

Russia's Policy toward the Middle East

By Mark N. Katz, Washington, DC

Abstract

Russian leaders—especially Vladimir Putin—have spoken on many occasions about how Russia is once again a great power. Since the rise of Putin, Russia has also been pursuing an active foreign policy in the Middle East. Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East under Putin and Medvedev, though, is not so much that of an assertive great power as it is that of a prudent power pursuing relatively limited objectives. Primary among these limited Russian objectives are: First, keeping the North Caucasus from becoming an anti-Russian cause célèbre in the Muslim Middle East the way Afghanistan was in the 1980's; second, working with others to prevent the rise of radical Sunni forces in the Middle East that would be hostile to Russia; and third, pursuing Moscow's economic interests in the Middle East. Putin and Medvedev have pursued these objectives through seeking good relations with virtually all the Middle East's disparate actors and avoiding taking sides in the many disputes among them. Up to now, Moscow has been remarkably successful at this balancing act. Going forward, though, it may become more difficult for Moscow to do so.

Getting Along with Everybody

Since the rise of Putin, Moscow has sought good relations with all the Middle East's many governments, including both pro-American and anti-American as well as both Arab and non-Arab. Moscow has also established close ties with the two major Palestinian movements—Fatah and Hamas—and with the powerful Lebanese Shi'a opposition movement, Hezbollah. Basically, Moscow has sought good relations with all major actors in the Middle East except for Al Qaeda and its affiliates—and they, of course, are hostile toward all of the above and others besides.

Yet, while antipathy toward Al Qaeda and its affiliates is common to them, there are (as is well known) many disputes among Middle Eastern actors. The best known are the Israeli–Palestinian and Israeli–Arab disputes, but there are also disputes within the Palestinian community (between Fatah and Hamas), among Lebanon's many communities, within Iraq, between Iran on the one hand and the U.S. and America's allies (including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the other conservative Arab monarchies) on the other, and more still. Moscow has managed to navigate all of these and stay on relatively good terms with each of the parties in these many disputes even though none is happy about Moscow having good relations with its opponents.

In the Arab–Israeli arena, Putin revived Russian–Syrian relations from the torpor they had fallen into during the 1990's. Moscow sells arms to Syria—including missiles that Israel claims Damascus has passed on to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. Moscow has long been friendly with the secular Palestinian movement, Fatah, but under Putin has also established good relations with Hamas. On the other hand, Moscow has developed especially close ties with Israel since the rise

of Putin. The addition of Israeli technology enhances Russian arms sales to India and other countries. Russia itself has begun to purchase Israeli weaponry—specifically, unmanned aerial vehicles. Not only has Russian–Israeli trade grown substantially, but there are multitudinous cultural and human contacts between Russians and Israelis (especially the Russian-speakers among the latter). As with Hamas, Moscow maintains friendly ties with Hezbollah. But it also has good relations with the Lebanese government as well as Sunni, Christian, and other parties that are often at odds with both Hezbollah and Syria.

Not only Israel, but the U.S., EU, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab governments allied with Washington are both fearful of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons and annoyed with Moscow for selling weaponry and nuclear know-how to Tehran. Russia and Iran do indeed have close relations in the petroleum, military, and nuclear spheres. Yet not only (as mentioned before) does Russia simultaneously manage to maintain good relations with Israel, but also with Saudi Arabia and other conservative Arab states. Especially remarkable is the relationship that Russia has built up with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Although the UAE and Iran have a longstanding territorial dispute over three islands in the Gulf and although Iran is a major purchaser of Russian arms, the UAE is also a major buyer of weapons from Russia. In addition, Russian firms have been allowed to operate in Saudi Arabia, and Russian arms sales to the Kingdom are under negotiation. Russia has also either maintained or built up good relations with other Arab states allied with the U.S., including Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, and Egypt.

While Russia (along with many other governments) strongly objected to the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq that

began in 2003, Moscow later established good relations with the post-Saddam elected government in Baghdad. Lukoil even won the contract to exploit the lucrative West Qurna 2 oil field (it had previously signed a contract to exploit this field with Saddam Hussein's regime, but he canceled it in late 2002). Russian firms are also doing business in the Kurdish north.

Reasons for Success

Being able to get along with so many disparate governments and movements is not easy, and Moscow's success in doing so is a significant accomplishment for Russian foreign policy. None of the governments and movements that Moscow now has good relations with is happy that Moscow also maintains good relations with its rivals. There is a risk for Moscow, of course, that seeking to maintain good relations with all sides in a quarrel could result in deteriorating relations between Russia and one or more of the parties involved. So far, though, this has not happened. This may be because Middle Eastern rivalries are so intense that each party fears that if it allows its relations with Moscow to deteriorate, Russia would do even more to help its adversary.

Israel, for example, has complained about Russian arms sales to Iran and Syria. Yet if Israel downgraded or even broke relations with Russia over this, Moscow might sell even more weapons to Damascus and Tehran. Similarly, Iran bitterly resents how Russia and China (at American and European urging) have voted in favor of UN Security Council sanctions against Iran, how long Russia has delayed completing the nuclear reactor at Bushehr, and how Moscow (at Israel's and Saudi Arabia's behest, the Iranian press has claimed) has delayed delivery of S-300 air defense missile systems to Iran. But if Iran downgraded or broke relations with Russia over these issues, Moscow might vote for harsher Security Council sanctions against Tehran and increase its cooperation with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other governments that Iran sees as its opponents. Moscow's success, then, in making friends with all the major actors in the Middle East (except, as already noted, Al Qaeda and its affiliates) is not simply the result of a friendly policy toward all, but of the animosities in the region being so intense that the various actors cannot afford a deterioration in their relations with Russia despite their resentment of Moscow's ties with their rivals.

In addition, Russian foreign policy in the Middle East benefits from the region's highly ambivalent relationship with the U.S. While many governments cooperate closely with the U.S., their citizens often have an extremely negative view of American foreign policy and don't like the fact that their governments are closely

associated with it. Leadership meetings with top Russian officials, buying Russian weapons or other goods, or just talking with the Russians about doing so all help foster an image of Middle Eastern governments as being independent of the U.S. and even willing to defy it. Yet while Moscow is able to exploit the region's anti-American sentiment to make diplomatic and economic gains, Russia's ability to export to and invest in many countries of the region is enhanced by the American-sponsored security order that helps keep these governments in power and able to make deals with Moscow.

Challenges Moving Forward

Although Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East since the rise of Putin has been highly successful up to now, there is reason to believe that it might not continue to be so. The plight of Muslims in Chechnya and elsewhere in the North Caucasus and Russia in general has not become an anti-Russian cause célèbre in the Muslim Middle East. Neither the Middle Eastern governments nor the major opposition movements (except Al Qaeda and its affiliates) support Russia's domestic Muslim opposition against Moscow either. But if this somehow changes (through a spike in conflict or some other reason that focuses the Muslim Middle East's attention on Russia's Muslims), Moscow's problems in the North Caucasus could come to resemble those that it faced in Afghanistan in the 1980's. Yet even if Muslim Middle Eastern governments (along with Fatah, Hamas, and Hezbollah) continue to refrain from assisting radical Muslim forces in the North Caucasus, they are unlikely to prove willing or even able to help Moscow combat them if the situation in this region deteriorates.

In addition, while Moscow has been able to benefit from anti-Americanism in the Middle East while also benefiting from the American-supported security order there, Russian interests could well suffer if the American presence in the region weakens or declines. The withdrawal of American combat forces from Iraq in August 2010 and the projected withdrawal of its support forces in 2011 will provide an early test as to whether the Iraqi government will be able to maintain even the fragile degree of security that the U.S. has helped established, or if the situation deteriorates. The latter could negatively impact Moscow if it means that petroleum firms from Russia (as well as elsewhere) are unable to operate in Iraq and if Al Qaeda in Iraq—which has taken action against Russia over Chechnya in the past—makes a comeback. Similarly, a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan (whether or not U.S./NATO forces remain there) could have a very negative impact on Russian interests if it resumes its pre-9/11 support

for Islamist groups opposed to the Moscow-backed secular regimes of Central Asia.

Finally, Moscow is fortunate that both pro-American and anti-American regimes in the Middle East all oppose radical Sunni Islamists, and that radical Shi'a Hezbollah and even radical Sunni Hamas are focused on events in Lebanon and Palestine respectively. Moscow, though, has little capacity itself to prevent the rise of more anti-Russian Sunni radicals in the region; it depends on others to do this instead. The unpopularity and incompetence of so many Middle Eastern dictatorships combined with the declining appetite of the U.S. and its allies for military intervention in the wake of the Iraqi and Afghan imbroglios increases the prospects for radical Sunni Islamists gaining power in one or more of these countries. These new radical regimes, of course, will undoubtedly see America, Israel, and the West in general as their main enemies. But they might well identify Moscow as an enemy too, and decide to help radical Muslim groups fighting against it. Nor will Russia's

having had good relations with the regime(s) ousted by Sunni radicals serve to endear Moscow to them.

The negative scenarios for Russia outlined here, of course, might not arise. The Muslim Middle East may continue to ignore what is happening in the North Caucasus, and thus do nothing to exacerbate the problems Moscow faces there. Although America is retreating from Iraq and may well retreat from Afghanistan, radical Sunni forces there and elsewhere in the Middle East may yet be kept at bay. Even if they do gain strength, they may be consumed by conflict with more immediate enemies in the region and with the U.S. rather than with Russia. The problem for Moscow is that there is not much it can do to influence developments in the Middle East that could impact Russia. Trying to be friends with everyone in the region willing to be friends with Moscow—plus trying to make economic gains wherever it can—may well be the best that Russian foreign policy can do in the Middle East under present circumstances.

About the Author

Mark N. Katz is Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. During Fall 2010, he is also a Visiting Scholar at the Middle East Policy Council in Washington, DC.

ANALYSIS

Russia and Africa: Coming Back?

By Vladimir Shubin, Moscow

Abstract

As recent Presidential visits demonstrate, Russia is placing increasing priority on relations with African countries. However, this should not be viewed as a new phenomenon, positive relations between Moscow and many African countries date back several decades. An important challenge for these relationships is to improve economic trade links to match the recent increase in political interaction. Several common economic interests exist between Russia and certain African countries, and thus the development of these should be a priority for Russia's foreign policy, in order to consolidate these relationships.

The recent visit of South African President Jacob Zuma to Moscow represents the latest example of a process that is often regarded as "Russia coming back to Africa". Speaking in Moscow, President Zuma referred to Russia as "a historic friend of the South African people", underlining Moscow's past support for Africa, by stating that: "We [South Africa] have fond memories of that solidarity and friendship, which existed when

friends of the oppressed in South Africa and Africa were very few. It is the basis on which we can build stronger political, economic and social ties".

Similar perceptions about Russia are evident in other African countries as well. Not only did Russia never have colonies in Africa, but it made a vital contribution to decolonization in various ways: from initiating the Declaration on Granting Independence to Colo-