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## Russia's Greater Middle East Policy: Securing Economic Interests, Courting Islam

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**Mark N. Katz**

*April 2010*



Russia/NIS Center

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**ISBN: 978-2-86592-691-6**

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# Contents

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**SUMMARY ..... 4**

**INTRODUCTION ..... 5**

**GREATER MIDDLE EAST: DOES THE CONCEPT MAKE SENSE? ..... 6**

**THE ARAB-ISRAELI ARENA: EVERYONE’S FRIEND, RUSSIA ..... 8**

**TURKEY, SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAQ: SECURITY CONCERNS, ENERGY COOPERATION..... 11**

**Turkey: pipelines and the South Caucasus ..... 11**

**Saudi Arabia: Russia’s new friend? ..... 12**

**Iraq: oil and Al Qaeda..... 13**

**IRAN: MOSCOW’S COMPLEX STRATEGY ..... 16**

**AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN: BEYOND THE TRAUMA ..... 18**

**GAS PRODUCERS: IN SEARCH OF DEEPER COOPERATION ..... 20**

**MOSCOW’S GREATER MIDDLE EAST POLICY: HOW SUCCESSFUL? ..... 23**

## Summary

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Russia's foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East is not an aggressive, anti-Western one, but a defensive policy aimed more at protecting Russian economic interests, working with virtually any government that opposes Sunni radicalism, and preventing Moscow from becoming a target of Muslim anger as occurred during the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1979-1989) and Chechnya (since 1994).

## Introduction

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Russia's relations with the US and with several European countries have grown increasingly contentious since Vladimir Putin first rose to power a decade ago. There have been several issues that have divided Russia on the one hand and the US and many European governments on the other, including: NATO expansion, Kosovo, Ukraine, Georgia, Russian gas policy, US plans to deploy ballistic missile defense in Eastern Europe, and the state of democracy and human rights in Russia. In the Middle East, Western governments have found Russian foreign policy to be worrisome in several respects. This list includes its close ties to Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah as well as its potential to organize a gas cartel along with Algeria, Libya, Qatar, and Iran. Russian firms also actively compete with Western ones for contracts in the petroleum, military, and other spheres in traditionally conservative, pro-Western states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

It would be easy, then, to see Moscow's policy toward the Middle East as part and parcel of its broader foreign policy that is competitive with and often hostile toward the West.<sup>1</sup> This, however, would be a mistake. Whatever its differences with the West elsewhere, a close examination of Russia's foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East shows that it is not aggressive and anti-Western, but a defensive policy aimed at protecting Russian economic interests, working with virtually any government that opposes Sunni radicalism, and preventing Moscow from becoming a target of Muslim anger as occurred during the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1979-1989).

This paper will discuss the Kremlin's policy toward the major countries and issues of the Greater Middle East region.<sup>2</sup> The conclusion will examine how successful Russian foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East has been since the rise of Putin as well as how successful it is likely to be in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> For a serious argument about how Russia sees itself in competition with the US for influence in Europe, see R.D. Asmus, "Russia's 'Sphere' in Europe," *Washington Post*, 26 December 2009, <[www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/25/AR2009122501286.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/25/AR2009122501286.html)>.

<sup>2</sup> The Arab-Israeli arena, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the region's major gas exporters (Algeria, Libya, Qatar, and—potentially—Iran).

## Greater Middle East: Does the Concept Make Sense?

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The concept “Greater Middle East” was popularized by former US President George W. Bush, who saw authoritarianism as something that encouraged radical Islamism in the region, and regarded the fostering of democratization as an antidote to this.<sup>3</sup> The increasingly authoritarian Putin regime, however, did not share the Bush Administration’s goal of spreading democracy in the Greater Middle East. Indeed, Russian leaders sometimes expressed doubt that this was actually Washington’s goal. In February 2007, for example, President Putin drew attention to the contradiction between US calls for increased democracy in the Greater Middle East while refusing to recognize Hamas’s victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections.<sup>4</sup>

For the most part, the phrase “Greater Middle East” in Russian foreign policy discourse has not been used to address Moscow’s policy toward this region, but for discussing—usually critically—Washington’s. By contrast, the Russian foreign policy discourse typically discusses Moscow’s relations with the Middle East (and other regions) on a country-by-country basis. Nevertheless, it still makes sense to talk about Russian foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East for two reasons.

First, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 has opened Muslim regions of the former USSR to influences from the wider Muslim world from which they had been largely insulated under Soviet rule. Independent of the question of democratization or American foreign policy, these Muslim regions of the former USSR—and Russian Muslims generally—are now influenced by trends in the Greater Middle East. As Dmitry Trenin and Aleksey Malashenko from the Moscow Carnegie Center put it, “The principal challenge for Moscow is stabilizing the still weak post-Soviet states, while finding an acceptable *modus vivendi* with the increasingly turbulent Muslim world beyond the former Soviet territory. Other factors complicate

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Bush declared: “We have set out to encourage reform and democracy in the Greater Middle East as the alternatives to fanaticism, resentment, and terror.” “President Bush Reaffirms Resolve to War on Terror, Iraq and Afghanistan,” 19 March 2004, <<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/03/20040319-3.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> “Putin Opposed to Pitting Fatah, Hamas against One Another,” Interfax, 10 February 2007.

Russia's task, from the 2003 Iraq war and its effects, to the Israeli-Palestinian situation, to the developments in and around Iran."<sup>5</sup>

Second, even when Russian foreign policy discourse focuses on Moscow's bilateral relations with particular countries, it often refers to the common threat of Islamic radicalism: a concern that Moscow shares with the various governments of the region. Sometimes, it explicitly discusses how Islamic radical elements in the Greater Middle East affect the Northern Caucasus or Central Asia.

Irrespective, then, of how the Bush Administration or anyone else has made use of the term, the Greater Middle East is a highly salient concept for Russian foreign policy.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> D. Trenin and A. Malashenko, *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia*, Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004, p. 165.

<sup>6</sup> For a pre-9/11 discussion of how Moscow's policy toward the Caucasus, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, Israel, and the Arab countries were all related, see M.N. Katz, "Post-Soviet Russian Foreign Policy toward the Middle East," *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1996, p. 229-246.

## The Arab-Israeli Arena: Everyone's Friend, Russia

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The US and Israeli governments are concerned about the revival of Russian-Syrian military ties since Putin's rise to power, and about the development of friendly relations between Moscow and the militant Islamist movements, Hamas and Hezbollah. But Russia also has developed reasonably good relations with Jordan (which Putin visited in 2007), Egypt (visit in 2005), the Lebanese government, Fatah—Hamas's secular Palestinian rival—and even Israel (visited in 2005 and has pledged to return in 2010).<sup>7</sup>

The evolution of close ties between Russia and Israel over the past decade has been a somewhat surprising development considering Russia's traditionally pro-Arab stance. There are, however, several reasons why the Kremlin now values close relations with Israel: the growing Russian-Israeli trade relationship (rising from 867 million US dollars in 1995 to 2.769 billion US dollars in 2008),<sup>8</sup> Israeli security assistance to Russia,<sup>9</sup> and the addition of Israeli technology to Russian arms exports. Furthermore, with over a million Russian-speakers now living in Israel, Russia and Israel have developed close cultural contacts—which the Israeli government sought to increase in 2008 when it ended visa requirements for Russian tourists.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Israel received 356,000 visitors from

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<sup>7</sup> For a positive assessment of Russian-Israeli relations (which also acknowledges their differences) that appeared in the journal published by the Russian Foreign Ministry, see V. Vorobiev, "The Herzliya Conference in Jerusalem," *International Affairs* (Moscow), Vol. 54, No. 4, 2008, p. 76-86.

<sup>8</sup> "Foreign Trade of the Russian Federation with Far Abroad Countries," Russian Federal State Statistics Service, <[www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b09\\_12/lssWWW.exe/stg/d02/26-05.htm](http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b09_12/lssWWW.exe/stg/d02/26-05.htm)>. By contrast, Russian trade with the entire Arab world was reported to be \$8 billion in 2009; A. Ferris-Rotman, "Russia Courts Arab Investment, Lures Trade," Reuters, 4 June 2009, <[www.reuters.com/article/idUSL467450920090604](http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL467450920090604)>.

<sup>9</sup> This assistance increased in 2009 when Israel agreed to sell \$50 million worth of unmanned aerial vehicles to Moscow. See "UAV Sale Marks a New Milestone in Russian-Israeli Defense Relations," *Defense Update*, 13 April 2009, <[http://defense-update.com/features/2009/april/israeli\\_russian\\_uav\\_130409.html](http://defense-update.com/features/2009/april/israeli_russian_uav_130409.html)>.

<sup>10</sup> "Tourism in Israel 2008," Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel, November 2009, <[www1.cbs.gov.il/www/statistical/touris2008e.pdf](http://www1.cbs.gov.il/www/statistical/touris2008e.pdf)>.

Russia in 2008. In October 2009, more Russians than Americans visited Israel for the first time (58,000 and 49,000, respectively).<sup>11</sup>

In short, Russia now has good relations with every major actor in the Arab-Israeli arena, both pro-Western and anti-Western. Israel, of course, is not happy that Moscow sells missiles to Syria,<sup>12</sup> that Damascus (the Israeli government believes) has provided (or could provide) some of these missiles to Hezbollah, or that Moscow has friendly relations with Hamas. But Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas, for their part, are unhappy with the close relations that have developed between Russia and Israel. Despite their animosity toward one another, neither Israel on the one hand nor Syria, Hezbollah, or Hamas on the other has broken or even distanced its relations with Moscow as a result of Russia's ties to its opponent(s).<sup>13</sup>

Being seen to be actively involved in the diplomacy of the Arab-Israeli peace process is also important to Russia since this helps bolster its claim to being a great power. Its engagement in this process may also be aimed at demonstrating to Muslims in Russia and elsewhere that Moscow is at least trying to resolve this problem. Realistically, though, Moscow has little chance of either coercing or convincing any of the various parties to make the concessions necessary for a peace agreement. And despite its verbal support for the Palestinian Authority, Moscow provides it with very little financial support compared to the EU, US or rich Arab countries.

Not only does Russia seem unable to lure America's allies in the Arab-Israeli region away from it, but Moscow seems uninterested in even attempting this. Finally, Moscow has made clear that it is not going to help anti-Western forces in the region confront pro-Western ones. Nevertheless, having good relations with all the important actors in the Arab-Israeli arena is highly important for Moscow. Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon all have secular governments that work to keep Islamist forces inside their countries contained. Fatah, the secular Palestinian movement, does this too. To the extent that they succeed in doing so, and thus prevent the rise of Islamist regimes that could support Islamist forces inside Russia and other former Soviet republics, Moscow benefits.

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<sup>11</sup> D. Sadeh, "Russia Surpasses US in Number of Tourists to Israel," 22 November 2009, <[www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3808089,00.html](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3808089,00.html)>.

<sup>12</sup> After strenuous Israeli objections, Putin in early 2005 turned down a Syrian request to buy "Iskander" missiles which, with a 280 km range, could have hit targets deep inside Israel. Moscow, though, did sell short-range "Igla" anti-aircraft missile systems to Syria that year. Since then, Syria has sought to purchase S-300s from Moscow; "Syria Profile: Missile Overview," Nuclear Threat Initiative, November 2008, <[www.nti.org/e\\_research/profiles/Syria/Missile/index.html](http://www.nti.org/e_research/profiles/Syria/Missile/index.html)>. Moscow, though, has recently signed a contract with Syria for the new Pantsyr S1 anti-aircraft missile system; "Russia Supplies Pantsyr S1 to UAE, Signs Contract with Syria," Interfax, 16 November 2009.

<sup>13</sup> R. Oliphant, "Middle Eastern Promise," Russia Profile, 10 December 2009.

Hamas and Hezbollah, of course, are Islamist movements. Having amicable relations with them, however, serves important Russian interests. First, since Hamas and Hezbollah are widely popular among Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere. Second, while Hamas and Hezbollah are both Islamist movements, their objectives are limited to Palestine and Lebanon, respectively. They do not appear to be at all interested in the plight of Muslims in Russia. Indeed, the Kremlin has received Hamas delegations in Moscow while Hamas welcomed Russia's recognition of Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence in August 2008.<sup>14</sup> Finally, Moscow justifies its maintaining good relations with Hamas and Hezbollah on the basis of the electoral support these two groups have received.<sup>15</sup> Of course, Moscow's friendly relations with them also play an important role in keeping Chechnya and the North Caucasus off the agenda not only of these two important Islamist movements, but also of Muslim public opinion generally.

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<sup>14</sup> I. Simic, "Russian Recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia: New Political Reality," Pravda.ru, 29 August 2008, <[http://english.pravda.ru/opinion/columnists/29-08-2008/106242-South\\_Ossetia\\_Abkhazia-0](http://english.pravda.ru/opinion/columnists/29-08-2008/106242-South_Ossetia_Abkhazia-0)>.

<sup>15</sup> "Russia Maintaining Contacts with Hamas, Hezbollah," Interfax, 7 December 2006.

# Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iraq: Security Concerns, Energy Cooperation

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## *Turkey: pipelines and the South Caucasus*

Russo-Turkish relations went from being mutually suspicious politically but warm economically in the 1990's to mutually friendly politically and even warmer economically in the 2000's. The improvement in their relationship is due to several factors, including the reduction in each side's fear that the other posed a security threat, shared frustration about dealing with the US and EU, and increasingly convergent policies toward the South Caucasus.<sup>16</sup> This trend accelerated in 2009-2010.

Moscow especially values the growing Russian-Turkish trade relationship (which Putin himself in January 2010 described as being larger than Russian trade with either the US or the UK).<sup>17</sup> Russian-Turkish trade has grown from 2.2 billion US dollars in 1995 to a stunning 33.8 billion US dollars in 2008.<sup>18</sup>

During 2009, Turkey accelerated its pursuit of rapprochement with Armenia, despite the objections of Azerbaijan.<sup>19</sup> While Turkey has not recognized the independence of Abkhazia or South Ossetia, Turkish companies are reportedly conducting "quite active" trade with Abkhazia, and Ankara has allowed the Abkhaz president to visit Turkey—much to the dismay of Georgia. Turkey's efforts to improve relations with Armenia could lead to important economic relief for a government closely allied to Moscow. Further, Turkey's willingness to trade with Abkhazia is far more useful for bolstering that breakaway region than recognition by distant countries such as Nicaragua,

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<sup>16</sup> L. Yanik, "Allies or Partners? An Appraisal of Turkey's Ties to Russia, 1991-2007," *East European Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 3, September 2007, p. 349-370.

<sup>17</sup> "Russia's Trade with Turkey Bigger than with US and UK," Interfax, 13 January 2010.

<sup>18</sup> "Foreign Trade of the Russian Federation with Far Abroad Countries," Russian Federal State Statistics Service, <[www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b09\\_12/lssWWW.exe/stg/d02/26-05.htm](http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b09_12/lssWWW.exe/stg/d02/26-05.htm)>.

<sup>19</sup> Turkish sympathy for Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute led Turkey to close its border with Armenia in 1993. See S. Markedonov, "Azerbaijani-Turkish Relations: New Agenda," <[www.politcom.ru](http://www.politcom.ru)>, 29 October 2009.

Venezuela, or Nauru. Nor is Moscow displeased at the subsequent deterioration in Turkey's ties with US-backed Georgia.

Moscow also values Turkey—its secular military in particular—as a bulwark against Islamic extremism. Moscow, though, is not pushing Turkey to disengage from the US and EU, nor does it expect this to occur.<sup>20</sup>

## ***Saudi Arabia: Russia's new friend?***

Since 2003, Saudi-Russian relations have become friendlier than ever before. There has been a series of high profile visits between the two countries, including one by then Crown Prince Abdallah to Moscow in September 2003 and another by then President Putin to Riyadh in February 2007. The Kingdom has even hosted the Kremlin-appointed Chechen president, Ramzan Kadyrov, on several occasions. Further, LUKoil and some other Russian firms are now operating in Saudi Arabia. Saudi-Russian trade has grown from negligible levels before 1990 to 336.8 million Euros in 2008.<sup>21</sup> There have also been many reports that Riyadh may soon start buying weapons from Russia.<sup>22</sup>

This improvement in Saudi-Russian relations, though, was quite slow in coming. Despite superficially improved ties in the early 1990's, Saudi-Russian relations deteriorated again by the mid-1990's. Riyadh grew concerned about Russian arms sales to Tehran as well as support for its atomic energy program. For their part, Russian officials and commentators openly accused Riyadh of supporting the Chechen rebels and of seeking to spread "Wahabism" among Muslims in Russia and other former Soviet states. The two countries also had competing interests in the oil sphere: Russia sought to increase both its production and exports while Saudi Arabia wanted Russia to join the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and abide by the production limits set by it. The Saudis saw Russia as behaving like a "free rider"—benefiting from the boost to oil prices that Saudi/OPEC production limits engineered without limiting its own production.

By the time of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against the US, Saudi-Russian relations had grown very tense. President Putin's reaction to 9/11 was not only to seize this as an opportunity to

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<sup>20</sup> V. Dubnov, "The Turkish Safe Bet," <[www.gazeta.ru](http://www.gazeta.ru)>, 18 January 2010.

<sup>21</sup> J. Sfakianakis, "Saudi-Russian Trade Relations: The Energy Giants," SABB Notes, 20 November 2007, p. 2-3, <[www.sabb.com/Attachments/Publications/SABB-Saudi-Russian-Trade-Relations.pdf](http://www.sabb.com/Attachments/Publications/SABB-Saudi-Russian-Trade-Relations.pdf)>; and "EU Bilateral Trade with the World: Russia," EU DG Trade, 22 September 2009, p. 6, <[http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc\\_113440.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113440.pdf)>.

<sup>22</sup> M.N. Katz, "Saudi-Russian Relations since the Abdullah-Putin Summit," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Winter 2007, p. 152-157.

improve Russian-American relations, but to encourage Americans to see themselves as being in a common struggle with Russians against what Moscow portrayed as Saudi-backed Sunni terrorists. By 2003, though, both Russian-American and Saudi-American relations had deteriorated with the lead-up to and then the launching of the American-led intervention in Iraq that both Moscow and Riyadh opposed. It is in this context that Saudi-Russian relations improved over the course of 2003, culminating in the visit of Crown Prince Abdallah to Moscow.

A particularly important contribution to the improvement in the Saudi-Russian relationship was the switch made by Riyadh from criticizing to actually supporting Moscow's policy in Chechnya. Especially after the 2003 Al Qaeda-launched attacks inside Saudi Arabia, Moscow and Riyadh increasingly recognized each other as allies against a common enemy: radical Islamism. The dramatic rise in the price of oil throughout most of the 2000's also helped to ease Moscow-Riyadh tensions over Russian oil production levels.<sup>23</sup>

However, despite some talks on possible arm purchases, the Saudis have no illusions about Russia being able to replace America as the Kingdom's principal defender. Nor does Moscow appear to seek this role. Despite the sharp deterioration that has occurred in Russian-American relations, Moscow seems to recognize that the continuation of a close Saudi-American security relationship actually benefits Russia. Moscow simply is not in a position to defend the Kingdom, or Russia's growing economic interests in it. Further, Moscow recognizes that the most likely replacement for a government in Saudi Arabia that is closely allied to the US is not one that is closely allied to Russia, but a radical Islamist one as virulently hostile toward Russia as it is toward the West. Despite its differences with the US elsewhere, then, Moscow has a strong interest in the preservation of the *status quo* with regard to Saudi Arabia.

## ***Iraq: oil and Al Qaeda***

Russia—along with many other governments—objected strongly to the US-led intervention in Iraq. After the event—especially after it became clear that the US could not achieve its political and military goals easily—Moscow focused less on objecting to the American presence in Iraq and more on its commercial interests and on security concerns regarding Sunni radicals.

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<sup>23</sup> Oil prices fell sharply for several months from mid-2008, but then climbed back up again to a high enough level so that there has been no visible friction between Riyadh and Moscow over Russian production levels.

Although Moscow approved the UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions that were imposed on Iraq for invading Kuwait in 1990, Russian firms did much to help Saddam Hussein skirt these sanctions until the downfall of his regime. One of Moscow's motives for doing this was to curry favor with Saddam in order to give Russian firms an advantage over those from countries strictly abiding by the UNSC sanctions in obtaining contracts for developing Iraq's petroleum reserves. Many possible deals were discussed, but one was actually signed in 1997 by LUKOIL to develop the enormous West Qurna-2 field.

Saddam, though, cancelled this contract in late 2002 (it appears he found out that LUKOIL was seeking reassurance from the US that its contract would be honored after his downfall). Both LUKOIL and the Russian government claimed that this move was illegal and that the contract remained valid. Despite Moscow's repeated efforts (including the write-down of almost all Iraq's considerable Saddam-era debt), neither the American occupation authorities nor the post-Saddam Iraqi government would agree to honor LUKOIL's 1997 contract. In December 2009, however, LUKOIL (with Norway's Statoil as a minority partner) won a competitive bid to develop West Qurna-2—which is now believed to contain nearly thirteen billion barrels of oil (Gazprom Neft also won a contract to develop the Badra field with estimated reserves of two billion barrels).<sup>24</sup> Russia, then, has finally secured the stake that it has long sought in the Iraqi petroleum sector, and hopes to expand this.

Moscow's concerns about Sunni radicals in Iraq arose in June 2006 when jihadists linked to Al Qaeda in Iraq kidnapped five Russian citizens who worked at the Russian Embassy in Baghdad. They killed one immediately and threatened to kill the others unless Moscow withdrew its troops from Chechnya within 48 hours. They followed through on their threat when this did not occur. Even though Al Qaeda in Iraq was already fully occupied with fighting its various opponents (American and Coalition troops, Iraqi Shi'as, and even some Iraqi Sunnis), it was still concerned about the plight of the Chechens and took action against Russia on their behalf.<sup>25</sup> Some Russian commentators wondered whether Al Qaeda in Iraq and its allies would devote even more attention to Russia after an eventual American departure from Iraq.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, while Moscow opposed the American-led intervention, Russia has now become dependent on the American-backed

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<sup>24</sup> A. Anishyuk, "LUKoil Snaps Up Coveted Iraqi Field," *Moscow Times*, 14 December 2009, <[www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/lucoil-snaps-up-coveted-iraqi-field/391372.html](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/lucoil-snaps-up-coveted-iraqi-field/391372.html)>.

<sup>25</sup> M.N. Katz, "Russian Hostages in Iraq," *United Press International*, 24 June 2006, <[www.upi.com/Business\\_News/Security-Industry/2006/06/24/Policy-Watch-Russian-hostages-in-Iraq/UPI-94091151130780/](http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2006/06/24/Policy-Watch-Russian-hostages-in-Iraq/UPI-94091151130780/)>.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, M. Yusin, "Now that the Americans Are There, They Should Stay," *Izvestiya*, 13 March 2007, p. 5.

government in Baghdad to protect its economic interests in Iraq as well as to contain radical Sunni forces that might support Islamist opposition forces inside Russia. Russian companies are also quietly doing business in Iraqi Kurdistan, where Moscow has opened a consulate.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, even former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov publicly expressed concern in December 2009 about how the withdrawal of US troops would affect Iraq's stability.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Russia Is Arriving in Iraqi Kurdistan," *Vremya novostei*, 24 November 2007.

<sup>28</sup> "American Troop Withdrawal from Iraq Will Not Lead to Stabilization in that Country—Primakov," RIA Novosti, 31 December 2009.

## Iran: Moscow's Complex Strategy

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The US and the EU-3<sup>29</sup> are unhappy with Moscow (and Beijing) for not fully cooperating with them in imposing further UNSC sanctions against Tehran in response to Iran's non-compliance with demands for reassurance that it is not attempting to acquire nuclear weapons. Indeed, many in the West see Russian assistance to the Iranian atomic energy program and sales of missile technology as important contributions to Iran's potential to develop a nuclear arsenal. Moscow, though, has made clear that it does not want Iran to acquire such weapons, and has (along with Beijing) supported limited UNSC sanctions against Iran for not fully cooperating with the International Atomic Energy Agency's verification efforts.<sup>30</sup>

Moscow's motives with regard to Iran are quite complex. While Russia does not want Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, it does not wish to jeopardize the relatively good relationship that it now has with the Islamic Republic. Iran is an important customer for Russian weaponry, nuclear technology, and other items. Russian-Iranian trade has grown from 276 million US dollars in 1995 to 3.715 billion US dollars in 2008.<sup>31</sup> Russian firms have been able to make some investments in the Iranian petroleum sector, and are actively seeking to make more. Although ruled by a revolutionary, Islamic regime, Tehran has not supported the Chechen and other Muslim opposition groups in the North Caucasus.<sup>32</sup> Russia and Iran are both vulnerable to secession, and both opposed it up until the 2008 Russian-Georgian War when Moscow recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—a move that Tehran pointedly did not follow.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Britain, France and Germany.

<sup>30</sup> "Russia Concerned by Iran Nuclear Plans," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), 30 November 2009, <[www.rferl.org/content/Russia\\_Concerned\\_By\\_Iran\\_Nuclear\\_Plans/1891176.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Russia_Concerned_By_Iran_Nuclear_Plans/1891176.html)>, and "Powers Warn Iran of New Sanctions," RFE/RL, 10 December 2009, <[www.rferl.org/content/Russia\\_Renews\\_Support\\_For\\_Diplomatic\\_Solution\\_On\\_Iran\\_Nuclear\\_Program/1900774.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Russia_Renews_Support_For_Diplomatic_Solution_On_Iran_Nuclear_Program/1900774.html)>.

<sup>31</sup> "Foreign Trade of the Russian Federation with Far Abroad Countries," Russian Federal State Statistics Service, <[www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b09\\_12/lssWWW.exe/stg/d02/26-05.htm](http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b09_12/lssWWW.exe/stg/d02/26-05.htm)>.

<sup>32</sup> M. Malek, "Russia, Iran, and the Conflict in Chechnya," *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Winter 2008, p. 25-34, <[http://cria-online.org/2\\_4.html](http://cria-online.org/2_4.html)>.

<sup>33</sup> For a critical Iranian analysis of Russian policy in this instance, see "Russians Are the Big Losers of Georgia War," *Abrar*, (Tehran) 8 September 2008.

There are, of course, important differences between Russia and Iran. Russia, Iran, and the other Caspian littoral states (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan) have been unable to agree upon how to divide that inland sea ever since the breakup of the USSR. Tehran is unhappy that Moscow has yet to complete the Bushehr nuclear reactor (which they originally promised to do by 1999) or deliver the S-300 missile defense systems which Israel has so strongly objected to. Moscow, for its part, is unhappy that Tehran has not accepted Putin's various offers to enrich uranium for Iran and thereby resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis. Up to now, though, Moscow and Tehran have been able to maintain good relations despite these differences. Moscow, though, has noted the strong anti-Russian sentiment expressed by the "Green Movement" which disputes the Islamic regime's claim that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was re-elected on the first ballot in June 2009. Moscow, then, understands that its close relations with Iran are linked to the fate of Khamenei and Ahmadinejad.

Thus, when the US and EU governments ask Russia to join them in increasing pressure on Iran over the nuclear issue, Moscow is reluctant. This is not because it wants Tehran to obtain nuclear weapons, but because it fears alienating Tehran or pushing the Islamic regime to adopt more anti-Russian policies. A more hostile Iranian policy toward Russia could have highly negative consequences for Moscow, including: deterioration of the Russian-Iranian trade relationship, Tehran reassessing its reluctance to support Islamist movements in Russia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, and a nuclear Iran targeting Russia. Since there is a strong possibility that Iran might acquire nuclear weapons anyway, running the risk of alienating it may well seem pointless to Russia.

## Afghanistan and Pakistan: Beyond the Trauma

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With the establishment of Western military facilities in Central Asia shortly after 9/11 and the seeming success of the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan that quickly toppled the Taliban regime, Russian commentators soon became nervous that America was gaining influence in this region at Russia's expense. At Moscow's instigation, the 2005 summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization called for the US and its allies to set a date for departing from bases in Central Asia as the military activity in Afghanistan was declining.<sup>34</sup> As it subsequently became clear that the US and its allies were encountering increasing difficulties in Afghanistan, some Russians predicted that America and its allies could not do any better there than the USSR had between 1979 and 1989.<sup>35</sup>

By 2009, however, Moscow appeared increasingly fearful that the Obama Administration and America's European allies would sooner or later withdraw their forces from Afghanistan, thus leaving Russia alone to deal with the threat that a resurgent Taliban would pose to Central Asia and Russia. Thus, Moscow actually acted to facilitate the continuation of the US/NATO military presence in Afghanistan, agreeing to allow lethal and non-lethal material to be sent across Russia.<sup>36</sup> Russia's economic stake in Afghanistan has also grown, with bilateral trade rising from 30.9 million US dollars in 1995 to 187.8 million US dollars in 2008.<sup>37</sup>

While the Bush Administration had strongly promoted Hamid Karzai as president of Afghanistan and had close relations with him right up until Bush left office in January 2009, the Obama Administration has distanced itself from Karzai and made clear that it sees the high level of corruption in his regime as a major obstacle to the success of the US/NATO military effort in Afghanistan. As the

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<sup>34</sup> "SCO Calls for Deadline on US Presence in Central Asia," RFE/RL, 5 July 2005, <[www.rferl.org/content/article/1059693.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1059693.html)>.

<sup>35</sup> "Coalition Repeats Soviet Troops' Mistakes in Afghanistan," Interfax, 24 December 2009.

<sup>36</sup> A. Kuchins and T. Sanderson, *The Northern Distribution Network and Afghanistan: Geopolitical Challenges and Opportunities*, CSIS, January 2010, p. 2-7, <[http://csis.org/files/publication/091229\\_Kuchins\\_NDNandAfghan\\_Web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/091229_Kuchins_NDNandAfghan_Web.pdf)>.

<sup>37</sup> "Foreign Trade of the Russian Federation with Far Abroad Countries," Russian Federal State Statistics Service, <[www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b09\\_12/IssWWW.exe/stg/d02/26-05.htm](http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b09_12/IssWWW.exe/stg/d02/26-05.htm)>.

Karzai government's relations with Washington were deteriorating and doubts arose about whether US/NATO forces would remain after mid-2011, Moscow expressed its support for Karzai and its willingness to work with him.<sup>38</sup> Corruption, apparently, is not an obstacle to good relations as far as the Kremlin is concerned. Thus, while Moscow supports the US/NATO position in Afghanistan, it also seeks to differentiate Russia from the West in ways that Moscow hopes will please the Karzai government. According to a report published by *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* in January 2009, this is already happening.<sup>39</sup>

Moscow has long had antagonistic relations with Pakistan. During the cold war, sources of tension between the two countries included Pakistan's close relations with both the US and China; the Soviet Union's close relations with Pakistan's main rival, India; and Pakistan's support for the Afghan mujahedeen fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan. After most outside powers, including the US and those European nations which had helped the mujahedeen, lost interest in Afghanistan following the Soviet troop withdrawal, Pakistan remained engaged in Afghanistan and provided support for the Taliban—something that Moscow found threatening. Indeed, Russia supported anti-Taliban forces in northern Afghanistan long before the US and NATO did after 9/11.

Shortly after 9/11, Pakistan formally cut ties with the Taliban and supported US/NATO operations in Afghanistan. However, Moscow remained uneasy about the continued Taliban presence in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's apparent inability—or unwillingness—to defeat it. Since the rise of Putin, however, Russian-Pakistani relations have improved.<sup>40</sup> This partly seems to be a reaction to the improvement in Indian-American relations—something which neither Moscow nor Islamabad has been pleased with. Under Putin, Russia has also sold arms to Pakistan. Trade between the two countries has risen from 47.6 million US dollars in 1995 to 615 million US dollars in 2008. In addition to commercial motives, Moscow appears to be selling arms to and pursuing friendly relations with Pakistan to give Islamabad a stake in maintaining good relations with Russia—and thus an interest in restraining Taliban behavior that is directly harmful to Moscow's interests.

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<sup>38</sup> Russia's Ambassador to Afghanistan stated in December 2009, "Many of your friends will have to go sometimes, because they came from far away to help you. But when they go, we stay—together with your neighbors, we stay." "Envoy Says Russia Seeks Greater Role in Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, 24 December 2009, <[www.rferl.org/content/Envoy\\_Says\\_Russia\\_Seeks\\_Greater\\_Role\\_In\\_Afghanistan/1913042.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Envoy_Says_Russia_Seeks_Greater_Role_In_Afghanistan/1913042.html)>.

<sup>39</sup> V. Skosyrev, "Karzai Wants to Reduce Dependence on the United States," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 31 January 2009.

<sup>40</sup> "Pakistan Interested in Military Cooperation with Russia," *Interfax*, 23 June 2009; "Trade Between Russia, Pakistan Growing Even During Crisis," *Interfax*, 30 July 2009.

## Gas Producers: In Search of Deeper Cooperation

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Many in Europe and America fear Europe's growing dependence on Russia for natural gas supplies, and that Moscow is likely to take advantage of this dependence for political purposes. The following justifications for these fears are given: 1) Russia's cut-offs of gas supplies to Ukraine and Belarus (which Russian gas pipelines to EU countries traverse); 2) Russian gas pipeline projects—Nord Stream and South Stream—that would bypass Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, and other Eastern European countries with which Russia has difficult relations; 3) Russian cooperation with other gas exporting countries—especially Iran, Qatar, Algeria, and Libya—in consolidating the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), which many fear could act as a cartel—similar to OPEC—in setting higher prices than might ordinarily prevail; and 4) aggressive efforts by Gazprom to acquire stakes in the exploitation of Middle Eastern gas projects as well as the transport of gas from the Middle East to Europe that some see as an attempt to dominate all gas supplies to the EU.

This set of circumstances, though, looks very different in Moscow—especially considering that Russian gas production is falling, Turkmenistan is no longer dependent on Russia to buy most of its gas since there are now gas pipelines from Turkmenistan to China and to Iran.<sup>41</sup> Europe itself appears to have a newly discovered source of gas in the form of gas shale, and European demand for gas is falling.<sup>42</sup> Far from being efforts to control Ukraine and Belarus, Moscow's cut-offs of gas to them as well as efforts to build pipeline routes bypassing them is more an attempt to prevent these two impecunious countries from forcing Moscow to sell them gas at below market prices through their ability to siphon off gas intended for Moscow's more lucrative EU customers.

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<sup>41</sup> Russia has traditionally bought up the majority of Turkmenistan's gas production either for re-export to Europe or to free up Russian gas for export to the European market.

<sup>42</sup> For a cogent statement about the overall Russian-European gas picture, see U. Ellemann-Jensen, "Defusing Russia's Energy Weapon," *Moscow Times*, 16 December 2009, <[www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/defusing-russias-energy-weapon/396225.html](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/defusing-russias-energy-weapon/396225.html)>. See also: "Bubbling Under: The Hunt for Shale Gas in Europe," *Economist*, 5 December 2009, p. 75; and A. Anishyuk, "Turkmens Start Gas Supplies to China," *Moscow Times*, 15 December 2009, <[www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/turkmens-start-gas-supplies-to-china/396187.html](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/turkmens-start-gas-supplies-to-china/396187.html)>.

It is with this context in mind that Moscow's policy toward the Middle Eastern gas exporters—both individually and *via* GECF—must be examined. While some see Gazprom's effort to gain access to Middle Eastern gas reserves as an attempt to dominate all Europe's gas imports, it can also be seen more as an attempt to gain stakes in the production of gas from the Middle East or elsewhere to Europe to compensate for Gazprom's declining production in Russia.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, while some see Russian efforts to gain an interest in gas pipeline routes to Europe from Algeria or Libya as evidence of Russian intent to control how much and at what price Europe can import gas from almost anywhere, these investments (should Gazprom succeed in making them) can also be seen as similar to those that Western international oil companies have made and would like to make more of.<sup>44</sup> Finally, while Russia as well as other gas producers have called for the GECF to be strengthened, Moscow has made clear that it is not prepared to act as the "swing producer" that cuts back production, as Saudi Arabia does in OPEC, in order to bolster prices.

For Russia to exercise control over gas supplies from the Middle East to Europe (assuming that it even wants this) would require the active cooperation of most or even all the major Middle Eastern gas producers. It is difficult to imagine any of Iran, Qatar, Algeria, and Libya—which have worked assiduously over years to get the best terms possible from Western petroleum companies—simply ceding to Moscow control over how much gas they sell to Europe and at what price. While some in the West may believe this is possible, it does not appear that there are many in Russia who share this opinion. Indeed, Russian commentary suggests that Moscow views Middle Eastern gas producers less as partners than as competitors who could potentially take away Russia's share of the gas market not just in Western Europe, but even in Eastern Europe. In addition, claims of willingness to cooperate with Russia made by Middle Eastern gas exporters may not reflect actual intentions, but may

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<sup>43</sup> On Russia's gas production problems (and their consequences), see R. Kupchinsky, "As Russian Production Drops, Poland Turns to Qatari LNG," Jamestown Foundation Blog, 2 July 2009, <<http://jamestownfoundation.blogspot.com/2009/07/as-russian-gas-production-drops-poland.html>>; and "US Passes Russia as Top Gas Producer," upstream.com, 12 January 2010, <[www.upstreamonline.com/live/article203335.ece](http://www.upstreamonline.com/live/article203335.ece)>. On Gazprom's efforts to gain stakes in gas projects in the Middle East and Africa, see "Gazprom Interested in Swap Operations with Algerian Partners," Interfax, 10 March 2006; "Gazprom, Qatar Petroleum Co. May Launch Joint Energy Projects," ITAR-TASS, 24 April 2008; and "Russia's Gazprom, Iran's Deputy Minister Discuss Gas Cooperation," Interfax, 13 January 2010.

<sup>44</sup> On Gazprom's interest in pipeline projects outside the former USSR, see "Gazprom Interested in Proposal to Build another Gas Pipeline from Libya to Europe," Interfax, 11 July 2008; and "Gazprom Linked Iran and Qatar," *Kommersant*, 12 November 2008.

instead be part of a bargaining strategy aimed at eliciting concessions from Western governments and petroleum corporations.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> For more on Russian relations with the major Middle Eastern gas producers, see M.N. Katz, "Russia and Algeria: Partners or Competitors?" *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Winter 2007, p. 152-157; M.N. Katz, "Russia and Qatar," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 11, No. 4, December 2007, <<http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2007/issue4/pdf/1.pdf>>; M.N. Katz, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the Ahmadinejad Era," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 2, Spring 2008, p. 208-210; and M.N. Katz, "The Russian-Libyan Rapprochement: What Has Moscow Gained?" *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 3, Fall 2008, p. 122-128.

## Moscow's Greater Middle East Policy: How Successful?

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If Russia has been pursuing an anti-Western agenda in the Greater Middle East, then its efforts have not been particularly successful. No traditionally pro-Western government in the region has switched, or appears likely to switch, from relying primarily on the US to relying primarily on Russia as its principle ally. Furthermore, no anti-Western government or movement in the region has displayed, or appears likely to display, any significant willingness to alter its foreign policy to please Moscow. Indeed, several anti-Western actors—Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas—are frustrated that Russia has not been willing to compete with the West in the region by supporting their anti-Western and anti-Israeli attitudes.

However, if Moscow is not pursuing an aggressive, anti-Western foreign policy in the Greater Middle East, but a defensive one aimed more at protecting Russia from Sunni radicalism and advancing Russia's economic interests, then Moscow's policy toward the region has been relatively successful. Moscow has friendly relations with virtually every major actor in the region—both pro-Western and anti-Western—except Al Qaeda and its affiliates. While Moscow may not be able to get any of the actors in the Greater Middle East to significantly alter their policies to suit Russia, it has succeeded in keeping opposition to the Kremlin's policy toward Muslim regions in Russia off the agenda of virtually all Greater Middle Eastern governments and even the major opposition movements (with the notable exception, again, of Al Qaeda). This is a significant achievement because if Muslim governments started aiding Chechen and other anti-Russian Muslim groups in the North Caucasus—as they did the Afghan mujahedeen during the 1980's—Moscow's ability to maintain control over the region could be significantly challenged. Further, Russia's friendly relations with all governments in the Greater Middle East have helped it steadily expand its economic ties throughout the region.

But while Moscow has been successful in pursuing its defensive foreign policy aims in the Greater Middle East from 2000, it may not always be so. Although Moscow has so far succeeded in keeping its policies toward the North Caucasus from becoming a rallying point uniting the broader Muslim world against Russia (like the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan did in the 1980's), Moscow's good relations with most Muslim governments and opposition movements will not necessarily prevent the rise of Islamic opposition

inside Russia or the Muslim republics of the former USSR. And while Moscow's Muslim friends in the Greater Middle East may not support the rise of Islamist opposition inside the former USSR, they are hardly likely to be willing or able to help Moscow defeat it.

Further, Russia has up to now benefited both from American and European efforts to contain radical Sunni Islamists in the Greater Middle East and from not paying the costs that the US and many EU governments have incurred in doing so. Indeed, Russia has actually profited from providing transportation and transit services for this Western effort.<sup>46</sup> Yet there is no guarantee that the West will be successful. Indeed, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have become increasingly unpopular both in America and in Europe; some form of Western withdrawal, resulting in radical Islamists gaining at least partial control over both of these countries is an increasing possibility. Should this happen, as was argued earlier, it is highly likely that radical Sunni Islamists will target Russian interests. The rise of radical Sunni Islamists in Iraq, Afghanistan or elsewhere in the Greater Middle East could also threaten Moscow's economic interests not just in the region, but possibly in Central Asia and the Caucasus too.

Thus, far from seeking the reduction of the West's presence in the Greater Middle East, Moscow's two principal interests in the region—opposing the rise of anti-Russian Islamists and furthering Russian economic interests—are actually served by Western influence remaining. Yet while Russian interests in the Greater Middle East would not be served by the decline of Western influence in it, the Putin-Medvedev regime has little desire to see it increase either. Although this does not appear likely in much of the region, it could occur in Iran if the continuing protest against the regime's widely disputed declaration that Ahmadinejad was re-elected president of Iran in June 2009 results in the downfall of the Islamic Republic and its replacement by a democratic government. This would quickly result in Iran's economic ties to the US being restored and those to the EU being expanded, which could lead to Iran competing with Russia in selling gas to Europe and in providing a transit route for the export of petroleum from Azerbaijan and Central Asia to the world market. In addition, any progress toward resolving Israeli-Syrian, Israeli-Palestinian, intra-Palestinian, and intra-Lebanese conflicts could also result in Syria, Fatah, Hamas, and Hezbollah improving their relations with the West and so having less need to rely on Russia.

It is not clear whether the Greater Middle East will remain basically as it is now, witness the decline of Western influence and the rise of radical Sunni Islamists, witness instead the rise of Western influence resulting from conflict resolution and democratic transformation, or experience some combination of these possibilities in different parts of the region. What does seem clear, though, is that

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<sup>46</sup> Kuchins and Sanderson, *op. cit.* [36], p. 5-7.

Russia appears to have very little ability to affect what happens in the Greater Middle East. Yet what happens in the Greater Middle East can have a significant impact on Russia. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Moscow would pursue a basically defensive foreign policy that seeks to maintain good relations with everyone in the region willing to have good relations with it.