

Russia Resurgent?

Moscow and the Middle East

Dec 27, 2000



Brief Analysis

On December 18, 2000, Eugene Rumer, author of [Dangerous Drift: Russia's Middle East Policy](#) ([templateC04.php?CID=42](#)) (The Washington Institute, 2000), and Shlomo Avineri, director of the Institute for European Studies at Hebrew University, addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

EUGENE RUMER

The economic, social, and military condition in Russia today precludes it from playing a significant role in the Middle East for some time to come. At \$400 billion, Russia's gross national product (GNP) matches that of the Netherlands, although its population is far greater. President Vladimir Putin's hopes that Russia could resume its active military presence in the Mediterranean were scrapped following the Kursk submarine disaster. It will take time before the Russian government's efforts to reform its domestic situation materialize into changes in its international stature.

Russia's policy in the Middle East is not based on a coherent long-term strategy. Apart from the sale of weapons, Russia has little else to offer the region — such as the modern technology or foreign aid that other nations commonly use to increase their influence in the Middle East. Despite the end of the Cold War, the Russians continue to forge a policy aimed at resisting American dominance in the region. The Russian government also puts a high priority on projecting an image of its global influence to its people. Despite declining influence in the Middle East, Russian-Israeli relations are still a special situation. Yet, that relationship is one that is driven more by Israeli interest in Russia than by any specific Russian strategy. Since one in every six Israelis is of Russian descent, Israel has consistently attempted to maintain a stable working relationship with Moscow.

Indeed, the Russian government is a passenger rather than a driver of the country's international relations. Within the government, powerful domestic lobbies prescribe the foreign agenda. Russia's engagement with Iran is one example of this phenomenon. As an oil producing country, Russia is hurt by an increase in oil production elsewhere. Yet, it yielded to pressure from Russian oil companies to invest in Iran.

Russia has not been responsive to U.S. pressure with regards to exporting military technology. Imposing sanctions on Russia as part of arms control policies would be useless and counterproductive. Since financial gain is the primary motivation behind the flow of scientists and technology to Iran and elsewhere, the United States could reduce this flow by hiring Russian scientists to work in the American technology sector.

SHLOMO AVINERI

For much of the last century, a strong Soviet Union has had very little interest in Middle East peace. Today, however, Russia's international position is weak and inactive, and Moscow is supportive of efforts to promote stability. Russia has not hampered the peace process, and is no longer considered an adversary of Israel in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The recent violence in the Middle East has been met by a passive Russian reaction, compared with the harsh

criticism that emerged from European leaders at the Nice Summit. Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat's recent trip to Moscow was a disappointment to the Palestinians, as President Putin reiterated the need for any declaration of Palestinian statehood to take place within the framework of an agreement with Israel, rather than unilaterally.

Russian policy in the Middle East can be divided into four aspects:

- 1) Israel is the strongest regional power, and the Russians gain very little strategically through enmity with Israel. After all, hostile forces surround Russia, and they can ill afford to be at odds with Israel. Russia can no longer conduct its foreign policy under a banner of ideology like it did throughout the Soviet era. With respect to the peace process, Moscow insists on restarting the talks, and feels that their involvement could prove useful, despite Russia's declining influence in the region.
- 2) The Russian government wants to maintain links with the Russian immigrant population in Israel. The three ethnic parties in Israeli politics often play a key role in Israeli elections. In addition, these groups maintain strong sympathies towards their Russian ancestry. They can therefore provide Russia with a diplomatic lever within the Israeli political system.
- 3) Russia recognizes Israel's distinction in the technology sector and believes that there is potential for technological cooperation between the two nations. Russia has already started a joint venture with Israel in the development of advanced military helicopters.
- 4) Islamic fundamentalism is a problem that plagues both Russia and Israel. However, each country has valid reasons for not cooperating with the other on this problem. Israel does not want to upset the United States by assisting the Russians with the Chechen problem. Consequently, Prime Minister Ehud Barak maintains that despite shared concerns over fundamentalism and terrorism, Chechnya is still a Russian internal matter that Israel would prefer to keep its distance from. Also, Russia's standing with Muslim-majority countries could be damaged if it were to work closely with Israel on issues emerging from Islamic fundamentalism. Since working together on this issue would compromise both countries' interests, cooperation is likely to remain limited in the near future.

Russia is presently considering selling arms to Syria. However, substantial arms transfers like those that took place in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are unlikely to occur, since purchases can only be funded through Saudi Arabia. Despite harsh rhetoric toward the Americans recently, the Saudis can ill afford to upset Washington by funding such transfers. Even if Syria were to purchase new arms, such a move could not be conceived as a prelude to confrontation with the Israelis. Like his father, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad treads carefully when it comes to his policy towards Israel.

More stringent diplomatic measures by the United States are not going to convince Russia to control nuclear proliferation to Iraq and Iran. Engaging Russia in serious dialogue and cooperation in the technology sector would ultimately prove more successful than retribution. If the U.S. hopes to stem nuclear technology to Iran and Iraq, it should develop a common approach with the European Union, rather than applying pressure directly upon the Russians.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ramin Seddiq.

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