

## Comparing Putin's and Brezhnev's Policies toward the Middle East

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**Abstract** This article compares Moscow's and Washington's foreign policies toward the Middle East in 1982 and 2008. In 1982, Moscow and Washington each had a distinct set of friends and foes. In 2008, Washington still has a distinct set of friends and foes, but Moscow has relatively good relations with all governments and most major opposition movements in the region—the only exceptions being Al Qaeda and its affiliates. It is argued that Putin's policy toward the Middle East is not really aimed at displacing the U.S. in the region, but protecting Russia and Russian interests from Al Qaeda and its allies. Indeed, a continued American presence in the region serves to protect Russian interests in the region.

**Keywords** Arab-Israeli region · Persian Gulf/Arabian Peninsula region · Brezhnev era · Cold War era · Al Qaeda

Putin and the Kremlin have made it clear that they seek to restore Russia as a great power. Indeed, they have sought to project the image of Russia as having already become a great power once again. Putin has also been highly critical of U.S. foreign policy and attempted to rally others against American "hegemony" and "unipolarity." The general impression that Moscow has recently given is that it wants to see American influence decrease and Russian influence

increase worldwide. Further, Moscow appears to have fully persuaded itself that this is what others want too.

But has Russia actually re-emerged as a great power? Is it even trying to do so? Is it really trying to reduce American influence too? While these might be its aims in other parts of the world, there is strong reason to doubt whether Moscow is trying to achieve them in the Middle East. For if these were its goals, the Putin administration has certainly not acted very effectively to achieve them. I will argue here that this is not because it has tried and failed to do so, but that Moscow not only has not tried but also does not want either to reduce American influence or act as the predominant great power in the Middle East.

This argument, I believe, can best be made through first comparing current Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East with Soviet foreign policy toward the region in the latter Brezhnev era—a time when the Soviet Union was arguably at its strongest and when it was unquestionably pursuing great power ambitions as well as challenging the U.S. for influence in the region. I will first compare the state of Moscow's and Washington's relations with governments and other important actors in the Middle East both in the late Brezhnev era and at present. For ease of exposition, I will do this separately for the Arab-Israeli region, the Persian Gulf/Arabian Peninsula region, and North Africa. Doing this will show that while Washington's relationship patterns in the Middle East are very similar now to what they were in the past, Moscow's have changed dramatically. What this dramatic change in Moscow's relations with Middle Eastern states and other actors says about current Russian foreign policy goals in the region will then be explored.

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## **Arab-Israeli Region**

The Arab-Israeli region consists of Egypt, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. In addition to the governments of these countries, major actors in the region have been the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)/Fatah (the organization was mainly referred to as the PLO during the late Cold War era and as Fatah now) and Hizballah. Hamas has emerged as an important actor in the post-Cold War era.

During the late Brezhnev era, the actors in this region that Moscow was on good terms with were ones that Washington was on bad terms with, and vice versa. Thus, while Washington was closely allied with Israel during this period, Moscow had hostile relations with it. Similarly, while Moscow was closely aligned with Syria and the PLO during this period, Washington had hostile relations with them. Egypt went from having close relations with Moscow and hostile ones with Washington in the Nasser and early Sadat years to having close relations with Washington and poor ones with Moscow in the later Sadat years and under Mubarak. In civil war-torn Lebanon, Moscow basically supported the policy of its ally Syria while Washington mainly (if not completely) supported the policy of its ally Israel. Jordan had civil but distant relations with Moscow; it was mainly allied with Washington during this period.

The same countries in the Arab-Israeli region that were aligned with the U.S. at the end of the Brezhnev era were also aligned with it in 2008: Israel, Egypt, and Jordan. Also as then, Washington now has bad relations with Syria and Hizballah. The U.S. now has good relations with the Lebanese government and other Lebanese groups opposed to Hizballah. Further, Washington now has reasonably good relations with Fatah—a change from the late Brezhnev era. But this is mainly because of the emergence of Hamas, which has adversarial relations not just with Israel and the U.S., but also with Fatah.

By contrast, Moscow in 2008 had either very good or reasonably good relations with all the major actors in the Arab-Israeli region. Moscow's closest ally there now, as before, is Syria. But Moscow also has reasonably good relations with Jordan (which Putin visited in 2007), Egypt (which he visited in 2005), and even Israel (which he also visited in 2005). While Israel is unhappy about Russian arms deliveries to Syria and its ties to Iran, these have not put a stop to the burgeoning Russian-Israeli trade relationship or their cooperation in the security realm. In addition, while the Putin administration has maintained close ties with Fatah, it has also sought good relations with Hamas after the latter's victory in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections. Two high-level Hamas delegations have now visited Moscow (though neither met with Putin). In Lebanon, Moscow has sought good relations with the Lebanese government, but also with Syria's ally Hizballah.

By 2008, in short, Washington has both allies and adversaries in the Arab-Israeli arena, but Moscow is friends with everyone there.

## **The Persian Gulf/Arabian Peninsula Region**

This region consists of Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Yemen. In the late Brezhnev era, there were still two Yemens: North and South. They joined together in 1990 and, except for an abortive secessionist effort in 1994, have remained united ever since.

In the late Brezhnev era, most of the countries in this region that Moscow had good relations with were ones that Washington had bad relations with, and vice versa. Moscow then was closely allied with Saddam Hussein's Iraq and with Marxist South Yemen—both of which the U.S. had hostile relations with. By contrast, Moscow did not even have diplomatic relations with five of the Gulf monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman) with which Washington had close ties to.

Three states in the Persian Gulf/Arabian Peninsula region, however, did not fit into this friend of one/adversary to the other pattern. Kuwait maintained good relations with both Washington and Moscow. By the end of the Brezhnev era, North Yemen also had good relations with both Washington and Moscow—and was receiving assistance from both. Iran under the Shah had friendly relations with the U.S. and poor relations with the USSR. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, though, Iran had hostile relations both with Washington and with Moscow.

In 2008, Washington continued to have friendly relations with the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman) and also with Yemen. Washington also continued to have hostile relations with Iran. The major change in Washington's relationships in this region was with Iraq. While the U.S. had poor relations with Iraq's Saddam Hussein at the end of the Brezhnev era (then good relations in the latter part of the 1980's, and then poor ones again after the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait), the U.S. and its allies overthrew his regime in 2003 and have occupied Iraq ever since. It is the U.S. that primarily maintains the Iraqi government now in place there. The U.S., of course, also faces many adversaries inside Iraq.

Like Washington, Moscow enjoyed good relations with all the GCC states plus Yemen in 2008. (Moscow's ties to Qatar turned rocky in 2004 when Doha convicted two Russian agents for the assassination of a Chechen rebel living there, but Putin managed to smooth things over fairly quickly afterward.) Unlike Washington, Moscow had close ties with Iran in 2008. Though not without differences with it, Moscow continued to sell weapons and nuclear know-how to Tehran as

well as act with Beijing to shield it from the harsher sanctions that the U.S. wanted the Security Council to impose over Iran's non-compliance with the United Nations Security Council on the nuclear issue. And while Putin opposed the U.S.-led intervention that deposed Russia's ally, Saddam Hussein, and resulted in an American military occupation, Moscow now also has reasonably good relations with the American-backed Iraqi government—from which it hopes to receive oil concessions (including ones that the Saddam regime agreed to but the post-Saddam one has not yet confirmed). Russia has also stayed out of the fighting in Iraq.

As in the Arab-Israeli region, Washington now has both allies and adversaries in the Persian Gulf/Arabian Peninsula region. Moscow, though, is friends with all governments there.

### **North Africa**

This region consists of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Sudan. (Egypt is also in North Africa, but is considered part of the Arab-Israeli region here.) At the end of the Brezhnev era, Moscow had close ties to Libya while Washington had hostile relations with it. By contrast, Moscow had poor relations with the Arab nationalist regime then ruling Sudan while Washington had relatively good relations with it. Moscow had strong ties with Algeria and cooler ones with its neighbors, Morocco and Tunisia. Washington, by contrast, had close ties with Morocco and Tunisia and cooler ones with Algeria. Washington's relations with Algeria, though, were somewhat cooperative as were Moscow's with Morocco and Tunisia. The Cold War was not as intense in the Maghreb as it was elsewhere in the Middle East.

In 2008, Washington had good relations with Morocco and Tunisia. It also enjoyed good, albeit somewhat prickly, relations with Algeria. Libyan-American relations had also improved dramatically by this time. American relations with the Islamist regime in Sudan, though, were poor because of the latter's actions in its western Darfur region.

In 2008, Moscow also had good relations with all five of these governments. Putin visited Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia in 2006. Moscow's ties to Libya remained strong. While the West (including the U.S.) was highly critical of Sudanese government actions regarding Darfur, this was not an issue for Moscow, which actually sold arms to Khartoum. North Africa, then, is also a region in which Moscow now has good relations with all governments.

### **Al Qaeda (Plus Antecedents and Current Affiliates)**

Al Qaeda had not yet come into existence at the end of the Brezhnev era. Moscow, though, was then at war with its antecedents, the mujahideen, in Afghanistan at that time.

Washington provided aid to the mujahideen, as did Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and many other Muslim and non-Muslim governments. Radicalized Muslims from many countries, including Osama bin Laden from Saudi Arabia, also helped the Afghan mujahideen then. While both bin Laden and the U.S. government have denied any direct contact with each other, they were on the same side opposed to Moscow during that period.

Bin Laden left Afghanistan just about when Soviet forces did. From the time of the American military build-up in Saudi Arabia following the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, bin Laden would become America's implacable enemy. Washington, though, did not fully focus on bin Laden until 9/11, shortly after which America would lead an invasion of Afghanistan (where bin Laden had been based) and conduct a worldwide "War on Terror" against Al Qaeda and its many affiliates.

Putin firmly associated Russia with the American War on Terror after 9/11. He claimed that Moscow was fighting the same enemy in Chechnya as the U.S. was fighting in Afghanistan. While Russian-American relations have deteriorated since then, there has not been any corresponding improvement in Russian relations with Al Qaeda. Indeed, one of Al Qaeda's affiliates—Al Qaeda in Iraq—kidnapped and executed five Russian diplomats based in Baghdad in June 2006.

Al Qaeda and its affiliates, then, are the one set of Middle Eastern actors that Russia does not have good relations with. In this, however, Russia is similar to every other government. Except for the Taliban during the years it ruled Afghanistan (1996-2001), no government has had good relations with Al Qaeda.

### **Implications and Prospects**

In 1982, Moscow and Washington each had a distinct set of allies and adversaries throughout the Middle East. Very few countries were either allied to both or were adversaries with both. Of course, different years in the Cold War would have shown different alliance/adversary relationships with the U.S. and USSR than in 1982, but at any given point during this period each Middle Eastern country was usually an ally of one and an adversary of the other.

In 2008, Washington still had a distinct set of allies and a distinct set of adversaries. Indeed, its allies and adversaries in 2008 were mostly (though not completely) the same as they were in 1982. By contrast, while Moscow had both allies and adversaries in the Middle East in 1982, it had friendly relations with every government and almost every major opposition movement there in 2008. The only exceptions were Al Qaeda and its affiliates.

What does this say about Putin's foreign policy toward the Middle East? In one sense, it appears to be far more successful

than Brezhnev's in 1982—or Soviet foreign policy toward the Middle East at any time during the Cold War. It is, after all, more advantageous to be friends with virtually everyone (except the one party—Al Qaeda—that virtually nobody else is friends with) than to be friends with only some states in the region and adversaries with the others.

In addition, the friendlier ties that Moscow has developed with America's Middle Eastern allies raise the prospect of Russia gaining influence with them at America's expense. Moscow's now having friendly relations with nearly all Middle Eastern governments while Washington does not may put Russia in a better position than the U.S. to serve as a mediator for the Middle East's many disputes—just like the U.S. was regarded by most Arab states as the primary mediator between them and Israel after Moscow broke relations with the Jewish state in 1967.

Despite these bright prospects, Russia is not in a position to replace the U.S. as the predominant great power in the region. For while Moscow may have better relations with more governments there than the U.S. does, not one of them can count on Russia to defend it if attacked—not even the anti-American ones. This also explains why there is no real possibility for Moscow to replace Washington as the primary ally of those Middle Eastern states that are closely aligned with the U.S. For no matter how frustrated they may be with American foreign policy, their security would not be enhanced by trading their alliances with Washington for ones with Moscow. Nor do any anti-American regimes in the Middle East have any illusions that Moscow will protect them either.

It is not clear, though, that Putin is even trying to displace the U.S. as the predominant power in the Middle East. For while Moscow has joined many of Washington's Middle East allies in complaining about American foreign policy and Russian firms have sought to gain commercial advantages (especially in the petroleum sector) in these countries, it does not appear to be in Russia's interests to disrupt these countries' alliances with the U.S. Indeed, the continuation of their alliances with the U.S. serves to protect Russia's growing investments in these countries. A disruption of America's alliance with any of them, by contrast, either risks or could occur as a result of the rise to power of a new regime hostile not just to America, but to Russia as well.

Indeed, this is the kernel of the foreign policy problem Moscow now faces in the Middle East: the decline of American influence there may actually hurt Russian interests in the region, not help them. Even with its heavy military presence in the region at present, the U.S. is clearly having difficulties containing Al Qaeda and its affiliates. These Islamic extremist forces would undoubtedly be even less contained if, for example, America withdrew from Iraq. One Russian analyst noted how such a move in particular would have negative consequences for Moscow:

Better the current puppet government in Baghdad than Al Qaeda, which would almost certainly gain control over several Iraqi provinces once the Americans were to 'distance themselves.'" Then die-hard 'jihadists' would pour into Iraq from other regions, including the North Caucasus. Training camps would be set up there, somewhere in the vicinity of Tikrit. And the jihadists would start dashing back and forth like shuttle merchants—off to Russia to blow something up, then back to Iraq for R&R. And they would feel perfectly secure in doing so. Because the local field commander—an emissary of bin Laden—would never surrender them to Moscow....[I]f the U.S. leaves Iraq, the load of dirty work will increase for many countries. So it would be better if the Americans would just stay put. (Maksim Yusin, "Now that the Americans Are There, They Should Stay," *Izvestia*, March 13, 2007, p. 5. *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, 59:11, April 11, 2007, p. 14).

What this reflects is a Russian sense that Al Qaeda and its affiliates have not forgotten about Chechnya or their other differences with Moscow, and that they might well target Russian interests—or even Russia itself—if America left Iraq. Nor is Russia eager to take up the fight against Al Qaeda from America.

That being the case, Putin's policy of befriending virtually everyone in the Middle East can be understood as directed more against Al Qaeda and its affiliates than against the U.S. For despite all their differences with one another, all existing Middle Eastern governments have reason to fear Al Qaeda. Even radical opposition movements such as Hamas and Hizbollah have had their differences with it. It also makes sense for Moscow to want the U.S. to stay in the region both to undertake the main burden of fighting against Al Qaeda and its affiliates and to deflect their attention away from Russia.

While Putin insists that Russia is once again a great power, he is not seeking to displace America in the Middle East as Brezhnev did during the Cold War. Putin's policy in this region is not so much that of a great power, but of a prudent one instead.

Mark N. Katz is professor of government and politics at George Mason University. He has been writing about Soviet and Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East for over a quarter of a century. His recent works on this subject include: "Playing the Angles: Russian Diplomacy Before and During the War in Iraq," *Middle East Policy*, Fall 2003; "Putin's Pro-Israel Policy," *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2005; "Putin's Foreign Policy toward Syria," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, March 2006; "Putin, Ahmadinejad and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis," *Middle East Policy*, Winter 2006; and "Russia and Algeria: Partners or Competitors?" *Middle East Policy*, Winter 2007.