

MARK N. KATZ (Fairfax, VA, USA)

## ***POST-SOVIET RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD THE MIDDLE EAST***

Since the breakup of the USSR in 1991, there has been significant change in Moscow's Middle East policy. During much of the Cold War, Moscow sought to project Soviet influence throughout even the far off Arab region of the Middle East. In the post-Cold War era, though, Russian foreign policy has focused on that part of the Middle East closest to the former USSR—the Northern Tier. This article will examine the major aspects of post-Cold War Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East in order to identify Moscow's multiple goals in the region and discuss Moscow's capacity for achieving them. First, though, a brief review of the different stages of Imperial and Soviet foreign policy toward the region is necessary in order to show the extent to which post-Cold War Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East has and has not changed.

### ***Imperial and Soviet Foreign Policy toward the Middle East***

For purposes of this discussion, it is important to note that the "Middle East" for the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation has included the Muslim regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

### ***Imperial Policy***

There were many differences in Tsarist policy toward the Middle East from the late eighteenth century (when Russia emerged as a great power) until the fall of the monarchy in 1917. Still, there was a degree of consistency in the aims pursued by the Tsars toward the Middle East during these years as well as the means by which they pursued them. This was the period when Russia, like many West European states, established its colonial empire. During this period when the Tsars were expanding Russian power in the Caucasus and Central Asia, their foreign policy toward the Northern Tier focused, to a greater or lesser degree, on seizing territory from and attempting to limit British influence in Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan. Tsarist foreign policy also attempted to extend Russian influence into the Arab world on occasion—notably at the time of the French Revolution and then in the 1890s and early 1900s, but these efforts achieved little in the face of more determined competition in the region from other European

states as well as the emergence of serious threats from Europe demanding Russia's full attention.<sup>1</sup>

Except for the fact that the West European colonial empires were established overseas while the Russian one was established overland, the processes of colonization employed by Imperial Russia were not dissimilar to those employed by Western Europe: seizure of territory from weaker states, co-optation of local rulers, playing off local rivals against each other, and the settlement of large numbers of colonists from the "mother country" in the colonies. Tsarist policy toward the Caucasus and Central Asia, then, was not particularly different from the policy of other European colonial powers in the areas where they predominated. Nor did Russia, being an autocracy, suffer from the contradiction of a nation enjoying democracy itself ruling other nations by force which would increasingly afflict, and contribute to the downfall of, the colonial empires of Britain, France, and other democratic West European states. The success of Tsarist policy, though, did depend on the ability of Russia to maintain its influence by force, and when this came to an abrupt end with the dissolution of the Tsarist regime in 1917, Russia lost control of the Caucasus as well as its ability to influence even the northern tier Middle Eastern states.

### *Lenin's Policy*

Lenin radically transformed Russia's foreign policy, seeking not simply to gain an important place for Russia within the existing system of international relations, but to overthrow that system altogether and replace it with a revolutionary socialist one. The Leninist foreign policy toward the Middle East, however, bore a remarkable resemblance to previous Tsarist policy. After winning the Russian civil war, the Bolshevik regime moved quickly to restore Russian control in the Caucasus and put down rebellion against Soviet rule in Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> Lenin also sought to ally with anti-Western but non-Marxist regimes in Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan. Moscow even ended its support to a nascent Marxist regime in northwestern Iran—the Gilan Soviet—in an apparent effort to improve its relations with the Iranian monarchy and prevent it from increasing its reliance on Britain for fear of

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1. On Tsarist foreign policy toward Turkey and Iran, especially in relation to Russian expansion in the Caucasus and Central Asia, see Hugh Seton-Watson, *The Russian Empire, 1801-1917* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 41-51, 57-62, 289-311, 430-45.

2. Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1987), chs. 15-16.

the Soviet threat.<sup>3</sup> Although Moscow expressed support for revolution against West European rule in the Arab world, it took few practical steps to foment it under Lenin.

The Soviet Union under Lenin, then, used force to reassert Russian rule where it could, sought alliances against the West with the Northern Tier states, and virtually ignored the rest of the Middle East where it lacked the ability to seriously involve itself. Despite its professed revolutionary aims, this was a relatively prudent foreign policy.

### *Stalin's Policy*

Stalin's foreign policy underwent several dramatic reversals, depending on whether he thought he was in a position to damage the West or whether he needed its cooperation. His foreign policy thinking was often characterized by overoptimism about Moscow's ability to manage events in other countries in a way that would benefit the USSR. Preoccupied by his ambitious domestic projects as well as with events in Europe and the Far East, Stalin paid considerably less attention to the Middle East. To the extent that Stalin had a foreign policy toward this region, it too was mainly concerned with the Northern Tier countries.<sup>4</sup> Stalin made only minimal effort to project Soviet influence into the Arab world. In the late 1920s, he established diplomatic relations with the conservative Saudi and North Yemeni monarchies and hoped to cooperate with them on the basis of common opposition to British colonialism, but nothing came of this scheme.<sup>5</sup>

Shortly after the German attack against the USSR in 1941, the Soviet Union and Great Britain cooperatively occupied Iran. When the British were withdrawing their forces from southern Iran as per the Anglo-Soviet agreement on terminating their occupation after the war ended, Stalin appeared unwilling to withdraw Soviet forces from the northern part of the country. He also supported the emergence of Marxist regimes in Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. Yet despite the fact that the West could do little to force him to, Stalin did in fact withdraw his troops from northern Iran and allowed the two "Soviet" republics there to collapse in exchange for what he apparently

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3. S. Nell MacFarlane, "Successes and Failures in Soviet Policy toward Marxist Revolutions in the Third World, 1917-1985," in Mark N. Katz, ed., *The USSR and Marxist Revolutions in the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), p. 12.

4. "From 1919 to 1945, Moscow lacked the strength or opportunity to do otherwise than maintain the status quo with its southern neighbors." Alvin Z. Rubinsteln, *Soviet Foreign Policy since World War II: Imperial and Global*, 4th. ed. [New York: Harper Collins, 1992], p. 204.

5. John Baldry, "Soviet Relations with Saudi Arabia and the Yemen, 1917-1938," *Middle Eastern Studies* 20, no. 1 (Jan. 1984), 53-80.

hoped would be close relations with the Shah's regime—an expectation that was dashed soon after the completion of the Soviet withdrawal.<sup>6</sup>

Far from being an example of aggressiveness, Stalin's foreign policy toward Iran in the aftermath of World War II was remarkably restrained considering that he did not face serious constraints from the West here. Similarly, although Stalin demanded a Soviet base in the Turkish Straits and the award of a UN Trusteeship over Libya, he did not press for these aggressively (he was not in a strong position to do so).<sup>7</sup>

In light of strong Soviet support later for the Arab side in the Arab-Israeli dispute, Stalin's support for the creation of Israel in 1948 appears curious.<sup>8</sup> Far from foreseeing that Israel would eventually receive strong support from the United States and so create an opportunity for Moscow to ally with the Arabs (as some conspiracy theorists argue), Stalin's support for Israel appears to have been based on assumptions that 1) Britain and France would remain predominant in the Arab world; and 2) Jewish hostility toward Britain before Israeli independence would endure afterward, thus creating the opportunity for the USSR to ally with Israel. Both these assumptions, of course, proved inaccurate.

#### *Khrushchev's Policy*

It was under Nikita Khrushchev that the Soviet Union was first able to sustain an active foreign policy in the Middle East as a whole. Several factors made this possible. Unlike during the nineteenth century and much of the 1920s, Soviet control over the Caucasus and Central Asia was quite firm from the 1930s until the Gorbachev era. Similarly, unlike the 1910s, 1930s, and much of the 1940s, Russia was not under direct attack or the threat of it from Germany. In addition, the rapid progress of the Soviet nuclear weapons program gave Moscow increased confidence that the USSR would not be directly attacked by any other nation.

It was this growing strength of the Soviet Union that made those Middle Eastern states closest to it increasingly fearful and hence willing to join Western-sponsored security alliances. Hence during the 1950s, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan all joined Western-sponsored security pacts.<sup>9</sup>

Increased Soviet strength, then, was counter-productive to Khrushchev's efforts to increase its influence in the Northern Tier since this greater strength led these states to fear Moscow. What gave Khrushchev the op-

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6. Rubinstein, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, pp. 66-67.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Iraq, though, ceased its military cooperation with the West after the 1958 revolution which ousted the monarchy.

portunity to play a larger role in the region was the rise of Arab nationalism. Arab nationalism was highly anti-Western due to Western colonization of the Arab world as well as support for Israel and pro-Western Arab monarchies. In its confrontation with the West, Arab nationalist leaders—especially the foremost one, Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt—sought support from the Soviet Union, and Khrushchev readily gave it.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to Egypt, Arab nationalist regimes came to power in Syria, Iraq, Algeria, and North Yemen before Khrushchev's ouster in 1964. Although there were differences over various issues between Moscow and all of them, in general these states were pro-Soviet. This was also the period when Moscow acquired military facilities in the region, especially in Egypt. Khrushchev also tried to improve Moscow's relations with conservative pro-Western Arab regimes at this time, but these efforts were generally (though not completely) unsuccessful due to these states' fear of their Arab nationalist neighbors.<sup>11</sup> In a sense, though, this did not worry Moscow since these conservative Arab governments all appeared highly vulnerable to being overthrown and replaced by pro-Soviet Arab nationalist regimes also. Although mainly the result of American pressure, Arab public opinion credited Nasser and Khrushchev for having forced the British and French to withdraw from the Suez Canal and the Israelis to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula after their tripartite intervention in 1956.<sup>12</sup>

Khrushchev's Middle Eastern policy appeared to be highly successful. It depended, however, on several factors. The first of these was that Arab nationalist regimes would remain pro-Soviet. This, in turn, depended on their continuing satisfaction with the extent of economic and military assistance they received from the USSR. But Khrushchev made the point repeatedly that while the USSR was willing to assist Third World revolutionaries, it was not willing to do so to the point where this risked a Soviet-American confrontation.<sup>13</sup> Although this self-limitation on Soviet behavior would be made manifest in other regions before Khrushchev's ouster (most notably during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis), it would only be later that Moscow's Arab nationalist allies would come to understand that there were definite limits to Soviet military assistance for them.

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10. Rubinstein, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, pp. 212-14.

11. Although Kuwait established diplomatic relations with the USSR in 1963, none of the other conservative states of the Arabian Peninsula did so until the Gorbachev era. On Soviet relations with the Arabian Peninsula states generally, see Mark N. Katz, *Russia and Arabia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986).

12. George Lenczowski, *The Middle East in World Affairs*, 4th ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 534-36.

13. Mark N. Katz, *The Third World in Soviet Military Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 18-21.

### *Brezhnev's Policy*

The contradictions in Soviet foreign policy toward the Middle East (especially the Arab world) inherited from the Khrushchev era would become apparent in the Brezhnev era—though not right away. In fact, Soviet influence in the Arab world would at first expand under Brezhnev in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Their defeat that year served to greatly increase Arab hostility toward the United States for, unlike in 1956, having so strongly supported Israel in this conflict and afterward. Many Arab governments broke diplomatic relations with the U.S. at the time. Already anti-American Arab nationalist regimes moved closer to the USSR, accepting a greater Soviet military presence in their countries in exchange for increased shipments of Soviet arms with which they hoped to defeat Israel in a future encounter. Even many conservative Arab states distanced themselves from the U.S. and moved closer to the USSR. These conservative Arab states did this partly to placate anti-American public opinion in their own country which could have jeopardized their survival if they were too closely identified with the U.S. But they also improved relations with the USSR in order to give Moscow an incentive to moderate the hostile policies of Moscow's radical Arab allies toward their conservative neighbors. And those conservative Arab states which remained hostile toward the USSR (Saudi Arabia and the smaller emirates of the Persian Gulf which Britain withdrew its protection from in 1971) appeared to be vulnerable to guerrillas supported by South Yemen—the one Arab state where a Marxist-Leninist regime had come to power.<sup>14</sup>

By the beginning of the 1970s, the USSR appeared well on its way toward becoming the predominant external power in the Arab world. Over the course of the 1970s, however, Brezhnev's foreign policy would experience numerous setbacks stemming from the contradictory nature of its foreign policy in this region. To begin with, Moscow never considered Arab nationalism to be anything but a way station on a road that would ultimately lead to the establishment of Marxist-Leninist regimes in these states. When Arab nationalist forces were strong and Marxist-Leninist ones weak, Moscow acquiesced to the suppression of the latter by the former. And when Marxist-Leninist (or more pro-Soviet) Arab leaders succeeded in ousting Arab nationalist (or less pro-Soviet) ones, Moscow benefited, as in 1978 in South Yemen when the pro-Soviet faction in the South Yemeni ruling party ousted and executed the pro-Chinese one.<sup>15</sup> But when such attempts failed (as when the more pro-Soviet Ali Sabri attempted to overthrow Anwar al-Sadat in Egypt after the death of Nasser, and when the Sudanese Communist

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14. Lenczowski, *The Middle East in World Affairs*, pp. 784-87.

15. Katz, *Russia and Arabia*, pp. 92-93.

Party launched an abortive coup against the Arab nationalist regime of Jafaar al-Nimeiry in Sudan), this contributed to the reorientation of once pro-Soviet regimes away from Moscow and toward Washington.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, the Arab defeat in the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict made clear the limit to which Moscow would risk a broader conflict with the U.S. in order to support the Arabs against Israel. This limit had been evident in 1967, but on this earlier occasion the Arabs blamed their defeat on American support for Israel. By contrast, the Arabs generally blamed their 1973 defeat on the inadequacy of the weaponry Moscow had supplied them with. There was also a general sense that since the USSR could not be relied upon to provide the Arabs with the strength necessary to push Israel out of occupied Arab territory, the Arabs needed to enlist the help of the U.S. in order to persuade it to do so.<sup>17</sup> While their defeat in 1967 led to a Soviet diplomatic victory in the region, the Arab defeat in 1973 led to an American diplomatic victory there. Despite the unhappiness of many Arab states over the Egyptian-Israeli accords signed at Camp David in 1978, Washington succeeded at excluding Moscow from all but a pro forma role in the politics of Arab-Israeli peace-making from the aftermath of the 1973 war onward.

Toward the end of the 1970s, events in two Northern Tier countries at first appeared to provide important gains for the Soviet Union, but would soon prove to be serious losses for it. The first of these apparent gains occurred in 1978 when a Marxist-Leninist regime came to power in Afghanistan. But not only did this new regime elicit strong domestic opposition, its leadership was also seriously divided. In order to prevent the regime from falling from power or out of the Soviet orbit, Brezhnev ordered the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. This decision turned out to be disastrous for three reasons: 1) unlike the Hungarians in 1956 or the Czechoslovaks in 1968, the Afghans put up a fierce resistance which Soviet forces were never able to defeat; 2) detente with the West—and the benefits which Moscow derived from it—came to an end; and 3) the Muslim world in general (including the Middle East) came to see the USSR as the enemy of Islam. Not only were several conservative Arab states able to capitalize on rising anti-Soviet sentiment in the Arab world to move closer to the U.S. despite its support for Israel, but the anti-American regimes in

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16. Lenczowski, *The Middle East in World Affairs*, p. 787.

17. Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War II to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), ch. 7. Sadat's disenchantment with Moscow was evident the year before the 1973 Arab-Israeli war when he ordered the removal of most Soviet military advisers from Egypt in response to, among other things, Soviet unwillingness to supply him with the advanced weaponry he wanted. Rubinstein, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, p. 215.

Iraq and (after 1979) Iran also condemned the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, thus complicating Moscow's relations with them.<sup>18</sup>

The second event—the Iranian revolution of 1979—was welcomed by Moscow since it brought about the downfall of one of America's staunchest allies in the region. The Brezhnev regime hoped to ally with the Ayatollah Khomeini on the basis of a common anti-American foreign policy, and that the Islamic fundamentalist regime which replaced the Shah's would itself soon be replaced by a Marxist-Leninist one. However, not only did the Islamic fundamentalist regime remain firmly in power and defeat its communist and other leftist opponents, but Khomeini's foreign policy was as anti-Soviet as it was anti-American.<sup>19</sup> Given Soviet involvement in and then invasion of Afghanistan on Iran's eastern border as well as Moscow's massive supply of Soviet arms to Iraq, whose forces poured across Iran's western border in 1980, it is hardly surprising that Khomeini saw the USSR as an enemy. From Moscow's perspective, the new regime in Iran was a serious problem since it represented a competitive revolutionary ideology which threatened pro-Soviet as well as pro-Western regimes in the Middle East, and even had the potential to spread to the Muslim regions of the USSR itself.

By the first half of the 1980s (encompassing the last years of the Brezhnev era and the short reigns of his two immediate successors, Andropov and Chernenko), the Soviet position in the Arab world had become considerably weakened. Its only allies were isolated or beleaguered radical regimes in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and South Yemen. In addition, Moscow's ambition to extend its influence in the Northern Tier states was frustrated both by the tenacious resistance to the Soviet-backed Marxist-Leninist regime in Afghanistan and to the emergence of a formidable revolutionary challenger in Iran.

#### *Gorbachev's Policy*

Between 1985 and 1987, Gorbachev's new foreign policy logic had not fully evolved, and Moscow still competed with the U.S. for influence in the Middle East (and elsewhere). By 1988, however, it was evident that Gorbachev had decided to subordinate Soviet policy toward the Middle East to both his policy of seeking detente with the West as well as his ambitious domestic goals when the USSR agreed to withdraw its forces from Afghan-

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18. Other radical regimes friendly to Moscow (Algeria, Libya, Syria, and North Yemen) did not condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, but did not, like Marxist South Yemen and Ethiopia, support it either. Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy since the Invasion of Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 71-80.

19. Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, pp. 185-96.



istan by February 1989. In 1990, Gorbachev also acquiesced to the dissolution of the Marxist-Leninist regime in South Yemen through its merger with non-Marxist North Yemen; considering that the Soviet Union under Gorbachev had decisively intervened in South Yemen's 1986 civil war to prop up the Marxist-Leninist regime there, this was a remarkable policy turnabout in the space of four years. It was also during this period when the USSR came to support American-sponsored Arab-Israeli peace efforts instead of trying to promote its own Middle East peace plan in competition with the U.S. But the most spectacular example of the extent to which Gorbachev subordinated Moscow's policy toward the Middle East to its relations with America and the West came during the 1990-91 crisis over Kuwait. Although the USSR did not send troops itself, Moscow supported American-sponsored UN Security Council resolutions condemning Iraq, imposing sanctions on it, and finally, authorizing the use of force to end the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait.<sup>20</sup>

There was an inherent logic to Gorbachev's refashioning of Soviet policy toward the Middle East (and the Third World as a whole) so as not to contradict Soviet foreign policy toward America and the West, which he had also refashioned to support his ambitious domestic agenda. Unfortunately for Gorbachev, his domestic agenda was riddled with inconsistencies and ultimately led to his downfall as well as the breakup of the USSR. Why this happened cannot be recounted here; the story is well known anyway. *Vis-à-vis* the Middle East, however, it is important to note that Gorbachev's domestic policies inspired the rise of non-Russian nationalisms, including in Russia's own Middle East: the Caucasus and Central Asia. Although much stronger in the former than the latter, the breakup of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 meant that the uncontested Russian control over these two regions which had been maintained since the Stalin era had come to an end.

#### ***Post-Soviet Russian Foreign Policy toward the Middle East***

It is only with this history in mind that continuity and change in Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy toward the Middle East can be adequately assessed. Yeltsin's foreign policy toward the Middle East immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union was a continuation of Gorbachev's: cooperation with America and the West in this region based on the Russian desire to obtain Western resources needed for Russian economic reform and growth. But two important changes have occurred since the breakup of the USSR that have strongly affected Russian foreign policy in general as well

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20. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East*, ch. 4; Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, ch. 17; and Rubinstein, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, pp. 218-28.

as toward the Middle East in particular: 1) the impact of Russian economic as well as military decline; and 2) the rise of Russian nationalism.

The first of these changes, the decline of Russian economic and military strength, has led to Russia no longer being willing or able to involve itself in costly military conflicts abroad or to give away large quantities of military and economic assistance to impecunious allies the way the USSR did from Khrushchev to Gorbachev. Russia is still willing to transfer arms abroad, but only to those states which can pay for them in hard currency.

The second change that has affected Russian foreign policy—the rise of Russian nationalism—has occurred for several complex reasons, not least of these being the decline in Russian economic and military strength. Popular expectations raised by Yeltsin's government just after the breakup of the USSR that market reform would quickly lead to a higher standard of living for the Russian population were not fulfilled. Indeed, for the majority of Russians, the standard of living has declined. There is also massive popular disappointment over the loss of Russia's superpower status and its empire. Non-democratic forces have risen up which blame the West—and both Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's efforts to have good relations with it—for this double loss.

Yeltsin appears determined to reassert Russian influence over the South Caucasus and Central Asia in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet while he has devoted considerable attention to this goal, he has faced many constraints in pursuing it. First and foremost, the significant degree of democratization that has occurred in post-Soviet Russian politics has meant that Yeltsin has had to operate in an environment (which he himself did much to create) where public opinion matters. And public opinion in Russia, just like in other countries, can be contradictory. While many Russians, for example, favor the restoration of the USSR, they came to increasingly oppose Yeltsin's failed military effort to defeat Chechen secessionists, ultimately forcing Yeltsin to withdraw Russian troops from this region in 1996. Ironically, it was one of the leading Russian nationalists, Alexander Lebed, who negotiated an end to the fighting and the Russian withdrawal during his brief stint as Yeltsin's national security adviser.<sup>21</sup>

What happened in Chechnya has had a profound impact on Russian policy toward the South Caucasus and Central Asia. For if the Russian public will not tolerate protracted military intervention to keep Chechnya within the Russian Federation itself, it appears highly unlikely that it would

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21. Vera Tolz, "The War in Chechnya," *Current History* 95 (Oct. 1996), 316-21. On Russian public opinion on the war in Chechnya shortly before the 1996 Russian presidential elections, see U.S. Information Agency, "Half the Russian Public Willing to Grant Independence to Chechnya," *Russia/NIS Opinion Alert* L-14-96, March 6, 1996.

tolerate protracted intervention to keep areas outside Russia, such as the South Caucasus and Central Asia, under Russia's influence.

Similarly, Russia has intervened militarily in Tajikistan to defend "ex-communists" against "Islamist" forces from 1992 to the present. Unlike the intervention in Chechnya which was done with mainly Russian conscript troops, the Russian intervention in Tajikistan has been more akin to the "Foreign Legion": while the officers and NCOs of this 18,500 man force are predominantly Russian, the enlisted men are predominantly Tajik. Even then, Russian public opinion has taken a negative view of this intervention, and in 1997 Russia negotiated a cease-fire and power-sharing agreement in Tajikistan.<sup>22</sup>

Post-Soviet Russia, then, cannot resort as easily to the use of force as Imperial Russia or the Soviet Union did to gain and retain control over the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia, however, is still able to exercise powerful means aimed at preventing the new states of South Caucasus and Central Asia from becoming too independent from Moscow. These include limited military intervention (as when Russian troops drove government forces out of Abkhazia, a breakaway region of Georgia), the ability to destabilize these weak regimes, and considerable leverage over the choice of export routes for the petroleum wealth that some of them possess.<sup>23</sup> Yet because post-Soviet Russia has neither the will nor the capacity to undertake prolonged, large-scale military operations in these regions like Imperial or Soviet Russia, and because the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia are all independent and some are rich in petroleum, Moscow's continued influence over them is now dependent on how it manages its relations with the countries just to their south: Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan.

### *The Northern Tier*

Because of their geographical proximity to the South Caucasus and Central Asia as well as their varying combinations of linguistic, ethnic, and religious links with some of them, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan could potentially undermine Russian influence in these areas of the former USSR. In-

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22. Muriel Atkin, "Tajikistan's Civil War," *Current History* 96 (Oct. 1997), 336-40. On Russian public opinion concerning the war in Tajikistan, see U.S. Information Agency, "Environment and Nuclear Proliferation Are Among Russians' Top Concerns," *Russia/NIS Opinion Alert* L-68-95, Nov. 13, 1995.

23. Rosemarie Forsythe, *The Politics of Oil in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, Adelphi Paper no. 300 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1996); and Darrell Slider, "Democratization in Georgia," in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, eds., *Conflict, Cleavage, and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), p. 172.

deed, when the USSR broke up at the end of 1991, it was widely predicted that Turkey and Iran would actively compete for influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia and that Russia would no longer play a strong role in them.<sup>24</sup> These forecasts have clearly proven to be inaccurate: Russia remains the predominant power in the South Caucasus and Central Asia while Turkey and Iran have achieved only a relatively modest degree of influence there so far. Still, there is now in the post-Soviet era a potential that did not exist during the Soviet period for the Northern Tier countries to play an important role in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. This potential may increase if changes in these parts of the former USSR create opportunities for the Northern Tier states.

Russian foreign policy, then, has sought to ensure that such opportunities do not arise through managing Russia's relations with the Northern Tier states in such a way that these states do not have the incentive, or barring this, the opportunity to challenge Russia's position in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. So far, Moscow has pursued this set of objectives vis-a-vis the Northern Tier countries relatively successfully.

Considering the very recent history of the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, it would not have been surprising if the Islamic regime that ousted the Marxist one in Kabul was extremely hostile toward Russia. In fact, the Afghan regime that came to power in 1992 was quite hostile toward Russia at first. It allowed Tajik Islamic forces to operate from Afghan territory in their struggle against the ex-communist Tajik regime which Russian forces had helped restore to power.<sup>25</sup> But as this regime became increasingly beleaguered by the increasingly powerful Taliban forces, Moscow and the Rabbani government in Kabul found that they shared common interests. Before its downfall, Russia reportedly provided military assistance to the Rabbani government, which in return ended its support for the Tajik Islamic opposition and began cooperation with the Russian-backed Tajik regime.<sup>26</sup>

Russian relations with the Taliban after they came to power in Kabul in 1996 have been extremely poor. Russian officials have expressed the fear that, after subduing northern Afghanistan, the Taliban intend to spread their brand of Islamic revolution into former Soviet Central Asia. Moscow has continued to provide assistance to the remnants of the Rabbani gov-

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24. See, for example, William Drozdiak, "Iran and Turkey Vie for Political, Economic Influence in Soviet Muslim States," *Washington Post*, Nov. 24, 1991, p. A27.

25. Rubin, "Tajikistan," pp. 216-19.

26. "Russia is once again a significant arms supplier . . . to the government in Kabul controlled by Ahmad Shah Massoud, a former guerrilla commander who was the bane of Soviet forces in the Panjsher Valley north of Kabul." John F. Burns, "The West in Afghanistan, Before and After," *The New York Times*, Febr. 18, 1996, p. E5.

ernment and its allies that continue to hold onto northern Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup> If in fact the Taliban do represent a threat to the stability of Central Asia, the Russians have so far succeeded in containing it within Afghanistan.

Russian-Turkish relations have had a complicated evolution in the post-Soviet era. On the one hand, there has emerged an unprecedented degree of cooperative interaction between the two countries. Turkish businesses, for example, are actively involved in the growing private sector of the Russian economy. On the other hand, many in Russia fear the possibility that Ankara may be able to displace Moscow as the pre-eminent power in the ex-Soviet republics with linguistic links to Turkey (Azerbaijan in the Caucasus and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan in Central Asia). The Russian nationalist strain in Moscow's foreign policy has identified Turkey not only as a threat to Russian interests in these states, but also in the Muslim regions of the Russian Federation.<sup>28</sup> Russian nationalists frequently claimed that Turkey supported the Chechen independence movement.<sup>29</sup> The ultra-Russian nationalist leader, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, appears to regard Turkey as Russia's primordial enemy.<sup>30</sup>

Turkey has, in fact, attempted to extend its influence into the South Caucasus and Central Asia. There have been several obstacles, however, to the spread of Turkish influence to these regions. To begin with, Turkey does not directly border on any of the predominantly Turkic former Soviet republics (except for its very short common border with Azerbaijan's Nakhichevan exclave which itself is geographically discontinuous from Azerbaijan). In addition, Turkey's economy is not particularly strong and there are severe constraints on the aid and investment that Turkey can provide to these former Soviet republics. Further, Ankara's cultural campaign to link these republics more closely with Turkey was largely unsuccessful, resulting instead in resentment over Turkey's perceived cultural arrogance.<sup>31</sup> So far, Turkish efforts to spread its influence to these republics have been lim-

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27. Mark N. Katz, "Tajikistan and Russia: Sources of Instability in Central Asia," *Caspian Crossroads* 2, no. 4 (Spring 1997), 13.

28. For example, according to "specialists" from the Russian Defense Research Institute, "Turkey is acting as an instrument of American policy in the region, whose main goal is the establishment of Western control over the Caspian's energy. . . ." Stanislav Lunev, "Russian Dangerous Ambitions in the Transcaucasus," 2, no. 8, April 19, 1996.

29. The Turkish Welfare Party (the Islamic political party which gained the most votes in the 1996 Turkish parliamentary elections) does in fact publicly support Chechen independence. Stephen Kinzer, "Ferry Incident Raises Turkey-Russia Tension," *The New York Times*, Jan. 21, 1996, pp. 1, 10.

30. "Zhirinovskiy vs. the Turks," *Middle East Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (June 1994), 87-91.

31. Mesbahi, "Regional and Global Powers and the International Relations of Central Asia," pp. 21-20; and Kelly Couturier, "Discord Between Russia, Turkey Growing," *The Washington Post*, Dec. 4, 1994, p. A44.

ited both by Turkey's distance from them (especially the ones in Central Asia), the lack of sufficient resources that might enable Ankara to spread its influence, and perhaps most importantly, Turkey's unwillingness to damage its relations with Russia by aggressively seeking to displace its influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.<sup>32</sup>

In sharp contrast to Moscow's wary relationship with Turkey, Russian-Iranian cooperation has developed to such an extent that some observers see an alliance emerging from it. Underlying this increased Russo-Iranian cooperation are several convergent interests which make such an alliance a real possibility.

One of these convergent interests is economic. Russia wants to increase its hard currency export earnings, but has few opportunities for doing so. Iran wants to buy arms and nuclear reactors, but is unable to get these from the West due to American pressure on its allies not to sell these items to Tehran. It is not surprising, then, that Russia has been eager to sell Iran—a country which can pay in hard currency—goods which Iran cannot obtain from the West.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, Russian and Iranian interests converge in a number of broader political areas. Moscow and Tehran share one important common interest vis-a-vis the U.S.: neither wishes to see American influence grow in the Caucasus or Central Asia. Nor do Russia and Iran wish to see the influence of Turkey grow in these regions either. Further, Russia and Iran are both multi-ethnic states which seek to forestall all secessionist movements within their borders from gaining ground.

Russia's policy of keeping Azerbaijan weak and impoverished serves Iranian interests perfectly. What is now independent Azerbaijan is the northern part of a larger area where Azeris predominate; the southern part is in Iran, and more Azeris live there than in the north. The independence of what was Soviet Azerbaijan has already led to an upsurge of nationalist feeling among Azeris to the south who seek secession from Iran and unification with Azerbaijan.<sup>34</sup> Although difficult to gauge just how powerful this movement is among Iranian Azeris, it does not seem to be particularly strong at present. Obviously, though, it is something that the Iranian government wants to discourage.

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32. Malik Mufti, "Daring and Caution in Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle East Journal* 52, no. 1 (Winter 1998), 32-50.

33. Robert O. Freedman, "Yeltsin's Russia and Rafsanjani's Iran: A Tactical Alliance," *Middle East Insight* 11, no. 5 (July-Aug. 1995), 88-89; "Russia to Increase Cooperation with Iran," Jamestown Foundation *Monitor*, [jif-monitor@andrew.cais.com], April 12, 1998.

34. David Nissman, "The Two Azerbaijan: A Common Past and a Common Future," *Caspian Crossroads* no. 2 (Spring 1995), pp. 20-23.

The authorities in Tehran fully understand that Iranian Azeris would be far more attracted to a peaceful, prosperous, democratic Azerbaijan than a war-torn, poverty-stricken, dictatorial one. Thus, Tehran has a strong incentive to acquiesce in Moscow's efforts to keep Azerbaijan poor and weak.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, the Iranian government had relatively little to say concerning the brutal Russian use of force in Chechnya. This may seem somewhat surprising, considering that this was a case of non-Muslims suppressing Muslims.<sup>36</sup> But whatever concerns Tehran may have had about this appeared overshadowed by the common Russian-Iranian interest in preventing secession. Tehran may reasonably fear that an internationally recognized independent Chechnya could encourage secessionist movements in Iran.

Tehran did nothing to help the democratic/Islamic government that briefly came to power in Tajikistan in 1992. Nor did Iran do much to assist the increasingly radicalized Islamic opposition to the Soviet-style *apparatchik* regime that was restored to power and kept in place with the help of Russian armed forces.<sup>37</sup> While not uncritical of Moscow's use of force here, Tehran has worked with Russia to arrange a political settlement among the warring factions in Tajikistan.<sup>38</sup>

It may seem especially surprising that Iran would not avail itself of the opportunity to support Islamic revolutionaries, especially in Tajikistan—the one former Soviet republic in which, like Iran, Farsi is the predominant language. Tajikistan, though, provides yet another instance of Russian and Iranian interests converging.

Moscow fears that if Islamic revolution is successful in Tajikistan, it could sweep not only through Central Asia, but also through the Muslim regions of the Russian Federation. While Iran in theory favors Islamic revolution in other countries, it has become unenthusiastic about Islamic revolutionaries who do not recognize Iranian leadership. The Iranian leaders appear to have concluded that it makes little sense for Tehran to support the Islamic opposition in Tajikistan at present when Iran would not necessarily gain an ally even if a Tajik Islamic regime did somehow come to power.

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35. Thus, despite the fact that Armenians are predominantly Orthodox Christian and Azeris are predominantly Shia Muslim, Iran has not supported Azerbaijan in the ongoing Azeri-Armenian dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh. Leila Alleeva, "The Institutions, Orientations, and Conduct of Foreign Policy in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan," in Adeed and Karen Dawisha, eds., *The Making of Foreign Policy in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), pp. 298-99.

36. Kenneth Katzman, "Iran, Russia, and the New Muslim States," *Caspian Crossroads* no. 2 (Spring 1995), p. 15.

37. Freedman, "Yeltsin's Russia and Rafsanjani's Iran," pp. 90-91.

38. Atkinson, "Tajikistan's Civil War," p. 340.

But while Iran is at best indifferent toward the Tajik Islamists, its relations with the Taliban have been openly hostile. The Taliban have condemned the Islamic Republic for being insufficiently Islamic. Tehran, for its part, has accused the Taliban of being agents of the CIA. Iran fears that the Taliban, if allowed the opportunity, would compete with Iran for the leadership of the international Islamic revolutionary movement. Just like Russia, Iran has supported the remnants of the Rabbani regime in northern Afghanistan.<sup>39</sup>

Yeltsin's policy toward the Northern Tier—especially Iran—appears to be highly successful so far. Not only has Russia succeeded in preventing Turkey or Afghanistan from displacing Russian influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, but it has gained something akin to a willing ally in Iran—something that previous Soviet leaders never succeeded in transforming Iran into. Russia's diminished post-Soviet circumstances have obviously not prevented it from conducting an active foreign policy vis-a-vis the Northern Tier countries.

#### *The Farther Middle East*

This has not been the case, however, with regard to Moscow's foreign policy toward what for Russia is the "farther" Middle East—the Arab states and Israel. Under Yeltsin's first foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, Russia came to play only a minimal role in this region. Kozyrev essentially continued Gorbachev's policy of cooperation with the West. Although Russia continued to officially co-sponsor the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations with the U.S., Moscow no longer played any significant role in this process. It clings to this role mainly so that Moscow can point to it as a sign that Russia is still a great power.<sup>40</sup>

In early 1996, though, Kozyrev was replaced as foreign minister by Yevgeniy Primakov, an old Soviet Middle East-hand with close links to radical Arab governments. When fighting erupted between Israeli and radical Arab forces based in Lebanon during the spring of 1996, Primakov attempted to act as a mediator to the conflict. His efforts, however, failed when all parties to the dispute accepted American mediation instead.<sup>41</sup>

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39. Ralph H. Magnus, "Afghanistan in 1996: Year of the Taliban," *Asian Survey* 37, no. 2 (Febr. 1997), 111-17; Terrence White, "Iranian Weapons Part of Arms Build-up on North-West Afghan Battlefield," *Agence-France Presse*, April 21, 1997; *Reuter*, May 10, 1997; and *Xinhua*, July 28, 1997.

40. Robert O. Freedman, "Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Kozyrev Legacy," *Caspian Crossroads*, no. 4 (Winter 1995/96), pp. 18-20.

41. "Primakov Wants More Activist Policy in the Middle East," Jamestown Foundation *Monitor*, [jft-monitor@andrew.cais.com], Febr. 22, 1996; "Primakov Rebuffed in Is-



Primakov was attempting to reassert an independent role for Russia in the Arab-Israeli arena. It must be noted, though, that he was not trying to re-establish Russia's military presence in the region, but its diplomatic one. What is noteworthy about his failure was that even Moscow's long-time ally, Syria, did not see dealing with Russia as an alternative to dealing with the U.S. Although Primakov sought to reassert a Russian role in the Arab-Israeli arena, he was unable to sustain this effort.

To the extent that Moscow still has a sustained policy toward the farther Middle East, it is primarily an economic one. It has sought improved relations with Israel<sup>42</sup> and the conservative Arab states not in an effort to displace the U.S. as the predominant political power in the region, but for the sake of increased trade with them.

Moscow would like to increase its exports (especially of arms) to Iraq and Libya, the two remaining radical Arab states possessing significant oil wealth. Although the Russian government has frequently urged they be lifted, Moscow has observed the UN Security Council-imposed restrictions on trade with Iraq and Libya (which are far stricter with regard to the former).<sup>43</sup> Despite the obvious economic benefit that would accrue to Moscow from increased trade with these two states, Moscow has not broken the sanctions regime against them primarily because of the negative effect this would have on Russian relations with the West as well as conservative states in the Middle East. Under Yeltsin, Russia has virtually ended arms transfers to former allies in this region which cannot afford to pay for them.<sup>44</sup>

Primakov stepped up his efforts to involve Russia in diplomatic efforts concerning Iraq with the crisis that emerged following Baghdad's heightened

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rael," *ibid.*, [jif-monitor@andrew.cais.com], April 23, 1996; and "Kremlin Slams United States for Mideast Peace Effort," *ibid.*, [jif-monitor@andrew.cais.com], April 24, 1996.

42. In the spring of 1996, it appeared that Russian relations with Israel were about to deteriorate when some branches of the Russian government moved to halt the activities of the Jewish Agency—the organization assisting Jews who wish to immigrate to Israel. This was avoided, however, after these actions became publicized and the Yeltsin government acted quickly to allow the Jewish Agency to resume operations in Russia. "Jewish Emigration Organization Alleged to Be Interfering in Russian Affairs," *ibid.*, [jif-monitor@andrew.cais.com], May 17, 1996; and "Positive Signs for Jewish Agency," *ibid.*, [jif-monitor@andrew.cais.com], May 28, 1996.

43. Freedman, "Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East;" "Primakov Wants More Activist Policy in Middle East;" "Moscow Wants Libya Sanctions Reviewed," *ibid.*, [jif-monitor@andrew.cais.com], March 27, 1996; and "Blockbuster Russian-Libyan Trade Deal?" *ibid.*, [jif-monitor@andrew.cais.com], March 29, 1996.

44. For a general discussion of trends in post-Soviet Russian arms exports, see Andrew J. Pierre and Dmitri V. Trenin, eds., *Russia in the World Arms Trade* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1997).

non-compliance with the UN-mandated weapons inspection program and its efforts to end American participation in it. When the crisis emerged, Primakov launched an active campaign to forestall the American use of force against Iraq and to cajole Baghdad back into compliance with the inspection program. As an incentive to Iraq, Primakov proposed—and won grudging American acceptance for—easing the UN-imposed restrictions on Iraqi oil exports.<sup>45</sup>

Primakov's campaign, however, proved to be futile in early 1998 when the crisis re-emerged. Despite the increased oil export quota that Russian diplomacy won for him, Saddam Hussein decided once again not to comply with the weapons inspection program but to create a crisis situation instead. Even high level Russian Foreign Ministry officials admitted that the Russian diplomatic effort had failed.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Yeltsin's success in maintaining predominant Russian influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia as well as managing relations with the Northern Tier states is an impressive accomplishment, especially given Russia's economic and military decline. Yet despite his foreign minister's concerted efforts to revive an important diplomatic role for Russia in the farther Middle East, Russia has been unable to achieve it. This represents a return to the pattern of Russia seeking to play an important role in this region but being unable to sustain it which existed from tsarist times through the Stalin era. In retrospect, then, Moscow's success in playing an important role in the farther Middle East under Khrushchev and Brezhnev may have been an aberration for Russian foreign policy.

Whether this proves to be the case, or whether Moscow will return to playing a more aggressive role in the farther Middle East in the future cannot, of course, be foretold. It was observed earlier that it has only been when Russia has been firmly in control of the Caucasus and Central Asia that it could sustain an active Russian presence in the farther off Arab world. Since the time the USSR broke up in 1991, however, this condition has again been absent.

*George Mason University*

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45. Daniel Williams, "Putting Russia Back on the Global Map," *Washington Post*, Jan. 25, 1998, p. A24.

46. Daniel Williams, "Russian Vows to Seek Iraqi Solution," *ibid.*, Jan. 31, 1998, p. A17. See also Daniel Williams, "Russia, France, Turkey Press Initiatives on Iraq," *ibid.*, Febr. 3, 1998, p. A13.