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Putin's Middle East Visit: Russia is Back

Ariel Cohen

Vladimir Putin's visit to Saudi Arabia on February 11 was the first ever for any Russian or Soviet leader. Putin also visited U.S. allies Jordan and Qatar. Coming from Munich, where Putin delivered his most bellicose anti-American speech, he further delineated a Russian Middle Eastern policy at odds with Washington's in an interview with Al-Jazeera. Putin reiterated Russia's opposition to the Iraq war and disputed the justice of Saddam's execution. He was also critical of U.S. democracy promotion in the Middle East, attributing the empowerment of Hamas and Hezbollah to January 2006 parliamentary elections promoted by Washington. At the same time, he justified Russia's refusal to recognize Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorist organizations due to their electoral victories.

Also during his visit to the Saudi capital, Putin stunned the world with an offer to sell Saudi Arabia "peaceful" nuclear reactors. In addition, he offered 150 T-90 tanks and other weapons. During his Middle East tour, the Russian president indicated Russia's willingness to sell helicopters, build rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) factories, provide sophisticated anti-aircraft systems (the Carapace (*Pantsyr*), TOR M1, and Strelets), and sell the Saudis expanded satellite launches and an opportunity to join the Russian satellite navigation system, GLONASS.

During his visit to Qatar, the third largest natural gas producer in the world, Putin said that Iran's proposal to form an OPEC-style cartel of gas producers was "an interesting idea"—after his minister had

dismissed it out of hand—and invited Saudi banks to open wholly-owned subsidiaries in Russia.

Putin summed up Russia's new foreign policy and Middle East policy as follows:

From the point of view of stability in this or that region or in the world in general, the balance of power is the main achievement of these past decades and indeed of the whole history of humanity. It is one of the most important conditions for maintaining global stability and security....

I do not understand why some of our partners [Europe and the U.S.]...see themselves as cleverer and more civilized and think that they have the right to impose their standards on others. The thing to remember is that standards that are imposed from the outside, including in the Middle East, rather than being a product of a society's natural internal development, lead to tragic consequences, and the best example of this is Iraq.

This *Realpolitik* was praised in Arab capitals, where the old Soviet anti-Western and anti-Israel stance is still remembered fondly. King Abdullah I of Saudi Arabia bestowed the King Faisal Award on

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Putin, calling him “a statesman, a man of peace, a man of justice”—quite a turnaround from the jihad against the Soviets funded by the Saudis 20 years ago during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. It is also worth noting that Saudi Arabia officially decries the 100,000 killed and 500,000 displaced Muslims in Chechnya, while private groups based in the Gulf support terrorists there.

At Odds with the West. A number of factors drive Putin’s recent rhetoric and actions in the Middle East. First, by embracing Middle Eastern monarchies and Islamist authoritarianism in Iran, he signals Russia’s ongoing movement away from Western norms of internal political behavior. This has important implications, as 2007 and 2008 are election years in Russia. Putin is loudly rejecting the American approach of democracy and human rights, which has stumbled and sputtered in the Middle East.

Second, Russia is following the Soviet model of opposing first the British and then the U.S. presence in the Middle East by playing to anti-Western sentiment in the “street” and among the elites. Putin’s Munich speech, his Al-Jazeera interview, and his press conferences in Jordan and Qatar solidified the Kremlin’s public diplomacy message, emphasizing its differences with Washington.

Third, the Russian leadership is concerned about high Muslim birthrates in Russia, especially as the Slavic Orthodox population is declining. Russia is facing an increasingly radicalized Muslim population along its southern “soft underbelly,” particularly in the North Caucasus, where two Chechen rebellions, even though they were effectively crushed, led to the spread of Salafi Islam. Many young Russian Muslims view themselves more as members of the global Islamic *Ummah* (community) than as citizens of Mother Russia. Keeping Muslim powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran at bay, preventing them from supporting insurgencies in Eurasia, and toning down radicalization are unspoken but important items on the Kremlin’s agenda.

Finally, Russia is a high cost oil producer, the largest oil producer in the world, the largest oil exporter outside of OPEC, and the largest gas producer. As such, it seeks to maintain high energy prices—usu-

ally generated by tensions and conflicts in the Middle East. Russia is perfectly willing to sell weapons to both sides of the growing Sunni-Shia divide. This was evidenced when it offered the same nuclear reactors and the same anti-aircraft systems to both Iran and to the Arab Gulf states, which are increasingly nervous about Iran’s growing military power and nuclear ambitions. As one Russian observer put it, weapons sales create allies. Russia is using weapons and nuclear reactors the way imperial Germany used railroads—to bolster influence and to undermine the dominant power in the Middle East.

What Can Washington Do? Clearly, the new Middle East—in which U.S. power and prestige are threatened in Iraq and where Moscow is challenging America’s superpower status—will be a more competitive and challenging environment. Today’s Middle East needs to be viewed with the realism and toughness that its history and culture require.

The U.S., as a status quo power in the Middle East, should bolster its relations with pro-Western regimes in the Gulf. While some weapons sales and business projects will inevitably take place, only by maintaining a security umbrella in the Gulf can the U.S. maintain more clout in the region than Russia.

The U.S. should continue dialogue with Moscow on issues of mutual concern, such as nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and destabilizing weapons sales. But more importantly, it should provide military assurances to Gulf countries against Iranian encroachment, which Russia is incapable of giving. It should expand cooperation in the fight against terrorism, which threatens the Middle Eastern monarchies. And it should be competitive in proposing cutting-edge economic ventures, an area in which Russia lacks expertise, while granting access to U.S. capital markets for development projects.

After a 20-year hiatus, Russia is forcing its way back through an open Middle East door. Washington decisionmakers had better take note.

—Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies and International Energy Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.