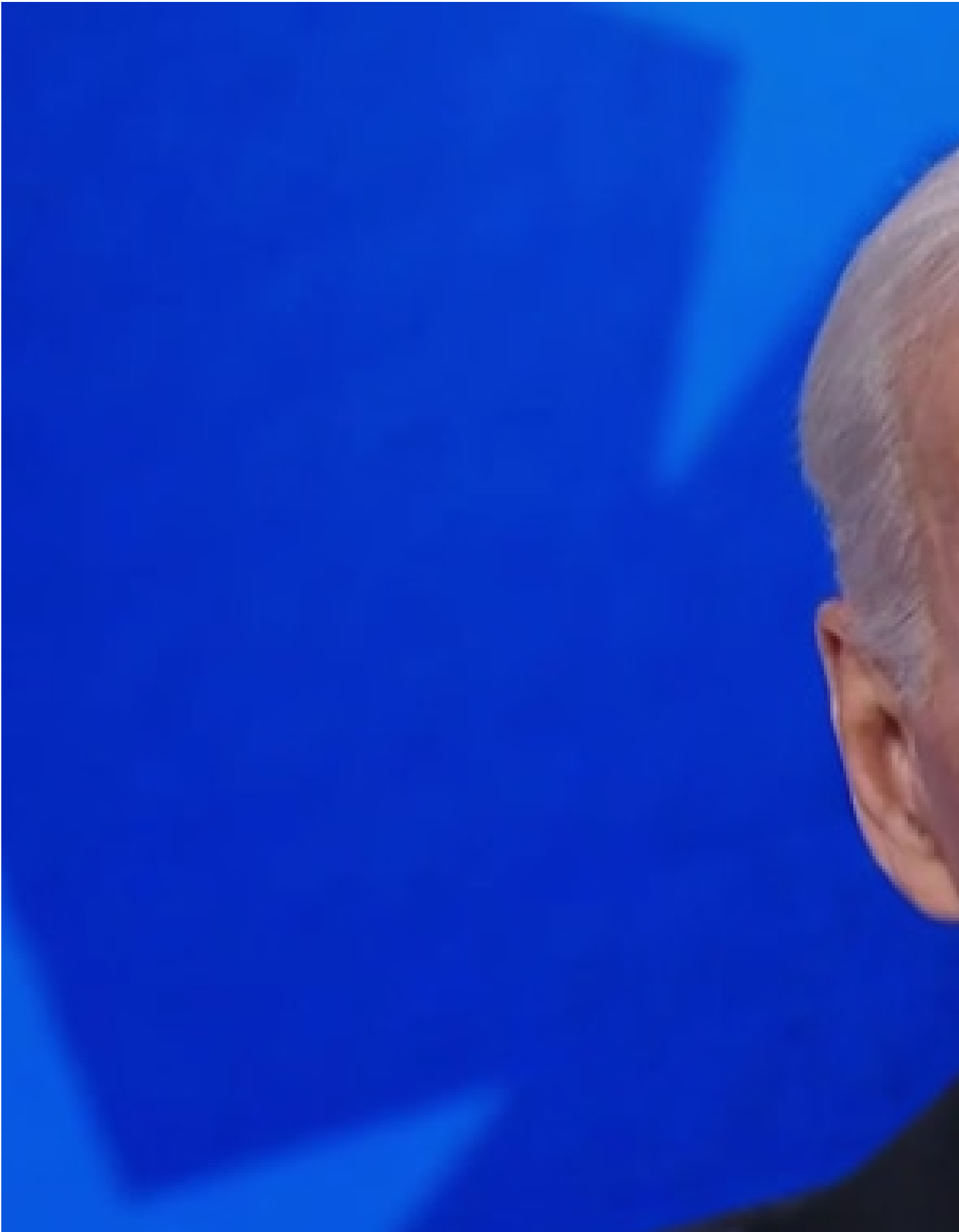
One foreign government official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive security matters, said the Russian-Iranian cooperation was now more than just a marriage of convenience.

"Relations between Russia and Iran are assuming a more serious character, a more strategic character than before because the calculation has changed," the official said.

The official said that "the very fact that Iran is going to provide drones to attack Ukrainians is a very important development, which cannot be ignored," and added that Washington was still weighing how to respond.

The White House has sought to expose the Russian-Iranian military cooperation, publicly revealing Iran's plans to deliver "hundreds" of drones — including weapons-capable unmanned aircraft — before President Joe Biden's July visit to the Middle East. The administration also released satellite imagery of a Russian delegation visiting Kashan Airfield in central Iran on June 8 and July 5, where some of Iran's more advanced drones were on display.

Last month, when asked about drone deliveries to Russia, Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani said technological cooperation between the two countries preceded the conflict in Ukraine.



Military experts said that Iran has built up a significant drone fleet, including “kamikaze” drones, that would fill a gap in Russia’s armed forces.

The U.S. government believes Russia plans to use the drones on the battlefield in Ukraine and that the drones are capable of conducting air-to-surface attacks and electronic warfare, U.S. officials said.

U.S. officials say they are watching Russian-Iranian cooperation closely. One senior administration official said the drone deal suggested Russia was struggling to maintain its military campaign in Ukraine.

“We think that really demonstrates some desperation on the Russian side, in terms of the state of its military,” the senior administration official said.

Russia’s troubled performance on the battlefield in Ukraine has damaged Moscow’s efforts to promote the Russian defense industry to governments in the Middle East, according to Brennan.

The Russian experience in Ukraine “has undermined and undercut their arguments about just how effective these weapons systems are, given that the Ukrainians have been able to withstand the onslaught. It has hurt their image as a military supplier and developer of sophisticated weaponry,” he said.

Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior foreign policy adviser to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said in July that Russia had established itself as a reliable partner for Iran, and that the Islamic Republic should give up trying to accommodate the West and instead look to Moscow for support and shared strategic interests.



Metin Aktas / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images file

CIA Director William Burns said last month that both Iran and Russia are looking for ways to help each other evade sanctions and “to demonstrate that they have options.”

“The reality is that the Russians and Iranians need each other right now,” he told Andrea Mitchell of NBC News at the Aspen Security Forum in July.

But Burns said the two oil-rich countries are economic competitors and historical rivals, and that there were limits to the partnership.

Despite Moscow’s alignment with Iran, Russia so far has maintained friendly relations with Tehran’s adversaries in the Middle East, including Israel, which has enjoyed a pragmatic relationship with Russia. Although Russia waged an air war against Syrian rebels in support of the Damascus regime, it has never tried to prevent Israel from carrying out repeated military strikes against Iranian or Iranian-backed forces in Syria over the past decade.

But Russia’s growing cooperation with Iran has raised the possibility that Moscow could end its understanding with Israel, though there is no evidence such a move is imminent or that Israel’s freedom of action has been curtailed, former U.S. officials said.

“I really don’t think it’s in either of their interests to upset the apple cart there,” said Douglas London, a retired CIA officer from the agency’s clandestine service and the author of “The Recruiter: Spying and the Lost Art of American Intelligence.”

In May, after Israeli warplanes attacked targets in northwestern Syria, Russia fired anti-aircraft missiles toward the Israeli jets, according to Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz, [who confirmed an Israeli media account of the incident in July](#).

Gantz called it a “one-off incident” and said the Israeli jets were never in danger as the Russian missiles had not locked onto the planes.

Since the May episode, Israel has continued to conduct strikes inside Syria without any reports of warning shots from Russia. Last week, Israel struck a warehouse containing hundreds of Iranian-made missiles in the Syrian city of Masyaf, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based opposition war monitoring group.

The Israeli Embassy in Washington declined to comment when asked about Israeli strikes in Syria.

Russia’s increasing cooperation with Iran could also complicate diplomacy outside the Ukraine conflict, including efforts to revive the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. U.S. officials say the talks have made some progress over the past few weeks. But some skeptics of the deal argue that deepening ties between Moscow and Tehran could mean that if sanctions were lifted on Iran, the regime would be better placed to help Russia counter the effects of its economic isolation.

The senior Biden administration official said that argument “doesn’t hold up.”

Any Iranian bank or company that tried to help Russia violate sanctions would be sanctioned and the nuclear deal, known as the JCPOA, would not prevent the strict enforcement of sanctions targeting

Russia.

“Iran can try to help Russia evade sanctions without the JCPOA or with the JCPOA. And we’ll obviously look for ways to frustrate that regardless,” the official said.

By Dan De Luce, Josh Lederman and Ed Flanagan

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