

Policy Watch: Saudi-Russian partnership

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At the time of Russian President Vladimir Putin's February visit to Riyadh, some Russian commentators expressed the view that improved Saudi-Russian ties were occurring at the expense of Saudi relations with America and the West.

"Saudi Arabia is turning away from the West towards Russia," Moscow's NTV Mir declared on Feb. 12. The next day, another Russian commentator observed that, "the Saudis wish to go out of control of the United States and believe that Russia can help them in reaching this goal."

In response to views such as these, a Feb. 15 article in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* by Artur Blinov noted about Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan (all three of which Putin visited just after his Munich speech), "The three countries are also well-known to have close relations with the United States, so any manifestations of anti-Americanism in our dialogue with them makes little sense."

The fact that Putin brought along with him executives from Russian petroleum, arms and atomic power enterprises to these three countries indicated to Yevgeny Satanovksy of Moscow's Middle East Institute what the true nature of Russia's interest in the Middle East now is: "It's no longer about ideology," *Vedemosti* quoted him in its March 1 edition, "it's about business."

In the present era of strained Saudi-American relations (especially with regard to Iraq), Riyadh may see one of the benefits of improved ties with Moscow is that this contributes to the image of Saudi Arabia pursuing its own foreign policy independent of the United States. Allowing some Russian firms to participate in various projects within the kingdom may also be useful in strengthening Riyadh's position in its ongoing negotiations with Western corporations about the terms and conditions under which they operate in the kingdom. If Western firms are unwilling to accept the terms that the Saudis offer, Riyadh can point out, there may be Russian firms that are.

Yet while Riyadh values improved relations with Moscow, it is not at all willing to trade its alliance with America for one with Russia. While Saudi Arabia's longtime alliance with the United States has not served to alleviate all the kingdom's security concerns (indeed, many Saudis feel that America's intervention in Iraq has exacerbated them), Riyadh does not see itself as being able to deal with these concerns more successfully without the United States. Nor does it see Russia as able to replace the United States as its principle protector.

Nor, it seems, does Russia aspire to such a role. For if the United States with all its resources is facing extreme difficulties in maintaining order in the Middle East, how could Russia do so? This is openly acknowledged by some Russian observers, such as Maksim Yusin in his March 13 *Izvestia* article: "Today there are no more Chechen, Uzbek or Tajik radicals in Afghanistan. Russia and its neighbors can breathe a sigh of relief. The Americans did the dirty work for them. But now, if the U.S. leaves Iraq, the load of dirty work will increase for many countries. So it would be better if the Americans would just stay put."

Moscow, then, seems content to boost its economic ties to Riyadh in the context of an overall friendly relationship with it that does not aspire to overturn the key Saudi-American security relationship. Indeed, to the extent that Riyadh's relationship with the United States contributes

to the kingdom's security, the Saudi-American alliance helps facilitate Russia's growing investment in and trade with Saudi Arabia. The Saudi-Russian relationship that has developed since 2003, then, can best be described as a partnership rather than an alliance. Nor does it seem likely to develop into an alliance. The real question about their relationship is how likely is their partnership to continue?

There are three contingencies that could (but not necessarily would) lead to strained relations between Moscow and Riyadh. First, if the simmering Chechen rebellion suddenly re-ignited or serious Islamist opposition arose elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, Moscow may well blame Saudi Arabia for this (as it did before).

Second, if oil prices fell dramatically and Saudi Arabia and OPEC sought to deal with this through cutting back its production while Russia maintained or expanded its own, then Saudi-Russian relations would probably turn sour.

Third, Saudi-Russian relations would deteriorate if Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons appeared imminent to Riyadh but Moscow denied this and insisted on shielding Tehran. The most likely consequence from any of these scenarios is that obstacles would suddenly arise for Russian enterprises doing business in or with Saudi Arabia.

At present, though, it does not seem likely that the Chechen rebellion will burst forth anew, that oil prices will suddenly fall or that Russia would be less frightened than Saudi Arabia at the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran. The Saudi-Russian partnership focusing on economic relations, then, seems likely to continue and even increase. While this is something that American and other Western corporations may see as impinging on their business interests, it does not appear to threaten the larger politico-military interests of the United States and its closest allies.

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