



The Foundations of Russian Policy in the Middle East

By Stephen Blank

Summary

There is little doubt that Russia is winning in the Middle East at the expense of the United States. This strategic development has a lengthy history:

- As foreign minister and later prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov laid the intellectual and political foundations for Vladimir Putin's current policies in the Middle East.
- Putin has adroitly refined and modified that framework where and when necessary, e.g. to confront the threat of terrorism and develop Russia's capabilities.
- The framework is intrinsically anti-American and motivated by an obsession to recover Russia's great power status of bygone times.
- Russia regards the Middle East as a prime area for achieving both critical domestic and foreign policy goals that are also increasingly linked together by Moscow.

Introduction

Few American officials and analysts believe that Vladimir Putin has a strategy, and even fewer discern a Russian strategy for the Middle East beyond Syria.¹ The myth of Putin as a mere tactician or poor strategist dies hard.² This chapter attempts to remedy that shortcoming by demonstrating Russia's long-standing, dynamic, and evolving strategy for the entire Middle East since the times of former spymaster, foreign minister and then prime minister of Russia, Yevgeny Primakov. Although Primakov functioned as leader during the nadir of Russian

influence and bequeathed to Vladimir Putin a strategy born of weakness; since Moscow intervened in Syria's civil war in 2015, Russia has proceeded with growing confidence, retaining the core precepts of Primakov's approach while adding and refining them in the light of Putin's perceptions and experience. In essence, we must remember that Russia's intervention in Syria's civil war did not occur in a void but rather takes place within a definite and discernible context.

From Primakov to Putin

Although Primakov's vision emanated from Russian weakness, its core precept is that Russia must regain its standing as a great power. Consequently one enduring driver of Russian policy here is the constant effort to remind everyone that Russia is a great power globally and has critical equities in the Middle East that must be respected. But Russia must also act and be seen as a great power globally and regionally to counter the United States—its principal rival if not enemy. Russia's return as a pole of the emerging multipolar world is “a natural desire in the multipolar world.”³ Therefore, Russia must act as and become a counterforce to the US in the Middle East.⁴ Upon becoming foreign minister in 1996, Primakov told *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*,

Russia's foreign policy cannot be the foreign policy of a second-rate state. We must pursue the foreign policy of a great state—the world is moving toward a multipolar system. In these conditions, we must pursue a diversified course oriented toward the development of relations with everyone and, at the same time, in my view, we should not align ourselves with any individual pole. Precisely because Russia itself will be one of the poles, the “leader-led” configuration is not acceptable to us.⁵

Thus, rivalry with the US has been the core of foreign policy for over 20 years, not least in the Middle East. In fact, Russia acts as if it itself is at war with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and not just the United States. On January 18, 2005, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov told the Academy of Military Sciences, the official institutional locus of systematic thinking about contemporary war, that, “There is a war against Russia under way, and it has been going on for quite a few years. No one declared war on us. There is not one country that would be in a state of war with Russia. But there are people and organizations in various countries who take part in hostilities against the Russian Federation.”⁶ In that light, Russia's failure to achieve great power status and a lack of recognition abroad means, first of all, a defeat in this war. Moreover, Moscow creates domestic pressures that threaten the foundations of Russia's own statehood. Consequently if Russia is not a great power, then Moscow is nothing. The effort to deploy and sustain Russia's military and political presence in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean has been, since Catherine the Great, a structural feature and obsession for many Russian statesmen.⁷

In order to reassert Russia's greatness, Primakov and Putin aimed ultimately at strategic denial, denying Washington sole possession of a dominant role in the Middle East from where US influence could expand to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). For both men the Middle East was and remains, as Soviet leaders insisted, an area close to Russia's borders, despite the retraction of those borders from the Middle East after 1991. Such statements highlight the fact that for both men and their disciples, Russian security in key ways equates to

Soviet security and policies.⁸ Russia's Middle Eastern policy is therefore a critical component of a global or multi-vector strategy to reassert Russia's parity with the US globally and regionally. Regional "bipolarity" supposedly will facilitate American recognition of multi-polarity, i.e. Russia's equal standing to Moscow both in the Middle East and at large. Russia's assertive Middle Eastern policies arguably furnish its domestic and elite audiences with proof of Russia's continuing great power vitality and supposed anti-terrorist resolution; and for this reason alone, those policies command respect. This point is particularly important in the context of Putin targeting Sunni terrorism in Syria against President Bashar al-Assad as linked to the Arab Spring.

Achieving great power status in the Middle East was essential for Primakov and subsequently to Putin because Russia's transition to democracy remains incomplete. Put another way, Russia's unsettled internal constitution requires attainment of great power status in the Middle East to deflect demands for greater democratization at home. Therefore, when Chechnya exploded, Putin found it necessary to gain Middle Eastern support for Russia so that those governments could add their influence in favor of preserving Russia's integrity. Achieving and preserving great power status in the Middle East not only ensures internal stability in Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia, it also mandates that Russia be able to offer Middle Eastern governments something in return for their support for its domestic "tranquility." Indeed, Primakov and Putin have both argued that despite the US victory in the Cold War and ensuing hegemony, there remains an opportunity for Russia to balance America in the Middle East.⁹ As Anna Borshchevskaya argues, Putin's anti-American disposition has been a constant in his Middle Eastern policy.¹⁰ And for some time now, Putin and his spokesmen have explicitly seen the US as a power in decline, adding momentum to the Kremlin's design for the Middle East.

Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria convinced Moscow the US is a type of "rogue elephant" that acts unilaterally and is overly prone to violence; yet, for all its power and tactical proficiency, which Russia respects and admires, in Moscow's view the US does not know how to bring these wars to positive strategic conclusions. From Russia's perspective, America has failed to curb its ways and represents a growing threat to Russia because the US refuses to accept its own decline and disregards what Moscow deems to be legitimate Russian interests. Ongoing American efforts to force its views upon recalcitrant powers despite its decline generate possibilities for Russian advances. But to exploit its opportunities, Russia must be able to offer something tangible beyond mere diplomatic support to countries in the Middle East.

This last point highlights both the evolution and one significant difference from Primakov to Putin. Primakov asserted as best he could Russia's traditional standing in the region but failed. Russia's weakness deprived him of anything to offer except "good offices." So he could not present a credible regional alternative to Washington or compel the US to take Russia seriously. Putin, coming to power amidst a war that threatened Russia's integrity, had to offer local governments something tangible to obtain genuine support from them against the Chechens and other terrorists. So he had to build up the state and launch economic reforms that were borne aloft by surging energy prices during 1999–2008. Those actions enhanced Russia's economic power and attractiveness, allowing Putin to launch a regional diplomacy offering trade advantages, energy deals, arms sales, and other opportunities in return for support against the

Chechens and terrorism. Those tradeoffs characterized Russia's regional policy from 2000 to 2008.¹¹

First, throughout this period, Putin offered trade deals to virtually every Arab country. And by 2007, when he toured the region, these trade packages included nuclear reactors, exploiting their fear of the Iranian nuclear program.¹² Second, by 2005, Russia repudiated its post-Soviet policy of not selling arms on credit, forgave Syria's debts, and began selling Damascus weapons on credit.¹³ Similarly this period witnessed revived arms sales to North African and other Arab states. These arms sales are linked not only to Russia's unremitting efforts to regain its former regional standing but also to its strategy to become the world's dominant natural gas exporter and gain decisive leverage upon Europe through access to and control over Middle Eastern and African energy sources.¹⁴ Access to Arab states through arms sales and gas deals are correlated, and often this combination has led to Russian bases. Consequently, Russia tried for a long time to consummate a major arms deal with Libya and Algeria, whom Moscow regarded as potential gateways to the broader African and Arab markets.¹⁵ We can expect a repetition of this phenomenon should Russia be able to sell arms to Egypt and if its proxy, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, prevails in Libya.¹⁶

Before the Arab Spring Libya had expressed interest in many weapons.¹⁷ Finally, in October 2009, Libya signed a total of five contracts with Russia to include equipment and spare parts for the Army and Navy as well as the modernization of its T-72 tanks.¹⁸ Russia concurrently also sought access with the Italian energy company ENI to Libyan gas fields and assets and announced a \$1 billion sale of aircraft to Rome.¹⁹ This approach is part of a global strategy that Russia also applies wherever Moscow discerns possibilities for exploiting regional disturbances in order to leverage itself as both a global and regional power in that region, e.g. the CIS, the Balkans and the Middle East.²⁰ We see a similar pattern of the nexus among arms sales, energy deals, and Russia's quest for naval or air bases in Vietnam, Syria and Cyprus.²¹ Similarly, since 2013, Russian arms sales to Iraq have been labeled as a vital priority for Russia in conjunction with its energy deals there.²² Russian arms sales to Egypt are now apparently coordinated with a deal that will revive tourism, after terrorists detonated a bomb on a Russian flight over Egypt in 2015.²³

Thus, strategic continuity from Primakov to Putin remains the dominant though not exclusive trend. Most importantly, both leaders argued that for Russia to play its "assigned" regional role, Moscow had to offer a contrast if not a counter to US interests and rally Arab voices that they confidently believed were opposed to America's exclusive hegemony in the Middle East. Accordingly, when the US slipped, Russia could then exploit its opportunities. They both relied on this trend, arguing that such "multi-vector" diplomacy epitomized the transition to multipolarity that they allegedly saw.²⁴ It is well known that Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov have subsequently consistently developed, refined, and implemented this global diplomacy in service of a supposed multi-polar world order. Consequently when Russia could display hard power in 2015 and directly challenge Washington, Moscow could do so with impunity while conducting an effective dialogue with every regional government, even though that capability did not and still does not guarantee the attainment of all of Russia's objectives. Meanwhile, Moscow also possessed the economic leverage to compel Turkey to embrace Russia, even without threatening energy supplies to Turkey, after Ankara shot down a Russian plane in 2015.

This simultaneous ability to speak to every regional government while also possessing visible coercive power is a critical asset of Putin's policy and now a cornerstone of the strategy. And this is his personal achievement even if the broader framework for policy remains Primakov's creation.

Iran

Primakov and Putin sought partnership with Iran to counter US pretensions in the Middle East. But Russia has compelling domestic motives for doing so as well. Russia fully grasps Iran's capacity for fomenting unrest in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and that is one reason why Russia refrains from provoking Iran even when both sides' policies have not been jointly aligned. At the same time, Moscow knows Iran aspires to be a regional great power, will always be there, and has an immense potential to make trouble for Russia if it so chooses.²⁵ Critically, both leaderships fully grasp that Iran's implacable opposition to US interests in the Middle East makes Tehran available to Moscow as a partner against Washington since the Islamic Republic clearly needed great power support.²⁶ Even if Iran, unlike China is not a "strategic partner" of Russia as many Russian and even Iranian academics argue, the evidence of policy coordination in Syria and elsewhere is very strong.²⁷ And Moscow's growing influence includes collaborating against Washington in Afghanistan.²⁸

Primakov and Putin recognized that Moscow must always have close relations with Tehran even though Iran could ultimately threaten Russia because of its missile and nuclear programs.²⁹ Russian experts also argue that Moscow must always be able to engage Tehran, even in difficult times.³⁰ Indeed one reason why Russia sells Iran weapons is its awareness of the latter's potential to disrupt the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan. Moscow realized it had to blend arms sales with close monitoring of Iranian activities.³¹ Moscow's economic calculations to keep its defense industry markets selling to Iran is also part of a strategy to push away US and European influence in the Islamic Republic because Moscow believes that if Russia did not sell arms to Iran its competitors would wrest that market away from Russian companies. Therefore, arms sales to Iran have always been a Russian tool to prevent an Iranian challenge to Russian power; and from Moscow's point of view, this strategy has succeeded handsomely.³²

In the 1990s, Russian analysts clearly argued that while Russia opposed the Iranian nuclear program, cooperation with Iran could serve as a model for dealing with other proliferation issues, e.g. North Korea.³³ Subsequently, under Putin, Russian thinking evolved to the point where Chief of Staff General Yuri N. Baluyevsky stated that Washington's claim that Russia now admitted to an Iranian threat was a misinterpretation. While Russia never denied a global threat of proliferation of missiles, "we insist that this trend is not something catastrophic, which would require a global missile defense system deployed near Russian borders."³⁴ Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov stated that, "We don't share all the West's views on the capacities of the Iranian nuclear program."³⁵ Foreign Minister Lavrov and his deputy, Sergei Ryabkov, stated that though sanctions might become inevitable if Iran does not comply with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regarding enrichment of uranium, Iran represents no threat to Europe or the United States. Moreover, Moscow has no evidence of its planning a military nuclear program that would justify missile defenses.³⁶ And since the adoption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of

Action (JCPOA) in 2015, Russia has consistently been Iran's defense attorney, strategic partner, arms seller and energy trader.³⁷

Furthermore, in some respects Russia's attitude toward Iranian proliferation resembles Andrei Gromyko's concerning reports of Iraqi proliferation in the 1980s. For Gromyko, these reports suggested major instabilities in the Middle East, but those would be US and Israeli headaches that would lead them to come to Moscow on their knees to help stop these new conflicts.³⁸ Alexei Arbatov further observes that,

There is a broad consensus in Russia's political elite and strategic community that there is no reason for their nation to take US concerns closer to heart than its own worries—in particular if Washington is showing neither understanding of those problems of Russia, nor any serious attempts to remove or alleviate them in response for closer cooperation with Russia on non-proliferation subjects.³⁹

Russia does not view Iran as a potential enemy. Iran is a major consumer of Russian arms, an extremely important Russian geopolitical partner, as well as a growing "regional superpower" that balances out the US military and political presence in the Black Sea/Caspian region and Middle East, while simultaneously containing Sunni extremism in the North Caucasus and Central Asia.⁴⁰ Russia also views Iran as the dominant regional power in the neighborhood that can project power into the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. Therefore, Moscow repays Iran for refraining from doing so by upholding Russia's pro-Iranian policies.⁴¹ Neither does Russia take the proliferation threat nearly as seriously as do the US and its allies in Europe and the Middle East.⁴²

Obviously Russia's robust economic interests in Iran as well as the nuclear, energy and defense industry lobbies that benefit from those interests greatly influence Moscow's policies today as they have in the past. But beyond those lobbies, Russia's fundamental strategic interests lie in promoting Iranian-US hostility, not cooperation. Official Russian statements advocate strengthening Iran's role as a legitimate actor in a Middle East security system even as Iranian leaders threaten to destroy Israel and promote state-sponsored terrorism. Lavrov even went beyond this region and said that Iran should be invited to participate in any security system for the Black Sea region.⁴³

For over two decades, Russian pundits and officials have openly stated that they want Iran to be a partner of Russia and not the US lest the US consolidate its position as the *Ordnungsmacht* (law enforcement agency) in the Middle East, where Moscow still desperately desires to be seen as a great power capable of influencing regional trends. Iranian-American hostility precludes such consolidation by Washington and permits Russia to exercise influence by supporting the maintenance of a system of controlled tension that benefits the Kremlin. Iranian rapprochement with the West undermines Russia's use of the energy weapon to subvert European security institutions and governments because large quantities of Iranian gas and oil would then be shipped to Europe. An Iranian reorientation to the West would also likely stimulate foreign investment to and access from Central Asia through Iran to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, allowing the free flow of Central Asian energy to the entire world, bypassing Russia and undermining its ability to control Eurasian energy and trade flows. Therefore, the presumption

that we can expect any genuinely serious cooperation from Moscow regarding Iran is unfounded, and even mischievous. Not surprisingly Iran now stands with Russia against the US in Afghanistan as well.⁴⁴

By adopting this stance, Russia has obstructed Western efforts to win over Iran against Russian interests that are threatened by any Western hegemony in the Middle East. From very early on, the Russian-Iranian partnership—as expressed, for example, by Iran’s help in winding down Tajikistan’s civil war in 1992–1997—was characterized by the notion that Tehran reckoned with and refrained from jeopardizing Moscow’s vital interests, which, in turn, helped achieve the domestic consolidation sought there by Moscow.⁴⁵ Moreover, given Iran’s extensive connections to Syria and, after 2003, a Shiite-led Iraq, Tehran could become the core for a pro-Moscow bloc in the Middle East to enhance Iranian and thus indirectly Russian influence at the expense of the United States. Not accidentally, this emerging Shiite bloc, now clearly visible, recalls the Rejectionist Front of 1978-1979 against the Camp David Treaty. Accordingly, Primakov advocated removing all US troops from the Persian Gulf as part of a broader Gulf security plan.⁴⁶ Russia still supports this plan, opposing “NATO-like alliances” in the Gulf.⁴⁷ So even if Iran is as a tactical partner and strategic rival in Syria, Moscow will keep Iran as a partner as long as it can because the rewards of doing so are great and the risks of failure are even greater.⁴⁸

We see this adherence to an Iranian orientation in Moscow’s skepticism toward President Donald Trump’s and some Sunni Arab states’ concept of an “Arab NATO,” which Russia sees as an anti-Iranian alliance and worse yet as an effort to create a Sunni bloc that will inevitably generate new fissures within the region given its overtly anti-Shiite character.⁴⁹

Turkey

Primakov’s consistent approach to Iran, which was improved under Putin, also applies to Russian policy toward Turkey. Putin advanced Primakov’s outlook to encompass Turkey and move Ankara away from a pro-Western to a pro-Russian orientation.⁵⁰ Putin’s Turkey policy has aimed all along to neutralize any possibility for Turkey to project power either in the Caucasus, Central Asia or in the Middle East, while binding Turkey closer to Russia through economic and political ties—particularly trade and energy. The internal collapse of Kemalism and the rise of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Islamic anti-Western view have been inestimable boons that Putin has adroitly exploited since coming to power.⁵¹

These policies, along with Russia’s century-old cultivation of the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and now Syria to generate pressure on Ankara or Baghdad whenever necessary, is now the norm. The impressive economic leverage upon Turkey that Moscow then displayed after 2015, plus its tactical flexibility in then dealing with Turkey in Syria once Turkey restored ties on Russia’s terms, demonstrates the range of instruments that Putin has built up to manage Turkey and exploit its domestic currents to his benefit.⁵² Those anti-Western and anti-democratic currents also have gone far to neutralize Turkey as a potential threat to Russia in the Caucasus or as a NATO member.

Concurrently Putin, utilizing Russia's rising economic capability, arms sales and energy deals, including nuclear energy, has assiduously courted every Middle Eastern government to create good or at least solid working relationships with all of them and establish Moscow's regional bona fides. By 2008, Russia had achieved viable linkages to all of the Middle East but clearly was still playing well back in the orchestra. A decade later, with US policy adrift and unmoored, Russia is acting confidently and forcefully throughout the region using a strategic plan based on Primakov's thinking.

Terrorism

The global threat of both Sunni and Shiite terrorism emerged in the 1970s. Whereas in the Soviet period Moscow assiduously cultivated and spawned many of the terrorist groups that have evolved into today's organizations, the wars in Chechnya brought home the danger posed by Salafi terrorism to Russia.⁵³ Russian officials saw the possibility of relaunching the "Soviet-style" sponsorship of terrorism against the West. This threat and awareness of the potential threat against the West has led to the evolution of a wholly "instrumentalized" view of terrorism.

On the one hand, Putin strove consistently to estrange the Chechen terrorists from potential or even actual sponsors in the Middle East by means of combining threats and blandishments that Russia's rising economy offered him. As Moscow has itself often claimed, its perspective on the overall Middle East is closely tied to its threat perception, particularly Islamic terrorist threats, to its domestic stability.⁵⁴ Moreover, this commingling of internal with external threats is part of the officially sanctioned approach to national security and foreign policy in Putin's Russia. As the Russian 2008 Foreign Policy Concept states, "Differences between domestic and external means of ensuring national interests and security are gradually disappearing. In this context, our foreign policy becomes one of major instruments of the steady national development."⁵⁵

Putin also simultaneously pursued alignment with the US against terrorism, in 2001–2003, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Putin also sought to enhance Moscow's position as an interlocutor with every Middle Eastern state, including Israel. He used all of Russia's instruments of power to impress upon Middle Eastern audiences that Russia, too, was an Islamic state. Russia even became an associate member of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), advocating cooperation while building ties with every Middle Eastern government. This association has reached the point where the OIC has now named Putin a friend of Muslims, and he reassures Muslims that they can count on Russia.⁵⁶ In other words, Putin is courting the Muslim World in innovative ways.

At the same time, Putin has long sought and continues to portray Russia as the West's partner in the campaign against Islamist terrorism. One key motive of his activities in Syria has been to show the West why it should collaborate with Russia against what Putin believes is terrorism. Nadezhda Arbatova and Alexander Dynkin write that,

The main goal of Russia's involvement is to show that Moscow's assistance may play a crucial role in the settlement of major issues, such as the Syrian conflict and international terrorism, and to underline the point that the Islamic State (also known as ISIS or ISIL) is

the greatest threat the world faces. Any improvement in Russia-West relations through cooperation on such issues would increase the chances of a lasting peace in Ukraine.⁵⁷

Certainly, Putin and the Russian leadership have embraced this idea to the point of calling the Islamic State the main threat to Russia when it suits them (for actually the US is that threat).⁵⁸ But the Russian intervention in Syria may arguably have been also intended as a riposte to what Putin sees as an American global conspiracy against Russia.⁵⁹ This understanding becomes particularly important because Putin's regime explicitly regards its domestic security as unstable and the state as having failed to achieve the "necessary level of public security."⁶⁰ And this instability is traceable, in no small measure, to Islamic terrorism and criminality associated with terrorism.⁶¹ Therefore, preventing the spread of terrorism beyond the North Caucasus and ultimately eliminating terrorism are major state priorities, especially with the 2018 presidential elections around the corner. Moscow reiterates endlessly that it intervened in Syria to prevent terrorists from returning home and turning Russia into a new Iraq. This claim clearly has a basis in reality and implicitly underscores the connection from internal to external security—even if, in 2013–2014, Moscow facilitated the terrorists' movement to Syria to reduce the incidence of terrorism in the North Caucasus.⁶²

Of course, we did. We opened borders, helped them all out and closed the border behind them by criminalizing this type of fighting. If they want to return now, we are waiting for them at the borders. Everyone's happy: they are dying on the path of Allah, and we have no terrorist acts here and are now bombing them in Latakia and Idlib. State policy has to be pragmatic; this was very effective.⁶³

This view gained prominence because Putin, at the end of the day, argued that the Arab Spring constituted an American-made threat against Russia. The long-standing desire to restore Russia to its previous Cold War prominence in the Middle East at Washington's expense dovetailed nicely with the implosion of the post-World War II Middle East order. As Russian prime minister, Putin quickly voiced fear that the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya would "inevitably" trigger greater violence in the North Caucasus.⁶⁴ Similarly, then-President Medvedev expressed the belief that the Arab Spring was the direct result of a foreign conspiracy against Russia. As *Al Jazeera* reported,

'The situation is tough. We could be talking about the disintegration of large, densely populated states, talking about them breaking up into little pieces,' [Medvedev] said in comments broadcast on state television. 'These are not simple states and it is highly probable that there will be difficult events, including fanatics coming to power. This will mean fires for years and the spread of extremism in the future. We need to look this straight in the eyes.' [...] 'They have prepared such a scenario for us before, and now more than ever they will try and realize it. In any case, this scenario won't succeed,' he said⁶⁵

Since 2011, Moscow called the Arab Spring a real threat to its domestic order and has repeatedly justified intervention.. Clearly, Moscow considers all opposition to Russian allies and/or interests as inherently terrorist and that assessment justifies virtually any kind of response in order to protect Russian state interests even outside normal international jurisdiction lines.

On the other hand, combining this threat perception with its “instrumentalizing” of terrorism leads Moscow to sponsor terrorism for its own purposes and not only in the Middle East but also in Ukraine and even Latin America.⁶⁶ This tactic also coincides with centuries of experience in inciting ethnic tensions in targeted societies. The ability of the Russian state to manufacture, incite, and exploit ethnic or other conflicts among the peoples on Russia’s periphery dates back to the very inception of the Russian state.⁶⁷ Nor was this tactic confined to Russian subjects. This policy was a hallmark of Russian policy toward the Kurds and Armenians in the late Ottoman Empire and remains so today. Moscow’s policy makes clear Russia’s attitude toward the Kurds varies with the prospects for Russian ties to Turkey and Iraq.⁶⁸

Russia is more than willing to tolerate instability and economic weakness in the neighboring countries, assuming they are accompanied by an increase in Russian influence. In fact, Russia consciously contributes to the rising instability and deterioration of the economic situation in some, if not all, of these countries.⁶⁹

Indeed, Russia’s overall national security strategy and tactics do not respect accepted ideas of sovereignty or territorial integrity, seeing them as instrumentalized weapons—just like Moscow sees terrorism.⁷⁰ Indeed, Moscow “instrumentalizes” “Gray area diplomacy” as an acute form of non-linear destabilization—and not only in Ukraine or Georgia, but in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere.

The notion encompasses the systematic use of a given territory to destabilize the central state form within, create a new status quo, use legal precedents and diversion to give a smokescreen of legitimacy, ensure political control form within, and finally force the central state to accept the new situation with no possibility to come back to the status quo ante. Through controlled tension, Moscow can “reheat” the proverbial buffer zones at will and keep them unstable militarily and politically.⁷¹

Simultaneously, Moscow is the principal armorer through Syria and Iran of Hezbollah, the Houthi in Yemen, and the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which Ankara considers to be a terrorist group affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey.⁷² Russia also refuses to recognize either the PKK or Hamas as terrorists, although Turkey and Israel recognize them as such. Finally, Russia is evidently supplying the PKK with weapons, even though this Kurdish group’s military operations in Syria clearly involve terrorist acts, including the bombing of civilian targets.⁷³ Despite valuable trade relations with Russia, Israel’s government openly views Russia’s support for Hamas and Hezbollah, to whom Russian arms are going, as a classic example of a double standard, whereby Moscow denounces terrorism but supports its proxies as not being terrorists.⁷⁴

Terrorism and Israel-Palestinian Issues

In 2007, Russia’s ambassador to Israel, Andrei Demidov, stated that Israel must talk with Hamas. But when queried about Russia’s refusal to talk with Chechen terrorists, he said that the Chechen problem is an internal Russian one: “We decide how to settle the problem.” Moreover, he mendaciously claimed that Moscow settled Chechnya by peaceful means and created a

government, parliament and judicial system there. He even recommended that Israel learn from Russia's example.⁷⁵

Demidov's hypocritical statement shows Russia's true *Realpolitik* calculations along with the implicit belief that Israel is not truly a sovereign state while Russia is. So while Russia's sovereignty is inviolable, Moscow can tell Israel to negotiate with terrorists who seek its destruction. Not surprisingly, Israel replied that Hamas is no different than Chechen terrorists.⁷⁶ But Moscow rejected this argument. This statement also shows Moscow's wholly utilitarian attitude toward terrorists: Moscow's attitude is "I decide who is a terrorist." Thus, if terrorist groups like Hezbollah or Hamas suit Russian interests, so much the worse for supposed cooperation with the West.⁷⁷

Russia has also consistently maintained that the Palestinians should unite. As such, in Moscow's view, Hamas should take part in the discussions leading to any peace conference and ultimately be a member of the unified Palestinian delegation. Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Denisov said, in 2007, "National unity in Palestine is the main determining condition for an independent Palestinian state."⁷⁸ Consequently, Moscow regularly expresses its desire for this unity and dismay whenever the perennial strife between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas undermines the two groups. Accordingly, Russia constantly urges Hamas to support the PA but deals openly with Hamas while advocating Israeli negotiations with the PA and Hamas' participation in those talks.⁷⁹

However, in pursuing this goal, Russia has also had to maintain, in open defiance of the facts, that Hamas is not a terrorist organization. Since 2006, when President Putin invited Hamas' leadership to Moscow after their election victory, Russian authorities have allegedly tried to convince Hamas to renounce terrorism, recognize Israel, and abide by all previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements. Yet, Moscow imposed no conditions on the visit or subsequently on Hamas and seemed unfazed by the fact that Hamas' leadership continues to express its determination to destroy Israel.⁸⁰ Putin even stated earlier that Russia did not recognize Hamas as a terrorist organization on its list of such groups. This emphasis on pushing Hamas and the PA to unite continues to be a key point in Russian diplomacy.⁸¹ Yet, nothing has changed Hamas' outlook or *modus operandi*.

Other less obvious reasons also exist for Russia's steadfast engagement with Hamas and Hezbollah. According to the influential senator and chairman of the Federation Council's Foreign Affairs Committee, Mikhail Margelov, the idea that Russia has good relations with Hamas is merely an illusion. The real reason for opening those ties is that Moscow cannot afford to forego contacts with any potentially important player lest Russia be deprived of leverage over them and have to adjust to other players' initiatives. This posture highlights Russia's regional weakness not its strength. Margelov stated,

We are in communication, which is mostly of an informational nature for us. When there is a player on the political arena, it would be just too fantastic for those backing this player if we allowed them a monopoly in using it. Therefore, it is better to speak with HAMAS directly than to depend on the Iranians or Syrians, who will dictate to us their conditions for talking with HAMAS. But we are under no illusion about the fact that

HAMAS is heterogeneous: in Gaza, in a more subdued state in the West Bank, and in Syria.⁸²

It is also clear that there are factions in Russia who would go further in supporting Hamas. In 2006–2007, then–Chief of the General Staff Yury Baluevsky even intimated that Russia might sell Hamas weapons, only to be corrected by Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, who stated that Russia would only do so if Israel approved.⁸³ Yet, Israel’s intelligence community reported by 2010 that despite the 2008–2009 war with Israel, Hamas had amassed 5,000 rockets and modified some of these rockets that Hamas acquired from Iran. Israel concluded that Hamas has not only rearmed but is looking to extend the range of its missiles and fire multiple tubes from vehicles. Hamas has also acquired Russian SA-7 and SA-14 anti-air missiles as well as AT-3 and AT-5 anti-tank weapons, either from Iran or Syria. As a result, Israel’s military then assessed that war with Hamas was likely in 2010; but the war came instead in 2012.⁸⁴ It is inconceivable that Moscow did not know about these transfers to Hamas or Hezbollah.

Meanwhile, Hamas continues its terrorist operations and rocket attacks against Israel despite Russian urging to desist from this course.⁸⁵ But none of Hamas’ terrorism has changed Russia’s outlook on Palestinian unity or the need for Hamas to play a role in the peace process. Sponsoring Hamas helps ensure Russia’s presence and leverage in the peace process. Russia regards its contacts with Hamas as its “contribution” to peace talks and will continue pursuing them despite Hamas’ inflexibility on Israel.⁸⁶ When then-President Medvedev met in Damascus with Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal in 2010, he urged not just reconciliation with the PA but also that Israel engage with Hamas who should be part of the peace process.⁸⁷ And that stance remains in force today.

Israeli Ambassador Zvi Magen observed that what disturbs Russia about Hamas is not its attacks on Israel but its refusal to unite with the PA. Moscow clearly distinguishes between internal terrorists, whom Russia regards as its exclusively internal affair, and groups like Hamas that it wishes to cultivate. Therefore, and to safeguard its ability to maintain contacts with everyone, Moscow seeks to prevent further Hamas rocket attacks on Israel. But those rocket attacks are irrelevant to the issue of terrorism in its eyes.⁸⁸ Russia has advanced numerous reasons for inviting Hamas to Moscow and conducting an annual round of meetings with Foreign Minister Lavrov and its representatives. In 2006, after Hamas’ election victory, Putin said that Hamas was the winner in a democratic election that Moscow must respect; the Russian president added that Moscow never recognized Hamas as a terrorist movement and that Russia tries to work with all sides.⁸⁹ More accurately, Putin saw in Hamas’ election win in 2005 an American defeat as well as an opportunity for Russia to make gains at the US’s expense.⁹⁰ So despite Lavrov’s consistent urging of Hamas to reconcile with the PA, adopt a more flexible tone with Israel, and desist from radical terrorist acts, those admonitions have gone nowhere.⁹¹

This instrumentalized outlook represents a consistent Russian policy.⁹² Former Ministry of Foreign Affairs official Andrei Kovalov wrote that, “When working on the staff of the Russian Security Council, in 1997, I encountered schemes by the special services to direct Islamic extremism and Islamic terrorism against Europe and the United States on the pretext that these phenomena were supposedly created by them and aimed against Russia.”⁹³ He also observed that under pressure of the Chechen threat in the 1990s, the security services and many officials were

unable to confront the realities of terrorism and concluded that the West exported Islamic terrorism into Russia to tear the country apart.⁹⁴ Therefore, suggesting that Russia export terrorism back to the West was not a stretch.

Conclusion

Russian foreign policy since Primakov contains both continuity and innovation. Primakov formulated the basic intellectual framework and threat assessment regarding terrorism. He and his successors also restored the anti-American and neo-Soviet outlook in Russia's overall national security policy. Elsewhere, this author has argued that Russian policy retains its Leninist imprint, particularly in its threat assessments and modus operandi.⁹⁵ That policy's evolution in the Middle East clearly shows the enduring Soviet-like if not Tsarist worldview that drives Russian foreign policy. And for the most part, except perhaps in Moscow's current quest to stabilize Syria, Russia's policy welcomes ongoing regional conflict.

As Niall Ferguson has written, "Russia, thanks to its own extensive energy reserves, is the only power that has no vested interest in stability in the Middle East."⁹⁶ Indeed, even in regard to Israel, with whom Russia conducts a thriving economic relationship, Moscow clearly believes that Israel's security and sovereignty are disposable, contingent realities and that it reserves to itself alone the right to determine who are the terrorists. In 1998, this author characterized Primakov's policy as one motivated by what Johann Wolfgang von Goethe called the spirit of eternal negation. Not only does Moscow count on unending strife, it can only succeed if that strife continues, whatever form it might take. Negation, not construction, is its real policy. Moreover, since Russian policy in the region is deemed to be essential to the domestic stability of the regime, whatever else Russia might be in the Middle East it is not, cannot, and will not be a partner for peace.

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