

Russia and the Middle East Under Putin

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Abstract

This article aims at analyzing Russia's foreign policy towards the Middle East in a comprehensive manner. After giving a brief overview of the relations under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, the article concentrates on the Putin administration. The article looks at Russia's relations with the Middle East under Putin in two major periods: From 2000 to 2004, when there was a consolidation of Putin's power domestically and from 2004 to 2008 when the Russian leader pursued a more assertive policy towards the region. The impact of Russian invasion of Georgia on the relations with the Middle East is also analyzed. In the article, Russia's foreign policy towards Turkey, Iran, Syria, Islamic movements and the Arab-Israeli conflict are studied in detail. The article concludes by highlighting four important points: Firstly, after Yeltsin's decade of absence from the Middle East, Putin has restored Russia's presence in the region. Secondly, despite this presence, to what extent Russia has been able to exercise real influence in the region is a real question. Third, as Moscow increased its presence in the Middle East, it has also increased its dilemma of choice as to which side to back in the numerous conflicts that pervade the region. Finally, the Middle East has become of increasing economic importance to Moscow, and Putin has pursued economic relationships with almost all the countries in the region.

Keywords: Russia, Russian Foreign Policy, Russia and the Middle East, Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin.

Putin Döneminde Rusya ve Ortadoğu

Öz

Bu makalenin amacı Rusya'nın Ortadoğu politikalarına yönelik kapsamlı bir analiz yapmaktır. Boris Yeltsin dönemindeki ilişkileri konu alan kısa bir özetin ardından makale, Putin Hükümeti dönemine odaklanmaktadır. Makale, Putin dönemi Rusya-Ortadoğu ilişkilerini iki kısımda ele almaktadır: 2000-2004 arasında Putin'in yerel gücünü pekiştirdiği dönem ve 2004-2008 arası Rus

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liderin bölgeye yönelik daha kendinden emin politikalar izlemeye başladığı dönem. Rusya'nın Gürcistan'ı işgalinin Rusya-Ortadoğu ilişkileri üzerindeki etkisi de ayrıca analiz edilmiştir. Makalede Rusya'nın Türkiye, Suriye, İslami Hareketler ve Arap-İsrail çatışmasına yönelik politikaları detaylı olarak incelenmiştir. Makale, dört önemli konunun vurgulanmasıyla son bulmaktadır: Öncelikle Yeltsin'in Ortadoğu'dan uzak kaldığı 10 yıllık sürecin ardından Putin, Rusya'nın bu bölgedeki varlığını yeniden inşa etmiştir. İkinci olarak Rusya'nın bölgedeki varlığının ötesinde sorulması gereken asıl soru, Rusya'nın bu bölgede gerçekten ne ölçüde etkili olabildiğidir. Üçüncü olarak; Moskova'nın bölgedeki varlığı güçlendikçe, Rusya'nın bölgedeki çok sayıdaki çatışma arasında hangilerini destekleyeceğine dair açmazı da aynı ölçüde büyümüştür. Son olarak ise Moskova için Ortadoğu'nun ekonomik önemi git gide artmaktadır ve bu nedenle Putin, bölgedeki hemen hemen her ülke ile ekonomik ilişkileri geliştirmeye yönelik politikalar izlemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya, Rus Dış Politikası, Rusya ve Ortadoğu, Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin.

روسيا والشرق الأوسط في فترة "بوتين"

خلاصة

ان الهدف من هذا المقال هو اجراء تحليل شامل حول سياسة روسيا تجاه الشرق الأوسط. فبعد اعطاء موجز قصير يتناول العلاقات في عهد بوريس يلتسن، يركز المقال على فترة حكومة بوتين. ويتناول المقال علاقات روسيا بالشرق الأوسط في فترة بوتين في قسمين : يتناول القسم الأول فترة اعوام 2000 – 2004 التي عمل فيها بوتين على توطيد نفوذه الداخلي، ويتناول القسم الثاني فترة اعوام 2004 – 2008 التي اتبع الزعيم الروسي خلالها سياسات اكثر وثوقا بنفسه تجاه المنطقة. كما يتناول المقال بالتحليل تأثير احتلال روسيا لجورجيا على العلاقات الروسية – الشرق اوسطية. ويبحث المقال بالتفصيل عن سياسات روسيا تجاه تركيا وسوريا والحركات الاسلامية والصراع العربي – الاسرائيلي. وينتهي المقال بالتأكيد على اربعة محاور مهمة : المحور الأول : انه وبعد ابتعاد يلتسن عن الشرق الأوسط لفترة ناهزت العشرة اعوام، قام بوتين بتوطيد مركز روسيا في هذه المنطقة. والمحور الثاني يتناول انه فيما عدا تواجد نفوذ روسيا في المنطقة، فان السؤال الحقيقي الواجب توجيهه في هذا المضمار هو مدى امكانية روسيا ان تكون قوة مؤثرة في المنطقة في واقع الحال. اما المحور الثالث، فيخص حقيقة انه بتعاظم وجود ونفوذ موسكو في المنطقة، يتعاظم وبنفس الوتيرة معضلة روسيا المتمثلة في اين تقف روسيا من الاشتباكات والصراعات العديدة في المنطقة واي من هذه القوى ترى ان تكون في جانبها. وفي الأخير ننوه بان الاهمية الاقتصادية للشرق الأوسط تتضاعف باستمرار بالنسبة لروسيا، ولهذا السبب فان بوتين يتبع سياسة تطوير العلاقات الاقتصادية مع كافة الاقطار في المنطقة تقريبا.

الكلمات الدالة : روسيا ، سياسة روسيا الخارجية، روسيا والشرق الأوسط، بوريس يلتسن، فلاديمير بوتين.

After a decade in which Russia under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin was pre-occupied with economic crises, an uprising in Chechnya, political instability and a foreign policy focus on the states of the Former Soviet Union [FSU] and the United States; Moscow, under its new President, Vladimir Putin, especially in his second term [2004-2008], and subsequently as Russia's Prime Minister, began to refocus Russian attention on the Middle East. To be sure, Russia did not totally neglect the region during the Yeltsin era. Both Turkey and Iran, which bordered on the FSU, did get Russian attention, albeit more from a defensive point of view than from an effort to expand Russian influence, while the Arab-Israeli conflict greatly receded in importance to Moscow, compared to what it had been in Soviet times.

I. The Yeltsin Legacy

In the case of Turkey, Russia was concerned about Turkish efforts, especially in the period of Turkish President, Turgut Özal [1991-93], to extend its influence through the Turkic parts of the FSU [Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan], as well as Turkish support for the Chechen uprising. For their part, the Turks were concerned about Russian support for the Kurdish issue, and about rising Russian oil exports by tankers through the Bosphorus that threatened the city of Istanbul. Despite these conflicts, trade between the two countries skyrocketed [especially the so-called "suitcase trade"], Turkish construction companies were active through Russia, and Russian armament companies sold Turkey helicopters that were used against the Kurds, even as the Russian Foreign Ministry was backing the Kurdish cause -- a good example of the semi-chaos in Russian foreign policy that prevailed under Yeltsin.¹

By 1997, however, Russian-Turkish relations had begun to improve. From the Turkish perspective, disenchantment with the United States because of its protection of the Kurds in Northern Iraq whom Turkey felt posed an irredentist threat against it, made Turkey more willing to improve ties with Russia. For its part, Moscow, which had planned to sell the SAM-300 surface-to-air missile system to Southern Cyprus -- a development which would have compromised the airspace not only of Northern Cyprus, but also much of central Anatolia -- changed its position and agreed to sell the SAM-300 to Greece instead. In addition, in December 1997, Moscow and Turkey signed a major natural gas agreement under which a natural gas pipeline, to be named "Blue Stream" would be constructed under the Black Sea from Russia to Turkey,

1 For an overview of Russian policy in the Middle East under Yeltsin see Robert O. Freedman, *Russian Policy Toward the Middle East Since the Collapse of the Soviet Union. The Yeltsin Legacy and the Challenge for Putin* [Seattle: Henry Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, 2001.]

and Russia would become the major supplier of natural gas to Turkey. Then, in 1999, Russia refused to give asylum to Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, who, under heavy Turkish pressure, had been expelled from his base in Syria. The Russian action was to set the stage for an even greater improvement of Russian-Turkish relations under Putin.²

In the case of Iran, the regime in Tehran, although it did have its disagreements with Moscow, saw Russia as a protector against US attempts to isolate it in the international arena, as well as a supplier of military equipment to help protect it against regional enemies, first and foremost Iraq. Moscow also saw a mixed picture of potential dangers and benefits in the relationship. Moscow's main concern was that Iran, a self-proclaimed Islamic Republic, would support its coreligionists in Chechnya, even though the majority of Chechens were Sunni Muslims, and the majority of Iranians were Shi'a. In addition, Iran had considerable influence in the FSU Central Asian state of Tajikistan, which was culturally and linguistically linked to Iran. Fortunately for Moscow, Iran kept a low-profile during the two Chechen wars [1994-96 and 1999-], and helped Russia secure a ceasefire in the Tajik civil war in 1997. Areas of disagreement between Tehran and Moscow included the demarcation of the Caspian Sea [Iran wanted 20%, although it had only 12% of the coastline], and the proper route for Caspian Sea oil and natural gas to flow to the West [Moscow wanted all the energy to flow through Russian pipelines, while Iran offered an alternative route].

On the positive side of the ledger, Iran was an important customer for Russian armaments, especially combat aircraft and submarines, although under pressure from the United States, Russia, in the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement of 1995, agreed to halt all arms sales to Iran by the end of the decade when existing contracts were completed. Russia also agreed to construct a nuclear reactor for Iran at Bushehr, a billion dollar project that was extremely helpful to Russia's nuclear industry.³

The Arab-Israeli conflict, by contrast, was only of tertiary interest to Yeltsin's Russia, a situation very much unlike that in the Soviet era when successive Soviet leaders from Khrushchev to Andropov, sought to exploit the Arab-Israeli conflict to increase Moscow's influence in the Middle East. Russia let the US take the lead in Arab-Israeli diplomacy during the period when Andrei

2 On Öcalan and the Kurdish issue, see Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending* [New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008], pp. 59-60.

3 For a detailed analysis of Russian-Iranian relations from 1991-2006, see Robert O. Freedman, *Russia, Iran and the Nuclear Question: The Putin Record* [Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College, 2006]

Kozyrev was Russia's Foreign Minister [1991-1995], as Moscow endorsed the Oslo I [1993] and Oslo II [1995] agreements between Israel and the Palestinians as well as the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel. Meanwhile, on a bilateral basis Russian-Israeli relations flourished; economically, culturally and even militarily as Russia and Israel signed an agreement to produce an AWACS radar aircraft [Israel supplied the avionics and Russia the airframe] for sale to countries such as India. For its part, Israel was happy that Moscow continued to allow Russian Jews to immigrate to Israel, and hoped that the rapidly developing cultural relations between Russia and Israel, based on the one million Russian-speaking immigrants from the FSU residing in Israel by 1991, would lead to closer political relations between Moscow and Jerusalem.⁴

By 1996 however the Russian-Israeli honeymoon had ended, as Yeltsin, under increasing pressure from right-wing forces in the Russian Duma [legislature] and following the US intervention in Bosnia, took a tougher position in world affairs. Kozyrev was replaced by Soviet-era hardliner Yevgeny Primakov who displayed an increasingly critical attitude toward Israel, and a more sympathetic position toward the Arab states and the Palestinians. Thus during the Spring 1996 fighting in Lebanon between Israel and Hizbollah, Primakov and Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres [who had succeeded the assassinated Yitzhak Rabin] openly clashed. However, underlining the diplomatic impotence of Russia, it was American Secretary of State Warren Christopher, and not Primakov, who succeeded in bringing the fighting to an end.⁵ Peres' successor, Binyamin Netanyahu, sought to improve relations with Russia, even giving Moscow a \$50 million agricultural loan during a visit in March 1997, and stating that Israel would consider buying Russian natural gas. In addition, bilateral relations continued to develop as the Israeli food manufacturer Tnuva filmed a "milk in space" commercial aboard the Russian Space Station Mir. However, Moscow was critical of Netanyahu's policies, especially his expansion of Jewish settlements on the West Bank. For his part, Netanyahu was critical of Russian military and economic aid to Iran, which included building the nuclear reactor at Bushehr, because Iran was an avowed enemy of Israel. Indeed, Netanyahu later cancelled discussions of the natural gas deal with Moscow because of Russia's supply of missile technology to Iran.⁶ However, one of Netanyahu's ministers, Ariel Sharon, gained favor in Moscow by backing the Russian position in Serbia during the US-Russian clash over Kosovo in the late 1990's. Nonetheless, by the late Summer of 1998 Russia had become enmeshed in a near disastrous economic crisis, which effectively limited Russia's freedom of action in the world,

4 These events are discussed in detail in Robert O. Freedman, "Russia and Israel Under Yeltsin," *Israel Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 [Spring 1998: 140-169.]

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

including in the Middle East, and this situation was to continue until a sick, and frequently intoxicated, Yeltsin suddenly resigned as Russia's President, to be succeeded by Vladimir Putin in January 2000.

II. The Putin Era: Part One [2000-04]

A. Consolidating Power

When Vladimir Putin became Russia's Prime Minister in the Fall of 1999 and Acting President in January 2000 [he was formally elected Russia's President in March 2000], he had three major objectives. The first was to restore Russia's prestige in the world so as to prevent the United States from unilaterally dominating the world. Putin's second objective was to rebuild the Russian economy so that Russia could again become a great power. The third objective was to curb Muslim and especially Middle Eastern aid to the Chechen rebellion that had erupted again in 1999, so that Moscow could more easily suppress it. In order to accomplish these tasks, Putin had to consolidate his power in order to end the near anarchy that had pervaded much of Yeltsin era. To do this Putin all but eliminated the political influence of oligarchs Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky and Mikhail Khodorkovsky and took over their media outlets. He replaced Yevgeny Adamov, head of the Ministry of Atomic Energy [Minatom, now Rosatom], who had a habit of trying to make nuclear deals with Iran not approved of by the Kremlin, with Alexander Rumantsev, who in November 2005 was, in turn, replaced by Sergei Kiriyenko.

The powerful gas monopoly, GASPROM, heavily involved in Turkey and Central Asia, had its director, Ram Vekhirev replaced by Alexei Miller, while the Defense Ministry had its leader, Defense Minister Igor Sergeev, replaced by the Secretary of the National Security Council, Sergei Ivanov. Two other holdovers from the Yeltsin era were also removed during Putin's first term. Russia's Prime Minister Mikhail Khazyanov was replaced by Mikhail Fradkov and Russia's Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, was replaced by Sergei Lavrov.

Putin also changed Interior ministers, set up plenipotentiaries to oversee Russia's 89 regions, and consolidated Russia's arms sales agencies into Rosoboronoexport, in an effort to gain greater control over a major source of foreign exchange -- and to prevent unauthorized foreign arms sales. Putin also put a great deal of emphasis on improving Russia's economy, not only through the sale of arms, oil and natural gas [the Russian economy has been blessed with high oil and natural gas prices during most of his years in office] but also by selling high tech goods such as nuclear reactors and by expanding Russia's business ties abroad. Indeed, business interests were to play an increasingly significant role in Putin's foreign policy.

Making Putin's task easier was the support he received from the Duma, especially from his Edinstvo [Unity] party - now the enlarged United Russian Party - in contrast to the hostile relations Yeltsin had with the Duma from 1993 until his resignation as Russia's President in December 1999. Indeed, in the Duma elections of December 2003, Putin greatly increased his support, weakening both the Communist and Liberal Democratic parties which were his main opponents, and he scored an overwhelming victory in the 2004 Presidential elections.

B. The Islamic Issue

As Putin was consolidating his power in the 2000-2004 period, his foreign policy, like Yeltsin's, was basically defensive. Initially, with oil still below \$20 per barrel, and capital flight still plaguing Russia, Putin's policy was cautiously cooperative with the United States. The one exception was in regard to Iran where Putin, in 2000, unilaterally abrogated the 1995 agreement between U.S. Vice-President Al Gore and then Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin under which Russia had promised to end all arms exports to Iran when existing contracts ran out in 1999.⁷ In addition, Putin invited Mo-hamed Khatami, the President of Iran, for a state visit to Russia in March 2001. Needless to say, the warming of relations between Russia and Iran was not received well in Israel or the United States. However, following 9/11, Putin actively cooperated with the United States – after all, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, as well as their ally, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan – were also threats to Russia, and Moscow not only provided useful intelligence to the United States, but also initially raised no objections to the establishment of U.S. bases in Central Asia to fight the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

In the 2002-2003 period, US-Russian relations began to chill, in part because of Putin's crackdown on the Russian media, and in part because US president George Bush abrogated the US-Soviet ABM treaty, and also sought to move NATO closer to Russia's borders by including the Baltic States. The biggest problem, however, was Iraq where the US was angry at Russian efforts to weaken the UN sanctions regime against Saddam Hussein and Russia opposed US plans to invade Iraq. During this period, however, Putin was also preoccupied with the rebellion in Chechnya, and the Chechen seizure of a Moscow theater in 2002, which caused numerous casualties, reinforced this concern. Indeed when an Al Qaeda group attacked Saudi Arabia in May 2003, Putin was quick to compare that attack to Chechen rebel attacks against Russia, and he invited the Saudi Crown Prince to Moscow several months later and got him to support Putin's hand-picked Chechen leader, Akhmed Kadyrov.⁸

7 Freedman, *Russia, Iran and the Nuclear Question*, pp. 12-13.

8 The visit is discussed in Robert O. Freedman, "Can Russia Be a Partner for the United States in the Middle East?", in *NATO-American Relations* [ed. Aurel Braun] [New York: Routledge 2008] p. 129-30.

Another element of Putin's policy of securing Islamic legitimization for Russia's policy in Chechnya involved courting other key Islamic leaders, and gaining membership for Russia in the OIC. This effort accelerated during a Putin visit to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in August 2003. Malaysia was a key country in Putin's strategy because it was to host the next Islamic summit in October 2003 and would be the OIC leader until 2006. Besides securing deals for the sale of 18 Su-30 fighter-bombers, Putin obtained the support of the outspoken Malaysian leader Mutahir Mohammed for Russian membership in the OIC.

At the OIC meeting in Malaysia in October 2003 Putin made the Russian case for observer status [something Russia was to achieve in 2005], noting that the number of Russian mosques had grown from 870 in 1991 to 7,000 in 2003 and that the 20 million Muslims "peacefully and productively" living in Russia disproved the theory of the clash of civilizations. Putin also brought a number of Russian Muslim leaders to the OIC meeting including, of course, Chechen leader Kadyrov. As far as Chechnya was concerned, Putin noted that the situation there was "returning to normal" and in not-so-veiled criticism of the U.S., stated "some are involved in practicing terrorism. Others are using this situation for their own mercenary ends, as a tool of political pressure to achieve their own goals, which have nothing in common with the interests of Islam, with protecting human rights, or with international law in general."⁹ Putin's Chechen strategy, however, was to receive a major blow seven months later, when Kadyrov was assassinated.

C. Russia and Iraq

Prior to the Anglo-American attack on March 2003 which overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein, Putin had two central goals in Iraq. The first was to obtain the more than \$8 billion dollars owed to Russia by Iraq. The second was to support the development of major Russian business ties with Iraq, especially Moscow's oil companies. Such deals however [other than oil for food purchases which were quite profitable for Moscow] could only take place when U.N. sanctions against Iraq were lifted. Consequently Moscow energetically pushed for the lifting of sanctions until the war broke out.

Nevertheless as the U.S. moved inexorably closer to war in 2002, Putin faced a clear dilemma - how to maintain good relations with the U.S. while at the same time protecting Russia's extensive business interests in Iraq and its hopes for future contracts there. As the crisis deepened, however, Putin

9 Cited in Maksim Glikin, "Protocols of the Elder of Malaysia," *Nezavisimaya Gazetza*, October 17, 2003 [Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press [hereafter CDSP] [vol. 55 no. 41, p. 17.]

saw some benefits flowing to Russia. Oil prices, on which Russia depended for more than one-third of its tax revenues, shot up from \$25 per barrel to an average \$38 per barrel, giving Russia an economic windfall. Under the circumstances, the Russian leader adopted a dual strategy. First, he sought to prevent the war by calling for the UN Security Council to legitimize any decision to go to war. Second, he sought to prolong the crisis as long as possible so as to keep the extra income flowing to the Russian economy. This, in turn, would keep Russian growth rates high, would enable Moscow to pay off some of its international debts [thus enhancing its international investment climate], and would provide enough extra spending power to get Putin not only through the Duma elections in December 2003 but also through the Presidential elections in the Spring of 2004.

At the same time Moscow sought to maintain contact with the United States, as well as with both the Saddam Hussein regime [his advisor Yevgeny Primakov was sent to Baghdad] and, discretely, with the Iraqi opposition so that no matter who emerged on top in Iraq, Russia would continue to have access to Iraqi oil. Saddam Hussein, however, was less than happy with Moscow's policy and in 2002, canceled the lucrative contract Lukoil had received to develop the West Qurna oil field, although he left the contracts with Machinoimport and Zarubzhneft in place. Nonetheless, by also floating the possibility of up to \$40 billion in new trade deals, he sought to entice Putin to give him greater support.¹⁰

Interestingly enough, as the war approached, US-Russian relations did not immediately suffer. In part this was due to the fact that the leading forces opposing a US-British attack on Iraq were the French and Germans, and this provided diplomatic cover for Moscow, and in part it was due to the fact that the U.S. kept hoping for Russian support, or at least neutrality, during the war, hinting that it would in return respect Russia's economic interests in Iraq. Nonetheless, once Putin publicly sided with French leader Jacques Chirac, US-Russian ties began to deteriorate. The situation was to worsen once the war broke out in later March. Putin, while not being forced to veto a resolution calling for UNSC support of the war, because the U.S. decided not to seek such a U.N. resolution, nonetheless spoke out sharply against the Anglo-U.S. attack, calling it the most serious crisis since the end of the cold war, and asserting that it was "a direct violation of international law, and a major political mistake that could cause the International Security system to collapse."¹¹

10 Less than a week after canceling the Lukoil project, Iraq ordered 5,000 taxis from the Russian firm GAZ, in a \$25 million dollar deal [Simon Ostrovsky, "Baghdad orders 5,000 Volga taxis from GAZ," *Moscow Times*, December 20, 2002.]

11 For the complete text of Putin's speech, see *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, March 21, 2003 [CDSP vol. 55 no. 11, p. 5.]

Russian-American relations were further hurt by credible reports that Russia had secretly sold military equipment to Iraq, including night-vision goggles, anti-tank missiles, and devices to interfere with U.S. GPS positioning systems.¹² In addition, the Russian ambassador to Iraq accused U.S. forces of shooting at a Russian convoy exiting Baghdad; the Kremlin protested a U.S. military spy plane flying over Georgia; and the Duma postponed action on an arms control treaty. Putin also, perhaps hoping to further prolong the crisis, demanded a cease-fire during the first week of the war, as U.S. forces encountered unexpected, if temporary, resistance.

In seeking to explain Putin's apparent hardening of policy during the war, there are several possible explanations. First, with the Duma elections drawing closer, and the Russian public strongly against the war, Putin did not wish to leave the issue solely in the hands of the opposition Communist party, especially since his own party, United Russia, was at the time running into problems. Secondly, with most of the Muslim world opposing the war, Putin may have felt that a strong anti-war position could both win Moscow friends in the Muslim world which, as noted above, Putin was cultivating and also assuage Russia's 20 million Muslims, many of whom are unhappy with his policy in Chechnya. Indeed, Putin asserted, "Russia has a community of 20 million Muslims and we cannot but take their opinion into account, I fully share their concerns."¹³ Finally, with Germany and France also strongly opposing the war, Putin may have felt that the newly created Franco-German-Russian bloc of states could serve as a check on U.S. unilateralism, and Russian opposition to the war would strengthen the prospects of a multipolar world.

D. Iran Becomes a Problem for Moscow

After revelations in late 2002 that Tehran had been concealing large parts of its purportedly peaceful nuclear program Moscow came under increasing pressure to curb its nuclear assistance to Iran.

The problem became especially serious for Russia in December 2002 when it was revealed in a series of satellite photographs that, in addition to Bushehr, Iran was building two new nuclear facilities, one a centrifuge plant near the city of Natanz and the other a heavy water plant near the city of Arak. Initially Russia downplayed the development, with the then Director of Minatom, Alexander Rumantsev, stating that the photos taken of the plants were not suf-

12 See Peter Slevin, "Three Russian firms' deals anger U.S.: Iraq purchased jamming gear, missiles, night vision goggles," *Washington Post*, March 23, 2003. See also Bob Drogin, "Banned arms flowed into Iraq through Syrian firms," *Los Angeles Times*, December 30, 2003.

13 Cited in Sharon LaFraniere, "Russia's Putin calls Iraq war a mistake," *Washington Post*, March 18, 2003.

ficient to determine their nature, and, in any case, the Russians had nothing to do with the two plants. Other representatives of Minatom said Russia was ready to supply nuclear fuel to Iran.¹⁴

By February 2003, however, Rumantsev was hedging his position, noting “at this moment in time Iran did not have the capability to build nuclear weapons.”¹⁵ By March 2003 with an International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] team visiting the two plants, Rumantsev had further changed his position and asserted that Russia could not tell whether Iran was secretly developing nuclear weapons: “While Russia is helping Iran build its nuclear plant [at Bushehr] it is not being informed by Iran on all the other projects currently underway.”¹⁶

Following its initial successes in the Iraq war, the U.S. stepped up its pressure on Russia to halt the Iranian nuclear weapons program. In response, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov noted in an Interfax interview at the end of May 2003 that Russia wanted all Iranian nuclear programs to be under the supervision of the IAEA.¹⁷

Then, following the Bush-Putin talks in St. Petersburg in early June 2003 when Bush was at the height of his international influence following the fall of Baghdad, Putin asserted that the positions of Russia and the U.S. on Iran were closer than people thought. However, he added that “the pretext of an Iranian nuclear weapons program [could be used] as an instrument of unfair competition against Russian companies.”¹⁸

By early June 2003 it appeared that the U.S. was making two demands on Russia, vis-à-vis the Bushehr reactor. First, while the U.S. wanted Russia to end all support for Bushehr, at the minimum, the U.S. argued that Moscow should not supply any nuclear fuel to the Bushehr reactor unless Iran agreed to send all used fuel back to Moscow. Second, Moscow should also withhold the nuclear fuel until Iran signed an additional protocol with the IAEA permitting that agency unannounced visits to all Iranian nuclear facilities. On the latter issue, both the G-8 [of which Russia is a member] and the EU also

14 See Guy Dinmore, “Russia ready to supply N-fuel to Iran,” *Financial Times*, December 24, 2002.

15 Guy Dinmore, “U.S. raises fears over Iran’s nuclear policy,” *Financial Times*, February 24, 2003.

16 Cited in Ali Akbar Dareini, “Iran’s first nuclear power plant 70 percent constructed,” AP report, *Washington Times*, March 12, 2003.

17 Interfax, May 28, 2003, “Moscow-Tehran cooperation gives no grounds for criticism – Russian Foreign Minister, [Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report Russia (Hereafter FBIS: RUSSIA) Diplomatic Panorama, May 28, 2003.]

18 Simon Saradzhyan, “Russia needs Iran proof or incentives,” *Moscow Times*, June 3, 2003.

pressured Iran. Indeed, the G-8 statement issued in early June noted: “We urge Iran to sign and implement the IAEA Additional Protocol without delay or conditions. We offer our strongest support to comprehensive IAEA examination of this country’s nuclear program.”¹⁹

The question, of course, was not only how far Iran would go to comply, but how far Russia would go to pressure Iran. In this there appeared to be some initial confusion in Moscow. While British Prime Minister Tony Blair asserted that Moscow had agreed not to deliver nuclear fuel until Iran signed the IAEA protocol, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Alexander Yakovenko, stated that Moscow would only freeze construction on the Bushehr plant if Iran refused to agree to return all spent nuclear fuel to Russia, and that Iran was not required to sign the protocol, because “the protocol is an agreement that is signed on a voluntary basis.”²⁰

Meanwhile, perhaps to deflect some of the U.S. pressure, Minatom Minister Alexander Rumanstev announced on June 3, 2003 that the Bushehr reactor would be completed in 2005, not 2004 as originally planned. While he blamed the delay on the need to replace the reactor’s original German parts, it could well be that this was an important gesture to the U.S.²¹

Then, on September 12, 2003, the IAEA, of which Russia is a member, gave Tehran a deadline of October 31st to provide full information about its nuclear program to show that it was not secretly building nuclear weapons, and furthermore urged Iran to freeze its uranium enrichment program. While the tough wording of the message prompted the walkout of the Iranian delegation from the Vienna IAEA meeting, the question now became how Russia would react to the situation. Interestingly enough, at the time, Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Kisylak tried to soft pedal the IAEA report by saying Iran should not see the October 31st deadline as “an ultimatum.”²² However, in September a dispute between Russia and Iran had broken out over who would pay for the return of the spent fuel from the reactor, with Iran demanding that Russia pay for it and Moscow refusing. Complicating matters further for Putin on the eve of his visit to the U.S. in late September, was the U.S. sanctioning of a Russian arms firm [The Tula Instrument Design Bureau] for selling laser-guided artillery shells to Iran.

19 Cited in *New York Times*, June 3, 2003, “Primary points from the statement of the Group of 8.” See also Judy Dempsey, “EU presses Iran on nuclear arms,” *Financial Times*, May 27, 2003.

20 Cited in Vladimir Isachenko, “Russia will ship nuclear fuel to Iran,” *Washington Post*, June 5, 2003.

21 Cited in *Ibid.*

22 Cited in “World Scene,” *Washington Times*, September 14, 2003.

Fortunately for Putin, Bush's position at the time of the summit was weaker than it had been when the two leaders last met in June. Guerrilla warfare had erupted in Iraq and the U.S. was beginning to have trouble dealing with it. Indeed, Washington had turned to the U.N. in an effort to get additional troops, along with monetary aid to rebuild Iraq. Along with a sputtering American economy, Iraq had become a major issue in U.S. politics, as Bush's standing in U.S. polls had begun to drop. Consequently, while Bush raised the issue of Iran with Putin, the most he could extract from the Russian leader was the somewhat vague statement that "It is our conviction that we shall give a clear but respectful signal to Iran about the necessity to continue and expand its cooperation with IAEA."²³ In addition, Bush proved unable to get Putin to agree to cease construction on the Bushehr reactor.

Nonetheless the central factor in Russian-Iranian relations by 2004 was the question as to when Russia would complete the Bushehr nuclear reactor. While there was progress on coordinating electricity grids via Azerbaijan, Russian-Iranian trade increased to the level of \$2 billion per year, and Tehran and Moscow negotiated on further arms and civilian plane sales as well as on the Russian launch of an Iranian satellite,²⁴ Bushehr dominated the discourse as Iran increasingly clashed with the International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA]. Even the division of the Caspian Sea, the other "hot button" issue in the Russian-Iranian relationship seemed to be put on hold during the period with Russian Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov noting in October 2004 that the Caspian Sea littoral states had only agreed on parts of 8 of the 33 articles of the proposed Caspian Sea Legal Regime.²⁵

Moscow's dilemma was basically two-fold. Throughout 2004 either the IAEA continued to find that Iran was hiding information about its nuclear activities, or Iran was renegeing on agreements it had already made with the IAEA and/or the EU-3 [Germany, France and England]. This, in turn, bought heavy U.S. pressure on Russia to hold off supplying nuclear fuel to the Bushehr reactor project it was constructing in Iran, lest Iranian efforts to develop a nuclear bomb be enhanced. Increasingly, as 2004 wore on, the Russian leaders appeared to be at least somewhat persuaded by the U.S. argument and their criticism of Tehran mounted.

23 Cited in Dana Milbank, "Putin agrees in spirit but little else," *Washington Post*, September 28, 2003.

24 See Andrey Kioloskov, "Who is lighting up Iran. Energy systems expand in synch," *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, December 17, 2004 [FBIS: RUSSIA, December 17, 2004] and Tehran IRNA, "Iran to purchase Russian Topolev passenger planes," November 26, 2004 [FBIS: MESA November 26, 2004.]

25 Cited on Tehran TV *Vision of the Islamic Republic Report*, October 26, 2004 [FBIS: MESA, October 26, 2004.]

Indeed as Iran throughout 2004 was seeking to wriggle out from its commitments to the IAEA and EU-3, Moscow appeared to take an increasingly tough tone with Tehran on nuclear issues. Thus Putin, in June 2004, threatened that “Russia will halt its work at Bushehr if Iran refuses to behave in an open manner and fails to comply with IAEA’s demands.”²⁶ Similarly, when meeting with French leader Jacques Chirac and German leader Gerhard Schroeder in September, Putin stated Russia’s opposition to an “expansion of the club of nuclear powers, notably through the addition of Iran.”²⁷ Then in commenting on the tough September IAEA resolution, Rumantsev stated “It is balanced and serves the interests of all parties.”²⁸

While Russia proved supportive of the EU-3 negotiations with Iran, it reportedly opposed Iranian efforts to get 20 centrifuges excluded from the agreement, something that was negatively commented on by the Iranian news agency Mehr. Putin himself, as the final negotiations with the EU-3 wound down, made a not-so-veiled warning to Iran, stating “We are engaged in bilateral negotiations with Iran. We’re helping it use nuclear power for peaceful purposes. If final agreements are achieved, we will continue this cooperation.”²⁹ Then, when the agreement was reached at the end of November, and the subsequent IAEA report took a relatively tough stand against Iran, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Kislyak told Interfax that not only did Russia praise the IAEA resolutions as “well balanced,” but “we also welcome Iran’s decision to freeze all uranium enrichment programs. This is a voluntary, trust building measure. We hope this decision will be reliably fulfilled.”³⁰ The Russian Foreign Ministry, in a statement issued after the IAEA resolution, reinforced Kislyak’s words, noting “a full and sustained fulfillment of this voluntary undertaking, with due monitoring on the part of the IAEA is essential for the settlement of remaining issues regarding Iran’s nuclear program.”³¹ Russia’s relatively hard line on Iran, however, was to evaporate in 2005.

26 Cited in Dmitry Suslov, “Iranian Draw,” *Rusky Kuryer*, June 13, 2004 [CDSP vol. 56 no. 24, p. 15.]

27 Cited in Alexei Andreyev, “Sochi Three,” *Rusky Kuryer*, September 1, 2004 [CDSP vol. 56 no. 25, p. 19.]

28 Cited in Andrei Zlobin, “Iran could face sanctions,” *Vremya Novostei*, September 20, 2004 [CDSP vol. 56. No. 38, p.22.]

29 Mehr News Agency [Tehran], “Russia’s ‘secret’ moves against Iran at IAEA revealed,” November 29, 2004 [FBIS: MESA November 29, 2004.]

30 Interfax, “Putin says [he] applauds Iran’s decision to suspend uranium enrichment program,” November 25, 2004 [FBIS: RUSSIA November 25, 2004.]

31 Interfax, “Russian Foreign Ministry welcomes [well-balanced] IAEA resolution on Iran,” November 20, 2004 [FBIS: RUSSIA November 30, 2004.]

E. Russia and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

As US-Russian relations chilled following the invasion of Iraq so did Moscow's relations with Israel. At the same time, there was a clear improvement in Russian-Palestinian relations. Moscow's tilt to the Palestinians became evident after the Israeli reentry into the cities of the West Bank following a series of Palestinian terrorist attacks in 2002. A secondary goal of Moscow's pro-Palestinian tilt was to curb Arab support for the Chechen rebellion. Still, even while tilting to the Palestinians, Putin periodically uttered soothing remarks about how much he valued the bilateral Russian-Israeli relationship and the role of Russian émigrés living in Israel. However, on issues of substance such as Russian aid to Iran, and Israel's construction of a security fence to protect itself from terrorist attacks, Russia and Israel had opposing positions. To be sure, Putin did have a point about the continuing strength of the bilateral Russian-Israeli relationship. By the early 2000's trade had risen to more than \$1 billion per year, cultural relations continued to develop, 50,000 Russian tourists were visiting Israel annually, and Russia and Israel signed an agreement under which Russian rockets would put Israeli satellites into orbit.³² Nonetheless, these areas of bilateral cooperation were increasingly overshadowed by diplomatic conflicts.

By the time of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's visit to Moscow in September 2003, the growing diplomatic differences between the Russia and Israel had become increasingly evident. While Sharon was in Moscow, Putin promised to take Israeli concerns into account while introducing a UN Security Council resolution codifying the Diplomatic Quartet's "Road Map" for peace. However, following the visit, when Moscow introduced the resolution, it was without the Israeli reservations. As far as Yasser Arafat was concerned, by 2002 Israel had refused to talk to the Palestinian leader, blaming him for the wave of terrorist attacks, which were occurring during the Al-Aksa *intifada*. By contrast, Putin continued to assert that Arafat was still politically relevant³³. On the issue of Israel's security fence, Russia joined the majority of EU states in voting to support a UN General Assembly [non-binding] resolution condemning Israel for building its security fence and calling on Israel to comply with the majority decision of the International Court of Justice to tear down the fence. The United States and six other countries, opposed the resolution.

By September 2004, however, Russia may have wished that it had construct-

32 Ruth Sinai, "Lift restrictions on Russian tourists Ministers says", *Ha'aretz* January 3, 2005.

33 "Road Map with a stop in Moscow" *Trud* November 28, 2003 [CDSP vol. 55 no. 47, p. 18.]

ed a security fence on its own separating the rest of the Russian Federation from Chechnya, after a series of Chechen terrorist attacks culminated in the seizure of a Russian school in Beslan that led to the deaths of 332 people, many of them children. This may have prompted Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, on a visit to Israel as part of a post-Beslan Middle East tour during which Russia sought world support against Chechen terrorism, to accept an Israeli offer to cooperate in the area of counterterrorism. The Israeli offer included the sharing of information on safeguarding critical installations, the training of counterterrorism specialists, and the exchange of intelligence data.³⁴ Still, any hope that Israel may have had that Moscow would adopt a more pro-Israeli stand in Israel's conflict with Palestinian terrorists as a result of the security agreement quickly faded. In October 2004, just one month after the Russian-Israeli agreement, Moscow supported a United Nations Security Council Resolution [vetoed by the United States] to condemn Israel for its military incursion into Gaza that was aimed at rooting out as many Hamas terrorists as possible before the Israeli Knesset vote on Ariel Sharon's Gaza disengagement plan.³⁵

This Russian policy was in sharp contrast to Putin's early policy on Hamas when a visiting Israeli delegation to Moscow at the start of the Al-Aksa *intifada* in the Fall of 2000, was told by Sergei Lavrov, then head of Russia's Security Council, that the terrorism that Israelis were facing in Gaza and the West Bank was exactly what Moscow faced in Chechnya.³⁶

F. Putin and Turkey

Faced with a still difficult economic situation, and pursuing an increasingly difficult war against the Chechens, Putin not only continued Primakov's policies of cooperation with Turkey but carried them further. First, Putin stepped up Russian support for the Blue Stream project. Thus, in early December 1999 he got the Russian Parliament to approve \$1.5 billion in tax breaks for the construction of Blue Stream, and Gasprom and ENI signed a contract for the construction of the underwater section of the pipeline³⁷. This led Turkish Minister of Energy Cumhur Ersumer to note that Russia had pulled ahead in

34 Grigory Asmolov, "Israel's intelligence community will assist Russia's," *Kommersant* September 7, 2004 [CDSP vol. 36 no. 26 p. 23.]

35 Yula Petrovskaya, "Russia is a collateral victim of terror in the Middle East", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* October 11, 2004 [CDSP vol. 56 nos. 40-41, p. 3.]

36 Cited in Robert O. Freedman, *Russian Policy Toward the Middle East Since the Collapse of The Soviet Union*, p. 55.

37 Andrew Jack and Leyla Boulton, "Russia paves way for pipeline," *Financial Times*, December 4-5, 1999.

the race to supply natural gas to Turkey.³⁸ Cooperation intensified in late October 2000 when Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Khasyanov journeyed to Turkey where he signed a number of agreements. Khasyanov made clearer than ever before Russia's policy change toward Turkey with his statement "Our main mutual conclusion is that Russia and Turkey are not rivals but partners, and our governments will from now on proceed from this understanding."³⁹ Khasyanov also pledged that Blue Stream gas would flow to Turkey by the fall of 2001 and also promised to increase natural gas supplies to Turkey through other routes during the late fall and early winter 2000-2001.⁴⁰ Moscow, in an effort to get a major military contract from Turkey, also cut the price it was charging for the new Russian-Israeli KA-50 combat helicopter to come in well below the U.S. Bell King Cobra helicopter which Turkey was considering purchasing from the United States.⁴¹ The two countries also promised to step up cooperation of their law enforcement and secret police forces in the war against terrorism, and stated it was their goal to increase trade back up to the \$10 billion per year level it had attained before the Russian economic collapse of August 1998.⁴²

The Khasyanov visit, despite continuing problems over Chechnya and Russian oil exports via the Turkish straits, was to establish the basis for a sharp improvement in Turkish-Russian relations during Putin's second term.

III. Putin Goes onto the Offensive in the Middle East [2004-2008]

A. Turkey

By 2004, with his domestic political opponents under control, overwhelmingly reelected to a second term as Russia's President, the Russian economy improving, and with oil prices rapidly rising, Putin was ready to move ahead with his three major objectives for Russia: 1. restoring Russia's status as a great power, thereby ending American dominance of the post-Cold War world ; 2. developing the Russian economy, especially in the high tech area, and 3. further limiting foreign aid to the Chechen rebels who were continuing their struggle against Russia. Unfortunately, for Putin, two events in the

38 Hugh Pope, "Russia takes lead in race to supply gas to Turkey," *Wall Street Journal*, February 17, 2000. Meanwhile, Iran was also a competitor in the Turkish natural gas market and an agreement to extend for 3 years the existing 22 month contract was negotiated in February 2000 [amboll@aol.com], August 24, 2000.

39 Quoted in *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, October 25, 2000 [FBIS: RUSSIA, October 25, 2000].

40 Itar-Tass Press review, October 26, 2000 [FBIS-RUSSIA, October 26, 2000].

41 Moscow Interfax, in English, October 25, 2000 [FBIS-RUSSIA, October 25, 2000].

42 Itar-Tass Press Review, October 26, 2000, *loc.cit.* and "Russia to increase gas sale to energy-hungry Turkey," *Agence France Press*, October 28, 2000.

September-November 2004 period – the Chechen seizure of the school in Beslan that led to the loss of 332 Russian lives in a bungled rescue operation, and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine which brought to power a Ukrainian president whom Putin had publicly opposed – made both Putin, and Russia, look weak. To counter this image Putin decided to formulate a new strategy for Russia in the Middle East, a region where the United States' position was rapidly weakening due to the growing insurgency in Iraq and the revival of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Seeking to exploit the weakened US position, Putin after a visit to Turkey moved first to court the leading anti-American rogue states and movements in the region – Syria, Iran, Hamas and Hizbollah. Subsequently, he was also to court the leading Sunni powers in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates while still trying to maintain good bilateral ties with Israel.

Putin's first visit, in his influence-building mission in the Middle East, was to Turkey. He was able to take advantage of the fact that because of the emergence of a quasi independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq, and the US failure to root out PKK bases there, US-Turkish relations were deteriorating.⁴³ Making matters worse was the US attack on Fallujah in Iraq in November 2004. Turkey's new Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan called those killed by US forces "martyrs", having already denounced US actions in Iraq as "state terror", a term he did not use to describe Russian savagery in Chechnya.⁴⁴ Indeed, Turkish-American relations had gotten so bad by the end of December that a Turkish diplomat had described them as being in a "continual state of damage control."⁴⁵ Consequently, in its move toward improving relations with Russia, Turkey was now following a multidimensional foreign policy, precisely the strategy Moscow was promoting.

Moscow had much to gain from an improved tie to Turkey. In addition to Turkey being a growing market for its natural gas, a Turk had become Secretary General of the OIC and Turkish support for Russian observer status in that organization was critical,⁴⁶ Turkish help in controlling the Chechens on its territory and expediting Russian oil exports were also of primary importance for Moscow. These were among the topics discussed first during the visit

43 See William Hale, Turkey, the US and Iraq [London: Middle East Institute at SOAS, 2007], Chapter Five.

44 Ibid p. 137.

45 Cited in *Milliyet*, "Strain seen between Turkey, U.S. over public comments about Iraq," December 27, 2004 [FBIS-ME December 25, 2004]. For a Turkish columnist's view that the deterioration had gone too far, see Sami Kohen, "Warm to Russia, cold to the U.S.," *Milliyet*, December 8, 2004 [FBIS-RUSSIA December 8, 2004].

46 On the eve of Putin's visit, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov thanked Turkey for its support "to Russia's effort to take part in the activities of the OIC," [cited in Lavrov interview in *Milliyet*, December 5, 2004 FBIS: RUSSIA, December 5, 2004].

of Putin to Ankara in early December and then, a month later, in Erdoğan's return visit to Moscow.

Putin's visit was the first in 32 years for a Russian leader and a number of agreements were signed during his visit including one on jointly combating terrorism. The agreement stated that Russia and Turkey "condemn terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and underscore the need to expand joint measures to combat it."⁴⁷ Also signed was an agreement to prevent incidents at sea,⁴⁸ and the two countries agreed to expand their cooperation in the defense industry.⁴⁹

While the visit of Putin to Turkey was clearly a success in improving Russian-Turkish relations and the two countries signed a protocol on expanding their ties to a "multidimensional partnership,"⁵⁰ the return visit of Erdoğan to Moscow in January appeared to open huge new areas of bilateral cooperation. Thus Erdoğan spoke of expanding trade from the then approximately \$10 billion a year to \$25-\$30 billion, and, perhaps seeking to rectify the trade imbalance between the two countries [Russian exported \$8 billion to Turkey per year, but only imported \$2 billion from it] the Turkish Prime Minister brought along more than 500 Turkish businessmen to Moscow and opened a Turkish trade center there.⁵¹ Erdoğan also talked of Turkey becoming a transit zone for Russian gas to Europe, and the Turkish Energy Minister, Hilmi Güler, also in Moscow, discussed the possibility of establishing a liquid natural gas terminal in Ceyhan for exporting Russian gas, and selling Russian gas to Israel under the sea, as well as possibly constructing a cable line under the Black Sea to exchange electricity with Russia.⁵² Güler also proposed a solution to the problem of Russian tankers being delayed in the straits – the construc-

47 *Interfax*, "Russia, Turkey declaration pledge to step up anti-terrorism fight," December 6, 2004 [*FBIS: WEST EUROPE*, December 6, 2004].

48 *Interfax*, "Navy commander says Russia, Turkey to sign agreement to prevent sea incidents," December 5, 2005 [*FBIS-RUSSIA*, December 5, 2004].

49 *Turkish Daily News*, "Partners in trade, Turkey and Russia eye closer defense cooperation," December 5, 2004.

50 Cited in Yusuf Kanli, "After all, have we become Russia's strategic partner?," *Turkish Daily News*, December 7, 2004 [*FBIS-RUSSIA*, December 7, 2004] and Ankara *Anatolia*, "Turkey: Russian President Putin departs from Ankara," December 6, 2004 [*FBIS-WEST EUROPE*, December 7, 2004].

51 *Inar-Tass*, "Turkish Premier highlights growing economic cooperation potential with Russia," January 8, 2005. Erdoğan also stated that Turkish investment in the Russian economy was more than \$2 billion U.S. dollars, and that Turkish construction companies had secured \$14.3 billion in contracts. [*FBIS-RUSSIA*, January 9, 2005]. At that time Russia was Turkey's second largest exporter and eight largest importer, while Turkey was Russia's 14th largest trade partner [*Interfax*, "Russian-Turkish trade expands 60.3 percent in first half of 2004," December 3, 2004 [*FBIS-RUSSIA* December 3, 2004]. See also AP "Putin sets 25 billion dollar goal for trade with Turkey, *Moscow Times*, January 12, 2005.

52 *Anatolia* "Turkish Energy Minister Guler views energy projects with Russia in statement in Moscow," January 12, 2005 [*FBIS-RUSSIA* January 12, 2005]. There were, however, other competing pipeline projects including Burgas-Alexandropolis and Burgas-Vlore [Albania].

tion of an oil pipeline from Samsun in North Central Turkey to Ceyhan on the Mediterranean to carry Russian oil. For his part Erdoğan waxed eloquent in describing possible joint Russian-Turkish projects to export goods to Eurasia and elsewhere in the world, a device clearly aimed at fostering Russo-Turkish cooperation, rather than competition, in such areas sensitive to Moscow as Transcaucasia and Central Asia, and Erdoğan also pledged Turkish support for Russia's joining the World Trade Organization. Finally the Turkish leader also expressed interest in establishing contacts with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

For his part Putin was more reserved although he stated that Erdoğan's estimate of \$25 billion dollars in trade was "quite realistic," and agreement was reached on construction of a gas storage facility. Putin also promised that Russian experts would closely examine all the specific Turkish proposals.⁵³ In the political sphere the Russian leader somewhat vaguely stated that Russia would try to help mediate and possibly serve as a "guarantor" in the conflicts between Turkey and Armenia and Azerbaijan and Armenia.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, it was a very productive set of visits and laid the basis for increased Russian-Turkish cooperation, especially in the economic sphere, during the remainder of Putin's second term as Russia's President.

B. Aiding the Radicals

As in the case of Turkey, Syria was a target of opportunity for Russia as it sought to rebuild its position in the Middle East. By the beginning of 2005 Syria was under heavy pressure on two fronts. Not only had the UNSC condemned its activities in Lebanon but the U.S. was complaining that Syria had become a conduit for foreign jihadists fighting in Iraq. Consequently, when Moscow, during Bashar Assad's visit to Moscow in January 2005 agreed to write off 73 percent of Syria's \$13.4 billion debt to Russia, Putin demonstrated strong support for an increasingly isolated Syrian government.⁵⁵ Then, in March 2005 Russia and Syria signed an agreement for Russia to develop new oil and gas deposits in Syria⁵⁶ and in April, just before Putin arrived in Israel, Russia signed an agreement to provide short-range surface-to-air missiles to

53 *Itar-Tass*, "Russia: Putin says cooperation with Turkey based on confidence, equality, respect," January 11, 2005 [*FBIS-RUSSIA* January 11, 2005] and *Itar-Tass*, "Putin states accord reached on boosting gas supplies to Turkey, January 11, 2005 [*FBIS-RUSSIA* January 11, 2005].

54 Cited in *Turkish Daily News* [online] "Russian mediation with Armenia?" January 12, 2005. See also *Itar-Tass*, "Putin, Turkish Prime Minister discuss Karabakh settlement, relations with Armenia," January 11, 2005 [*FBIS-RUSSIA* January 11, 2005].

55 Nabi Abdullaev, "Assad praises Russia, wins debt deal," *Moscow Times*, January 25, 2005.

56 RIA, "Russian company signs oil, gas exploration deal with Syria," March 21, 2005 [*FBIS-RUSSIA* March 22, 2005].

Syria – a further sign of support for Syria which was under increasing pressure because of the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.⁵⁷ Indeed under heavy international pressure, spearheaded by France and the United States, Syria was compelled to pull its troops out of Lebanon by the end of April 2005. Then, the special commission investigating the assassination of Hariri, under the leadership of the German police officer Dettlev Mehlis, issued an interim report in October 2005 implicating high-ranking members of the Syrian government, and noting that the Syrian regime had obstructed cooperation with the commission. At the same time, a committee under Terje Larsen issued a report to the U.N. that stated that Syria, despite pulling its forces out of Lebanon, had continued to supply Lebanese and Palestinian militias in Lebanon with weaponry.⁵⁸ Upon the release of the two reports, the U.S., Britain and France, acting jointly, called for U.N. sanctions against Syria. As in the case of Iran, Moscow sought to prevent the sanctions and succeeded in somewhat watering down the UN Security Council Resolution criticizing Syria. Nonetheless the resolution, UNSC 1636, did condemn Syria for trying to mislead the Mehlis Commission by following a policy of “cooperating in form but not in substance,” and demanded Syria expand its cooperation with the investigation or face “further action.”⁵⁹ While Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov praised UNSC Resolution 1636 for taking Russia’s views into account, and did manage to prevent an immediate referral of Syria to the UN Security Council,⁶⁰ Moscow may face some difficult choices once the final report on the Hariri assassination is issued, given the close tie between Hariri and Saudi Arabia which Putin was also trying to court. Meanwhile, after the arms deal with Syria, and the change of Russian policy toward Iran in February under which Moscow finally agreed to sign the long-delayed agreement to supply nuclear fuel to the Bushehr reactor [see below], Putin journeyed to the Middle East, visiting Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian territories in what was clearly a “show the flag” visit to demonstrate that Russia was again a factor in the Middle East. Indeed, during his visit Putin called for a Middle East Peace Conference to be held in Moscow. In the Palestinian territories Putin promised the newly elected Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas, fifty armored personnel carriers for his security forces, while telling the Israelis that he would do nothing to hurt their country and for this reason he had turned down an agreement to sell ground-to-ground missiles to Syria. Most Israelis doubted him, however, given the surface-to-air missile sale to Syria,

57 Steve Gutterman, “Putin defends missile sale to Syria,” AP Report, *Moscow Times*, April 29, 2005.

58 The two reports are found on the United Nations website.

59 Cited in Resolution 1636 [2005], October 31, 2005, United Nations website, Security Council, October 31, 2005.

60 Interfax, “Lavrov voted for Syria resolution because her [Russia’s] views [were] taken into account,” October 31, 2005 [*FBI/RSUSSIA* October 31, 2005].

an enemy of Israel, and the nuclear agreement with Iran, a country sworn to Israel's destruction. Indeed, as Moscow stepped up its aid to Iran throughout the remainder of 2005, Russian-Israeli relations deteriorated.

Putin clearly realized as he set out to rebuild Russia's position in the Middle East that in order to cement the relationship with Iran, which he saw as a foreign policy priority, he had to finalize the nuclear fuel agreement. Consequently in late February 2005, Russia signed the final agreement for the supply of nuclear fuel to the Bushehr reactor.⁶¹ Under the agreement all spent fuel was to be returned to Russia, thus, in theory at least, preventing its diversion into atomic weapons. Perhaps emboldened by the agreement with Russia, Iran's then chief nuclear negotiator, Hassan Rowhani warned that Iran would never permanently cease enriching uranium, and if the U.S. sought sanctions at the UN Security Council, "The security and stability of the region would become a problem." Rowhani also stated that Iran was not happy with the pace of negotiations with the EU-3, and threatened to end the negotiations if there were no progress.⁶²

Then, following the election of the outspoken Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in July 2005, Moscow did its best to delay even the discussion of sanctions against Iran in the United Nations Security Council that the U.S. was advocating because of Iran's decision to renew enrichment of uranium, and its refusal to supply the International Atomic Energy Agency with information about its atomic programs.

Making matters worse, Ahmadinejad called for wiping Israel off the map and denied the Holocaust. Despite such declarations, in November 2005 Moscow signed the agreement with Tehran to provide it with sophisticated short-range Tor surface to air missiles, that could be used to protect its nuclear installations against a possible Israeli or American attack.⁶³ By moving to help Iran to protect its nuclear installations, Moscow appeared to send a clear signal that it would stand by Iran, irrespective of its nuclear policies.

As Putin was increasing Russian support for Iran, he also tried to prevent the Arab and Muslim worlds from aiding the rebellion in Chechnya. Thus he obtained for Russia observer status in the Islamic Conference [OIC], and took the opportunity to side with the Muslim world by denouncing the Dan-

61 Scott Peterson, "Russia fuels Iran's atomic bid", *Christian Science Monitor*, February 28, 2005.

62 Cited in Nazila Fathi, "Iran says it won't give up program to enrich uranium," *New York Times*, March 6, 2003.

63 These events are discussed in detail in Robert O. Freedman, *Russia, Iran and the Nuclear Question*, pp. 30-35.

ish cartoons which were seen as insulting to Islam. For the same reason, he pursued an improved relationship with Saudi Arabia, an effort that bore some fruit as the Saudi government, distancing itself from the Chechen rebels, promised to help in the reconstruction of Chechnya.

Then, following the Hamas victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in January 2006, Putin called the event “a very serious blow” to American diplomacy in the Middle East, thus appearing almost to return to the “zero-sum” influence competition that characterized Soviet-American relations until the advent of Gorbachev. Soon after the election he invited a Hamas delegation to Moscow, asserting that Hamas was not on Russia’s terrorist list, and hence not considered a terrorist organization – a clear change from Russia’s policy in 2000 when, as noted above, a visiting Israeli delegation after the start of the Al-Aksa *intifada* was told that the terrorism Israel was facing in Gaza and the West Bank was exactly what Russia was battling in Chechnya.⁶⁴ By inviting Hamas to Moscow, Putin undermined the consensus of the Diplomatic Quartet [the US, Europe, UN, and Russia] which was not to have anything to do with Hamas until it recognized Israel, renounced terrorism against it, and accepted all previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements. When the Hamas delegation came to Moscow, Putin had a number of objectives. First, by inviting Hamas, he associated Russia with the then Arab consensus which was to give Hamas time to change its policies, and in the meantime to work with a Hamas government and not to sanction it. Russia was widely praised in the Arab world for its invitation, which also bestowed a modicum of legitimacy on Hamas – much to the anger of Israel which saw Hamas as a terrorist enemy seeking to destroy it. Another goal for Putin was to get Hamas, an Islamist organization, to downplay the Chechen issue, and the Hamas delegation complied, with delegation leader Khalid Mashal stating after a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, that the Chechen separatists were an internal problem of Russia. The comment drew a bitter reaction from the Chechen rebels which called Hamas’s decision to visit Putin’s Russia, which had killed so many Chechen Muslims, not only regrettable but also “un-Islamic”.⁶⁵

Another blow to Russian-Israeli relations occurred six months later when war broke out between Israel and Hizbollah following the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers. Not only did Moscow look the other way when Syria transferred some of its Russian weapons to Hizbollah, Russia also opposed sanctions against Syria, then Hizbollah’s main sponsor, at a meeting of the G-8, and

64 For a study of Russia’s policy toward terrorism, see Robert O. Freedman, “Can Russia be a Partner for the United States in the Middle East”, *loc. cit.*

65 Ibid.

criticized Israel for its overreaction to the kidnapping. In the aftermath of the war, Russia sent a group of engineers to rebuild some of the bridges destroyed in the conflict, but did not offer troops for the expanded UNIFIL contingent in southern Lebanon, whose mission, at least in theory, was to prevent the rearming of Hizbollah.

In the face of Israel's deteriorating relationship with Russia, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert journeyed to Moscow in October 2006, perhaps hoping to secure a reversal of some of Russia's anti-Israeli regional policies. Olmert had three issues to discuss with Putin: 1. Iran, 2. Syria's transfer of arms to Hizbollah and 3. Russia's diplomatic support for Hamas. A secondary list of priorities focused on Russian-Israeli bilateral relations, including trade, especially the potential purchase of Russian natural gas, and Russian-Israeli cooperation in arms sales to third countries. For his part, Putin had a more limited list of goals for Olmert's visit. First came his desire to have Russia recognized as a major player in Middle East diplomacy, and Olmert's visit helped confirm this. Second came Putin's efforts to rebuild the Russian economy which was an element in Moscow's efforts to regain great power status, and trade with a high-tech country like Israel, especially in the area of nanotechnology, would help Moscow achieve that goal. Given the results of the meeting, it appears that Putin fared far better than did Olmert. Thus on Iran, Russia made no concessions, with Lavrov, after Olmert's visit, saying that Moscow was still opposed to sanctions against Iran.⁶⁶ Moscow also played down the issue of weapons transfers,⁶⁷ and as far as Hamas was concerned, Lavrov stated, following the departure of Olmert, "Demanding now that Hamas fully accept the Quartet's conditions such as the recognition of Israel, the denunciation of violence against Israel, and acceptance of all existing agreements is unrealistic at this time".⁶⁸

If Olmert got very little satisfaction, from his Russian hosts on issues of major importance to Israel, he proved willing to accede to Putin's goals, perhaps hoping that if bilateral relations improved further, Russia might change its anti-Israeli regional policies. Thus Olmert agreed with Putin to raise trade from the then \$2 billion annual level to \$5 billion, and Olmert agreed to discuss the possibility of Israel's purchasing natural gas from Russia by way of a pipeline from Turkey, thereby reversing the stand on natural gas purchases adopted

66 Cited in Yossi Melman, "Putin to PM: Using force against Iran could end in disaster", *Haaretz* October 22, 2006.

67 Cited in Interfax, "Russia's Ivanov: Issue of Hizbollah's Russian weapons "closed topic". October 20, 2006 [*FBIS-RUSSIA* October 21, 2006].

68 Cited in Avi Issacharoff, "Russian FM calls international demands on Hamas 'unrealistic'", *Haaretz*, October 22, 2006.

by Netanyahu in 1997. That seemed to be a mutually advantageous deal for both Russia and Israel, because Turkey in 2006 had failed to use the amount of gas it had contracted with Russia to purchase, and Israel which in addition to the natural gas it purchased from Egypt had planned to purchase natural gas from a field off of Gaza, but because of the rise of Hamas, saw the Gaza project as an unlikely possibility.⁶⁹ The one concrete agreement to come out of the Moscow talks was the setting up of a working group to coordinate arms sales to third countries.⁷⁰ While Russia and Israel have cooperated in the production of such weapons systems as the AWACS, the two countries completed for contracts to refurbish old Soviet equipment like the MIG-23 aircraft.

C. Courting the Sunnis

Meanwhile, however, Russia's backing for Iran and its allies Syria, Hamas and Hizbollah came into conflict with Putin's goal of improved ties with the Sunni States of the Arab world, especially Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, Jordan and Egypt, which particularly after the Israeli-Hizbollah war had become increasingly suspicious of Iran and its allies, Syria, Hizbollah and Hamas. Consequently, as a sop to the Sunni Arabs prior to visiting Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan in February 2007, Russia in December 2006 finally agreed to UN Security Council sanctions against Iran, albeit very limited ones. Then in March 2007, following the trip, Putin agreed to additional very limited sanctions. During his visit to the Gulf Arabs, Putin sought major investments in Russia's banking and space industries, weapons sales, and joint investment projects in oil and natural gas [Putin was to have similar goals during a visit to Libya in 2008]. The energy deals were especially important to Moscow because its own production of oil and especially natural gas appeared to have almost peaked.⁷¹ During the Spring and Summer of 2007, as part of Putin's efforts to court the Sunni Arabs, Russia also conspicuously delayed sending Iran the promised nuclear fuel, making the dubious claim that the rich Persian Gulf country had not made the necessary payments, and a November 2007 visit by Putin to Iran didn't change the situation. However, following the ill-conceived US National Intelligence Estimate on Iran of December 2007 which erroneously argued that Iran had given up its nuclear weapons program, and

69 Li'or Brun, "Israeli-Russian talks on planned \$2 Billion natural gas deal viewed", *Maariv*, October 19, 2006 [FBIS-MESA October 20, 2006].

70 Interfax, "Russia, Israel to set up working group on arms trade", October 26, 2006 [FBIS-MESA October 20, 2006].

71 Putin's visit to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan is discussed in Robert O. Freedman, "The Putin Visit to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan: Business promotion or Great Power Maneuvering" in *Johnson's Russia List* 15 February 15, 2007 [available at <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/2007-39-39.cfm>]. See also *Russian and CIS Relations with the Gulf Region* [ed. Mawat Terterov] [Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2009].

hence was not an immediate threat; Moscow, perceiving diminishing pressure from the Gulf Arabs and the United States on this issue went ahead with the sale of the nuclear fuel, and the shipments had been completed by February 2008. Ironically, even as Moscow was helping Iran develop its nuclear capability, Putin, seeking business for Russia's nuclear industry, offered to build reactors for the Gulf Arabs, Egypt, and Jordan as well, as the Arab states sought to keep up with their rival, Iran. For their part the Sunni Arab states, increasingly unhappy with US policy toward Iraq, which strengthened the Iraqi Shia, and indirectly Iran, welcomed Russia as a counterweight to the United States.

The one major problem Moscow encountered in the Arab World in 2007 dealt with the Palestinians. In June of that year Hamas seized power in Gaza, killing a number of Fatah officials working there. With Fatah and Hamas now at loggerheads – Abbas fired the Hamas Prime Minister and replaced him with one of his own appointees, Salam Fayyad, who had a reputation for fiscal honesty and was close to the Western financial community – Moscow faced a difficult problem of choice. Making matters worse for Moscow was that Hamas turned increasingly to Iran for support, thereby alienating key Sunni states and making Moscow's legitimization of Hamas problematic for Russia. In reacting to this problem, Moscow stepped up its efforts, first announced during Putin's visit to the Middle East in 2005, to convene an international peace conference in Moscow. In addition, Moscow increased its backing for the Arab Peace Plan, which had been first introduced in 2002 and then reintroduced in 2007. Perhaps most important of all, Russia called for reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah as a necessary precondition for the peace conference to take place.

Thus, at the time of the Russian invasion of Georgia, Russia was following a policy of encouraging the main anti-American forces in the Middle East – Hamas, Hizbollah, Syria and Iran – while at the same time trying to cultivate the major Sunni Arab states of the Middle East, and seeking to draw them away from their alignment with the United States, and also trying to maintain good bilateral ties with Israel. The invasion of Georgia, coming as it did in the midst of the Russian diplomatic offensive in the Middle East, was to impact Putin's Middle East balancing act, especially with regard to Syria, Turkey, Israel and Iran.

IV. The Impact of the Russian Invasion of Georgia on the Middle East

A. Syria

In an almost classic case of political opportunism, Syrian President Bashar Assad seized upon the Russian invasion of Georgia – and the fact that Israel [along with Germany, France, United States and Turkey], had provided military equipment and training to the Georgian military – to try to convince the Russians to sell Syria the weapons they had long wanted and that the Russians had so far proved unwilling to sell them, especially the short range, solid fuel Iskander-E ground-to-ground missile that could reach virtually every target in Israel; Mig-31 combat aircraft, and the SAM 300 anti-aircraft missile system, which if installed in Syria near Damascus, could control most of Israel's airspace. As Assad told the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*, on the eve of his visit to Moscow when Georgian-Russian hostilities were still going on: “I think that in Russia and in the world, everyone is now aware of Israel's role and its military consultants in the Georgia crisis. And if before in Russia there were people who thought these [Israeli] forces can be friendly, now I think no one thinks that way”.⁷² It is clear that Assad was referring to Putin who on repeated occasions stated that he had denied the Iskander missiles to Syria, because they could harm Israel.

In backing the Russian intervention in Georgia - one of the few countries in the world to do so - Assad was repeating the policy of his father Hafiz Assad whose Syrian regime was one of the few in the world to support the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.⁷³ While Assad senior was richly rewarded with Soviet military equipment for his support of Soviet policy in Afghanistan, it remains to be seen what Bashar Assad will get. All Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov would say after the Assad visit was that Moscow would “consider” Syria's appeal for new weapons sales, and that in any case Russia would not sell any weapons that would affect the Middle East strategic balance”.⁷⁴ Since sale of both the Iskander-E and SAM-300 systems would definitely affect the regional military balance, Syria appeared unlikely to get these weapons. It should also be noted, however, that Moscow has developed a habit of holding up arms sales to Syria and Iran to try to squeeze concessions from Israel, and should Israel not behave in the way Moscow wanted, it risked the possibility that these arms sales would be implemented.

72 Mikhail Zygar, “Interview with Syrian President Al-Asad”, *Kommersant*, 20 August 2008 [FBIS: MESA], August 21, 2008.

73 For a discussion of Soviet policy toward Syria during the Hafiz Assad Era, see Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan* [Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991].

74 Cited in *Vesti TV*, “Russian Foreign Minister on Syrian Ties, NATO and Georgia” August 22, 2008 [FBIS-RUSSIA August 22, 2008].

B. Turkey

By the time of the Russian invasion of Georgia, Russian-Turkey relations had improved considerably since the visit of Erdoğan and Putin to each others capitals in December 2004 and January 2005. Russia had become Turkey's number one trading partner, with trade exceeding \$25 billion per year, and Turkey was now dependent on Russia for more that 60% of its natural gas imports. On the other hand, Turkey had been a major ally of Georgia, and along with Germany, France, Israel and the United States, had cooperated militarily with Georgia. In addition, Turkey's hopes of being a major energy hub rested not only on plans to trans-ship Russian and Iranian natural gas, but also on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and on the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline, both of which cross Georgian territory. In addition, the Turkish leadership was not pleased over the precedent set by South Ossetian and Abkhaz independence, given the demands of Turkey's Kurdish groups.

Torn by these conflicting pressures, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan sought to mediate the Russian-Georgian conflict by proposing a "Caucasus Cooperation and Stability Alliance", composed of Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁷⁵ However, given the fact that Georgia and Russia are still actively hostile to each other, and Armenia and Azerbaijan remain near war over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh--- although Turkey and Armenia have begun to improve relations --- the Turkish prime minister's proposal seemed little more than an attempt to prevent the Georgian-Russian relationship from deteriorating further, a development that would pose significant problems of choice for Turkey. In any case Russia demonstrated its displeasure with Turkish policy on the Georgian question (especially its allowing large US warships through the Straits with humanitarian aid to Georgia) by imposing a semi-blockade on Turkish exports to Russia through tightened border controls, which reportedly cost the Turks up to a billion dollars.⁷⁶

Relations between Turkey and Russia began to improve, however following the visit of the deputy undersecretary of the Turkish Foreign Ministry to Abkhazia, and Turkey's signing of the Nabucco pipeline agreement in July 2009, which was a rival to Russia's proposed South Stream pipeline project. After these events Putin, with Russia suffering from the world economic crisis and a sharp drop in oil prices, evidently decided that it was necessary to overcome the sour taste in the relationship caused by the Russian invasion of

75 See Fulya Ozerrkan and Mustafa Oguz, "Caucasian Table Setting for Five", *Turkish Daily News* [online] August 22, 2008.

76 Anatolian News Agency, "Turkey Estimates Cost of Russian Trade Dispute 1 Billion by End of September", September 14, 2008 [*FBIS-RUSSIA* September 15, 2008].

Georgia. Thus in the period August to October 2009, in addition to a Putin visit to Turkey, a series of agreements were signed between Turkey and Russia that raised the level of their relationship to a new height. First, the two countries signed an agreement on 6 August to lift restrictions on trade, thus eliminating the *de facto* Russian embargo.⁷⁷ Next, in a major reversal of Russian policy, Moscow agreed to provide oil to the Samsun-Ceyhan pipeline in return for Turkey allowing Russia to use Turkish economic zone waters for the South Stream pipeline whose purpose was to end Moscow's dependence on the Ukrainian pipeline system.⁷⁸ The agreement was probably also aimed at pressuring the new, and less pro-Russian government of Bulgaria to be more flexible on the planned Burgas-Alexandropolis pipeline.⁷⁹ An additional 20 protocols were signed including a document on the construction of the second line of the Blue Stream pipeline [Blue Stream 2], with an annual capacity of 16 billion cubic meters, which could bring natural gas to Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus and Israel.⁸⁰ Another protocol extended Turkey's ability to buy natural gas from Russia [the old one was to expire in 2011], for an additional 20 years. Gasprom also signed an agreement to build a LNG terminal in Ceyhan as well as to build an oil refinery there as part of the Samsun-Ceyhan project.⁸¹ Turkey and Russia also signed a protocol on nuclear cooperation. While Moscow has offered a tender to Turkey to build a complex of four reactors, the Turks have complained about the price, and it remains to be seen if the new spirit of Turkish-Russian cooperation will overcome the pricing dispute.⁸²

Nonetheless, several issues of importance remain on the Russian-Turkish agenda. If Russia doesn't pressure Armenia to make concessions on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, then Erdoğan's outreach policy toward Armenia which involved reopening Turkey's border to trade and reestablishing diplomatic relations, may backfire on Erdoğan, especially since his outreach policy toward Turkey's Kurdish community is becoming increasingly unpopular. Second, if there is no movement on the Cyprus issue, and Russia continues its cozy relationship with the southern, Greek-held part of the island, then voices may be raised in Ankara about the diplomatic utility of the Russian relationship to Turkey.

77 "Russia Removes Ban on Turkish Exporters" *Turkish Daily News* [online] August 14, 2009.

78 Lyubov Pronina, "Putin Lands Energy deals in Ankara", *Moscow Times* August 7, 2009 and "Turkey, Russia Take Giant Step to Boost Energy Ties", *Turkish Daily News* [online] August 7, 2009.

79 See Reuters, "Bulgaria warns on Balkan Pipeline", *Moscow Times* November 5, 2009.

80 Ankara Anatolia [A.A.] "Joint News Conference by Turkish, Russian Prime Minister" August 6, 2009 World News Connection Middle East [Hereafter WNCME] August 7, 2009.

81 Ibid.

82 *Itar-Tass*, "Russia, Turkey sign nuclear cooperation accord", August 6, 2009 [WNCME August 7, 2009] and AFP "Turkey casts doubt on nuclear plant project" *Turkish Daily News* [online] August 19, 2009.

C. Israel

Since the Olmert visit to Moscow in October 2006, Russian-Israeli relations continued their schizophrenic nature with good bilateral relations in clear contrast to Moscow's siding with Israel's enemies, Syria and Iran. Thus on the eve of Bashar Assad's visit to Moscow in August 2008 Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had a telephone conversation about Israeli-Syrian relations and about the situation in Georgia; trade between Russia and Israel exceeded two and a half billion dollars a year, much of it in the high-tech sector which Putin needs to develop the Russian economy so that it is not dependent primarily on energy exports; cultural ties thrived and Moscow established a cultural center in Tel Aviv; the two countries signed a visa-waiver agreement to facilitate tourism; negotiations were completed for the return to Russia of Czarist property in Jerusalem; and Israel's Kadima Party signed an agreement with Putin's United Russia Party to establish party-to-party relations.⁸³ While some in the Russian military such as Russia's Deputy Chief of Staff, Anatoly Nogovitsyn publicly complained about Israeli aid to the Georgian military,⁸⁴ Foreign Minister Lavrov went out of his way to praise Israel for stopping arms sales to Georgia.⁸⁵

What then explains Russia's continued bifurcated policy toward Israel and how will the Russian invasion of Georgia affect it? It appears clear that Russia has three goals vis-à-vis Israel. First, it is the homeland of more than a million Russian-speaking citizens of the Former Soviet Union, and Russia sees Russian speakers abroad as a source of its world influence. Hence the emphasis on cultural ties between Russia and Israel, in which Israelis of Russian origin play the dominant role. Second, as noted above, Putin is determined to develop the Russian economy, and high-tech trade with Israel especially in the area of nanotechnology⁸⁶ is a part of his plan. Third, the Arab-Israeli conflict is a major issue in world politics, and Putin would very much like to play a role in its diplomacy, if not in finding a solution to the conflict. For this reason he continued to call for an international peace conference in Moscow and he wanted Israel to attend, so as to build up the role of Russia as a world mediator.

By early 2009, perhaps in an effort to convince Israel to attend a Middle East

83 Lili Galili, "Russian PM to Open Party Branch in Israel" *Haaretz* [online] August 21, 2008.

84 Cited in "Russia Accuses Israel of Selling Arms to Georgia", *Jerusalem Post*, August 20, 2008.

85 *Iar-Tass*, "Russian FM Lavrov Praises Israeli Decision to Refrain From Assisting Georgia" August 19, 2008 [*FBIS-RUSSIA* August 20, 2008].

86 Ria-Novost, "Russian Nanotechnologies corporation to get R 54 billion in 2010" October 8, 2009 [*WNCME* October 8, 2009].

peace conference, and perhaps because it was growing increasingly disenchanted with Hamas, Moscow tilted a bit toward Israel in the Israel-Palestinian conflict or at least away from Hamas. Thus during the Israeli-Hamas war of December 2008-January 2009, Russia took a rather even-handed view of the conflict, instead of giving strong backing to Hamas. Moscow also praised the long-delayed August 2009 Sixth Fatah Congress, with Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Nesterenko asserting, “The restoration of Palestinian unity on the PLO platform and on the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative is an integral part of lasting peace”.⁸⁷ Putin, now Russia’s Prime Minister, although considered by most analysts to still be Russia’s most powerful leader, was even more explicit in his praise for Fatah, as he stated in greetings to the Congress, “Fatah, the core of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, steadily defends the interests of Palestinians, primarily their right to form a sovereign and viable state”.⁸⁸ The Russian support was in clear contrast to Hamas which denounced the Fatah Congress.

In May 2009 Israel’s new Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, himself an immigrant from the FSU, announced during a visit to Moscow, that Israel had agreed to attend the international peace conference in Moscow, long desired by Putin. This may have been the price Moscow was demanding for holding off on the delivery of SAM-300 missiles to Iran [see below] as well as sophisticated missiles and military aircraft to Syria. Lieberman was followed to Moscow both by Israeli President Shimon Peres, and Israel’s new Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, evidently concerned that Russia was about to consummate the sales.⁸⁹ Perhaps as further incentive for Moscow, Israel agreed to sell it reconnaissance drones, something Russia very much needed, given the poor performance of Russian surveillance equipment in the Georgian war.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, Russia was having difficulty managing its position on the Arab-Israeli conflict, as was made clear by Moscow’s flip-flop over the Goldstone report which condemned both Israel and Hamas for actions taken during the Israeli invasion of Gaza. In the UN Human Rights Committee, Russia – seeking to win Arab support – voted to approve the report which had been bitterly criticized by Israel. However, in the UN General Assembly vote to send the report to the UN Security Council, Moscow

87 *Itar-Tass* “Russia Wants Lasting Peace in Middle East-Diplomat” August 11, 2009 [WNCME August 11, 2009].

88 *Ibid.*

89 Charles Levinson, “Netanyahu’s Secrecy Sparks Anger”, *Wall Street Journal* September 11, 2009, *Kommersant* “Israel: President Peres Interviewed on Mid East Peace Process, Russia Visit”, August 18, 2009 [WNCME August 18, 2009], and Barak RaVid, “Medvedev: I’ll Review Decision to Sell Iran Anti-Aircraft Missiles” *Ha’aretz* August 20, 2009.

90 Piotr Butowski and Anne Musquere “Israel: Drone Sale to Russia Provides incentive for Domestic Industry: Russian Drones Evolving”, *Air and Cosmos*, September 22, 1009 [WNCME September 23, 2009].

abstained, perhaps wishing to assuage Israeli anger or, perhaps, because it might itself be accused in international fora of killing civilians during Russian military operations in the North Caucasus.⁹¹

D. Iran

Iran like Turkey, has suffered Russian invasions in the past and the cautious Iranian response to the Russian invasion of Georgia may have reflected that concern. In addition, Iran has restive minorities, and the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia could set a negative precedent for Iran. Perhaps for this reason the Iranian semi-official Fars News Agency ran a story citing the Georgian Ambassador to Iran who praised Iran for its position in the Russian - Georgian conflict.⁹²

But in 2009 Iran's nuclear program took precedence in Russian-Iranian relations over the invasion of Georgia. By November, there were serious clashes between Moscow and Tehran as Russian President Medvedev in what appeared to be a change in Russian policy, raised the possibility of sanctions against Iran; the completion of the Bushehr nuclear reactor was again delayed; and Iran became increasingly vocal about its unhappiness about Russia's delay in sending it the promised SAM-300 surface to air missiles.

As late as September, 2009 Russia appeared to be continuing its policy of preventing serious sanctions against Iran, while at the same time warning against a military attack on its ally. Thus Foreign Minister Lavrov, in mid-September, after saying new sanctions were unlikely, warned that the use of force against Iran would have "catastrophic consequences".⁹³ However in late September, Russian President Dimitry Medvedev, hinted that sanctions could be possible, stating at the United Nations "Sanctions rarely lead to productive results, but in some cases sanctions are inevitable".⁹⁴ If Russia was now seriously considering sanctions, however, then Putin, who after all has the real power in Russia, downplayed the idea. With US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in Moscow in mid-October Putin stated that it was "premature" to threaten sanctions against Iran. As Putin noted. "Our President deter-

91 Barak Ravid, "Russians Deal Lieberman 'Slap' by Endorsing Goldstone, *Ha'aretz*, October 18, 2009, Voice of Israel Network B, "Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Criticizes Russia on Gaza Report, Says Efforts to Continue", October 18, 2009 [WNCME October 18, 2009] and *Istar-Tass* "Russia Abstains on Goldstone Resolution" November 6, 2009 [WNCME November 6, 2009].

92 *Fars News Agency*, "Georgia Praises Iran's Stance on Caucasus Conflict" August 23, 2008 [FBIS-MESA August 25, 2008].

93 "Russia: Lavrov warns use of force against Iran would be 'catastrophic'" *Vesti TV* September 17, 2009 [WNCME September 18, 2009].

94 Cited in Christi Parsons, "Russia's President Pledges to Help US Nudge Iran on Nuclear Issue", *Los Angeles Times* [online] September 24, 2009.

mines foreign policy, and if Dmitry Anatolievich [Medvedev] said [sanctions are] inevitable, they're inevitable. But if you look closely at all his statements, and the context he made them in, you'll be convinced that there is no steel and concrete determination toward sanctions."⁹⁵ Reinforcing Putin's position was Lavrov, who appears to work for Putin, not Medvedev, who had stated a few days earlier, "At the current stage all forces should be thrown at supporting the negotiating process. Threats, sanctions and threats of pressure in the current situation, we are convinced, would be counterproductive."⁹⁶

Indeed, Iran began to consider an international offer to send 75% of its nuclear fuel to Russia for enrichment to a level of 20% [and then to France to be made into fuel rods for Tehrans's medical reactor]. Lavrov warmly endorsed the idea – after all something similar had been suggested by Putin in 2006⁹⁷ –, but at the same time the Russian Foreign Ministry sought to downplay the newly discovered Iranian enrichment facility at Qom, which many Western analysts considered was dedicated to military purposes. In a statement it noted, "We are convinced that hasty conclusions on this score will not benefit the objective assessment of this situation".⁹⁸

Meanwhile, in a *Der Spiegel* interview in early November, Medvedev, who expressed displeasure at the Qom facility, which he called "alarming", stated that Iran, "has to abide by the existing rules and not try to hide any sites." He added, "if agreements are reached on programs for uranium enrichment and its use in Iran for peaceful purposes, Russia will be pleased to participate in such programs, [but] if the Iranian leadership takes a less constructive position, theoretically everything could be possible". While asserting that he would not like sanctions to be imposed because "as a rule, sanctions lead to a very complicated and dangerous direction," Medvedev also stated, "but if there is no movement forward, nobody can rule out such a scenario".⁹⁹

The reaction to Medvedev's statement by the Iranian leadership was a strong one, Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani accused Medvedev of undertaking a misinformation campaign against Iran like that of the United States, "Apparently, Russian President Medvedev has said that if Iran does not agree, they [Rus-

95 Cited in Gregory L. White, "Putin Points up Split with US on Iran", *Wall Street Journal* October 15, 2009.

96 Cited in AP Report, "Russia FM, 'Threats of Sanctions Against Iran Won't Work'", *Ha'aretz* October 13, 2009.

97 Interfax "Russia May Take Part in Processing of Iranian Spent Fuel – Lavrov", October 5, 2009 [WNCME October 5, 2009], Robert O. Freedman, *Russia, Iran and the Nuclear Question* p. 37.

98 Interfax, "No Hasty Conclusions Should be made on New Uranium Plant in Iran-Moscow", October 8, 2009 [WNCME October 8, 2009].

99 Interfax "Medvedev Suggests Sanctions May be Imposed On Iran", November 9, 2009 [WNCME November 9, 2009].

sia] will move toward sanctions. I should say that a similar misinformation campaign existed before, and the US Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton] made similar remarks. They should know that they should not talk about Iran by using such misinformation campaigns”.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, as Iran continued to stall in its response to the international offer, with numerous Iranian leaders openly denouncing it as a way to “steal” Iran’s enriched uranium, Russia continued its traditional policy of protecting Iran diplomatically, with Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Andrei Nesterenko, stating in mid-November, “As far as we know, no official response from Tehran has been received yet”¹⁰¹. He added, demonstrating Russia’s concern that it might get into a bruising sanctions battle with the United States with whom relations had begun to improve following the election of Barak Obama, that Russia now supported IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei’s idea that Iran’s uranium be taken to Turkey and stored there until it was needed to make fuel, thus backpedaling from Russia’s goal of itself enriching Iran’s uranium.¹⁰²

Meanwhile, besides being criticized by Ahmadinejad’s regime, Russia also found itself attacked by Iran’s opposition movement which had been galvanized by the major election irregularities that accompanied the 12 June 2009 Iranian Presidential election. Indeed, many of the opposition replaced the traditional Iranian street chant of “Death to Israel and Death to the United States”, with “Death to Russia and Death to the Dictator [Ahmadinejad]”.¹⁰³ The growing popular disenchantment with Russia in Iran, coupled with increasing official Iranian criticism of Russia’s delay in sending the promised SAM-300’s to Iran [a contract had reportedly been signed in 2007], Moscow’s delay in completing the long-delayed Bushehr nuclear plant [now rescheduled for March 2010] and what appeared to be Russian wavering on the sanctions issue, posed serious problems for Moscow. Indeed, while Russia joined the IAEA majority in voting to condemn Iran for its secret Qom Installation,¹⁰⁴ it is a very open question as to whether Russia would be willing to seriously jeopardize its relations with the regime in Iran – especially with the insurrection in the North Caucasus regaining its momentum and Russia’s increasing economic investment in Iran, particularly in the oil and gas sectors, by voting serious sanctions against Iran. On the other hand, should the

100 *EARS* News Agency “Iran Majlis Speaker: Russian President Reaction ‘Misinformation Campaign’ ” November 9, 2009 [WNCME November 9, 2009].

101 Cited in *Interfax* November 11, 2009 [WNCME November 11, 2009].

102 *Turkish Daily News* [online] “Head of IAEA Suggests Turkey as Solution to Nuclear Impasse with Iran”, November 8, 2009.

103 Cited in *Los Angeles Times* [online] “Protests Flare in Iran’s Capital as Demonstrators, Security Forces Clash” November 4, 2, 2009.

104 Borzoli Daragahi and Greg Miller “IAEA Board Votes to Censure Iran” *Los Angeles Times* [online] December 2, 2009.

opposition take power – still a doubtful prospect at this point – Russia could lose its position in Iran, much as it lost its position in Iraq when Saddam Hussein was overthrown.

In any case, the IAEA vote condemning Iran for its secret facility in Qom is a good point of departure for drawing conclusions about Russia's return to the Middle East under Putin.

Conclusions

What then can be concluded about the first decade of Russia's reemergence into the Middle East? First there is no question but that after Yeltsin's decade of relative absence from the Middle East---except for Iran and Turkey--- and his own first term in which his posture to the Middle East was basically defensive, Putin has succeeded in restoring Russia's presence in the region. Second, while Russia certainly has a renewed presence, there is a real question as to the degree in which Moscow has been able to exercise real influence in the Middle East. Third, as Moscow increased its presence in the Middle East, it has also increased its dilemma of choice as to which side to back in the numerous conflicts that pervade the region. Finally, the Middle East has become of increasing economic importance to Moscow, and Putin has pursued economic relationships with almost all the countries in the region.

One of Putin's goals as he began to pursue a more assertive role in the Middle East beginning in late 2004, was to demonstrate Russia's renewed visibility in the region, as Putin sought to compensate for setbacks in Beslan and Ukraine. He accomplished this through personal visits as to Turkey, Egypt, Israel, and the Palestinian territories in the December 2004-April 2005 period, to Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Iran in 2007, to Libya in 2008, and to Turkey in 2009; major arms sales, as to Iran and Syria in 2005; diplomatic support for rogue states and organizations such as Syria and Iran in 2005, and Hamas and Hizbollah in 2006; and by gaining observer status in the Islamic conference in 2005.

There is a question, however, as to how much this renewed presence has led to renewed influence for Russia in the Middle East. To be sure, at least formally, Saudi Arabia committed itself to help the official government in Chechnya instead of the Islamic rebels fighting it, and Israel agreed to attend Russia's long desired---and long postponed---Moscow Middle East peace conference. Yet these were relatively minor concessions. On the more important issues, Putin has been less successful. Thus he has been unable to get Iran to desist from its uranium enrichment program, or even to get Tehran to send

its enriched uranium abroad for further enrichment. He has also been unable to forge a reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, or even to get Hamas to change its program which calls for Israel's destruction, despite Moscow's carrying on formal negotiations with Hamas since 2006. In addition, Moscow's openings to Turkey and Saudi Arabia were made possible, in large part, by these countries' disenchantment with the United States invasion of Iraq and its aftermath which strengthened both the Kurdish and Shia sectors of the Iraqi population; while Moscow's deepened relations with both Syria and Iran was facilitated by these countries' regional and international isolation.

Nonetheless, as Moscow deepened its relations with many of the countries of the Middle East, it began to run into serious problems of choice. Not only was it stuck on the horns of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as Moscow endeavored, with limited success as its conflicting votes on the Goldstone report indicated, to maintain good ties with both Israel and Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority, but also, after the Hamas seizure of power in Gaza in June 2007, to try to maintain good ties with both Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. By the latter part of 2009, perhaps frustrated by Hamas's obduracy, Moscow had tilted a bit closer to both Israel and Abbas and away from Hamas. Another difficult problem of choice for Moscow lay in the rapidly escalating political conflict between Iran and the Sunni states of the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. It would appear that the fact that Russia agreed to minor UN Security Council sanctions against Iran both before and after Putin's visit to Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Qatar in 2007, the delay in completing the Bushehr reactor, and the Russian vote in the International Atomic Energy Agency in late 2009 to condemn Iran for building a secret nuclear facility near Qom, were aimed, in part, to assuage Sunni Arab anger at the role Moscow had played in developing Iran's nuclear program and military capability. This, in turn, however, angered Iran, and when coupled with new hints of Russian support for additional sanctions in late 2009, had put the worst chill in Russian-Iranian relations since Putin became Russia's President in 2000. Nonetheless, it was still a very open question as to whether Russia, given the expanding Islamic insurgency in the North Caucasus, and its own expanding economic interests in Iran, especially in Iran's oil and natural gas sectors, would actually vote to endorse serious sanctions against Iran which would include a ban on arms sales to and investments in the Islamic Republic.

Finally, economic gain was also a goal of Putin's increased activity in the Middle East, and in this area his efforts met with a modicum of success. Turkey became a major trade partner for Russia, especially as a market for Russian natural gas exports, and it could also become a major hub for Rus-

sian oil and natural gas exports to Europe and the Middle East. Arms sales, as in the case of the Soviet Union, were also a component of Russian foreign economic policy, and while Iran was a major market for such Russian weapons systems as combat aircraft and submarines, Moscow has also begun to penetrate the arms markets of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Whether Moscow would be able to get the major investments it wants from the Gulf Arabs, however, remains to be seen. Economic relations also played a role in Russian-Israeli relations, as Putin's desire to wean Russia off its dependence on energy exports made Israel's small, but high tech economy very attractive, particularly in the area of nanotechnology which Russia was trying to develop. In addition, by the latter part of the decade Russia was beginning to run into problems producing oil and natural gas which had become more difficult and more expensive to extract. Consequently, Gazprom, Lukoil and Rosneft, among other Russian energy companies sought deals with Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Middle Eastern states where the cost of production was considerably below that of Russia. The success of these ventures, as well as those with Cuba and Venezuela and other countries with which Russia has signed exploration agreements, however, is not yet clear, although Russia clearly hopes that significant finds in these countries would help Russia's energy balance.

In sum Russia has reemerged in the Middle East under Putin as a diplomatic, economic and military actor. Yet its political influence remains limited and it appears that, at least at the present time, Putin's primary goal in the region is to demonstrate that Russia is again a factor in the Middle East, even if its influence in the region remains limited.

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