



Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?

Author: Andrej Kreutz

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Reviewed by Dr. Klejda Mulaj
Senior Researcher, Gulf Research Center

This book describes Russian policy in the Middle East with particular focus on the post-Soviet period from 1991 to the present. The author pays attention, however, to previous Soviet and Imperial periods as necessary background to understanding recent events. He highlights both historical continuities as well as historical contradictions in the relations between Russia and the Middle East.

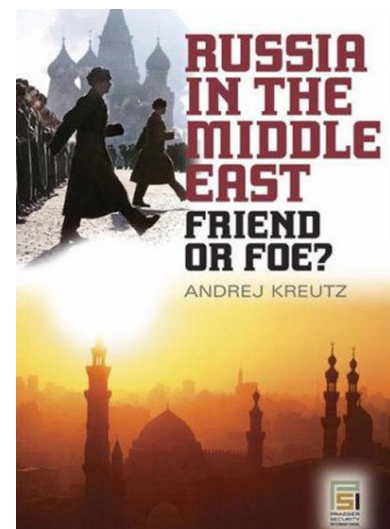
Considering Russia's relations with Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, Kreutz notes that Moscow has always been interested in the Eastern Mediterranean and its Arab nations for geopolitical, economic, and cultural reasons. These countries provide a waterway to the Mediterranean Sea, linking Russia to the Middle East, southern Europe, Africa, and Asia. This waterway is crucial to Russia, and Moscow continues to view Syria, Lebanon and Jordan as necessary partners. Any military or social threat from the region will cause fear and anxiety in Russia.

From the late 1950s to the 1980s, Syria was one of Moscow's main allies. Kreutz points out

that following the logic of the Cold War, the USSR supported the Arab national liberation struggle against

Israel and US hegemony. Its main champion, Damascus, was subsidized, armed, and protected by Russia. Relations with Lebanon and Jordan, on the other hand, though never neglected, were of minor importance. Both countries were firmly in the Western camp and the Soviets had no practical means of influencing their policies.

Nowadays, nevertheless, the Russian Federation is much weaker than the USSR, and it adheres to different social and ideological precepts. Having embraced capitalism, Russia now wants to accommodate Western interests. Starting from the late 1980s, Moscow reestablished and greatly expanded its relations with Israel, and its policy towards the Arab World has become more cautious. Although it maintains ties with Syria, their



strength has diminished. In its relations with Lebanon, Russia will not antagonize the US or Israel. Jordan may appear as a more promising partner for Russia, but their bilateral relations are jeopardized by Russian intervention in Chechnya, which is strongly condemned by the influential Chechen community in Jordan, an aspect which is insufficiently explored in this book.

In so far as Russian – and Soviet – relations with the Palestinians are concerned, Kreutz notes that they have been interwoven with the Zionist-Israeli enterprise, Arab nationalism, and Third World national liberation movements. Between 1956 and 1990, Soviet-Palestinian relations were tied to the Cold War. During the Cold War period, the USSR used Palestinian organizations as tools against the United States and Israel. But as noted, the post-Soviet Russian Federation is no longer a revolutionary power and it is weaker than the USSR. Strong relations with the United States have been vital to post-Soviet Moscow, and Russian ties with Israel have acquired a special strength. Russian foreign policy – in Kreutz's view – must follow a thin line of compromise because Moscow sees close cooperation with Israel as a necessary precondition for good Russian-American relations. Kreutz states, nonetheless, that the Palestinians and their cause have not been completely forgotten. Russian leaders still express their recognition of Palestinian national rights. President Putin's visit to the region and Hamas's visit to Moscow may suggest that Russia has deviated from the Western line of action, but this may be very symbolical.

Turning to Moscow's relations with Iraq, the author points out that these relations have been important, especially in the period from 1958 to 1990, and were part and parcel of the USSR's relations with Third World countries' national liberation movements, and in particular, Arab nationalism. These relations were characterized by a number of features. First, given Iraq's location as the nearest Arab country to the Soviet border, the threat of

Soviet expansion was greater to Iraqi leaders than the leaders of other Arab states. Second, given that Iraq contains a substantial Kurdish minority, and that Kurdish people lived also in Russia (as well as Turkey and Iran), Moscow found itself caught in an uneasy dilemma of choosing between its recognition of Kurdish self-determination or its general support of Arab nationalism and the friendly Iraqi government. Third, the Iraqi Communist Party was one of the most influential Marxist organizations in the region. Though it never ruled the country, it still represented a significant political force and proved to be a valuable asset – and an embarrassment – in Soviet dealings with the Iraqi government, which was at the same time anti-imperialist and anticommunist. Fourth, Iraq is rich in oil and other natural resources and, therefore, was an attractive economic partner to Moscow when it was out of Western control (1958 - 2003). Russia's economic ties with Iraq have been greater than with any other Arab country in the region. However, after the American and Allied occupation of Iraq in 2003, Russia's political and economic influence declined sharply. Now Russia's goals regarding Iraq relate to the preservation of Iraqi territorial integrity, its political stability, US withdrawal from the country, and the protection of Russia's remaining economic interests.

Egypt is another Middle Eastern country which has been the object of Russia's attention for many centuries owing to its unique location at the junction of the Eurasian and African continents, and its leading role in the trade and culture of North Africa and the Arab East. There are also several political factors that facilitate Moscow-Cairo relations. First, Egypt is not a major oil or natural gas producing country, and, therefore, it does not compete with Russia in the energy market. Second, the Egyptian regime is secular and considers Islamic fundamentalism as one of its major enemies. Consequently, Moscow does not suspect Cairo of supporting Chechen rebels or other radical Islamic movements. Third, post-communist

Moscow views Egypt's stable diplomatic relations with Israel as a great advantage since the Russian Federation considers it necessary to cultivate and sustain relations with Israel.

Examining Russia's relations with the Arab Peninsula, Andrej Kreutz states that, at the beginning of the new century, there are four major reasons for the important links of Russia with this part of the Arab world. First, Putin's Russia is determined to have access to the warm seas and the world's oceans, including the Indian Ocean. Russian deals with the countries of the Arab Peninsula are therefore a geo-strategic necessity. Second, because of overwhelming American superiority and its own weakness, Moscow cannot challenge Washington's dominant position directly, but it still wants to preserve its presence in areas close to its historical zones of influence by providing Arab states with arms supplies and at times – largely rhetorical – diplomatic support. Third, because Russia is one of the world's major oil-producing nations, it has a vested interest to be in touch with other major producers, mostly located in the Arabian Peninsula. Fourth, Russian leaders are aware of the importance of the Arabian Peninsula to Islam and to the Russian Muslim population (currently estimated at 15–20 percent of its population and growing faster than any other Russian community). Moscow is particularly interested in preventing support for Chechen separatists and radical Islamic movements in Russia from the Arabian Peninsula's rich Muslim communities.

In conclusion, Andrej Kreutz reiterates that Russia views Middle Eastern involvement as essential to its security because it has a substantial domestic Muslim minority, and because of the po-

tential threat from the powerful Western (mainly American) military and political presence in the area. Any military threat from the region, such as terrorist infiltration or the presence of powerful foreign armies, civil war, acts of terrorism, or socio-political destabilization, will trigger fear in Russia; fear that is magnified because the Russian Federation (for economic reasons) is no longer guarded by the defense perimeter installations that used to defend the Soviet border.

Moscow is seriously concerned about Western control over Iraq, and possibly over Iran, since it believes that this harms Russia's interests and threatens its security. President Putin wants to preserve good diplomatic relations with Washington but at the same time Moscow is interested in minimizing American influence in the region and also supports Iran to advance its nuclear energy program despite American suspicions about Tehran's intentions.

Overall, relations of neocapitalist Russia with the Middle East have been cautious and marked by self-interested pragmatism. President Putin does not appear to have any pro-Arab or pro-Muslim sentiments. He simply thinks that Russia should protect its own interests and act flexibly in the pursuit of this goal.

Yet, Russia cannot play a heavyweight role in the Middle East and needs to be strategic in its approach since it cannot compete directly with the United States or leading Western European Union countries. Regardless, the Middle East will be a lasting feature of Moscow's foreign policy and the author makes a plea for greater involvement of Russia in finding lasting solutions to problems in this region.