

# Moscow's New Twist

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Articles & Testimony

**P**resident Vladimir Putin's Russia has made its choice, and it is not one that gives Israel, the United States or Western Europe any cause for joy. The Kremlin has apparently adopted a strategy of engagement with the forces of Islam, and is staking out a new position between the Muslim world and the West. As Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov has put it: "Russia cannot and will not play the role of a frontline state in a new cold war."

In an exceptionally significant and unusual article on foreign policy that Lavrov published on March 3 in the weekly *Moskovkiye Novosti*, on the eve of his departure for talks in Washington, the foreign minister stated that "Russia will not allow anybody [to] set it at loggerheads with the Islamic world." Waving a cautionary finger at Western Europe, he added: "Nor is Europe likely to be ready for the role of a frontline region," suggesting that though the Western Europeans themselves may not yet fully realize it, "they have also become part of the Islamic world."

According to the unofficial Russian Foreign Ministry translation of his article, Lavrov describes Mother Russia as a "multifaith society," meaning that it is no longer an Orthodox Christian nation that contains Muslim minorities, but has evolved into a "multinational" country with a multicultural air. He goes on to explain that whether Western Europe likes it or not, it is likewise perceived in Moscow as a region in which Islamist forces have built up a degree of strength and momentum that should not be underestimated.

Russia is therefore planning on cooperating with the forces of Islam, engaging with them in dialogue, not conflict. Moscow is by no means seeking confrontation with the West, but will not bow to what Lavrov calls the "dogmatism" of President Bush, noting that "history offers many confirmations that madness can be collective." This new strategy requires some reinterpretation of history, leading Lavrov to lament the fact that his country allowed itself to be drawn into the maelstrom of World War I.

The Hamas leaders' visit to Moscow as invited guests, the Russian-Iranian negotiations over a compromise formula on the nuclear issue, and the supply of new anti-aircraft missiles to Syria just when international pressure on the Asad regime is at its peak -- all these are merely early expressions of a policy that is likely to become systematic and dynamic, suggesting not only a revised foreign policy, but first and foremost, a redefinition of domestic policy as well.

The link between home and abroad is personified by new Minister of Atomic Energy Sergey Kirienko, a former prime minister and the son of a Jewish father, who in recent years has been preaching in favor of integrating the indigenous Muslim population into the Russian political elite. Kirienko and his circle of intellectuals consider that the greatest danger to the Russian Federation emanates from the Muslim republics of the Upper Volga such as Tatarstan, Bashkiriya, Chuvashiya and Mordovia. If they develop separatist tendencies, like those that sparked the civil war in Chechnya and threat to spread to several other Muslim republics of the Caucasus, then, they believe, the whole of Russia will be in danger of splitting in two.

Therefore, they argue, Russia's salvation and renaissance will depend on close cooperation with none other than the local Muslim forces, whose numbers are in any case rising sharply. Some Russian opinionmakers and politicians,

including several of Jewish descent, are openly talking about such an alliance, and even about the "dynamism" that Islamists could contribute to the Russian elite.

The theory is that by actively courting the Muslims deep in Russian territory, Moscow will be able to prevent them from slipping into the arms of al-Qaeda or other extremist political theologies of the Wahhabist strain. And, the theory goes, by generously courting Islamist forces across the borders, Moscow will be able to contain the Muslim rebellion in the Caucasus and deprive it of outside assistance.

Indeed, it was amazing to see how quickly the Chechen warlords vented their fury at the Hamas leaders who came to Moscow. The long years of Hamas propaganda in support of Shamil Bassayev, "Khatab" and their colleagues were forgotten in an instant, and Khaled Mashal and his friends were portrayed as having stuck a knife in the back of their brothers-in-faith.

From Iran, the Russians expect a payback for their containment of Azerbaijan, in the form of coordination regarding the oil and gas wealth of the Caspian Basin, and of course the suffocation of the Chechen revolt. Even radical Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is ready for such a deal.

Russia is maneuvering itself into its new position. Lavrov defines this posture as serving as a "bridge" between the West and Islam, in an effort to prevent a clash of civilizations. In less diplomatic speak, that translates as Russia preferring to cozy up to the forces of Islam at the expense of its relations with the United States.

Putin, for his part, will continue to talk by phone with Ehud Olmert, but only after the heads of Hamas have been photographed in Moscow from every possible angle. And when it comes to the Kremlin's ladder of priorities, relations with Israel are sliding down to the bottom rung. Israel is now paying for its long years of neglect of Russia, for selecting the wrong officials to handle its relations with Moscow, and for ignoring the fact that even a weak Russia is a giant in our neighborhood.

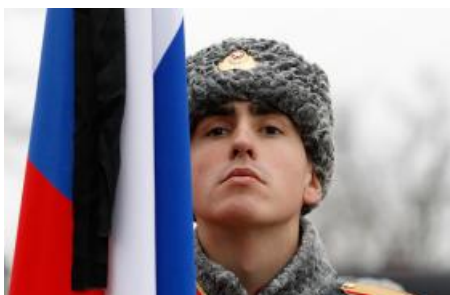
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