

Russia Returns to The Middle East

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

When Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in Saudi Arabia on Feb. 10, for a tour including also Qatar and Jordan, many in the Arab and Islamic world jubilated at the idea that Russia was “back” in the region. Their ideological argument is that, during the Cold War, when the world was divided into two hostile blocs, the Soviet Union had defended their interests against the United States and its client states—or vice versa, as the case might have been. After the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, the empire faction in the United Kingdom and United States, around Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, et al., began drafting their plans for securing world hegemony for what they deduced themselves was the sole surviving superpower, through a policy of permanent wars. This doctrine, which was implemented in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 events, led to regime change through war and other means, in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon, where governments were brought into being as de facto vassals of the new would-be empire. They were the stepping-stones for planned future assaults against the real strategic targets: Russia, China, and India.

Thus, Putin’s arrival in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on the heels of his historic intervention at the Munich International Security Conference (see articles in this section), was hailed as a sign that the old strategic balance associated with the Cold War superpower rivalry, had returned, and hopes were raised that the neo-con project for the region might be thwarted.

Although there is something to be said for this view, it does not adequately capture the essence of developments. Such a simplistic comparison reflects only superficial similarities, whereas the reality is far more complex and interesting. It is not a competing power game we are dealing with, but a competing policy approach associated with a newly self-defined role for Putin’s Russia in one of the world’s strategic crisis cockpits.

The Saudis, traditional allies of the United States, rolled out the red carpet for Putin, the first Russian President to visit since the two countries established diplomatic relations 80 years ago. King Abdullah, Crown Prince Sultan, and top civilian and military officials, including Riyadh Governor Prince Salman and Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, turned out to welcome him. He was given a 21-gun salute on arrival, and was treated to a tour of the King Abdul Aziz Historical Center, as well as the founding monarch’s old palace, and

was awarded the King Abdul Aziz Medallion of Honor, the highest civilian award in the kingdom.

The Russian President met with the political leadership, as well as a large gathering of businessmen. What he presented was an offer of economic cooperation, rather substantial military exports, and coordination particularly in the energy sector. All this, in the context of political collaboration in the interest of putting out various regional fires, and seeking durable peace.

Gas, Oil, . . . and Nuclear Energy

Putin addressed the Saudi-Russian business forum, attended by its president, as well as the presidents of the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry, and the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry. “The kingdom’s business and products are extremely important to the Russian market,” Putin began, calling on businessmen from both countries to identify joint investment opportunities. Trade between the two countries has grown over the past seven years, from \$88.5 million in 1999 to \$412 million in 2005, and measures were discussed to vastly increase this volume, through reduced tariffs, joint banking facilities, direct transportation links, and, perhaps, even a free-trade zone between Russia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member countries. Areas of cooperation which he mentioned are oil and gas, aerospace technology, transportation (railways), satellites, and—most important—nuclear energy.

Russia’s role in the world economy has been redefined under Putin, in particular, as far more than a raw-materials-exporting country. Russia has launched an ambitious program for producing nuclear energy plants, for domestic use, as well as export. And Saudi Arabia, as well as the other GCC countries, are eager to benefit from this technology.

Back in November, at their summit held in Riyadh, the GCC countries decided to explore development of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal reported to the press on Feb. 15, that Putin had discussed this perspective with the Secretariat General of the GCC, noting, “Russia is a country with nuclear energy experience, and cooperating with it in this field is similar to cooperation on other areas.” He said there were “no barriers” to nuclear energy cooperation with Russia. Were agreements to be sealed with the Saudis for Russian nuclear technology transfer, that would open the way for similar deals with the other GCC countries: Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Oman. Russia has already announced its readiness to provide Algeria with nuclear plants, and Egypt is also eager to adopt the new technology. And, of course, Russia is completing the Bushehr nuclear plant in Iran.

The surprising announcement by the GCC summit, that they wanted to go nuclear, was interpreted by some in the West as an indication of their fears of a potentially nuclear-



Russian Presidential Press and Information Office

President Putin (left) with King Abdullah (right) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on Feb. 11. Putin was warmly welcomed in his visit to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan—all traditional U.S. allies that are concerned about the global economic crisis and the devolution of Southwest Asia into war and chaos.

armed Iran. However, the Iranians immediately endorsed the idea, and formally offered to share their technology with their neighbors. The GCC move has de facto contributed to lending legitimacy to Iran's program, since all the GCC members are traditionally allied to or associated with the United States.

In Qatar, Putin approached another potentially explosive idea, which is, to establish a cartel of gas-producing countries. The idea had been originally proposed to the Russians by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in a letter presented the Russian president by envoy Ali Akbar Velayati, during a February visit to Moscow. He proposed "a cooperation organization in the gas sector similar to OPEC."

In a joint press conference with the Emir of Qatar, Putin said he thought the idea was "interesting" and worth pursuing. He emphasized that this cartel would not, like OPEC, set prices, but rather coordinate policies among producers so as to ensure uninterrupted supplies. Putin said, "It is important to develop common approaches, equal conditions for gas producers, and a system of relations with gas consumers. That is why we are interested in developing relations with Qatar in this sphere." He then announced that at a gas producers' conference in Doha, Qatar, in April, Russia will be represented, for the first time, by its Energy Minister, and will discuss the idea further.

The Saudi monarch was extremely pleased with the visit, and showered praise on Putin. In an interview to the Russian news agency Itar-TASS on Feb. 12, the King stressed the excellent prospects for cooperation among the world's major oil-producing and -exporting countries, especially in energy,

investment, science, and technology. "The two countries," he said, "enjoy huge economic potentials, vast natural resources, and a variety of investment opportunities apart from a distinguished cultural heritage. They also enjoy huge political influence at the world stage. This will contribute to taking our mutual cooperation to new heights within a strategic perspective."

Cooperation to Settle Conflicts

The King went on to say that relations with Russia were not exclusively economic, but also political, and expressed his desire to consult and coordinate with Russia on major regional and international issues. Among these issues, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict looms large, and both countries' political leaders have intervened to find solutions. Abdullah stated the plain fact that "a solution to this conflict will lead to solving many other problems and save a lot of financial resources for the development of the entire region."

Just prior to Putin's visit, King Abdullah had undertaken an extraordinary effort to mediate the internal Palestinian conflict between the Fatah and Hamas factions. In his capacity as Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah had managed to host talks between Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas. Significantly, he organized the encounter in Mecca, the holy city, site of the annual Hajj pilgrimage. Following their stated intention on arrival, that they would not leave until they had reached agreement, the two Palestinian faction leaders hashed out differences, and finally came up with a draft proposal for a unity government. Press coverage of the breakthrough fea-

tured photos of the two men, in pilgrims' robes, performing the Hajj at Mecca.

The Russian government immediately endorsed the agreement and called for the international financial sanctions against the Palestinian Authority to be lifted immediately. Putin had also played a part in the Palestinian issue, when he broke an international taboo, and invited Meshaal to Moscow for talks.

During his visit to Jordan, the third and final leg of his journey, Putin focussed precisely on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, in discussions with Jordanian King Abdullah II. After two hours of talks on Feb. 13, the Jordanian monarch stated: "President Putin and I agreed that negotiations towards the establishment of a viable, independent Palestinian state should be accelerated. We are witnessing a unique opportunity to restart the effort to achieve a comprehensive Middle East peace," he said, adding that Russia has "an important role to play," as a member of the Middle East Quartet. Putin also held talks with Mahmoud Abbas. Putin noted: "For Russia, the Middle East is strategically important. We understand that this possibility of action must be done in a delicate and balanced manner."

Although not detailed in press accounts, it is to be assumed that Putin also discussed other regional crises with his Arab hosts, from the war in Iraq, to Lebanon and Iran. Here, too, there have been overlapping initiatives from the Saudi, Iranian, and Russian sides to deal with these hot spots. Iran and Saudi Arabia have been coordinating closely to cool down tensions between the opposition and government in Lebanon, which they respectively support, as well as to seek to reduce sectarian conflict in Iraq. On the Iran issue, there have been intensive diplomatic efforts on the part of Moscow.

Religion and Culture

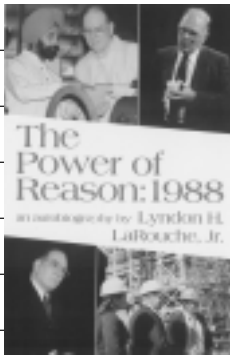
Putin made explicit reference to what he thought Russia's role could be also in regard to the religious dimension of the conflicts. "Russia is determined to enhance cooperation with the Islamic world," he told the forum of Saudi and Russian businessmen in Riyadh. He said Russia was a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country, characterized by the peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims, and that the country had experience in promoting cooperation among ethnic groups and religions. "Russia is bent on pursuing this approach in all regions, including the Middle East and the Arab Gulf," he said. Significantly, among the members of his delegation was Mintimir Shaimiyev, the leader of the predominantly Muslim region of Tatarstan, who was given the "King Faisal International Award for Service to Islam," an annual prize worth \$200,000.

For his part, King Abdullah also highlighted the importance of respecting other cultures. "We have to know that all human civilizations emerged from one source and have benefitted from one another," he said, calling for the integra-

tion of civilizations. "We should stand against calls for creating division and discrimination among them."

This is a point Putin had stressed in his explosive speech to the Munich meeting. And it should come as no surprise that, in briefing reporters following his trip to Southwest Asia, he should also reference the significance of that speech. While expressing his satisfaction with the results of his visits to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan, he also reflected on the Munich speech, saying that what he stated there was not anything new. "The whole world is saying that," he explained, referring to his condemnation of unilateralism in Washington. "Some countries are doing that rudely, which is counterproductive and unacceptable, and some countries are doing that stealthily. It does not become Russia to have a grudge against someone." One has to state one's position openly, he said, adding that he was glad his U.S. colleagues were on hand. "It is good that U.S. Administration members and senators were seated right in front of me, because it is inappropriate to say such things behind their back."

Indeed, "the whole world is saying that" about the Bush-Cheney madness which is threatening peace worldwide. Nowhere else than in Southwest Asia, are political leaders more aware of the dangers of the policy thrust which the Russian President denounced. Thus their warm welcome to Putin as a political leader of a world power, with a distinctly alternate approach.

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