



## **Russia and the Middle East: The Primakov Era**

By Robert O. Freedman\*

When he became Russia's foreign minister in January 1996, Yevgeny Primakov, an old Soviet Middle East specialist, was expected to put his personal imprint on Russian policy toward the Middle East, as well as do a better job in coordinating Russian foreign policy than his predecessor, Andrei Kozyrev. After more than two years in office, Primakov has clearly encountered many of the same problems of coordination Kozyrev faced. His policy in the Middle East has closely resembled that of his predecessor, with the exception of Russian policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict which has acquired a special flavor under Primakov.

To understand contemporary Russian foreign policy, it is first necessary to analyze the various elite factions that influence Russian policymaking--factions that neither Kozyrev nor Primakov have been able to control.

The first element to consider is the Russian legislature, especially the lower house (Duma). Within the Duma are three major factions:

(1) the "Atlanticists," who have supported a pro-American foreign policy (except on the issue of NATO expansion), as well as rapid economic reform and a policy of cooperation with the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union (FSU);

(2) the "Eurasianists," who advocate a balanced Russian foreign policy (east, west and south) and a position of superiority

vis-a-vis the states of the FSU as well as slower economic reform;

(3) the "Chauvinists," a grouping of ultra-nationalists and old-line Communists who, though they disagree on economic policy, are anti-American and advocate Russian domination over the FSU states.

During the period that Kozyrev was Russian foreign minister, the Duma moved further and further to the right. Indeed,

Primakov, known for his anti-American policies, was appointed foreign minister in January 1996 largely as Yeltsin's reaction to the Duma's sharply rightward turn after the December 1995 elections. In many ways, Primakov, who opposes U.S. hegemony and advocates a major role for Russia in world affairs, became Yeltsin's ambassador to the Duma where he is well-liked. Nonetheless, Yeltsin still had to contend with a Duma where the power balance tipped toward hard-line factions. This clearly affected his foreign policy.

Within the Russian government's Executive branch by the time Primakov became foreign minister, there were a number of quasi-independent actors. In addition to the foreign ministry, there were:  
--The energy companies--especially Lukoil and Gasprom--closely linked to former Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, which openly contradicted Kozyrev's policy on developing Caspian Sea oil by agreeing to develop an Azeri oilfield despite the Russian Foreign Ministry's opposition;

--Business magnates such as Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Potanin who have been in and out of government (Berezovsky served as deputy secretary of Russia's national security council from October 1996 to November 1997);

--The "Reformers" such as Boris Nemtsov and Anatoly Chubais, who entered the government in March 1997 and were particularly influential in Russian policy toward the FSU (they succeeded in watering down the Primakov-promoted Russian-Belarus unification plan) until their weakening in the fall of 1997;

--Rosvooruzheniye, the Russian arms sales agency, which seemed ready to sell arms to anybody;

--The Ministry of Defense which was initially very active in Russian policy toward Transcaucasia and Tajikistan, but has been weakened over the last few years because of the rapid changeover of defense ministers;

--The Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and the Ministry of Atomic Energy.

To achieve a modicum of cohesion in Russian foreign policy, it is necessary for Primakov, as it was for Kozyrev, to line up as many as possible of these quasi-independent actors, as well as the Duma, in favor of a particular policy. In the case of Russian policy toward Iran and Iraq, both Kozyrev and Primakov were able to build a consensus; in the case of Russian policy toward Turkey, the contradictions that existed during Kozyrev's era have been exacerbated under Primakov, and in the case of Russian-Israeli relations, the once warm diplomatic relations of the Kozyrev era have become badly strained under Primakov, though cultural, economic and even military cooperation has increased.

Finally, when he took office, Primakov had to face the fact that Russia, which was losing its war in Chechnya, was a very weak state and he was conducting foreign policy from a very weak base.

## **RUSSIA AND IRAQ**

Russian policy toward Iraq started to shift away from strong support of the U.S. position as early as January 1993 when Yeltsin, under fire from nationalists and Communists in the Duma, moved from actively supporting the anti-Iraqi embargo to criticizing renewed U.S. bombing of Iraq. By 1994, the Russian government began to call for lifting sanctions, although Yeltsin was unwilling to do so unilaterally for fear of severely damaging the U.S.-Russian relationship, despite the fact that the Duma regularly voted for the lifting of sanctions. Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tarik Aziz became a visitor to Moscow even before Primakov took office, and Kozyrev sought to defuse a major crisis precipitated by Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in 1994 (albeit without success), much as Primakov was to try to do in 1997 and 1998.

By the time Primakov became Russia's foreign minister, it was clear that Yeltsin had three major interests in developing Russia's relationship with Iraq:

First, through international diplomatic activity, to demonstrate both to the world and to a hostile Duma that Russia was still an important factor in the world, despite its weakened condition, and was both willing and able to oppose the U.S. Indeed, as Andrei Piontkowski of the Center for Strategic Studies in Moscow stated during the 1997 Iraqi crisis, "For 30 years we were a superpower equal to the United States. Now the political elite is in a difficult period, feeling diminished, and compensates at least by standing up to the U.S. on minor issues."

The second interest Yeltsin's Russia has in Iraq is in regaining the \$7 billion Iraq owes to Russia, something that cannot be achieved until sanctions against Iraq are lifted.

The third interest in Iraq is in acquiring contracts for Russian factories, oil and gas companies, although the actual activities of these companies also cannot begin until sanctions are lifted.

To spur the Russians to greater efforts to lift the sanctions, Saddam Hussein has cleverly dangled major contracts before influential Russian companies, such as Lukoil, which was part of a multi-billion dollar agreement to develop the West Kurna oil field. The deal, reminiscent of the oil concessions when Iraq was a colony of Britain, let Lukoil keep 75% of the profit and also freed the company from paying Iraqi taxes. Given the nature of this "sweetheart deal," Lukoil has become a major factor in the "Iraqi lobby," pushing for lifting sanctions. In addition, even before sanctions are lifted, Russia had become the major purchaser of Iraqi oil under the UN-approved oil-for-food agreement and committed itself to purchasing 36.7 million barrels in 1997.

Given these interests, Primakov's behavior in both the October-November 1997 and January-February 1998 Iraqi crises is perfectly understandable. Following the expulsion of U.S. weapons inspectors and the departure of the other inspectors, Primakov, with dramatic flair, called U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright back from a visit to India, met her and other UN Security Council members at 2 A.M. in Geneva, Switzerland, on November 20, and got their agreement to a deal whereby all the weapons inspectors, including the Americans, were allowed to return to Iraq in return for a vague promise to work for lifting sanctions.

For the moment at least Primakov and Yeltsin could bask in international acclaim for averting a U.S. attack on Iraq. As Aleksei Pushkov, a correspondent for *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, noted, "The denouement--perhaps a temporary one--of the latest crisis involving Iraq that was

achieved by Primakov demonstrated the ability that Russia still has to world affairs, even in its current very weakened state." Moscow's efforts to defuse the crisis indeed did prove short-lived, as in January 1998 Saddam began backtracking on the agreement reached with Primakov by prohibiting inspections of his "palaces" and other sites where chemical and bacteriological weapons activities were suspected.

As the United States and Britain massed military forces in the Persian Gulf and an attack on Iraq appeared imminent, Primakov again scurried to solve the crisis, though this time the Russian diplomatic effort was far more disjointed than in November. First, with deputy foreign minister Viktor Posuvalyuk in Baghdad, the Russian foreign ministry claimed it had reached a satisfactory agreement on inspection of the palaces, only to have that agreement immediately repudiated by Baghdad. Then, perhaps to regain the initiative for Moscow, Yeltsin himself seemed to take over leadership of the Russian diplomatic effort, threatening a world war if the U.S. bombed Iraq and pledging that Russian "would not allow" such an attack under any circumstances. Then, he asserted U.S. Secretary General Kofi Anan would go to Iraq before Anan agreed to do so.

Moscow was further embarrassed by a *Washington Post* article noting that Russian companies had been negotiating sales of "dual use" equipment to Iraq capable of making biological weapons. While Anan was ultimately to go to Baghdad and negotiate an agreement satisfactory to both the United States and Iraq, in contrast to the November crisis, Russia had ceded the diplomatic initiative to the UN secretary general. To be sure, Moscow benefitted from the fact that Yeltsin's bluff was not called and by the Security Council's decision to allow Iraq to

sell more oil, which may enable Russia to get an early start in refurbishing Iraq's oilfields.

Nonetheless, with all its diplomatic activity, Russia was very far from getting the sanctions lifted. In addition, should Saddam Hussein backtrack on his agreement with Anan and subsequent Russian diplomatic efforts fail to prevent a U.S. attack, Primakov's limited diplomatic achievements--which in any case were made possible by U.S. willingness to make every diplomatic effort possible before an attack--may well pale into insignificance.

## **RUSSIA AND IRAN**

The rapid development of Russian-Iranian relations has its origins in the latter part of the Gorbachev era. After alternately supporting first Iran and then Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, by July 1987 Gorbachev had clearly tilted toward Iran. Relations between the two countries were solidified in June 1989 with Hashemi Rafsanjani's visit to Moscow, where a number of major agreements, including one on military cooperation, were signed. The military agreement permitted Iran to purchase highly sophisticated aircraft from Moscow including MIG-29s and SU-24s. At a time when its own air force had been badly eroded by the 8-year-long Iran-Iraq war, and by the U.S. refusal to supply spare parts, much less new planes, Soviet military equipment was badly needed.

Iran's military dependence on Moscow grew as a result of the 1990-91 Gulf war. The United States, Iran's primary enemy, became the primary military power in the Gulf, including close cooperation with GCC states and prepositioning arrangements for U.S. military equipment. Saudi Arabia, Iran's most important Islamic challenger, acquired massive amounts of U.S. weaponry.

Given Iran's need for sophisticated arms, the pragmatic Iranian leader Hashemi Rafsanjani was careful not to alienate either the Soviet Union or Russia. Thus, though Azerbaijan declared independence from the Soviet Union in November 1991, Iran, unlike Turkey, did not recognize its independence until after the USSR collapsed. Similarly, despite occasional rhetoric from Iranian officials, Rafsanjani ensured that Iran kept a relatively low profile in Azerbaijan and the newly independent states of Central Asia, emphasizing cultural and economic ties rather than Islam as the centerpiece of their relations.

This was due partly to the fact that after more than 70 years of Soviet rule, Islam was weak in the countries from the former Soviet Union. The leaders of the Muslim successor states were all secular Muslims and the chances for an Iranian-style Islamic revolution were very low. Indeed, some skeptics argued that Iran was simply waiting for mosques to be built and Islam to mature before trying to bring about Islamic revolutions. Nonetheless, the Russian leadership basically saw Iran as acting very responsibly in Central Asia and Transcaucasia and this was one of the factors which encouraged it to continue supplying Iran with modern weaponry -- including submarines--despite strong U.S. protests.

Still, there are several problems with Russia-Iran relations. Because of Iran's own economic problems, it has not had enough hard currency to pay for the weapons and industrial equipment it wants to import from Russia. Indeed, despite predictions of several billions of dollars in trade, Russian-Iranian trade dropped to \$400 million in 1997, less than Russia's trade with Israel.

In addition, Russian supplies of missile technology to Iran have caused increasing conflict with the United States (and Israel). Although Russia in late 1997

very publicly expelled an Iranian diplomat for trying to smuggle missile technology, and in January 1998 promised to stop selling "dual use" equipment to Tehran, the issue has become a serious irritant in Russian-American relations, with particularly sharp criticism of Moscow coming from the U.S. Congress.

Finally, in the past two years, Iran has increasingly thrust itself forth as an alternative export route for Central Asian oil and natural gas. This comes into direct conflict with the efforts of hardliners in the Russian government to control the oil and gas exports of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan so as to limit their freedom. Iran has sought to defuse this problem by trying to organize tripartite projects with Russia and the Central Asian states and cooperating with Moscow on the question of sovereign rights in the Caspian Sea. But Iranian availability as an alternate export route remains a major problem for Moscow, one that will become even more severe if there is a U.S.-Iran rapprochement that leads to ending U.S. efforts to prevent foreign investments in Iran's oil and natural gas pipeline and well infrastructure.

## **RUSSIA AND TURKEY**

Unlike Russian-Iranian or even Russian-Iraqi relations where the majority of key Russian foreign policy actors support close relations, thus making first Kozyrev's and then Primakov's stewardship of the relationships a relatively easy task, in the case of Turkey, there are sharp disagreements that continue to hamper Primakov's efforts to manage a coherent policy. On the one hand, Russia has numerous interests in pursuing a good relationship with Turkey. First, trade between the two countries ranges between 10 and 12 billion dollars a year, making Turkey Russia's main trading partner in the Middle East. Not only are Turkish

construction companies active throughout Russia, even acquiring the contract for the repair of the Duma, damaged by the fighting in 1993, but there is 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. Second, Turkey is a major purchaser of natural gas from Russia, thus giving Gasprom a real incentive to promote Russian-Turkish relations. Third, Turkey purchases 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 are also serious problems in the relationship. First, Turkey is competing with Russia for influence in the Transcaucasus and Central Asia.

Second, Turkey is pushing an oil export route for Azeri and Kazak oil that would go through Georgia to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan rather than to the Russian port of Novorossisk via Chechnya. In addition, concerned about the ecological danger of supertankers going through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, Turkey has limited such traffic, thereby leading Russia to threaten to build an alternate route from the Black Sea through Bulgaria and Turkey's enemy, Greece. Third, Russia has complained that the Turks were active in aiding the Chechen rebellion and thereby threatened Moscow's control of the North Caucasus.

Given these conflicting interests, it is not surprising that Russian policy toward Turkey has not been a coherent one, and the policy appears to have become even more incoherent since Primakov took power. Indeed, in looking at recent Russian-Turkish relations, it often appears that Russia's right hand doesn't know--or worse perhaps--doesn't care what its left hand is doing.

Thus, in January 1997, as mentioned above, the Russian arms firm Rosvooruzheniye had been selling helicopters to Turkey that helped it suppress its Kurdish rebellion--even as the Russian foreign ministry had been flirting with Kurdish nationalists by allowing formal Kurdish conferences in Moscow. The company then agreed to sell a sophisticated surface-to-air missile system, the SAM-300-PMU-1, to the Greek Cypriot government. While the Greek Cypriots claim the missiles are there only to defend their section of the island against the Turks who occupy the northern section, the 150-km range of the missiles reaches into southern Turkey and, if deployed, would seriously complicate Turkish air maneuverability. Turkey has taken the threat so seriously that it is inspecting, on various pretexts, ships going through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles and has warned that it will not allow the missiles to be deployed.

While tensions were rising between Turkey and Russia in the political-military arena, they were improving on the economic front. Gasprom chief, Rem Vakhirev, told Itar-Tass on November 3, 1997 that Gasprom would build a natural gas pipeline under the Black Sea from Russia to Turkey and would increase the supply of gas to Turkey from 3 billion cubic meters per year in the year 2000 to 16 billion cubic meters per year in the year 2010. This would provide about half Turkey's expected natural gas needs.

Chernomyrdin, then still prime minister, came to Turkey in mid-December 1997 to finalize the pipeline deal and also signed a series of other agreements. In an important political agreement, the two countries agreed to abstain from actions likely to harm the other's economic interests or threaten their territorial integrity. If taken literally, that would mean Russia would not interfere with the construction of the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey pipeline if that route is selected as the main export route

from Azerbaijan, and there have already been rumors that Turkey would hire Russian companies to help build the pipeline to Ceyhan.

Nonetheless, despite the good feelings engendered by the natural gas agreement and the Chernomyrdin visit, there was no move by the Turks on lifting the limits on tanker traffic through the straits and, despite rumors to the contrary, no promise by Russia to drop the missile sale to Cyprus. Indeed, at the end of January 1998, Primakov stated that Russia intended to honor the deal in the absence of an agreement on demilitarizing Cyprus--something the Turks were very unlikely to accept. Clearly, if the missile deal goes through and the Turks make good on their threats to destroy the missiles--possibly killing a number of Russian technicians in the process--a serious blow will be dealt to Russian-Turkish relations. This may well lead to a showdown in the Russian foreign policy establishment with those favoring improved economic ties with Turkey clashing with others, such as Primakov, who seek the geopolitical advantages of an alignment with Greece (which has threatened to fight Turkey if it bombs missile sites on Cyprus) against Turkey. Whether Primakov or his policies can survive such a conflict remains to be seen.

## **RUSSIA AND ISRAEL**

The Russian-Israeli relationship, like the Russian-Turkish relationship, reflects a conflict between Russian economic interests seeking a good relationship with Israel and Russian hardliners and geopoliticians who seek benefits for Russia out of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Unlike the case of Russian-Turkish relations, however, the geopolitical advocates did not come to the fore until Primakov, an advocate of close Russian-

Arab relations, become foreign minister. Russia has a number of interests in Israel.

First, on the economic front, there is extensive trade which crossed the \$500 million mark in 1995, making Israel Russia's leading trade partner in the Middle East after Turkey.

Second, on the diplomatic front, a close relationship to Israel enables Russia to play--or appear to play--a major role in the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Third, with more than 800,000 Russian-speaking Jews, Israel has the largest Russian-speaking diaspora outside the former USSR and this has led to very significant ties in cultural exchange and tourism, including plans for building a Russian house of culture in Jerusalem.

The fourth major interest is a military-technical one as the Russian military-industrial complex has expressed increasing interest in coproducing military aircraft with Israel, especially since many of the workers in Israel's aircraft industry are former Soviet citizens with experience in the Soviet military-industrial complex.

During Kozyrev's period as Russia's foreign minister, there were relatively few diplomatic-political disputes, though Israel expressed displeasure at Russian arms sales to Iran which Israel considers an enemy. When disputes between Israel and its Arab neighbors took place, as over Lebanon, Russia under Kozyrev took a very even-handed approach and was a strong supporter of the Oslo I and Oslo II accords and the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty.

However, after Primakov took over as foreign minister, Russia became far more critical of Israeli activities, whether in Lebanon when Shimon Peres was prime minister, or toward the Palestinians after Netanyahu took office. As the Israeli-Palestinian peace process floundered under Netanyahu, Primakov thrust Russia forward both as a mediator--to gain world recognition for Russia's increased

diplomatic role, just as he did during the Iraqi crises--and also to reduce Arab dependence on the United States which was perceived by many Arabs as siding too closely with Israel.

The end result was a chilling of Russian-Israeli political relations despite a rather successful Netanyahu visit to Moscow in March 1997 during which Israel gave Russia a \$50 million agricultural credit and discussed expanding trade and possibly buying Russian natural gas. Indeed, even though political relations deteriorated (Netanyahu later canceled further discussion of the natural gas deal because of the Russian supply of missile technology to Iran), Russian and Israeli firms signed an agreement to coproduce an AWACS aircraft and the Israeli food manufacturer Tnuva filmed a "milk in space" commercial aboard the Russian space station MIR.

As in the case of Russia's relations with Turkey, Russian-Israeli relations may increasingly become a battleground within the Russian foreign policymaking establishment between those interested in good economic and even military/technical relations with Israel, and those like Primakov seeking political advantages through a closer relationship with the Arabs. During the period that Chubais and Nemtsov were allied with such business magnates as Berezovsky, it appeared that their policies would prevail over those of Primakov. The split between the reformers and Berezovsky during the late summer of 1997, however, seems to have given Primakov more room to maneuver, but the outcome of the struggle over Russian foreign policymaking is still very much in doubt.

## CONCLUSION

This analysis of Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East under Primakov has demonstrated that in many areas, especially Russia's relations with Iraq

and Iran, Primakov has carried on policies initiated by his predecessor, Andrei Kozyrev. It also shows that Primakov has not fully overcome the problems of coordinating Russian foreign policy that plagued Kozyrev, given the existence of numerous quasi-independent actors.

While Primakov has succeeded in giving Russia a higher profile on the world stage as a result of his mediation efforts during successive Iraqi crises and as the Arab-Israeli peace process faltered, the looming crisis in Russian-Turkish relations over the missile sale to Cyprus and serious divisions in Moscow over relations with Israel will challenge not only the Russian foreign minister's ability to manage relations with those two countries, but may also determine whether he will stay in office.

Primakov is out to demonstrate that Russia is again a factor in world politics. However, he is operating against a background of a very weak Russian state. Russia's economic, political and military weaknesses may yet prove to be his undoing.

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