

Analysis

Russia and the Muslim World: The Chechnya Factor and Beyond

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Abstract

This article looks at Russia's relations to the Muslim world as an aspect of its foreign policy directly related to domestic issues. It argues that because of its own large Muslim population and its desire to conduct an independent foreign policy, Russia has developed a special relationship with Muslim countries and claims a different approach to fighting terrorism than the US. This relationship is not without problems, as the case of Iran demonstrates. Also, Russia's conflict with Muslim-dominated Chechnya has shown the difficulties that Russian leaders have in coping with autonomy struggles and religious diversity within the Russian Federation.

The Impact of 9/11

In the aftermath of 9/11, many observers in the West and Russia predicted a fundamental re-orientation of Russian attitudes and policies toward the Islamic world, and the Middle East in particular, that would bring them in line with policies conducted by the US and even Israel. The prediction was based on Putin's own obsession with the international ramifications of terrorism that plagued Russia as a consequence of the war in Chechnya. In the two years preceding 9/11, Russian leaders had pointed out to their Western colleagues the threat of terrorism emanating from an arc of instability stretching from hotbeds of Islamic fundamentalism in the Philippines through Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, on to Central Asia, Chechnya, the Middle East and Kosovo in Europe.

In the months following September 11, Western and Russian scholars expressed the view that a new lasting alliance between the US and Russia would be formed on the basis of the common threat of Islamic militant fundamentalism. In early 2002, Russian scholar Dmitri Glinesky-Vasiliev forecasted that Russia would support a US war against Iraq that was already in the cards.

To be sure, there were a number of important signs pointing in that direction. Putin thought that a window of opportunity had suddenly opened for an overall political understanding with the US. He supported the opening of military bases for the US in Central Asia and contributed, in different ways, to the success of the US-led effort to overthrow the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Russian relations with Israel significantly improved. Yet a robust new US-Russian strategic partnership failed to materialize.

The Failure of the US-Russia Partnership

The first reason that the US-Russia partnership failed was the Bush Administration's complete disregard of

many of Russia's key national interests. It is sufficient to mention only two. In December 2001, Washington announced its unilateral withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. In the few preceding weeks, Bush had given his final and decisive endorsement to admit the three Baltic Republics to NATO. These US actions simply continued the long-standing US strategy toward Russia: contain Russian influence wherever possible.

There is however a second and more fundamental reason. Already in 1992–93, in the debates concerning what was then Russia's alignment on US foreign policy, Russian scholars and politicians argued that their country could not afford to go along with American policies in the Middle East. They invoked the fact that Russia is surrounded by Muslim countries and that around 16 million Muslims live in Russia. This was indeed to become a major factor in shaping Russian foreign policy, especially under Putin.

In October 2003, Putin scored a significant international political success. In spite of the merciless war he was conducting in Chechnya, he was the first head of state from a country without a Muslim majority to be invited to address a summit meeting of the Islamic Conference Organization, which brings together 57 Muslim countries. Putin reminded the members of Russia's Islamic identity due to the fact that eight of the 21 ethnically-defined republics of the Russian Federation are dominated by Muslim nations. In an interview to Al Jazeera, Putin stated "unlike the Muslims who live in Western Europe, our Muslims are indigenous and have no other homeland." On a different occasion, he even stated that Islam had existed on Russia's territory longer than Christianity.

In these conditions, Russia claims a privileged political relationship with the Arab and Muslim world as a whole – in fact, Russia has achieved official observer status within the Islamic Conference Organization.

Putin and other top Russian leaders keep denouncing the idea (or ideology) of the “clash of civilizations.” They assert that Russia, as a European state, has an historical and existential mission as a bridge between the Western world and the Muslim world.

The Chechnya Factor in Russian Politics

Three arrays of motivation must be considered to explain the meaning of these claims and related policies. The first has to do with the necessity of countering the deleterious effects of the Chechen war inside Russia and for its foreign policies. Russia’s outreach to the Muslim world seeks to prevent, or at least minimize, a polarization between the Russian ethnic majority and Russia’s Muslims and give the latter a sense of belonging to the Russian state while blocking the rise of Islamophobia.

It is tricky to pull off such a policy given Russia’s hounding of presumed Islamic fundamentalists in Chechnya and other parts of the country. However, Putin’s will to check the polarization resulting from his policies is real and is often reflected in his speeches when he claims that “terrorism must not be identified with any religion or cultural tradition.” Instead of systematically characterizing the Chechen fighters as “Islamic fundamentalist terrorists,” as he would generally do during the first years of the second Chechen war, after 2003 Putin often spoke of them as “terrorists linked to international criminal networks of arms and drug traffickers,” thus trying to avoid a reference to Islam.

“Multi-polarity” as Key Objective of Russian Foreign Policy

A second range of explanation for Russia’s search for a special political relationship with the Arab and Muslim world has to do with the officially-stated general goal of Russian foreign policy to “reinforce multi-polarity in the world” – a doctrine that was developed during the late 1990s under then-Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov. Multi-polarity in essence means creating poles of resistance to US hegemony and unilateralism in world affairs. More specifically, here the purpose is to take advantage of the general hostility towards Washington’s foreign policy that keeps growing in the whole of the Arab and Muslim world.

Of course, this is not an entirely new dimension of Russian foreign policy. In Soviet times the USSR claimed to be the natural ally of anti-imperialist Arab states of “socialist orientation.” Not only has the support for any “socialist orientation” disappeared, but Russia no longer divides the countries of the Middle East into those that are aligned with the US and those that are not. Russia is looking for a strong political relationship not only with Iran and Syria, but also with states

that are traditional allies of the US, like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt. In all cases, economic interests and concerns weigh much more heavily than in Soviet times. Most importantly, Russia is focused on energy, which has been the driving force of Russia’s significant come back in world affairs. It involves not only oil and gas, but also nuclear energy which both Medvedev and Putin consider as a key sector for the future. Moreover they see it as crucial to give Russia international economic competitiveness in an area of high technology and move away from its role as a supplier of raw materials to the world market. The same applies to the export of a wide range of sophisticated weapons – the arms industry was one of the most advanced high tech sectors of the Soviet economy, though the economic difficulties of the 1990s seriously shook it.

Russia is no longer seeking formal alliances in developing its relations with Arab and Muslim states. Instead Russia desires a strong, but non-constraining political relationship, along the lines of the “strategic partnership” with China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a key instrument of multi-polarity. Russia, like China, does not want to be on the front line of opposition to Washington and that is why both avoid stating openly that multi-polarity is aimed at the US. As political scientists would say, it is “soft balancing” that Russia is pursuing with respect to the US. This also applies to its relationship with its closest partners in the Muslim world. For instance, Russia supports Iran only as long as such support does not seriously endanger its relationship with the West. It is no coincidence that Iran is granted only observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, although Teheran would like to become a full member.

Russia’s Multiple Identities

The third factor which explains Putin’s policies towards the Muslim world relates to post-Soviet Russia’s tortuous and difficult search for identity, both internally and in terms of its international posture. Accordingly, these policies cannot be seen only as circumstantial political opportunism, which they are to a large extent. In 2005 Academician Sergei Rogov wrote in the official journal of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that “the Islamic factor” in Russian politics “is in the first place an identity question” and “this is one of the reasons why Russia cannot be a nation-state in the European sense.” He added that “the political aspect of our relations with the Islamic world (...) directly relates to our security.”

It is against this background that in September 2003, then Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov complained that the US war in Iraq had caused an important increase in terrorist attacks in Russia and elsewhere in the world. The spike in attacks had been an anticipated con-

sequence of the war and it was one of the reasons why Russia had opposed it. As we know, it was the concerted action of France, Germany and Russia in the UN Security Council that deprived the US war of international legitimacy.

The Russian leaders fear that the widespread idea of “the clash of civilizations” will become a self-fulfilling prophecy as a result of US foreign policy, particularly that of George W. Bush. That is to say, a prophecy that is false, but one that generates behavior, which makes it come true. Coming on the heels of the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq, and the unprecedented and unconditional American support for Israel’s most uncompromising policies, the Russian leaders are convinced that US military attacks on Iran would be a catastrophic scenario for world affairs. They are scared of the enormous destabilizing consequences that such an offensive would have, not only for the Middle East, the Caspian region and Central Asia, but for Russia itself.

The Case of Iran

These concerns provide a key to understand the ambivalent and complex relationship between Russia and Iran. On the one hand, Iran is an important partner for Russia in the region and one that Moscow would like to see protected. Iran is the third most important customer for Russian military hardware and a showcase for the controlled export of Russian nuclear plants. (Moscow prides itself for having concluded with Teheran an agreement for the return to Russia, under supervision, of all the spent nuclear fuel of the Bushehr power plant.) Iranian leaders have always abstained from showing support for Chechen fighters. Russia and Iran cooperated in actively supporting the armed opposition to the Taliban in Afghanistan long before the US did. On the other hand, Russian leaders in a non-ambiguous manner have denounced Ahmadinejad’s incendiary speeches about Israel, calling them “shameful.” Moscow keeps pressing Iran in a diplomatic manner to comply with the demands of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to give the international community guarantees that it is not seeking to build nuclear weapons. Three times, albeit reluctantly, Russia has voted alongside the US and the other members of the UN Security Council to impose economic sanctions against Iran in order to force the regime to stop uranium enrichment and respond to the IAEA’s concerns. Together with China, Russia succeeded in limiting the scope of these sanctions, while taking care to have them framed in a way that excludes even an implicit possibility of escalation to military sanctions.

In endorsing economic sanctions, Putin was obviously risking the possibility of harming relations with Iran, which in fact happened to a certain extent. He

wants to show the US and other western states that Russia is a responsible member of the non-proliferation regime. Moscow has not entirely lost hope to see Iran reaching an agreement with the IAEA. Such a deal would be an enormous diplomatic success, vindicating the independent role it claims in international affairs.

There is no doubt that Russia does not want to have a nuclear Iran near its borders. However, it is clear that it would definitely prefer to live with a nuclear Iran than the anticipated destabilizing consequences of a US military attack, whatever its nature.

Russia’s Relations to Turkey and Saudi Arabia

Paradoxically, the positions taken by Russia towards Iran have helped a significant political rapprochement between Russia and two of the US’s traditional allies: Turkey and Saudi Arabia. As rivals of Iran, both fear Iran’s effort to obtain nuclear weapons. At the same time, they oppose a US-strike against Iran for the same reasons that Russia does. They are fearful of the consequences it may have in their immediate neighborhood as well as on their own territory. As a result of the Iraq war, Turkey now has to live with a de facto independent Kurdistan on its border and sees it as a looming threat. The problem could be considerably worse with a destabilization of Iran that would affect its Kurdish part. As US-based analyst Fiona Hill has noted: “the US-Turkish relationship is an unnoticed casualty of the Iraq war (...) America’s alliance with the Iraqi Kurds broke the back of the US-Turkish strategic partnership.” Russia obviously is taking advantage of this situation at a time when its economic relations and common political interests with Turkey are at a higher level than at anytime in the last two centuries.

Despite a much smaller amount of trade, similar political convergences apply to Russia’s relations with Saudi Arabia, which also had opposed the Iraq war in spite of its hostility towards Saddam Hussein. In February 2007, Putin was the first head of state from Russia (and the Soviet Union) to visit Saudi Arabia. He offered contracts for the construction of nuclear plants and arms sales to his hosts and proposed concerted policies for oil production and exports. Interestingly, Putin pleaded for an increase of the quota for the number of Russian Muslims authorized to make the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. As a result, the number of Russian pilgrims increased from 20,000 to 26,000 in 2007. Among these were 3,000 Chechens. In the past, Saudi Arabia had been the most strident of the Muslim states – following only the Taliban’s Afghanistan – in condemning Russia’s behavior in Chechnya. Without going as far as Afghanistan by recognizing or openly supporting Chechnya’s independence, the Saudi rep-

representative at the meeting of the Islamic Conference Organization of 2000 had invoked the “right of self-determination” for the “Muslim people of Chechnya.” This has now ceased.

Moscow’s Stance Toward Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

In the past four to five years, Russia has reactivated its attempts to play a mediating role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on grounds that have brought it closer to many Arab and Muslim countries. Prior to and shortly after 9/11, Russia had achieved a noteworthy rapprochement with Israel, particularly and not surprisingly around the issue of terrorism based on Islamic fundamentalism. In this respect, it is interesting to note that both countries had opposed NATO’s 1999 war against Serbia. Both countries saw the armed Kosovar resistance to Serbia as tied to international Muslim terrorism. Echoing a major Russian concern, then Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon had stated “If it becomes NATO policy to get involved militarily in internal conflicts in the world, would not Israel find itself one day under attack if the Arabs of Galilee want autonomy?” (He was referring to a small Arab majority area, north of Israel proper.) After 9/11, on September 30, 2002, during an official visit to Israel, Putin declared that “We regard Israel an important participant in the antiterrorist coalition.”

Things have changed since. Russia considers its policies towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a crucial component of the mediating role it wants to play between the West and the Arab and Muslim world. Its relations with Israel have deteriorated, but far from completely, for a number of reasons, notably because of the formal contacts that Russia has established with Hamas since it won the Palestinian elections of January 2006. In March 2006 and 2007, Moscow welcomed official Hamas delegations. Contrary to Israel and the US, Russia refuses to regard it as a terrorist organization. The same applies to Hezbollah in Lebanon. To justify this position, Russian leaders insist that these are not uprooted and itinerant terrorist organizations. They consider them political organizations with a strong and identifiable social basis in a country to which they belong and where they participate in legitimate elections. While urging Hamas to recognize Israel as a state and stop terrorist attacks, Russian representatives say that ostracizing Hamas can only confine it to terrorism.

Among the sensible things that Putin has said about terrorism, he sometimes stated that it cannot be eradicated without addressing “the causes that feed it, like social injustice and deprivation.” The prescription is obviously more easily put on the agenda in addressing foreign affairs than internal ones.

About the author

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Analysis

Muslim Fundamentalism in Dagestan: A Movement on the Rise

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Abstract

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian republic of Dagestan has faced numerous security threats. A number of ethnic groups, clans, and organized crime groups live side by side there and periodically resort to violence to pursue their interests. Violence among Islamic fundamentalist militants is also on the rise. All indications suggest that their underground movements are gaining momentum. This article addresses the central questions: Why are more people joining the ranks of these groups and why are they increasingly prone to violence?

The Muslim Tradition in Dagestan

More than 90 percent of Dagestan’s residents are members of ethnic groups that were converted to Islam in the course of their history. Islamization began in the 7th century with the conquest of the city of Derbent by

the Arab Caliphate. However, Islam did not simply replace the pre-Islamic traditions, but intermingled with them. The local conventions, traditions, and customary laws known collectively as *adat*, such as the practice of the blood feud, are still followed today.