

Russian and the Middle East

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In the days of the Russian empire, Russia's relations with the Islamic world were very different from the West's, being defined by Russia's own imperial expansionist logic. The Kazan khanate was already conquered by Russia by the sixteenth century. With the decline of the Safavid dynasty in Persia in the eighteenth century, Russia was able to easily move in and occupy Azerbaijan, Dagestan, the Kazakh steppe, and finally Turkestan (present-day Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). Crimea was seized from the Ottomans at that time as well. The Caucasus tribes were more resistant, and it was not till the mid-nineteenth century that they were quelled.

Afghanistan became Russia's southern flank, and British-Russian imperial rivalry there prompted Britain to initiate two wars in attempts to subdue Afghanistan in the nineteenth century to keep Russia at bay, finally allowing the British to control Afghanistan's foreign affairs. Just to make sure, the British signed a treaty with the Russians on the northern boundary in 1887 (no need to worry about the amir).

Under the influence of British-Russian intrigues, from the 1890s on, both Central Asia and Afghanistan modernized somewhat. Muslims were by then a significant part of the Russian empire, but were treated brutally. When the Russian revolution happened in 1917, even the atheist communists looked good in comparison. And indeed, after a few decades of repression of all religions, the fruits of socialism came to Soviet Muslims and Christians alike, with economic well-being far exceeding that of the Muslim world under the imperialist yoke.

The socialist revolution in Afghanistan in 1978 must be seen in this context. Until its collapse in 1991, the Soviet Union, after briefly flirting with the newly created Jewish state of Israel in 1948, was a solid ally of the Arab world in its fight against Israel, and was welcomed as an ally by the peoples of Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Palestine. Afghan leftists did not fear

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Soviet influence (most studied in Moscow at the Patrice Lumumba Friendship University) and by the 1970s looked on enviously at the high standards of living, education and culture next door, without a thought for how shaky the foundation for an 'Afghan Soviet Republic' might be. Confirming this generally positive relationship with Muslims in post-Stalinist times, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the Muslim majority 'republics' voted overwhelmingly in a referendum by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to maintain the union, as the orphan Afghan Socialist Republic desperately fought off the western-backed mujahideen.

Looking back, it is only too clear how painful the legacy of these 'Great Games' played in the Muslim world by the West (including Russia and the Soviet Union) was for Islamic civilization, leaving a trail of tribal and linguistic divisions, trade routes disrupted, and local leaders as dictators with opportunistic allegiances.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has had to rethink its relations with the Middle East and Central Asia. So far, considering its must reduced state as an ex-superpower, no grand strategy is evident, other than non-interference and good neighborly relations, though there are hints of a new constellation of forces.

What has been accomplished by Russia is some modest institution-building with its 'near abroad', both in competition and cooperation with the US.

*Russia and China founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 1996, which includes Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and four observers—India, Iran, Pakistan and Mongolia.

*The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was formed in 2002, bringing together Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, as well as Armenia and Belarus, though Uzbekistan's prickly dictator Islam Karimov unceremoniously withdrew last year.

*The newly reinstalled President Vladimir Putin campaigned on his ambitious plan to build a Eurasian Union, which has broad backing and is moving ahead, building on the customs union already in place among Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus.

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There is strong official Russian reluctance to embrace the winds of change in the Middle East proper—the Arab Spring, which Russia sees as being manipulated by particularly the US. The West's invasion of Libya and financing of the insurgency in Syria revived the specter of British/ French/ Italian/ US imperialism on Africa's north coast and has proved a fertile breeding ground for al-Qaeda types. Rajab Safarov, director of the Center for Modern Iranian Research in Moscow, argues that Russia's policies towards the Muslim world are a direct reaction to America's attempts to reconstruct the Middle East. "The US managed to organize the chaos that followed the Arab Spring, creating a region that has no place for Russian influence. Color revolts [US-sponsored regime change in Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and Ukraine in the 2000s] were just a rehearsal. Now, Washington is trying to apply the same strategy to the Middle East."

Russia also has domestic political concerns arising from the recent uprisings sweeping the Middle East, both within the federation and with its ex-Soviet 'near abroad' neighbors, including its 'near abroad' Muslims in Central Asia. The immediate result was the 'White Revolution' in Russia itself, which reached a white-hot peak during the parliamentary elections of December 2011, though its challenge to Putin and his United Russia has so far been quelled.

But Russia is even more worried about the spillover effect of a reawakening Muslim world in its restive Caucasus region, where separatists in Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan and Tatarstan continue their terrorist attacks, despite the impossibility of ever realizing independent Islamic states there. The 1990s especially was a violent and unstable period in the Caucasus, where a defiant Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudaev conducted a surprisingly successful campaign for independence from the Russian Federation, using terrorist attacks.

The first was the 1995 Budyonnovsk hospital hostage crisis, which resulted in 200 deaths. It was Chechen terrorist Shamil Basayev's first major 'success' in as much as it led to peace talks with the Yeltsin's government and resulted in the establishment of a quasi-independent Chechnya. The next major terrorist acts were the five bombings of mostly Moscow apartment buildings that killed nearly 300 people in September 1999. None of the Chechen field commanders, including Basayev, accepted responsibility for the bombings and Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov denied involvement of his government.

However, they coincided with border skirmishes between Chechnya and Dagestan, and given that al-Qaeda and Wahhabism were increasingly active in Chechnya, Russia launched what is called the second Chechen War, on which Vladimir Putin staked his presidency after he was appointed president by Boris Yeltsin in December 1999.

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There followed a decade of gruesome war in Chechnya, with tens of thousands dying. In addition to Russia's military campaign, Chechen terrorism continued with Basayev's 2002 siege of a Moscow theatre (200 deaths) and the 2004 Beslan school siege (330 deaths). Basayev was finally killed by Russian security forces in 2006. The Kremlin declared "mission accomplished" in Chechnya in 2009, pulling most of its forces out of the tiny 'republic', and leaving it under the control of local strongman Ramzan Kadyrov. Since then there have been sporadic terrorist incidents: the worst being the 2010 Moscow subway bombings that killed 40; the latest, the 2012 assassination of Dagestan's most revered Muslim scholar Sheikh Said Afandi and Tatarstan deputy chair of the Spiritual Board of Muslims Valiulla Yakupov.

Just as the Russia state is determined to keep its Muslim regions part of the Federation, it is also determined not to let Afghan Taliban, whose earlier incarnation arguably brought the entire Soviet Union crashing down, back into power. The brittle regimes in Central Asia would be in danger of Talibanization, in the view of Russian political strategists, with dire implications for all of Eurasia.

Relations with Turkey, the Levant, North Africa, Iran

While Russia has been trying to reassemble some form of union with its Central Asian republics, and is working with China and Iran on Eurasian matters, it is more in reactive mode in the Middle East proper, cautious of the fluid situation, striving to put a cap on unpredictable change. Until the crisis in Syria blew up, where Turkey has lined up with the Saudi-Gulf-NATO attempt to speed up regime change, Russia was attempting to move with Turkey towards a new axis that would provide a credible alternative to US hegemony in the Middle East, agreeing on visa-free travel, building the massive South Stream gas pipeline to Europe, commencing construction of Turkey's first nuclear power station, with ambitious trade and investment plans (denominated in rubles and lira).

Russia maintains relations with Palestine's Hamas (which went so far as to recognize Russian-backed newly independent Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and, as a member of the so-called quartet of Middle East negotiators (along with the EU, the US and the UN), insists that Israel freeze expansion of settlements in the Occupied Territories as a condition of further talks. It appears to be trying to regain some of the goodwill that existed between the Soviet Union and Arab states, supporting the UN Goldstone Report which accused Israel of war crimes in its 2008 invasion of Gaza. Its relations with Egypt have been weak since president Anwar Sadat kicked the Russians out in 1972, and have not improved with the February 2012 revolution and the ascent to power of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is technically illegal in Russia, classified as a terrorist group. Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia are correct but wary, turning a blind eye to

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(what is hoped is) past support for Chechen rebels, with a Russian railway supposedly under construction as part of Saudi Arabia's economic expansion plans.

Russia embarked on a diplomatic offensive with Arab states in 2008, offering Syria and Egypt nuclear power stations, and is re-establishing a military presence in the Mediterranean at the Syrian port Tartus, though this is now on hold given Syria's current civil war, with Russia and Iran lined up against the West and the Arab states.

There are many reasons for Russian refusal to jump on the regime-change bandwagon in Syria, but western attempts to portray Russia as the power-hungry bad guy in Syria do not hold water. The small Russian naval facility at Tartus has more symbolic than real significance. Damascus has a poor record on repaying its debt, which will have to be mostly forgiven whatever happens now. Russia's economic interest in Syria is modest compared to economic cooperation with Turkey. The real reasons for Russia refusal to join the West against Syria are:

*Russia does not approve of outside attempts at regime change, which is what the battle in Syria has turned into. After NATO's 'success' in Libya, Russia is concerned about NATO making R2P (responsibility to protect) the new imperial catch-phrase. It is genuinely concerned about heightened civil war in an evenly divided population, with rebel groups openly armed by the Syrian regime's Arab and western foes.

*Whatever the Turkish/ Arab motives are in supporting the Syrian rebels (there are many conflicting ones) the US/ Israeli desire to replace the current regime in Syria is because Syria is a gateway to their joint obsession—Iran, and its regional allies Hezbollah and Hamas. "If Iran falls, Washington will tighten the noose around the neck of the Russian regime. A pro-western Iran will mean Russia is surrounded by US military bases," argues Safarov.

*The collapse of the Assad regime would be another confirmation to both Russian liberals and Russia's Muslim peoples, that there is no longer any 'politics as usual', and that Putin's autocratic style and the Russian Federation itself can be reversed. If it leads to an attack on Iran, the consequences for Russia and the Eurasia Union would be catastrophic.

Since the mid-1980s, a million-odd Russians have emigrated to Israel. The importance of Jewish financial and economic interests in post-Soviet Russia—both the banking and industrial

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oligarchs and the Kosher Nostra mafia—ensures that Israel gets a sympathetic hearing from Russian leaders. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman is a Russian Jew who emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1978. Russia now has its very own well-funded Israel Lobby; many Russians are dual Israeli citizens, enjoying a visa-free regime with Israel. Of course, the US benefits from Israeli pressures on Russia. This is a key feature of the current Great Game, where the US and Israel act as the new imperial “centre”.

However, the Russian Israelis are not necessarily a Lieberman-like Achilles Heel for Russia. A third of them are scornfully dismissed as not being racially Jewish enough, and could be a serious problem for a state that is founded solely on racial purity. Many have returned to Russia or managed to move on to greener pastures in Europe and America. Already, such prominent rightwing politicians as Moshe Arens, political patron of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, are considering a one-state solution. Perhaps these Russian immigrants will produce a Frederik de Klerk to re-enact the dismantling of South African apartheid. Russia has been able to flex its own economic muscles in Israel, with Gazprom’s deal to market Israeli Mediterranean liquefied natural gas starting in 2017, which was signed in February 2013.

Russia holds another intriguing key to peace in the Middle East. Zionism from the start was a secular socialist movement, with religious conservative Jews strongly opposed, a situation that continues even today, despite the defection of many under blandishments from the likes of Ben Gurion and Netanyahu. Like the Palestinians, True Torah Jews don’t recognize the “Jewish state”.

But wait! There is a legitimate Jewish state, a secular one set up in 1928 in Birobidjan Russia, in accordance with Soviet secular nationalities policies. There is nothing stopping the entire population of Israeli Jews, orthodox and secular alike, from decamping to this Jewish homeland, blessed with abundant raw materials, truly Golda Meir’s “a land without a people for a people without a land”. It has taken on a new lease on life since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russian president Dmitri Medvedev made an unprecedented visit there in 2010, the first ever of a Russian (or Soviet) leader and pointed out the strong Russian state support it has as a Jewish homeland where Yiddish, the secular language of European Jews (not sacred Hebrew), is the state language.

Given Turkey’s historic links with Turkestan via the Ottoman Caliphate and Russia’s links with Turkestan via the Soviet secular ‘caliphate’, the long-term scenario for Russian strategists is probably to develop a strong Russian-Turkish axis. Whatever happens in Syria, given its strong economy and aggressive leadership, Turkey will be the new strongman in the Middle East proper. Together, Russia and Turkey have far more justification as Middle Eastern “hegemons”

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than the British-American-Israeli usurpers. In a delicious irony, invasions by the US and Israel in the Middle East and Eurasia (Afghanistan, Iraq, Gaza, threats to Iran) have not cowed the countries affected, but emboldened them to work together, creating the basis for a new alignment of forces, including Russia, Turkey, Iraq and Iran.

Russia has long been working closely with Iran. The new constellation of Russia, Iran and China in Eurasia is taking shape as the US withdraws from the region. Russia continues to veto any overt attack on Iran and is handing over complete control of Iran's nuclear power stations this year. Both Russia and Iran support the current Afghan government against the Taliban. In fact, in case US State Department and Pentagon officials haven't noticed the obvious, the main beneficiary of the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq has been Iran, by definition. The invasion brought to power the ethnic Persian Tajiks in Afghanistan, and the invasion of Iraq set up a Shia-dominated government there. Just as Russia and Turkey are creating an alliance in the Middle East proper, Russia and Iran have forged a long-term alliance in Central Asia with implications for Eurasia as a whole.

A new role for Russia

Russia is still struggling to leave its own tragic civil war in Chechnya behind, and to make sure there's a place at the table for its Muslims. With its 16–20 million Muslims (about 12 per cent of the population), not to mention the largely pro-Russian populations of former Soviet republics, it has a natural interest in joining the Organization of Islamic Conference. Predominantly Muslim Tatarstan is an example to the Muslim world of the Russian tolerance of Islam. The Tatar president, Mintimer Shaimiev, joined deputy chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church Vsevolod Chaplin at a religious conference in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in November 2008. President Shaimiev read a greeting from Medvedev that stressed: "Russia intends to stick firmly to its course to expand active interaction with the Islamic world." Chaplin said, "Russia is inseparable from the Islamic world, as many millions of Muslims live there, and the Islamic world is inseparable from the Russian and Orthodox world, whose members live in so many Muslim countries."

Contrast the attitudes of the United States and Russia towards the OIC. In 2008, US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, speaking at a reception in Washington to introduce Sada Cumber, the first US special envoy to the OIC, said: "The notion that the United States is at war with Islam, as we sometimes hear, is simply propagated by violent extremists who seek to divide Muslim communities against themselves." Cumber, a smooth Pakistani-born businessman from Texas, later admitted that he hadn't made much headway at the OIC conference in persuading people of the truth of Rice's claim. In contrast, Russia actually wants to join the OIC—its Muslim

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population is larger than that of several Asian and African Muslim states—“to enhance co-operation with Islamic nations”, according to Russian ambassador at large Veniamin Popov. Russia continues to work within international bodies and observe international laws, while the US continues to deny its responsibility for the terrible situation in the Middle East and to bully the world to follow one of its many “roadmaps”.

Russia inherits fond memories across the Middle East region as the anti-Zionist Soviet Union’s successor. It now has the chance to gain long term credibility as a principled partner not only in the Middle East but to non-aligned countries everywhere, and should hold the fort, the anti-imperial one, against what’s left of empire.

As for Russia’s domestic dilemmas, good relations with the various Muslim Brotherhoods across the region will be the best ‘vaccine’ against the jihadi terrorists who continue to plague the Caucasus and occasionally Russia-proper now. Egypt’s Sinai border incident in August 2012 when 16 guards were killed has forced the Egyptian MB to come down hard on such terrorists, and it will be eager to help Russia deal with its own, as terrorism knows no boundaries anymore.

From a US point of view, Russia, Central Asia and the new-old Middle East are much of a kind—lesser, weaker powers, strategically located, with lots of oil and other goodies. Farsighted Russian strategists should be making common cause with the new Islamist forces, as they face the same foes (imperialism and terrorists). They can only advance if they work together.

The germ of such a re-alignment is taking shape in Russia’s alliances with Turkey, Iran and various groupings—the SCO, CSTO, and others outside the Muslim world, such as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China). The tragedies of Syria and Afghanistan will require difficult compromise from all sides, but Russia cannot be accused of Machiavellian intrigues in either country.

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