

Russia Returns to the Middle East Scene?

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Brief Analysis

A good indicator of Russia's role in the Middle East is that Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak had no plans to return to Israel to be present for Boris Yeltsin's visit there even before Yeltsin stepped down as Russian president. The Israeli leader preferred to remain in the United States rather than greet the first ever visit by a Russian president to Israel, even though Russian immigrants constitute the largest bloc in the Israeli population.

Russia's Declining Role. Russia will not be a significant military player in the region in the foreseeable future. The past ten years have seen a dramatic decline in Russian superpower presence and influence in the Middle East and Persian Gulf. By contrast to the 1967 and 1973 wars in which the Soviets were able to put up a fairly credible naval presence in the region, Russia deployed a single intelligence gathering ship in the Mediterranean during the Kosovo campaign last spring. That action was wrongly seen as showing Russia's return to the eastern Mediterranean. In fact, it was a sign of how weak Russia had become.

Today, it is not so much that Russia has interests in the Middle East, as that the Middle East has interests in Russia. For Syria, Russia is a potential major supplier of weapons; if politics allow, Damascus may get a favorable deal on the package that has been pending since last summer. Israel today has an unprecedented interest in Russia with nearly one million Russian speakers--by far the largest Russophone diaspora outside the former Soviet Union--many of whom still maintain Russian citizenship, property in Russia, and contacts with relatives there.

Lack of a Strategic Purpose. There is no need to speculate about the return of Russia to the region as a strategic competitor. Russia is becoming a fairly marginal player whose influence stems largely from its permanent seat in the UN Security Council and its consequent ability to affect regional developments in the Persian Gulf. And although Russia's influence is also translated into the ability to sell weapons, Moscow is unlikely to return to the Middle East as a deliberate and aggressive country that proliferates conventional or weapons of mass destruction (WMD) technology.

Russia's chaotic domestic policymaking environment and the central government's inability to assert any strategic vision or sense of priority in effect allows powerful corporate, bureaucratic, and regional lobbies to pursue their own foreign policies without any central oversight by the federal government. Confusion prevails in the absence of a coherent Russian Middle East policy. Perhaps if acting Russian president Vladimir Putin is able to assert the power and authority of the central government, Russia will continue to become a more responsible player in the Middle East, acting with a greater sense of strategic vision.

Iran. There is not an animosity between Russia and Iran capable of generating the same fears that the United States has about Iran's pursuit of ballistic missiles and WMD. Russia is primarily concerned by what is most important to Russian security, e.g., developments in the Caspian, Caucasus, and Central Asian regions. In the Caspian, Iran and Russia have taken similar positions; in the Caucasus, Iran has purposely not criticized Russian policy regarding the war in Chechnya. In Central Asia, although Russia was wary of Iranian influence in the early 1990s, since 1997 both Russia and Iran have been fearing the influence of the Taliban and the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. Iran is a fairly benign country from Russia's standpoint and is not high on the list of Russian security priorities.

Turkey. The strategic competition between Russia and Turkey has disappeared. When Turkish prime minister Bulent Ecevit went to Moscow just as Russia was attacking the Chechen capital Grozny, he literally did not utter a single word in defense of the Chechens, which was seen as an important gesture and a remarkable statement about the prevalence of realpolitik motives in the two countries' perceptions of one another. Anyway, the main priorities in the Turkish-Russian relationship are trade, gas pipelines, and tourism--not strategic competition.

ROBERT FREEDMAN

Boris Yeltsin left after a bleak year for Russian diplomacy in general and Russian policy in the Middle East in particular. In 1999, Russia had to deal with the aftermath of the U.S.-British bombing of Iraq, which, despite extensive bombast, Russia was unable to prevent. Then came the allied bombing of Kosovo, about which again, despite loud warnings, Russia could do nothing. Escapades such as the dash of the Russian army units at the Pristina airport or Yeltsin's recent reminder while he was in China to President Clinton, "don't forget, we have nuclear weapons," only underlined the current marginalization of Russia in the world.

Turkey. In 1998, Russia seemed to have a schizophrenic policy toward Turkey. Gazprom and some Russian economic advisors were pushing the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline directly from Russia across the Black Sea bed to Turkey, a multi-billion dollar project that would make Russia the main supplier of natural gas to Turkey. Others, including former Russian prime minister Yevgeny Primakov (and echoed by Yeltsin), were taking a hard stance on the issue of shipping missiles to Cyprus--missiles which the Turks said they would destroy--and thus raising the prospect for confrontation. But as Russia's internal situation worsened after the 1998 economic collapse, the Russians decided to emphasize the trade factor more than the confrontational element toward Turkey.

Consequently, the Blue Stream gas pipeline has assumed prime importance. But Blue Stream now faces two major competitors: Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. The recent warming of relations between these two countries seems designed in good part to contain the competition and assure the prospects for Blue Stream.

As for the pipelines bringing oil from the Caspian to world markets, Russia has been unhappy about the Baku-Ceyhan line which would move from Azerbaijan through Georgia down to Turkey, bypassing Russia. Some, but not all, in the Russian government would oppose this pipeline so far as to undermine the governments of Azerbaijan and Georgia. In 1998-99, there were assassination attempts against the leaders of both countries, and some in the area suspected Russian involvement. Oligarchs and reformers alike, however, seem more interested in cooperation with, rather than opposition to, the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Iraq. The pattern of Russian policy toward Iraq over the last year was to minimize antagonization of the United States while at the same time maximizing residual Russian influence over Iraq. Russia has three basic interests in Iraq: first, business for Russian oil companies, pipeline companies, and other Russian business interests; second, obtaining the \$7 billion owed them by the Iraqis; and third, prestige--that is, demonstrating that Russia is still a player in the world.

One of Russia's goals was to replace the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) with a new body while forcing out UNSCOM's director. This was accomplished, with help from the French. But the bottom line so far is that Russia has not been able to persuade the United States to moderate its position on sanctions or to convince the Iraqis to accept the compromise agreement. This illustrates the limits and marginality of Russian influence in the region.

Syria. Russia's main interest is in making money by selling arms. The problem is that as long as Syria is on the U.S. terrorism list, the U.S. government is going to sanction any Russian companies that sell arms. It seems unlikely that there would be a major Russian arms deal to Syria in the face of U.S. sanctions: Russia does not need the money as badly now that the price of its main export (oil) is up, and Putin seems to want to maintain good relations with the

United States.

In any case, Russia does not have as strong an interest in its relations with Syria, with whom it is less involved, as it does in its relations with Iran, Turkey, or Iraq. That said, Russia would be willing to contribute troops to an international force on the Golan Heights, which might make Syria more willing to accept such a force.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Levent Onar.

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