

Russia and the Middle East: Policy Challenges

Zvi Magen



Memorandum **127**

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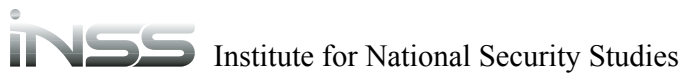
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Executive Summary

Russia is a veteran actor in the Middle East, and as a consequence, relations with it have preoccupied Israeli leaders and the Israeli public for many years. The relations between the two nations have undergone reversals: while the Soviet Union supported the establishment of the State of Israel, it subsequently sided with Israel's enemies. After the dissolution of the USSR, Russia relinquished its involvement in the Middle East; a decade later, however, it renewed its interest in the region.

The Middle East is critical to Russia due to a combination of multiple factors. Russia's past and present policies in the region were and remain a function of its rivalry with the West, notably the United States. Middle East resources, the fact that the nations of the region are major consumers of Russia's security exports, and the need to halt the spread of radical Islam into Russia explain the region's importance to Russia and render Russia's influence there crucial to its international standing. As part of an effort to establish a configuration of allies to serve as the foundation for Russia's status in the Middle East and thereby compete with the United States, Russia has become the gatekeeper of the Iranian regime, which seeks to complete its nuclear program, and the Syrian regime, which is in the thralls of a domestic revolution.

The Arab Spring that erupted in the Middle East during 2011 has created a new regional reality with complex ramifications for the region and the international arena. As a direct outcome, after years in which Russia reestablished its regional presence and made significant strides in relations with Middle Eastern nations, Russia has reached a crossroads with regard to its policies there. Russia, like the other international players, was surprised by the regional transformations and the loss of some of its important assets. Consequently, it has been forced to minimize damage and engage in feverish activity so as to identify new loci of influence and contacts – a process

fraught with friction both with nations in the region and with the international arena.

In light of the new reality, concrete changes in Russia's Middle East policies have begun to emerge. Among these is the increasing weight ascribed to Israel, and the assumption that heightened relations with Israel will enhance Russia's regional interests.

Introduction

The attempt to assess Russia's foreign policy, that is, to understand the motives of Russia's leaders and translate them into the objectives these leaders wished to promote is no small challenge. Russia's conduct in the international arena – not always comprehensible to the Western mind – should be viewed as its implementation of a strategy formulated according to the assessment of what it has to offer and the worldview that guides Russia's leaders. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Russian regime identified its current strategic objective as the attainment of superpower status. The objective was based on the assumption that because of political, security, and economic constraints, any other route would only weaken it further, perhaps even causing it to fall apart altogether. The regime espoused this worldview when Vladimir Putin was first elected president, which represented a change from the approach of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, who following the collapse of the Soviet Union had worked to shape a nation according to a Western democratic model (1991-1999).

The first decade of the post-Soviet era elapsed, leaving Russia with an unstable socioeconomic system and diminished international standing. In fact, Russia had failed to fill the vacuum left by the USSR in the international arena and was left sidelined. However, Putin's first term of office (2000-2008) as well as the presidency of Medvedev (2008-2012), who followed in his predecessor-patron's footsteps, attested to a fundamental change in Russia's foreign policy. Putin's and Medvedev's foreign policy was designed to regain Russia its title of "superpower" and accord it an influential position in formulating the global agenda. As a result of this policy, Russia transformed its image and, although its efforts to attain a decisive status have yet to yield all the desired results, it is no longer possible to ignore Russia and pretend that it is not an important international player.

In order to accomplish its objective, Russia formulated an assertive foreign policy noted for its dual approach to various international issues

and for the manipulative manner in which it conducts its foreign affairs. The policy is based on exploiting unstable situations around the world. Applying the principle of “divide and rule,” Russia maneuvers among local players, and by generating friction with global competitors – issuing challenges and assuming positions of defiance usually not backed by real capabilities – attempts to oust them from various arenas. In its quest to position itself as a key player, Russia has managed to exploit the tools and relative advantages it has at its disposal, including its nuclear arsenal, equal to that of the United States; its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council; its participation in international forums such as the Quartet, established in Madrid in 2001 to advance the Middle East peace process, together with the United States, the European Union (EU), and the United Nations; and its proven ability to instigate and manage crises. This modus operandi did not appear out of thin air; it was a direct copy of former Soviet practice. Khrushchev, for instance, also instigated crises and issued threats that were not backed by abilities. This was evident during the Sinai Campaign in 1956 and the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

Of all the regions in which Russia seeks to enhance its status, the Middle East is the most prominent. Russia perceives the region as geopolitically valuable, a place where regional and global interests converge. As such, it is an arena for international competition – political, economic, and security-based. These features also render the Middle East capable of posing a possible threat to Russia’s national security. In recent years, Russia has managed to promote some of its objectives in the Middle East by tailoring its policy to the changing reality in the region and maneuvering among the camps. However, it goes without saying that Russian interests in the Middle East conflict with those of the United States and the EU, and are also a source of potential friction with China. Until the upheavals resulting from the Arab Spring, Russia based its strategy in the region on the assessment that the status of the United States in the Middle East was declining. Moscow also perceived the fact that the Arab-Israeli political process in general and the Israeli-Palestinian process in particular had reached an impasse as one of the manifestations of America’s decline. This assessment was thus translated into a concerted Russian effort to oust the United States from the region in the hope of replacing it as the leading player. The implementation of this assessment focused on developing cooperative systems with various players – even competitors and rivals – in the Middle East. A striking example is

the establishment of close relations with the radical camp in the region; this camp became Russia's main partner in promoting an anti-Western stance. Concurrently, Russia engaged in feverish activity in regional politics, at the same time inserting itself into various international settings in an attempt to promote the political process between Israel and its neighbors. In addition, Russia intensified its security involvement in the region by establishing military bases in Syria and manufacturing weapons for any interested party.

As a result of the wave of uprisings that shook the Middle East in 2011, Russia's policy in the region reached a crossroads. The Russian leadership viewed the rapid changes with concern and mixed emotions. Its dilemma arose from a choice among options, all of which entailed negative consequences for it, even though some Russian foreign policy shapers not only believed in the chances of establishing good relations with the new regimes forming in the Middle East, but also that these regimes had the potential to upgrade Russia's status in the region. In contrast, others feared that radical Islam would take control of the Middle East, that Russia itself would become a future target of the rising Islamic power, and that the revolutionary process would invade Russia. As events developed in practice, Russia has lost important strongholds in the region. It is trapped in the Shiite camp while engaging in a difficult rearguard action to defend the collapsing Iranian-Syrian axis. Furthermore, it is facing a growing Sunni camp backed (according to the Russian perception) by the West – a situation that could lead to Russia being marginalized yet again.

In the midst of all this, Russia's national agenda has recently focused on the likelihood of the United States or Israel conducting a military attack on Iran. Among the issues discussed is the possibility of exploiting such an attack to instigate aggressive steps in the Caucasus in order to promote strategic objectives there. The discussion of this possibility is highly charged. Should it be implemented, it would have far reaching implications.

In response to these challenges, Russia is frantically trying to identify solutions, including moves designed to establish a bloc of supporting nations in the Middle East as an alternative to the systems that have collapsed, and to increase its role in the political process in the region. It is unclear whether Russia intends (or has the power) to lead the process, or whether it will be satisfied with some measure of involvement and consider involvement itself as a political success. In this context, Russia attributes a significant role to Israel, both as a partner in the political process and as a potential partner

in promoting future Russian objectives in the region. From the Russian perspective, the compatibility of Israeli and Russian interests and intellectual values could engender such a partnership.

More recently, Russia has begun to examine the possibility of changing its policy in the Middle East in general. This implies forging closer relations with Israel – a step that would apparently involve the establishment of a shared political constellation. Underlying this trend are both political and economic interests (notably natural gas). There is talk of establishing a political axis that would include Greece and Cyprus in addition to Israel. Should this come to pass, Russia would be able to enhance its regional position in light of future challenges.

Russia also is facing a difficult domestic situation that necessitates urgent economic and political changes. The sociopolitical wave of protests that began there in 2011 and accompanied Putin's reelection as president has threatened the very foundation of the regime. Although controlling events and halting the internal erosion will not occur in the absence of improved relations with the West, Russia has no intention of conceding its competition with the West in order to enhance its international status. Therefore, competition between the powers is expected to continue and even intensify – at least in the foreseeable future; this will also, or possibly especially, be manifested in the Middle East.

The purpose of this memorandum is to examine the central themes of Russia's policies regarding the international arena in general and the Middle East in particular, while identifying the interests that guide it in the region and the principles from which it derives the steps to pursue its policies. The memorandum will survey Russia's foreign policy outlook and its implementation in the global system, Russia's policy in the Middle East, including an expanded discussion of its relations with the Islamic system, Russia's policy in regional and bilateral contexts in the region, and Russia's policy toward the Middle East political process and the parties involved, including Israel. Finally, the memorandum will discuss Russia's handling of the implications of the Arab Spring and its preparations for the Middle East of tomorrow.

This gamut of topics, relevant to issues at the core of Middle East politics and to the understanding of Russia's motives and strategy in the region, should be useful in enabling Israel to make the appropriate political plans and preparations.

Chapter 1

Russia in the International Arena

The Thrust of Russia's Foreign Policy

Russia's foreign policy developed according to its view of national challenges and objectives, which in turn were affected by geopolitical, economic, ideological, ethnic, and religious factors. Russia perceives itself as one of the leading powers in the international arena. Moreover, it has cultivated a standpoint according to which attaining superpower status is critical for its continued security and economic existence. Russia's current weakness is viewed as a temporary aberration that will pass once it regains its status as a global power. On the basis of the definition of its strategic goals, Russia considers the international political system to be an alignment that can and should be tailored to its own outlook and ambitions. Its foreign policy, therefore, is designed to promote this goal by adjusting solutions to changing conditions while taking into consideration its own limits and the constraints of international reality.

During the Cold War, which was characterized by a bipolar international system, the USSR found itself heading one of the poles and in constant competition – military, technological, economic, and ideological – with the West, namely, the United States and its allies, and to a lesser extent with China. Ultimately, the competition, which necessitated the investment of tremendous resources, took its toll on the USSR and eventually brought about its demise, leaving a vacuum that Russia was unable to fill. In the first decade of its post-Soviet existence, Russia's foreign policy was shaped against the background of the breakup of the Soviet Union; this was expressed in its attempt to forge a nation based on a Western, democratic model. In practice, Russia was forced to make do with secondary roles in the international arena, including the Middle East. In contrast, the United States – the winner

of the Cold War – and its allies (“the West”), managed to exert a great deal of influence on the major processes around the world, causing other nations, including Russia, to take a backseat role. Russia believed that this development, which included former Communist bloc and USSR nations joining the EU and NATO as well as pressures on Russia regarding issues of democracy, human rights, and political conduct, was directly intended to damage and undermine it.

Russia’s leadership did not remain passive. With Vladimir Putin’s election as president, the desire to recreate the glory of the past, rehabilitate Russia’s status, and acquire the ability to shape the global agenda became a national Russian objective. The majority of the Russian public, at least at that time, supported this ambition and Putin’s policy to realize it. The policy, which was defined as a desire to shape a multipolar international system (at the expense of the leading position of the United States, of course), was backed by an old ideology in new clothing that combined the Russian imperialist tradition and the Soviet geopolitical view.¹

During Putin’s first years in office, an assertive tactic, characterized by international schemes, shows of strength, and defiance against the West, particularly the United States, was formulated in order to promote this political strategy. Concurrently, the policy included an effort to establish cooperation with the international community at large, enabling Russia – in its own view – to promote its position in the international arena. During the initial phase, the policy could be described as asymmetrical: it was conducted without significant economic, political, or military tools or levers of influence. Nonetheless, its implementation was made possible partially thanks to Russia’s improved economic capabilities, which resulted from increases in the cost of energy sources. This development bolstered Russia’s confidence in its foreign relations and translated it into independent moves on various international fronts, including the Middle East. Medvedev, who continued the endeavor of positioning Russia as an active partner in the international arena, also employed this approach, albeit with some changes of emphasis.

This policy was accompanied by ups and downs in Russia’s relations with the West, which viewed it as rather pathetic and an expression of weakness rather than as imperialistic ambitions.² Thus the effort to establish positive bilateral relations with the United States in the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by a cooling-off period in the relations

between the nations, reminiscent of the Cold War era. The crisis came to a head in 2008, after Russia went to war with Georgia, occupied some of the latter's territory, and established an independent political entity there – South Ossetia. In this way, Russia also managed to prevent Georgia from joining NATO, apparently also backed by a subsequent understanding with the US as part of the latter's "reset" policy.

Barack Obama's election as president of the United States signaled a reversal in the relations between the two nations. At the beginning of Obama's first term of office, the Russians viewed the American president as weak, which encouraged a defiant approach to the United States. However, the 2009 economic crisis that wreaked havoc on Russia and the world at large caused it to lose many of its capabilities and much of its confidence. That year the United States presented Russia with a proposal – part of a comprehensive political initiative promoted by President Obama designed to improve relations between the United States and nations and systems in the international arena.³ As part of this initiative, dubbed the "reset" plan, the United States offered Russia an opportunity to improve its relations with America and proposed a list of issues for cooperation between the nations as well as a list of steps the United States would be willing to take in order to improve the atmosphere between them. According to its formulation, the objective of the "reset" policy was to decrease tension in the international arena, maintain the system of strategic weapons inspections, and prevent friction between the West and Russia emanating from Western involvement in the former USSR. The Russian authorities viewed the proposal as an opportunity to change a policy that was in any case obsolete.

As far as one can deduce from all references to the topic, the American initiative included the following principles:⁴

- a. An American concession regarding the placement of anti-missile interception missiles in Eastern Europe (one of the most dramatic topics on the international agenda at the time);
- b. American willingness to sign an agreement to reduce strategic arms (the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START) out of consideration for Russia's position on the issue;
- c. Recognition of Russia's special status throughout the former Soviet Union, namely, NATO's concession regarding eastward expansion and Russian hegemony in this sphere;

- d. Incorporation of Russia into various NATO activities and international political processes, including the Middle East.
- e. Russia's participation in the anti-Iranian sanctions regime and its willingness to work alongside the United States and NATO against radical Islamic elements in various locations, including Afghanistan.

Although Russia's acceptance of the initiative entailed mutual gains and losses, it was seen as an important American achievement. For its part, Russia played its role in the understandings with the United States by participating – albeit partially and selectively – in the sanctions against Iran. From Russia's point of view, it was a success that, despite its lack of any real leverage, afforded it an opportunity to promote its status in the international arena. Russia considered the cost of the policy it was asked to adopt in return to be low, relative to the benefits it was offered as a result of improving relations. During the November 2010 NATO conference in Lisbon, the end of the conflict between NATO and Russia was made official. As a result, limited cooperation between them developed on certain projects, such as cooperation in the war against terrorism in Afghanistan. However, Russia was not included in activities that were important to it in Europe. At least during the first year of the agreement, Western nations refrained from trying to exert their influence in areas of the former Soviet Union, thereby strengthening Russia's hold there.

In April 2010, the New START agreement to reduce strategic weapons was signed, limiting the total number of nuclear warheads to 2,200 and the number of deployed nuclear warheads to 650, and decreasing the number of nuclear weapons platforms (i.e., various forms of missiles) to 800. Nonetheless, not all of Russia's requests were granted, and there were still issues that were not resolved to its liking. For example, the New START agreement limited the number of tactical warheads without distinguishing, as Russia had wanted, between warheads and aircraft.⁵ Other issues where Russia's position remained essentially unchanged were its active integration into the Middle East political process, which granted Russia's connections with NATO improved status, and its integration into the anti-missile defense program, which remained a sensitive and controversial issue. This sensitivity was exposed in November 2011 when President Medvedev announced that he intended to position Russian surface-to-surface missile systems opposite NATO's missile interception systems.⁶

This announcement made it clear that Russia had no intention of abandoning its strategic objectives. Presumably, having exhausted the advantages it gained as a result of Obama's "reset" policy, it will again attempt to advance its goals in the international arena with renewed vigor. In the following two years, it was possible to discern the development of a discussion regarding new ways to reshape the international arena in a way that could guarantee Russia a key role. The discussion was initiated by the Russian government⁷ and took place in international forums such as the Valdai International Club and the Yaroslavl Global Policy Forum. Opinions concerning the issue were based directly on the Russian assessment that it could not cope with the economic, political, and security challenges on its own because of the growing gap between it and the West, nor could it face the challenge posed by China's global ambitions alone. Among the ideas presented in response to these threats was the possibility that Russia would join one of the existing frameworks while creating a new international architecture in which it would play a significant role. Thus far, these ideas have not been greeted with enthusiasm.

This renewed thinking is evidence that Russia finds itself once again at a crossroads.⁸ Domestically, it faces civil discontent, which will be difficult to assuage without economic and political reforms. Moreover, it is possible that the protest movement of 2011 will not disappear easily and will resurface during Putin's second presidency, following his election in March 2012. On the other hand, improvements to Russian-Western relations will undoubtedly not occur without Russia acquiescing to Western demands for greater democratization, given the West's enduring distrust of Russia's intentions and ambitions (hence NATO's rejection of Russia's advances). All this is happening at a time when Russia is becoming increasingly concerned about international terrorism, the spread of nonconventional weapons and launch mechanisms, and the expansion of ethnic and religious confrontations on the international arena, some of which are a direct threat to Russia itself.⁹

Indeed, there is a clear conflict of interests between Russia and the West, a direct outcome of Russian ambitions on the one hand and Western ambitions – as perceived by Russia – on the other. However, more than a few Russian elements share the sense that the West in general, and the United States in particular, is growing weaker – hence the Russian assessment that it has new opportunities. Conversely, in the West, Russia is viewed as a strident agitator that needs to be calmed down. The result of this dynamic is the exacerbation

of Russian-Western tensions. Moreover, the year before the current upheavals in the Middle East, the United States formulated a new defensive strategy (NDS) based on shifting its chief strategic effort away from the Middle East to areas of Asia and the Pacific. The implementation of the NDS in parts of the former Soviet Union creates additional tension for Russia, which is endeavoring to neutralize this program. One expression of this endeavor is the Russian initiative to get the Euro-Asian program (see below) off the ground. In light of this, Russia is vacillating between becoming a part of the West on the one hand, and on the other, confronting the West and the other challenges posed by the international arena, in coordination with anti-Western forces. The future shape of the system depends on Russia's choice. It seems that since his reelection, Putin persists in adhering to the view that, given its domestic and foreign challenges, Russia's future depends on its ability to attain proper international status – in other words, by becoming a superpower once again. At the same time, however, Russia clearly needs Western cooperation, if only to ensure continued economic development and the modernization that is so critical to its existence. Thus, as usual, Russia will undoubtedly seek the middle road, namely, continued cooperation with the West in the format of the “reset” policy but without conceding its superpower aspirations.

Russia and its Neighbors

Russia must formulate a unique response to each of the geopolitical spheres adjacent to its borders. It is located in the center of the Euro-Asian continent and considers itself as constituting a central axis in this sphere. In the West, it is bordered by Europe, in the east by China, and in the south by the Muslim world. Since each of these regions has at times worked to exercise hegemony over its neighboring regions, Russia is concerned about similar attempts on the part of its neighbors even today. In recent years, it has attempted to persuade large areas to form a union with it, thereby reestablishing a Euro-Asian superstate.¹⁰ The working plans published by the Russia media spoke of an essentially economic regional unity, similar to the EU, intended to include most of the states of the former USSR and any other nations in Asia or Europe that want to join.¹¹ The plan earned chilly responses from most of the European candidates, with the exception of some of the former Soviet states. China, seeking to promote a similar project of its own in which it would become the regional center of gravity, rejected the notion. Russian

policy in the areas near China focuses on establishing political axes with potential partners while exploiting internecine disputes and neutralizing competitors among the big powers seeking to expand their influence in the region.

The western region. The nations of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe and the Baltic area, which were formerly part of the USSR but are currently integrated into the European alliance and NATO, constitute Russia's gateway to the West. From the Russian point of view, ever since the dissolution of the USSR the West has worked to undermine Russia by severing it from states that were once part of the USSR or were under its influence. Russian spokespersons have claimed that bids of this sort were carried out subversively in former Soviet states, fomenting the "color" revolutions and encouraging those states to abandon Russia and join NATO.¹² This activity on the part of the West in Russia's western region was attended by economic investments and various forms of cooperation, including security assistance. Russia deems this a challenge because unlike the Warsaw Pact nations, which it conceded without opposition after the collapse of the USSR and most of which joined NATO, the former Soviet states represent very different interests. These states are considered crucial to Russia's future survivability; this explains Russia's tough, violent struggle for control over them – a struggle that has already destroyed some of the West's achievements there. After Russia's unsurprising victory, the West's plan for Georgia to join NATO was rejected. The next challenge facing Russia is Ukraine, which is also feeling its way toward the West. Russia is exerting a great deal of pressure – mostly economic – on it, in particular by creating problems in the supply of energy sources, as well as by employing subversive political methods (such as creating domestic and international crises and engaging in efforts to topple the regime). This trend succeeded after the implementation of the "reset" policy, which also includes a freeze on NATO's spread to the east and de facto recognition of Russian hegemony in the former Soviet territories. However, following a certain period of time, it seems that the West's involvement in the former Soviet Union has returned to its previous level.

The southern region. This vast sphere, formerly part of the USSR, runs along Russia's southern border and includes the Caucasus and its three countries – Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia – bordered in turn to their south by Turkey and Iran. The region also includes Central Asia, ranging

from the Caspian Sea to the Chinese border, and containing five former USSR states: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Four Muslim countries, extending from Turkey to China, are situated to the south of the FSU countries: Iran and Afghanistan, and the adjacent Iraq and Pakistan. This region is an unbroken geopolitical entity, which together with an expanded Middle East creates many common denominators with diverse geographical, ethnic, economic, cultural, religious, and political components. In addition, it contains some of the world's most important energy reserves, as well as vital access to them and their transport routes.

Central Asia was a source of conflict between powers as early as the nineteenth century, when control of the region was called the "Great Game." A similar competition, called the "New Great Game," is currently taking place among Russia, NATO, and China, and the prize will take the form of influence in this energy-rich region. Furthermore, from Russia's perspective, this region represents its soft underbelly, since it is Russia's main point of contact with the West, radical Islam, and China. Like Russia, Western nations are also endeavoring to stop the spread of radical Islam and curb China's inroads into the region; this too is a part of the above mentioned NDS. However, they are doing so by halting the spread of Russia's influence via political and economic tools, and by offering many types of assistance, including military. Moreover, the West considers the region to be a sphere with the potential to help contain Iran. Western activity includes a military presence and a network of military bases deployed in the Middle East and the Gulf, Central Asia, and the Indian Ocean. All in all, Russia's strategic situation in the regions on its border and in those bordering the Middle East also seems to pose a challenge.

The Caucasus. This region, located at the intersection of Russia and the Middle East, is thick with the dust of historic battles fought both between nations and between its ethnic and religious minorities. Its peace and security depend on a delicate internal and external balance between competing forces. States and ethnic groups go to battle in order to safeguard their independence and territorial integrity. In recent years, all the neighbors of the Caucasus nations have intensified the competition for influence in the region.¹³ Due to fears that the United States will jeopardize Russia's interests in oil and gas exports and transport, Russia is determined to neutralize these states and ethnic groups by expanding its own influence there.¹⁴ Turkey and Iran are also making every effort to expand their regional influence, with NATO

as another player contending for the same objective. Russia is resolutely working to hold onto its dominant status, and the outcome of the 2008 war in Georgia undoubtedly helped Russia achieve its goals there.

In the southern Caucasus, which is deemed vital to Russian interests and also a target of NATO's attempts to entrench itself (already the cause of a direct confrontation between Russia and Georgia in 2008), an anti-Russian, anti-Iranian axis consisting of Azerbaijan and Georgia is again forming, with Turkish and American involvement. Turkey, already challenging Russia, is maneuvering to become a regional leader and is actively involved with Russia's allies in the Middle East – Iran and Syria – in the Caucasus by participating in the formation of the Georgian-Azeri axis, and also in its continuing friction with Greece and Cyprus, the locus of another Russian strategic effort. The economic domain, particularly in terms of energy sources, is also part of this list. At present, it is again possible to identify serious developments linked to areas in the Caucasus vital to Russia's national security, where the aforementioned West is challenging Russia by trying to extricate Georgia and Azerbaijan from Russia's sphere of influence. As noted, Turkey is also involved in this effort while similarly challenging both Russia and Iran.

The Far East. China's desire to expand its influence beyond its borders represents a threat to Russia. Nonetheless, at this stage the foremost Chinese interest is stopping the West from establishing itself in areas of influence that it deems critical, and to this end China is working with Russia. China's main problem is securing as far as possible its requisite supply of energy sources independently of either the West or Russia. In light of this, China has established relations with Iran to serve as an energy provider and anti-Western strategic partner. China would prefer its energy routes to traverse Central Asia, which is, at least for the moment, free of a Western presence. Central Asian states are taking advantage of this to develop economic ties with China while endeavoring to avoid Russian influence. Thus, most of the energy lines are being constructed along a route that bypasses Russia. Concerned about the loss of economic status and political influence in the region, Russia is attempting to minimize the consequent losses using a variety of methods such as trying to keep the United States out of the region by offering Central Asian states its cooperation – ironically benefiting China. Russia is also anxious about the insidious spread of Chinese population groups toward Russia and the former Soviet states as well as by the probability that China

will increase its efforts to appropriate influence in the greater Middle East. For Russia, then, China is the major enemy of the future.¹⁵

The former Soviet states. Russia considers the post-Soviet sphere to be under its influence – both in practice and in potential – as well as a security buffer against the neighbors surrounding it. Moreover, regardless of geography, policy in this sphere is dictated by economic considerations and by competition with other elements seeking to establish themselves and gain direct access to the energy sources in the former Soviet republics. As the result of the declarations of independence by those republics, Russia, which had been the largest and most important Soviet republic, became the heir apparent to the USSR.

Initially, following the collapse of the USSR, there was an attempt to organize the fourteen republics into a regional alliance, a notion modeled on the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The latter was a fairly loose structure that the three Baltic republics – later to become part of the EU and NATO – refused to join. Other states, while remaining members of the CIS, went in different directions, some preferring to join the West, and others seeking new settings, including the establishment of additional alliances such as GUAM, the alliance of Russia's rivals in the post-Soviet sphere (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova). Still others tried establishing settings to promote political, economic, and security cooperation with Russia. Thus, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) came into being for the rapid response of joint forces, as did the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), which includes China and has granted Iran and Pakistan observer status, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which also includes states outside of the CIS. Russia is an observer in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The fact that Russia has plans to establish other treaties in order to promote its goal of uniting the Euro-Asian states is noteworthy. An economic cooperative setting uniting Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus was created in 2012. Once established, it can be expected to become an entity that is fundamentally similar to the USSR.

In recent years, Russia has conducted itself assertively vis-à-vis both the states in the region and the international players. This is reflected first and foremost in its attempt to unseat the United States and its allies by applying political and economic pressures (for instance, denying access to energy sources), subversive conduct (for instance, harming regimes and factors

that represent a risk to Russian interests in the relevant states), and military force (for instance, the war against Georgia). Russia's endeavors to establish regional organizations in the sphere also serve this goal. In some cases, the organizations try to curb radical Islam. In exchange, Russia turns a blind eye to questionable human rights practices and supports the authoritarian regimes of these states. In accordance with agreements and sometimes in the absence of such agreements, Russia maintains a permanent military presence in some of the states in the region. The aim of this presence is to secure borders externally, such in the Caucasus and Central Asia, to serve strategic purposes on bases such as the Russian naval base in Sebastopol in the Crimea, which belongs to Ukraine, and to provide internal security in various areas of dispute, such as in Transnistria in Moldova and in Central Asia. In addition to this and as part of the CSTO for collective security, Russia maintains rapid response forces in various states intended for use in emergencies.

To a decisive extent Russia's status in its immediate environment relies on its understandings with the United States. In fact, an important paragraph in the "reset" policy recognizes Russia as having special (that is, hegemonic) status in the sphere, and the putative proof is the wane of the so-called "color revolutions," which, according to Russian spokespersons, were organized by the West. The ambitions of Georgia and other states to free themselves of Russia and join NATO have faded, at least for the time being. The pro-Western governments have been replaced by pro-Russian regimes, as is the case in Ukraine. However, several developments are causing Russian leaders to lose sleep once again: additional nations in Russia's sphere of influence in the former USSR are considering "defection" to the West. From Russia's point of view, this is undoubtedly the result of subversive American involvement inside this vital Russian zone of interests. The possible "defection" closely follows other challenging American moves, including the ongoing crisis over the placement of American ballistic missile defenses – a plan against which Russia is waging an unyielding battle. Part of this battle is manifested in Russia's defiance of the United States and the West in the international community and, above all, in the Middle East.

Russia and Islam

Russia has a long, complex history with the neighboring Muslim world. Islam in its various guises boasts a millennium-long history in the Russian

sphere. From the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, Russia conquered Muslim-populated areas that were then subsumed under the Russian Empire. These areas had previously been under Tatar, Turkish, or Persian control, and some enjoyed periods of independence. The populations faced confrontations with Russia for generations. Once conquered by the Christian Russian Empire, these areas declined. After the 1917 revolution, some of the Muslim areas tried to establish independent entities, but none lasted. During both the imperial period and the USSR era, relations between the Muslims and the authorities were troubled and prone to violence. The suppression of the rebel areas after battles in the 1920s and 1930s took years. Local residents even cooperated with the Nazis during World War II, to the point of enlisting in their ranks and fighting Russia alongside them. During the final years of the USSR, however, Muslim fervor dwindled to almost nothing. The overwhelming majority of the population strayed far from religion, a development that was attributable in part to the Soviet reduction of the presence and activity of traditional institutions. This fate was shared by other religious and ethnic segments within the USSR.

Russia views the Muslim-populated Caucasus and Central Asia regions as a key national security challenge. Of the 50 million Muslims who lived in the USSR, some 20 million remained in Russia; the rest became citizens of the six Muslim nations situated along Russia's border. Russia's Muslim population is concentrated in two large spheres: in seven provinces in the northern Caucasus (Kabardino-Balkaria, Chechnya, Karachay-Cherkessia, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Adygea, Dagestan), and in two provinces in the Volga region (Tatarstan and Bashkortostan). In addition, several million Muslims have migrated to Russia's large cities and live there as temporary residents or migrant workers. The Russian challenge grows even more acute in light of the negative demographic balance vis-à-vis the Russian population.

The attitude of both the Russian public and its leadership toward the Islamic challenge lacks uniformity and tends to ignore the possibility that Islam could constitute an essential threat. The political attitude toward the topic reflects the Russian leadership's hesitations with regard to Islam's role in the international arena. On the one hand, the Muslim awakening brings Russia closer to the West, as it too has an Islamic problem,¹⁶ but on the other, the Muslim-Western conflict creates an opportunity for Russia to position itself at the head of the anti-Western camp. At the same time, radical Islam

seeks to exploit the frictions between Russia, the West, and its neighbors, as well as to intensify the threat it represents to Russia.

Islam in Russia. Current relations between Russia's Muslim establishment and the regime are usually proper; this follows many years of futile efforts to institute a state-sponsored Islamic establishment – an idea that was finally abandoned. On the other hand, in a manifestation of the desire to be part of the Muslim world in general, the Muslim community in Russia is making ever-increasing contact with the Muslim world beyond Russia. This trend continues under the watchful eyes and guidance of an establishment anxious to avoid unnecessary friction and confrontation with the authorities.

Organized Muslim activity came into existence in the final years of the USSR with the appearance of Islamic-inflected information centers and newspapers. At least some of the prominent leaders were connected to the Soviet security services (the most notable being Jamal Guider). In 1990, the Islamic Revival party was founded, and in 1995 the Interregional Islamic Council was established. The founders belonged to the political establishment and were also involved in various commercial ventures, including the promotion of weapons exports to the Middle East.

In the wake of the dissolution of the USSR, many radical activists from the various Muslim sects streamed into Russia, with some immediate consequences. Although most Russian Muslims are not strict observers of religious law but rather express their Islam by displaying solidarity with the Muslim community in Russia and worldwide, the Islamic activists – clerics and combatants trained in Russia and elsewhere – found fertile soil for their teachings. As in other countries in the region, religious ideas were soon spreading – a development reflected in the establishment of new Islamic institutions that replaced the old religious establishment and conducted educational activities among the youth, all the while seeking converts to Islam within non-Muslim groups.

In Muslim heritage ethnic groups in Russia, there are several noteworthy reasons underlying the trend of returning to religious practice. It is seen as a means of self-identification and a way to protect the community, as well as a means to demonstrate kinship with the global Muslim community, which shares border-transcending values. The return to religious practice also affords an opportunity to rally around the anti-Western stance, with which Russia's Muslim population identifies. Nonetheless, one should remember that rising nationalism within Russia's population plays an important role

in Russia's Muslim awakening. In parallel to the development of Islam as a familiar phenomenon on the Russian landscape, a clear Russian Islamophobia, attended by violence, is also emerging.

Islam's inroads into Russia were accompanied by friction with the old traditional leadership. With the passage of time, a certain degree of coexistence between the new and the old leaderships emerged, based on shared support for Islamic values and hostility to the West and what it stands for. Nonetheless, rivalry exists between the traditional Russian Islam and the radical stream, known in Russia as the Wahhabi.

Islamic terrorism and Russian policy. Radical organizations in the Muslim world are responsible for the training of activists, some of whom participate in training camps and subsequently in terrorist activity in Russia. Activists receive a Muslim education in Egypt, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and elsewhere, as well as in Russia itself and in the republics of the former Soviet Union. Those living in Russia who were trained and inspired by the radical organizations in the Middle East have learned how to enlist support, disseminate ideology, assimilate into their surroundings, and infiltrate the local establishment. The original ideology, which focused on achieving independence from Russia, eventually became jihadist. This trend, which has gained impetus because of the complicated war on Russia's southern border, includes tagging Israel, the United States, and the West in general as enemies.

The ascendant jihadist radicals in the northern Caucasus would like to establish a state based on *sharia* (Islamic law). The leading organization is the Islamic Front of the northern Caucasus, a group with Chechnyan roots, which spreads terrorism deep into the heart of Russia.¹⁷ Of the host of radical Islamic groups founded in Chechnya, the Islamic Front of the northern Caucasus, active in Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Bashkortostan, is paramount. Shariyat and Ganath operate in Dagestan, Jamat Hizb-wat-Tahrir in Bashkortostan, Yarmok in Kabardino-Balkaria, and Khlifate and Jamat Ingusheti in Ingushetia.¹⁸

Ironically, Russia has found itself involved in an asymmetrical war, a model of struggle developed as a tool to attack other nations during the USSR era. Along with the rebels backed by a supportive population historically in conflict with whichever central government happened to be in power, radical Islamists from the Middle East – first and foremost the Muslim Brotherhood – were also involved in the fighting. In the late 1980s, the

Muslim Brotherhood transferred its activities from Afghanistan to Muslim regions in the USSR, where it led the Islamic reawakening. The Russian authorities, usually careful not to confront foreign Islamic groups, officially listed the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization and declared its activities illegal.

A ruthless war between the Russians and the Muslim rebels developed in the northern Caucasus. While the Chechnyan uprising was quashed after two wars there (1994-1996 and 1999-2007), the northern Caucasus is still a hotbed of resistance. Guerrilla warfare and terrorism have spread to other areas deep inside Russia, although in the years since the end of the second Chechnyan war in 2007, regular fighting in the Caucasus has died down. In order to achieve this, the Russian army has waged a merciless struggle consisting of purging pockets of resistance, destroying villages, and making extensive use of targeted assassinations of key figures, thus eliminating most of the guerrilla units. According to the Russians, law and order have been restored to the rebel provinces with the help of pro-Russian local leaders.

Since the end of regular fighting between Russia and the Islamic rebels in the northern Caucasus, the radical Islamic struggle has focused on mass terrorist attacks, namely, raids on combat troops and suicide attacks targeting government institutions and Russian security services both in the Caucasus and deep in Russia, the latter being considered particularly heinous. Among the targets attacked were public institutions – hospitals (for instance, in Budyonnovsk in 1995), schools (Bilsan in 2004), cultural centers (Moscow Theater in 2004), residential buildings in large cities (including Moscow in 1999), and traffic hubs (the Moscow subway system in 2010 and the Moscow-St. Petersburg train in 2009). There have been skyjacking attempts and attacks on civilian aircraft (at two of Moscow's airports in 2004). The conflict between Russia and radical Islam is also being waged in the Volga region and in the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union, particularly in Central Asia. The authorities in these essentially authoritarian nations have used a heavy hand to stop, supervise, and limit the expanding Islamic activity, albeit without great success.

Russia perceives itself as part of Western civilization, a concept not necessarily self-evident to Westerners. Yet Western civilization notwithstanding, the fact that significant parts of its area and population

are part of the Muslim world is exploited by Russia to establish the claim that it belongs to the Muslim world. Thus, Russia became an observer at the Muslim Conference, established a parliamentary group called “Russia and the Islamic World – a Strategic Dialogue,” and, above all, implements an anti-Western policy in the Middle East that includes maintaining an independent policy regarding the “axis of evil” (Iran, Syria, and the radical organizations). In Russia, many view the Muslim world as an important partner in furthering Russia’s international status, and support embracing it. In addition to Muslim activists, these supporters include communists and those interested in rebuilding the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, as well as various special interest elements from the foreign service, security apparatus, and arms industry.

The Russian solution to the Muslim challenge is twofold. Russia’s domestic policy reflects suspicion of the Muslim system, and the Russian security services have conducted an unrelenting war against Islamic activists. However, they do not over-emphasize the Islamic cast of the rebellion; rather, they present the rebels as insurgents against the state and as criminals who must be confronted by means of the principles and procedures of internal security. Even if Russia’s foreign policy is interlaced with anti-Western, pro-Islamic rhetoric, radical Islamic groups consider Russia a target of jihad, although the Islamic world – especially the radical wing – recognizes that Russia can be its partner in stopping the West and harming it. Russia cooperates with the international effort against radical Islam, albeit selectively, at the same time sending positive signals to Muslim states and groups, particularly the anti-Western ones. This policy clearly distinguishes between domestic Islamic terrorism, presented as an internal Russian matter, and Islamic terrorism outside of Russia. Furthermore, Russia distinguishes between radical Islamic groups that do not fight against Russia, granting them government support and political advancement, and those that operate against Russia from across its borders. This was the case at least until the Arab Spring, which upset Russia’s stance with regard to this issue.

Despite the problematic nature of this peculiarity, it seems that Russia’s policy has borne fruit. Despite the harsh treatment of radical Islamic elements at home, anti-Russian feelings in the Muslim world do not seem to have increased, even though Russia’s status in the Middle East has waned because of its unreserved support for Iran and Syria during its devastating civil war. Muslim political demands of Russia have not triggered a great deal of

solidarity in the Muslim world, and many who supported such demands have retracted them. As part of the effort to calm the rebel areas, hailing back to Putin's early days in office, Russia reached discreet understandings with various Islamic nations and organizations, including Turkey, Iran, and most of the organizations, except for al-Qaeda, about abstaining from supporting subversive Islamic activity on Russian soil. Even the Muslim Brotherhood, with which an understanding was reached in 2006, slowly ceased its anti-Russian activities and started viewing Russia as a partner in the struggle against the common enemy – the United States.

Because of the Arab Spring, however, Russia has lost most of its strongholds in the region – strongholds that were painstakingly amassed over many years. Russia finds itself challenged by the rise of Islam and isolated in the Arab world, especially given the evolving Sunni bloc's opposition, which is backed – in Russia's opinion – by the West. This situation is liable to cause Russia to be expelled from the region. In fact, Russia finds itself trapped within the Shiite camp while waging a relentless rearguard action in defense of the Iranian-Syrian axis, which is on the verge of collapse. Also causing Russian leaders to lose sleep is the concern that the Arab Spring will not only reach Russia's zone of interest, but even cross the border into Russia itself.

Chapter 2

Russia and the Middle East

In the past, Russia's strategy of confrontation with the West in the Middle East focused on choosing sides while providing its clients with assistance in many fields – political, economic, and military, including active participation in fighting. The USSR financed and equipped most Middle Eastern countries, notably Egypt, Syria, South Yemen, Iraq, Algeria, and Libya. With the collapse of the USSR, Russia's status and strongholds in the Middle East were suddenly eliminated. The new Russian regime turned to the West, snubbing the Soviet Union's old allies, which were therefore exposed to Western influence.

A decade or so later, during President Putin's term of office, Russia began to work toward rebuilding its standing in the Middle East. Russia views the region – the Near and Middle East, to employ Russia's terminology – that stretches from Pakistan to North Africa as a continuous Muslim sphere with the potential for political union under one leadership; it also views the nations of the region as its natural partners. In 2003-2004, when the United States was preoccupied with the war in Iraq, Russia identified a window of opportunity and started to increase its inroads into the Middle East. It formulated a new strategy of establishing positive relationships with all the players, all the while keeping a finger in the pot of every regional locus of events. An excellent example is the fact that Russia maintains a relationship with Israel concomitantly with its relationships with Israel's enemies. (The topic of relations with Israel, the Palestinians, and the Middle East political process is dealt with in a separate chapter.) While concurrently adopting a policy of cooperation with the West, Russia also expended efforts on reducing the influence of its competitors. Its ability to maneuver among the sides was manifested in the way it provided mediation and arbitration

services to rival entities. The competition between Russia and the West for influence over the region was thus renewed.¹⁹

Regional Dimensions

Russia's policy in the Middle East is based on several premises.²⁰

- a. In the first decade of the 21st century, the global importance of the Middle East as an energy-rich region increased, with the issue of transport routes being of critical significance for the security of many nations.
- b. As a result of globalization and the end of the bipolar era, the Middle East's ideological vacuum has undergone a return to religious practice and nationalism, causing instability and conflicts. Moreover, the problem of nuclear weapons in the region is worsening, and critical resources such as water and food are diminishing.
- c. The generational shifts in the region's political leaderships and the changes in the public mood engender a lack of clarity about the future. The need for the development and modernization of the region's nations is obvious, as is the need for reducing their socioeconomic and political gaps. Furthermore, the Arab-Israeli political process must be encouraged, even though attempts to mediate between the opposing sides seem to have come to naught. In light of all this, new approaches are crucial in order to resolve the region's problems, the fundamental precondition for a successful regional breakthrough being the integration of the traditional political systems of the region's nations into the political processes.
- d. The United States pursued an aggressive regional policy of modernization and democratization, manifested in the imposition of foreign standards on traditional Muslim societies. The result was the opposite of the declared goal: the conservative and radical powers resisted, regional security was compromised, and international terrorism grew more powerful than before. (The desire for nuclear power in the Middle East is a direct outcome of the attempt to impose foreign standards on the region, although Iran perceives the increased pressure to which it is being subjected as contributing to regional instability.)
- e. The Arab street views the declaration of war on Islamic radicalism as a challenge to Islam itself, and this fans anti-Western flames. An American withdrawal from the region would not only fail to alter this anti-Western trend; it would actually exacerbate it by unleashing radical Islamic forces

seeking a different target – perhaps Russia itself, as well as regions with Russian interests.

Russia formulated its policy on the basis of these assumptions (some of which are no longer valid because of the Arab Spring), its strategic objective being to serve as an alternative to the United States and establish its position in the region as a power acceptable to all sides. To this end, its interim goals were to contain the threat posed by Islamic activity, and above all to promote its economic interests in the region.

In terms of trade with the nations of this region, Russia's military and security technology exports are particularly important. (Elsewhere in the world, major Russian exports are energy sources and raw materials.) After expending a great deal of effort on rebuilding itself, Russia began to make inroads into the international arms market alongside the big Western manufacturers. Within just a few years, it managed to recoup and even ameliorate its position in this domain in the Middle East. The improvement in the quality of its security products allowed it to compete with Western manufacturers.

Arms exports also had a political goal since they were deemed a means to expand Russia's influence and enhance its status both in the target nations and internationally. In addition, some view the flow of weapons to Middle Eastern terrorist organizations as an additional contribution to Russia's security, because it permits the terrorists in the region to continue their struggle against the United States and Israel, thereby preventing them from directing the struggle into Russian territory.²¹ However, the policy of exporting weapons is characterized by the care taken not to upset the balance and stability in the region. The fact that Russia does not supply S-300 missiles to Iran is an example of this approach.

The issue of nuclear technologies, particularly the export of reactors, is also a preferred Russian issue. Russia has a fairly strong lobby working to promote this issue and offer nuclear goods to anyone in the region. It has played an active role in promoting the Iranian nuclear program both by selling know-how and technology, directly and indirectly, and by supplying the reactor in Bushehr. This development, led by Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov following the West's intervention in the war among the nations comprising the former Yugoslavia, was part of Russia's reassessment of its role in the Middle East. Primakov, who supported a tough Russian stance with regard to the international arena and close relations with the West,

oversaw the supply of arms to Iran and the assistance Iran received in building the Bushehr reactor.

Throughout the years Russia has ignored the sinister significance of the Iranian program, preferring to exploit the aspects likely to do it some good. On the other hand, because it does in fact feel uneasy about a nuclear Iran, it is careful to convey an image of cooperation with the international community's efforts to hamper the progress of the program by dragging its feet during the completion stage of the reactor, for example. At the same time, Russia, a permanent member of the UN Security Council and all the international nuclear arms control forums and institutions, including the IAEA, has cooperated fully with them. It participated in the P5+1 forum and supported most of the UN resolutions calling for Iran to stop enriching uranium. (In total, during 2006-2010, resolutions 1737, 1747, 1803, and 1929 called for imposing sanctions on Iran.)

A significant change in Russia's approach to Iran's nuclear program occurred when it responded to President Obama's "reset" policy, whereupon there was a certain cooling off in the relationship between Russia and Iran.²² The Iranians reacted with a great deal of anger, and for several months there were harsh exchanges between Moscow and Tehran. In addition, Russia issued certain public statements of concern about the completion of the Iranian nuclear project in the foreseeable future, a nuclear arms race developing in the Middle East as a result of a nuclear Iran, and the collapse of the international arms control regime. Nonetheless, the rationales underlying cooperation with Iran overrode concerns about the negative ramifications of the Iranian nuclear project, if indeed there were any. In fact, it is still possible that despite the strident rhetoric in Russia in defense of Iran, there will be quite a few sighs of relief should other international elements ensure that the project fails to get off the ground.

Until the outbreak of the Arab Spring, it seemed that Russia was rapidly achieving its immediate objectives in the Middle East. It had maneuvered itself into a unique position of maintaining relationships with many different elements in the region, thereby gaining potential advantages in providing mediation and arbitration services. In addition, this policy was instrumental in preventing the northern Caucasus from falling into Islamic hands by severing it from the nations of the Middle East and from the range of operation of most of the radical organizations active in the region. However, this situation is unlikely to continue indefinitely. The fact is that the radical Islamic forces

are holding Russia hostage. The possibility that Middle Eastern radicals will seize control places Russia in a position where it must again choose sides. Even so, it is continuing its efforts to promote its regional standing by exploiting its regional clients' anti-Western policy as well as the negative attitudes toward the United States and the West in general that are prevalent in the Arab street. Although Russia preaches the inclusion of the traditional Islamic world in the regional democratization process, it does so on the basis of the pace and priorities of the region's inhabitants and political systems rather than on the basis of American dictates. Thus, Russia courts various Islamic elements in order to open hearts – and doors – in the region.

This policy reflected the Russian effort to maintain proper relationships with all the entities in the region. Having learned the hard way the implications of the unequivocal picking of sides, as was the wont of the Soviet regime, Russia is careful to foster relations with nations with both pro-Western and anti-Western regimes, as well as with radicals and moderates, Arabs and non-Arabs, Sunnis and Shiites, Israel on the one hand and various Palestinian groups on the other. Until the implications of the Arab Spring become clear, the Russian method is working, since each and every entity is concerned that Russia will abandon it and take its enemy's side.

Moreover, the West's courtship of Russia, as part of the effort to stop the Iranian nuclear project and the attempt to weaken radical organizations active in the Middle East, has helped Russia bolster its position as an influence-wielder in the region. The "reset" program, which recognized Russia's ambitions in the region, is proof. Russia's becoming a partner in the political process – as a member of the Quartet and other international forums such as the P5+1 – can be viewed in the same light. However, one cannot rule out the possibility that ironically the United States' weakened influence in the Middle East will make it difficult for Russia to offer itself as a viable alternative. America's withdrawal from the nations of the Middle East is liable to result in the rise of radical regimes and transform them into bases of operation that also target Russia and its spheres of influence.

This rather bleak forecast for Russia is a result of the assessment stating that the revolutionary process set in motion by the Arab Spring will lead to the sweeping Islamization of the region. According to Russia, this is being promoted by the Sunni nations led by Saudi Arabia. The latter is consolidating a regional front against the Shiite constellation, which includes the anti-Western Iran-Syria axis. Russia's leaders understand that the Sunni

bloc, backed by the West, is succeeding in advancing Islamic regimes in areas on the brink of revolution while curbing Iran's influence and hastening the failure of Iran's intention to establish a regional Islamic alignment against the West in general and Israel in particular. In its zeal to defend Syria against the revolution occurring at home and the international pressures being brought to bear on Bashar Assad to step down, and in its capacity as Iran's defender against international sanctions, Russia is trapped in the Shiite camp. Recalling the lessons of USSR involvement in the Middle East and wary of being perceived as taking sides in the regional conflict, Russia is finding itself compelled to choose a side that is in danger of being the losing one.

Bilateral Dimensions

Iran. Over the years, relations between Russia and Iran have had their ups and downs, and have even been characterized by periods of outright hostility. Since the dissolution of the USSR and the mutual overcoming of past grudges, Iran has become a major Russian partner on bilateral, regional, and global issues. As a pivotal nation in the Middle East and Central Asian sphere – one that is of interest to other powers as well – Iran is a potential threat to Russia's geopolitical interests. However, thanks to its geographical location, its friendly policy regarding Russia, and the fact that it refrains from challenging Russia on issues of Islam both in Russia itself and in the former Soviet Union, Iran is the recipient of special considerations on Russia's part as a partner in the effort to thwart Western designs in the Middle East, and as a potential leader of the Muslim world. Russian leaders tend to think that Russia is more likely to benefit from cooperating with Iran than with other elements in the region or even with the West. Russia's policy regarding Iran is ambivalent because it is informed by caution.

In fact, relations with Iran are a disputed issue in Russia. There are concerns about Iranian threats to Russian interests and about Iran's conduct once it possesses nuclear weapons, since it will then have the wherewithal to become an economic rival in the Caspian Sea as a consequence of its influence on the Islamic issue. Iran's geopolitical ambitions are also a threat to Russia. Therefore, hand in hand with the support, there are misgivings about Iran's future conduct. Russia's policy regarding Iran is really a manifestation of its anti-Western goal of ousting the West from the Middle East and the exploitation of Iran as a tool to this end. Russia is hampering the West's freedom to operate against Iran's aspirations to produce nuclear

weapons, even though Iran's conduct in the regional and international arenas, particularly the progress it has made in its nuclear project, has caused Russia more than a little embarrassment and consternation. At the same time, however, Iran's conduct has afforded Russia the opportunity to organize the regional anti-Western camp, along with some attendant economic bonuses.²³ From Russia's perspective, the instability in the Middle East following the Arab Spring is liable to make the cost of conceding relations with Iran much higher. Therefore, Russia may be expected to maintain its ambivalent policy regarding Iran and not suspend relations.

As a result of the above mentioned considerations, Russia has endorsed Iran's defiance in the international arena and has demonstrated lenience toward Iran for exporting its own brand of radical Islam. Furthermore, Russia is keen to export arms – one of its leading sources of income – to Iran, which has purchased Russian military equipment since the end of the Iraq-Iran War. In this context, one should recall the Russian aid that Iran received for the construction of the nuclear reactor in Bushehr, as well as the fact that Russia turned a blind eye to the flow of sensitive Russian nuclear and missile technologies to Iran in the first decade of this century. For the most part, the arms exported were basic, and there was no overt assistance in missile development. During those years, the media published several items about Russian arms sales to Iran to the tune of many billions of dollars,²⁴ but in practice very few of them ever materialized; when they did, they did not involve advanced systems. Although a deal for the purchase of S-300 missiles has been signed, the missiles have not yet been supplied, despite intense Iranian pressure.

In addition, despite a relatively new trend in Russia to prefer developing technological fields with Western assistance to cooperating with Iran on energy sources, there are many interest-driven parties in Russia that view Iran as a partner, particularly when it concerns security exports. Nonetheless, Russia will undoubtedly continue its attempts to enjoy the best of all worlds. Furthermore, tensions in the international arena over the Iranian nuclear project affect oil prices and are threatening to drive them up – hence Russia's interest in maintaining the tensions. However, cooperation with Russia is also important to Iran, especially as a card to play in its conflict with the West.

Alongside the developments stemming from the Arab Spring, rendering Iran one of Russia's last allies in the region, and in the wake of the IAEA report verifying the existence of a military nuclear program in Iran, Russia

came to Iran's aid and became something of the gatekeeper responsible for curbing the pressures brought to bear on Iran. This policy is fundamentally anti-Western, and Russia's conduct is informed more by concerns about Chinese successes in the competition for Iranian resources than by affinities particularly pro-Iranian.

In order to advance its goals, Russia is working on different levels simultaneously: while providing Iran with wholesale endorsement internationally, it is also involved in the P5+1 attempt to contain the Iranian nuclear program. Concurrently, however, according to an assumption that is gaining wide acceptance in Russia – that the question of an attack on Iran by the United States and/or Israel is only a question of when and not if – there are preparations underway in Russia for such a development, even though it seems that Russian military intervention in Iran is not viewed as plausible. Instead, Russia is pondering the idea of exploiting an attack on Iran for the purpose of aggressive intervention in the Caucasus, namely, Georgia and Azerbaijan, which represent the common axis with NATO against Russia and Iran. While this is reflected in military preparations, there are still profound disagreements and charged discussions whose outcome entails highly complicated implications.

Turkey. Turkey is Russia's powerful neighbor and a NATO member – a fact that jeopardizes the potential for a rapprochement between the nations. Moreover, there are historic Russian concerns about Turkey. In the past, Turkey controlled areas conquered by Russia, especially in the Caucasus. Most of the Muslim population of Russia and the former Soviet Union speak Turkish dialects, and pan-Turkish dreams are not altogether dead. However, recent years have witnessed a growing rapprochement between the nations as a result of common economic interests: trade between Turkey and Russia increased from \$10 billion to \$25 billion a year,²⁵ making Russia Turkey's major trade partner. In addition, a Russian government company is responsible for the plans to build the first nuclear reactor in Turkey.

On the other hand, while Turkey is an important consumer of Russian natural gas and oil, these products are transported to Europe through routes – including the Nabucco pipeline, parts of which are still under construction – that traverse Turkey. At the other end of the line, an underwater segment in the Caspian Sea that will bypass both Iran and Russia and supply Central Asian nations with these fuels is slated to be built. For its part, Russia, in cooperation with Iran and China and in competition with Turkey, has

increased its activities there. This cooperation is evident in the Southern Stream project to convey natural gas to Europe via the Black Sea, and in the East Siberia-Pacific Ocean project to convey oil to China. In addition, in November 2011, Russia inaugurated the Northern Route, a pipeline whose objective is to convey natural gas to Europe.

In light of the change in Turkey's political orientation since the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party headed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Turkey's concurrent practice of distancing itself from the United States and the West in general, Russia's interest in Turkish intervention on its behalf in the Muslim world, particularly given Turkey's rising status in the region, has increased. Russia requires Turkish support in the context of the OIC, where Russia has observer status. Russia needs to coordinate with Turkey chiefly to prevent the latter from backing the Islamic rebels in the Caucasus. Nonetheless, both Turkey and Russia are attempting to improve their standing and increase their influence in the same areas – hence the new strain on their relationship. Thus, for example, Turkey, a partner with Georgia in many joint ventures, opposed the Russian invasion. Moreover, commencing in the fall of 2011 and as a result of the civil war in Syria, disagreements arose between Turkey and Russia as to how to relate to Bashar Assad's regime and the Syrian army's resistance to the rebels. While Turkey was one of the nations calling for Assad to step down from power, Russia remained faithful in its support of him.

Additional tensions between the two nations have surfaced; these have even translated into friction over security. Turkey is challenging Russia about drilling for natural gas near Cyprus, something that Turkey is determined to stop. Russia also has reason to be concerned about Turkey joining the Nabucco project to convey gas from Central Asia to Europe via a pipeline that bypasses Russia. Geopolitically, in addition to the Iranian and Syrian issues, Turkey is opposing Russia with regard to the Caucasus, where it is aligned with Georgia and Azerbaijan to the detriment of Russian interests.

Most of all, the Russian-Turkish conflict has worsened in light of events in Syria, with Russia supporting Assad's regime and Turkey attempting to topple it. As a result, it is merely a matter of time before the tension generated by worsening relations is translated into actual military terms. In addition, there is subversive activity on the Kurdish issue. In order to deal with the challenges posed by Turkey, Russia is working toward establishing its own strategic axis in conjunction with Greece, Cyprus, and possibly also

Israel, for the conceivable containment of Turkey. However, efforts to push forward this strategic axis have experienced significant obstacles, including the newfound Turkish-Israeli détente, which was facilitated by the US.

Jordan. Russia has also expanded economic cooperation with Jordan and has offered it weapon systems, notably aerial defenses. Although the offer has yet to be accepted, Russia has persisted in its attempts to interest Jordan in buying arms in the hope that the kingdom will eventually decide to diversify its weapons suppliers.

Lebanon. There is economic cooperation between Russia and Lebanon, with trade between the two countries increasing significantly, particularly after the 2006 Second Lebanon War. After the war, Russia sent humanitarian aid and a military engineering unit to help rebuild infrastructures and construct bridges. Many Lebanese nationals study at Russian institutions of higher education. Russia also supplies Lebanon with weapons. In 2010, Russia offered the Lebanese army Mi-24 fighter helicopters free of charge after Lebanon rejected a deal involving MIG-29 fighter jets and dozens of tanks – a deal that included initial maintenance and training of professional staff.²⁶

While maintaining relations with the Lebanese government, Russia has also established a separate relationship with Hizbollah, whereby it seeks to neutralize the possibility of external aid to radical Islamic elements operating against Russia and on Russian soil. (It does the same with the Palestinian Hamas.) Russia does not define Hizbollah and Islamic organizations that are active outside of Russia and its spheres of influence as terrorist organizations, and accordingly views Hizbollah as an internal Lebanese problem. Hence, Russia turns a blind eye to the transfer of Russian arms from Syria and Iran to Hizbollah. In parallel, it engages in dialogue with the Lebanese government and attempts to promote arms sales to the Lebanese army as well.

Egypt. Egypt was the first and most important nation in the Middle East with which the Soviets established a relationship of friendship and cooperation. USSR-Egyptian relations included massive military assistance, including repeated reconstructions of the Egyptian army following its defeats in wars against Israel, not to mention Soviet participation alongside Egypt in the fighting against Israel. The relationship involved huge investments in economic infrastructures in Egypt, including the building of industrial sites such as the Aswan Dam.

In 1972, when Egypt expelled its Soviet advisors, the relationship entered a cooling-off period that lasted until the dissolution of the USSR. Egypt forged positive relations with the new Russia, taking care not to threaten internal Russian interests in the context of the Islamic challenge, and avoiding competition with Russia over energy sources. Trade between Egypt and Russia, consisting mainly of Russian exports, stands at more than \$2 billion per annum. In addition, prior to the Arab Spring, some 1.5 million Russian tourists visited Egypt every year. Nonetheless, although Russian public opinion prefers the old regime to the unknown future, Russia did not come to the aid of President Mubarak's collapsing regime.²⁷ Currently, after the establishment of a Muslim regime in Egypt, Russia is again trying to regain its former role, hoping for a closer relationship and a rosier future.

Syria. In the 1970s and 1980s, Syria was the USSR's chief ally in the Middle East. It served as a base for Russian experts and advisors as well as for Soviet naval units and aerial defense systems for independent missions. After the dissolution of the USSR, Syria's relations with Russia cooled off over "the betrayal of the Arab issue." The massive Syrian debt to Russia for the purchase of Soviet arms systems, denied by Syria, also became a bone of contention between the two nations. However, the relationship was reestablished as part of Russia's attempt to return to the Middle East and establish an anti-Western front in the region. Bashar Assad's first visit to Russia took place in 2005, and since then relations between the two nations have grown steadily closer. The question of Syria's debt was settled when the Russians agreed to waive 73 percent of it (i.e., \$9.8 billion).²⁸ Since then, Syria once again views Russia as an important political partner, especially given its own international isolation.

For its part, Russia has expressed sweeping support for Syria over the years, rejecting accusations leveled against Syria on a number of problematic issues such as the Syrian nuclear project, its involvement in Lebanon, its arming of Hizbollah, its support for terrorist organizations, and its cooperation with Iran. In return for the canceled debt, Syria has given Russia a renewed foothold in the seaports of Latakia and Tartus and has become the Russian navy's only maintenance base in the Mediterranean, thereby affording Russia operational flexibility throughout the Mediterranean basin, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean. The Syrians have even suggested that the Russians renovate the port of Tartus, and work on that task has already commenced.²⁹

Assad's visit to Moscow in 2005 also included discussions of a new arms deal, and although Russia expected a large scale Syrian order, it ended up consisting of a relatively limited number of systems: MIG-29s, MIG-31Es (eight planes, apparently intended for intelligence gathering), and some aerial defense systems of the older generation. The talks also focused on understandings with regard to the future supply of advanced S-300 surface-to-air missiles and Eskandron-2 surface-to-surface missiles. During President Medvedev's visit to Syria in 2010, the possibility of Russia supplying Syria with a nuclear reactor was discussed, but owing to considerations of maintaining the military balance in the Middle East, these deals – inherently provocative towards the West in general and Israel in particular – were never completed. In practice, Syria never received any significant weapon systems apart from the Cornet-E anti-tank missiles (some of which ended up in the hands of Hizbollah) and the Pantsyr-S1 aerial defense system. Iran in fact financed some of these deals, including Hizbollah's acquisitions. An exception to this rule occurred in December 2011, when Syria was supplied with Yakhont P-800 naval cruise missiles capable of posing a challenge to Israel and NATO forces in the Mediterranean.³⁰

Similar to its relations with Iran, relations with Syria serve Russia's goal to increase its regional influence.³¹ For its part, Syria is eager to advance relations with Russia as a way to enhance its regional status. Against this backdrop, Russia sought to convene a regional peace conference in Moscow with the participation of Syria, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, and perhaps even Iran. While the practical significance was irrelevant even before the Arab Spring, from Russia's perspective the option is still on the table.

During the tumult that erupted in Syria in 2011 Russia has sided with Bashar Assad's regime, despite the rebellion and the pressures exerted on Assad by the international community in general and Sunni nations in the Middle East in particular. In addition to defending the regime, Russia has tried to mediate among the rebels, hoping to lay the foundation for relations with the future regime. If so, the question arises as to Russia's motives for supporting Assad's controversial regime.

Russia's chief foreign relations interest, in addition to Middle Eastern issues, is the conflict with the West, both globally and along its own borders, where it is endeavoring to contain American and NATO challenges. In this context, posing challenges to the West in the Middle East in general and in Syria in particular serves the Russian need to create balance and keep its

adversaries' attention focused on the Middle East instead of on its zone of interests along its borders. However, despite conflicting interests, some sort of understanding between the Russians and Americans/NATO, based on a global understanding, for example, regarding European ballistic missile defense, is not impossible (see the section on the challenges of the Arab Spring, below).

Syria, along with Iran, is ostensibly Russia's last bastion in the Middle East, once the Arab Spring left Russia on the outside looking in. At the same time, friction with the growing Sunni bloc, which enjoys cooperation with the West in Russia's version of reality, is on the rise. The fall of Syria, and possibly that of Iran at a later stage, is liable to generate a contiguous alignment of regimes hostile to Russia all the way from North Africa to China.

In addition, by defending Assad, Russia is maintaining the principle of staying out of Syria's business and allowing the Syrian people to determine their own future. In fact, at present, foreign military intervention in Syria is unlikely, whether because of Russia's stance, because of the impotence of the West, or because of the military resilience of the Syrian regime. This also affords Russia the freedom to act both as a supporter of the regime and as an entity that will be critical in shaping future alternatives.

Indeed, Russia is keen to maintain its presence and influence in Syria even after the fall of Assad. Therefore, while supporting Assad, Russia is also in touch with the Syrian opposition but, in the absence of an acceptable solution, Russia is prepared for any scenario, however radical it may be – for instance, creating new geopolitical facts on the ground. The Russians are therefore hoping to promote their objectives, which include getting their way on other fronts and ensuring Russia's influential position in shaping the future regional order.

Iraq. Iraq remained a close ally of the USSR until the end of the Soviet era. Russia considers Iraq to be of tremendous geopolitical importance as the link between the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, Turkey, Iran, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. It therefore made significant efforts to entrench itself in Iraq – an investment that turned to dust when Saddam Hussein's regime collapsed. However, the Russian old guard, particularly its Middle East experts, maintained warm relations with Iraq and voiced heavy criticism of the United States during the 2003 invasion. Once the shock of the loss had worn off, the Russians established good relations with the new Iraqi

regime, at the same time exploiting personal connections and economic infrastructures dating to former days. For its part, the Iraqi army still relies heavily on the weapons and training previously provided by Russia. When Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki visited Moscow in 2009, the continued cooperation between Russia and Iraq was affirmed in many fields, notably the economy.

In addition to exporting Russian outputs and production to Iraq, Russia is involved in Iraqi infrastructures, including oil production in the Kurdish region: in 2011, Lucoil, a Russian company, won a large tender in this field.³² Looking to the future, Russia is hoping to rebuild itself out of the vacuum created in Iraq after the American troop withdrawal. In a further development in Russian-Iraqi relations, Prime Minister al-Maliki paid a surprise second visit to Russia in October 2012 (following his first visit in 2009), where he signed a major \$4.2 billion arms deal and various agreements on Russian participation in Iraqi oil production. Iraq's interest, exploited by Russia, seems to be to project an image of independence of its neighbors and the West. From Russia's point of view, it is clear that the last word on the issue has yet to be spoken.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Unlike Egypt and Syria, Saudi Arabia is considered a sworn enemy of the USSR and Russia. The Russians, with good reason, suspect Saudi Arabia of helping Islamic radicals in Russia and the former Soviet Union; Wahhabism, the Islamic stream prevalent in Saudi Arabia, has become synonymous with Islamic radicals. Nonetheless, there has been a rapprochement between Russia and Saudi Arabia. In the wake of President Putin's visit to Riyadh in 2007, there have been exchanges of delegations leading to agreements of cooperation, including joint security ventures. Underlying this development was Russia's awareness of Saudi Arabia's importance in the Middle East and Saudi Arabia's concerns about the Iranian threat. An additional concrete reason for the growing closeness was Russia's interest in Saudi Arabia's estrangement from the rebels in Chechnya as well as in its participation in the reconstruction of Chechnya, which was destroyed during the war with Russia.

As allies of the West, the Gulf states were anxious about the Soviet inroads into the region. After the fall of the USSR, however, relations between Russia and all the nations in the region were established on the basis of shared interests, notably Russia's interests in the economic potential of the region. During the 1990s, Russia sold weapons to Kuwait, including

armored personnel carriers, anti-tank missiles, and long range rockets. In the 2000s, it also sold many armored personnel carriers to the United Arab Emirates. It subsequently added light weapons and various anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles to the inventory.

Hovering in the background of the relations between Russia and the Gulf states – similar to the relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia – is the Iranian nuclear project, which threatens the national security of the Gulf states as well as Russia's status in the region.³³ These nations are also looking for a way to diversify their weapons sources, and the Russian military assistance provides an appropriate response to their expectations.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states have become a key challenge to Russia as a result of the establishment of a Sunni alignment directed against the Shiite axis, which – for the Sunnis – also includes Russia. Russia is now endeavoring to find a way out of this conundrum, in which it is presented as a partner to the Shiite alignment in the Middle East, constantly contending with all Sunni nations, led by Saudi Arabia. As a consequence of the overall confrontation between the Sunni and Shiite camps, Russia is looking for ways to rehabilitate its relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

North Africa. Extensive cooperation is developing between Russia and Algeria. The two countries signed an arms deal totaling \$7 billion. Russia and Libya signed a \$4 billion deal, but this occurred only a short time prior to the collapse of Qaddafi's regime, and its status is currently unclear. When the Arab Spring broke out, Russia joined the West to oust Qaddafi, a move it later regretted when the Arab Spring and its attendant pressures from the international community arrived at the gates of Damascus, Russia's main ally in the region.

Yemen. During the Cold War, the USSR supplied South Yemen, then a Marxist state, with a great deal of security assistance of various types. Cooperation between Russia and Yemen was renewed in 2000 and soon reached serious proportions, with Russia supplying some 60 percent of Yemen's materiel. In 2009, Russia and Yemen signed a new arms deal estimated at \$1 billion.³⁴

Chapter 3

Russia and the Political Process

Russia-Israel Relations

The modern Zionist movement was founded in Russia, and the State of Israel was founded by Russian immigrants who instilled Russian cultural and philosophical values in the very foundations of Israel's existence. The USSR helped save Jews during World War II and assisted in the establishment of the State of Israel. The waves of immigration from the USSR, Russia, and the CIS have constituted a significant component of Israel's population. During the Cold War, however, the two nations were estranged for many years. Diplomatic relations were severed from 1967 until 1988, and because of the Arab-Israeli conflict and its exploitation by the USSR, the Soviet leadership made even greater inroads into the Middle East and established closer ties with Israel's enemies. During those years, the Jewish population in the USSR was persecuted and those who desired to immigrate to Israel were denied the opportunity. The ties between the nations were restored in the late 1980s with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and have developed since, with both sides endeavoring to overcome difficulties and obliterate negative reminders of the past.

In principle, Russia views Israel both as a nation that shares cultural, spiritual, and moral bonds with it, and as a technological, economic, and political partner – although this tie is subject to whatever issue happens to be on the agenda. According to the Russian perception, Israel is a developed Western nation with international influence. On the one hand, this influence has positive potential for Russia's interests in the West and the Middle East; on the other hand, it has negative potential because Israel is allied with the United States. In addition, Russia tends to perceive the State of Israel and

the Jewish people in the Diaspora as a single system, and this perception exerts a significant influence on shaping Russia's policy regarding Israel.

Over 1.25 million people from Russia and the former USSR have immigrated to Israel since its establishment. Russia feels a paternalistic commitment to the security and welfare of this population, many of whom still embrace the Russian language and culture and serve as a bridge for ties with Russia. Indeed, Putin's statements defining Russian-Israeli relations as special chiefly because of the responsibility he feels for the Israelis with roots in the CIS and Russia are repeated often:³⁵ he reiterates this at meetings with Israelis and representatives of Jewish organizations everywhere, both prior to becoming president of Russia and until today.

The majority of the Russian Jewish community immigrated to Israel and the West in the first years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Those who stayed in Russia and the nations of the former USSR formed an organized community, with the help of the authorities and the encouragement of Israel and Jewish communities in the West. For its part, the Russian government tried to exploit this situation to transmit messages that would promote political interests in the West, particularly the United States and Israel.

The renewal of Russian-Israeli relations was characterized by an accelerated development of economic and political cooperation; later on, however, the pace slowed down. Despite its keen interest in the continued, unrestricted, large scale immigration of Russian Jews, Israel had only a limited interest in economic, political, and security cooperation with Russia, partly because of the latter's modest economic and international status. For its part, Russia limited its cooperation with Israel for political reasons. In the first decade of its modern incarnation, during the era of President Yeltsin, Russia left political leadership in the Middle East in the hands of the United States. Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev (1991-1995) landed up playing a fairly passive role in the Oslo Accords (1993-1995) and the signing of the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan. In 1995, the Israeli-Russian relationship entered a cool period as a result of new superpower aspirations among the Russian elites and friction with the Americans over the latter's involvement in the former Yugoslavia, where Russia had unsuccessfully tried everything in its power to prevent NATO's military intervention.

In light of Russia's economic and political comeback, a change occurred in Israeli and Russian attitudes toward their mutual relations. Israel identified

economic opportunities in Russia and came to the conclusion that ties with Russia were critical in slowing down the supply of Russian weapons to Israel's enemies, primarily Iran. In the meantime, however, Russia underwent a political reversal, whereby it adopted a defiant anti-Western policy that manifested itself in the staging and exploitation of international crises in order to challenge the United States. In the Middle East, this policy was translated into support for the anti-Western axis in the region on the one hand, and intensified Russian efforts to play a role in all the political processes in the region – particularly the Israeli-Palestinian one – on the other.

However, given the overall change in Russia's international policy, signs of erosion of President Putin's early positive attitude toward Israel reappeared. In 2004-2005, Russia shifted closer to the Arab nations and assumed patently pro-Palestinian stances, displaying little consideration for Israel's interests. Similarly, it participated in the Quartet's criticism of Israel's conduct in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. During the 2006 war, Russia extended Syria political support by backing it in the international arena and providing it with military aid, including shipments of advanced anti-tank missiles, all of which reached Hizbollah indirectly. Israel's objections were dismissed by Russia.³⁶ Since 2007, after the Fatah-Hamas split and Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip, Russia and Hamas have grown closer. At that time, Israeli diplomats were expelled from Russia (usually without any genuine grounds, but rather on the basis of pretexts easily decoded as messages of dissatisfaction with Israel's conduct), and limitations were imposed on the activities of Israeli consulates in Russia.

The following years witnessed a decline in Russia's antagonism toward Israel. During Operation Cast Lead, conducted by Israel against Hamas in Gaza in late 2008-early 2009, Russia halted the supply of balance-changing arms to the region, and refused to provide Iran and Syria with S-300 anti-aircraft missiles. (At the same time, however, Russia pressured Israel to stop providing Georgia with advanced weapon systems.³⁷) The renewed rapprochement was reflected in the expansion of mutual trade between Russia and Israel, particularly Israeli exports of technology, medical knowledge and equipment, and agriculture and food. Joint venture agreements involving the security industry – notably the joint manufacture of weapon systems such as unmanned aerial vehicles – were signed. After a lengthy suspension, the activities of the Committee for Strategic Cooperation, a combination of an economic committee and a business council, were resumed.

In addition to the expansion of trade, reciprocal visits by leaders and senior functionaries took place (including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Russia in early 2010, President Shimon Peres's visit in May 2010, and Defense Minister Ehud Barak's visit in September 2010). President Putin encouraged Israeli investments in Russia.³⁸ Russia decided to purchase Israeli security technologies, including unmanned aerial vehicles. The cooperation extended to include the war on terror³⁹ and space ventures (Israeli satellites were launched in Russia in 1998, 2000, 2003, and 2011). At the same time, there was an expansion of cultural ties. Moreover, in light of the fact that half a million Russian tourists visit Israel every year, the two nations signed a mutual agreement canceling the need for tourist visas. After Putin's reelection to the Russian presidency, he demonstrated a desire for closer relations and cooperation with Israel by making Jerusalem one of his his first post-election destinations.

Can Russia and Israel be strategic partners?⁴⁰ It would seem that Russia's leadership well understands the meaning of favoring the Arab side and the Muslim world rather than adopting a clear pro-Israeli policy. Therefore, Russia is also trying to draw closer to Israel without jeopardizing its position in the Arab world. In Russia, Israel is perceived as a potential ally; in light of this, Russia is assuming as careful and balanced a stance as possible. The fact of the matter is that Russia's leaders repeatedly declare their commitment to the peace process and Israel's security. For its part, Russia is eager to draw Israel away from the United States and offer itself as an alternative. However, because it lacks the means to exert pressure on Israel, the latter's cooperation with the Russian stance is limited. And since the influence of the United States on Israel is also limited, at least in the context of the efforts to revive the Middle East political process, Russia itself is attempting to promote the issue. In any event, when political deadlocks arise, Russian spokespersons assume an overtly pro-Palestinian stance, accompanied by criticism of Israel and the United States. They tend to moderate their tone whenever efforts to revive the political process go into high gear.

A significant change in Russia's policy regarding Israel began as part of its reassessment of its overall Middle East policy. The new importance attributed to Israel stems from a host of reasons: as a result of the Arab Spring, the two nations have now found themselves challenged by the rise of Islam; Russia has lost critical strongholds in the region; and the challenge to Russia on the part of Turkey and the emerging Sunni bloc is becoming

more acute. These reasons are all forcing Russia to seek a new regional architecture to serve as an alternative to the previous one, which is in the throes of rapid change.

In this reality, Israel presents as a desirable partner for Russia – not instead of the existing Iranian-Syrian axis, but in addition to it – as Russia implements what it calls its “multi-directional policy.” As far as anyone can tell, Russia is piecing together a new political axis, apparently based on Israel as its strategic partner in the region. Indeed, despite their charged past the two countries have many things in common. Politically, the relationship is good, despite their opposing views on some issues. Economically too there has been an upsurge in a wide range of fields, particularly technology. And more recently, Russia has exhibited serious interest in the production of Israeli natural gas. According to the Russian viewpoint, the alignment with Israel is apparently supposed to include other countries, such as Cyprus and Greece. However, one cannot assume that Russia will relinquish its special ties with Iran, Syria, and its other allies in the region as a token of good will. On the contrary: from its perspective, it is keen to add relationships in parallel to those that already exist. Such a situation would help Russia improve its status in the Middle East as well as build other influential tools that would help it accomplish its long-coveted goal of being equal to the United States and significantly improve its ability to operate in the eastern Mediterranean basin.

The Israeli-Palestinian Issue

The Russian-Palestinian relationship is a lasting remnant of the Cold War: after the Six Day War in 1967, the Soviets cut off diplomatic ties with the State of Israel while simultaneously establishing ties with various Palestinian organizations. Relations between the Russians and Palestinians, particularly the Palestinian Authority (PA), endured the fall of the USSR, although the Russian Federation’s influence on the peace process has been tenuous at best, reaching a record low during the 1990s when the Russian state was in a process of transition and was relatively powerless in the global arena. This was to change with the rise to power in 2000 of President Putin who placed a newfound emphasis on Russia’s position in the Middle East while leveraging Russian involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process for international exposure.

Russia's ties with the PA did not prevent it from supporting Hamas, which it never defined as a terror organization but rather as an opposition group. Despite its membership in the Quartet, its position on Hamas was at variance with that Quartet's official position, and it did not insist that Hamas fulfill the criteria stipulated as a basis for dialogue. Ties with Hamas were established even before Hamas won the elections in the PA in 2006 – President Medvedev met with Khaled Mashal, head of Hamas' political bureau, during a visit to Damascus. Russia, viewing the election results in the PA as a blow to America's policy in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, was the only non-Muslim country to recognize Hamas. After the elections, Mashal visited Moscow in his first visit in the international arena. According to Russia, Hamas has a positive attitude toward the peace process and is willing to recognize Israel.⁴¹ The ties with the movement remained firm even after the takeover of the Gaza Strip, with Russia trying to mediate and effect a reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, albeit unsuccessfully. After the signing of the reconciliation agreement (May 2011), attained under Egyptian auspices, a united Palestinian delegation visited Moscow for discussions intended to examine the possibility of institutional cooperation and a shared political path.⁴²

The PA, while fostering relations with the United States and EU nations, paid heed to the Russian call. Its efforts to maintain a balance between relations with Russia on the one hand and relations with the West on the other were manifested in its relations with the Quartet. The PA, like the PLO and its ties with the USSR before it, supported Russia's attempt to revive the political process under the auspices of the Quartet, which counterbalanced America's support for Israel. There were frequent summit meetings between PA and Russian representatives, and the PA received a certain amount of aid from Russia, as dictated by Russia's limited resources.

Over the course of the many years that Russia was involved with the peace process, a set of assumptions and operating principles developed in a fixed pattern. Russia (like the USSR before it) recognized the principle of establishing a Palestinian state after the Palestinian declaration of independence at the 19th Palestinian National Council assembly held in Algiers in 1988, and has adhered to it ever since. President Medvedev too made a similar announcement during his visit to the PA in January 2011, and Prime Minister Putin echoed the sentiment in July 2011. The purpose of the political process, as far as Russia is concerned, is to establish a Palestinian

state alongside Israel. In Russia, the prevailing notion posits that in order to attain this goal, both sides will have to make significant concessions.⁴³ Underlying this approach is Russia's opposition to unilateral moves and its harsh criticism of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005. Nonetheless, Russia supported the Palestinian appeal to the UN in September 2011 for recognition of the independence of a Palestinian state. With regard to negotiations, Moscow espouses the approach that a broad international front rather than a single mediator (namely, the United States) must accompany the process. It also supports a comprehensive process not just between Israel and the Palestinians but also between Israel on the one hand and Syria and Lebanon on the other, and possibly even between Israel and Iran.

The 2009 resumption of Russian diplomatic activity in the Middle East represented a renewed hope for the resurrection of Russia's international status thanks to the American "reset" program. However, this development was joined by an intensifying pro-Palestinian trend in Russia's policy, alongside manifestations of disappointment with Benjamin Netanyahu's government, seen by Russia as overly right wing and therefore resistant to a settlement. This policy reflected Russia's traditional preference for multilateral involvement in the effort to promote a settlement in the Middle East. Over the years, Moscow has relied on the Quartet to serve as the expression of its preferred collectivist approach, and has consistently supported the Roadmap presented by the Quartet in June 2002. It has also supported the expansion of the Quartet's authority, which was supposed to grant it enhanced political maneuverability and the possibility of creating leverage that would enable it to bypass the United States. In addition, Russia backed the Arab Peace Initiative as it was presented anew in 2007.

In 2010, Russia's diplomatic activity in the region intensified. Regional leaders, including Prime Minister Netanyahu, PA Chairman Abu Mazen, the Lebanese prime minister, and the King of Jordan, visited Russia. President Medvedev visited the PA in 2011, but at Israel's request did not visit Israel for technical reasons (the Israeli Foreign Ministry was on strike), which Russia took as an insult. During his visit to the PA, Medvedev declared support for the establishment of a Palestinian state, though not necessarily for immediate recognition. On June 2, 2011, PA Ambassador to Russia Fiyad Mustafa said that given the weakened standing of the United States in the Middle East, it was incumbent on Russia to take the reins and lead the

region's political process. On various occasions (such as the G-20 summit in Paris on March 1, 2010, the Quartet's meeting in Moscow the same month, and his visit to the PA in January 2011), Medvedev declared Russia to be in the midst of a process of dialogue with all the relevant parties in order to encourage them to renew the talks. He expressed his optimism about the chances of jumpstarting the process in all channels.⁴⁴ In practice, these efforts – including the Russian recommendation to launch bridging talks between Israel and the PA within 24 days, jumpstart direct talks within four months, and establish a Palestinian state within 24 months – failed.

Russia was conspicuously absent from the September 2010 meeting in Washington, where the renewal of the talks under American auspices was announced, even though these also failed to gather momentum. Thus, Russia was forced to make do, at least for the time being, with an interim achievement: the Quartet's announcement, made public on September 23, 2011 (in conjunction with the UN General Assembly session where the PA placed its request for recognition of Palestinian independence on the agenda), included not only a renewed call to the sides to return to the negotiating table, but also its agreement to hold a peace conference in Moscow.

In order to improve the chances of a regional settlement, and with the principles of multilateralism and flexibility in mind, the following objectives were defined:⁴⁵

- a. The Palestinians are supposed to work toward reconciliation and a normalization of relations between the PLO and Hamas.
- b. Terrorism must stop.
- c. The Palestinians must refrain from setting preconditions concerning the outcome of the negotiations and recognize prior decisions on the issue, such as Security Council resolutions on the Arab-Israeli issue, the steps of the Roadmap, and the Arab Peace Initiative.
- d. Israel must halt, fully and completely, any settlement activity in the West Bank, including construction in East Jerusalem.
- e. Moscow feels that as a result of the assumption of power by radical elements in various regional nations, delaying the renewal of the peace process will harm Israel.
- f. As regards promoting an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, Moscow does not rule out the possibility of an imposed settlement should the dialogue fail.⁴⁶ In the Russian view, perhaps a forced settlement would actually

be more convenient for the sides, since it would relieve them of the necessity to make tough political and ideological decisions.

In light of the events of the Arab Spring and the concern about the deterioration in the situation in the Middle East, the Russians restated their arguments regarding the link between the situation in the region and the need to renew the peace process. Foreign Minister Lavrov pointed this out to the Israeli delegation that visited Moscow on June 5, 2011, when he stressed the need to divide Jerusalem and resolve the Palestinian refugee problem.⁴⁷ The Russians even tried to persuade the PA not to complicate the resumption of the negotiations by setting the precondition of a freeze on Israeli construction in the West Bank and asking for UN recognition of a Palestinian state. This request notwithstanding, Russia backed the PA fully when the Palestinians decided to appeal to the UN.

It is noteworthy that the Quartet meeting held in July 2011 failed to come up with a shared formula because of the discrepancies between the positions of its members (in part because Russia opposed recognizing Israel as a Jewish state). For its part, Russia conducted talks with the sides independently as part of its effort to promote a regional peace conference in Moscow. Although the Quartet welcomed the proposal, it has yet to be put into practice, mainly because it is highly doubtful that such a conference will succeed in resuscitating a practical dialogue between Israel and the PA – in Moscow or anywhere else.

Russia also expressed support for establishing a broad international front to steer the political process. Among the candidates for inclusion in such a front were the “new powers” – China and India – as well as Malaysia, South Africa, and other nations in the region that had no negative associations with the Middle East. This approach was not viewed as relevant since the candidates were not particularly eager to join the effort to revive the talks. Another possibility that arose from maintaining the status quo but decreasing the level of violence involved an attempt to contain the conflict. In this context, Russia recognized the need for cooperation between the Israeli and Palestinian security services. According to Russia, this model would enable both sides to enjoy calm as well as a better quality of life, at the same time laying the groundwork for a positive atmosphere in future negotiations. Russia also recognized the congruence between this model of managing the conflict and the stance of Hamas, which was prepared to implement an extended ceasefire (*hudna*).

For years, Russia has adhered to the position that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is exerting a negative influence on the atmosphere in the Middle East and beyond, and that a lack of resolution will accelerate dangerous trends, including religious and political extremism and terrorism; hence its interest in jumpstarting the political process. However, its decision to encourage the political process does not reflect its particular interest in this issue, since Russian interests in the Middle East can be promoted even in the absence of an Arab-Israeli settlement. The obvious explanation would seem to be that Russia is trying to wield influence in the Middle East – an arena of contention with the United States. The gamut of internal problems occupying the United States – Washington’s proven inability to push Israel to take steps that would allow the renewal of the dialogue with the PA, the image of American impotence in the Middle East, and the removal of the political process from the top of the American agenda after the events of the Arab Spring – has spurred Russia to attempt to establish itself as the leader of the process. However, the United States has resolved to sideline Russia. Even after the launch of the “reset” program, Russia was denied a central role in the Middle East since the program was intended primarily to encourage Russia to participate in the sanctions against Iran. Lately, as Russia’s standing in the Middle East has clearly declined – a direct result of the Arab Spring – its interest in reviving the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has increased, assuming it can exploit the process to rebuild itself as an influential element in the region.

The Challenges of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring upheavals in the Middle East came as a surprise to Russia. Similar to the spokespersons of other regional and international entities who found themselves lacking a ready response, Russian spokespersons quickly delivered the assessment that it was convenient to work with the collapsing regimes, no matter how corrupt or dictatorial.⁴⁸ The Russians looked back nostalgically on the previous regimes that had demonstrated their stability over many years, implemented anti-Islamic policies, and proven to be good economic partners. Moreover, the future of the relations Russia had established with anti-Western regimes in the Middle East was also uncertain.

Consequently, Russia resolved to emerge from the transformation with the upper hand. First and foremost, it sought to exploit the rise of energy costs. It also made determined efforts to promote new political initiatives

vis-à-vis several elements in the region, including the Israeli-Palestinian issue. It turned its back on the collapsing regimes in Egypt and Libya. However, while it participated in the sanctions against Qaddafi's regime, it opposed NATO's forcible intervention in Libya.⁴⁹ On the other hand, Russia chose to come out squarely in defense of Assad's regime in Syria. Besides the immediate matter of protecting its assets in the region, this conduct reflected Russia's desire to maintain good relations with the West and the United States, its concern about internal criticism (support for authoritarian regimes in the Middle East was a cause of dissent among the top echelons of Russia's leadership), its reluctance to jeopardize relations with the regimes that would survive the upheavals, and its willingness to establish good relations with the new regimes.

It seems that Russia would prefer "moderate" authoritarian regimes in the nations of the Middle East, the kind that would include non-radical Islamic elements in their ranks yet not have a definite Western orientation. Therefore, the possible rise of radical elements to power in nations that have undergone – and will undergo – political transformation as well as the likelihood that they will inspire radicals in their territories are of particular concern to Moscow. Another source of worry is the possibility that the Middle East will witness the onset of widespread democratization. The combination of the two trends is not inconceivable, although in Russia's view, the archaic political culture still prevalent in the Middle East would seem to rule out the conditions for the development of Western-style democracy. In any event, should Islamic elements come to power by means of democratic processes, it may signify that the region's anti-Western camp, on which Russia has based its Middle East policy for many years, stands to be dismantled.

These concerns stem from the processes that touched off the Arab Spring, and exacerbate the prevalent fear in Russia of the recent political trends in Turkey, which is seen as attempting to rebuild the Ottoman Empire, as well as Russia's anxiety concerning the progress of the Iranian nuclear project. The Russian leadership is concerned by the possibility that Islamic forces could perhaps assume power in regional nations and would either be taken over by the Iranian camp or grow closer to Turkey, thereby rejecting a dialogue with the international community. From Russia's point of view, this is no less serious than the possibility of being ousted from the region by competing elements headed by China.⁵⁰

Russia examined the above-mentioned processes in light of the inability of the EU and the United States to stabilize the Middle East and stop the Islamists, and consequently in light of what was perceived as the West's weakness. Concerns in this vein were voiced by Russian spokespersons; they may have uttered their words in order to challenge the West and propose Russia as the "responsible adult" that would work to stabilize the region.⁵¹ The Middle East is thus the site of increasingly heated competition between the powers. According to the Russians, it is imperative that the alternative to the threatened Middle East stronghold be formulated via an anti-Western channel. This could also be connected to Russia's endeavors to renew the Israeli-Palestinian political process – preferably led by Russia – on the assumption that it would contribute to regional calm and Russia's strengthened regional stature.⁵²

The most important challenge facing Russia's policy and status in the Middle East as a result of the shockwaves generated by the Arab Spring is the weakening of Bashar Assad's rule. The rebellion that erupted in Syria in 2011 threatens to bring down the regime and cause the collapse of the region's radical axis led by Iran, thereby weakening Russia's hold on the region. To prevent the collapse of the axis, Russia is backing Assad's efforts to repel Western pressure on him to abandon his post. Russia, alongside China, opposes the imposition of international sanctions on the Syrian regime. Unlike the Libyan case, where Russia withdrew its support of Qaddafi's regime in light of the rebellion against it, the fall of the Assad regime would create a security problem for Russia (in part because this could result in the loss of its bases in the Mediterranean) as well as an economic problem (should arms exports to Syria and arms maintenance there be compromised). Moscow suspects that the West's motives for ousting Assad include the marginalization of Russia in the region. Nonetheless, it seems that Russia is aware of the possibility that Assad's regime will collapse – even without external intervention. Therefore, in order to establish its future status in the region in general and in Syria in particular in light of the anticipated changes, Russia is making every effort to pave the road to cooperation with a new Syrian regime by establishing ties with the leaders of the Syrian opposition as well.⁵³

In Russia itself, this issue lacks a full consensus. There are voices cautioning against getting involved and losing face should the situation deteriorate into uncontrollable violence in Syria and Iran. However, it is

likely that Russia will prefer to continue its current rigid policy in the Middle East, including support for the Assad regime to the extent possible. Should the latter collapse, Russia cannot be expected to be deterred from creating new geopolitical facts in Syria and neighboring countries.

At the same time, given the instability of the Middle East and the accelerated processes of change underway, some individuals in the Russian establishment would prefer to eschew involvement in the region and its inherent risks – at least for the time being. However, in view of the upheavals in the region, the efforts of the United States and Russia to increase their influence over both the old and the emerging regimes in the affected nations will indubitably only intensify their inter-power antagonism. Russia is more likely to persist with its attempts to entrench itself in the region by preserving its special ties with the anti-Western axis, i.e., Iran, Syria, and the radical organizations, as it did prior to the Arab Spring.⁵⁴ In parallel, reflecting its modus operandi of the past, it will try to be part of political processes that can shape the future of the region, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

It seems that on the one hand, Russia still believes that it can influence the direction the Middle East will take in order to extricate itself from the current uncertainty resulting from the Arab Spring. On the other hand, Russian voices are demanding that Russia abandon its assertive Middle East policy.⁵⁵ Indeed, it is possible to discern the ambivalence among Russia's leaders as regards the policy that ought to be adopted, given Russia's loss of influence in the region. From Russia's point of view, reshaping the bloc of Middle East nations that support Russia is the preferred solution, assuming that the anti-Western camp can maintain its power in the future. In any event, Russia will have to reestablish correct relations with the Sunni camp before it can regain its traditional position as inter-bloc mediator in the region. At the same time, Vladimir Putin, following his return to the presidency, has combined strident anti-Western rhetoric with an expression of growing willingness to arrive at a compromise with the West regarding the division of influence in the Middle East.

This willingness to compromise with the West has yet to evolve fully, especially with regard to the Syrian crisis in which Russia stubbornly persists in its policy of providing military and economic aid to the embattled Assad regime. The Russians have even gone so far as to isolate the theater of operations by deploying its navy off of the Syrian coast. However, there have

been indications suggesting that both American and Russian widespread disappointment in developments in Syria would bring both sides to the table. A change in the US administration and the subsequent offering of a global payment could bring both sides ever closer to a much-needed understanding. An example of this occurred in March of 2013, when the United States decided to cancel the final phase of the European missile defense system, instead “shifting resources” in order to address the North Korean threat. The cancelling of part of the missile defense system, which was harshly opposed by Russian leadership, might signify a shift in Russian-American/Western relations, which can have major implications for the Middle East.

Another possible solution under consideration on alternatives for a future regional agenda is the possibility of establishing comprehensive cooperation with Israel, perhaps as part of an expanded axis with Greece and Cyprus (some of the Balkan nations are also mentioned in this context). Such an alignment could enable Russia to enhance its status in the Middle East and the eastern part of the Mediterranean basin, and to promote economic interests, notably natural gas, which is critical to Russia and which is being developed by Israel and Cyprus, to Turkey’s great displeasure. Such an axis would be able to challenge Turkey and any other country working against shared interests. According to Russia’s assessment, if it managed to become part of such an axis in tandem with the anti-Western Iranian-Syrian axis and without harming the latter, it would possess a great deal of leverage and would be able to reestablish itself in the region with enhanced status, preferably equal to that of the United States.

Thus, Russia’s current predicament in the Middle East is such that it can be described as at a crossroads. It has lost its previous assets in the region and given the difficult challenges it faces, is endeavoring to identify solutions. Russia seems to imply that it cannot make do with a defensive policy regarding its partners in the Middle East, but rather must go on the offensive in order to rebuild its status. It may decide that the best way to do so will be to attempt to change the existing regional geopolitical order and shape and influence new alternatives.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Russia, motivated by the desire to become an influential international player, has changed its conduct in the international arena in ways that have sparked questions in the international community. After a period of political cooling-off in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR, Russia under President Putin's leadership took a dramatic turn toward political activism while challenging the existing world order. The key motive was the assumption that no other scenario would enable Russia to survive the economic and security challenges facing it. In order to realize this intention, it adopted an assertive foreign policy that involved friction with competing nations, albeit from an inferior economic and financial position. Russia continued to relate to the post-Soviet sphere as a security zone protecting it from its neighbors' ambitions, namely, the Western system, which called for the eastward spread of NATO; the Muslim world's view of Russia as a target for expansion; and China's rivalry with Russia with regard to spheres of control. Russian leaders even spoke of establishing a Euro-Asian umbrella organization, headed by Russia. Quite naturally, Russia's policy on Asia, the Middle East, and Europe renewed tensions with the West.

The tensions between Russia and the West were also the result of the high priority Moscow gave to restoring the stronghold and status in the Middle East it had lost due to the collapse of the USSR. Over the years, Russia's Middle East policy focused on maneuvering between enemy sides and camps in an effort to present itself as a mediator and independent operator in the international arena. Thus, it endeavored to promote relations with the anti-Western bloc of nations as well as with those identified as moderates (pro-Western Sunni nations that fear Iran and its allies). Inevitably, this approach generated friction with the West, because in practice Russia sided with the radicals in the region. When Russia itself has been threatened by radical Islam, it has been quick to establish common ground with the radical

elements in the Middle East – Iran, Syria, Hizbollah, and Hamas – and create a regional anti-Western bloc with them. Through its ties with this axis, Russia has sought to initiate moves that would oust the West from the region. Russia cooperates extensively with Iran, its main partner in this axis, particularly on security and nuclear issues. Despite the disagreement between the two nations as a result of Russia's participation in the international sanctions intended to delay progress on the Iranian nuclear project, Moscow continues to view its relations with Tehran as a strategic asset it cannot easily concede, especially when that concession would lead to the resulting vacuum being filled by its rivals.

While Russia's relationship with Israel is positive, it is also charged and complex – the consequence of historical grudges and tensions. Russia views Israel from several angles. On the one hand, it perceives Israel as a regional power capable of helping it promote its interests in the regional and international systems. On the other, as an ally of the United States, Israel is also a potential enemy. Since 2004-2005, when Russia intensified its efforts to return to a position of influence in the Middle East, relations between the two have cooled off. Russia grew closer to Israel's enemies and assumed an unequivocally pro-Palestinian stance. Although Russia mitigated its policy regarding Israel toward the end of the first decade of the new millennium, the bones of contention between them remain firmly in place. Russia is seeking to drive a wedge between Israel and the United States and, if possible, replace the latter as ally and protector.

Russia's strategy in the Middle East, part of a comprehensive foreign policy, is based on an assessment of the United States' waning strength. Russia seeks to challenge America's regional status, particularly in terms of the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian political processes. Considering these processes to be rife with possibilities for international exposure and influence, Russia plays an active role in international forums and discussions on the subject and also strives to promote the idea of a peace conference in Moscow. The United States makes a point of keeping Russia from taking an active role and sidelining it.

The upheavals rocking the Middle East during the Arab Spring took Russia by surprise; it has consequently begun to rethink its policy and make efforts to establish alternatives to its previous assets. The conceivable rise to power of radical Islamists in Middle East nations concerns Russia, chiefly because such individuals are liable to serve as inspiration for radicals on

Russian soil. At the same time, a victory by the democratic trend in the region, while not likely, is also no consolation for Russia because it could mean the breakup of the anti-Western axis on which it has based its policy in the region for so many years. It seems, therefore, that Russia would prefer the establishment of moderate authoritarian regimes in place of the traditional regimes that have already collapsed or are on the brink of collapse, that is, regimes that can incorporate non-radical, anti-Western Muslim elements. In the wake of a reassessment, Russia's spokespersons have expressed growing concern about the long term ramifications of the Arab Spring. Russia is also keeping an anxious eye on the progress of the Iranian nuclear project. An additional outcome is Russia's intense effort to revive the Israeli-Palestinian political process.

The United States "reset" program, whereby Russia was supposed to make changes in its foreign policy, particularly regarding the Middle East and Russia's participation in the sanctions against Iran, granted Russia a host of far-reaching benefits: recognition of its special status in the post-Soviet sphere, concessions in the START agreements to reduce and control strategic arms, and integration into certain NATO programs. From Russia's point of view, the "reset" program was a success and attested to the wisdom underlying its policy. Nonetheless, Russia is aware of its economic and technological dependence on the West, and after exhausting the program's advantages finds itself at a crossroads in the Middle East once more, forced to seek a way to improve its international standing.

Thus while Russia still considers itself to be an influential player that can stabilize its shaky standing in the region, it will have to choose between curtailing its ambitions and asserting its involvement. Given the collapse of its old strongholds in the region, Russia's willingness to compromise with the West over the division of influence in the Middle East seems to be increasing. While there are voices in Russia calling for abandoning its assertive policy in the Middle East, it is unlikely that the Russian leadership will easily concede what they deem an asset – at least not without receiving something significant in return from the West. Even if a compromise such as Russia withdrawing its support for the Iranian-Syrian axis is achieved, its ambitions for a realignment in the Middle East and playing an active role there once again will not decline.

The components of such an approach are evolving, evidenced by Russian intentions to begin extensive cooperation with Israel and perhaps work

toward establishing an alliance with other nations such as Greece, Cyprus, and possibly some Balkan nations. Russia would strive to maintain such an alignment in tandem with its alliance with Iran and Syria, should the latter survive, thereby enhancing its position of influence in the region.

Israel is certainly eager to change Russian policy, particularly as concerns Russian aid to Israel's enemies. In this context, several questions arise: What price would Israel have to pay politically, particularly in terms of its relations with the United States, and in terms of security, notably in the Palestinian arena, in order to maintain correct or even good relations with Russia? Would it be possible to establish ties of close friendship between Russia and Israel, two nations that share some fundamental interests and have common cultural denominators, or would Russia continue to view Israel as a means to realize regional ends? Time will tell. In any event, at least for now it seems that expanding Russian-Israeli cooperation, which would give Russia a more significant political role to play in the political process than in the past – preferably in coordination with the United States – would serve as a convenient and appropriate foundation for improving relations between the sides and also contribute to positive changes for Israel in the regional balance of power.

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