

# Putin and the Middle East

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**I**n the period since August 1999, when he became Russia's prime minister, and especially since January 2000, when he succeeded Boris Yeltsin as Russia's president, Vladimir Putin has made a number of changes in Russia's domestic and foreign policies. Thus he has tightened control at home, eliminating a number of the quasi-independent actors in Russian domestic politics and foreign policy such as the oligarchs. In foreign policy, however, except for initiating a second war in Chechnya, there has been far more continuity, whether in continuing the rapprochement with China, cultivating Germany, or having alternating periods of good relations and confrontation with the United States. In the Middle East there has also been more continuity than change in Russian policy, although the 11 September terrorist attacks on the United States may have a profound effect on Russian Middle East policy if—and this is a very big if—Putin decides to significantly change Russian policy toward Iran and Iraq to strengthen relations with the United States.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Impact of Russian Domestic Change on Foreign Policy in the Middle East**

One of the most striking aspects of the Putin presidency has been his ability to bring quasi-independent players in Russian domestic and foreign policy under tighter centralized control. Thus Putin has all but eliminated the political influence of oligarchs Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky and deprived them of their media outlets. He has also replaced Yevgeny Adamov, head of the Ministry of Atomic Energy, who had a habit of trying to make nuclear deals with Iran not approved of by the Kremlin.<sup>2</sup> The powerful gas monopoly, Gasprom, heavily involved in Central Asian and Middle Eastern policy, had its director, Ram Vakhirev, replaced by Alexei Miller, and the Defense Ministry had its leader, Defense Minister Igor Sergeev, replaced by Secretary of the National Security Council Sergei Ivanov. Putin also changed interior ministers, set up plenipotentiaries to oversee Russia's eighty-nine regions, and consolidated Russia's arms sales agencies into Rosoboronoexport in an effort to gain greater control over a

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major source of foreign exchange. Putin also put a great deal of emphasis on improving Russia's economy, not only through the sale of arms, oil, and natural gas (the Russian economy was blessed with high oil and natural gas prices during much of his first two years in office) but also on expanding Russia's business ties abroad, and business interests were to play an increasingly significant role in Putin's foreign policy. Making Putin's task easier was the support he received from the Duma, especially from his *Edinsvo* (Unity) party, which was a clear contrast to the hostile relations Yeltsin had had with the Duma from 1993 to his resignation as president in December 1999.

In this article, I will examine the question of continuity and change in Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East under Putin with case studies of Russia's policy toward its three most important Middle Eastern partners: Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, which also happen to be, along with Israel, its most important Middle Eastern trading partners.

### **Russia and Iran**

Putin inherited a close Russian-Iranian relationship from Yeltsin as Iran, by September 1999, had become Russia's closest ally in the Middle East. The two countries cooperated on a large number of regional conflicts and had also developed a strong bilateral relationship, particularly in the areas of arms and nuclear reactor sales.

As far as regional conflicts were concerned, Russia and Iran were cooperating in maintaining the shaky ceasefire in Tajikistan, were aiding the Northern Alliance in their battles against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and were jointly supporting Armenia against Azerbaijan, which neither Russia nor Iran wanted to emerge as a major force in the Transcaucasia. Hence both countries opposed construction of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. Both Iran and Russia also denounced what they saw as U.S. efforts to establish a unipolar world.

As far as bilateral relations were concerned, Russia was Iran's primary supplier of weaponry, including supersonic jets, tanks, and submarines, and Moscow was also building a nuclear reactor complex for Iran at Bushehr. The CIA reported that Russia was covertly aiding Iran in the development of ballistic missiles, such as the Shihab III with a range of 1,500 kilometers, that could hit U.S. Middle Eastern allies such as Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Despite these areas of cooperation, Putin faced two major problems in Iran when he first took office. The first was his decision to invade Chechnya following a series of bombing incidents in Russia that were blamed on the Chechens, who were seeking their independence from Moscow. Since Chechnya was a predominantly Muslim republic of the Russian Federation, the Russian army began to kill large numbers of Muslim Chechens whom the Russian army called "terrorists." As the then leader of the Islamic Conference, Iran could not sit by while Muslims were being massacred, and a war of words over Chechnya quickly erupted between Tehran and Moscow. Yet state interests took precedence over Islamic ideology in Tehran as both the conservatives who dominated the levers of power, led by Ayatollah Khamenei, and President Khatemi, who had a great

deal of popular support but very little real power, downplayed the Chechen conflict as an “internal” problem of Russia.

The second problem facing Putin was the Majlis (parliamentary) elections of February 2000, which brought into office a large majority of reformers. Although Putin may have feared that they would generate support for a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement—long a worry in Moscow—the conservatives quickly went on the attack against the new Majlis and marginalized its influence. Thus by the end of 2000, despite both the ongoing Chechen war and the Majlis elections, Russian-Iranian relations remained solid. Indeed, they were given a major boost with the announcement, just before the U.S. presidential elections in November 2000, that Moscow had unilaterally abrogated the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement of 30 June 1995 under which Russia was to have ended all military sales to Tehran by 31 December 1999 once existing arms sales contracts had been completed.<sup>3</sup> This decision risked U.S. sanctions, ranging from a ban on the use of Russian rockets for satellite launchers to the discouragement of U.S. investments in Russia, to U.S. pressure on the IMF not to reschedule Russian debts. While improving Russian-Iranian relations, and clearly benefiting Rosoboronoexport, Putin’s new consolidated arms sales agency, the decision to abrogate the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement clearly hurt U.S.-Russian relations. Nonetheless, Putin followed up the abrogation by taking another step to firm Russian-Iranian relations—the dispatch of a delegation led by Muslim deputies of the Unity Party elected to the Duma from the Muslim Rafakh movement.<sup>4</sup> They met with both Khatemi and Khamenei. The meetings underlined not only Iran’s interest in a close Iranian-Russian tie, but also—despite Chechnya—a tie between the Muslims of the two countries. The visit by the Russian Muslim Duma deputies was followed by a visit by then Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeev, during which the two countries reportedly reached an agreement, in the words of Iranian Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani, “to expand and deepen all kinds of long-term military, security and defense relations.”<sup>5</sup> For his part, Sergeyev noted that Iranian officers would be trained at Russian military academies and that the two nations would also expand political, scientific, and technical cooperation.<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of 2001, however, Russian-Iranian relations began to run into problems. With an approach to foreign policy that was increasingly based on aiding the struggling Russian economy, Putin moved to improve relations with Azerbaijan so as to expedite oil production, and the profits from it, from the Caspian Sea; Russia had found sizable oil reserves in its sector of the sea. While Iran had been demanding a 20 percent share of the seabed, Moscow had signed an agreement with Kazakhstan in 1998, splitting the sea into national sectors, and followed this up in January 2001, in a Putin visit to Baku, by signing a similar agreement with Azerbaijan, thus apparently siding with the two major oil producers in the Caspian, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, against Iran. Tehran was clearly angered by this development, as well as by the military exercises Moscow carried out on the Caspian during the Putin visit to Baku. The Iranian news agency IRNA cited a source at the Iranian Foreign Ministry as stating: “Iran believes that there is no threat in the Caspian Sea to justify the war games and military presence, and such

measures will harm the confidence-building efforts of the littoral states in the region.”<sup>7</sup> Ironically, Iran was to use just such military pressure several months later.

The Caspian Sea dispute, along with military cooperation, was high on the agenda of Khatemi’s visit to Moscow in the middle of March 2001. The Iranian ambassador to Moscow, Mehdi Safari, in an apparent attempt to solicit support from Rosoboronoexport, dangled the prospect of \$7 billion in arms sales to Iran, prior to the Khatemi visit.<sup>8</sup> This followed an estimate of up to \$300 million in annual sales by Rosoboronoexport director Viktor Komardin.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, U.S.-Russian relations had sharply deteriorated as the new Bush administration had called for the abrogation of the ABM Treaty, and for the expansion of NATO into the Baltic states. Making matters worse, the United States had angered Moscow by bombing Iraqi anti-aircraft installations and by expelling a number of alleged Russian spies. Given this background of deteriorating U.S.-Russian relations, one might have expected more to come out of the Putin-Khatemi summit than actually happened. To be sure, Putin formally announced the resumption of arms sales, Khatemi was awarded an honorary degree in philosophy from Moscow State University, and the Iranian president was invited to tour Moscow’s contribution to the international space station.<sup>10</sup> Former Russian foreign minister and prime minister Yevgeny Primakov waxed eloquent over the Khatemi visit, calling it the biggest event in the history of relations between Tehran and Moscow. Yet the treaty to emerge from the meeting, titled “The Treaty on Foundations of Relations and Principles of Cooperation” merely stated that “if one of the sides will be exposed to an aggression of some state, the other side must not give any help to the aggressor.”<sup>11</sup> This was far from a mutual defense treaty, and something that would allow Moscow to stand aside should the United States, one day, attack Iran. No specific mention was made of any military agreements during the summit, and Russian deputy defense minister Alexander Luskov, possibly in a gesture to the United States, stated, “The planned treaty will not make Russia and Iran strategic partners, but will further strengthen partnerlike, neighborly relations.”<sup>12</sup>

On the matter of the Caspian Sea, however, Russia appeared to move to the Iranian position—and to violate the agreement just signed between Russia and Azerbaijan. The Russo-Iranian agreement on the Caspian stated: “The sides do not officially recognize any borders in the Caspian Sea” and “the legal status of the Caspian had to be based on the agreement of the five littoral states.”<sup>13</sup> Immediately after this agreement was signed, however, Putin’s special envoy to the Caspian, Viktor Kalyuzhny, hurried to Kazakhstan where he stated, “Russia has not departed and will not depart from the principles set down in the agreements signed by Moscow with Astana [Kazakhstan] and Baku.”<sup>14</sup> Only a few days earlier, the outspoken Kalyuzhny had denounced the Russian firm Transneft for agreeing to cooperate with Iran in the Samara-Kazakhstan-Iran oil pipeline, because it would compete with pipelines from the Caspian through Russia.<sup>15</sup>

If the Caspian Sea issue remained muddled during the Khatemi visit, the Bushehr nuclear reactor issue was not. Despite U.S. protests, Putin (who was anxious to sell Russian nuclear reactors abroad) and Khatemi stated that Russia would finish work on the complex,<sup>16</sup> and the director of the Izhorskii Machine

Works, Yevgeny Sergeev, stated that the first reactor unit would be completed in early 2004, and “as soon as the equipment for the first reactor leaves the factory, a contract for the second nuclear reactor will be signed.”<sup>17</sup>

Following the Khatemi visit to Moscow, the Caspian Sea issue again generated problems for Russian-Iranian relations. On 23 July 2001, Iranian gunboats, with fighter escorts, harassed a British Petroleum research ship, forcing BP to suspend its activities in the region, which was located in the national sea border of Azerbaijan according to the Russian-Azeri agreement, but according to Tehran lay in the 20 percent share of the Caspian that it unilaterally claimed.<sup>18</sup> The fact that Turkey subsequently sent combat aircraft to Baku (the arrangement to send the aircraft, however, predated the Caspian Sea incident) complicated matters for Moscow, as the last thing Moscow wanted was for a conflict to arise between Turkey and Iran, both of which Putin was cultivating. Moscow seemed initially to side with Baku over the incident. In a meeting in Sochi, Putin, together with the presidents of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, declared any redrawing of the Caspian’s maritime borders would be “inappropriate” although the Russian leader later said he had been “misunderstood.” In any case should Moscow continue to hedge on the Caspian issue<sup>19</sup>—and risk losing the petrodollars from Caspian Sea development—there was a possibility that both Turkey (despite its economic problems) and the United States would come to the defense of Azerbaijan. For its part, Baku reportedly was also seeking to buy arms from Moscow and had offered to renew Moscow’s lease on the Gabala radar station.<sup>20</sup>

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While the dispute over the Caspian raged, the prospect of arms sales continued to reinforce Russian-Iranian relations. Iran’s Defense Minister Ali Shakhmani, an admiral, was due to visit Moscow in early September 2001. However, in a show of pique because Putin was entertaining Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon at the time, Shakhmani canceled his planned three-day visit “to prevent the Zionist regime from exploiting, for propaganda purposes, the conjunction of the visit [by Shakhmani] with the visit of the Zionist regime’s prime minister to Moscow.”<sup>21</sup>

The Iranian pique, however, did not last long as Shakhmani arrived in Moscow on 1 October, this time to discuss not only arms sales but also the U.S. reaction to the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. Russia had pledged its support to the United States after the attacks, while the Iranian reaction was divided with Khatemi showing sympathy for the United States while Khameni denounced it.<sup>22</sup> At the meeting the two countries signed a general agreement that set out an agenda for cooperation and set sales at a minimum of \$300 million per year, but did

not specify what types of weapons Moscow would sell to Tehran. Russia's new defense minister, Sergei Ivanov, claimed that Russia would sell Iran only "defensive" arms and would not violate any international laws or norms in so doing.<sup>23</sup> Here, however, will be an acid test of the new post-11 September U.S.-Russian relationship. If Russia limits itself to the sale of additional tanks (including a training center for T-72 tanks), along with MIG-29s, SU-27s, and SU-30 aircraft and helicopters, as well as BMP-3 armored infantry vehicles, that would probably be acceptable to the United States. On the other hand, if Moscow were to sell Iran advanced air defense equipment such as the SA-300, which could engage U.S. aircraft, or the new Russian ship-to-ship missiles with ranges from 120 to 280 kilometers—weapons that could threaten the U.S. fleet in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean—that would be a severe blow to U.S.-Russian relations.<sup>24</sup>

From Iran's perspective, Russia's continued cooperation with the United States in the anti-terrorist campaign posed problems. First, a number of Iranians were unhappy with Putin's acquiescence in the deployment of U.S. forces to bases in Central Asia. Iranian radio noted on 18 December, following the U.S. military victory in Afghanistan, "some political observers say that the aim of the U.S. diplomatic activities in the region is to carry out certain parts of U.S. foreign policy, so as to expand its sphere of influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and this is to lessen Russia's traditional influence in the region."<sup>25</sup>

Complicating Russian-Iranian relations further was President Bush's State of the Union speech on 29 January 2002 in which he called Iran (along with Iraq and North Korea) part of the "Axis of Evil" and hinted at military action against it. While denying that Russia was selling missile technology to Iran, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov stated that Russia disagreed with the U.S. view on Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an "Axis of Evil," although it seemed unlikely that Iran would be an early target for the expanded U.S. war on terrorism—Iraq was far more likely. Meanwhile, however, the attempted smuggling of tons of Iranian weapons to the PLO in early January 2002 angered many in Washington as well as in Jerusalem. In any case Moscow could not rule out an eventual U.S. attack on Iran, especially if it continued to develop long-range missiles. Consequently, balancing Russia's interests in Iran with a desire to improve ties to the United States appears to pose a major diplomatic problem for Putin. He would face a similar problem in his dealings with Iraq.

### **Russia and Iraq**

Putin inherited three main goals in Iraq from Yeltsin. The first was to regain the more than \$7 billion dollars owed to Russia by the regime of Saddam Hussein. The second was to assist in the pursuit of major Russian business interests in Iraq, especially for Moscow's oil companies and Gazprom, interests that could be developed once the UN sanctions against Iraq were lifted. The third goal, therefore, was to secure a partial or full lifting of the sanctions so Russian firms could begin to work in Iraq. Meanwhile, the danger Putin faced was that the United States, which together with Britain had heavily bombed Iraq in December 1998 and since then had periodically bombed Iraqi air defense positions interfering

with U.S. patrols over the “no-fly” zones in Iraq, would again launch a major attack against Iraq, which like the one in December 1998 would make Russia look impotent as one of its friends came under U.S. assault.<sup>26</sup>

Once Putin became prime minister in August 1999, Moscow began to further press for a new UN Security Council resolution. After extensive haggling with the United States and despite the visit to Moscow of Iraqi deputy prime minister Tarik Aziz, who called on Moscow to veto the UN Security Council resolution then under discussion, Russia chose not to exercise its veto. The resolution, No. 1284, on which Russia along with France, China, and Malaysia abstained, set up a new UN inspection agency, the UN Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), to replace UNSCOM and demanded from Iraq “unrestricted access and provision of information” and that it allow UNMOVIC teams “immediate, unconditional and unrestricted access to any and all areas, facilities, equipment records and means of transport they wish to inspect.” The resolution also reiterated Iraq’s obligation to repatriate all Kuwaiti and third country nationals whom it held, and requested the UN secretary general to report to the council every four months on Iraq’s compliance with this part of the resolution. The resolution also held out some potential benefits for Iraq, including permission for *hajj* pilgrimage flights, removal of the ceiling on the amount of oil Iraq could sell, and possible increases in the amounts of oil, spare parts, and equipment to be imported (this would also be of benefit to Russian oil companies), following an evaluation of Iraq’s existing petroleum production and export capacity. Most importantly, following reports from the executive chairman of UNMOVIC and the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that Iraq had cooperated in all respects with UNMOVIC and the IAEA, the sanctions on the import of civilian goods to Iraq would be suspended for a 120-day period that would be renewable.<sup>27</sup>

The Iraqis were initially furious with the resolution and with Russia for not vetoing it. The Iraqi newspaper *Babel*, controlled by Saddam Hussein’s son Uday, asserted, “Iraq will not implement or respect this resolution which maintains the embargo and turns Iraq into a protectorate led from the outside with Iraqi money, and indefinitely maintaining the embargo.”<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, a member of the Iraqi parliament, Yusuf Hamdan, denounced the “cowardliness” of Russia, China, and France for not vetoing the resolution.<sup>29</sup> Earlier Iraq had threatened France—and by implication perhaps Russia as well—with an article in *Babel* asserting that Iraq should break off diplomatic relations with France and expel French oil representatives if it supported the resolution.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, the Iraqis sought to entice U.S. oil companies to pressure the U.S. government to lift sanctions (the same strategy it had used on Russian oil companies), reportedly offering concessions to U.S. oil companies once sanctions were lifted. Indeed, Iraq’s Vice Minister of Oil Farz al-Shobin said U.S. oil companies are welcome in Iraq and bemoaned the fact that “the U.S. government prevents them from talking to us.”<sup>31</sup>

Despite the “carrot and stick” approach of Iraqi diplomacy, the sanctions resolution passed, and Iraq continued to find itself isolated in world affairs. Possibly for this reason, only a few days after the resolution passed, Iraq agreed to go ahead

with a \$419 million deal with the Russian firm Technoprom Export to resume construction of a large power station, work on which had been interrupted by the invasion of Kuwait and the sanctions regime.<sup>32</sup> In making this move Baghdad may have hoped that the somewhat looser regulations of UNSC Resolution 1284 and its emphasis on the humanitarian needs of the Iraqi people might enable it to import the previously banned equipment. Indeed, despite the Iraqi rejection of UNMOVIC, much depended on whom the UN would select as its chairman. Russia vehemently opposed Rolf Ekeus (who was supported by the United States), the first UNSCOM chair nominated by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, and the United States ultimately acquiesced in the second nominee, Hans Blix, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency.<sup>33</sup> Blix had been severely criticized for not discovering Iraq's efforts to develop nuclear weapons before 1990, and it remained to be seen if he would prove a more vigorous inspector as head of UNMOVIC. The selection of Blix may be seen as a small victory for Russia—and Iraq—and Blix's comment that his inspection teams would not force their way into suspected weapons sites in Iraq but would defer to UN headquarters to resolve any confrontation must have been good news for both Russia and Iraq, since such a procedure would weaken the inspection process.<sup>34</sup>

Moscow won another small victory when its former ambassador to the UN, Yuli Vorontsov, was chosen as UN undersecretary general with responsibility for solving the problem of the six hundred missing Kuwaiti prisoners from the Gulf War, although, depending on how aggressively Vorontsov, a diplomat with extensive Middle East experience, pursued his mandate, a degree of friction with Iraq was a possible outcome of the appointment. Nonetheless, Iraq's unwillingness to accept UNMOVIC inspectors or even allow Vorontsov into Iraq to check on the missing prisoners, coupled with the U.S. unwillingness to push UNMOVIC when Blix said his inspectors were ready,<sup>35</sup> made the UN operation appear by September 2000 to be a dead letter. In these circumstances, Russia, supported by most of the Arab world, began to whittle around the edges of the sanctions by supporting "humanitarian" flights to Baghdad and suggesting that Iraq might be more amenable to the return of the inspectors if the United States and Britain stopped their flights to police their self-proclaimed "no-fly" zones in Iraq.<sup>36</sup>

As 2001 dawned, Russia faced two challenges in dealing with Iraq: U.S. threats and military actions against Iraq, and managing the conflict with the United States over sanctions. Soon after U.S. President George W. Bush took office, he ordered a major air strike against Iraqi radar stations and air defense command centers, in response to the growing sophistication of Iraqi resistance to U.S. patrols in the "no-fly" zones in northern and southern Iraq.<sup>37</sup> However successful the strikes were militarily, they had a negative effect on the U.S. image in the Arab world, already tarnished by Bush's "hands-off" policy toward the rapidly escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It also did not help U.S. efforts to promote a policy of "smart sanctions" against Iraq, which U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell sought to promote during his late February 2001 visit to the Middle East. The Russian Foreign Ministry negatively responded to the attacks because they "aggravate the already explosive situation in the Middle East and the Persian

Gulf,” and Putin’s press secretary also criticized the attacks noting, “unprovoked actions like these are not conducive to resolving the Iraqi situation.”<sup>38</sup> On a visit to Iraq several weeks later, Duma speaker Gennadi Seleznev took a harsher tone, denouncing the attacks as “savage and terrorist acts” and calling for the lifting of the embargo.<sup>39</sup> Yet Putin, despite the attacks, had not been willing to follow the advice of the Duma speaker, long an advocate of improved Russian-Iraqi relations. Consequently, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein resorted to a ploy he had used in the Yeltsin years—threatening to cancel contracts already signed with Russian oil companies (Lukoil, Zarubezhneft, and Mashinoimport) to develop Iraqi oil fields unless they began work—despite being prohibited from doing so by the UN sanctions regime.<sup>40</sup> Putin disregarded the threat, but continued Russia’s policy of not cooperating with the United States and Britain in their plans to “smarten” the sanctions regime. The United States and Britain wanted to ease sanctions on civilian items, but harden them on “dual use” items with military capability, and also called for maintaining UN control over Iraq’s oil revenues and tightening controls against oil smuggling.<sup>41</sup> (There were, however, differences within the U.S. administration between Vice President Cheney and Secretary of State Powell on the sanctions.)<sup>42</sup>

A visit to Moscow by Iraqi Vice President Yahia Yassin Ramadan in April elicited only a promise from Putin to work for lifting the sanctions.<sup>43</sup> Still there was no evidence of any Russian pressure on Iraq to readmit UN inspectors or to cooperate with the UN in determining the fate of six hundred missing Kuwaitis under the UNMOVIC regime<sup>44</sup>—despite UNMOVIC’s statement that Iraq continued to have the capacity to deliver deadly chemical and biological weapons.<sup>45</sup> The Russian representative to the Security Council, Sergei Lavrov, opposed the U.S.-British plan, calling instead for expediting Iraqi contracts with foreign firms awaiting a decision from the sanctions committee under the existing rules (Russian firms would be a prime beneficiary of such a development) and for reducing the reparations Iraq had to pay to victims of its invasion of Kuwait from 25 percent to 20 percent of its oil receipts.<sup>46</sup> Russia, along with France, also proposed that UN funds pay for Iraq’s legal defense against environmental claims against it stemming from the 1990–91 war.<sup>47</sup>

When the U.S.-British plan, which by the end of June had received French support, was formally proposed to the UN, Lavrov threatened to veto it, noting that the plan “would not alter the humanitarian catastrophe that has come about in Iraq, but instead contribute to the further destruction of the country’s economy.”<sup>48</sup> Lavrov proposed an alternative plan, whereby UN arms inspectors would return to Iraq as monitors instead of inspectors, who had to ask permission in advance to visit a suspected facility. The Russian plan also called for the restoration of Iraq’s oil earnings to Baghdad’s control. Although Iraq did not accept the Russian proposal either, Iraqi deputy prime minister Tarik Aziz did praise Moscow for opposing “smart” sanctions. The result of the process was that the United States and Britain withdrew their draft resolution—clearly a political victory for Saddam Hussein, and for Moscow as well—and the existing “oil for food” program was extended for another five and a half months.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, business advantage became an increasingly important aspect of Russian interests in Iraq as Putin sought to rebuild the Russian economy. *Pravda* reported that in talks between Vladimir Rushailo, the secretary of the Russian Security Council, and the Iraqi ambassador to Moscow, Mozher al-Doury, Rushailo thanked the Iraqi leadership “for its encouragement of Russian companies penetrating the Iraqi market.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, there were reports that in the first ten months of 2001 Russia had signed contracts worth more than \$1.85 billion with Iraq, and Iraq accounted for more than 60 percent of Russia’s entire trade in the Arab world.<sup>51</sup>

This was the situation on 11 September, when Al Qaeda terrorists attacked New York and Washington. This immediately raised the possibility that, in its war

on terrorism, the United States would retaliate against Iraq as well as against Osama bin Laden and his Taliban protectors in Afghanistan. While there were divided counsels in Washington on the desirability of attacking Iraq, and a great deal of opposition to such an attack in parts of the Arab world and in Europe, President Bush exploited the U.S. build-

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***“Perhaps the most serious problem facing Russian-Turkish relations in 2001 under Putin was Chechen terrorism.”***

up in the Indian Ocean and U.S. military successes against the Taliban. At the end of November Bush warned Saddam Hussein that if he did not readmit UN inspectors to check whether Iraq was developing nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons, he would face the consequences.<sup>52</sup> Bush’s threat came as the United States and Russia were negotiating a six-month extension of the “food for oil” program with Iraq. Although Moscow had threatened to veto U.S. efforts for “tough sanctions” in July, this time Moscow agreed to negotiate a “goods review list” by June 2002 in return for a six-month extension of the “food for oil” program.<sup>53</sup> How seriously the Russians would negotiate on the new list remained, however, to be seen and the initial discussions which the United States and Russia held in mid-December did not show much progress.<sup>54</sup>

Meanwhile, after 11 September, Saddam Hussein sought to shore up support from Russia, as in late September Iraq invited Russian oil companies to develop additional oil deposits in Iraq, with Iraqi Oil Minister Amer Mohammed Rashid noting at the time that “economic and trade relations between Iraq and Russia are strategic, despite the continuing embargo and U.S.-British strikes.”<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, as U.S. pressure on Iraq rose, Putin felt constrained to respond. In an interview in the *Financial Times* on 17 December, Putin, who just had to absorb the announced U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty, warned the United States against attacking Iraq and urged the United States to concentrate on blocking “the financing of terrorist activity.” Putin followed this up by saying, “And so far I have no confirmation, no evidence that Iraq is financing the terrorists that we are fighting against.”<sup>56</sup> Whether Putin, whose major goal was cutting financing for

the Chechen rebels, would be any more able to prevent a U.S. attack on Iraq than Yeltsin had been remained to be seen, and Bush's State of the Union address that labeled Iraq as a member of the "Axis of Evil" reinforced its position as a likely target for U.S. military action. As in the case of Iran, Putin's reaction to growing U.S. pressure on Iraq will be a major test of his diplomatic ability.

### **Russia and Turkey**

Unlike the cases of Iraq and Iran, which had been Moscow's allies in the Soviet period, Turkey was a NATO ally of the United States, and for much of the Yeltsin period Turkish-Russian relations combined aspects of both confrontation and cooperation. On one hand, Russia had numerous interests in pursuing a good relationship with Turkey. First, until the 1998 economic collapse, trade between the two countries ranged between \$10–12 billion a year, making Turkey Russia's main trading partner in the Middle East. Not only were Turkish construction companies active throughout Russia, even acquiring the contract for the repair of the Duma, damaged by the fighting in 1993, but there was a large flow of Russian tourists to Turkey, especially to Istanbul and Antalya, and Turkish merchants donated \$5 million to Yeltsin's reelection campaign in 1996.<sup>57</sup> Second, Turkey was a major purchaser of natural gas from Russia, thus giving Gasprom a real incentive to promote Russian-Turkish relations. In December 1997 then prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin had come to Ankara to promote the multibillion dollar "Blue Stream" natural gas pipeline that would link the two countries. Third, Turkey purchased military equipment from Russia, including helicopters that had been embargoed by some NATO countries (including, until recently, the United States) because of concern that they would be used in Turkey's ongoing conflict with its Kurdish minority.

On the other hand, there were serious problems in the relationship. First, Turkey was competing with Russia for influence in the "near abroad," especially in Transcaucasia and Central Asia. Second, Turkey was pushing an oil export route for Azeri oil that would go through Georgia and Turkey to its Mediterranean port of Ceyhan (the Baku-Ceyhan line) rather than to the Russian port of Novorossisk via Chechnya. In addition, concerned about the ecological dangers of supertankers' going through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, Turkey sought to limit such traffic, thereby leading Russia to threaten to build an alternative pipeline from the Black Sea through Bulgaria and Greece, until 1999 a major enemy of Turkey. Third, Russia complained that the Turks were active in aiding the Chechen rebellion and thereby threatened Moscow's control of the North Caucasus. Underlying the tension in the Russian-Turkish relationship were memories of centuries of confrontation as the expanding Russian empire came into conflict with an Ottoman empire on the decline. Turkey was also uneasy about Russian support for the Kurdish terrorist movement, PKK, and about the continued Russian military presence in Armenia and Georgia, near Turkey's northeastern border.

By the time Putin took office in August 1999 as Russia's prime minister, confrontation had given way to cooperation. In part this was due to the crisis in the Russian economy in August-September 1998, which greatly weakened Russia,

and in part it was due to the realization in Moscow that Turkey had not turned out to be the major competitor in Central Asia that the Russian leadership had once feared. Strong evidence of the change in policy came in the Russian acquiescence in the decision not to deploy the SAM-300 anti-aircraft missile system in southern Cyprus—the possibility of such a deployment at one point had led Turkey to threaten to attack the missiles<sup>58</sup>—and in Yeltsin's decision not to grant asylum to PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan despite requests from the Russian Duma.<sup>59</sup>

Faced with a very difficult economic situation, and pursuing an increasingly difficult war against the Chechens, Putin not only continued Yeltsin's policies of cooperation with Turkey but carried them even further. First, in the face of international competition, Putin stepped up Russian support for the Blue Stream project. Thus, in early December 1999 he got the Russian parliament to approve \$1.5 billion in tax breaks for the construction of Blue Stream, and Gazprom and ENI signed a contract for the construction of the underwater section of the pipeline.<sup>60</sup> This led then Turkish minister of energy Cumhur Ersumer to note that Russia had pulled ahead in the race to supply natural gas to Turkey.<sup>61</sup> Cooperation intensified in late October 2000 when Russian prime minister Mikhail Khazyanov journeyed to Turkey and stated in Ankara, "Our main mutual conclusion is that Russia and Turkey are not rivals but partners, and our governments will from now on proceed from this understanding."<sup>62</sup> Khazyanov also promised to increase natural gas supplies to Turkey during the late fall and early winter of 2000–01.<sup>63</sup> Moscow, in an effort to get a major military contract from Turkey, also cut the price it was charging for the new Russian-Israeli KA-50 combat helicopter to come in well below the U.S. Bell King Cobra helicopter that Turkey was considering purchasing from the United States.<sup>64</sup> The two countries also promised to step up cooperation of their law enforcement and secret police forces in the war against terrorism and stated that it was their goal to increase trade back up to the \$10 billion per year level it had attained before the Russian economic collapse of August 1998.<sup>65</sup>

Despite this marked effort by Russia to improve relations with Turkey, a number of important problems complicated the rapprochement. First, the increasingly close military ties between Russia and Armenia, although primarily directed against Azerbaijan, were also worrying to Turkey. Nonetheless, Ankara had to take satisfaction over the agreement reached with Moscow at the OSCE meeting in Istanbul in November 1999, under which Russia agreed to pull all of its 2,600 troops out of Moldova by 2002 and to dismantle two of its four bases in Georgia by 2001. That agreement also stipulated that a state cannot deploy forces in another state without the host country's consent, a provision aimed at protecting such countries as Azerbaijan.<sup>66</sup> Still, Russia had more offensive military equipment on its southern flank than the CFE permitted—something that greatly concerned Turkey. Therefore, Turkey and the United States stated that they would not present the revised CFE pact to their legislatures for ratification until Moscow came into compliance with the treaty.<sup>67</sup> Second, the Baku-Ceyhan project was also moving ahead. The rise in the price of oil, and Turkey's increased willingness to financially support construction of the project, made the pipeline a more desir-

able undertaking for the oil companies extracting petroleum from the Caspian Sea.<sup>68</sup> The project received a strong endorsement at the OSCE meeting in Istanbul in mid-November 1999, and a feasibility study was approved in October 2000. Should the project be completed, it would reinforce Turkey's relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia and further weaken the Russian position in the Southern Caucasus, as well as in Kazakhstan, from which part of the oil for the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline would have to come unless large enough amounts of oil and gas were found in Azerbaijan's new natural gas field.

Turkey also stepped up its activity in Central Asia in fall 2000, as its new president, Ahmet Sezer, not only visited Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, but also sent two planeloads of arms and ammunition to Uzbekistan to help it combat Islamic insurgents.<sup>69</sup> This came into direct conflict with Russia's effort to use the threat of "Islamic fundamentalism" in the region, reflected by the emergence of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan which was reportedly aided by the Taliban, to bring the Central Asian states more under its control. In addition, although Russia and Turkey had come somewhat closer on the issue of the straits, Turkey continued to warn about overcrowding of the straits by oil tankers and other vessels, and accidents reinforced the Turkish argument that the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline was the safest way to transport Caspian Sea oil.<sup>70</sup> Finally, Turkey was uneasy about the Russian military build-up in the North Caucasus as a result of the Chechen war and had embarked on its own military build-up.

As 2001 dawned, the overall positive thrust in Russian-Turkish relations, motivated by Putin's desire to improve the Russian economy, continued. The key to the relationship was the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline that was due to start deliveries in 2002. When maximum capacity was reached in 2008, the \$3.3 billion pipeline, stretching 1,200 kilometers, would transmit 16 billion cubic meters of gas to Turkey annually. The Blue Stream project, however, ran into charges of corruption and payoffs in Turkey's so-called "white energy" scandal, as the prosecutor indicted former energy minister Cumbur Ersumer, although parliament voted not to open an inquiry, possibly due to pressure from Deputy Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz, of Turkey's Motherland Party, who was accused of taking bribes to promote the project. In any case, Turkey, by moving ahead with a gas import project with Iran and signing an agreement to import natural gas from Azerbaijan's Shakh Deniz field (that will begin sending gas to Turkey by 2004), moved to limit its dependence on Moscow.<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile, in another positive gesture, Russian deputy foreign minister Ivan Ivanov, speaking at a seminar on Turkish-Russian economic relations in May 2001, said that Russian firms were now ready to participate in the building of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, even though Russia still had doubts about its economic viability.<sup>72</sup> For his part, also speaking at the seminar, Turkish Foreign Ministry deputy undersecretary Mithat Balkan said that the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline would be cheaper than expected and he offered its use to Moscow to avoid the possibility of a further overcrowding of the straits following the completion of the Tengiz-Novorossisk pipeline, which threatened a threefold increase in the amount of oil passing through the straits.<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps the most serious problem facing Russian-Turkish relations in 2001

under Putin was Chechen terrorism. In March 2001 Chechen gunmen hijacked a Russian passenger jet from Turkey to Saudi Arabia, and one month later pro-Chechen gunmen raided the Swissotel in Istanbul, leading Moscow to criticize Turkey for allowing “extremist terrorist groups” to operate on its territory.<sup>74</sup> Russian foreign minister Ivan Ivanov called for tougher measures against Chechen terrorism following the incident, and journeyed to Turkey in early June where he stated in a news conference that Turkey and Russia should cooperate in a new partnership in the fight against international terrorism.<sup>75</sup>

The other major problem facing Russian-Turkish relations in 2001 was the continued drop in Russian-Turkish trade, which was more serious for the Turks because of their 2001 economic crisis. The shuttle trade continued to decline, as did the number of special charter flights between Moscow and Istanbul, which dropped from an average of forty to fifty per week in 1996 to only eight or nine per week in 2001.<sup>76</sup> This contributed to a decline in trade, already begun by the Russian economic crisis of 1998, from a high of \$12 billion per year in the mid-1990s to only \$4.5 billion by 2001 (primarily Russian exports), although Turkish stores in Moscow such as Ramstore (created by the Turkish conglomerates KOC and ENKA) continued to do well.

The events of 11 September had a mixed effect on Russian-Turkish relations. Both Russia and Turkey joined in the U.S.-led anti-terrorist alliance, but some Turks expressed suspicion that Russia would seize the opportunity to tighten Moscow’s control in Transcaucasia, especially Georgia, and avoid meeting the CFE limits (these concerns were partially mitigated when the United States sent its troops to Georgia). On the other hand the U.S. activity in Central Asia, which seemed to limit Russian influence there, was seen positively in Ankara. Nonetheless, with Putin still concerned over the war in Chechnya, which showed no signs of ending, and the Turkish government still concerned about the revival of the PKK threat, even though Ocalan sat in a Turkish prison, in late January 2002 Turkey and Russia signed a military cooperation agreement calling not only for the exchange of officers for training purposes, but also for Russia to prohibit terrorist organizations on its soil from acting against Turkey.<sup>77</sup> For its part, Turkey informed Moscow of its willingness to consider the extradition of Movladi Udugov, one of the main leaders of the Chechen rebellion.<sup>78</sup>

In sum, although not as delicate as Russia’s relations with Iran and Iraq, dealing with Turkey presented Putin with a series of challenges, primarily over trade and Chechnya. Nonetheless the move from confrontation to cooperation in Russian-Turkish relations, begun by Yeltsin, had clearly gained momentum under Putin, and it seemed doubtful that the events of 11 September would derail it.

### Conclusions

In looking at Russian policy toward the Middle East under Putin, and particularly toward its three major Middle East partners—Iran, Iraq, and Turkey—three major conclusions can be drawn. First, having brought the previously quasi-independent Russian foreign policy actors such as the Ministry of Atomic Energy and Gasprom, as well as the oligarchs, under control, and having a far more docile Duma to deal

with than did Yeltsin, Putin has a much freer hand than Yeltsin did to deal with foreign policy issues, including the Middle East.

A second conclusion lies in the challenge posed to Putin following the terrorist attacks of 11 September. In the cases of both Iran and Iraq, the new, post-11 September Russian-American relationship may be seriously challenged by Putin's policy choices. As far as Iran is concerned, there are two issues. The first is arms sales. Having already angered the United States in November 2000 by unilaterally abrogating the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement that called for the end of arms sales to Iran, Putin faces some difficult choices in the types of arms he now chooses to sell to Tehran. If Moscow provides sophisticated air defense weaponry and ship-to-ship missiles, which could seriously complicate U.S. activities in the Persian Gulf and the Indian ocean, Putin runs the risk of seriously damaging Russian-American relations.

Also, since Iran has been labeled part of the "Axis of Evil" by U.S. President Bush, it runs the risk of being attacked by the United States as a sponsor of terrorism and a developer of weapons of mass destruction. Any such attack, although unlikely in the near future, would pose a difficult choice for Putin. On one hand, the March 2001 Russian-Iranian treaty did not call for Russia to come to Iran's defense if it were attacked (it stipulated only that Russia would not help the "aggressor"). On the other hand, Iran is Moscow's most important Middle East ally, and not only purchases Russian arms and nuclear reactors but also provides aid to Russian diplomacy in such regional problem areas as Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Consequently, should Moscow stand by while Iran is attacked, it risks losing a key regional ally, as well as suffering a blow to its international prestige. Yet if it seeks to interfere in the attack, it runs the risk of jeopardizing its new relationship with the United States. These are not enviable choices for Putin and, as in the case of arms sales, Putin's diplomatic abilities will be tested as he seeks both to maintain the Russian position in Iran and foster Moscow's new relationship with the United States.

If Putin faces difficult policy choices with regard to Iran, his choices with regard to Iraq are, if anything, more challenging. The problem here for Moscow is twofold. First, if it resists, as it has in the past, U.S. efforts to tighten sanctions against Iraq—something Iraq will definitely exploit—Moscow risks justifying a U.S. attack on Iraq to eliminate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Second, since Iraq is number one on the U.S. "Axis of Evil" list, the United States may attack Iraq with or without the WMD justification with the aim of eliminating the regime of Saddam Hussein. This poses a difficult choice for Putin. If Putin does anything more than orally condemn such an attack, he risks jeopardizing his ties to the United States. On the other hand, an attack in Iraq that eliminates the Saddam Hussein regime could jeopardize Moscow's regaining the more than \$7 billion in debt that Iraq owes it as well as lucrative business deals for its oil companies that await the lifting of sanctions. It is possible, of course, for Putin to finesse the problem by cooperating with the United States to arrange a post-Saddam Hussein regime, on the proviso that the \$7 billion debt be rapidly repaid to Russia and the Russian oil companies' deals be honored in a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. Given

the fact that Saddam Hussein has, at best, been a highly fickle ally to Moscow in the past (his invasions of both Iran and Kuwait led to a weakening of the Soviet Union's position in the Middle East) such a policy outcome is certainly in the realm of possibility. Whether Putin will be able to diplomatically manage the U.S.-Iraqi crisis, however, remains to be seen.

The final conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that business interests are an increasingly important factor in Putin's policy toward the Middle East, as Moscow seeks to earn hard currency to restructure and modernize its economy. These hard currency deals are not only weaponry and nuclear reactors, as in the case of Iran, but natural gas in the case of Turkey and oil exploration in the case of Azerbaijan. Indeed, Moscow has proven willing to clash, albeit somewhat mildly, with Iran, its primary Middle Eastern ally, over the exploitation of Caspian Sea oil, and Putin's improvement of relations with Azerbaijan—despite Iranian objections—underlines the increased importance of financial issues for Moscow as it seeks a legally unfettered way of developing the oil and natural gas deposits in its sector of the Caspian Sea.

The increasing priority Moscow gives to its economic interests is most clearly seen in Russia's policy toward Turkey. Despite continuing irritations over the Chechen war, Moscow, as Prime Minister Khazyanov noted in his October 2000 visit to Ankara, has clearly switched from confrontation to cooperation. The centerpiece of the relationship is the Blue Stream natural gas pipeline, but Moscow has also changed its policy on the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, which it appears now to endorse, and has said that Russian companies would be prepared to assist in its construction. Although there is still some friction over Transcaucasia and Central Asia, for the time being at least economic cooperation is the driving force behind Russian-Turkish relations.

In sum, Putin, until 11 September, basically continued the general policy outlines of the Yeltsin regime toward the Middle East, which were cooperation with Iraq and Iran despite the friction this caused with the United States, and economic cooperation with Turkey. Although the policy of economic cooperation with Turkey not only continued but was accelerated by Putin, in the cases of both Iran and Iraq, Putin's newly found desire to improve relations with the United States came into conflict with Moscow's old policy line toward Baghdad and Tehran. How Putin handles this situation will be an important test of his diplomatic abilities.

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