

Policy Watch: Moscow's Mideast hopes

Published: June 11, 2007 at 10:24 AM

MARK N. KATZ

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has pursued three main goals in the Middle East: first, to prevent the United States from becoming the predominant power there; second, to prevent the Middle East (and broader Muslim world) from sympathizing with and supporting Chechen rebels and other Islamic opposition movements in Russia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union; and third, to make money for Russian enterprises through expanding their investments in and exports to the Middle East.

Recently, Russia has been attempting to pursue all three of these goals through establishing and maintaining friendly relations with all Middle Eastern governments simultaneously, including those that are anti-American, pro-American, and/or opposed to one another. Thus, while Russia maintains good relations with anti-American regimes in Iran and Syria, it has also established friendly relations with pro-American ones in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt and elsewhere. Moscow is even trying to maintain good relations with Israel, Fatah and Hamas all at the same time.

What Moscow -- and many other governments -- feared at the time the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq began in 2003 is that the United States would quickly succeed in establishing a democratic government there, would then proceed to intervene in Iran and/or Syria, and that a democratic Middle East would emerge. While this vision was highly discomfoting to all the region's authoritarian regimes (both pro- as well as anti-American), it was also uncomfortable for Moscow.

The Putin administration assumed that a democratic Middle East would be a pro-U.S. Middle East where Russia would have little influence. Further, the Americans would use their influence to exclude Russian firms from the region. Most importantly, though, the spread of democracy in the Middle East would increase the likelihood of democratic revolution toppling additional authoritarian regimes in the former Soviet Union -- perhaps even in Russia itself.

By now, however, neither Moscow nor the Middle East's authoritarian regimes worry about the United States being successful in Iraq. Quite the contrary: Moscow and several other governments have reason to worry about what will happen if the United States fails in Iraq and leaves.

For while Moscow has by now succeeded in persuading or cajoling all those Middle Eastern governments that were not already completely opposed to the Chechen rebels to stop giving them even minimal support, Moscow knows that there are forces in the Middle East that are willing to support them. In June 2006 the Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq kidnapped several Russian diplomats in Baghdad, demanded that Moscow pull its troops out of Chechnya within 48 hours if it wanted them released and executed them when Moscow did not comply.

What was especially remarkable about this incident is that the Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq (a Sunni umbrella group that includes al-Qaida in Iraq) presumably already had its hands full fighting U.S. forces, Iraqi Shiites and other Sunnis it doesn't like. Despite this, however, the Mujahideen Shura Council found time to think of Russia.

How much more time and effort might they devote to the Chechen cause if U.S. forces left

Iraq? The Russians themselves are asking this question. In an article published March 13, 2007, in Izvestia (one of Russia's leading newspapers), Maksim Yusin wrote, "Better the current puppet government in Baghdad than al-Qaida, which would almost certainly gain control over several Iraqi provinces once the Americans were to 'distance themselves.' Then die-hard 'jihadists' would pour into Iraq from other regions, including the North Caucasus ... and the jihadists would start dashing back and forth like shuttle merchants -- off to Russia to blow something up, then back to Iraq for R&R. ... So it would be better if the Americans would just stay put."

This statement reveals that some in Moscow are worried about the implications for Russia of a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. It also indicates something about what Moscow's interests in the Middle East actually are. While Moscow does not want the United States to be predominant there, it does not want the United States to withdraw, either. For the American presence serves to contain -- and distract -- those jihadists who could well be expected to help the Chechens and other Muslim opposition forces in Russia if they had the time and leisure to do so (they already have the will). And to the extent that the American presence does enhance the security of Middle Eastern countries other than Iraq, this provides the stability that Russian enterprises -- especially oil and gas firms -- need in order to operate there.

For Moscow is well aware that if the United States -- with all its resources -- cannot pacify Iraq or keep order in the Middle East more generally, Russia certainly could not hope to do so either. The problem for Moscow is that while a strong American presence in the Middle East limits Russian influence there, a weak American presence there may limit Russian influence there even more.

--

(Mark N. Katz is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University.)