



Middle East Spotlight

Iran's Russian Friend

Not only has Russia long been Iran's largest conventional arms supplier—selling it fighter jets, tanks and long-range missiles, but Moscow has also partnered with Tehran to develop sensitive nuclear technology. This Iran-Russia atomic cooperation comes while much of the world is trying to isolate Tehran for its rejection of multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions demanding that it end its nuclear work.

The light-water reactor in the southern Iranian city of Bushehr represents the centerpiece of Russian-Iranian nuclear cooperation. Moscow first agreed to help Iran construct the reactor in 1995. Since then—and especially in the years following the 9/11 attacks—the Bushehr project has raised concerns about nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

Moscow has attempted to allay fears of an Iranian nuclear weapons program by committing to take back all spent fuel from Bushehr that could be used for bomb making. However, some scientists fear that Iran could one day extract weapons grade plutonium from the Bushehr reactor. In addition, some U.S. officials worry that the Russians and Iranians are using Bushehr as a cover for the transfer of other sensitive technology.

There are also concerns that knowledge gained by Iranian scientists working at Bushehr could further Iran's illicit nuclear program at other sites in the country, such as Natanz, Isfahan and Arak. As part of Russia's work with Iran, Russia has trained about 700 Iranian nuclear engineers.

For years now, the United States has been working with her allies to isolate Iran through sanctions, divestment and other financial and diplomatic means. Throughout this effort Russia has hampered these labors, using its veto power to water down U.N. sanctions resolutions and drawing out negotiations when Iran has failed to meet deadlines.

Russia remains a problem outside the Security Council as well. During negotiations with Iran in Geneva Russia neglected to censure Iranian diplomats for their stalling tactics. Instead, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that there should be “no artificial limits” imposed on Iran. Downplaying any sense of urgency, Russia's U.N. ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, later added, “We haven't set any deadlines for their response.”

The United States and our allies need to aggressively spearhead international efforts to impose tougher sanctions on Iran to isolate and pressure the regime to change course. Russia must come on board and discontinue her obstruction of international efforts and end her nuclear cooperation with Iran, who remains a nuclear outlaw.