CHAPTER V
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RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE WEST ASIA DURING VLADIMIR PUTIN’S PRESIDENCY (2000-2008)

1. Transitional Period of Russian Foreign Policy

Russia’s interest in the West Asia significantly reduced with the ratification of its first Foreign Policy Concept (FPC) in 1993 by the then president Boris Yeltsin. It emphasized a foreign policy of retrenchment, accommodation, and risk-avoidance in bilateral relations, especially with states farther than the borders of the former Soviet Union or USSR. Of the nine “vitaly important interests” recognized in that text, only one concerned about states outside the territorial limits of the previous Soviet Union. The policy was suffered due to its deficiency in clarity. However, the West Asia was stated there only briefly in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict.\(^1\)

With the demise of USSR, Russia has adopted a modified foreign policy. In early 2000, the Putin administration has started to implement the Military Doctrine and the National Security Concept through the newly integrated Foreign Policy Concept (FPC). Although the FPC of 2000 was exemplified as an ontologically new policy document, it re-emphasized the doctrines of “pragmatic nationalist” and reinvigorated the foreign policy concept that Sergei Stankevich, foreign policy advisor to Yeltsin, proposed to Yeltsin back in 1992. It was illustrated in that

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The National Security Concept represents formally adopted general political goals on protecting the citizens, society and state against external and internal threats of any nature, taking into account the available resources, and conforming to the level of guarantees which provide the global and regional security system. This document defines the security objectives and reviews the risk factors that currently threaten the security of Russia. The Military Doctrine presents a system of strategic views, principles and approaches to ensure national security in military-political and military terms. The doctrine explores the military-strategic environment, and defines defense policy priorities and directions of employment, build-up and development of the armed forces in the interest world as a whole. The Foreign Policy Concept is a system of views on the content and main areas in the foreign policy activities of Russia. The legal basis of these documents consists of the Constitution of the state and other legislative acts that regulate the activity of certain bodies of state power in foreign and security policy, generally recognized principles and norms of international law, an international treaties signed by the name of the given states. (Vladimir Rukavishnikov, ‘choices for Russia’, in Roger E. Kanet, ed., Russia: Re-Emerging Great Power (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p.72).
proposal, "...foreign policy with us does not proceed from the directions and priorities of a developed statehood. On the contrary, the practice of our foreign policy...will help Russia become Russia". Subsequently, the new model of the FPC rebranded Russia as a unique country capable of affably combining various diverse elements in pursuing Eurasianism – the term particularly favored by President Putin. Moldavsky argued that the new FPC proposed 'that Russia implement the tactics of pragmatic opportunism and in the meantime perform the mission of a conciliator that maintains a multilateral dialogue of cultural, civilization, and states.'

The existence of the proposed concept "Russia become Russia" by Stankevich can also be found in the foreign policy notion introduced by Medvedev. All these documents intended Russia as a Rosetta Stone of sorts, i.e., a key to dialogue and understanding between the West and the East. It is widely argued that the FPC is the result of the guidance of pragmatic nationalists of the 1990s. The FPC was intended to equip Russia and to promote its’ image as a country with the qualities of a decisive mediator to reconcile the conflicting worldviews between the West and the East.

2. Pillars of Russia’s Foreign Policy

It is generally accepted that the post-Soviet Russian foreign policy had four stages. The first two stages were evolved during the administration of Boris Yeltsin, while the others were developed during the two terms of presidency of Vladimir Putin. The first and second stages of foreign policy development were marked by a weaker Russia resulting reactiveness in its foreign affairs. In the third stage Russia acted more vigorously by reinforcing its political will and advancing the energy sector. As a result Russia adopted an active foreign policy. The fourth stage was marked by the assertion of Russian influence at the international domain. Kosachev and Aslund argued that in the fourth stage, 'Putin faced a choice between realpolitik, in which might is right, and the post-World War II structures of international security cooperation.'

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2 Olena Bagno-Moldavsky, N.1, p.123.
3 Ibid., p.124.
In order to understand Putin's foreign policy it is not appropriate only to analyze the concepts and philosophies of the foreign policy but to discuss Putin's domestic economic policies and political agenda. Putin is in mission to restore Russian national might after years of what he perceived have been deterioration and stagnation. In his consideration there is a direct linkage between promoting domestic order and improving international respect for Russia. Arguably his perception about foreign policy is widely connected. One approach of the foreign policy is to raise revenue for the state, which can be both from trade and other bilateral and multilateral activities with its political allies (e.g. arms trade and energy cooperation with China, India, Syria and Iran). Another approach is to increase respect for Russia. In this way, Putin is using foreign policy to gear up his drive for controlling the domestic economic and political order.⁵

Vladimir Putin is a person of sound understanding in foreign affairs. He has been identified as a manager who is implementing foreign policy calculatedly and effectively, for example, Russia's involvement in the recent conflicts, namely, in Chechnya, Belarus, Georgia, and the territory disputes with China and Japan. Since Putin has strong grip in the foreign affairs, the policy makers including the foreign minister held a minor role. Putin had served in KGB, the intelligence agency of Russia, for 16 years. His service record shows that he was in East Germany for 5 years. It is also evident that he has high command over the all foreign affairs issues of concern in the Western Europe. All these have made Putin a professional in foreign relations- reflecting notable marks at the present FPC of Russia.⁶

3. Russia's Interests in the Region

The foreign policy of Putin administration places West Asia with greater significance. Moscow considers the importance of the West Asia for a number of


reasons. First, the territorial proximity: West Asia is just immediate neighbor of the former Soviet Union. There are few major cities of Russia located within close proximity of some cities of West Asia. The distance between Iraq’s Mosul and Grozny, Chechnya’s capital, is about 600 miles. Second, the Muslim factor: the growing number of Muslims in Russia makes up one-seventh of the country’s population. During the Soviet era Muslims were isolated and religiously suppressed. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the barrier separating Russian Muslims was also irradiated allowing cooperation with the Muslims in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Arabs. Third, Russia’s critical involvement with several West Asian regimes is shaping the outcome of the ongoing conflicts. The political turmoil in Muslim world is somehow impacting Russia’s domestic security. Militants and their radical thoughts from the West Asia are crossing into the Russian, especially, in the central Russian republics of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, North Caucasus, and Central Asia. Fourth, the energy security: Russia is creating formidable influence at the policy and trade of energy (oil and gas) of the region. Russia considers itself as a major energy power of the world, and searches its control over the global energy trade. In doing so Russia keeps strategic and calculative engagement with various West Asian countries. Fifth, Russia’s position squaring with American interest in the West Asia: Russia remains cautious but assertive due to American involvement in the region. American direct and indirect involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and presence in all most all Arab countries makes Russia nerves. Thus Russia re-modeled its foreign policy to address these issues by placing West Asia as an important region.

A. Geo-political Considerations

Russia wants to build a unique power bloc and remains as an actor in the Caspian, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. This entire region is geographically very close to West Asia—just at the upper north. In the changing world order, Russia is mindful of the growing importance of states such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran,

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7 Currently, Russia is in first place on the list of countries by oil production (10.1 M bbl/day) and in second place on the list of countries by oil exports (4.4 M bbl/day), after Saudi Arabia. The Russian government welcomes foreign investments in the oil and gas sector of economy. Russian oil tycoons often say, in their opinion, oil reserves in the Russian Federation have been ‘underestimate’, and in reality they account for no less than 150 billion barrels, but the adopted figure is 50 billion barrels. But there is an alarming forecast which could not avoid in an analysis: some experts say, if Russia continues to export raw oil in the coming years in the same amount as today, then its huge oil resources may be depleted by the year of 2050. (Roger E. Kanet, ed., N.1, p.74).
whom it recognizes as strategic regional partners. In this multi-polar world Russia considers the growth of the U.S. military presence in the West Asia as a possible security concern. The U.S. presence has grown significantly due to the Gulf war and invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. U.S. maintained its presence in the Central Asian countries (regarded by Russia as spheres of interest) to support its operation in West Asian countries. Russia opposes the U.S. military presence in the Central Asian countries considering it's a direct violation of Russian interest.  

B. Security Considerations

Russia is improving its regional security strategies to consolidate its authority in Central Asia, Eastern Mediterranean and South Caucasus. In doing so, Russia provides high priority to the security and stability in the North Caucasus. By far these are most unstable regions of Russia. There are numerous numbers of violence and attacks. It is believed that ineffective policies have added greatly to the conflicts. Russian authority has been exceptionally responsive to views of harmful external influence in the North Caucasus. President Vladimir Putin considered the North Caucasus as the epicenter of Russia's “war on terror”. His approach has received wider recognition after the initial successes in the second Chechen War in 2000. Consequently, Putin is regarded by most Russian as a leader with aggressive and powerful characteristics.

The domestic security context has made Russia apprehensive to the growing extremism in the West Asia. The linkage between Russia's domestic security and West Asian conflict encourages domestic fanaticism, which includes terrorism in the North Caucasus. For over a decade, Russia’s national security has faced real major danger by the Chechen separatists. The experience of the two Chechen wars is still

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fresh in the memory of the Russian authority. That keeps Russia alert to any potential security threats generated at the south. The revival of Taliban in Afghanistan and its support base in Southern Russia is a specific concern of major regional destabilization. Moscow regards that the rise of Taliban and its sympathizers in Central Asia could cause the region unstable and local insurgents could return. The security establishments of Russia view both Syria/Iraq and Afghanistan/Pakistan as training grounds for international Jihadis. Further the unmanaged Arab spring has added a new dimension to the ever growing Russian tension.

In addition, the instability of Afghanistan is a significant security concern for Russia. If one includes Afghanistan in the West Asia, then as a region it turns out to be a major concern for Russian security. One could imagine that Afghanistan is far away from Russia, but there shouldn’t be any illusions that the connection between the groups in Russia and Afghanistan are shaped not only by ideological inspiration but also by the trade and consumption (e.g. Consumption of Afghan drugs in Russia).  

Another security concern of Russia is the principle of nuclear proliferation. Essentially Moscow had been suspicious of Pakistan’s nuclear ambitions from the early 1990. It believed that U.S. and its allies were not serious or hadn’t considered important enough to stop Pakistan getting nuclear weapon. The emergence of a nuclear-armed Pakistan in 1998 vindicated the suspicion of Russia. Russian is especially cautious about Pakistan. It doesn’t consider Pakistan as a secure and stable state. Rather it suspects that the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the intelligent agency of Pakistan, is sporadically collaborating with the Islamist extremists. There

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11 In a world community totaling nearly 195 member states of the UNO, seven have declared their possession of nuclear weapons in the past century, and only one of them—South Africa—has cancelled its nuclear arms program; North Korea and Israel are also believed to possess such weapons, even if undeclared. Twenty or more states have chemical weapons, ten or more possess biological weapons, and a dozen or more have operational ballistic missiles. The number of states in each category threatens to grow as expertise and technical capability grow with each passing year. (Roger E. Kanet, ed., N.I, p.73).
were even concerns about the role of A. Q. Khan, the nuclear scientist of Pakistan. Of course he is not a freelancer, but his technical knowledge about the nuclear technology can be fatal if he transfers his expertise to any extremist group. Russia's historical memory of decade-long Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and Pakistan's assistance to the resistant force of the mujahedeen is still fresh. Thus Russia considers any support by the elements of Pakistani security establishment towards Afghan Taliban leadership as potential threat to Russian security. It cannot be totally ignored that Pakistan was America's ally throughout the cold war period and a base in the 1950s for the U.S. spy planes those conducted surveillance over the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{12} Thus nuclear power of Pakistan is still an indirect threat for Russia, which can impact through any groups rooted in the West Asia.

There are also significant evidence suggesting Russia position about nuclear Iran. Most of the records show Russia's great opposition to the possession of nuclear weapon by Iran.\textsuperscript{13} The United States is appropriately worried about Iranian nuclear ambitions, yet Russia lives close by, and she cannot be indifferent about Iran.\textsuperscript{14} However, in contrast to Russia's position about the relatively recent Pakistani nuclear issue, Moscow perceives the Iranian role in the West Asia as a main fixture of the regional setup. Russia considers Iran basically a rational actor, though a difficult partner. Russia is satisfied with a solution to the Iranian nuclear issue, which would keep Iran's program undoubtedly peaceful, under the guarantee of total observation and monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).\textsuperscript{15} As a quid pro quo, Russia focuses that the international community requires considering Iran's legitimate security concern and assisting form a comprehensive security system in the Gulf. In the Moscow's viewpoint, the worst potential consequence would be a

\textsuperscript{12} Dmitri Trenin, N.8, p.5.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.,

\textsuperscript{14} Marina Ottaway and Dmitri Trenin, N.10.

\textsuperscript{15} The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is an international organization that seeks to promote the safe and peaceful use of nuclear technology. The IAEA was established as an autonomous organization on 29 July 1957. Though established independently of the United Nations through its own international treaty, the IAEA Statute, the IAEA reports to both the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council. In the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986, it expanded its advisory role on the safety of nuclear power production, and it has played an important role in the verification of nuclear weapons programs and in gathering evident relating to adherence to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.
military attack of the U.S. or Israeli against Iran that would not destroy Iran’s nuclear program but would ensure Iran emerge as a nuclear weapon state. This will subsequently destabilize the region and increase the threat of Islamic Extremism.

C. Impact of the 9/11

The event of the 9-11 terrorist attack in 2001 was a turning point for countries to discuss and work collectively on the issue of terrorism. Russia was not any exception to that. Top of that, for more than a decade Russia had suffered due to significant incidents of terrorist attacks from the South. As a result Russia opted to become a partner to the U.S. lead coalition against global terrorism.  

Many argue that in the wake of the 9-11 attacks, Moscow allayed with the U.S. and substantially supported the war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. It was to the extent that Moscow agreed to settle the Status of Forces Agreements with NATO. Under the agreement Western military received safer transit across the Russian territory to Afghanistan, whereas Russia received essential cooperation from the U.S. on the Afghan drugs issue. While United States got free access through Russia it also had to accept Russia’s supremacy in Central Asia. In 2005 when Uzbekistan determinately shut down the U.S. military bases Russia deeply appreciated the step. For a similar step Russia rewarded Kyrgyzstan in 2009 with financial package.

But there are ranges of partially overlapping interests in the West Asia between Moscow and Washington. Some are contradictory and others are complementary. Though these two countries were opponents and competitors they also shared various key common interests. However, it is yet to be determined the model for such cooperation. Unlike of the 1990s, in present circumstances Moscow could not be argued to modestly bandwagon the Washington’s policies. One can

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16 What became more or less clear from the Russian domestic experience is that to counter terrorism, the government must coordinate justice and home and foreign affairs to good effect. Prevention, not military operations, should be at the heart of any counter-terrorist strategy, and its primary instrument is intelligence operations. The state and/or the international community must react to the terrorist threat, but avoid overreaction. (Roger E. Kanet, ed., N.1, p.72).

17 Dmitri Trenin, N.8, p.19.
argue, therefore, that it can be a serious, pragmatic, and case-by-case basis partnership that both countries expected to further their interests.

D. Chechnya: Anti-Radical Islamists

Chechnya issue was the major determining event that shaped Putin’s consideration about terrorism and the West Asia during his two terms of presidency. It is evident that while Islamist terrorism threatened U.S. security, the Chechen conflict obviously threatened both Russian security and its territorial integrity. The conflict in Russia’s Chechnya province has claimed over one hundred thousand lives since President Boris Yeltsin ordered the Russian military march into Chechnya in 1994. After the 1996 cease-fire, the situation in Chechnya further deteriorated, converting it to "Somalia of the Caucasus." Foreign jihadists especially from the West Asia infiltrated the Chechen leadership. Interestingly, a convenient correlation occurred in August 1999 with the appointment of Putin as prime minister when militant Islamist rebels in Chechnya attacked neighboring Dagestan the same month and a series of residential apartment bombings rocked Moscow and other cities the following September, creating a sense of panic in Russia and beyond. Putin’s response was tough, when he ordered for a new major military campaign in the northern Caucasus and clamping down on all the activities of Chechens and other Russian Muslims in Russian cities. It can be observed that Putin’s resolute handling of the crisis was appreciated well in contrast to Yeltsin’s then ailing health in the atmosphere of apparent political paralysis. In many respects, therefore, the second Chechen war was more than a ticket for Putin to win the presidential elections in March 2000.

Appointed acting president by Yeltsin at the end of December 1999, Putin quickly utilized the media to focus on his direct handling of the military and security

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operations, which included a visit to Chechnya to boost the morale of Russian soldiers. Despite the widespread accusations of human rights abuses committed by the Russian military and the anti-Muslim fervor, Russian public opinion appeared to support the uncompromising stance adopted by Putin. Western governments also generally chose to ignore major human rights violations and the harassment of Chechens and Russian Muslims because Putin successfully justified that he was waging a war against terrorism to protect Russian citizens and to prevent chaos in the Caucasus.\textsuperscript{21}

The Chechen cause was not helped by the emergence of a new brand of guerrillas influenced by the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Wahhabi sect in Saudi Arabia. These fighters represented a violent so-called Takfiri and intolerant from of Islam. Those not adhering to their form of Islam, including other Muslims, were considered heretics and executing them was religiously sanctified. Since the late 1990s and throughout the Putin period these groups, broadly referred to as Wahhabis in Russia, were responsible for a series of brutal terrorist operations including mass kidnappings, beheadings and spates of hostage-taking. Among the most notorious leaders of this movement Shamil Basaev, whose ability to evade Russian forces became legendary. Basaev and his comrades converted the Chechen cause from a national liberation struggle into a wider Islamic Jihad, something that was not acceptable to Russians and the West alike.\textsuperscript{22}

One may note that the Kremlin was able to shape public perceptions of the conflict by utilizing the Chechen violence to exaggerate the Islamic terror threat within Russia. Alexei Malashenko, a professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, alluded to the alarmist approach that was manipulated by the Putin leadership with some effect. According to Malashenko, for example, “vast” Wahhabi network existed throughout Russia from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok and from Murmansk to Orenburg. Manifestations of Wahhabism have been noted in Tatarstan, Bashkoria, Mordvinia, in the Samara oblast, and in Kurgansk, Orenburg, Penza, Perm, Uliansvsk, Cheliabinsk


\textsuperscript{22} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.69.
and Tiumen oblasts; not to mention southern Russia from Rostov and Volgograd to the republics in the northern Caucasus. Yet according to a Norwegian observer Atle Staalesen, Wahhabism ‘has become, as it were, a generic term that covers all kinds of “extremist Muslim activity” in particular insofar as they are linked to the war in Chechnya.’

The usage of the term Wahhabi indicated that the threat is a foreign one seeping into Russia. Contrary to the interpretation expressed by Malashenko, other perspectives suggested that the Islamic factor was far more complex in Russia than that of booming Wahhabism. Idiosyncratic or esoteric Sufism was much more traditionally ingrained in the Caucasus and among other Russian and Central Asian Muslims than the Wahhabi form based in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Russian Federation Muslims belonged to a large collection of ethnic groups, sometimes hostile to one another and usually alien to each other in terms of culture, language, and history. Moreover, Moscow’s attitude to Muslim militants in the former Soviet zone was not always consistent, considering its support for the Muslim Abkhaz rebels in their effort to break away from Georgia. This suggested a degree of expediency in Russia’s policies in terms of magnifying the threat posed by non-state Islamic militants when it was useful for Moscow to do while supporting other such groups when it served Russian interests.

The ongoing conflict in Chechnya under Yeltsin and Putin was therefore a part of a history of rebellion beginning with Imperial Russia, continuing into the Soviet era, until Stalin’s mass deportations and murders led to a period of temporary pacification before resurfacing with the fragmentation of the Soviet Union. While the infiltration of foreign fighters or Jihadis with Wahhabi influence into the Caucasus was on increase under Yeltsin then Putin, claims by Malashenko that by 2006 most or all men in some Muslim republics such as Dagestan belonged to radical Islamic


25 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.70.
groups, or Jama’a, were excessive. Yet such sweeping claims were not confined to members of Russia’s intellectual and political elite. In the West some scholars too claimed as late as 2007 that despite Putin’s best efforts to assert state control Moscow was facing a ‘radical re-Islamisation of some of Russia’s Muslims and the formation of a geographically expanding, ethnically diverse, and flexibly organized terrorist Islamist network across Russia’.27

Chechnya issue therefore was one of the determining factor that shaped Russia-West Asia relationship since Putin came to power. It is evident that any West Asian government which ‘seeks Moscow’s support understands it must either side with the Russian struggle against Chechen separatists or, at a minimum, agree not to meddle.’28 With the end of the Cold War, the Israeli government has sought to better its relations with Moscow. Since 1999, Israeli intelligence has shared information with their Russian counterparts and assisted Russian forces in training and border security. As observed by Ilya Bourtman, a specialist in Russia-Israel relations, ‘Israeli officials have likened the Chechen separatists to Palestinian terrorists.’29 It is also evident that Damascus has assisted Russia diplomatically. In September 2005, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad welcomed the pro-Moscow president of Chechnya, Alu Alkhanov, to Damascus, granting the embattled Chechen leader some international legitimacy.30

E. The Demographic Challenge

The Muslim demographic factor posed a long-term challenge to the Russian state’s inter-communal comity and territorial integrity. The immediate shortage of

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26 Alexey Malashenko, N.23, p.6.


28 Igor Khestin and John Elliott, N.18, pp.21-27.


resources in the North Caucasus because of economic backwardness, however, might imbue this demographic shift with a revolutionary dynamic.\textsuperscript{31}

Russia's ethnic Muslims were a sizeable minority and continued to have considerably higher birth rates than ethnic Russians. 2002 census results indicated that there were 14.5 million ethnic Muslims and they comprised some 10 percent of Russia's population.\textsuperscript{32} Moreover, these official figures did not include several very small Muslim nationalities. In addition, several hundred thousand of the 1,457,700 respondents who chose not to identify their nationality were likely from ethnic Muslim groups. So, in 2002, ethnic Muslims probably number 15 million and comprised more than half of Russia's non-Russian population. Moreover, in 2005, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Seigei Lavrov notably advanced the number of 20 million. Others asserted that Russia could have almost 26 million Muslims, together with Azeri and Central Asian immigrants.\textsuperscript{33} Thus, if Russia's political system slighted minority aspirations for self-determination, it was likely to provoke Muslim communalism which could be translated easily into Islamic separatism and even Islamism by effective radical propaganda.\textsuperscript{34}

Russia's long-term Muslim challenge lied in the high birth rates of its ethnic Muslim population as compared to that of ethnic Russian. The number of ethnic Muslims grew by 20 percent between the 1989 Soviet census and the 2002 Russian census. Meanwhile, the country's overall population declined by just over 1 percent, and the ethnic Russian population fell by over 3 percent. Nine of Muslim nationalities' population growth reached astonishing level of over 40 percent, with the


\textsuperscript{32} A good overview of other estimate of the number of ethnic Muslims in Russia made before the carrying out of the October 2002 Russian census may be found in A. V. Malashenko, “Islam i politika v sovremennoi Rossii,” in Yu. M. Kobishchanov, ed., \textit{Musulmaneizmenyayushcheisya Rossi} (Moscow: Russian political encyclopedia, Musulmaneizmenyayushcheisya Rossi (Moscow: Russian Political Encyclopedia, 2002), pp. 7-24, at p. 8, and Hunter, Islam in Russia, pp. 43-44, cited in Gordon M. Hahn, N.27, p.8.


\textsuperscript{34} Gordon M. Hahn, N.27, p.8.
Ingush nearly doubling their numbers. Of Russia’s twenty-three Muslim nationalities included in published census data, only four declined in size in the inter-censuses, a phenomenon explained by an exodus of these groups’ members back to their ethnic homelands in Central Asia after the Soviet collapse. The ethnic Muslim groups’ higher population growth rates mean that the ranks of idle young males, especially in the North Caucasus republics, would be growing.\footnote{Gordon M. Hahn, N.27, p.10.}

With these indicators, the Muslim population’s growth rate in Russia was reportedly projected to be 0.6% annually over the next 20-year period. On the contrary, Russia’s non-Muslim population was estimated to reduce by an average of 0.6% annually over the same two decades.\footnote{‘The Future of the Global Muslim Population’, \textit{Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project}, 2011. (http://www.pewforum.org/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-russia.aspx) last accessed March 30, 2015. For Russia, with its basically conscript army, an aging and declining population—especially among native Russian males—might impact military capacities that its potential foes may seek to exploit. (Vladimir Rukavishnikov, choices for Russia, in Roger E. Kanet, ed., N.1, p.74).}

Consequently, by late into the twenty-first century the decline in the ethnic Russian population and the rapid growth among the country’s ethnic Muslims together will threaten the ethnic Russian’s majority. One estimate had it that by mid-century the ethnic Russian population will have declined to as little as 60 million, as the mortality rate increases with the passing of the much more numerous older generation. The second half of the century, all else remaining equal, should see a further decline of at least 10-15 million. If the ethnic Muslim groups’ population continues to grow at the rate it did between the 1989 and 2002 censuses, their numbers will increase to approximately 45 million by the century’s end. By that time, therefore, ethnic Muslims will form a plurality and perhaps a majority of Russia’s population, and Islam will likely begin to challenge Russian Orthodox Christianity as the country’s most widespread religion. Moreover, Russia’s Muslim republics will be overwhelmingly ethnic-Muslim. Even Orenburg Oblast, which separates Tatarstan and Bashkortostan from an external border and thus functions as a break on their secessionist aspirations, may approach majority-Muslim status.\footnote{Gordon M. Hahn, N.27, p.11.}
Therefore, Russia generally strengthened its diplomatic commitment of the Muslim world and obviously identified Muslim countries as an ideal place to locate itself enthusiastically in the 21st century world order and to enlarge its capacity and influence in the West Asia. Under those circumstances, this new dynamic in Russian foreign policy could be described in part by the growth of Muslim population and the requirements to accommodate as well as integrate them in Russia's track to come to be again a major world power.38

In order to encourage its needs to accommodate and uphold the spiritual, economic and political cooperation and development of its Muslim population, while struggling to subdue any dissemination of radical and potentially dissentient interpretations of Islam within it. With this intention, in 2003, Putin inquired about joining the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), although notably had only 20 million Muslims—nearly 15 percent of the population—Russia disqualified as to become member it required at least 50 percent minimum Muslim population.39 Though the OIC did not offer Russia full membership initially, it did grant Moscow observer status later.40

F. Russia’s Response on Cartoon Jihad

Moscow’s position became clearer during the cartoon crisis of 2006, when instead of taking side with West, Putin was quite critical. Bush strongly called the U.S. fight as a "war with Islamic fascists."41 Although Putin had fought against Muslim extremists in Russia, what worked at domestic level was not certainly what Putin prescribed for those outside Russia. On February 4, 2006, large scale dissents emerged in several Muslim countries opposing the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad by the cartoonist of Danish daily Jyllands-Posten. The same had been widely republished in other newspapers in few countries in Europe. Consequently, in

38 Vincent Gagnon-Lefebvre, N.33.

39 The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is an international organization founded in 1969 consisting of 57 member states. The organization states that it is "the collective voice of the Muslim world" and works to "safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world in the spirit of promoting international peace and harmony". The OIC has permanent delegations to the United Nations and the European Union. The official languages of the OIC are Arabic, English, and French.

40 Igor Khrestin and John Elliott, N.18, pp. 21-27.

Syria and Lebanon, some protesters went out of control and set the Danish embassies on fire. Angry mobs attacked and damaged an Italian consulate in Libya. During this crisis, Moscow was noticeably on the Islamists’ side instead of supporting the western position for free speech.\footnote{Igor Khrestin and John Elliott, N.18, pp.21-27.} 

The chairman of the International Affairs Committee of Duma (Parliament of the Russian Federation)—Konstantin Kosachev, openly criticized the government of Denmark for allowing such slanderous cartoons to be printed. Similar comments were also made by the high Russian authority, Mr. Putin. On the third day of the mass protests, Putin commented, ‘one should reflect 100 times before publishing or drawing something … if a state cannot prevent such publications, it should at least ask for forgiveness.’\footnote{Igor Khrestin, ‘Putin’s Pander’, \textit{The Weekly Standard}, March 7, 2006. (http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/011/937aqhve.asp) last accessed July 25, 2012.} 

In such circumstances, on February 17, 2006, the acting mayor of the southern Russian city of Volgograd, Mr. Andrei Dorin, announced an order to shut down the local paper Gorodskie Vesti. This was after it printed a different image that included the Prophet Muhammad together with Moses, Buddha and Jesus. At the same time, when Anna Smirnova, local editor of Nash Region in Vologda, re-published the original Danish daily newspaper Jyllands-Posten cartoons, she was confronted with charges of provocation religious animosity.\footnote{Steven Lee Myers, ‘2nd Russian Paper Shut in Cartoon Furor’, \textit{The New York Times}, February 21, 2006. (http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/21/international/europe/21russia.html?_r=1) last accessed February 1, 2015.} Accordance to the article 282 of the criminal code of Russia, this crime is punishable by an all-out sentence of five years in prison. Finally, Smirnova was fined 100,000 rubles (almost US$3,700). Later on the paper’s owners decided to shut down the newspaper mentioning concerns over safety of journalists’.\footnote{Igor Khrestin and John Elliott, N.18, pp.21-27.} There are different views. Steven Lee Myers concluded that
few days before Hamas delegation visited Moscow, president Putin shut down two Russian newspapers for republishing cartoons of the prophet Mohammed.\textsuperscript{46}

Khrestin and Elliott argued that curious moves of the Russian government were due to lack of any public commitment. In support to that argument compelling evidence can be presented. According to a nationwide survey conducted by the Levada Center, only 14 percent of respondents being outraged by the act of cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. It was commented that the majority were not concerned with this issue. Similarly, the responses of the Muslim leaders of Russia were consistently soft. Russian Supreme Mufti Talgat Tadjuddin expressively mentioned that 'in a cultured society, it is necessary that there be cultured people.'\textsuperscript{47}

While local politics were significantly involved with the crackdowns, the common feedback of Kremlin demonstrated that the fight against Islamic extremists was relative. It shows that Putin would not accept in Russia either terrorism or the ideological inspiration for terrorism, but he would selectively give grounds for something alike radicalism abroad if it promotes Moscow's interests in the Islamic world. Finally it is worthy to mention the view of Andrei Serenko, an expert at the Fund for Development for Information Policy. He concluded that shutdown of a regional newspaper was to promote Putin's position among the Muslim world bysignifying its image as the defender of Muslims.\textsuperscript{48}

G. Economic Terms

The highest Russian concern was to promote its economic interests. Russia's position in the world economy could be summarized expeditiously by focusing on its arms and energy trades. All these sectors are heavily linked with West Asia and Russia had been pursuing both.\textsuperscript{49}

Factually, Russia is the only major power not relied on the West Asia for its energy supplies. Besides other nations, Russia has developed cooperation with Israel

\textsuperscript{46} Ilya Bourtman, N.29.

\textsuperscript{47} Igor Khrestin and John Elliott, N.18, pp.21-27.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49} Marina Ottaway and Dmitri Trenin, N.10.
in information technology, communications, and energy. It has historic cooperation with Syria on diamond trade, military technical, oil, and gas cooperation.\textsuperscript{50} Russia’s economic and fiscal strength is increasing due to the price hike of oil, gas, and other extractable commodities.\textsuperscript{51} All these are contributing Russian economic growth, where West Asian cooperation remains important.

Several experts viewed that Russia, as a leading energy producer, perceived the oil and gas-rich West Asian countries as partners and competitors for its journey of better growth. Russia shares its interest in maintaining the stability in oil price, and regulates competition in the gas market, e.g., by pursuing Iran to pump its gas to India instead of Europe so as to provide leverage to export gas to EU.

In addition to energy interests, several West Asian countries also are among the few consumers of Russian high-tech exports. The available evidence suggests that in September 2011 Russia has finished the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant in Iran.\textsuperscript{52} There is similar project for Syria, and railroads in Libya and Saudi Arabia and it even leased and sold commercial airplanes to Iran. It is vital to understand the fact that since Soviet times, Russia had been as a major arms exporter to the West Asian region. Iran, Syria, Algeria, and other countries purchase Russian-made weapons and materiel consistently.\textsuperscript{53}

A foreign policy concept paper approved by Putin on June 2000 defined Moscow’s priorities in the West Asia by mentioning that Russia’s involvement is to restore and strengthen its position, particularly economic ones.\textsuperscript{54} Putin continued this


\textsuperscript{53} Dmitri Trenin, N.8, p.6.

\textsuperscript{54} Igor Khrestin and John Elliott, N.18, pp.21-27. Putin’s first state of the nation speech in 2000 contained plenty of talk about ‘patriotism’ and ‘strengthening of state, but later his rhetoric employed words of liberal economic reforming, not returning to a state economy. Therefore the concerns about the likely return to the Soviet past should be
strategic practicality through its constant engagement with Iran and Syria as well as consolidation of economic relations with Israel. In terms of arms trade, Moscow maintained strategic involvements with its previous customers in the West Asia. Russia had sold conventional weapons to Iran and Syria. It had wanted to expand its share in the arms markets long dominated by the United States – as a result, full reconciliation between Tehran and Washington would go against Moscow’s interest.\textsuperscript{55}

Based on such reality Moldavsky viewed ‘its major goals—multi-polarity and economic opportunism—are unlikely to change in the future’.\textsuperscript{56} According to the World Bank annual report 2012, the Arms exports of Russia was 6,039,000,000 US dollar in 2010 (Figure 3). Arms export includes the supply of military weaponries through sales, gifts, supports, and those made locally through manufacturing licenses. The report covered major conventional arms, such as aircraft, cannons, armored radar systems, vehicles, naval ships, and missiles. However, the figure did not cover transfers of bullets, light weapons, small arms, support equipment, small cannons, trucks, and technology transfers or additional services. The enormity of arms export shows Russia’s priority of the West Asia both for economy as well as of its strategic partnership. In summary, it can be conclude that Moscow’s foreign policy in the region had turned to be a proactive one.

4. Russia’s Policy in the West Asia during Putin Era

Although the West Asia is not important to Russia as its closest neighbors, this region is nevertheless an area of concern to Russian policy-makers largely because of its proximity to Russia’s turbulent southern borders. However, it is evident that Russia’s influence in the West Asia is nowhere near as great as that enjoyed by the Soviet Union. Absence of the resources—economic, military and political—necessary to sustain Soviet-West Asian relationships to counter US and European influence, Russian diplomacy is limited to taking a handful of niched opportunities. This included making overtures to Iran, Syria and Hamas, all of which have welcomed the

\textsuperscript{55} Dmitri Trenin, N.8, p.18.

\textsuperscript{56} Olena Bagno-Moldavsky, N.1, p.123.
opportunity to break out of their international isolation, but which have done little to enhance Moscow’s influence in the West Asia and political capital elsewhere. It can be observed, therefore, that Russia’s moves towards these actors have undermined its position in the coalition of major powers seeking to promote West Asia’s peace.\(^{57}\)

Gestures towards Hamas and relations with Iran have also done little to make up for the long shadow cast over Russia’s reputation in the Islamic world by the war in Chechnya. Russia’s recognition of Israel and its expressions of support for the global “war on terror”, widely perceived as a US-led war on Islam, also undermine its position in the Islamic world.\(^{58}\)

In Putin’s era, relations with Islamic world are nonetheless important to Russia, and represent a major challenge for its foreign policy. Russia has its own sizeable Muslim minority, estimated at 13% (figures vary between 13-20%) of its total population. Russian Muslims are no longer isolated from their co-religionists abroad, as they were during the Soviet era, and, as the unstable situation in the North Caucasus where many of this population lives would suggest, they have experienced radicalization much like the rest of the Muslim world.\(^{59}\)

Although Russia has important economic interests in the West Asia (energy and arms trade are at the top of the list), its main concern there is likely to remain security. The region’s further destabilization is something that most Russian analysts view as potentially posing a direct threat to Russian security. As observed by Aleksey Malashenko, the chair of the Carnegie Moscow Center, Russian policy towards the West Asia during two terms of Putin’s presidency, “has thus been aimed at minimizing that volatility and avoiding such destabilization.”\(^{60}\) This policy has entailed opposition to the war in Iraq, as a cause of greater regional instability; obtaining membership in the Organization of Islamic Countries in order to project the image of Russia as a friend of Islam; maintaining the relationship with Iran; courting


\(^{58}\) Eugene B. Rumer, N.57, p.28.

\(^{59}\) Ibid.,

Hamas in an effort to win grassroots support among Muslims; and other steps intended to position Russia in West Asian minds as occupying a different place in the international arena from a West seen as inherently hostile to Islam.\textsuperscript{61}

According to observers, the successes of this policy have so far been limited. It remains to be seen how effective an approach it will prove to be in the long run. Unlike US policy in the West Asia, which has sought to bring about long-term, systemic change in the region, Russian policy has been aimed at preserving the status quo and avoiding major changes. As the region changes nevertheless, this policy may well prove no more successful than US attempts to pre-empt change. All the same, Russian policymakers show few signs of modifying their tendency to deal with challenges from the West Asia largely on the hoof; confining diplomacy to making conciliatory noises as and when necessary to restore a fragile balance.\textsuperscript{62}

5. Russia’s relations with the countries of the West Asia

5.1. The Far Abroad: Iran and Turkey

Iran and Turkey emerged as powerful magnetic poles for Muslims to gravitate towards in the post-Soviet space as they sought to form their identities in the 1990s. Turkey offered the model of secular modern Islam that contrasted sharply with the revolutionary religious Shi’a version offered by Iran. In turn, Moscow’s leadership appeared genuinely concerned that the two states harbored expansionist aims in Russia’s southern backyard in Central Asia and the Caucasus and was uncertain about their impact on the significant Muslim populations of the Russian Federation. Perhaps to allay Russian fears a senior advisor to Tatarstan President Mintimer Shaimiev proposed the idea of Euro-Islam in 1998 which organically combined Muslim values with the values of liberalism and democracy. According to this idea Muslim Tatarstan, a major component of the Russian Federation, gained little from orientating itself towards large external Muslim powers and would be better served by integrating with the dynamic and prosperous European civilization in tandem with Orthodox Russia. Despite Shaimiev’s efforts to reassure Moscow the rise of Putin in 1999 confirmed that there was lingering uncertainty about Russia’s future as a unified

\textsuperscript{61} Eugene B. Rumer, N.57, p.28.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., p.19.
country and its identity. In the eyes of many Russians there was no consensus on what Russia’s national borders should be; nor was there a distinct national consciousness when Putin became president and this boldly underlined the national security necessity of establishing a clear understanding about the spheres of influence along its southwestern rim with Turkey and Iran.\(^{63}\)

By virtue of their sizeable territorial mass, large populations and indispensable geo-strategic locations Turkey and Iran were widely viewed as states of major significance in the international order. Dominating the geographic edge of the north and east of the West Asia, these two non-Arab Muslim countries historically exerted a strong influence on their Arab neighbors and established themselves as regional powers. Iran was the inheritor of a great Persian civilization while Turkey represented Sunni Turkic culture and was the successor of the long-dominant Ottoman Empire in the West Asia. Iran’s 1.6 million square kilometers landmass was double that of Turkey but its population of 80.8 million is slightly smaller than the latter’s 81.6 million.\(^{64}\) The two countries directly bordered the former Soviet Union and after 1991 became significant players in Central Asian and Caucasian affairs, consequently placing them high on the priority list among Russia’s elite foreign policy makers.\(^{65}\)

5.1.1 Iran

One can interpret Iran’s foreign policy as an expression of its revolutionary Islamic ideals. The government of the Islamic Republic spared little effort in promoting the idea of Islamic solidarity, and conflict with the Gulf Cooperation Council states sometimes came across as Shi’a resistance to Sunni domination rather than a national struggle. The prominence of clerics in the Iranian policymaking establishment and the regime’s frequent referenced to Islamic ideals added to this impression. Yet, time after time, Iran’s foreign policy revealed itself as a nationalist foreign policy, seeking to reclaim the regional influence that Iran (and Persia) had in the past, and which the present government considered to be its birthright. Time after time, as well, Iran’s foreign policy revealed a clear-eyed focus on advancing national

\(^{63}\) Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.253.


\(^{65}\) Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.254.
goals over pan-Islamic ones, for example through sustaining closer ties with non-Muslim nations such as Armenia than with Muslim nations such as Azerbaijan or Saudi Arabia.\(^{66}\)

Iran’s relationship with Russia relied far more on strategic considerations than trade. Russia, as a global power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, was an important Iranian tool in blunting efforts to isolate it. According to observers, ‘Not only has Russia vetoed UN Security Council resolutions seeking to sanction Iran, but the prospect of a Russian veto has shaped global efforts to influence Iranian behavior.’\(^{67}\)

Russia was and has been a principal military, economic, and geopolitical partner of Iran and viewed its West Asian policy through the prism of competition with the United States. Russia has been actively engaged in the West Asia since the 19th century. After a hiatus caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation began to pursue a more assertive course in the West Asia, at times significantly contradicting U.S. policy in the region, particularly in arms sales and ties with radical regimes, such as Iran and Syria.\(^{68}\)

Although Iran is not an Arab nation, it is a Muslim nation and it is involved in Arab and West Asian issues, especially the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Tehran’s relations with Moscow are thus important to Moscow-Arab relations.\(^{69}\)

**Russia-Iran Relations**

Iran and Russia shared a variety of interests, perhaps chief among them opposition to a U.S.-led order in the broader West Asia. While each approached the prospect of what it saw as U.S. hegemony differently, each came to the same

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\(^{67}\) Bulent Aliriza, Jon B. Alterman, and Andrew C. Kuchins, N.66, p.24.


conclusion: that it would be detrimental to its interests. According to Mark N. Katz, Russo-Iranian ties partly as a Russian defensive gesture against the United States. He wrote, ‘Russian analysts have long worried that an Iranian-American rapprochement could result in Western firms’ crowding out Russian ones in Iran. Beyond this, they want to prevent Washington from working with Tehran to provide an alternative route to Russia for the export of Caspian Basin oil and gas.’ Seen this way, Russia needed to stoke tension in the U.S.-Iranian relationship specially to defend its own interests.\textsuperscript{70}

A. Security Cooperation

Iran’s principal value to Moscow stemmed from a convergence of regional security interests. The Russians were appreciative of Tehran’s support for Moscow’s policies in Chechnya and the Northern Caucasus over the past two decades as well as in Central Asia—where they worked together to conclude the Tajik Civil War in the 1990s and in an informal coalition with India to support the Northern Alliance against the Taliban in Afghanistan well before 9/11.\textsuperscript{71}

The revitalization of relations between Iran and Russia under Putin was based on international developments and experiences in the 1990s, such as the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan and disappointment with the West in general but there were also strong internal economic motives that were considered. The rise in oil price in the late 1990s meant that Iran’s dollar cash flow had improved, making it an attractive potential customer for Russian exports. The still undiversified Russian economy depended on the weapons industry as its most practical and realistic export source. Moscow’s justification for selling weapons to Iran at the time was made easier because President Mohammad Khatami was a moderate. Khatami’s efforts to promote dialogue with the West even created the possibility for some Western states to resume arms sales and other exports. Some Russian analysts warned that Moscow was in danger of being left behind and ‘persistent calls by Washington to terminate Russian exports to Iran were portrayed by these circles in Moscow as being motivated by the desire of American corporations to save future opportunities in the Iranian market for


\textsuperscript{71} Bulent Aliriza, Jon B. Alterman, and Andrew C. Kuchins, N.66, p.14.
themselves'. The urgency that was felt in Moscow of maximizing the potential of the Iranian market was due to 'a growing realization in the military-industrial complex that the list of potential customers was getting too short'. China and India, while very large and lucrative partners, were insufficient as such a narrow market weakened the Russian hand in negotiations over contractual terms and undermined national security by providing the two Asian giants with weapons that could be used against the country of the original supplier.

The US invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 created in Tehran and Moscow a shared feeling of encroachment that demanded growing collaboration. On 1 May 2003 Bush prematurely declared that the war in Iraq was over and that US triumph had been achieved, with only 139 American soldiers killed since the war began in March. While this was to some extent true Washington had catastrophically failed in devising a post-Saddam strategy for the country. After Saddam Hussein, a new political reality emerged in Iraq that enabled Iran to establish a firm foothold in the country. The Shi'is formed the largest sect in Iraq and the US occupation empowered them to play a decisive role in the country’s new constitution and political system. Powerful Shi’a militias emerged, including Muqtada Sadr’s Mehdi Army, with received decisive support by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Beyond military support a contemporary assessment noted that all of Iraq’s dominant Shi’a parties ‘attract voters by relying on vast political and social-service networks across southern Iraq that, in many cases, were created with Iranian funding and assistance’. Iranian backing for the insurgency in Iraq against US troops was evident as part of a regional alliance with Syria that aimed to assert a new hegemony and undermine Western


73 Tor Bukkvoll, 'Arming the Ayatollahs: economic lobbies in Russia’s Iran Policy', Problems of Post-Communism, v.49, no.6, November/December 2002, p.32.

74 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.259.


76 Vali Nasr, 'When the Shiites rise', Foreign Affairs, 85, 4 July/August 2006.
influence. Indeed, observers noted that Iran’s sway in Iraq meant that it ‘has emerged as the main victor from the war’.

Moscow had vociferously argued since Primakov became foreign minister in 1996 that the United States was wrong to act on the basis that it was the world’s sole superpower. The US national Security Strategy of 2002 ‘arrogated the right to itself of pre-emptive military action’, without necessarily consulting with other important powers. By aligning its strategic interests with Iran Russia’s regional status was significantly enhanced. Initially, Iran appeared concerned by the ambitious and belligerent behavior by the United States, caving in to pressure and agreeing to accept the terms that allowed short notice access to nuclear facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as well as temporarily suspending uranium enrichment. Moscow was also initially stunned at the high-handed approach by the Bush administration. The military and political entanglement of the United States in Iraq however allowed the leaderships in Iran and Russia to claim a moral victory after the relentless international criticisms of the unilateralist approach by Washington.

The convergence of Russian interest with Iran over Iraq during the US occupation was an essential element of a broader strategic objective prevalent in Moscow to curtail US supremacy in the international system. Ostensibly, Moscow had little interest in allowing Iraq to become an Iranian puppet state and rather contrarily, Russia should have had more reasons to be concerned that the ascendancy of Shi’a power would aggravate the danger of militant Sunni extremism in the West Asia. While Russia was able after 2001 to skilfully manipulate Al-Qaeda terrorism to justify its own war in Chechnya and present itself as an ally of the West, the Moscow leadership recognized the danger that the Sunni insurgency in Iraq could inspire and mobilize Sunnis in and around Russia. In some respects, the motor ‘driving the relationship between Russia and Iran is their common concern about Sunni Islamic radicalism’. To a greater extent, both Iran and Russia were able to exploit Western

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78 Mike Bowker, N.77, p.95.

79 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.260.

hysteria over Al-Qaeda terrorism during Putin’s first term to divert attention from their own regional agendas by promoting the value of dialogue and cooperation with the West against terrorism. Moreover, Iran was seen as ‘a geo-political counterbalance to the expanding influence of Turkey, the United States, and Islamic Wahhabism in the South and North Caucasus and Central Asia.’ One contemporary observer argued that President Putin did not get on well with President Ahmadinejad, but as differences with Washington on arms control, missile defense, Syria, and other developments in the West Asia had grown, Moscow had found some scope for cooperation with Tehran.

In a television interview broadcast on 1 January 2008, Primakov noted that Russian-Iranian relations were long considered a high priority for Moscow, reflecting the view of a strong pro-Iranian lobby in Russia that portrayed Iran as a barrier to Western influence on its southern borders. The influence of this lobby was highlighted when in March 2001 an Agreement on the Foundations for Bilateral Relations and Principles of Cooperation was signed between Russia and Iran.

B. Economic Cooperation

Russia had huge political and economic interests with Iran. Iran was considered as one of the main recipients of Russian peaceful nuclear technology and arms sale. Moreover, Iranian oil and gas resources (4th and 2nd largest in the world respectively) were a lucrative target for future Russian investment.

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81 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.260.


83 Bulent Aliriza, Jon B. Alterman, and Andrew C. Kuchins, N.66, p.44.

84 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.261.

Energy Trade

Russia and Iran together represented the first and second in the world in natural gas reserves and second and fourth in oil production, which had encouraged the two to pursue economic partnerships involving the refining and export of oil and gas.  

Although there was little quantifiable energy trade, both worked together in exploiting gas reserves in the Caspian and signed a treaty in 2008 agreeing to cooperate on development of Iran’s gas and oil reserves but there was no joint commercial production. In addition, the long-proposed prospect of an Iranian-Russian-Qatari gas troika, which would have effectively monopolized the world’s gas market, was openly discussed by Russian and Iranian policy makers in 2008 and 2009 but the idea failed to materialize because of Moscow’s caution about the repercussions of such a move. Despite the statement by president-elect Medvedev on 19 April 2008 that ‘we support the idea of building an organization of gas-producing countries’, Russia was careful not to sacrifice its multilateral efforts in the West Asia by placing all its egg in the basket of an ultimately unstable regime in Tehran.

Due to mutual interests in Caspian which both Iran and Russia worried about external powers who would like to demolish their interest in the valuable sea, both countries thus called for Caspian Sea states to keep western influence out of the region. The five Caspian states, which include Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan, agreed in a joint declaration in 2007 that they ‘under no circumstances will allow the use of their territories by other states for an aggression or other military actions against any of the parties.’

It is evident that the two countries also shared interests in strong energy prices, as both were major energy exporters. They further had a shared interest in ensuring

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88 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p. 271.

that Europe looked eastward for its natural gas supplies, rather than south, as the opening of alternative gas supplies from the Mediterranean threatened both countries' markets.\textsuperscript{90}

Russian policymakers also remained concerned that Iran could, over the long term, emerged as a major competitor for the European gas market. Russia was Europe's largest supplier of natural gas, accounting for a quarter of the region's overall imports. Roughly 65 percent of Russian gas exports flowed to Western and East Central Europe in 2010. Iran possessed the second-largest reserves of conventional natural gas in the world. Apparently, Iranian gas would not flow to Europe soon, given economic sanctions and the time needed to develop transmission infrastructure.\textsuperscript{91}

\textbf{Arms Trade}

Russia has developed complex and close economic ties with Iran in energy, military, and technology. Since the Soviet era, a large number of Iranian scientists have been educated in Russian military academies and engineering colleges. Russian scientists and experts have continuously provided direct and indirect assistance to Iranian scientific and military development programs, while Russian state-owned and private companies have pursued their energy development and economic goals.\textsuperscript{92}

Moscow’s growing bilateral relations with Iran included large-scale military sales further indicating that there were no worries in the Kremlin about Iran's rising power and influence. Yeltsin temporarily had caved in to US pressure not to sell advanced weapons to Iran but as soon as ‘Putin became present he angered Washington by abrogating the Gor-Chernomyrdin agreement in November 2000 and resuming arms sales to Iran’.\textsuperscript{93} Putin’s action was an early statement that Russia would be looking after its own interests and that it had lost faith in pursuing pro-Western policies. President Khatami travelled to Moscow in March 2001 to ‘sign a

\textsuperscript{90} Bulent Aliriza, Jon B. Alterman, and Andrew C. Kuchins, N.66, p.24.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., p.17,

\textsuperscript{92} Ariel Cohen, N.68.

\textsuperscript{93} Mike Bowker, N.77, p.115.
new $6.5 billion arms deal,\textsuperscript{94} purchasing ‘thirty military transport planes and thirty MI-8 military transport helicopters’.\textsuperscript{95} It was reported that among the weapons systems Iran was more interested in ‘MiG-29 fighter planes and the S-300 anti-aircraft system’.\textsuperscript{96} The deal was augmented in 2006 when Russia sold over $1 billion-worth of Tor-M1 modern air-defence systems, ‘capable of protecting a target from up to 48 incoming planes or projectiles to a range of six kilometers’.\textsuperscript{97} The Russian Defense Minister Ivanov regarded this deal as an ordinary commercial trade, he stated: ‘Russia is supplying Iran with conventional armaments and military hardware such as armored vehicles and air defense equipment of a limited range. This is ordinary commercial trade and we are not going to end it.’\textsuperscript{98} Russian media report confirmed in early 2007 that half of the twenty-nine Tor-M1 missile systems bought by Iran had arrived and were being stationed around Iran’s nuclear sites.\textsuperscript{99} Yet Yevgeny Primakov, who was Russia’s ex-foreign minister and an adviser to Putin, attempted to downplay the relevance of military sales and focused instead on the pragmatic and tactical nature of Russian relations with Iran. The former prime minister, whose influence behind the scenes in policy making continued under Putin, sought to explain Russo-Iranian co-operation by stating: ‘I don’t agree with those on the left and right who say that Iran and Russia are strategic partners because a strategic partner for Russia has to have complete harmony with Russia’s interests and Iran does things that do not comply with our views.’\textsuperscript{100} To Talal Nizameddin, Primakov’s words was ‘the message to confirm that Moscow was pursuing a broader national security agenda where Iran was more of a means rather than an end.’\textsuperscript{101} After Vladimir Putin stepped

\textsuperscript{94} Owen Matthews (with Anna Nemtsova in Moscow), ‘Past as prologue: Moscow presents itself as the new “middleman” in the Middle East. But its role may actually be that of spoiler’, \textit{Newsweek International}, Feb 27, 2006. (http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11436739/site/newsweek/) last accessed February 27, 2015.

\textsuperscript{95} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.261.

\textsuperscript{96} Tor Bukkvoll, N.73, p.38.

\textsuperscript{97} Owen Matthews (with Anna Nemtsova in Moscow), N.94.

\textsuperscript{98} Ilya Bourtman, N.29.

\textsuperscript{99} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.269.

\textsuperscript{100} Interview with Evgenii Primakov on Rossiya Al-Yaum (Russia Today) TV, broadcast on January 1, 2008 in a review of the Middle East in 2007, cited in Talal Nizameddin, N.22, p.261.

\textsuperscript{101} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.261.
down in May 2008, there were claims of more advanced weapon being sold to Iran by Rosoboron export, the national arms export agency of Russia, including long range S-300 missiles. However, in 2010 President Medvedev signed a decree halting sales of long-range S-300 missiles to Iran, which directly threatened other countries in the Gulf region including Saudi Arabia as well as Israel, partly in response to international pressure.  

The Russian-Iranian Nuclear Cooperation

Among the controversial actions of Putin’s leadership was Moscow’s role in diluting Western pressure on Tehran to allow international nuclear inspectors full access to Iran’s nuclear programme. The construction of $800 million Bushehr nuclear plant, contracted to Russia in the Yeltsin era, was intended for peaceful purpose but eventually suspicions arose that Tehran was pursuing more sinister aims. From October 2000 when ‘Moscow...stepped up its efforts to complete the Iranian nuclear reactor at Bushehr (work on which had languished under Yeltsin)’  

a new trend was established and more dangerously ‘Russia–the soothing or indignant pronouncements of its leaders notwithstanding–according to many experts and officials in the area remains the world’s leading source of WMD-related items and expertise proliferation’.  

Putin and his state apparatus resiliently endorsed the Tehran regime and defended Iran’s right to pursue a peaceful nuclear programme by arguing that there was little evidence that Tehran was secretly acquiring technology for nuclear weapons.

Highlighting Moscow’s determination, Putin insisted that Tehran’s assurances convinced ‘Russia that Iran indeed does not intend to produce nuclear weapons and we will continue to develop relations in all sectors, including peaceful atomic

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102 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.269.


105 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.264.
energy.”  

Emphasizing patient negotiations as the only means to resolve Iran’s dispute with the West, ‘Russia (together with China) promised to veto any UNSC chapter VII resolution imposing sanctions to say nothing of the use of military force.’ Russia’s resolve was tested in late 2004 when Iran began its uranium enrichment process to take its nuclear programme to a more advanced stage. To deflect Western pressure Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov travelled to Tehran in October 2004 to convince the Iranian leadership to show flexibility in order to prevent tougher UN Security Council Resolutions that would embarrass Russia. Nonetheless, Moscow remained adamant that it would not compromise its role as contractor for the Iranian nuclear programme, particularly in light of the potential financial gains for Minatom, which governs the national nuclear industry. The Bushehr plant was one of several planned reactors, up to twenty according to Tehran, and its successful completion was expected to promote Russian nuclear expertise to a wider international market in a multi-billion US dollar export sector.

Moscow’s strategic support for Iran was shrewd and carefully managed to preempt growing international pressure and to avoid possible damage to Russia’s wider policy in the West Asia. Putin modified his stance in April 2005, appropriately announcing during his visit to Israel that he proposed that Iran place all its nuclear facilities under the safeguards of IAEA. Iran rejected the proposal and instead called for direct negotiation with the United States on the issue, otherwise it threatened to withdraw from the nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty altogether. Russia did not want its close coordination with Iran to jeopardize its diplomatic ties with other countries in the region, particularly Israel. The surprise victory of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the Iranian presidential election in June 2005 threatened to embarrass Putin, coming soon after his visit to Israel. Months after his election victory, in October 2005, Ahmadinejad suggested in a lecture to students that Israel ‘must be wiped off the map’. Yet Ahmadinejad’s bellicose speeches did not deter Moscow

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107 Alexei Arbatov, N.85.

108 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.264.

from maintaining extensive relations with Tehran and Russia’s dogged support for Iran in the face of widespread international criticisms reached such an extent that following Ahmadinejad’s election victory, one article in a Russian newspaper asked provocatively if ‘Russia Won the Elections in Iran?’.

In February 2006 Moscow proposed to host Iranian uranium enrichment in Russia as a safeguard that Iranian nuclear programme would receive limited fuel quantities to preserve its peaceful nature. In a bid to offset a tough Western response Putin suggested that Russia should be one of several countries that could establish uranium enrichment centers under the supervision of the IAEA. Tehran again rejected the offer, contending as ever that Iranian sovereignty was being violated by placing its nuclear programme at the mercy of international agencies and foreign countries. In 2006, as media speculation intensified that Washington was planning a military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities Putin began demanding that Iran ‘conform fully’ to its international nuclear obligation but tempered this by endorsing ‘the legitimate rights of the Iranian people to develop a nuclear-electric programme that is reliable’.

Moscow strongly endorsed a multilateral framework of negotiations with Tehran over the nuclear issue based on a 5 plus 1 formula, comprising the five Security Council Countries and Germany, as an alternative to sanctions and possible military action. Russia’s proposal received broad European sympathy in light of the lingering friction with the United States over Iraq and Putin subtly benefitted from worldwide mistrust of Washington’s aims.

The negative political ramifications of Russia’s role in shielding and developing the Iranian nuclear sector included criticism by the United States, Israel and other Arab countries, but the Russian leadership nonetheless saw political advantages to be gained because the crisis improved Moscow’s diplomatic positioning by enabling it to demand compromises in return for any positive role it played in defusing the crisis. The anti-Bush atmosphere prevailing in Europe from 2003

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112 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.265.
encouraged the Russian leadership not to acquiesce. Internally, an indicator of Putin’s toughened stance was the dismissal of Rumyantsev in 2005 as head of the Ministry of Atomic Energy and his replacement by the security services-supported Sergei Kiriyenko. This coincided with an agreement in February 2005 that allowed Russia to provide Iran with nuclear fuel following a dispute from September 2003 ‘over who pay for the return of the spent fuel from the reactor, with Iran demanding that Russia pay for it and Moscow refusing’.  

Two year later in early 2007 a dispute over delayed payment by Iran resurfaced which led to a pause in the construction work in the Bushehr plant. There were suspicions that the suspension of work was not unrelated to diplomatic pressure being placed on Russia. Rahman Qahremanpur, a member of the Iranian parliament’s National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, confessed that ‘our relations with Russia are not in a normal state right now, because Russia is under intense pressure by the Americans to cut its ties with us’. The dispute was eventually resolved in late March but the suspicions over the incident remained as conspiracy theories suggested that the whole confrontation was deliberately exaggerated by Moscow to give the impression that there was a genuine problem with Tehran. Despite the awkwardness of Russia’s cooperation with Iran in terms of wider relations with the international community, Moscow calculated that this was not significantly harmful to national interests. On the contrary, for one analyst: ‘Weapons sales, in addition to nuclear power and space co-operation, have become yet another important way to maintain the perception of Russia as a great power’. The developing nuclear industry was seen as an important source of income and employed thousands of high-level scientists who would otherwise be tempted to live and work abroad. Iran had also emerged as a geostrategic lynchpin holding Russia’s south together and an opinion became more prevalent in Moscow that persistent US threats to launch a military campaign against Iran belied a greater ambition by Washington and its allies to

113 Robert O. Freedman, N.109, p.44.


Weaken and isolate Russia. The advantages of supporting Iran’s nuclear programme far outweighed the disadvantage of Western, Arab and Israeli complaints.\footnote{116}{Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.266.}

Putin’s toughened stances on a variety of issues in the West Asia during his second term, not least Iran, raised disturbing questions about Moscow’s long-term objectives. A popular opinion maintains that Russia had no interest whatsoever in Iran becoming a military nuclear power because its influence would then be projected not only in the West Asia but also in Central Asia and the Caucasus, which Moscow would obviously be opposed to. There were other contrary indicators that Moscow saw benefits in such a development, especially as ever more damning evidence transpired that Tehran was going through the threshold required for a peaceful programme. During the tough years of bargaining at the United Nation Security Council in 2005 and 2006 Mike Bowker noted that: ‘Moscow was far more reluctant than the other powers to contemplate any form of sanctions against Iran if Tehran were, indeed, found to be developing nuclear weapon’\footnote{117}{Mike Bowker, N.77, p.118.}. In 2007, Ukraine’s populist leader Yulia Tymoshenko openly accused Russia of strengthening Iran’s hand in the nuclear crisis so that ‘the sanctions now imposed by the Security Council are so tepid that they are unlikely to be effective’\footnote{118}{Yulia Tymoshenko, ‘Moscow’s Mideast myopia’, \textit{Haaretz.com}, January 16, 2007. (http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/moscow-s-mideast-myopia-1.210203) last accessed February 27, 2015.}. Only added to the sense that Russia’s behavior lacked any genuine shared concern with the West and the United States in particular that Iran’s intentions were peaceful.\footnote{119}{Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.267.}

UNSC Resolution 1696, adopted on 31 July 2006 in the midst of war in Lebanon between Hezbollah and Israel, failed to threaten any serious measures for non-compliance and in time proved favorable to Iran and its Lebanese proxy. Russia’s role on the Security Council allowed Tehran to divert attention away from its own nuclear dispute with the United Nations by focusing on Hezbollah’s war with Israel in Lebanon in 2006, implying Moscow’s compliance with Iranian tactics. Public Iranian rejection of the Russian proposals regarding uranium enrichment pointed to
Moscow's limitations in influencing Tehran's behavior and conformed to reports that when Putin and Ahmadinejad met in New York in September 2006 the Iranian prudent bluntly told his Russian counterpart not to consider proposing any concessions by the Iranians. However, Putin was known to be a shrewd politician and there was a strong likelihood that Russia's doomed uranium enrichment proposal was made with the expectation that it would be rejected in order to deflect Western pressure on itself in light of accusations that Moscow was an integral part of a strategic triangle including Iran and Syria to weaken the US and its allies in West Asia.120

In light of the 2006 war in Lebanon, Iran emerged as an expanding if not expansionist power in the region, when also considering its established influence in Iraq and the determination to proceed in the nuclear programme. In all its schemes Russia proved to be a useful partner. Russia's stifling of various proposed UN Security Council Resolution on these issues resulted in mounting forewarnings that either the United State or Israel would unilaterally use military action to curtail Iranian power. In February 2007 a report by the IAEA claimed that in violation of previous agreements Iran had continued with its uranium enrichment programme, later confirmed by Tehran on the grounds that it was fulfilling its sovereign right not to succumb to international pressure. After the report was released speculation mounter about a US airstrike against Iran towards the end of the Bush presidency.121

Russia continued to deflect pressure on Iran by Washington and in October 2007, Putin warned, 'we should not even think of using force in this region'.122 This unambiguous message was made by Putin during his stay in Iran, the first trip by a top Kremlin official to Tehran since Stalin's visit in 1943. Typical of Putin's style, the visit was under the guise of a broader meeting comprising the Caspian Sea states, but the event was used to solidify and bolster bilateral relations with Iran, where the Russian president met both President Ahmadinejad and the supreme leader, Ali

120 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.267.

121 Ibid., p.268.

Khamenei. Within two weeks of Putin’s visit Foreign Minister Lavrov travelled to Iran on 31 October 2007 in a bid ‘to talk sense into Tehran’, according to the Russian media. In mid-December, however and in defiance of Washington Russia began delivery of nuclear fuel for the Bushehr plant with Russian officials claiming that the shipments would not be used for military purposes. When Putin as prime minister, met Ahmadinejad in July 2008 he re-emphasized Russia’s enthusiasm for Iran to complete the construction of the nuclear plant as soon as possible, in defiance of international concerns.

None-Military Trade

Russian non-military trade with Iran also recorded significant growth under Putin. Russia’s charge d’affaires in Tehran, Aleksie Dedov, noted a 43 per cent increase in the volume of trade between 2003 and 2004 alone to exceed $2 billion annually and underlining that: ‘Russia views Iran solely as its regional partner, and not as a challenger’. This was a significant improvement on the average $600 million annual turnover of the mid-1990s. An agreement was also reached in 2005 to unify the power grids of the two countries. The rise in energy prices between 1998 and 2006 increased Iranian revenues from oil and gas from $11 billion to $40 billion annually. Yet despite this additional spending power of the Iranians, overall, bilateral trade aside from the energy and military sectors remained unimpressive, with ‘Iran’s share in Russian foreign trade not exceeding 1 per cent’ in 2008 with a turnover of $3.7 billion, mostly accounted for by Russian exports ($3.3 billion). In comparison, Russian trade with Israel in 2007 was at three times the size and with turkey trade was five times the size of that of Iran, reaching over $20 billion annually. Co-operation with Iran in the technology field was also negligible when compared to

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124 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.268.


other major Asian countries, highlighted by minor projects such as the launching in October 2005 of a Russian-Iranian satellite sina-1 to allow the transmission of Russian television programmes. By 2010 Russian trade with Iran did grow to $4.2 billion but a telling comparison revealed that in the same year bilateral trade between China and Iran was at $30 billion and grew to $4.2 billion in 2011.\textsuperscript{128} China was reliant on Iran for providing its energy needs but its expanding economy also increased its capacity to replace Russia, particularly in the technology and industrial sectors.\textsuperscript{129}

The attraction of establishing closer economic ties with Iran was not helped by Tehran’s unreliability in paying for goods and services provided by Russia. According to one estimate: ‘Of the nearly $5 billion that Russia earned from arms exports to Iran in the 1990s, only about $1 billion was paid in cash.’\textsuperscript{130} In early 2007 Iran halted its cash transfers to Russia as a form of pressure by Tehran to ensure that Moscow continued to play the role of reliable partner in its struggle with the West over its nuclear programme. Iran exported pistachios and other food products to Russia but another major obstacle to trade was that ‘Freight between the two countries is possible only via the Serahs borders crossing in Turkmenistan, where the wheels of the train have to be changed, since the railway tracks have a different gauge in the former Soviet Union.’\textsuperscript{131} The failure to maximize the trade potential between the two countries was a result of a mutual reticence to view the other as an enduring strategic partner, further bolstering the view that each country saw the other as an instrument to further national goals in a broader setting.\textsuperscript{132}


\textsuperscript{129} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.270.

\textsuperscript{130} Tor Bulkvoll, N.73, p.31.


\textsuperscript{132} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.271.
5.1.2 Turkey

Russia and Turkey have had a long, often tumultuous relationship, and some of their difficulties are not so distant.  However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey and Russia have moved beyond the legacy of centuries-old enmity and rivalry. Although the conduct of its relationship with Moscow is less affected by considerations relating to the attitude of Washington than by its relationship with Tehran, Ankara is conscious of the need to avoid entanglements with its northern neighbor that would be perceived as negative from the perspective of U.S.-Turkish relations.

Among the most impressive success stories in twenty year of post-Soviet Russian foreign relations was the dramatic turnaround in Russian-Turkish economic ties. This was achieved despite lingering suspicions in Moscow that Turkey’s political elite harbored hidden ambitions to acquire influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia on the basis of Turkic connection. Putin inherited a pattern of improvement in bilateral relations after a difficult start under Yeltsin and a blip of tensions that emerged between Russia and Turkey between 1996 and 1996 when Foreign Minister Primakov endorsed the prospect of installing S-300 missile systems on the Greek-Cypriot portion of the island. The Turkish military strongly rejected the move as a direct challenge to national security and implied the threat of force to prevent their installation.

Throughout the 1990s, while Russia was undergoing military reductions in terms of troop number and equipment Turkey was rapidly expanding its military capabilities. The election of Necmettin Erbakan as Turkey’s first Islamist prime minister in June 1996 created an unease in Moscow because he had expressed sympathy with the Chechen cause. Primakov’s floating of the possibility of installing the S-300 missiles in Greek-Cyprus appeared to be a manoeuvre to remind Erbakan of Russia’s reach. The Russian leadership was suspicious about Turkey providing

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134 Bulent Aliriza, Jon B. Alterman, and Andrew C. Kuchins, N.66, p.4,

135 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.273.
logistical support to Chechnya during and after the 1994-1996 war, which considerably weakened Moscow’s grip on the recalcitrant Caucasian republic.\textsuperscript{136}

In 1999, relations began improving rapidly again after Erbakan was pressured into resining in mid-1997 by the Turkish military and Russia withdrew plans to install the missiles in Cyprus. This detent occurred in parallel to a warning of relation between Grecce and Turkey.\textsuperscript{137}

The positive atmosphere was made possible by Ankara’s general active pursuit of a co-operative policy towards Moscow at the time Putin was elected president in 2000 in line with the adopted strategy of normalization with the neighborhood, known as a policy of “zero problems” with neighbors in order to seek to leverage Turkey’s geostrategic location in the center of Eurasia, as well as its historical Ottoman ties and Muslim affinities, to give Turkey “strategic depth” and wider influence. A key element of this policy was expanding trade and economic cooperation with all of Turkey’s neighbors, especially with Russia and Iran.\textsuperscript{138} This concept developed by Ahmet Davutoglu—an influential advisor to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul—which helped the convergence to come about’.\textsuperscript{139} Davutoglu, with a similar pragmatic diplomatic mindset to that of Primakov in Russia, was later named Turkish minister of foreign affairs in May 2009 and the Turkish Prime Minister in 2014.\textsuperscript{140}

In response to Russia’s financial crisis in 1998 Moscow could ill afford the deterioration of relations with Turkey and co-operation resumed with greater urgency. The blatant pro-Western approach in Russia had subsided when Putin was elected in 2000 and a new pragmatic nationalist policy dominated but this did not hinder the improvement of relations with Turkey but rather helped promote them because Russian disappointment with the detached West necessitated greater priority being

\textsuperscript{136} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.274.

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.,

\textsuperscript{138} Bulent Aliriza, Jon B. Alterman, and Andrew C. Kuchins, N.66, p.3,


\textsuperscript{140} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.274.
afforded to influential countries closer to home. In his bid to promote better bilateral
relations, 'Putin lamented the fact that a Russo-Turkish political agreement lags
behind economic ties'\textsuperscript{141} in light of the power the two countries possessed to counter
threats in the West Asia and Central Asia. The new policy initiated by Primakov
encouraged a multi-polar world and close-co-ordination with large Eurasian states,
including China, India, Iran and Turkey, placing them at the heart of Russian national
interests.\textsuperscript{142}

\textbf{Russia-Turkey Relations}

The positive developments regarding these two countries relations in Putin era
were first materialized in action plan signed in New York in November 2001 by
Foreign Ministers Ismail Cem and Igor Ivanov outlining trade and tourism as the
backbone of long-term relations between the two countries. The plan, entitled From
Bilateral Relations to Multidimensional Relations, created mechanisms of co-
operation ranging from fighting terrorism to co-ordination on Caucasian and Central
Asian Affairs.

\textbf{A. Security Co-operation}

A positive outcome of political co-operation, for Turkey at least, was Russia's
closing down of the office of the PKK, Kurdish Workers Party, in Moscow and an
asylum request by Kurdish rebel Abdullah Ocalan was refused, leading to his eventual
capture by Turkish authorities.\textsuperscript{143} During Turkish Prime Minister Ecevit’s visit to
Moscow in 1999, Vladimir Putin as Prime Minister declared that ‘regardless of their
origins, Russia never supported, and will not support in the future, terrorism against
Turkey’.\textsuperscript{144}

\textsuperscript{141} Lionel Martin, 'Putin in Turkey: the unending quest for multipolarity', \textit{Eurasia Daily Monitor}, 1, 146, December 13, 2004
(http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=27237&no_cache=1#.VP1p9vmsW6 M) last accessed March 1, 2015.

\textsuperscript{142} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.274.

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., p.275.

The US war on terror and the invasion of Iraq further added to Turkey’s significance for Moscow because of its strategic location, leading one veteran expert of Russian foreign policy to claim, in the context of the Iraq war in 2003, that ‘Only three countries in the region are of primary significance to Moscow, and these are Iran, Iraq and Turkey.’

Moscow’s efforts to consolidate relations with Turkey were boosted by rising Turkish nationalism and sense of affinity with fellow Muslims, which was energized by Bush’s declared war on terror and the invasion of Iraq, both perceived among ordinary Muslims as a war on Islam. The political and economic policy elites in Turkey considered ‘enhanced relations with Russia as a counterweight to ties with the EU and the United States, should Ankara run into problems with Washington with regard to the war in Iraq or with Brussels during EU accession talk.’

The perceived snobbery by the EU in the handling of Turkey’s aspiration for membership created a popular resentment by Turks and, more significantly, hostility transpired towards the West by nationalist elements among Ankara’s rising political and security leaderships. As a reflection of this trend, ‘In March 2002, the secretary general of the Turkish National Security Council, General Tuncer Kilinc, declared that Turkey should form an “alliance” with Russia.’

Turkey, like Saudi Arabia, was opposed to the invasion of Iraq not out of any particular sympathy for Saddam Hussein but because of predications that it would drastically alter the delicate regional balance, taking into account all its religious and ethnic intricacies. Saudi Arabia’s primary concern was the influence Iran would acquire because of the strengthening of the Shi’is but for Turkey there was also a deep anxiety that the war would unleash a

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147 Sener Akturk, ‘Turkish-Russian relations after the Cold War’, *Turkish Studies*, 7, 3, September 2006, p.344.
widespread Kurdish uprising launched from the independent Kurdish entity in northern Iraq.\footnote{Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.275.} 

Moreover, the Iraq War 2003 also resulted in Turkey's new orientation to tone down excessive reliance on the United States after several episodes that led to disillusionment, particularly regarding Washington's support for the Kurd and over the Congressional support for the Armenian genocide as historic fact. Talal Nizameddin noted that in a climate of growing Turkish disenchantment with the United States, 'Ankara and Moscow downplayed their main differences over Russia's longstanding support for the Kurds.'\footnote{Soner Cagaptay and Mark Parris, 'Turkey after the Iraq War: Still a U.S. Ally?', \textit{The Washington Institute}, 2003 (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-after-the-iraq-war-still-a-u.s.-ally) last accessed August 12, 2014.}

\textbf{B. Trade Relations}

A number of academics held the view that Russia's positive interests with Turkey were predominantly economic and very much focused on oil and gas. The impressive Turkish-Russian rapprochement that began a little over a decade ago had been principally fueled by dramatic increases in trade, investment, and tourism. But on regional foreign and security policy, Turkey remained only an occasional partner for Russia.\footnote{Bulent Aliriza, Jon B. Alterman, and Andrew C. Kuchins, N.66, p.13.}

Moscow successfully nurtured the emergence of Turkey as a major trading partner in the region and as a comparative example, Russia's volume of trade with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in Caucasus in 1996 was 'less than 5 percent of the 1991 trade figures, and for Central Asia only about 10 percent' whereas trade with Turkey grew by over 50 percent in the same period.\footnote{Rajan Menon, Yuri E. Fedorov, and Ghia Nodia, eds., \textit{Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia: the 21st Century Security Environment}, v.2, (New York: M.E Sharpe, Inc., 1999) p.120.}

The Turkish AK party's government made improving relations with Russia a priority since it took office in 2002. Trade with Russia began to grow in the last decade of the Soviet period, and Ankara sought to use deepening economic and energy ties to pave the way for cooperation on political and security issues. The
Kremlin also tried to leverage those ties to encourage Ankara to pursue a more independent stance in international politics, periodically challenging U.S. and European policies.\textsuperscript{152}

\textbf{Figure 1 Turkish-Russian Trade}

\begin{center}
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\textbf{Source: adopted from Turkish Statistical Institute (http://www.turkstat.gov.tr)}
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Under Putin trade, investment, and tourism between Turkey and Russia grew enormously. The high level of economic relations between Turkey and Russia become the most important component of their bilateral multi-dimensional relations. Under Putin the growth rate in the value of bilateral economic relations was even more impressive, with the volume of trade doubling between 2003 and 2004 to reach almost $10 billion annually.\textsuperscript{153} Following Putin's historic visit to Turkey in December 2004 there were four meetings between the Russian president and Prime Minister Erdogan in 2005 and in that year the volume of bilateral trade reached an all-time high of $15

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\textsuperscript{152} Bulent Aliriza, Jon B. Alterman, and Andrew C. Kuchins, N.66, p.v.

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billion.\textsuperscript{154} Trade volume between two countries exceeded 25.2 billion dollars, as of the first 11 month of 2007, making Russia, Turkey's second trading partner after Germany. Russia was now the main import source for the Turkish economy. Imports from Russia accounted for about 13% of overall imports. Turkey's share in Russia's foreign trade also reached significant levels. As of 2007, Turkey, with a share of about 5%, was Russia's 4th export country. Russia's imports from Turkey were also increasing and reached 4.3 billion dollars in the first 11 month of 2007. The total value of projects undertaken by Turkish contractors in Russia surpassed 26 billion dollars, making Russia by far the most important market for Turkish construction services. As for Turkish direct investments in Russia, they were estimated to have reached 5.6 billion dollars. At the same time, there was a growing interest by the Russian firms, especially in the telecommunications, energy and tourism sectors, in investment in Turkey. Tourism was yet another economic area where bilateral relations have grown at a very rapid pace. Where in 1999 the number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey was below 500 thousand, this figure reached 2.4 million in 2007. Turkey had become the most preferred holiday destination for Russians. The number of Turkish tourist visiting Russia was also rapidly growing and reached about 200 thousand.\textsuperscript{155}

\textsuperscript{154} Suat Kınıklıoğlu, N.139, p.6.

Trade in energy products

Economic relations between the two countries were diverse, yet central to these ties was the construction of a new energy transportation infrastructure to deliver gas to the European Union and the Mediterranean Sea. The geo-strategic significance of this new energy infrastructure was immense and consequently Russian-Turkish relations were marked by contradictions in the Putin era with regard to the gas pipelines issue.\textsuperscript{156} Turkey's strategic position was unrivalled in terms of pipeline routes and according to one study in 2007, 'Ten producers, with 35.5 percent of global gas reserves, are or might potentially be interested in using Turkey as a transit country to the EU.'\textsuperscript{157} Turkey's largest share of gas imports arrived from Russia followed by neighboring Iran. The gas network project known as Blue Stream took Russian gas via 1,250 kilometers of pipelines under the Black Sea, emerging in Samsun on the Turkish coast and reaching the capital Ankara. From there it was

\textsuperscript{156} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.278.

\textsuperscript{157} M. Ali Tekin and Iva Walterova, 'Turkey's geopolitical role: the energy angle', \textit{Middle East Policy}, 14, 1, Spring 2007, p.85.
planned to extend the route to the Eastern Mediterranean, potentially supplying Israel and Lebanon as well as other states in the West Asia. The gains from the Blue Stream venture with Turkey were offset by direct competition as Russia looked alternative outlets. After Putin stepped down after completing two four-year terms to abide by constitutional term limits but retained power as prime minister, Russia initiated work in 2009 for a South Stream project that extended the pipelines network from below the Black Seas to southern Europe through Bulgaria. As a result of these and other projects Russia in the Putin era had expanded an energy pipeline infrastructure bridging Asia and Europe to empower Moscow in its strategic bargaining position vis-à-vis Europe and the West in general.158

Western government promoted trans-Turkish pipeline routes from the Caspian Basin countries to undermine a Russian monopoly of energy supplies to Europe and promote diversification of suppliers and routes. Chief among Moscow’s objections was the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, taking Azeri and Kazakh oil to the West, because it was considered ‘as a challenge to its status in the Caspian basin and an obstacle to its oil trade’.159 However, it was observed at the time that Turkey also desired to lessen its heavy dependency on Russian natural gas and oil through diversification. ‘Meanwhile, Russian efforts to control the flow of energy from the Black Sea and Caspian Basin regions threatened Turkey’s ambition to play a key role in expanding the East–West energy transit corridor—even as it further developed its own North–South energy axis with Russia.’160

Turkey’s heavy dependence on Russia for gas, accounting for half of its total gas imports since 2004, complicated matters further because Ankara preferred not to antagonize Moscow by challenging its regional energy strategy.161 Alexi Miller, as Gazprom Chief Executive Officer, accompanied Putin to Turkey in December 2004 to enhance strategic co-operation in the gas sector so that during Putin’s second term,

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158 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.279.
161 M. Ali Tekin and Iva Walterova, N.157, p.89.
sources suggested that Turkey imported 65 percent of its natural gas and 20 percent of its oil from Russia. The contradictory role of Turkey as a major energy-dependent customer and energy transportation rival was deftly handled by Moscow and Ankara in order to allow development of bilateral relations to flourish. Moreover, in 2012 Turkey not only reached agreement for Russia to build a second pipeline through its territories but also to construct its first nuclear power facility.\footnote{Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.279.}

**Arms Trade**

The leadership around Putin was keenly aware that while the Russian army was demoralized the Turkish armed forces grew by 20 percent in the 1990s and became ‘capable of fielding within a short period of time over 1 million troops’.\footnote{Andrei V. Zagorski, ‘Traditional Russian security interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia; perceptions and realities’, in Menon, Rajan, Yuri E. Fedorov and Ghia Nodia, eds., *Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia* (New York: East West Institute, 1999).} Such factors encouraged Russia under Putin to sell Russian arms to Turkey and also to work on joint military-industrial projects, of which a showpiece was the $4.5 billion deal involving attack helicopters built in partnership with Israel.\footnote{Oktay F. Taurisever, 'Turkey and Russia in Eurasia', in Lenore G. Martin and Dimitris Keridis, eds., *The Future of Turkish Foreign Policy* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004) p.149.} This was a major breakthrough considering that a ‘request that NATO markets be opened to Russian-manufactured weapons was rejected by the NATO negotiators’ under Yeltsin.\footnote{Igor Khripunov, N.115, p.44.} Turkey was a force to be reckoned with but Moscow also understood Ankara’s problems, such as Kurdish separatism, a fragmented Iraq and a difficult Syrian regime and all these problems created useful opportunities for closer co-ordination.

**C. Security Relationship**

Beyond economics, Russia’s foreign policy elite rated Turkey as a military power that required special consideration. Turkey boasted a military establishment that was the largest in the region with approximately 625,000 active duty military personnel instantly making it a formidable military actor even without considering its critically important ties to NATO. Turkish military spending more than doubled to $6.8 billion in 1996 from a decade earlier and continued to grow steadily while post-
Soviet Russia struggled to maintain expenditure on the basic infrastructure of its armed forces. Consequently, under Putin there was an increasing trend towards developing military coordination, beginning with the naval Black Seas Force that was formed in April 2001 and comprised Turkey, Russia, Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia.\textsuperscript{166} Significantly the venture was ‘the first time Turkey and Russia [were] participating as part of a major military contingent in 500 years of bilateral relations.’\textsuperscript{167} As further gesture of mutual trust in 2008 a Russian and Turkish military band performed together in the Kremlin, a minor but symbolically meaningful event.

As a result of the pragmatism shown by both leaderships, bilateral co-operations adopted an approach that focused on shared national security interest based on stabilization rather than conflict. With Ankara’s defence elite diversifying its arms suppliers to include Russia and promoting interdependence on the political and economic fronts, the image of Turkey as a NATO wedge driven into Russia’s southwest region faded during the Putin era to the extent that the two countries began exploring geo-strategic partnerships, particularly with regards to the Caucasus and Central Asia. Putin’s visit to India in December 2004 preceded his visit to Turkey in the same month, during which notions of a Eurasian foreign policy in the midst of concerns about US hegemony were revived. It was duly noted that: ‘Primakov was obsessed with the idea of strategic alliance among Moscow, New Delhi, and Beijing. But some political analysts seem to believe that it would be unwise to underestimate Ankara’s potential to become Russia’s strategic partner as well.’\textsuperscript{168} The security relationship followed the lead of trade relations and ‘in 2008 Medvedev stated that Turkey is becoming Russia’s “Strategic Partner” and in 2010 Turkey officially struck Russia from its “list of external security threats”’.\textsuperscript{169} Such propositions were an indication that Russian-Turkish relations had to some extent a long way under Putin.

\textsuperscript{166} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.279.

\textsuperscript{167} Sener Akturk, N.147, p.345.

\textsuperscript{168} Igor Torbakov, ‘In search of trilateral power, Putin goes East’, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 1, 1-41, December 6, 2004. (http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=27251&no_cache=1#.VP1xDPmsW6M) last accessed March 1, 2015.

D. Conflict of interests

Russia and Turkey also overcame a historic dispute over the Straits of the Bosporus and the Dardanelles, Russia’s naval gateway out of the Black Sea and into the world. Moscow was aware that “up to 25 percent of Russian foreign trade to the Mediterranean [passed] through the Black Sea Straits”.\textsuperscript{170} Turkey had long claimed that unrestricted shipping through the Straits posed an environmental hazard, particularly to the 11 million population of Istanbul. Ankara argued that the narrow straits were located on densely populated coastal cities and, if shipping was left unregulated, especially with regard to nuclear warships, would create risk on a catastrophic scale. Turkey insisted on the terms of the Montreux Convention of 1936 that allowed it to control access of military ships from other nations while maintaining the principle of the freedom of shipping for cargo and trade. Tensions first emerged in July 1994 when Turkey introduced restrictive measures and again applied further restriction in December 2002 that led Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov to protest in May 2003 that “decisions to change cargo transit rules should never be taken unilaterally”.\textsuperscript{171} However, differences over the Straits were submerged after 2003 in recognition of mutual political interests and under Putin there was special emphasis on developing the economic sector.\textsuperscript{172}

5.2 The Levant

5.2.1 Syria

Despite their many common interests (including opposition to American "hegemony" in general and to the American led intervention in neighboring Iraq in particular), Russian-Syrian relations have not been particularly close during most of the Putin era. Russian-Israeli relations, by contrast, became very close under both Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Since Syrian President Bashar al-Assad met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow in January 2005, however, Russian-Syrian relations have improved dramatically. Russia has even agreed to sell an advanced air defense missile system to Syria over both American and Israeli


\textsuperscript{171} Robert O. Freedman, N.145.

\textsuperscript{172} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.277.
objections. Russian-Syrian cooperation deepened since then despite Damascus’s increasing isolation over its role in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Yet while increasing cooperation with Syria, Putin has sought to maintain close ties to Israel. While this has not been easy, he has been relatively successful at this delicate balancing act—at least so far.  

Russia-Syria Relations

The Soviet Union had excellent relations with Syria during the Cold War era. Syria received Soviet support in its war against Israel both in 1967 as well as 1973. Syria continued to receive generous help from the Soviet Union before the disintegration of the communist state in 1989. However, when Putin assumed office, the ties with Damascus were not really robust. The most important reason was that Syria was in no position to repay the Soviet era debts to Russia, and Russia unlike its predecessor could not write off the debt because of its own economic woes. With the Russian economy’s resurgence, it was natural that the Russian would once again reach out to their Syrian friends. With President Bashar al-Assad’s visit to Moscow in January 2005, the relations received a major boost. Putin remarked that ‘Syria is a country with which the Soviet Union had, and today’s Russia has, special [and] very warm relations.’ To praise Moscow and urge it to play a bigger role in international affairs, Syrian President Assad asserted that ‘Russia’s role in the world is very large, and it has a colossal authority, especially in the countries of the Third World.’ He went on to state that ‘in these countries, there are great hopes that Russia will restore its earlier positions in world affairs.’ During the visit Moscow agreed to write off three-fourths, or $9.8 billion of Syria’s $13.4 billion Soviet-era debt, most of which was to pay for arms purchases. For Russia, Syria was significant because it was a


major client of Russian arms and despite Syria’s weak economic credentials; Russia valued the relation with Syria. In addition, Russia was aware of the fact that peace in the region could not be attained without full Syrian cooperation and having Syria on its side gave Russia a strong card to play in the fragile peace process.  

In fact there are several reports that Russia, at that time, was also pushing for establishing full-fledged naval bases in the Syrian ports of Tartus and Latakia. Despite vehement denials from Russian defense establishment, this news were floating around for a while. Russia was for long worried about the American naval superiority in the West Asian seas and would not want to forego any opportunity to set up its own bases in the region. It is evident that the Tartus can serve as a base for Russia’s Black Sea Fleet, away from its Sevastopol base. Moreover, the base could be armed with S-300PMU-2 missiles with a range of 200 km offering a shield for Syria from Israeli and American attacks.

However, Ed Blanché differently concluded that Russian plan to reactivate old navy bases in the West Asia was considered just to assert Russia’s position and influence in the region. Western concerns that the Kremlin sought to extend its naval presence, particularly in the Mediterranean, with permanent bases in Syria and possibly Libya and the Red Sea, while also considering reactivating an abandoned Cold War base in southern Yemen, were to heightened by the prospect that Ukraine would eject Russia’s Black Sea Fleet from its base at Sevastopol on the Crimean Peninsula. Moscow’s lease on the base, the only route for the Russian Navy into the

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178 For several years, moreover, there have been reports that Moscow and Damascus have been discussing the possibility of Russia acquiring a major naval base in Tartus on Syria’s Mediterranean coast. Although Russian warships still dock at the port to load fuel and supplies, the Soviet Fifth Mediterranean Squadron made greater use of it facilities. Having a semi-permanent base at Tartus would allow the Russian navy to expand its presence in the eastern Mediterranean. In addition, improving security ties with Syria could strengthen Russia’s great power aspirations and increase its influence in the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. It would also weaken Syrian incentives to move away from Russia in order to improve relations with the Obama administration. (Richard Weitz, *Global Security Watch—Russia: A Reference Handbook* (California: ABC-Clio, LLC, 2009) p.30). However, it was reported in June 2013 that all Russian military personnel had been evacuated from the navy resupply base in Tartus due to security concerns amid the on-going Syrian Civil War which started in 2011. (‘All personnel withdrawn from Russian navy base in Syria – diplomat’, *RT*, June 16, 2013 (http://rt.com/politics/navy-diplomat-syria-base-251/) last accessed May 20, 2015.

Mediterranean via the Dardanelles, expires in 2017. At the same time, Rom Phiramontri, the Director of Center for Russian Studies of Chulalongkorn University, argued that ‘it was evident at the time that Russia’s defense budget was decreased and consequently Russia would not be interested to enlarge its external presence in the region.’ In support of this argument, it is worthy to note that the intention of Putin was to reduce the size of Russian armed forces while simultaneously strengthening its presence in the region.  

Apart from seeking to reactivate a naval base, re-arming Moscow’s former client was one crucial component of Russian strategy. There were other deals on the table like the Iskander-E surface-to-air missiles, Igla Sa-18s, Strelets missiles and the Tor M1 systems leading to vehement protests from Israel and the United States. Perhaps due to the intense American and Israeli pressures, Putin cancelled the deal at the last moment but did not give any guarantee that such deals may not take place in the future. Mark N. Katz, one leading expert of Syrian-Russian relations, believes that Israeli pressure on Russia succeeded in changing the dynamics of Russian weapons sale to Syria. Indeed, the fact that Moscow would not sell Syria the air defense missiles it apparently wanted most (S-300, Iskander-E, and Igla) because of American and Israeli objections must have been a clear indication to Damascus of how Israeli security concerns limits Moscow’s overtures to cooperate with Syria. At the same time, in spite of the cancellation, it is evident that a few Strelets missiles were sold to the Syrians. Russia also tried to pacify the Israelis by leaking to Israel the tactical characteristics of the missiles. Israel argued that ‘these missile will ostensibly find their way to the Hezbollah and there are unconfirmed reports regarding its usage in the current Lebanese crisis [in 2006]’.

While Syria offered the Russian military industry a market, Russia was apprehensive about the profitability as well. The Syrian economy was not quite

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181 Interview to Dr. Rom Phiramontri, The Director of Center for Russian Studies of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand. January 10, 2012.


183 Mark N. Katz, N.30.

184 Rajendra Madhukar Abhyankar, ed., N.177, p.286.
capable enough for placing large orders and the Russians were weighing the costs of inviting American displeasure as well as losing some lucrative business with Israel as well. At that time, Russia was involved in a balancing act, trying to please all the actors involved. For example even as the Strelets sales was on, Russia sided with the United States and Israel in forcing the Syrian troops to withdraw from Lebanon, almost abandoning Syria. In fact, the Russian Foreign Minister was quite categorical in saying that ‘Syria should withdraw its troops from Lebanon,’ to the surprise of many observers. Putin was later tried to assuage Syrian sentiments by sending this Chief of General Staff to Damascus after the event. Among the issues discussed were Hamas (some of whose leadership is based in Syria) and the prospects for new weapons deals. Some Russian military analysts predicted that Russia would again propose to sell the Tunguska mobile air defense system to Damascus. In 2006, Hezbollah used Russian anti-tank rockets provided by Syria against Israeli forces. Since then, Russia had continued to deliver weapons to Syria despite U.S. and Israeli objections. Likewise, Iran continued to provide arms and training to Hamas and Hezbollah via Syria.

Despite having obviously supported arms to Syria, Russia also played a role of peace mediator in a conflict that it was visibly taking side. Russia supported a peace settlement between Israel and Syria and did not react painfully to the indirect Syrian-Israeli talks facilitated by Turkey. Moscow did not seek to undermine the international investigation into the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, which was blamed on the Syrian secret services.

Another important area of co-operation between Russia and Syria was in the energy sector. Russia (previously the USSR as well) had assisted Syria in building

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186 Rajendra Madhukar Abhyankar, ed., N.177, p.286.

187 Ilya Bourtman, N.29.

188 Ariel Cohen, N.68.

189 Dmitri Trenin, N.8, p.10.
several hydroelectric projects and heating plants, which at that time provided 30 per cent of the country’s needs. In addition, Syria experienced a severe shortage of energy supplies and negotiated with Russia on this issue. In December 2005 both countries signed an agreement in the gas sector to construct a pipeline worth $370 million to Syrian port of Ar-Rayyan and a gas processing plant at Palmyra as well as a multibillion dollar preliminary contract to build an oil refining and petrochemical complex in Syria.\textsuperscript{190} Both countries also reached to an agreement on nuclear cooperation as well like the 1999 intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in the field of peaceful use of nuclear power. However, due to severe opposition from the US and Israel as well as the Syrian inability to come up with hard cash have seriously hampered the development of these ties.\textsuperscript{191}

5.2.2 Israel

While the Soviet Union was among the first states to recognize Israel in 1948, Moscow quickly changed course and aligned itself with Arab nationalist regimes. The USSR severed diplomatic relations with Israel following the 1967 Six-Day War and subsequently supported Palestinian nationalist and terrorist movements in the West Bank and Gaza. Only in October 1991, shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, did Moscow and Jerusalem again exchange ambassadors. During the Yeltsin years (1991-99), Russian-Israeli relations were relatively good, especially in terms of trade. But they again cooled during Yevgeny Primakov’s tenure as foreign minister (1996-98) and prime minister (1998-99). Strongly pro-Arab, Primakov sought to shift Moscow’s policy once more into the Palestinian camp.\textsuperscript{192}

Under Putin, Russia had not only declined to adopt Western Europe’s increasingly shrill anti-Israel posture, but in many ways he had actually tilted Russian policy in Israel’s favor, at least with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It would be a mistake, however, to interpret recent Russian shifts as due to a fundamental


\textsuperscript{191} Rajendra Madhukar Abhyankar, ed., N.177, p.286.

ideological shift. Putin neither sought to please Washington nor to accommodate any domestic political imperative. Rather, Moscow's new West Asia policy resulted from Putin's personal calculation of Russian interests, one that did not find many other takers in his own government. Putin's two-track policy working with Israel, while also simultaneously working with Israel's enemy irks its relation with Israel, however to gain interests from every side of conflict was main character of Russia's foreign policy inevitably.


Soon after Putin's election as Russian president in 2000, the Camp David II Summit was held in July bringing together PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak under the personal mediation of US President Bill Clinton. Although Russia endorsed the event and was nominally a co-sponsor of the ongoing peace process it was excluded from the meeting held between 11 July and 25 July. The Camp David II Summit was a rare opportunity to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, in part because Clinton was very keen to end his presidency in its final year with the achievement of being termed global peacemaker. Barak had also indicated a genuine commitment to a comprehensive resolution after he withdrew Israeli troops from south Lebanon and he also offered Syria to return the Golan Heights according to the 1967 border. Yet despite such positive indicators the divisions between Israel and the Palestinians stubbornly persisted and had become more complex over time. Among the most contentious points of dispute was the status of Jerusalem, which Israel claimed was its united and eternal capital, while Palestinians wanted the eastern part of the city as their own capital. Moreover, Israeli public opinion was unwilling to allow the depopulation of all existing settlements in West Bank while the Palestinian leadership insisted on the right of all refugees to return. Moscow was noticeably detached from these issues and remained so during further efforts in 2000 to find a breakthrough, including at the Sharm Al-Shaikh gathering in October that was organized by the United States and Egypt, where Israeli-Palestinian talks were again conducted without Russian participation.  

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194 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.205.
The failure of the peace efforts on the Syrian and Palestinian fronts and a new violent uprising, known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada that broke out in late September 2001, proved to be a decisive political blow to Prime Minister Barak and he was replaced by the hawkish Ariel Sharon in March 2001. In this setting, Putin visited Israel in May 2001 with the purpose of improving bilateral relations. Sharon praised Putin during the visit and suggested that Russia's position had become more sympathetic to the Israelis than the Europeans. Attitudes in Russia had become more flexible towards Israel in the early Putin years and 'with the exception of a small number of left-wing and nationalist papers, most of the Russian media were...generally more pro-Israeli than in Western Europe, and the Russian public, while alarmed about the event remained largely detached and neutral'.

Security Cooperation: Counter Terrorism

In the light of the terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001, Putin sought to present Russia as a comrade-in-arms with the Western world and Israel fighting against barbaric Islamic terrorism. It was not missed by observers at the time that Putin's close identification with Bush against Islamic terrorism was bold 'even to the extent of welcoming (to the chagrin of the Russian military establishment) closer American ties with other Soviet successor states in the pursuit of what he was quick to identify as a common enemy'. Israel was a seeming natural partner in this global struggle.

Israeli opinion-makers supported the vision of forming a broad alliance, with commentators such as Ariel Cohen warning that: 'The ideological expansion of radical Islam cannot be stopped without the cooperation of US, Western Europe, Russia, India, Israel and other countries.' Putin was nonetheless forced to restrain his participation in this coalition and heed the calls of domestic interest groups to maintain good relations with the Arab and wider Muslim world. According to one

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195 Andrej Kreutz, N.69, p.72.


197 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.206.

Russian analyst, among those unhappy with a warming of relations with Israel were 'pro-Arab elements in Russia’s Foreign Ministry and in the increasingly influential secret police who hope to restore the close ties Moscow had in the Arab world in Soviet times.'\textsuperscript{199} Only months before 11 September 2001 'Muslim deputies in the Duma created their own separate parliamentary caucus claiming the defense of the Palestinian people as one of its major goals.'\textsuperscript{200} Internationally, coordinating too closely to Israel antagonized important partners such as Iran and damaged economic interests in the West Asia as well as risked alienating Russian and neighboring Muslims.\textsuperscript{201}

The nature of the strategic US-Israeli alliance further hindered efforts to improve relations with Israel because critics argued that Russia would always play second fiddle. Efforts to stimulate military cooperation between Israel and Russia, for example, ended in failure because of commitments that 'Israel must clear with the United States any significant transfer of advanced technology. Domestically, the Israeli government is under pressure to stay away from military-technical cooperation with Russia until there is convincing evidence that Moscow is not leaking nuclear and missile technologies to Iran.'\textsuperscript{202} The Russian-Israeli rapprochement eventually reached its peak in 2002 and from then on Moscow’s slant became more evidently and consistently unfavorable.

A discernible turning point can be traced to April 2002 when the Israeli military launched an operation against the Palestinian town of Jenin, in an act of collective punishment, which resulted in high civilian casualties and was accompanied by the imposition of a blockade on the town’s residents that prevented the supply of basic humanitarian aid. In response, the tone of criticism from Moscow became acutely more severe while the United States maintained its unquestioning support for Israel in the face of international outrage. This coincided with Russian displeasure with Israel for placing Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat under house arrest


\textsuperscript{200} Andrej Kreutz, N.69, p.72.

\textsuperscript{201} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.206.

\textsuperscript{202} Igor Khripunov, N.115, p.44.
from the end of 2001 and Moscow’s rhetoric became more vigorous in its criticism after his residential compound was placed under siege and shelled to a bare skeleton by the Israeli military in September 2002.

There were three compelling reasons for Russia to adopt a stronger anti-Israeli position at that time: First, the image of Arafat and the residents of Jenin being blockaded while enduring heavy shelling by the powerful Israeli military gained strong international public, including European, sympathy; Second, by not explicitly supporting the Palestinians Russia risked burning all its bridges with the Arab and Islamic world, which was already offended by the US anti-Islamic rhetoric in its war on terrorism; Third, there was a broad view that Sharon’s actions were not driven by a rational political agenda but by a personal and vindictive vendetta against his long-time for Arafat. Moscow’s leadership recognized that it dangerous to be associated with emotional behavior rather than a well-defined strategic line in dictating policy. Russia also did not want to be perceived as being outdone by the Europeans in terms of political and humanitarian sympathy with the Palestinians. Taking note of these factors Putin smelled an opportunity to take advantage of the raging international anti-Americanism in Europe and other parts of the world including the West Asia that swelled during the Jenin Siege following the diminishing tide of sympathy for the United States since September 2001. Russia sought to present itself as the defender of international justice and the protector of the weak as an alternative to Israeli violations and US double-standards. 203

As Russian foreign policy under Putin began hardening its tone towards Israel the United States and Britain coincidentally began an aggressive campaign to justify war against Iraq. Moscow thus identified the need to form a significant alliance of nations to counterbalance US ambitions in the West Asia, including plans to occupy Iraq, and this specifically required support from Arab and Muslim countries, which in turn led to a cooling of relations with Israel. A noticeably hostile attitude resumed in the Russian media and by political observers close to the government, with one regular commentator, as president of the Institute of Middle East Studies, Evgenii Satanovsky noting that Sharon’s ‘actions show that Israel’s former pride in its

203 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.207.
democratic institutions actually veiled traditions of clan authoritarianism that are quite a match for the neighboring Arab states."^{204}

B. Putin’s second presidential term (2004-2008): Israel’s deteriorating relationship with Russia

The deteriorating relationship between Israel and the Putin administration which partly increased after the 2002 Israeli military operation against the Palestinian town of Jenin became worse mainly after Putin’s re-election in 2004. Area of concerns for Israel was Russia’s active increase in its arms sales and delivery to Syria and Iran and Iranian nuclear issues. Russian growing influence in the Arab-Israeli conflicts after nearly absence for decades resulted from the Lebanese conflict in 2006 which enhanced Russia’s own prestige by allowing it to be on the winning side regard to Putin’s policy of supporting Iran and Syria in the region.^{205}

As a result of this changing regional atmosphere, Putin’s re-election in 2004 took place in a distinctly different setting with regard to Israel than when he was first elected as president. The US-led occupation of Iraq and the continued violence there compounded the worsening relations that were developing between the West and Russia over NATO expansion plans.

Even Russian-Israeli relations appeared to have deteriorated, Ilya Bourtman observed in one article that “the level of security cooperation increased dramatically in the post-Beslan security environment.”^{206} As Ehud Olmert, then Israel’s Vice Premier, stated in November of 2004, “I think there is a growing realization in Russia that they [Russians] have to become more prepared for future terror attacks and that it’s a good idea to compare notes with us [Israelis].”^{207} Senior level talks had focused on three areas: training, border security, and arms. Since 2004, Russian and Israeli anti-terror forces had secretly trained together, and there were plans to hold joint counter-terrorism exercises. The Israeli police, by Moscow’s request, also prepared reports

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205 Rajendra Madhukar Abhyankar, ed., N.177, p.283.

206 Ilya Bourtman, N.29.

detailing alternative responses to the hostage crises at the Nord-Ost Theater and Beslan.

However, NATO expansion to Russia’s traditional sphere of influence affected the Israel-Russia relationship. In the light of these developments, Robert O. Freedman, leading veteran expert of Russian foreign policy argued that, ‘Beginning in 2005, Russia has made a major effort to increase its influence in the region. This is in part a counterweight to NATO’s expansion eastward and in part a response to Russian reverses in Georgia and Ukraine. Russia has also signed major arms agreement with both Syria and Iran – agreements that have greatly exacerbated tension in the region’. Russia’s active and aggressive increase in its arms sales and delivery to Syria and Iran became a cause for serious concern in Israel. Russia’s ongoing support for Iran’s nuclear programme was more widely being seen as a deliberate effort to change the strategic balance in the region. More troubling for Moscow was Israel’s developing relations with Georgia and Azerbaijan, two countries making an active effort to break away from Russia’s orbit. It may be understood that a Russian, Syrian and Iranian alliance, if fulfilled, not only would surround US troops in Iraq but could also threaten Israel’s existence through the proliferation of advanced missile technology to its regional enemies.

Throughout Putin’s second term Israel continued to place the Iranian nuclear issue at the top of its security agenda. While Iran vehemently denied its intention to create nuclear weapons, arguing that its programme was only intended for peaceful purposes, the fierce anti-Israeli language emanating from Tehran and the military support the regime was providing to Hezbollah, Hamas and Syria suggested that there was a belligerent intent by the Iranian regime. Israel’s leadership and public shared the perception that the country simply could not afford to believe Iran, and by the same token Russia, about the peaceful nature of the nuclear programme. Aside from

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208 Ilya Boutrman, N.29.


210 Talal Nizameddin, N.24, p.208.

211 Rajendra Madhukar Abhyankar, ed., N.177, p.284.
posing a direct threat there was also the possibility that Iran could arm proxies with smaller but lethal dirty bombs to threaten Israel, particularly via Hezbollah in Lebanon. Even the scenario of Iran possessing nuclear weapons without using them because of the fear of retaliation would still be highly problematic for Israel. By joining the nuclear club the regime would broaden its popular support, ‘thereby increasing its legitimacy and longevity. Iran might be further empowered to pursue its regional interests...[and] Iran’s nuclearization might spur an expensive arms race that would drain resources away from more productive purposes in the Israeli economy.’\(^{212}\) That would make Israel’s long-term future dependent on consistently reliable large-scale Western support in the face of open-ended hostility by its neighbors.\(^{213}\)

In July 2006 Israel confronted evolving threats by retaliating to a Hezbollah raid on its northern border with a major military campaign in Lebanon. The Hezbollah raid was timed to coincide with a G8 Summit meeting in St Petersburg, Russia, that was preceded by strong language and threats between the United States and Iran regarding the latter’s nuclear programme. In Lebanon it was widely suggested that Hezbollah’s timing was intended to divert attention away from Iran during the Summit, when US President Bush was expected to put pressure on Putin to agree to further sanctions on Iran. Regardless of the legitimacy of arguments that the war was deliberately instigated by Hezbollah for such motives, the outcome was successful from Iran’s point of view because Putin was able to turn the tables on the United States by demanding that Israel halt its military campaign with immediate effect. Eventually, Israel succumbed to international pressure for a ceasefire without achieving any of its objectives, including crippling Hezbollah’s military strength in Lebanon.\(^{214}\) In fact, Hezbollah emerged stronger politically and the victory it claimed consolidated further the alliance between Syria, which was vital in facilitating the arming of the military Shi’a group as well as in terms of providing it with political support in Lebanon, and Iran. It also allowed Putin to feel confident that his policy of supporting Iran and Syria in the region was a correct one because it curtailed US

\(^{212}\) Ihsanch I. Sadr, “The impact of Iran’s nuclearisation on Israel”, *Middle East Policy*, 12, 2, Summer 2005, p.67.

\(^{213}\) Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.209.

\(^{214}\) Rajendra Madhukar Abhyankar, ed., N.177, p.284.
powers on the international stage and enhanced Russia's own prestige by allowing it to be on the winning side.215

Israel's setbacks in Lebanon were a personal humiliation for Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who was hurried into war in July 2006 and then hurried into a ceasefire in August 2006. Perhaps to counteract the criticisms from his political opponents Olmert embarked on a more proactive effort to negotiate with Syria, claiming that his intention was to split its partnership with Iran. Because those adequately familiar with Syrian politics recognized that Damascus was highly unlikely to change its behavior and its alliances, Olmert's actions were most likely a cynical attempt to rescue his personal reputation, especially as he was concurrently facing corruption charges in Israel. The dubious motives for the proposed Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations in 2007 led Primakov to ask: 'Is Israel's call for peace with Syria yet another diversion?'216 The questionable motives for announcing these talks were also directed at Syria and in November 2007, despite a long absence from the Foreign Ministry, Primakov was dispatched to Syria by Putin to convince President Asad to not disrupt Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts.217

Economic Cooperation

While political and security differences between Russia and Israel, particularly over Iran, became more apparent there was simultaneously a steady growth of direct trade that had doubled under Putin and crossed the $1.5 billion mark in 2007 in addition to 'over a billion [US dollar] in energy deals'.218 Israel became particularly interested in importing Russian gas in light of the Arab and the Iranian boycott while Russia sought to extend pipelines from the Black Sea via Turkey to the southern resort of Eilat.219 After a slight downturn due to the banking crisis in 2008 trade picked up again so that Israel emerged as the major economic interests in the West

215 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.209.


218 Ilya Bourtman, N.29.

219 Rajendra Madhukar Abhyankar, ed., N.177, p.283.
Asia for Russia. It is significant that Russia’s three main trade partners in the region, Turkey, Iran and Israel, are all non-Arab countries.\textsuperscript{220} It was also evident that 88 percent of Israel’s crude oil imported from the former Soviet Union countries that provided Israel with sour (high sulfur) oil, sometimes of poor quality, was at reduced market prices. Moreover, Israel’s dependence on Russian energy was increasing. Following a June 2004 meeting between Alexey Miller, the Chairman of Gazprom, and then Prime Minister Sharon, Israel promised to increase the share of Russian gas in its energy balance from one percent to 25 percent by 2025. In November 2005, it was reported that the Blue Stream Natural Gas Pipeline—a $3.4 billion dollar project between Russia and Turkey—would be expanded to Israel through the Eilat-Ashkelon pipeline to allow Russian and Azerbaijani oil and gas to be exported by tanker through the Red Sea to China and through the Suez Canal to Southern Europe.\textsuperscript{221} In March 2006, following a return visit by Alexey Miller to Israel, then acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stated that Gazprom had agreed to supply Israel with gas.\textsuperscript{222}

Apart from energy trade, arms deals were also significant on their economic interest. In November 2005, for example, the state-funded RIA News reported that Kozak had negotiated a deal whereby Israel would sell unmanned flying vehicles (UAVs) to Russia to help patrol the border with Chechnya.\textsuperscript{223} In 2009, Russia purchased a dozen unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) from Israel, worth more than $50 million.\textsuperscript{224} The sale was a watershed moment for Russia’s arm industry, which has not purchased foreign hardware since 1917. Since then, Russia has purchased Mistral-class assault ships from France worth more than $1.5 billion.\textsuperscript{225}

\textsuperscript{221} Ilya Boutman, N.29.
\textsuperscript{223} Ilya Boutman, N.29.
5.2.3 Russia-Palestine Relations

Since Soviet era, Moscow has long time backed for resolving the Palestine issue through its main organ, the Palestinian Authority. Moreover, when new political organ was created in the late 1980s namely Hamas, Kremlin also played a supporter’s role although Hamas has been considered as a terrorist organization and ignored for its legitimacy from Israel and Western countries. Putin’s two-track policy which working with Israel, while also simultaneously working with Israeli enemies including Hamas irked its relation with Israel, however to gain interests from every side of conflict was main character of Russia’s foreign policy and diplomacy.

In 2001 Putin was keen to establish good relations with newly elected US President George W. Bush and by doing so Russian statements largely agreed with the West in condemning Palestinian violence. The 11 September attacks further unified Moscow and Washington against terrorism and left the Palestinians feeling increasingly isolated. Between 2001 and 2005 there were several large-scale terrorist attacks against Israelis by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, including: ‘The death of 11 people in the Jerusalem district of Beit Israel on March 2, 2002; 22 people killed at Tel-Aviv’s Central Bus Station on January 5, 2003; and 11 people killed when bus No. 19 was bombed in Jerusalem on January 29, 2004.’226 Although Israeli military operations against the Palestinians also intensified there was a common perception in Washington and Moscow that terrorism could not be allowed to be seen as a successful method to achieve political aims. The Putin leadership, until late 2002, was particularly keen to assert this point in light of Russia’s own war in Chechnya.227

In May 2002 Russia was invited to join the Quartet on the West Asia–USA, Russia, EU and UN–to mediate in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute in recognition of its amenably pro-Western anti-terrorist stance.228 The Quartet was meant to be a fairer

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227 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.218.


Quartet on the Middle East: Established in 2002 on the initiative of the prime minister of Spain, the Quartet consists of a representative from the United Nations, the European Union, the United States, and Russia. It mandate, clearly unsuccessful thus far, is conflict resolution in the West Asia.
honest broker compared to the failed US monopoly on that role and its main achievement was the Road Map for Peace announced on 30 April 2003, with Russian and US support. However, Israeli Prime Minister Sharon treated the Road Map disdainfully and bypassed the internationally endorsed peace proposal by unilaterally withdrawing from Gaza. In addition, Sharon’s government also began constructing a security wall along the frontiers of the West Bank in a one-sided designation of Israel’s borders.229

With regard to Yasser Arafat death in November 2014, the reaction of Russian leadership was sympathetic, particularly following Israel’s military siege of his compound, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov laid a wreath on the long-time Palestinian leader’s tomb during his visit to the Occupied Territories on 23 November of that year. By then the mood was already changing in the relationship between Russia and the United States in light of the occupation of Iraq and differences over European defense plan. Following Putin’s re-election in March 2004 Russia aligned with European Union support for Palestinian and Arab rejection of the unilateral Israeli plan to build a so-called security wall between Israel and the West Bank.230 Although Bush was the first US president to openly endorse the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, Washington’s passive role towards Israel’s deliberate devaluation of the Road Map for Peace intensified anti-American sentiments in the West Asia and to some extent among Europeans. Washington’s marketing of the Road Map for Peace in 2003 and subsequent lack of action to implement it in the following years created the widespread impression that the plan was a temporary diversion intended to diffuse criticisms of the war on Iraq.231

In April 2005 Putin was ‘the first world leader to visit the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah since [Mahmoud] Abbas had taken over as its leader on January 9, 2005’.232 In a symbolic gesture of support for the Palestinian leadership,

229 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.218.


231 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.219.

232 Andrej Kreutz, N.69, p.76.
Putin laid a wreath on Arafat’s tomb and promised to ‘provide the Palestinian leadership with technical help, supplies of equipment and training.’\textsuperscript{233} It later emerged that ‘Putin had promised the Palestinians 50 armored personnel carriers, two Mi-17 military transport helicopters, and training for their security services.’\textsuperscript{234} Eventually, Washington and other European capitals followed Putin’s example in providing political support for Abbas in light of the growing challenge by Hamas. One of the enduring consequences of the US-inspired plan was the demand for Palestinian general elections. Following Arafat’s death the PLO’s dominant role in national politics became seriously challenged by Hamas, particularly as after decades of promises and negotiations the PLO had delivered the Palestinian diaspora very little in tangible terms.\textsuperscript{235}

On 26 January 2006 Hamas won a large majority of the Palestinian parliament in national elections and this result apparently, despite the floundering reputation of the PLO, ‘stunned US and Israeli officials’.\textsuperscript{236} Putin added a further element of surprise by immediately congratulating Hamas for their parliamentary success and extended an invitation to their leadership to visit Moscow. In a single political act, as observed by analysts, ‘Moscow now not only snubbed the West, which was seeking to isolate Hamas and its newly formed government, but also Palestinian President Abbas and the PLO, running against the grain of a long history of bilateral relations’.\textsuperscript{237} A Hamas delegation visited Moscow in March 2006, and again in March 2007, in defiance of the West, Israel and moderate Arab states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{238} These developments signaled a significant departure from Russia’s policy


\textsuperscript{235}Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.219.


\textsuperscript{237}Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.220.

towards the Palestinians and Israel from the 1990s and early Putin era and implied a more aggressive approach in the West Asian affairs.

In late June 2006 Israel launched a major military campaign deep into Gaza following the abduction of Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit and the killing of two other soldiers in a scenario not dissimilar from the Hezbollah raid a few weeks later on 12 July 2006 that sparked a major war in Lebanon. Concurrently, Russia had in 2006 acted firmly to protect Iran and Syria, the military and political patrons of Hamas and Hezbollah, from international sanctions.239

Mahmoud Abbas as president of the Palestinian National Authority (under PLO) and Hamas controlling parliament and consolidated with military superiority in Gaza, two Palestinian loci of political authority became a reality for the international community to consider. While the West and Israel continued to reject any engagement of Hamas, terming it a terrorist organization, Russia had deftly placed itself in a position to mediate in the bitter rivalry between Hamas and the PLO, which escalated into open clashes from 2006.240 Putin not only maneuvered to place Russia as a bridge between competing Palestinian factions but also enabled Moscow to act as an available mediator between the United States and the Palestinian political leaderships including its radical factions.241

However, it can be understood that Moscow's courting of Hamas between 2006 and 2007 was largely tactical rather than strategic. Russia had little influence over Hamas and no real interest in seeing the group dominate Palestinian politics. One may note that Hamas was part of a broader strategy that incorporated Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah, in undermining the United States in the West Asia and restoring an important voice for Russia in regional and international affairs. Conversely, Moscow


241 Talal Nizameddin, N.22, p.221.
was also keen not to allow a deterioration in its relations with Israel and also with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, which were involved in an intense regional struggle to resist Iranian-Syrian hegemony in the region that was vividly mirrored in Lebanon and among the Palestine. While in Lebanon this conflict took on a sectarian nuance as Shi’a Hezbollah challenged a Sunni-Druze-Christian majority, in the Palestinian Authority it was reflected in the PLO-Hamas schism. These divisions had become particularly pertinent following the Iraq war in 2003 and the transfer of political power in Baghdad to the Shi’a community, indirectly strengthening Iran in the region.242

On 26-27 June 2007 Moscow once more readjusted its policy when Foreign Minister Lavrov visited President Abbas to help him consolidate his position in light of his internal feud with Hamas. Soon after, during the visit of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to Moscow on 31 July 2007, Putin referred to him as the ‘legitimate leader of all Palestinians’.243 The statement came in the context of Hamas taking full military control of Gaza a month earlier in June to further undermine the political authority of Abbas. Moscow’s maneuvers were in part linked to efforts by the Kremlin leadership to host a conference on the West Asia. Russian policymakers considered that such an event would add prestige to Russia’s roles as an international diplomatic arbitrator and reaffirm the country’s influence in the West Asia. Nonetheless, despite Lavrov’s public announcement during the Annapolis Middle East Conference on 27 November 2007 that stated Russia’s desire to host a follow-up gathering in Moscow, the response was cool from the other attendees, except the Palestinian Authority leader Abbas. Hamas and it chief sponsor Iran demanded a boycott of the meeting. Russia expressed hope of a Middle East Conference in Moscow for a few months more but eventually gave up after its calls continued to be rebuffed.244

242 Talal Nizameddin, N.22, p.222.


244 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.222.
The Annapolis Conference— a Middle East peace conference held at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, on 27 November 2007— was organized by the Bush administration and spearheaded by then-secretary of state Condoleezza Rice as the power broker. Attendees included Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, and President George W.
Abbas visited Moscow again on 17 April 2008 to meet with the Russian president in an effort to revive the peace process and ultimately to consolidate the traditional political links between Russia and the official Palestinian government. Abbas offered Moscow the carrot that he would act as chief supporter and promoter in the region to encourage the United States to agree to host a West Asia conference in Russia. This occurred one month after Lavrov’s visit to Syria where he met the Hamas leader Khaled Mish’al, upsetting both the Israelis and Abbas. Moscow’s justification for the trip was that it was mediating between not only Israel and the Palestinians but also in helping the competing Palestinian factions to resolve their disputes to form a united front.

5.2.4 Russia-Egypt Relations

Diplomatic relations between the USSR and Egypt were established on August 26, 1943. Since then cooperation of the two sides had witnessed dramatic changes, but they had always been based on mutual trust and respect. In addition, the Russian Federation and the Arab Republic of Egypt were partners in both bilateral relations and on international arena.

To renew old ties with Egypt and Arab World was one of the most important of Russia’s policy. In an interview on April 25 2005 with Ibrahim Nafie, the editor-in-chief of Al Ahram, Vladimir Putin emphasized that:


247 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.223.

"Russia, just as the Soviet Union before it, has always maintained close ties with Arab countries, although these ties were not always of a steady nature, but they were cordial, warm and credible, as well as based on friendship. Over 300 million people live in the Middle East and North Africa. It is clear that the issues of the contemporary world cannot be resolved without taking into account the opinions and interests of the nations and countries of that region. I am hopeful that my visit will result in stronger ties and closer cooperation between Russia and Egypt and enable us to discuss with the Egyptian leadership various issues and ideas concerning developments in this region which is not distant from Russia."\(^{249}\)

Parallel to this Russia’s president also clearly pointed out the priorities of Russian policies towards the Arab world. Putin stated that:

"Primarily, to create a climate of stability that allows for the settlement of regional disputes and promotes the right circumstances for developing economic ties. We have a great interest in Arab history and culture and we’re greatly interested in cooperation with the Arab world."\(^{250}\)

On April 26-27, 2005, Vladimir Putin conducted a working visit to Egypt, the first visit on such a level for the last 40 years. He met with President Hosni Mubarak, Chairman of the People’s Council Fathy Sourour, and Secretary General of the League of Arab States Amre Moussa.\(^{251}\) As a result of negotiations of Vladimir Putin in Cairo the Joint statement on deepening the friendly relations between the Russian Federation and the Arab Republic of Egypt was adopted. It underlined that they were acquiring the strategic character. In the course of the visit to the headquarters of the Arab League, Vladimir Putin proposed to consider the issue of the accrediting the


\(^{250}\) Ibrahim Nafie interviewed to Vladimir Putin, N.249.

\(^{251}\) The League of Arab States was created on 22 March 1945 in Alexandria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Transjordan and North Yemen sponsored the infant organization. As the era of colonial domination ended, the League was enlarged, and today has 22 members, including Palestine. Beyond the founder members it now includes Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania, Somalia, Djibouti and the Comoros, Libya (which periodically threatens to withdraw from the League, as it did in April 2002) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which has been a full member since 1976. In May 1979, the League’s headquarters were transferred from Cairo to Tunis after the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. However, a decade later, with the re-integration of Egypt into the Arab World and the Gulf War, the organization returned to Cairo on 31 October 1990. The League’s main goal is to "draw closer the relations between member States and co-ordinate collaboration between them, to safeguard their independence and sovereignty, and to consider in a general way the affairs and interests of the Arab countries". (Alain Gresh and Dominique Videl, *The new A-Z of the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004) p.16).
Russian Ambassador to Cairo as Plenipotentiary Representative of the Russian Federation to the Arab League. In the course of regular session of the Council of this organization in September 2005, for the first time in its history, the official decision was taken on accrediting the Russian Ambassador in Egypt as Plenipotentiary Representative to the Arab League.²⁵²

Some analyst contrastively posed on Egypt-Russia’s relation that even Putin gave a face-lift to Russian-Egyptian cooperation in 2005, though it was clear to both sides that Russia’s role in the region was secondary to America’s and nothing would alter that balance in the foreseeable future. Political cooperation centered predominantly on the Arab-Israeli conflict.²⁵³

Egypt, whom Russia supplied with hardware, cars, and trucks and with whom Russia was in discussion over the sale of a research satellite and portable missiles, was also mindful of the historical ties that bind the countries. As Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit told Putin during his visit to Egypt in April 2005, “Egypt remembers its friends who have always supported that country in hard times.”²⁵⁴

5.3. Russia and the Gulf Countries

5.3.1 Iraq

For about a decade, beginning with Gorbachev’s New Thinking until the mid-1990s, Russian foreign policy had significantly downgraded Iraq on its priority list. Epitomizing this trend was the tacit Soviet endorsement of the US-led international coalition to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in August 1990. Moscow’s central objective during the late 1980s and early 1990s was to improve relations with the United States and the rest of the Western world. Nonetheless, despite this phase of retreat the geo-strategic and economic importance of Iraq on the world scene remained an unavoidable reality. Iraq bordered Turkey and Iran, which were both major regional powers with a potential for substantial influence in the Caucasus and

²⁵² Embassy of the Russian Federation to the Arab Republic of Egypt, N.248.

²⁵³ Olena Bagno-Moldavsky, N.1, pp.125-127.

²⁵⁴ Ilya Bourtman, N.29.
central Asia. Iraq also bordered important Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Syria and Jordan as well as small but oil-rich Kuwait.\textsuperscript{255}

The evolution of Russian policy towards the Iraq-US confrontation from a benign stance to an actively competitive one was due to several factors. During his early years as Russian president, Putin was keen to establish a positive rapport with the United States to secure international credibility for his own domestic political standing. The war on terror and militant Islam also saw a convergence of interests as Putin sought to impose Russian control over the recalcitrant Chechens and other Caucasian Muslim republics. When Putin took power Russia was still economically and politically as fragile as it had been under Yeltsin. Putin hoped, even as late as 2003, that by not antagonizing the United States the Bush administration would not only spare Russia outward hostility and undermine its interests but that it would actually respect certain Russian sphere of influence, including a share of the windfall in the reconstruction of post-war Iraq.\textsuperscript{256}

The decision by the US and its coalition partners to initiate Operation Iraqi Freedom to ‘liberate’ Iraq and force regime change in order to initiate a post-Saddam order drew reaction from Russia that has helped provide greater clarity to the question of the depth and strength of Russia’s “strategic realignment” westwards. The invasion of Iraq posed choices that many governments would have preferred to evade and avoid, but Russia’s response at least was clear and nuanced. On 20 March 2003 at a Security Council meeting in Moscow Putin in a keynote statement argued that the war was unjustified, that Iraq did not pose a threat to its neighbors and that military action represented a serious political mistake–even within a few months Russia helped legitimize the U.S. military presence in Iraq within the UN context–as it undermined the principle of state sovereignty and raised the spectre of an international order based on the principle of ‘might is right’.\textsuperscript{257} Russia therefore joined France and Germany amongst the major European powers in opposing the war. This resulted in the cooling of relations between the US and Russia. Other Russian politicians and political commentators stressed that Operation Iraqi Freedom occurred in violation of the UN

\textsuperscript{255} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.129.

\textsuperscript{256} Ibid., p.141.

\textsuperscript{257} Dmitri Trenin, N.8, p.8.
Charter and principles, that it weakened the anti-terrorist coalition, increase anti-Americanism and undermined the US’s leadership of the democratic world.258

However, as observed by Ella Akerman and Graeme P. Herd, the Iraqi invasion in the name of the ‘global war against terror’ had the unintended effect of highlighting the key goals of Russian foreign policy in the twenty-first century. Firstly Russia’s advocacy of the need to negotiate a second resolution demonstrated its determination to maintain its status as a world power through the exercise of its seat on the UN Security Council. Secondly, the Putin government appeared keen to reflect public opinion having in the eyes of many already made enough concessions to the US throughout the first-term presidency over, for example, the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, NATO enlargement, and the positioning of US troops in Central Asia and Georgia. Genuinely responding to public opinion was set to be an increasingly powerful dynamic in the context of the presidential election in 2004. Thirdly, Russia has successfully improved its relations with Berlin and Paris, moving its partnership to the strategic level and this trend was likely to have positive spillover effects on EU enlargement in the Baltic region in 2004 and 2005. Fifthly, reaction to the Iraq war and concern over the nature of reconstruction in the post-war phase revealed Russia’s determination to protect its economic interests—particularly Iraqi debt repayment and a share of the oil concessions that would flow in the coming years. Lukoil finally secured a contract to develop the huge West Qurna 2 field, but this means it was dependent on U.S. forces and the Iraqi government for maintaining stability in order to exploit this contract.259 Sixthly and lastly, the Iraqi war also demonstrated Putin’s interest in maintaining a good partnership with the US. Although Russia had opposed the war it had done so with far more flexibility and tactical élan than either Berlin or Paris.260


260 Ella Akerman and Graeme P. Herd, N.258.
Lilia Shevtsova, one of Russia’s top political analysts, observed that the events in Iraq in 2003 gave a clearer picture of how Russia’s foreign policy evolved. First of all, Iraq showed that this time Moscow no longer attempted to save Saddam, as it had during the first Iraq war in 1991.\(^{261}\) Second, Russia tried to avoid deepening of the conflict with Washington, even when it disagreed with U.S. policy. Moscow’s critical attitude was much softer than that of American’s most vocal critic, Jacques Chirac. Third, the Iraq debacle showed the limits of the United States-Russia partnership. Though Russia was unable to be an equal partner, it was not prepared—out of great-power considerations, among others—to become America’s junior partner, even though it had acted as one several times. Consequently, the contradictions and instability of that partnership were congenital. Fourth, unable to implement its position independently, Russia turned to international institutions, primarily the United Nations and its Security Council, where Russia’s membership was one of the few remaining guarantees of its great-power status. Fifth, the Iraq events confirmed both Russia’s fear of America’s excessive strengthening and it did not involve confrontation with the United States. Russia’s concerns about American hegemony and unilateralism were shared by America’s Atlantic allies, which incidentally tried even more actively to constrain U.S. predominance.\(^{262}\)

Marcel de Haas in this book, *Russia’s Foreign Security Policy in the 21st Century: Putin, Medvedev and Beyond*, certified that the Kremlin’s reaction demonstrated the dualistic nature of its policy. On the one hand Putin used the division in the Western camp to strengthen Russia’s status in the international community. At the same time he apparently had instructed Foreign Affairs Minister Igor Ivanov to use more measured words towards the USA, thus serving the opposite part of Russia’s dualistic policy: cooperation with the West in order to improve Russia’s economy.\(^{263}\)

\(^{261}\) During Desert Storm, Mikhail Gorbachev sent his emissary Yevgeny Primakov, who knew the Iraqi leader well, to Baghdad to help Saddam. This time, Putin sent Primakov to Baghdad right before the start of military action to persuade Saddam to give up power.


5.3.2 Saudi Arabia

Over the past decade, Russia activated relations with the conservative Gulf monarchies, virtually non-existent in the times of the Soviet Union; at the top of the list came Saudi Arabia. Moscow clearly understood the importance and prestige in the Muslim world of the country that has the holiest Muslim sites in its territory. In an effort at procuring international legitimacy for the Moscow-loyal Chechen leaders, the Kremlin organized their pilgrimages to Mecca, which is now regularly visited by thousands of Russian Muslims. Russia also wanted to make sure there was no Saudi support to the radicals in the Muslim republics in the North Caucasus or on the Volga. As Russia and Saudi Arabia are the world’s number one and number two oil exporters, energy dialog between OPEC’s leading member and the biggest non-OPEC producer is a natural area of cooperation.\textsuperscript{264}

It was observed at the time that during the 1990s and even after 9/11, Russian-Saudi relations were very poor due to the latter’s aid to the Chechens. However, in 2003, relations improved as both countries were similarly unhappy with U.S. foreign policy in the West Asia. With al-Qaeda launching attacks inside the Kingdom that year, Moscow and Riyadh also saw themselves as targets of Sunni radicals. Since then, Crown Prince Abdullah and then President Putin bestowed visits upon one another, and Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov was also welcomed in Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{265}

Apart from political moves, Saudi Arabia has also made meaningful economic openings for Russian business. Bilateral trade relations between the two countries witnessed steady growth in the Putin era. In the nine years between 1997 and 2006, Russian exports to the Kingdom grew in value from $112 million to $693 million, as increase of 533 percent, with Russia climbing from thirty-fourth largest exporter to Saudi Arabia, to twenty-fifth throughout the decade. By the time of Putin’s visit to Saudi Arabia, Russian exported crossed the $800 million figure, doubled the $400 million level in 2005.\textsuperscript{266} Early Saudi warmth for a strong Russia in the West Asia was

\textsuperscript{264} Dmitri Trenin, N.8, p.11.

\textsuperscript{265} Mark N. Katz (Speaker), Larissa Eltsefon (summary), N.259.

evident, in part because of Riyadh's displeasure at confused US policies and strategies in the region, which only seemed to strengthen Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. This culminated in 2007 when Putin was awarded the Kingdom's highest honor, the Abdul-Aziz Order for Services to Islam, as recognition of the new role Russia was playing in the region and as a message to the United States that alternatives existed on the global level.  

5.3.3 Other Gulf Countries

Post-Soviet Moscow's continuing interest in the Arabian Peninsula results from its geopolitical proximity to what Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov called Russia's "soft underbelly," and its search for lucrative trade opportunities. Another reason is that Russia, as a major oil and natural gas producing country, needs to keep a close eye on the region, which is also a major global energy supplier. Moreover, Russia, located close to the Arab nations and having a substantial Muslim minority among its own citizens, has a strong interest in a politically stable West Asia. Gulf countries loomed as both security and financial concerns for Russia as it was evident that, in the past, the Gulf States supported the Islamist insurgency in the Northern Caucasus, and they were capable of bringing the oil prices down such as the 1986 oil price collapse, thus hurting Moscow's energy revenues.

Qatar, a leading gas producer, joined Russia and Iran in the Big Three that promoted consultation among the gas-rich countries. Moscow though resisted Tehran's attempts to turn the forum into an OPEC-like cartel structure, which anyway it could not become, absent a world gas market. Similarly, economic interests tied Russia to the United Arab Emirates and Oman. To promote Russian-Arab trade links, which still were rather weak (around $7 billion prior to the world economic crisis

267 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.248.


269 Ariel Cohen, N.68.

2007-2008), there was a special committee headed by Evgeni Primakov, an Arabist and a former prime minister with many contacts in the region.270

5.4. Non-State Actors 271

5.4.1 Hamas

The main character of Russian foreign policy in Putin era was that Russia sought to maintain working relations with all relevant players in the region. It refused 'to shun anyone of importance: not Hamas, and not Hezbollah.'272 More than any other country, Russia perceived Hamas as a key player in the Israel-Palestine issue and recognized that the U.S. and Israeli policy did not succeed in eliminating the movement. In contrast, Hamas emerged stronger and received more support from the public. Russia was also mindful that many international powers were not fully supportive of US policy toward Hamas, but they were unable take a position that would place them in conflict with Washington. It can be observed, therefore, that Moscow aimed to fill this vacuum and encourage such hesitant countries to state their position more clearly. In addition, being outside the US influence zone, Moscow saw 'an opportunity to use Hamas in order to counter international attempts to contain Russia.'273

However, Igor Khestin and John Elliott argue that Putin's support to Hamas did not cover all of Hamas's actions. While Moscow has long supported the Palestine Liberation Organization and lobbied for the creation of the Palestinian state, Putin's outreach to Hamas broke with tradition. No matter, therefore, that Mikhail Margelov, the chairman of the International Relations Committee of the Federation Council, Russia's Upper House, praised the Israeli assassination of Hamas spiritual leader

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270 Dmitri Trenin, N.8, p.12.

271 Non-state Actors refers to actors other than state government that operate either below the level of the state (that is, within states) or across state borders. (Joshua S. Goldstein and Jon C. Pevehouse, International Relations, Eighth Edition, (Delhi: Dorling Kindersley, 2008) pp.517-518). For a focus on a role of non-state actors in the Middle East politics, see Roger Owen, State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East, Third edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

272 Dmitri Trenin, N.8, p.9.

Sheikh Ahmad Yassin in March 2004: Similarly, when a Hamas suicide bomber killed seventeen people in Beersheba in August 2004, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement condemning ‘the new barbarous foray by the extremists,’ and declaring, ‘We are convinced that no political or other purposes can be reached by means of violence and terror.’

Russia invited Hamas leaders to visit in 2006, to get attention and to re-enter the region as a player. Before Hamas officials arriving in Moscow on March 3, 2006, Putin announced, ‘We are willing in the near future to invite the authorities of Hamas to Moscow to carry out talks.’ The State Department reacted cautiously. Spokesman Sean McCormack warned that ‘as a member of the Quartet, we would certainly expect that Russia would deliver that same message’ to Hamas, namely to renounce violence, recognize Israel, and respect previous Palestinian and international agreements. Hamas was welcomed to Moscow, primarily for that reason. Another reason why Hamas was welcomed to Moscow is that foreign policy is about reality and less about ideals. One may have ideals, but one deals with the realities. The reality in Gaza was Hamas as Igor Ivanov, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation announced, ‘Hamas is in power, this is a fact.’ However, some analysts argued that Moscow was in no position to broker any agreement, especially singlehandedly. Marina Ottaway and Dmitri Trenin, Russian defense analysts gently pointed out that ‘the Russians are negotiating with Hamas to appear on the global stage as a great power.’

According to observers, Hamas leaders’ journey to Moscow procured its legitimacy and appeared on the global stage. Hamas leaders seized the opportunity proffered by Putin. Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said, ‘We salute the Russian position and ... accept it with the aim of strengthening our relations with the West and

274 Igor Khrestin and John Elliott, N.18, pp.21-27.


276 Igor Khrestin and John Elliott, N.18, pp.21-27.


278 Marina Ottaway and Dmitri Trenin, N.10.
particularly with the Russian government. During the visit, the Hamas delegation met with Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, toured the capital with the leaders of Russia's Muslim community, and had an audience with the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. However, the Russian government's engagement with Hamas did not lead the group to abandon terrorism. One may note that Hamas leaders' well publicized trip to Moscow turned out to be fruitless as Izvestia, a Russian newspaper, concluded, 'Moscow invited the Palestinians just to invite them, and Hamas came just to come.'

The Russian press was less forgiving than the Kremlin. In the press conference, an Izvestia reporter asked Hamas delegation leader Khalid Mashaal to comment on his June 2000 pronouncement that children should be trained as suicide bombers. The Hamas leader defended his comment. 'We have our own symbols, our own examples to imitate. And we are proud of this,' he told the assembled press. So what did Putin's outreach achieve? Again, Chechnya played front and center in his strategy: Hamas promised not to meddle in the North Caucasus.

5.4.2 Hezbollah

Meanwhile, post-Soviet Russia in the early 1990s under Yeltsin adopted a more formal state-to-state diplomatic approach towards Lebanon and its post-civil war governments, downplaying relations with militia groups and non-state actors including Hezbollah. Ostensibly, this pattern of state-to-state bilateral relations continued under Putin despite growing evidence that Moscow began since 2005 to support one coalition, led by Hezbollah, in favor of the Cedar revolution coalition. Moscow’s policy towards Lebanon suggested for anti-Israeli and anti-Western Palestinian guerrillas in the 1970s was replaced under Putin by Russian support, via Syria and Iran, for anti-Israeli and anti-Western Shi’a militants.

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280 Igor Khrestin and John Elliott, N.18, pp. 21-27 and Dmitri Trenin, N.8, p.9.


282 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.158.
Improving Russian-Iranian relations throughout the 1990s were mirrored by more positive interaction between Russia and Hezbollah but Yeltsin was initially reticent about elaboration these links because of the hostility that it could provoke from Israel and United States as Iran’s spiritual leader and successor to Khomeini, Ayatollah Khamenei, was candid in his assertion that ‘Hezbollah is the frontline of the Islamic world in its fight with the Zionist enemy.’ Such assertions did not sit comfortably with Russia’s bid to develop relations with Israel and the United States during Yeltsin’s first year in office.

Under Putin, Russia’s relationship with Hezbollah, prioritized because of Iranian and Syrian sponsorship of the militant party, was made more complex by the militant organization’s direct support for radical Palestinian groups in Israel and the Occupied Territories. Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s leader, had stated in an interview in 2006 to a leading Lebanese online media that while the Palestinians, ‘have fighters and expertise...What they need is financial, political and media support. And we do not deny that we help them on those fronts.’ US accusations concerning Hezbollah’s regional motives fitted well with warnings by some of the most prominent West Asian leaders that Shi’a crescent was being formed that spanned from Iran, through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon on the Mediterranean. A warning of this scenario was first presented by King Abdullah of Jordan and he was followed by President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, who was forced to step down in 2011, and Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatte, who transmitted his concerns directly to the Saudis in the spring of 2006 as the political situation in the region deteriorated. By 2009, Iranian support for rebels in the war in Yemen indicated that Tehran’s tentacles of influence reached well beyond the Levant.

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284 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.158.


286 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.120.
A US congress report in 2006 took note of the significant landmark that Russia had emerged as the largest arms supplier to the developing world, overtaking the United States. Among the most lucrative deals for Moscow was a $700 million agreement ‘to supply Iran with surface-to-air missile defense systems which American military planners fear could prove a serious obstacle if Washington ever decided to bomb Tehran over its nuclear plans’. The timing of the report and its content indicated a growing sense in Washington that Putin’s Russia was evidently providing an umbrella to those in the West Asia considered as posing the greatest security risk to US interest. Russians arms sales from 2006 thereafter followed an upward trend, reaching $10 billion in annual sales in 2010 and $12 billion in 2012, with Putin proudly noting that annual sales exceeded expectations for the year by $500 million.

Russia remained defiant, maintaining that its drive to increase its share of the world’s arms market was normal, in keeping with similar ambitions being pursued by the United States, Britain, France and other major powers. Responding to the US Congress report in 2006 that linked Russia’s arms export industry to international terrorists, Moscow released a list of terrorist groups which included Al-Qaeda but failed to list Hezbollah despite Washington’s obvious hostility towards it. Yuri Sapunov, head of anti-terrorism at Russia’s Federal Security Service, explained that this was because the group did not have links to, ‘organizations regarded as terrorists by the international community’. Russian response was not missed by observers at the time that ‘Russia does not consider Hamas or Hezbollah to be terrorist groups; to stand too much with Israel against terror might mean undercutting Putin’s Faustian bargain with Islamists over Chechnya.’ According to observers, however this

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290 Igor Khrestin and John Elliott, N.18, pp.21-27.
response intended to show that Moscow did not adopt Washington’s view of the world or its definition of good and bad international actors.291

In the light of Israel-Hezbollah War in 2006, according to observers, there was no special sympathy in Moscow for Lebanon’s Hezbollah, but, in order to keep its standing among the Arabs, Russia condemned Israel’s “disproportionate use of force” in its invasion of Lebanon. Moscow reportedly kept regular contacts with Muslim, Christian, and Druze factions in Lebanon.292 However, it was evident in this war that Hezbollah reportedly, ‘used Russian anti-tank rockets provided by Syria against Israeli forces’.293 Since then, Russia has continued to deliver weapons to Syria despite U.S. and Israeli objections. Likewise, Iran continues to provide arms and training to Hamas and Hezbollah via Syria.294

Hezbollah’s raid on Israel that instigated the fighting in July and August 2006 dominated the G8 Summit held in St. Petersburg on 15-17 July. The meeting was originally expected to be a forum used by the West to put pressure on Russia to agree to a strongly worded joint statement directed against Iran’s plans to speed up its nuclear programme but the war side-tracked the issue and gave Russia the initiative by demanding an immediate ceasefire, which Israel and the United States initially rejected. Putin remained unbending until the end of the summit despite his knowledge of Washington’s desire for action to limit Iran, stating that ‘it is too early to speak

291 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.120.

292 Dmitri Trenin, N.8, p.9.
The continued confrontation between Hezbollah and Israel peaked in July 2006 when the movement attacked an Israeli border patrol, killing three IDF soldiers and taking two hostages. In response, the Olmert administration launched large-scale air strikes and artillery bombardments across Lebanon leading to over 1,300 Lebanese casualties and wholesale destruction of Lebanon’s infrastructure. Whilst Israel did not achieve its stated aims of destroying the movement, the Lebanese government under Prime Minister Fuad Siniora approved the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 that included, amongst other texts, the full disarmament of all militias including Hezbollah. (Benjamin MacQueen, An Introduction to Middle East Politics (Los Angeles, London, and New Delhi: SAGE, 2013) p.259).


294 Ariel Cohen, N.68.
about sanctions against Iran.\textsuperscript{295} The Russian media made much of the gulf in perspectives on the issue, noting that statement by the leaders during the meeting ‘hardly inspired hope that any unambiguous statements could be hammered out’ leaving Putin ‘in the minority’.\textsuperscript{296}

The Summit in 2006, hosting the world’s largest economies, provided Putin with an opportunity to offer the West the hand of compromise and accommodation. Instead, Putin placed lower priority on Russia as an integral family member of largest Western economies that he did on defending geo-strategic interests in the West Asia. Russia’s stance strengthened Hezbollah’s position against Israel during the 2006 war by forcing the United Nations to adopt Resolution 1701. The Resolution implied that Israel and Hezbollah stood on an equal footing and, more significantly, the ceasefire allowed the Iranian-backed group to claim victory by confronting the celebrated Israeli army.\textsuperscript{297} Finally, Israel’s failure to limit Hezbollah’s influence in Lebanon allowed the Iranian-backed party to emerge stronger after the 2006 war.

6. Russia’s role in the West Asian regional issues

For a decade, Russia under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin was preoccupied with economic crises, an uprising in Chechnya, political instability, and a foreign policy focused on the states of the former Soviet Union (FSU) and the United States. Moreover, Moscow, under a new president, Vladimir Putin, began to refocus the country’s attention on the West Asia, especially during his second term (2004-08) and subsequently as Russia’s prime minister. To be sure, Russia had not totally neglected the region during the Yeltsin era. Both Turkey and Iran, which border on the FSU, did get attention, albeit more from a defensive point of view than from an effort to expand


\textsuperscript{297} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.121.
Russian influence, while the Arab-Israeli conflict greatly receded in importance to Moscow, compared to what it had been during Soviet times.298

6.1 Lebanese War 2006

On 12 July 2006 Hezbollah launched an attack inside Israel, killing two soldiers and capturing another two.299 A botched Israeli rescue attempt resulted in the killing of five more ‘soldiers’.300 Israel then launched a major military campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon, partly to save face and in part because the initial Hezbollah attack broke previously tacit rules of engagement. From 2000, Israel considered attacks by Hezbollah within the Israeli-occupied Sheba Farms as tolerable and its response was usually relatively mild. However, on this occasion Hezbollah attacked soldiers in Israel proper and, more provocatively for the Israeli government, it also launched missile attacks on Israeli towns across the border from Lebanon.301

The large quantities and sophistication of Russian military sales to Iran and Syria had rapidly caused high levels of alarm in Israel and the West before the outbreak of hostilities in 2006. Suspicions arose that advanced weapons were reaching Hezbollah as part of a broader agenda to dominate Lebanon and the region. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice warned during a meeting with a group of Arab journalists in February 2006 ‘that Syria, Iran and Hezbollah are a problem for the future course of Lebanon’s development and also therefore the future course of the region’.302

The war during the summer of 2006 resulted in immense political and military ramifications, creating a seismic impact on the region. Until then doubts lingered about Hezbollah’s true loyalties in light of Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in April

298 Robert O. Freedman, N.293.


301 Talat Nizzeddin, N.21, p.165.

2005 with many Western academics and observers continuing to believe that Hezbollah could be disengaged from its Syrian and Iranian patron. Daniel Byman, the director of research in the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, in 2005 reflected that ‘most of Lebanon’s ethnic and religious communities want Syria to leave, and even some Lebanese Shiites joined the recent anti-Syrian protest’. Typical of the naïvety present among US and other Western observers, the commentator suggested that ‘instead of trying to ostracize Hezbollah, Washington should focus on trying to get the organization to stop pursuing its goals through violence’. The cold reality of the war in the summer of 2006 showed that Hezbollah was an extremely well-armed organization with global reach and unlimited ambitions working under tight Iranian and Syrian control. The Israeli ground offensive was efficiently halted on the southern Lebanese hills using advanced Russian-made anti-tank missiles, procured originally by Syria. It was only because of Iranian and Syrian support that thousands of Hezbollah rockets rained down on northern Israeli towns and settlements during the war. Moreover, Israeli sources revealed that listening posts manned by Russian and Syrian intelligence personnel on the Golan Heights provided information to Hezbollah during its clashes with Israel. Iranian intelligence personnel were also involved in coordinating with the Syrians in the new Russian-built communications center on the unoccupied side of the Golan Heights.

The war of 2006 was primarily due to regional and global factors rather than a local dispute between Hezbollah and Israel over the Sheb’a Farms. Significantly, the initial Hezbollah raid was carried out on the eve of the G-8 Summit in St. Petersburg when it was anticipated that Washington and its Western allies would press Russia to endorse additional sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program. Putin’s friendly overtures to the West during the first term of his presidency became a distant cloud by the time of G-8 Summit in St. Petersburg in July 2006 and the deteriorating relations between Russia and the West coincided with the darkening political and security mood in the West Asia. Dmitry Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center,

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304 Daniel Byman, N.303.

305 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.166.
provided a starkly accurate analogy just before the start of the war, observing that Russia had seen itself, 'as Pluto in the Western solar system, very far from the center but still fundamentally a part of it. Now it has left that orbit entirely: Russia's leaders have given up on becoming part of the West and have started creating their own Moscow-centered system.' Moscow's position during the war therefore was always going to stifle Western proposals on the end game of the war. As the war raged, Putin placed emphasis on an immediate ceasefire and to focus on the widely broadcast humanitarian impact on the Lebanese and Israeli populations and thus shelving discussions on possible sanctions against Iran.

Hezbollah's eventual success in impeding the Israeli assault in 2006 allowed Syria and Iran make the political assertion to the West that no settlement in the West Asia would succeed without their blessing. The war effectively countered efforts to undermine Syrian and Iranian influence from 2004 through UNSC Resolution 1559, which sought to disarm Hezbollah and strengthen the Lebanese state. The assassination of Hariri in 2005, allegedly one of the figures responsible for UNSC Resolution 1559 and one of Lebanon's political heavyweights, was interpreted as being linked to the role of Hezbollah, its Syrian and Iranian patrons and the authority of the Lebanese state. The war in 2006 led to massive infrastructural devastation and the loss of over 1,200 lives on the Lebanese side but it strengthened the standing of Hezbollah and its patrons as a noble resistance to Israel's aggression, in part due to Russia's efforts to ensure a face-saving and speedy ceasefire. UNSC Resolution 1701 was adopted as a compromise to end the war by demanding an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon and also to limit Hezbollah by calling on the Lebanese army to patrol the southern region bordering Israel, which Hezbollah had prevented in the past. The Resolution also dispatched a largely symbolic international observation force to monitor possible smuggling of weapons through Syria and by sea.

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308 Ibid.,
Following the 2006 war, efforts to restrain Hezbollah achieved little, considering that the democratically elected government of Fu’ad Siniora was pitifully helpless in the face of Lebanon’s best-armed and well-funded military organization. Moscow’s ambiguous behavior in 2006 and thereafter became a source of increasing concern not only in the West but rather understandably in Israel. In early 2006, several months before the start of the war, the head of Israel’s military intelligence, General Aharan Zeevi-Farkash, criticized the use of Russian-made rocket-propelled grenades by Hezbollah in recent skirmishes. These weapons were first sold to Syria, with the insinuation that Russia would have known that their ultimate destination was Hezbollah, a claim that the Foreign Ministry in Moscow immediately denied.309 An experienced Israeli commentator, pointed out that: ‘Syria’s centrality to the collection and transfer of intelligence to Hezbollah is based on separate agreements Damascus signed with Moscow and Tehran on intelligence cooperation,’ and ‘as happened with the significant numbers of advanced Russian anti-tank missiles procured by Syria and transferred to Hezbollah, Russia found itself operating indirectly in favor of the Lebanese Shi’ite organization in matters of intelligence.’310 Israeli accusations accompanied other serious allegations concerning the transfer of heavy weaponry from Russia to Hezbollah. In Spring 2003 there were claims that since 2002 Hezbollah had been acquiring SA-18 shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles, leading Israeli National security Advisor Ephraim Halevy to ask the Russian government to halt the accessibility of such weapons to Hezbollah because of fears that they could target civilian airlines.311

Such apprehensions proved to be justified after Russian anti-tank weapons played a decisive role in the 2006 war, with television pictures transmitting their success in targeting Israeli tanks as they timidly trundled through the undulating Lebanese hills. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s first trip after the summer 2006 war was to Russia to seek assurances from Putin that support for Syria and Iran would be curtailed, but the response to such pleas was deliberately cool. Moscow continued


310 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.168.

to express its unwillingness to abandon Syria and by doing so it supported Damascus against international diplomatic pressure to halt its interference in Lebanese affairs.\textsuperscript{312} Olmert’s visit coincided with strong statements by Israel’s ambassador to Spain, intended to highlight this government’s despondency with Western diplomatic efforts to engage Damascus by warning that ‘Syria is not part of the solution. It is part of the problem’.\textsuperscript{313}

It can be observed that Israel’s efforts were fruitless partly because the country’s political establishment was woefully fragmented over how to deal with Syria. This was highlighted by Olmert’s visit to Moscow in October 2008, his last overseas trip as prime minister, to convince the newly elected Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to abort further sales of sophisticated weapons to Syria. Hounded by financial scandals, Olmert was soon after forced to resign as prime minister but his reputation was equally tarnished by his failure to adequately deal with the growing power of Syria and Hezbollah, placing Israel’s security at risk. Olmert had been one of the chief exponents of engaging Syria among Israel’s political elite. Yet Russia continued to supply weapons to Syria, while newly-elected US President Barak Obama quickened the peace of courting the regime in Damascus, which indirectly further strengthened the position of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Yet the policy of engagement not only proved worthless but also counterproductive in light of warnings that the regime could utilize chemical weapons in 2012.\textsuperscript{314}

Leaders of Lebanon’s Cedar Revolution had repeatedly rung alarm bells that Hezbollah harbored a hidden agenda to invalidate the power-sharing formula in Lebanon outlined in the country’s constitution, the Ta’if Accord signed in 1989, to enable more power to the numerically dominant Shi’is and potentially allow them to establish an Islamic state based on the Iranian model. Rodger Shanahan explained that: ‘Although estimated to comprised 40 percent or more of the population, [the Shi’a] are limited to 21 percent of parliamentary seats and barred from becoming president or prime minister. Hezbollah initially opposed the 1989 Ta’if Accord

\textsuperscript{312} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.168.


\textsuperscript{314} Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.169.
because it failed to rectify this imbalance. The success of the Shi’is in Iraq after 2003 served as a model that could be emulated in Lebanon and this Iranian-led Shi’a resurgence was boosted by the prospect of Shi’a nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran. The strengthening of Hezbollah was endorsed by Syria because Damascus wanted to crush the Cedar Revolution movement to restore its influence in Lebanon. The Syrian leadership recognized that non-Arab Iran needed Syria as a bridge into Lebanon, establishing cooperation based on mutual interests between the two countries.

Russia’s endorsement for the powerful Syrian-Iranian alliance was highlighted by Newsweek magazine in early 2006, pointing out that while Europe move toward, ‘the tougher stance taken by the United States...a newly confident Russia has stepped [...] in] as middleman between East and West, reaching out to the region’s untouchables— and making it clear that Moscow won’t be taking orders from anyone.” Moscow’s strategic endorsement of Iran and Syria raised fears that were expressed explicitly by Jumblatt and echoed by the monarchies of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, as well as, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak of ‘Iranian plans to dominate the region with Syrian partnership...to lead to the persianification of the region” and eliminate the US counterbalance. Russian unease over NATO expansion in Europe, the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, competition in the energy sector over Eurasian pipeline routing and Washington’s quest to spread democracy in Ukraine, Georgia and Lebanon fuelled strong motives to endorse Hezbollah and its regional patrons to undermine the United States in Lebanon and the wider West Asia. Joining forces with Syria and Iran has been an important element of Putin’s aspiration to place Russia on an equal footing with the United States.


316 Talal Nizameddin, N.21, p.169.

317 Owen Matthew (with Anna Nemtsova in Moscow), ‘Past as prologue: Moscow presents itself as the new “middleman” in the Middle East. But its role may actually be that of spoiler’, Newsweek International, February 27, 2006. (http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11436739/site/newsweek/) last accessed March 6, 2015.