

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1007
March 6, 2006

U.S. Should Warn Russia Over Its “Soviet” Middle East Policy

Ariel Cohen, Ph.D.

In recent weeks, Russia has distanced itself from positions on the Middle East that it once held in common with the U.S. and the European Union. In February, Russia negotiated with Iran to establish a joint uranium-enrichment venture to supply nuclear reactor fuel to the Islamic Republic. As well, it is selling anti-aircraft missiles to Syria. And on March 3, a high-ranking delegation of the Hamas terrorist organization visited Moscow at Russian President Vladimir Putin's invitation.

As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visits Washington to discuss the Middle East on March 6–7, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice should inform her Russian counterpart that Moscow is playing a dangerous game in the Middle East. It is jeopardizing Russia's G-8 presidency, its position in the Middle East Quartet, and its international standing. Russia cannot go on playing this two-faced game with the West.

Russia may have several aims in pursuing this new Middle East policy. Among them, keeping the price of oil high will certainly accrue to Russia's short-term advantage. Russia may sense an opportunity to increase its standing in its own backyard, at the expense of the power of its putative Western allies. Most foolhardy of all, Russia may be trying to placate Islamist extremists for the sake of its own security—a policy that is doomed to fail.

Back to the Soviet Past?

As it did during the Soviet era, Russia now seeks to maximize its policy options in the Middle East while restraining the U.S.'s ability to maneuver. In

the 1980s, for example, Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet Union became a major arms supplier to the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, while also selling arms to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, with which Iran was engaged in a long war for most of the decade.

The USSR, and later Russia, joined Iran in demanding that the U.S. withdraw its military forces from the Persian Gulf, where they ensure the security of the world's prime oil supply and shipping lanes. A nuclear-armed Iran, closely allied with and armed by Russia and China, could challenge the U.S., its interests, and its allies in the region.

Today, Russia is the lead supplier of Iran's civilian nuclear efforts and ignores that country's military nuclear program. In December 2005, Russia announced that it would sell Iran \$700 million worth of TOR-M1 (SA-15) short-range surface-to-air missiles and is now reportedly negotiating the sale of long-range anti-aircraft SA-10 missiles (known by their Russian designation, S-300). Buttressed by radars and computers, these missile systems could form a nationwide air-defense that would make future air strikes to disarm Iran's nuclear weapons program all but impossible.

Russia has also sold Iran a \$1.2-billion Bushehr nuclear reactor, to be completed in the fall of 2006,

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/RussiaandEurasia/wm1007.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

and plans to supply at least two more and possibly as many as five more reactors, which will cost \$8 to \$10 billion altogether. These reactors could be used to produce fissile material for a clandestine nuclear weapons program. In addition, Russia has trained hundreds of Iranian nuclear physicists and engineers; provided Teheran with ballistic missile technology; and launched an Iranian spy satellite.

Despite all of this, Moscow couldn't favor the idea of an Iran armed with nuclear missiles, because it would likely seek influence in Russia's own backyard—the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the oil-rich Caspian basin. As further evidence, Russia is placating Islamist extremists in other parts of the Middle East. Something else is at play.

Breaking Ranks with the West

Russia has broken with the joint position of the Quartet—which includes the U.S., U.N., EU, and Russia—that no negotiations with Hamas or cash assistance to a Hamas-lead Palestinian Authority (PA) will be possible until it renounces terrorism, disarms terrorist organizations, respects past agreements including the Road Map, and recognizes Israel.

During his February 2006 visit to Spain, President Putin announced that he would invite the leaders of Hamas to Moscow. He declared that Russia never considered Hamas a terrorist organization and that Hamas' election was a great failure of President Bush's foreign policy. Coddling Hamas, without securing a complete renunciation of terror and recognition of Israel, is simply appeasing a terrorist organization responsible for the deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians. Hamas controls veritable "brainwashing factories," where thousands of children as young as four are conditioned to become suicide bombers. Still, Russian Chief of General Staff Yuri Baluyevsky has already suggested that Moscow will sell weapons to the Palestinian Authority lead by Hamas.

These games that Russia is playing with radical Islamists are reminiscent of those Joseph Stalin played with Hitler until the Nazis invaded USSR in 1941. Russia has already suffered atrocities at the hands of Islamist militants, such as at the Beslan school and Dubrovka theater, where hundreds of hostages, including children, died. This legitimization of Hamas is self-defeating. Appeasement will

invite further Islamist aggression against Russia, especially as it is already dealing with expanding Islamist insurgencies in Chechnya and elsewhere in North Caucasus and faces a growing internal Muslim population.

Putin also broke with the West when he suggested that the media practice self-censorship in view of the row over the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad. Russian authorities have already closed down two newspapers for the offense of publishing similar cartoons.

Pulling Chestnuts from Middle Eastern Fires

Russia, an observer member of the Organization of Islamic Conferences, is pursuing a course that dilutes the solidarity and coordination of the G-8 and could lead to the destabilization of the Middle East. Among its troubling actions:

- Selling nuclear reactors and weapons to Iran, and anti-aircraft missiles to Syria and possibly to the Hamas-dominated PA;
- Empowering Iran to become a regional hegemon and deny U.S. access to the Gulf;
- Positioning itself to be a co-equal party alongside the U.S., while placating radical Islamist forces; and
- Stirring regional instability, which leads to higher oil prices, from which Russia benefits as a high-production oil exporter state.

A Message to Moscow

Russia should no longer be able to get away with aiding and abetting Iran and Hamas while paying lip service to solidarity with the West. During Mr. Lavrov's visit to Washington, the Administration must make clear that Russia's current policies will not improve its fortunes. Secretary Rice should tell Mr. Lavrov that Moscow is jeopardizing its role as a member of the Quartet and its presidency of the G-8 when it pursues a quasi-Soviet Middle Eastern foreign policy.

Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies and International Energy Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Institute for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.