

## Iran — Heart of Regional Crossroads



Photo:

VostockPhoto

An Iranian female supporter of the Iranian conservative group stands in front of a huge election billboard during election campaign in Tehran, Iran, 23 February 2016

On the 26th of February, 2016 Iranians will vote for a 290-member Parliament and an 88-member Assembly of Experts — one of the most important national political events. Will this vote have an influence on the relations with the Western countries? Is Iran capable of fixing falling oil prices or Iranian oil will make matters worse? How will Iran's role in the regional security framework change? These and other questions are tackled in an expert interview with **Mahmood Shoori**, member of the scientific council of Institute of Iran and Eurasia Studies (IRAS).

**How the result of this vote can change the stabilizing relations between Teheran and Western countries? Especially in light of the Iranian nuclear program?**

Undoubtedly, the result of votes for the Parliament and the Assembly of Experts can influence significantly the internal political situation, but its impact on foreign policy wouldn't be paramount. The Assembly of Experts does not play any major role in the realm of foreign policy, although its members have a considerable political weight in the country and their statements could be influential. Also, the Parliament cannot legally interfere with the decisions made in the realm of foreign policy and their implementation, although it can ratify some binding laws for the government. Thus, the executive branch tries to interact with the Parliament in this field. In addition, the Parliament has the right to impeach the President and ministers. As a result, the role of the Parliament in the realm of foreign policy is negative. However, there are three scenarios for the election: 1) the victory of Rouhani's supporters; 2) the victory of Rouhani's opponents; and 3) a balanced Parliament. Among these three only the realization of the second scenario is the least probable one, in which case the Parliament may set up serious obstacles for interaction with the West. Of course, in this regard the established relations with the West will have a decisive effect. If any of the Western countries put Iran under pressure or do not comply by their commitments as stipulated in the JPCOA, under different pretexts, the opposition groups will do all they can to force Rouhani government to adopt harsher measures towards the West. Given the current situation, it is likely that the future Parliament will be composed of forces supporting the Rouhani government and moderate opposition. In other words, the extremist groups won't get any seats in the new Parliament.



*Mahmood Shoori*

***Do you think the Iranian role in the Middle East security framework can be modified in the coming few years? How will it change? Especially given the Syrian deadlock.***

Throughout the last decade Western powers have made the security situation in the Middle East extremely complicated, which Iran does not welcome. Since its establishment Iran has been always threatened by southern and western neighbors. In fact, in addition to imposing direct sanctions on Iran the West has threatened it through its regional allies. Therefore, Iran has the right to cooperate militarily with other countries in the framework of international regulation to ensure its national security. Iran has sent some military consultants to Syria following the invitation of Damask. When current of next legally elected government in Syria do not need them, Iran will call them back. Unfortunately, the most important feature of the existing situation in Syria is that this country has become a point of confrontation of different actors who do not abide by clear and just rules of game. Under these conditions, the future is more than vague. It is clear that Iran will not set aside its goals and principles and will go against every ambitious and unilateral approach to shape the future regional order. As long as countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey acknowledge that the only way to build regional stability and peace is to take into account all security concerns, it is unlikely that Iran will change its course of action. Contrary to Turkey and Saudi Arabia, Iran never wanted to make power equations in the Middle East without these countries. But since they suppose that they are linked to Western powers and NATO, they are entitled to set the agenda for the whole region.



*EPA / ANGELO CARCONI / Vostock Photo*

[\*Iran Is Making a Comeback\*](#)

***The lifting of sanctions has triggered an avalanche of economic contracts struck between Teheran and European economies. Is it a remedy for hunger driven Iranian economy or national reforms are still much needed?***

Iran is not so naïve as to believe that positive changes in Iranian economy will be possible through trade contracts. Before imposing sanctions on Iran, many examples of such cooperation existed between Iran and some Western countries. Of course, after more than one decade of heavy sanctions Iranian economy is much interested in attracting foreign investments or advanced technology but the main economic orientation of the country is based on internal assets and resources in the framework of the resistance economy. Economic cooperation with some Western countries may resolve problems regarding everyday life but it is not an instant remedy.

***Do you believe that Russian companies may perform worthy rivals to European and American on Iranian market? In what fields?***

In my opinion, the fields of cooperation between Iran and Russia, on the one hand, and Iran and the West, on the other hand, are different. In many fields, Westerners have not enough political will to cooperate with Iran. For example, it is unlikely that Western powers would want to cooperate with Iran in building nuclear power plants. Also, this would be the case of military cooperation or transfer of sensitive technologies. It is evident that Russia cannot compete with the West in the Iranian consumers market, but it definitely can have a significant presence in Iranian market in terms of energy, railways, steel, and even aerospace industries. Unfortunately, the major obstacle for the expansion of Iran-Russia economic relations is the lack of necessary capital for fully taking advantage of economic capabilities available in the two countries.



*REUTERS/Faisal Al Nasser*

[\*A Clash of Titans: Saudi-Iran Diplomatic Dispute\*](#)

***How much gain can Iran extract from cheap oil? What is going to change with the Iranian oil flooding the world market?***

Iran does not seek to supply cheap oil to the market. At least, some of Iranian officials have denied such a plan. Of course, it is likely that Iran makes a more attractive offer on the world market in the short term, but Iran does not regard the current oil price as real and for this reason it will do its best to bring the oil prices to an adequate level. Unfortunately, it is not possible for oil exporting countries to act jointly due to their political rivalry. In this regard, like-minded countries such as Iran, Venezuela, Russia and Iraq should interact with each other. Iran's priority in the current situation is to regain its status on the world energy market. However, Iran does not seek to do this at the expense of the oil prices.

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## Baghdad Meetings: On the Results of Russian Delegation's Breakthrough Visit to Iraq



*Photo:*

*REUTERS/Khalid al Mousily*

*Iraq's Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari speaks during a news conference with Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin in Baghdad, Iraq February 11, 2016*

The February 11, 2016 [visit](#) of the Russian High Governmental Delegation to the Republic of Iraq is a remarkable event. It definitely stands out among all the bilateral meetings and negotiations to have taken place between the two countries. What makes the visit so significant is the fact that it is largely a breakthrough event: for the first time in many years, it was conducted in the best traditions of the long-lost USSR–Iraq friendship and it significantly boosted hopes for a new chapter to be started in the modern history of Russia–Iraq relations.

Undoubtedly, the bulk of the credit must go to Russian diplomacy, which attaches great importance to the process of rapprochement with Iraq and seeks to restore, as much as possible, Russia–Iraq relations to their former level in various fields, from military-technical cooperation to cultural exchange. Moscow's intentions are most earnest. This is much is clear from the delegation itself, which included around 100 government representatives and business leaders.

It is significant that the delegation was headed by Dmitry Rogozin, Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation. Rogozin, who has held the position of Chairperson of the Intergovernmental Russia-Iraq Committee since autumn 2014, essentially oversees the Iraqi direction of Russia's foreign policy. The Deputy Prime Minister took to the task with gusto and intelligence, achieving significant results in a short period of time. It is under his supervision that bilateral contacts have been intensified at different levels. [Trade volume](#) between the two countries increased tenfold over the span of two years, reaching \$2 billion in 2015. Great strides have been made in military-technical cooperation, with Russia and Iraq signing a large number of arms contracts totalling about \$4.2 billion. Both the visit to Baghdad itself and the preparations for it are Rogozin's great diplomatic debut in Iraq.

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The agenda of the two-day visit was very extensive. It included bilateral negotiations on an extremely broad range of issues, as well as the first [meeting](#) of the Russia–Iraq Intergovernmental Commission for eight years, which resulted in the development of a roadmap for bilateral relations in the near future. Four topics dominated the negotiations in Baghdad: the participation of Russian companies in developing Iraq's electric power industry; interaction in the oil and gas sector; intensifying trade in animal products; and searching for new areas of, and opportunities for, military-technical cooperation. It should be emphasized that, compared to the previous years, such a broad range of promising areas of Russia–Iraq relations is indeed an impressive breakthrough for Russia, and it should open up a qualitatively new stage in Russia–Iraq relations.



*REUTERS/Abdalahman Ismail*  
[The Middle East between the U.S. and Russia:  
Potential Traps for Moscow](#)

However, given the current complicated situation, the question is whether Moscow will be able to build on this success and implement the agreements achieved in full.

It is important to notice in this respect that, unfortunately, despite all the pomp of the visit and the overloaded agenda, a serious problem exists between Russia and Iraq and that will be difficult to overcome – namely, the current lack of real possibilities and objective conditions for developing full-scale comprehensive cooperation between the two countries. The reality of international relations in the Middle East today is such that Russia and Iraq have trouble finding common ground. Iraq, which is virtually a failed state, with a ruined economy and industry, is not able to offer Russia economic benefits or the high-quality products that Russia needs. Russia, by contrast, has much to offer Iraq, but has so far been unable to gain free access to the Iraq market, which is a special U.S. economic zone dominated largely by western companies. We could recall that the Americans did not allow Russian oil companies into Iraq for several years.

### Why does Russia need Iraq?

Both the visit to Baghdad itself and the preparations for it are Rogozin's great diplomatic debut in Iraq.

Clearly, Russia's current policy with regard to Iraq is largely linked to solving its own domestic problems, which have arisen as a result of economic sanctions and crisis conditions. Conceptually, this policy is derived from the new Russian strategy of overcoming the crisis, a strategy developed by Rogozin. The essence of his policy is that the military-industrial complex can and must become the driving force of Russia's economy. Rogozin, who is also Vice-Chair of the Military-Industrial Commission of the Russian Federation, is deeply convinced that the military-industrial complex will be the driving force that help Russia overcome the crisis.

Military-technical cooperation with Iraq has thus taken on strategic and vital significance for Russia. Iraq is one of Russia's largest partners in military-technical cooperation. Currently, Iraq is the second-largest buyer of Russian arms. In 2014, Russia's arms exports exceeded [\\$15 billion](#), with Iraq accounting for \$1.7 billion of this sum, or 11 per cent of all arms exports.



*RIA Novosti*

### [Russia in a Changing Middle East](#)

In 2015, the final shipment of Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air and anti-aircraft artillery weapon systems was delivered to Iraq from Russia. Naturally, the question of new military contracts with Iraq moved to the forefront. And that appears to be the principal goal for the Russian delegation's visit to Iraq. Obviously, it was necessary to test the waters at the highest level for the possibilities of further military-technical cooperation in the context of the U.S. sanctions. The problem is that Rostec State Corporation companies that export Russian arms were included in the sanctions list. In 2015, when Russia's arms exports to Iraq peaked, several other Russian defence companies were included in the revised sanctions list. This complicates Russia's task significantly, and casts serious doubt on the possibility of cooperation between Russia and Iraq developing at the same pace.

Therefore, Rogozin has repeatedly voiced Moscow's principal argument, which could influence the Iraqi government's stance on the issue. Speaking both in Baghdad and in Moscow, he has frequently [stated](#) that it was thanks to Russian-made weapons that the Iraqi army has been able to push Islamic State back. But will that argument work? In fact, most of the Iraq territories that were liberated in 2015 were done so largely by the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution of the Republic of Iran, led by General Qasem Soleimani and supported by the international coalition led by the United States and Iran. Iraq's puppet army, largely financed by the Pentagon, is incapable of conducting major warfare, its principal function being to suppress domestic riots and unrest. Its ineptitude is evident, as dozens of towns and villages have surrendered to the jihadists without a fight.

Why does Iraq need Russia?



*RIA Novosti :*  
[Russia in a Changing Middle East](#)

General diplomatic courtesy aside, it must be stated frankly that the current Iraqi government is guarded in its attitude towards Russia's desire for rapprochement. The Iraqi media is a case in point. The scale and level of the Russian delegation notwithstanding, most Iraqi newspapers, unlike their Russian counterparts, ran only short pieces and comments on the signing of the Russia-Iraq agreement on increasing trade volume. Ibrahim al-Jaafari, Iraq's Minister of Foreign Affairs, notified the Iraqi public that an agreement on economic and electric power industry cooperation had been signed with Russia, without being particularly emphatic or gushing about it.

It should be noted that this attitude on the part of the Iraqi authorities is quite logical. Iraq is not the same state it had been prior to 2003. Firstly, Iraq is now headed by those political forces which had been cruelly repressed by the previous regime, which Russia had actively supported. Secondly, Iraq is going through a deep political, financial and economic crisis. It is a bankrupt state which is utterly dependent on investments and loans from the United States and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Thirdly, all of Iraq's state property has been privatized by American companies.

The reality of international relations in the Middle East today is such that Russia and Iraq have trouble finding common ground.

It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that, despite many months of preparations, consultations and extensive coordination, the results of the Russian delegation's visit to Iraq are in fact fairly modest: a roadmap, a few agreements on cooperation in the electric power industry and on relatively small exports of meat from Russia. On the other hand, there is no need to be excessively disappointed. Though small, it is a true victory for Russia's economic diplomacy. In order to act on this success and to develop it further, Russian diplomats should, in the nearest future, persevere and work hard on overcoming all the hurdles on that harsh and difficult path to true rapprochement with Iraq.

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## A Diagnosis from Munich



*Photo:*  
/ Vostock Photos  
Munich Security Conference Chairman  
Wolfgang Ischinger, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry  
Medvedev, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls

Last weekend, politicians and scholars from all over the world gathered at the Munich Security Conference to discuss global security issues, or, to be precise, the severe lack thereof. Most of the attendees agreed that we have to work together to untie the tangled knot of current threats to peace and stability, with the bulk of responsibility falling on the shoulders of the leading global players – the United States, the European Union, Russia and China. However, we still seem incapable of presenting a collective response even to the most fundamental threats.

Regulars of the MSC remember President Putin's famous Munich Speech of 2007 very well. Observers would then often refer to the speech as one manifesting a strategic turn in Russia's foreign policy and a challenge to the United States and the West. I believe this interpretation of the Munich Speech to be deeply flawed. Nine years ago the President was trying to warn Russia's partners of where we can find ourselves if we disregard fundamental norms of international law, rely on unilateral action and military force as a way of resolving issues instead of seeking political solutions, and let our leaders be irresponsible and arrogant.

All that is left for us to do today is lament the fact that Russia's voice was not heard: many of the concerns expressed by the Russian leader have become a harsh reality. In the nine years since the Munich Speech, the world has not become a safer, more stable or just place. And this goes for the West as well, including the United States. Our will to work together has not only weakened, it has sunk to a historical low.



[www.securityconference.de](http://www.securityconference.de): [Snow is Still White in the Fields... Personal Notes on the Margins of the Munich Security Conference](#)

The way Syria was discussed in Munich is a vivid example of this lack of trust and willingness to engage in joint action. Russian politicians and diplomats reiterated that Moscow considered its actions in Syria to be a contribution to the global effort to combat the existential threat of Islamic fundamentalism and an attempt to save Syrian statehood and prevent it from descending into chaos. But many of the American and European participants saw Russia's military operation as nothing more than a case of the Kremlin's imperial ambition and an attempt to keep in place a regime loyal to Moscow. Some were simply disappointed by the lack of coordinated efforts with the Western coalition, while others went as far as to claim that the only thing Moscow was doing in Syria was bombing innocent civilians, so that the refugee flow to Europe would undermine the Union and its security.

Discussions on Euro-Atlantic security were equally strained. Just like with Syria, Russia and the West are anything but united on the issue, and their positions continue to diverge. Instead of combining our efforts to combat common security threats (terrorism and other forms of extremism, migration, etc.) we have essentially entered a new phase of the arms race. It is not a giant leap, for example, to assume that once the U.S. has deployed its missile defence system in Poland, Russia will respond by deploying its own Iskander missile defence system in the Kaliningrad Region.

We all remember the missile crisis of the mid-1980s, and many have the feeling that history is repeating itself. During the Cold War, however, we had various mechanisms for dialogue available. There was a common strategic culture of deterrence. We do not have any of that now, and that is why any incident in Europe or elsewhere could give rise to a major conflict.



MSC / Hildenbrandt: [A Case for Smoke Room Diplomacy](#)

The Munich Security Conference participants were unanimous in seeing significant deterioration of the circumstances for discussing new initiatives for integrated Euro-Atlantic security. Most importantly, trust has been broken completely, and without trust, it is hardly possible to build a new security system. Rebuilding trust is a painstakingly difficult process, which even in the best case scenario will take many years.

At the same time, neither Russia nor the West have the time to stall cooperation. Therefore, the most practical and productive thing to do right now would be to build cooperation around concrete issues where our interests overlap. And this is precisely what Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov talked about in Munich.

Combatting international terrorism and preventing political extremism are just some of the possible areas of cooperation, as are managing migration flows and solving the refugee problem, strengthening cyber and food security, tackling environmental issues and coordinating positions on climate change.

At the latest Munich Security Conference, Russian politicians once again confirmed their willingness to engage in dialogue. And, as before, Russia called for dialogue among equal partners, partners who are ready to listen to one another and take the interests of all sides into account. This is the only approach that will make it possible to lay the foundations for long-term and stable cooperation.

*A version of this article first appeared in [The Moscow Times](#).*