The model of Ukrainian-Iranian relations: Establishment and decline

Abstract. The relevance of the study is conditioned upon the sharp deterioration of diplomatic relations between Ukraine and the Islamic Republic of Iran against the background of the latter’s cooperation with the Russian Federation, which could potentially result in the severance of all ties. The purpose of this research is to identify the main preconditions that contributed to the decline of relations between Ukraine and Iran. The main methods include logical analysis, functional analysis, synthesis, deduction, induction, historical, formal and legal, etc. The study explored the history of diplomatic relations between the two countries since the beginning of the existence of independent Ukraine. The main events that were significant for both sides were considered. In particular, trade and economic relations were analysed, which consisted of exploring statistics on exports and imports of products. It allowed determination that Iran was among the top 10 exporters of Ukrainian products. The most important stage was to determine Iran’s role in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022. The positions of representatives of the international community were considered, and data from American and Ukrainian intelligence agencies were presented, which demonstrated Iran’s involvement in war crimes on the territory of Ukraine, and the possibility of future liability. Based on this, the main reason that called into question the possibility of further cooperation was identified. Notably, the severance of ties reduces Iran’s status in the international arena. The practical value of the results obtained is to highlight the bilateralism of Iran’s policy and to establish the necessity of further cooperation between Ukraine and this country.

Keywords: diplomatic relations; full-scale invasion; politics; Middle East country; war crimes

Introduction

After Ukraine gained its independence, an active process of developing a new model of interstate relations began. Ukraine’s diplomatic relations with Iran were characterised by the significant economic interest of both countries. As M. Eslami (2022) notes, it is confirmed by the significant volume of exports of Ukrainian products, and the support for cooperation in the construction of aircraft. Despite specific shortcomings, diplomatic relations were maintained and developed rapidly.

The fundamental document of bilateral relations between Ukraine and Iran is the Declaration on the Principles of Friendly Cooperation between Ukraine and the Islamic Republic of Iran, signed by the Presidents of the two states in Tehran on 26 April 1992 (Memorandum..., 1992). The document envisages that both countries will actively develop diplomatic relations as friendly states and partners. Priority is placed on negotiations and relations at the highest state level, meetings of foreign ministers, consultations, and negotiations between the parties on international and bilateral issues of mutual interest, including within the UN, other international and regional organisations, and forums at various levels.

Over the past 30 years, relations between Ukraine and Iran have gone from an ambitious partnership to a complete collapse. All these years, Ukraine has been helping Iran develop its aviation and nuclear power industry, supplying grain, and once the Iranians even got Ukrainian cruise missiles. In September 2022, the Ukrainian military began downing the first Iranian kamikaze drones that attacked cities. Kyiv then revoked the accreditation of the Iranian ambassador to Ukraine. Following the brutal attacks by Iranian “Shahedin” and the destruction of Ukraine’s energy sector, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba proposed that the president break off diplomatic relations with Iran (Kuleba offers..., 2022).

P. Van Bergeijk (2022) writes that the events of 24 February 2022 had an impact on the territorial integrity and inviolability of Ukraine, and on the international economy,
security, and, consequently, relations. No less important in this is the support of the RF by the Iranian authorities.

According to D. Saraswat (2022), international military cooperation is of great importance for ensuring security at the regional, national, and global levels. According to S. Rahman (2022), the main task is to increase the level of the state’s defence capability, guarantee military security, and establish an international legal security regime according to national interests. According to H. Dylan and T.J. Maguire (2022), international military partnership implies the existence of common purposes and interests, and approaches to the implementation of such activities.

However, notably, it is an “ideal” form of military and defence cooperation based on the principles of international law. According to the position, the practice demonstrates that this type of international cooperation may be conducted in violation of the relevant provisions of international conventions and treaties. As the author notes, it is non-conventional military cooperation. It can be either overt or covert, but the latter is more stable and permanent. In the current circumstances of a full-scale war, a striking example of this is the military-technical cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian federation. According to I. Kusa (2022) is implemented through the supply of kamikaze attack drones used against civilian infrastructure. It contradicts the provisions of international humanitarian law and the international legal obligations assumed by Iran. In addition, the author notes that Iran’s cooperation with Russia will grow and develop more rapidly, which has an adverse impact both on the security of Ukraine and the entire international community.

Therefore, the Tehran authorities are involved in war crimes committed on the territory of Ukraine. Thus, Iran is indirectly encroaching on Ukraine’s national security, territorial integrity, and inviolability, just like the aggressor country – the Russian federation. These circumstances call into question Ukraine’s further cooperation with the Islamic Republic and the maintenance of diplomatic relations.

Thus, considering the above, the purpose of the research is to determine the cause-and-effect relationship between the establishment, development, and decline of diplomatic relations between Ukraine and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

### Research results

**Bilateral relations between Ukraine and Iran**

One of the most significant factors of influence on Iran is its geographical location. It is located at the crossroads of regions, which allows it to promote its interests in Central and South Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Middle East. Notably, the presence of conflict points along the perimeter of the state’s borders determines Iran’s purpose to establish its draft geopolitical plan to deter its regional and global adversaries (Alcaro & Siddi, 2020).

Diplomatic relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Ukraine have been characterised by some contradictions and underdevelopment due to several factors. In 1992, the beginning of their establishment was marked by the opening of the Iranian embassy in Kyiv, and in October, the Ukrainian diplomatic mission was opened in Tehran (Duda, 2020). On 26 April 1992, the two leaders signed the Declaration on Cooperation between Ukraine and the Islamic Republic of Iran in Tehran (Declaration on the..., 1992). This regulation is defined as the basic document for bilateral relations. Notably, the legal framework comprises a total of 37 existing documents, of which 9 are interstate, 10 are intergovernmental, and 18 are interagency (Declaration on the..., 1992).

Bilateral relations between Ukraine and Iran are based on trade relations, which began to develop more actively in the 2000s. Their specific feature is the prevalence of exports from Ukraine over imports from Iran. Notably, trade relations usually concern agricultural products, metalurgy, fuel and energy, machine building, and infrastructure (Panova & Zheva, 2022).

In 2001, the volume of trade was USD 165 million, and in 2012 – USD 1.232 billion, but due to the impact of international sanctions in 2013, which were related to Iran’s internal policy, the figures decreased by 2 times. In 2015-2018, the restrictions were partially lifted, and trade turnover grew again, enabling Iran to enter the top 10 countries with the highest foreign trade turnover with Ukraine (Drones in the back..., 2022).

However, in 2018, sanctions were re-imposed, which caused the trade turnover to decline again. For a more detailed analysis, consider the statistical data (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Export, USD ths.</th>
<th>Import, USD ths.</th>
<th>Total volume, USD ths.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>116471.6</td>
<td>67399.8</td>
<td>1232112.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>116471.6</td>
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<td>2014</td>
<td>793924.7</td>
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<td>2022</td>
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Source: (Drones in the back..., 2022)
The data in the table demonstrates that turnover was highest in 2014–2016, and reached the same level again in 2021. However, notably, due to the political situation, the turnover has now been reduced again.

Overall, Ukraine’s exports were mainly agricultural products and foodstuffs, gas turbines and locomotives, while Iranian goods included medicines and dried fruits, and Ukraine was interested in energy, which cannot be exported due to sanctions. Notably, most of the goods are usually re-exported through third countries; the reason for this is the lack of clear interbank settlement channels (Gutsalyuk et al., 2021). One of the most promising areas for relations between Ukraine and Iran could have been nuclear energy and military-technical cooperation, but due to US pressure and sanctions, this area was curtailed in the 1990s (Hatami et al., 2020).

The Beginning of Disagreements in the Development of Ukrainian-Iranian Relations

Notably, the development of relations between Ukraine and Iran is hampered by the diversity of political opinions. Thus, Ukraine maintains ties with the United States, while Iran – with Russia. As a result, there is no political will to develop bilateral contacts. This distancing is observed in the international arena due to the lack of mutual support in UN votes. However, in 2016, the Strategic Vision of Ukraine’s relations with Iran was adopted, based on the principles of non-interference and non-prevention of cooperation by other states, friendly relations and mutual interest, which guarantees food security for Iran and energy security for Ukraine. However, due to the renewal of sanctions, the provisions of this Strategic Vision have become irrelevant (Alcaro & Siddi, 2020).

A tragic incident should be highlighted. On 8 January 2020, a Ukrainian plane, which was a commercial civilian flight, was shot down over Tehran. It happened as a result of a mistake by the Iranian air defences. As a result, 9 crew members and 167 passengers died. This tragedy had an adverse impact on bilateral relations between the two countries. The Iranian authorities denied any involvement and officially refused to negotiate the investigation. The Ukrainian authorities, in turn, claimed that this was a planned terrorist act and filed a lawsuit against Iran. The latter offered compensation of $150,000 to the relatives of each of the victims, but Ukraine did not agree to this amount. Now Iran is trying to resolve the case without recognising the illegality of its actions (Three years after..., 2022).

Iran’s Place in the Russian-Ukrainian War

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 deserves special attention. It demonstrates the intertwining of interests, events and positions in international relations that at first glance appeared to be little related.

In this case, mention should be made of the Iran nuclear deal and the 2014 Russian-Ukrainian war, as these events are interrelated (Hatami et al., 2020). The reason for this is the involvement of the European Union (EU), the United States and the Russian federation in both cases. The prerequisite is the 2014 negotiations on the nuclear deal with Iran, in which Russia acted as a mediator. One of the issues that were not agreed upon was Tehran’s nuclear ambitions. Thus, Iran should reduce, convert and modify its nuclear development and adopt the relevant protocol. The IAEA, in turn, has demanded an announcement of rapid inspections to give the international community more confidence. It provided an opportunity for Russia to obtain a concession from the United States (Alcaro & Siddi, 2020).

In 2022, negotiations on the renewal of the nuclear deal were held and were successful (Nuclear deal, 2022). For the Russian federation, this was a new opportunity to use it in its interests. In March of the same year, the Russian authorities published demands to the United States, seeking guarantees of the inviolability of Russian’s relations with Iran after the nuclear deal. However, the renewal of the nuclear agreement was not implemented; this process was suspended. Tehran’s authorities mentioned the US’s unwillingness to lift sanctions as the reason for this (Nuclear deal, 2022).

Representatives of the RF are trying to use the nuclear negotiations to satisfy their interests, putting Iran at risk. However, the latter is not trying to reduce contacts but rather supports Russia’s actions in Ukraine at the official level. Notably, senior officials and the Supreme Leader blamed NATO and the United States for the outbreak of war. There is a specific dissonance in this regard, as Iran’s official position is to resolve the conflict diplomatically. In addition, during the UN General Assembly’s vote on the resolution condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Iran abstained from expressing its position (Norman, 2022).

Instead, the full-scale invasion and aggressive military actions of the Russian Federation caused contradictions within the country and a lack of monolithicity. Therewith, as officials and authorities supported Russia, ordinary citizens, reformist circles, the middle class and conservatives reacted quite adversely and condemned Russia.

However, some prospects are opening up for Iran as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war. For example, if a nuclear deal is concluded and sanctions are imposed on energy supplies from Russia, the Islamic Republic could become a new supplier of gas and oil to Europe. In addition, notably, Russia’s position in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Siberia may be weakened. It provides Iran with an advantage in terms of increasing its economic and geopolitical influence in these regions while maintaining close cooperation with the Russian authorities. Thus, such a possible development of events could turn the current situation with relations between Russia and the Islamic Republic 180 degrees, with the latter acting as the “dominant” party. However, this situation is quite probable, due to the exceptional pragmatism of Tehran’s policy and the situational nature of these alliance-type relations.

On the one hand, if the Islamic Republic of Iran normalises relations with the West and lifts some of its sanctions, it will be able to establish relations with Ukraine and build a pragmatic political course in the post-war period. The prerequisites for expanding cooperation in this context are the mutual interest of countries in exporting and importing a particular category of products. In addition, notably, the support for the security of the food plan in the Middle East, and the broad scope of cooperation in the political and economic segments of the perspective plan. To imple-
Ukraine terminates the agreement on diplomatic relations with Iran

During a briefing on 18 October 2022, Dmytro Kuleba, the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, submitted a proposal to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to break off diplomatic relations with Iran due to the country’s arms supplies to Russia. Kuleba noted that Ukraine has never taken an anti-Iranian position, but due to the numerous damages caused by Iranian kamikaze drones to Ukraine’s infrastructure and possible further supply of weapons in the future, and the deaths and suffering of the Ukrainian people, it is impossible to talk about maintaining any diplomatic relations. The head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the resumption of relations could only be possible if the supply of weapons to the aggressor country was stopped (The Ministry of Foreign..., 2022). Notably, according to US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on 9 January 2023, the supply of weapons could lead to large-scale crimes; the US will consider holding the Iranian authorities accountable (Biden’s adviser had..., 2022).

Thus, considering the current circumstances, the resumption of relations between Ukraine and Iran is possible if the latter takes some steps. First and foremost, it means stopping Iran’s arms supplies to Russia, recognising its role in a full-scale war and taking responsibility. If Iran continues its current political course, relations with Ukraine will be severed indefinitely. Further research will examine in more detail the possibility of restoring relations between Iran and Ukraine.

Discussion

Over the past 30 years, relations between Ukraine and the Islamic Republic of Iran have come a long way, from an ambitious partnership to collapse. From the beginning of Ukraine’s independence, one of its main purposes was to establish economic cooperation with Iran. Despite several successful and promising projects, relations between the two countries have been accompanied by adverse aspects, which have now resulted in a rift between Iran and Ukraine.

Iran was one of the first states to recognise Ukraine’s independence, and on 25 December 1991, diplomatic relations between the two countries were established (From the history..., 2022).

In January 1992, the Iranian Foreign Minister came to Kyiv to sign a memorandum (From the history..., 2022). Thus, the main purposes at that time were Ukrainian agricultural products, aircraft and carriage building, and transportation of Iranian oil and gas through Ukraine. Notably, imports of oil and gas from Iran allowed Ukraine to abandon Russian products and, consequently, reduce its dependence on Russia. However, this project was not implemented. In September 1998, Behzad Mazheri, who was Iran’s ambassador at the time, noted that this could not be done because of high tariffs that raise energy prices compared to those of post-Soviet countries (Iran and Ukraine..., 2022).

Notably, Iran initiated the development of relations with Ukraine and further cooperation. As a result of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, a different regime came to Iran, for which Soviet communism was perceived as a hostile political system, but less dangerous than in the United States and Israel (Iran and Ukraine..., 2022).

According to A. Saeedi Ran and M. Halalkhor (2021), in 1992, the Iranian authorities decided to resume the project to build a nuclear power plant in Bushehr, which was stopped due to the Islamic Revolution, and it was then that the US and German governments imposed sanctions and refused to complete the facility. Nevertheless, in 1995, the Islamic Republic signed a contract with a Russian company to resume construction and engaged Kharkiv-based Turboatom and several Ukrainian enterprises as subcontractors. Notably, the US government’s refusal to build a nuclear power plant was due to Iran’s “nuclear ambitions”, which threatened the security of the international community. H. Lavranos (2022) notes that in March 1998, after a visit by the US Secretary of State and numerous appeals from Israel, Leonid Kuchma announced that Ukraine would abandon the Iran project in exchange for cooperation with the US in the high technology segment. Accordingly, the Iranian authorities have publicly adversely assessed Ukraine’s actions.

According to R. Czulda (2020), the greatest achievement of Ukrainian-Iranian relations was the project to build the AN-140 aircraft. In the future, Ukraine wanted to expand cooperation, involve the Islamic Republic in the production of the AN-70, and offer Iranian oil and gas supplies to Europe through Ukraine, but no significant changes in relations occurred. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the Ukrainian government has taken some steps to support cooperation with Iran and has guided its political course towards its further development.
Ukraine demonstrated its appreciation of the importance of relations with Iran by providing humanitarian aid. According to I. Kusa, (2022), after the December 2003 earthquake, planes with essential supplies, rescuers, surgeons, traumatologists, and a mobile hospital with other doctors were sent. In addition, the author writes that from 2005 to 2016, there were no significant events with Iran, and there were no meetings of the intergovernmental commission on economic cooperation. Notably, Iran’s position changed significantly during the presidencies of Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovych. The example of Turboatom’s abandonment of the nuclear power plant project was frequently used as an example of Western partners’ influence on Ukraine’s policy. Despite this, cooperation on the construction of AN-140 aircraft continued until 2015.

In 2014, the Revolution of Dignity occurred in Ukraine. It finally consolidated the movement towards the EU and NATO. Thus, Iran has added Ukraine to the list of US supporters. Accordingly, in the opinion of the Islamic Republic’s authorities, with the beginning of Russian aggression, Russia had more arguments to strengthen its positions (Iran and Ukraine..., 2022). Nevertheless, there was one more attempt to establish relations. According to S. Yousuf and S.I. Hussain (2022), in July 2015, the US, EU, China, UK, Germany, France, and Russia reached an agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran on its nuclear programme; some sanctions were lifted. S. Hurst (2022) argued that the Ukrainian authorities positively assessed the programme and decided to use the opportunity to increase the country’s exports, especially of agricultural products. In 2016, a meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission on Cooperation was held, which was attended by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine; notably, it was the first visit in 15 years. Thus, it again confirms the fact that these relations were more important for Ukraine than for Iran.

In the future, S. Hussain (2022) should be mentioned, who writes that in May 2018, the United States abandoned the Iran nuclear deal and soon reimposed sanctions, but Ukraine did not refuse further cooperation. The Islamic Republic ranked 7th among Ukrainian grain exports, although most of its needs were supplied by Russia, Iranian oil and gas supplies were not implemented (Drone in the back..., 2022). It indicates that Ukraine considered Iran as a promising country for cooperation, but for Iran, these ties were not important.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian federation demonstrated its aggressive actions, as evidenced by a large number of civilian deaths, damage to civilian infrastructure and other factors. Iran, in turn, has regularly claimed to be against it. Thus, on 14 March, Iranian Foreign Minister Amir Abdollahian held telephone talks with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba. He emphasised that the Iranian authorities support efforts of any kind to resolve the crisis and achieve peace (Political experts spoke..., 2023).

According to the facts, in July 2022, there were reports of a possible supply of kamikaze drones from Iran to Russia, and later Putin had a meeting with the real leader of the country; later, Russia began to use Iranian weapons in the war with Ukraine (Iran and Ukraine..., 2022).

On 23 September 2022, the Ukrainian authorities, considering Iran’s position on a full-scale invasion, stripped the country’s ambassador of his accreditation and reduced the number of diplomats at the embassy. Notably, Iran’s position sparked protests in Kyiv, which were attended by both Ukrainians and representatives of the Iranian diaspora. The latter, in turn, support Ukraine and oppose the actions of the Islamic Republic’s authorities (Protests against Iran’s..., 2022).

According to R. Van Zwenenberg (2023), Iran is involved in war crimes on the territory of Ukraine. In addition, he notes that it is quite common for Iranian politics to “say one thing and do something else”. S. Shpiro (2023) emphasises that there is a certain agreement between Iran and Russia that considers the interests of both sides. Considering this, it is inappropriate to continue maintaining diplomatic ties with a state involved in war crimes on the territory of Ukraine. Only if the supply of weapons is stopped and responsibility is borne will relations be restored. All of the above has resulted in the issue of severing Ukraine’s diplomatic relations with Iran. According to A. Geis & U. Schröder (2023), in the 1990s and 2000s, Ukraine considered Iran as a promising country for cooperation, which had a specific range of resources and interests. Currently, there is an opinion that the severance of relations with Ukraine is not desirable for the Islamic Republic, even though they are not important for the country. However, the lack of diplomatic ties with Ukraine and involvement in war crimes will significantly worsen Iran’s status in the international arena.

Thus, it is impossible and inappropriate to continue and develop Ukraine-Iran relations today. Iran supports the aggressor country by supplying weapons that are used to commit war crimes. Even if there is a possibility of restoring diplomatic relations in the future, it will only be possible if the supply is stopped.

Conclusions

This study was conducted to establish the cause-and-effect relationship of the model of diplomatic relations between Ukraine and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which included an analysis of their establishment and decline. Accordingly, it was determined that the development of these relations dates back to the beginning of Ukraine’s independence. Iran was among the first states to recognise the country’s independence and sovereignty in the international arena.

These relations were characterised by the geopolitical and economic interests of both countries. The trade and economic sector deserves special attention. An analysis of exports and imports of Ukrainian and Iranian products was conducted. It was determined that Iran occupied the 7th place in terms of exports, but Ukraine’s imports of Iranian oil and gas did not develop. In addition, the field of aircraft construction, namely the AN-140, is an important aspect of Ukrainian-Iranian relations.

The events of 2014 in Ukraine were marked by the Revolution of Dignity. The authorities in Tehran reacted adversely to this, and once again made a statement that Ukraine was a supporter of the United States.
Nevertheless, the trade and economic sphere continued to develop, and as of 2021, the total trade turnover reached USD 723724.8. The full-scale invasion that occurred on 24 February 2022 encroached on Ukraine’s territorial integrity and inviolability and entailed terrible consequences in the form of deaths, injuries, damage to civilian infrastructure, etc. In July 2022, the Islamic Republic of Iran was reported to be cooperating with the Russian authorities. It is supported by the fact that Tehran’s authorities supply kamikaze drones and send designers to occupied Crimea to resolve issues related to the control of this military equipment. Accordingly, on 18 October 2022, the issue of severing diplomatic relations with Iran in connection with the country’s assistance to the terrorist state in committing several war crimes was raised. It was determined that the restoration of these ties would be possible only if the supply of weapons was stopped. Notably, the US government is considering bringing the Iranian authorities to justice for their involvement in military aggression.

Further research will be devoted to determining the prospects for restoring relations with Iran in the post-war environment.

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None.

Conflict of Interest
None.

Reference


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