

## **RUSSIA: BACK TO THE MIDDLE EAST?**

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The Middle East continues to be a major area of conflict in global politics as reflected in the occupation of Iraq by the American forces, collapse of peace between Israel and Palestine, the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections of 2005 and lastly the assault of Israel on Lebanon in the summer of 2006. The dispute-burdened potential of the Middle East runs the risk of breaking down international as well as regional peace. It emerges that an element aggravating the instability in the Middle East is the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ascending influence of the US in the Middle East as the only superpower. The Russian resentment for that was strongly voiced by the Russian President Vladimir Putin on 10 February 2007 in the Munich Conference on Security Policy. Condemning the concept of a unipolar world and accusing the United States of undermining world security Putin said: 'I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world...One state, the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way...This is very dangerous. Nobody feels secure anymore because nobody can hide behind international law'.<sup>1</sup> Putin's attack on American unilateralism can be seen as the latest sign that Russians are for greater role in the globe as well as in the Middle East. Following a low profile policy towards the Middle East in the aftermath of Soviet disintegration, Russia has started to pursue a policy of engagement in Middle Eastern affairs. This article aims to analyze Russia's return to the Middle East in the light of its involvement in the Palestinian dispute after Hamas's electoral victory and in the recent Lebanon War.

### **The Old Approach to the Middle East**

The Middle East was used to be accepted as the most critical region in the Third World with vital Soviet interests. A great strategic value has always been attached to the oil reserves in the region and the sea lines.

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Rolof, 'Putin attacks United States and warns about NATO East Expansion', Peace Through Dialogue, 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy, [http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/2007/putin\\_2007.php?menu\\_2007=&menu\\_konferenzen=&sprache=en&](http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/2007/putin_2007.php?menu_2007=&menu_konferenzen=&sprache=en&); Lorenz Hemicker, 'Clear Messages Instead of Icy Silence' [http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/2007/abschlussartikel\\_2007.php?menu\\_2007=&menu\\_konferenzen=&sprache=en&](http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/2007/abschlussartikel_2007.php?menu_2007=&menu_konferenzen=&sprache=en&).

Sharing the same borders with Turkey and Iran and having a sizeable population with Turkic and Islamic elements were the other important points to be taken into consideration for understanding Soviet's policy towards the region. The Middle East was also an area where two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the USA, confronted each other due to the '*containment policy*' that the USA pursued. Therefore for the Soviets minimizing American influence in the region was a key policy priority. The Soviet Union embraced close relations both with moderate countries in the region such as Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, and radical regimes such as Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen and even Israel, when necessary. For instance, in the year 1987, the Soviet Union protected a Kuwaiti ship from Iranian attack and in the meantime commenced good relations with Israel.<sup>2</sup> The Soviet Union, depending on the situational imbalances in the Cold War, did not even hesitate to offer financial aid and invest directly in the industrial establishments of Turkey, which was a member of the NATO.

Upon abandoning ideological rivalry against the West with the emergence of 'glasnost' policy, Soviet policy toward the Middle East lost its previous priority. While Gorbachev was prioritizing détente with the West to receive financial and political support to reinforce reformist policies, interest towards the Middle East went into decline. It was obvious that, before the dismantling of the Soviet Union relations between the Soviet Union and Libya, Iraq and Palestine had gone downwards, which was reflected in the Soviet disinterest in the region during the Gulf War of 1991. It was surprising to many in Russia and abroad that the Russian government supported the coalition forces formed against Iraq, a country which Russia had a friendship treaty. Eventually in the aftermath of the War, while the USA gained greater role and influence in regional affairs, Russia almost disappeared as a great power.<sup>3</sup>

### **Low Profile Policy in the 1990s**

Under President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin, the reformists and the power elite were of the opinion that an ideological policy line that misused Soviet sources had given rise to the disintegration process.

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<sup>2</sup> The Middle East, Russia, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,251-1589600,00.html/>

<sup>3</sup> For more information about different approaches and debates on Russian foreign policies see, Zeynep Dağı, *Kimlik, Milliyetçilik ve Dış Politika: Rusya'nın Dönüşümü* (Identity, Nationalism and Foreign Policy: Russia's Transformation), Boyut Yayıncılık, 2002.

In this respect the course of action was to abandon any commitment to Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa that would burden the Russian economy and its rapprochement with the West, and to spare sources for restructuring Russia in political and economic terms. Furthermore the emergence of Commonwealth of Independent States with independent states in the aftermath of Soviet disintegration had resulted in Russia's lose of its Soviet borders with the Middle East, which had a geopolitically supportive role over this policy line.<sup>4</sup> Russia had also been in search for a new identity in respect to the West/East orientations with implications on domestic as well as its foreign affairs, which initially favored a pro Euro-Atlanticist choice. Anyhow, in the aftermath of disintegration, Russian foreign policy had to encounter Europe and the USA before anywhere else. Thus, interest in the Middle East was significantly weakened resulted in a Russian policy over the Middle East that was shaped by a situational instability instead of a long term strategy.<sup>5</sup>

During the Yeltsin presidency, the intensive dialogue with the West and the political and financial reforms pursued in the meantime formed an environment for the emergence of a new decision making elite in Moscow. Russian foreign policy and its position in the Middle East politics were shaped parallel to the priorities, interests and identities of this elite. In other words, both foreign and domestic politics of the new Russia was shaped in accordance with the interests and vision of that newly formed bureaucratic milieu. As the central government turned to be unable to control bureaucratic lobbies of the state owned industrial complex they started to run an independent policy disjointed with the center. For instance, Gazprom, a giant firm, and Minatom, Ministry of Atomic Energy, started to run their business in the Middle East or other parts of the world independent of a central strategy. Hence, since large scale firms like Gazprom and Minatom remained focused on a narrow interest, they did not seem to be interested in the overall consequences of their policies on Russian foreign and security policies as regards to the USA, the EU and the Middle East. In this respect, on one hand the centre was carrying on its intensive diplomatic relations with the West. While the Foreign Ministry in Moscow was trying hard to improve its cooperation with the USA, the state owned Russian firms were in rush commencing projects with Iran without considering the impact of this relationship on broader Russian-American

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<sup>4</sup> The Middle East, Russia, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,251-1589600,00.html/>

<sup>5</sup> Richard K. Hermann, 'Russian Policy in the Middle East: Strategic Change and Tactical Contradictions', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 3, (1994), pp. 455-474.

rapprochement. As a result, the dynamics of Russia's relations with the Middle East was greatly influenced by bureaucratic and technocratic groups and interest communities within the Middle East. With respect to this, Russian Diaspora in Israel had an influential role in Russian-Israeli relations, and Iraq got the support of Russia against the UN embargo thanks to the Russian private sector located in Iraq. Consequently, in the 1990s Russian policy towards the Middle East remained heavily influenced by the new bureaucratic and technocrat circles lacking a long term strategy, and susceptible to the diplomacy of Israel, Iran and Iraq to receive Russian support for their sake.<sup>6</sup>

Compared to Soviet period, Russia pursued a 'low-intensified' regional policy in the 1990s yet tried to be especially effective on three areas: keeping an eye on the "near abroad", maintaining its presence in the Peace Process, and holding on its share in the arms sales.

After the disintegration of the Union the agenda of Russian foreign policy focused on the 'far abroad/near abroad' dilemma. The conservative "Eurasianist" wing in the reformist bloc criticized the pro-Atlanticists tendencies within the Yel'tin administration for concentrating only on 'far abroad' thereby ignoring Russian national interests in the 'near abroad'. The Eurasianists took the lead in Russian foreign policy making by introducing a new 'military doctrine' and a 'new foreign policy' concept after 1993 through which Russia concentrated on the 'near abroad' with an aim to keep the former Soviet Republics under its control. Russia demonstrated to its neighbors that it would never abandon its interest in the "near abroad," particularly during the Tajikistan civil war in 1992.<sup>7</sup>

Russia's low level of involvement in the Middle East was heavily criticized by the nationalist groups who asked for greater cooperation with Iraq which was seen as an old ally and denounced American air raids on the Iraqi targets in January and June of 1993. They also demanded on the Russian government to ease economic embargo imposed on Iraq by the UN Security Council. Though Russia did not pursue an active policy in the Middle East it nevertheless took part in the peace negotiations that started between Israel and the Arab states, and supported the Palestinians right to

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<sup>6</sup> Eugene Rumer, 'Dangerous Drift: Russia's Middle East Policy', *Policy Papers*, No. 54, Washington Institute for Near East Studies, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Dağı, *Kimlik, Milliyetçilik ve Dış Politika: Rusya'nın Dönüşümü*, pp.171-202.

self government in the occupied territories.<sup>8</sup> Through high level official visits including Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States Russia sought to expand its trade with Middle Eastern countries especially as regard to arms sale. Consequently Russia signed arms sale deals with Iran, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Algeria as well as Egypt that used to be an old partner. Meanwhile it minded the arms sale embargo on Iraq and Libya in order not to jeopardize its relations with the Western world.<sup>9</sup>

In the meantime, when the Peace Process got stuck, Russia took the initiative even it was of low-intensity. For instance, to terminate the war in South Lebanon Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Yevgeny Primakov took up a ‘shuttle diplomacy’ in the Middle East. Russia by condemning Israeli attacks in South Lebanon against Hezbollah guerillas gave the signal that it was still somehow interested in the region. Yet its influence was markedly limited. Russia’s war against the Chechen separatists was distracting Russian relations not only with the Western countries but notably with Moslem countries as well.<sup>10</sup> Soviet occupation of Afghanistan had already created a deep antipathy towards Russia among Moslem societies. While the Russian support to the Serbs in Bosnia was causing reactions among the Arabs against Russia there was also solidarity between Arabs and Chechens as demonstrated by the former’s financial support to the Chechens as well as some Arab jihadists fighting against the Russian troops in the Caucasus.

### **The Putin Period**

After the Soviet disintegration, losing its ‘super power’ position Russia faced not only economic and political turbulence, but also experienced identity crisis problematizing its sense of direction in national as well as global politics.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, putting Russia in order domestically was a priority. In the pursuit of strengthening the power of the center, the Putin administration attempted reorganize the centre-periphery

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<sup>8</sup> For more information about Middle East Peace Process and Turkish position see, İlhami Soysal, ‘Ortadoğu Barış Süreci ve Türkiye (The Middle East Peace Process and Turkey)’, *Yeni Türkiye*, Yıl (Vol.)1, Sayı (No.)3, (March-April 1995), pp. 464-474.

<sup>9</sup> The Middle East, Russia, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,251-1589600,00.html>

<sup>10</sup> The Middle East, Russia, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,251-1589600,00.html>

<sup>11</sup> Gail W. Lapidus, ‘Asymmetrical Federalism and State Breakdown in Russia’, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Volume 15, Number 1, (1999), pp. 74-106; for a discussion on the problems originating from centre-periphery relations and federal structure of Russian Federation see, Zeynep Dağı, ‘Rusya’da Ulusal Kimlik Tartışmaları ve Federal Yapının Açmazı’ (National Identity Debate in Russia and the Dilemma of the Federal Structure), *Türkiye Günü* (Turkey Agenda), No. 63, (November-December 2000), pp. 5-18.

relations starting with Chechnya. Visiting Chechnya with a battle plane, that he himself was piloting, Putin sent determined messages that he would follow harsh policies to reinsert the authority of the central institutions.<sup>12</sup> Putin, by limiting the power of the oligarchs like Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky, and eliminating the bureaucrats like Yevgeny Adamov who signed energy deals with Iran without consulting to the Kremlin, and introducing administrative reforms, reestablished the authority of central institution in the conduct of national and foreign policy. Therefore it took some time for Putin to introduce and implement a new approach to the Middle East, but eventually eliminating centers of domestic opposition that challenges the authority of Kremlin enabled him to take full control in the field of foreign and security policy.<sup>13</sup>

The Putin Doctrine emphasized Russia's 'great power' status and developed a geopolitical discourse that placed Russia vis-à-vis the USA. It envisaged a tight relationship with the former Soviet Republics as part of a pragmatic and multidimensional approach to foreign policy. Creating a strong and influential Russian presence in the region was thought to be the key to remain in a position of strength and bargaining in vis-à-vis the West.<sup>14</sup> Putin attached great importance to develop beneficial economic relations in order that Russia could become politically stronger. While the rise in oil prices due to developments in the Middle East helped Russia stabilize its economy the new wave of armament in the Middle East also contributed Russia as an important arms supplier in the region. Reestablishing its traditional influence in the former Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus and resolving its immediate economic problems, Russia, under the leadership of Putin has started to claim a more assertive role in the Middle East.

In order to place Russia's return to Middle East in proper context, one should consider the role played by the event of September 11, which eased Russian penetration into the Middle East. At first September 11 led

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<sup>12</sup> Ariel Cohen, *The Rise of Putin: What It Means for the Future of Russia*, The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder, No. 1353, 28 March 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Robert O. Freedman, 'Russian Policy Toward the Middle East Under Putin: The Impact of 9/11 and The War in Iraq', *Alternatives, Turkish Journal of International Relations*, Vol.2, Number 2, (Summer 2003); Ramil Mammadov, 'Uluslararası Politikada Artan Rus Atakları' (Increasing Russian Attempts in International Politics), TASAM Kafkasya Masası.

<sup>14</sup> Ilan Berman, 'The Bear is Back: Russia's Middle Eastern Adventures', *National Review*, <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/berman200502180741.asp>; Robert O. Freedman, 'Russian Policy Toward the Middle East Under Putin: The Impact of 9/11 and The War in Iraq', *Alternatives, Turkish Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 2, Number 2, (Summer 2003).

the USA and Russia to have closer relations in the fight against international terrorism. The Russia's primary aim was to get the support of the USA for its struggle against the rebel Chechens. But this was too little in comparison to the gains of the USA that occupied Afghanistan and Iraq in the aftermath of the 9/11. Moreover establishment of military bases by the USA in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan as well as in Georgia brought the USA and Russia into an eventual strategic clash. The Russian attempt to return to the Middle East seems to be a strategic response to the increasing influence of the USA in Russia's neighborhood. As Russia's traditional zone of influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus was threatened by the American presence in the region the Russians moved towards the Islamic world and the Middle East in an attempt to balance American influence in a region close to Russia and to widen their strategic options vis-à-vis the USA.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, as articulated by Dimitri Trenin, an analyst in Carnegie Moscow Center, Russia is now expanding its effort to reestablish traditional links and alignments, first successfully carried out in former Soviet Republics in the 1990s, into the Middle East region.<sup>16</sup>

### **Russia as the Great Power in the Middle East**

Main items on the Russian agenda are fighting against terror, the future of Iraq, the nuclear controversy with Iran, the Arab-Israeli peace process and managing with Turkey. Although Russia alone is not powerful enough to shape the developments in the Middle East, President Putin has been taking assertive steps that are seen as a prelude to make Russia a "real great power" in the globe as argued by Freedman.<sup>17</sup> Even if Russia cannot gain its former position as a great power nevertheless it wants to be a leading actor in the regional power game. Assessing the importance of economic power in its efforts for regaining great power status, Russia tries to expand its economic relations with regional countries like Iraq, Iran and Turkey. Although the last two countries may also be regarded as rivals in the Caucasus and Central Asia, improving trade and investment in these countries has been taken up as a strategic choice. Moreover the fact that Russia had signed contracts with Iraq during the Saddam regime worth of

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<sup>15</sup> Ilan Berman, 'The Bear is Back: Russia's Middle Eastern Adventures', *National Review*, <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/berman200502180741.asp>

<sup>16</sup> Owen Matthews, 'Russia: Moscow presents itself as the new 'middleman' in the Middle East. But its role may actually be that of spoiler', *Newsweek International*, 27 February 2006, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11436739/site/newsweek/>

<sup>17</sup> Robert O. Freedman, 'Russia in the Middle East: Is Putin Undertaking a New Strategy?', Middle East Institute, February, 10, 2006, <http://www.mideasti.org/articles/doc348.html/>



52 billion dollars indicates economic value of Iraqi restructuring for Russia.<sup>18</sup>

Putin's Russia has also found in recent years a suitable policy environment and public opinion in the Middle East following the American occupation of Iraq and the Israeli attacks in Palestine and Lebanon which marked a rise in the tension between the Middle Eastern peoples and the West as manifested in the widespread the anti-Americanism in the region. Russia seems to have been skillfully exploiting this atmosphere in its rapprochement towards the Middle East. Russia's new Middle East initiatives also include a component as regard to the Chechnya problem, which could not have been resolved by use of force against the rebels. With a population of nearly 30 million within its territories Russia has been trying to play the 'Muslim card' to address the question of Muslim discontent in the federation, which was reflected in its wish to be a member of Islamic Conference of which it is now an observant.<sup>19</sup>

After realizing that the problem of Chechnya cannot be solved by sheer force, The Putin policy has sought to find ways to live in peace with the Moslems, who form a significant portion of the population in the Federation numbering around 30 million. In this vain Putin ordered in August 2006 the gradual withdrawal of the Russian troops form Chechnya.<sup>20</sup> To stop the flow of financial support from Saudi Arabian quarters to the Chechen rebels, Moscow has moved to improve its relations with Saudi Arabia. In February 2007 President Putin made a historic visit to Saudi Arabia where two sides discussed issues of Palestine, Iraq as well as cooperation in the fields of energy production and military ties.<sup>21</sup> All these earned some sympathy for the Russians among the Muslims in the region. As an oil exporting country, keeping oil prices high and cutting down financial support to Chechen rebels are two main reasons for Russia's strengthening the relations with Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>18</sup> According to CSIS's data, before the war, Russia made contract amounting 52 billion dollars with Iraq, <http://www.csis.org>.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Freedman, 'Russia in the Middle East: Is Putin Undertaking a New Strategy?', Middle East Institute, 10 February 2006, <http://www.mideasti.org/articles/doc348.html>; Muhsin Öztürk, 'Rusya'nın İKÖ Üyeliğini Pakistan İstemiyor' (Pakistan does not want the Russian Membership in the OIC), *Aksiyon*, December 6, 2004, pp.50-51

<sup>20</sup> Melih Can, 'İsrail'in Durdurulmasında Rusya'nın Etkisi Var mı? (Is there a Russian Factor in Stopping Israel)', *Zaman*, August 16, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Abdul Ghafour, 'Putin Visit Will Boost Ties', *Arab News*, <http://www.saudi-us-relations.org/articles/2007/loi/070212-putin-visit.html>; 'Putin goes on historic visit to Saudi Arabia', RIA Novosti, February 11, 2007, <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20070211/60530273.html>



Another development that facilitated Russia's re-entry into the Middle East is the European Union's recent predicaments as regard to its policy towards the region. The EU used to pursue a policy of balancing the power of the USA and Israel vis-à-vis the weaker side, the Muslims. But the electoral victory of Hamas in Palestine and the crisis over the uranium enrichment program in Iran have swung the EU ever closer to the USA in its Middle Eastern policy.<sup>22</sup> Thus the Russians are trying to fill the vacuum left for an honest external broker in resolving regional problems.

### **Back to Soviet Past?**

As reminiscent to the Soviet past, Russia has been trying to exploit the opportunities emerged in recent years to restrict the US's space of maneuver in the Middle East, which leads to charges that Russia is trying to return to the Soviet past. A veteran in Russian foreign policy Yevgeny Primakov, the head of the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, organized a high profile visit to the Middle East in 2005, which covered the countries of Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.<sup>23</sup> This visit reflected not only the increasing Russian economic interest in the Middle East but also served to demonstrate Russian solidarity with the Middle Eastern public at large.

As a result of its new assertive policy in the region, Russia has not only improved its economic relations with the countries in the region but has also been trying with success to establish better political relations. For that Russia intensified diplomatic relations with the countries with which it had better relations during the Soviet period. For example, Syrian president Bashar Asad's visit to Moscow in January 2006 had a vital importance in strengthening strategic relations between these two countries. Putin and Asad announced each other as the most important strategic partners in the Middle East and emphasized the multi-dimensional cooperation between the two countries. Outstanding indicators of this new rapprochement were writing off the 1/3 of Syrian debt of 13.4 billion dollars by Moscow and missile sales agreed to Syria. Moreover, Russia wants to expand the Tartus

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<sup>22</sup> Owen Matthews, 'Russia: Moscow presents itself as the new 'middleman' in the Middle East. But its role may actually be that of spoiler', *Newsweek International*, February 27, 2006,

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11436739/site/newsweek/>

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Blank, 'Primakov's Visit to the Middle East: High Profile, Few Results', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 2, Issue 31 (February 14, 2005); For what 'Primakov Doctrine' means see, Ilan Berman, 'The Bear is Back': Russia's Middle Eastern Adventures, *National Review*, <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/berman200502180741.asp>

harbor in Syria, where a deepening work has been started, from a technical maintenance station into a full naval base.<sup>24</sup> The Russian emphasis that unless the Golan Heights are returned to Syria there could be no permanent peace in the Middle East wins the Arab streets.

Russia's relations with Iran have been improving as well. The common objective of the two countries both in the Soviet period and today has been to get the American military power withdrawn from the Gulf. Despite the reactions from the US, Israel and the EU, Russia has been the main supporter of Iran's nuclear activities. Russia has recently negotiated with Iran to sell short-range missiles (TOR-M1) and long-range missiles (S-300) after the sell of 1 billion dollars missile program by a Russian missile company, Rosvooruzheni. Iran also agreed on an arms sale program from Russia in the long run worth of 7 billion dollars.<sup>25</sup> In addition to technical aid to Iran's efforts to develop missile systems, Russia trains Iranian scientists who work for Iran's nuclear program and helps Iran launch spy satellites. Russia, having established technical infrastructure of Iranian missile systems nation-wide, has met strong opposition of the West that seek to stop Iran's nuclear enrichment program.<sup>26</sup> In an attempt to prevent the crisis and find a middle way between the West and Iran, Russia offered Iran to use uranium enrichment facilities to be used for peaceful purposes. This has not resolved the tension between Iran and the West. When the crisis was high over the US Secretary of State Rice's strong assault on Iran, Sergei Kiriyenko, in charge of Russia's atomic energy institution, stated that that no country had the right to prevent another country to develop nuclear technology for peaceful usage. Furthermore the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov hinted that his country may not participate in the UN sanctions against Iran in an effort to differentiate Russia from the American and Israeli positions.<sup>27</sup> Calculating the implications of a nuclear armed Iran on regional politics at the expense of Russia, eventually Russia agreed to call on Iran to halt its uranium enrichment program and pass two

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<sup>24</sup> Robert O. Freedman, 'Russian Policy Toward the Middle East Under Putin'; Melih Can, 'Israel'in Durdurulmasında Rusya'nın Etkisi Var mı?', *Zaman*, August 16, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Owen Matthews, 'Russia: Moscow presents itself as the new 'middleman' in the Middle East. But its role may actually be that of spoiler', *Newsweek International*, February 27, 2006, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11436739/site/newsweek/>

<sup>26</sup> Yuliya Tymoshenko, 'Moscow and the Middle East' *Today's Zaman*, February 18, 2007; Ariel Cohen, 'US Should Warn Russia Over Its 'Soviet' Middle East Policy', <http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/wm1007.cfm>

<sup>27</sup> Owen Matthews, 'Russia: Moscow presents itself as the new 'middleman' in the Middle East. But its role may actually be that of spoiler', *Newsweek International*, February 27, 2006, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11436739/site/newsweek/>

UN Security Council resolutions in December 2006 and March 2007 imposing economic sanctions on Iran that refused to comply with the NPT.<sup>28</sup>

Another dynamic that contributed to Russian activities in the Middle East is the Iraq war. Although Russia acted with ‘Western coalition’ during the First Gulf War contrary to its public’s preferences, Iraq, as an economic and political partner, has always kept its strategic value for Russian foreign policy. Second Gulf War was important as an occasion to test the new Russian position vis-à-vis the regional countries and the US. The Russian diplomats, military elite and the top managers of energy firms regarded ‘Iraq’ crisis as a catalyst to prove the West that Russia is not a ‘junior’ but a ‘senior’ partner. Putin, feeling uncomfortable about a considerable petroleum reserves under the control of the US, viewed the war as a great mistake. A concern that the war could destabilize the region close to the Russian border was coupled with an expectation that the war would damage Russian economic interests in Iraq. Emphasizing on the role of the UN and diplomacy he sought to gain support both in Russia and abroad. Before the war Putin organized a summit in St. Petersburg with the participation of Germany and France in order to balance unipolar American hegemonic policy in international system and to have a greater say in the future of Iraq.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, then the American Secretary of State Colin Powell went straight saying that only the countries which joined the war actively will have reconstruction contracts in rebuilding Iraq. This inevitably damaged Russo-American relations, which was about to get closer in the post-September 11 context. It is however interesting to note that the recent attitude of the US to let the countries that had not joined the war next to the US to take contracts in the reconstruction of Iraq coincides with a period of assertive Russian policy in the Middle East. As Freedman argues, Putin pursued tripod policy; first was to ensure Iraq’s repayment of its debts to Russia. Second was to get the greatest possible share from Iraq’s reconstruction efforts. And last was to carry the Iraq problem into international platform to disable the US to dominate the process.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> UN Security Council’ Resolution 1747 (2007), March 24, 2007, [www.globalpolicy.org/security/sanction/iran/2007/0324resolution.pdf](http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/sanction/iran/2007/0324resolution.pdf); For more information about recent developments concerning sanctions on Iran see, <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/legal/iran.html>.

<sup>29</sup> For more information on Russian diplomacy during the Iraqi crisis see, Zeynep Dağı, ‘Irak Krizinde Rus Diplomasisi: Kutuplaşmadan Uzlaşıya’ (Russian Diplomacy during the Iraq Crisis: From Polarization to Reconciliation), *Karizma*, Sayı 15, (July-September 2003), pp. 43-48.

<sup>30</sup> Hakam Aql, ‘Russians Are Coming Back’, <http://www.axisglobe.com/article.asp?article=137>, June 1, 2006; Robert Freedman, ‘Russia in the Middle East: Is Putin Undertaking a New Strategy?’, Middle East Institute, 10 February 2006, <http://www.mideasti.org/articles/doc348.html>

It seems that Russia does not view Turkey's evolving role in the Middle East in clash with its policy priorities. Turkish-Russian relations add another dimension to the search for peace and stability in the region, which encourage these two countries to cooperate rather than conflict. Therefore, Turkey with its economic and political stability in the pursuit of EU accession and with its reformist discourse in the OIC appears as an opportunity for the Russians to balance American and Israeli influence over the region. The settling down of the dispute over the route of Eurasia energy sources gave an impetus to an expansion of economic and social contacts and improved diplomatic dialog between Turkey and Russia. In this respect, it is important to note that some circles in Turkey have advocated the partnership of Russia for a multi-dimensional foreign policy line within Eurasia in case there might be an obstruction in Turkey's partnership with the EU. Since Russia is increasingly perceived as a "regional partner" this may form a barrier against the increasing influence of the US in the region with a positive effect on Turkish-Russian relations.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Syria developing an effective cooperation with Turkey has been an indication of Russia's determination to emerge as a 'great power' in the equilibrium of Middle East politics with a pragmatic foreign policy.<sup>32</sup> It can therefore be argued that Russia abandoned the low-profile policy of the 1990s with the Putin period.

### **The Hamas Crisis and Russia**

Hamas's electoral success in the parliamentary elections held on 25 January 2006 in the territories of the Palestinian Authority provided Russia with another opportunity to make an active return to the Middle East politics. The question of how to respond to the Hamas' electoral success and the following Hamas government created disagreements among the four architects of the peace process, namely the US, EU, UN and Russia (the Quartet). While the US Secretary of State Rice declared the presence of Hamas in government threatening and unacceptable, the EU commissioner

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<sup>31</sup> Zeynep Dağı, 'Putin'in Türkiye Ziyareti ve Rusya'daki Dönüşüm' (Putin's Visit to Turkey and the Russian Transformation), *Aksiyon*, December 6, 2004, pp. 48-49

<sup>32</sup> Robert Freedman, 'Russia in the Middle East: Is Putin Undertaking a New Strategy?', Middle East Institute, February 10, 2006, <http://www.mideasti.org/articles/doc348.html>

for foreign and security policy, Javier Solana, pointed out that a terror organization cannot be accepted legitimate just because it won the elections announcing that the EU will be in contact with president Mahmut Abbas, not Hamas and its government. French President Jacques Chirac followed suit arguing that legitimacy of Hamas is only possible if Hamas abandons its ideological opposition to the peace process.<sup>33</sup>

Russian President Putin differed from the rest by expressing that that they do not regard the Hamas as a terrorist organization, and recognized the legitimacy of the Hamas government. The Russian position caused a major crack among the Quartet. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs made an official statement pointing out that elections in Palestine were an important milestone in the democratization process and in the formation of government institutions in Palestine. Alexander Kalugin, the head of Middle Eastern Affairs in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, did not hide that Russia would make the post-election process as an opportunity in developing the relations between Moscow and Hamas going beyond the traditional PLO support of Russia. Upon the break down of the common position, the Middle East Quartet organized a meeting on 30 January 2006 in London in order to reach an understanding on Arab-Israeli peace process and the role of Hamas. However, in the meeting it became clear that there were major differences between the views of the US, EU and Russia. In a press conference Putin acknowledged that Russian and Western point of views towards Hamas were totally different.<sup>34</sup> The spokesperson of the US State Department, Sean McCormack, responded by saying that they wondered what Russia's aim was adding that they expected Russia to help international community encourage Hamas abandoning the arms and recognizing Israel. To continue financial aid to the Palestinian government and engage with the Hamas government the Western governments laid conditions like "accept the road map, recognize Israel, disarm terror organizations, and denounce terrorism".<sup>35</sup>

The source of the problem is the fact that Hamas, an armed organization advocating use of violence as a means to fight against Israel, has taken the office after a democratic election. This constitutes a dilemma

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<sup>33</sup> 'Respect of Election Result is the Only Way Forward', *SoAL - Sozialistische Alternative*, 18.02.2006, <http://www.soal.ch/respect-of-election-results-is-the-only-way-forward>

<sup>34</sup> Michel Elbaz, Sami Rosen, Pavel Simonov, 'Russia Ready for Dialogue with Hamas', *Axis Information and Analysis*, [http://www.axisglobe.com/print/\\_article.asp?article\\_642](http://www.axisglobe.com/print/_article.asp?article_642), February 3, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> 'Putin'in Hamas Davetine Öfke' (Outrage to the Putin's Hamas Invitation), <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=178371>, 11 February 2006.

for the West including the US that call for democratization in the Middle East. Despite Hamas' democratic credentials, the Western embargo on the Hamas government led to accusations of double standards for the Western countries that demand from Hamas to prove itself as a "political" organization denouncing violence. The Russians, on the other hand, maintained that without engaging with the Hamas it would be unrealistic to expect a positive transformation in Hamas' attitude towards peace with Israel.<sup>36</sup> As the Western exclusion of the Hamas government that took the office after democratic election is compared to the Russian approach to the Hamas government, the Middle Eastern public opinion sympathized with the Russians.<sup>37</sup>

The Russians indeed took up the matter as part of their communication strategy to reach out the Arab masses. Putin in his official visit to Spain on 9 February 2006 went public saying that they did not consider Hamas as a terror organization. Declaring that Russia did not have any precondition to contact with Hamas authorities Putin invited Hamas leaders to Russia.<sup>38</sup> Ministry of Defense Sergey Ivanov stated that Hamas has taken the office with a democratic election; this fact has to be accepted by everyone. After the invitation, which prompted strong reactions from Israel and the US, the Russian foreign ministry explained, contrary to the US stance, that Russia did not see any legal obstacle to holding talks with Hamas which was never categorized as a terror organization since Russia lists organizations that engage in terrorist activities within Russian territory.<sup>39</sup> Over its stance on Hamas Putin managed to turn the antipathy for the US in the region into sympathy for Russia that opened a significant channel for its public diplomacy in the Middle East. By supporting the Arabs on their "national cause" in Palestine, the Russian sold the idea to the Arab street that the Middle East needs Russia to balance the US, which supports Israel unconditionally.

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Reynolds, 'İsrail'den Putin'e Çeçen Hatırlatması' (Chechen Reminder to Putin in Israel), [http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/news/story/2006/02/060210\\_israel\\_russia.shtml/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/news/story/2006/02/060210_israel_russia.shtml/)

<sup>37</sup> Zeynep Dağı, 'Ortadoğu Perspektifinden Türkiye'nin Avrupa Entegrasyonu: 'Ötekileştirme Aşılıyor Mu?' (Turkey's Integration with Europe from the Middle East Perspective) *Demokrasi Platformu*, Vol. 1, No 4, (Fall, 2005), pp. 97-113.

<sup>38</sup> İrfan Sapmaz, 'Hamas ve Rusya' (Hamas and Russia), [http://www.tgrthaber.com.tr/section\\_view.aspx?guid, February 18, 2006; Paul Reynolds, 'İsrail'den Putin'e Çeçen Hatırlatması',](http://www.tgrthaber.com.tr/section_view.aspx?guid, February 18, 2006; Paul Reynolds, 'İsrail'den Putin'e Çeçen Hatırlatması',) [http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/news/story/2006/02/060210\\_israel\\_russia.shtml/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/news/story/2006/02/060210_israel_russia.shtml/)

<sup>39</sup> Owen Matthews, 'Russia: Moscow presents itself as the new 'middleman' in the Middle East. But its role may actually be that of spoiler', *Newsweek International*, 27 February 2006, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11436739/site/newsweek/>



Not surprisingly Russia's position on Hamas caused firm reactions from Israel. The Israeli Minister of Communication, Meir Şetrit, questioned Russia's place in the Middle East Quartet as the USA and the EU did, and aired the view that Russia could be excluded. Şetrit claimed that Israel was stabbed from the back and he asked 'What would Russia do if we invited Chechen representatives to Israel? Russia cannot teach us ethics.'<sup>40</sup> Tzipi Livni, the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, meeting with the representatives of the five permanent members of the UN and the Secretary General, called on the Council to back up its call for Hamas's recognition of the state of Israel. However, the French support as declared by France's spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denis Simonneau, for the recent Russian efforts to bring Israel and Palestine together within an understanding of peaceful co-existence constituted another blow to the US and the Quartet. Sergey Ivanov, Russian Minister of Defense, reiterating that sooner or later the other members of the Quartet would develop more moderate approaches to deal with Hamas, declared Russia's determination over this issue.<sup>41</sup>

There were some other occasions where the Russians demonstrated their solidarity with the Palestinians. For instance, Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas met with Putin in Soçi in the aftermath of the elections, asking Russia's active engagement in the Israel-Palestine dispute and financial aid to overcome the economic crisis.<sup>42</sup> Then Russia provided an emergency aid worth of 10 million dollars to Palestine. As the US and the EU cut off the financial aid after the elections the situation in West Bank and Gaza where 25% of the population live with international aid went worse, and 165 thousand officers could not get their salaries. Whereas the increased economic hardship augmented the antipathy towards the West among Palestinians Russia, focusing on the fact that Hamas should be supported due to its democratic credentials in order to transform it into a modest political organization, went on criticizing Western policy against the Hamas. Andrey Denisov, the Russian representative in the UN, stated that cutting down financial aid to Palestine in order to strain Hamas, would

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Reynolds, 'İsrail'den Putin'e Çeçen Hatırlatması',

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/news/story/2006/02/060210\\_israel\\_russia.shtml/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/news/story/2006/02/060210_israel_russia.shtml/)

<sup>41</sup> 'İsrail, Putin'e Ateş Püskürüyor: Bizi Sırtımızdan Bıçakladı' (Israel Outrages: She stabbed us from the back),

<http://www.usakgundem.com/haber.php?id=2797>; 'Putin'in Hamas Davetine Öfke',

<http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=178371>, February 11, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> 'Abbas Rusya'dan Yardım İstedi' (Abbas asked for aid from Russia),

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/europe/story/2006/05/060515\\_russiahamas.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/europe/story/2006/05/060515_russiahamas.shtml)



be counterproductive, adding that the radicals who come to power and face realities would develop pragmatic and moderate policies.<sup>43</sup>

The Hamas leader Meshal's controversial visit to Moscow took place on 3 March 2006 causing concerns especially in Washington where Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov went to discuss about the developments in the Middle East meeting with Rice. Accusing Russia of playing a dangerous game against its Western partners, Rice warned that Meshal's Moscow visit jeopardized Russia's position in the Middle East Quartet and in G-8. Putin's moderate policy towards Hamas caused tension not only with the USA but with Israel too. Although Israeli-Russian relations are commercially strong, Moscow's support for Hamas created disappointments among the Israelis who felt that they were stabbed from the back.<sup>44</sup> Analysts, close to the US and Israel warned Russia that its Hamas strategy ran the risk of recoiling, because Russia, negotiating with Hamas today, would have to negotiate with the Chechen rebels and even El Kaide in the future. It is also argued that Russia with its policy of legitimizing Hamas would enhance the position of its Muslim population especially in Chechnya and North Caucasus where a radical Islamic tendency is already strong. But the Russian policy makers, on the contrary, are of the view that the closer relations with the Islamic world would moderate Islamic opposition that they face at home.<sup>45</sup> In brief, while Russia's support to Hamas, after taking the office with a democratic election, improved its relations with the Arab Middle East, it caused tension in its relations with the US, the EU as well as Israel.

### **Russia: The Power at the back of Lebanon Crisis**

In parallel to the developments concerning Palestine, the Israeli attacks on Lebanon in the summer of 2006 provided the Russians with another occasion that made Russia's assertive policy in the Middle East even more visible. Russian's influence on the decision for the ceasefire can be regarded as yet another reflection of its emerging regional role.

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<sup>43</sup> 'Rusya Talepte Bulunmayacak' (Russia would not demand for anything), <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=178995/>

<sup>44</sup> Michael Widlanski, 'Putin Leads Russia's Return to the Middle East and the Arab Embrace', *Jerusalem Issue Brief*, Vol.4, No.22, 5 May 2005; İsrail, 'Putin'e Ateş Püskürtüyor: Bizi Sırtımızdan Bıçakladı', <http://www.usakgundem.com/haber.php?id=2797>;

<sup>45</sup> Ariel Cohen, 'US Should Warn Russia Over Its 'Soviet' Middle East Policy', <http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/wm1007.cfm>

Israel's attacks on Lebanon, triggered by the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah guerillas, began on July 12, 2006. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov said that Israel's actions went 'far beyond the boundaries of an anti-terrorist operation and they constituted a disproportionate response to what has happened' adding that Russia 'firmly reaffirm support for Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity'.<sup>46</sup> Putin went public arguing that Israel was seeking 'wider goals' in its military campaign against Lebanon rather than the mere return of its abducted soldiers.<sup>47</sup>

During the atrocities that lasted in 33 days 1200 Lebanese, most of whom were civilians, died and 4500 were wounded while 159 Israeli soldiers, on the other hand, died in the fighting.<sup>48</sup> At the end of the fighting the Israeli image as of an unbeatable force was greatly damaged over the scenes of the destruction of Israel's strong Merkavi tanks. Iran and Syria used to be usual suspects as the arms suppliers of Hezbollah. But this time the Israelis pointed to another state behind the scene supplying Hezbollah with sophisticated weapons. Israel claimed that Hezbollah had and used Metis-M anti-tank missiles, RPG-29 rockets, SA missiles, Strela-2 and SAM, which were all Russian-made.<sup>49</sup> Although these claims were denied by the Russian Minister of Defense Ivanov, Israeli charges against Russia, even if they were untrue, brought Russia ever closer to the Arab street with its assumed role in the failure of Israel's attacks on Lebanon.<sup>50</sup> Anyhow the Israeli claims indicated that Russia was capable of changing balances in the Middle East.

Not only Israeli attacks on civilian targets but also the terms of a ceasefire at the end caused tension and disputes in the region. In the first draft resolution for the Security Council prepared by the US and France there was no provision concerning the withdrawal of Israel from the lands that it had invaded, which caused strong reactions from the regional countries as well as international community.<sup>51</sup> Russia's UN representative Vitali Churkin reacted saying that such a resolution would increase atrocities in the region, and added that Russia would work for a resolution acceptable to Lebanese government. Russia's declaration that it would veto

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<sup>46</sup> 'Bush defends Israel actions, Russia condemns attacks', *Reuters*, 2006-07-13.

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.mosnews.com/news/2006/07/16/moreisraeligoals.shtml>

<sup>48</sup> 'Putin Says Russia Considering Sending Troops to Lebanon',

<http://www.mosnews.com/news/2006/08/23/peacekeeperslebanon.shtml>, August 23, 2006.

<sup>49</sup> Melih Can, 'İsrail'in Durdurulmasında Rusya'nın Etkisi Var mı?', *Zaman*, August 16, 2006.

<sup>50</sup> 'Hizbullah'ta Rus Füzesi Olduğu İddiası Saçmalık' (It is nonsense to claim that Hezbollah possess Russian missile), <http://www.haber10.com/haber/40741>, August 25, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> 'Rusya, Lübnan Çıkarlarını Taşımayan BM Kararına Karşı Çıkıyor' (Russia is against the UN Resolution which does not carry Lebanon's interests), <http://www.irna.ir/tr/news/view/line-6/0608081242145849.htm>, August 8, 2006.

any resolution, brought to the Council by the US or France, which was not approved by Lebanon shaped the outcome of the war, and brought Russia to the forefront of Middle East politics.<sup>52</sup> In this respect, Russia, by demanding an immediate withdrawal of Israeli forces after a ceasefire, dared to challenge the US and Israel in the region, and underlined that it had its own long-term strategic objectives in the Middle East.<sup>53</sup>

The ceasefire terms, as prepared by the Lebanese government and supported by the countries in the Arab League, Iran and Russia, included the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, releasing the Israeli soldiers, setting Lebanese refugees free. The plan also envisaged Lebanon's control over its entire territory and deployment of a UN peace keeping force. The Lebanese government underlined the fact that after the withdrawal of Israeli soldiers the south of Lebanon where the Hezbollah militias were in control would be taken over by a 15 000 strong government force. The commitment of the government to take over the control in the southern Lebanon was hailed as a significant step in the direction of establishing sovereignty and independence in Lebanon.<sup>54</sup> Eventually, the Security Council adopted the resolution 1701 that included all these elements with the insistence of Russia. On the resolution 1701 Russia's role in balancing the demands of the US and Israel in favor of the Lebanese government was widely appreciated by the Arab public opinion.

Deployment of the UN peace keeping forces in Lebanon caused a controversy in Russia. Those who argued for sending troops regarded it as a golden opportunity for Russia to reaffirm its presence as a great power in the Middle East. It was at one stage reported that Putin was in favor of sending Russian peace keeping troops to Lebanon.<sup>55</sup> In this respect, Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov stated that they were considering taking part in the UN peace keeping force.<sup>56</sup> But at the end they settled for sending a battalion of military engineers. Based on the UN Security Council resolution 1701 and a request of the Lebanese government, Russia sent an engineer battalion in October 2006 to help reconstruction efforts after the

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<sup>52</sup> Mark N. Katz, Policy Watch: Russia's Lebanon Policy, <http://www.iraq-war.ru/article/100416>, August 28, 2006; 'Rusya'dan Lübnan'a Destek' (Russia supports Lebanon), <http://www.e-kolay.net/haber/Haber.asp?PID064&HID00&HaberID0407236>, August 8, 2006.

<sup>53</sup> 'Rusya, Lübnan Çıkarlarını Taşımayan BM Kararına Karşı Çıkıyor', <http://www.irma.ir/tr/news/view/line-6/0608081242145849.htm>, August 8, 2006.

<sup>54</sup> 'Rusya'dan Lübnan'a Destek', [http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/news/story/2006/08/060808\\_lebanondiplomatic.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkish/news/story/2006/08/060808_lebanondiplomatic.shtml), August 8, 2006.

<sup>55</sup> 'Putin Says Russia Considering Sending Troops to Lebanon', <http://www.mosnews.com/news/2006/08/23/peacekeeperslebanon.shtml>, August 23, 2006; 'Rusya da Türkiye Gibi Kararsız: 'Lübnan'a Asker Gönderelim mi'' (Russia is hesitant like Turkey: 'Shall we send troops to Lebanon'), <http://www.turkrus.com/content/view/2720/160/> ;

<sup>56</sup> 'Russia Hails Israel's Decision to Lift Blockade of Lebanon', <http://www.mosnews.com/news/2006/09/07/lavrovisrael.shtml>

war. Russian military engineers worked in Lebanon for two months repairing bridges and removing mines.<sup>57</sup> The Russian troops were not part of the UN peacekeeping force but on the base of a bilateral agreement with the Lebanese government. A journalist from the *Jerusalem Post*, Caroline Glick responded to the Russian military engineers sent to Lebanon as ‘the Russian bear has awakened after 15 years of hibernation’.<sup>58</sup> What is also interesting is that the troops sent to Lebanon to guard the military engineers were the Muslim Chechens who, in Defense Minister Ivanov’s words ‘have experience and knowledge of what a booby trap looks like, what a homemade explosive device looks like’.<sup>59</sup> It seems that Russia was using the ‘Muslim card’ in its game for the great power status in the Middle East.

## Conclusion

Russia has been pursuing a policy of balancing the power of the USA and Israel, and increase effectiveness of the UN in the Middle East through mobilizing the support of some regional actors. The emphasis on the UN underlines the Russian discontent with the American unilateralism in the region. The recent crises in the Middle East such as the chaos in Iraq, Hamas’ rise to power in Palestine, nuclear crisis with Iran and the new Lebanon war have brought Russia to the forefront of regional politics. Putin seems to have departed from an earlier ‘low profile’ policies in the Middle East which were to a large extent in line with ‘Western’ positions. Russia using the opportunities emerged recently acts in a way to demonstrate that it is still a “great power” in the region by strengthening its ties with anti-USA and anti-Israeli actors from Palestine to Lebanon and from Syria to Iran in an attempt to limit the power and influence of both the USA and Israel. Russia’s attempts to reestablish its “traditional role” in the Middle East is welcomed by regional actors as a balancing move against the unilateralism of the USA and domination of Israel. Hamas’ electoral victory and the Lebanon war have provided the Russians with perfect opportunity to make inroads into the minds and hearts of the Arabs by adopting more pro-Arab policies.

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<sup>57</sup> <http://www.un.int/russia/new/MainRoot/docs/press/160107enprel.htm>

<sup>58</sup> <http://halldor2.wordpress.com/2006/10/09/russia-goes-to-lebanon/>

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.mosnews.com/news/2006/10/12/vostokbattalion.shtml>