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By Stephen Blank

Russia claims to be an active mediator in the Middle East. To what degree is this true and what do Moscow’s actions tell us about its regional objectives? Russia’s policies are easily enumerated in the following Russian initiatives:

- Russia has sold conventional weapons to Algeria, Syria, and Iran and offered them to other states, e.g. Libya and Jordan. Although Moscow denies it, many of these weapons sold to Syria and Iran have then gone to Hezbollah.

- Russia still defends Iran against the West and opposes severe sanctions, despite Iran’s uranium enrichment program and its continued defiance of the UN. Despite the claim in the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that, as of 2003, Iran was not building a warhead, the evidence strongly suggests that Iran indeed is building a nuclear weapon. Iran’s new generation advanced centrifuges have begun producing small quantities of uranium hexafluoride that can be used to make the fissile core of nuclear warheads, although first it must be enriched to weapons grade uranium through a centrifuge cascade. (1) Israeli reports charge that Russia also has sold Iran low-enriched uranium by means of nuclear fuel rods. According to this source, Israeli and American sources agree that this low-enriched uranium can be transformed into plutonium in a nuclear reactor; this process will enable Iran to have the possibility of building a nuclear bomb if it can reprocess plutonium and do so without provoking a crisis with the IAEA. (2)
Meanwhile, Moscow recently announced an enhancement of its relationship with Iran and claimed that it has averted imposing truly serious sanctions upon Iran in the newest UN resolution. Moscow justifies its stance by invoking the NIE’s claim that Iran had stopped working on a nuclear warhead in 2003, even though enrichment goes forward. (3) Moscow is utilizing the NIE to undermine US threat perceptions and justifications for a European missile defense system. The publication of the NIE’s key judgments allows Russia to pursue an Iran policy that evidently is driven more by anti-Americanism and a desire for both great power standing and allies in the Middle East than by a realistic assessment of Iran’s potential threat. (4)

Indeed, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov used the NIE to say that Russia has no evidence that Iran was conducting research for a nuclear military program before or after 2003. (5) More bizarrely, he stated that US missile defense plans for Eastern Europe not only aim at deterring Russia, they also aim to replace Iran’s government. (6) Even though Moscow urges Iran to cease enrichment and to heed the mandate of the IAEA, it still falsely claims that Tehran already is undertaking such cooperation. Lavrov also complains that the West’s refusal to acknowledge Iran’s positive gestures towards the IAEA is bringing about an isolation and estrangement of Iran that hinders clarification and resolution of issues pertaining to its nuclear program. (7) Therefore, while Iran allegedly is ready to clarify all issues to the IAEA, the IAEA must be able to broaden its activities without outside pressure, even though Iran has deceived it regularly. (8)

According to President Putin, Russia and Iran are increasing cooperation. Lavrov reportedly offered Iran a strategic partnership in November 2007 that would include lifting of all sanctions, prevention of new ones, a treaty on arms sales, plus cooperation in economics, energy, and even space. Such partnership would mean that Russia views any encroachment on Iran’s interests as constituting an encroachment upon its own interests. (9) Lavrov even has argued repeatedly that “Iran deserves to be an equal partner of all regional countries in the resolution of the problems of the Near and Middle East.” (10) He also has proposed Iran’s similar involvement in Black Sea security
Additionally, Moscow has resurrected its long-standing Soviet proposal for a Persian Gulf security organization that debars the use of force, shows respect for members’ sovereignty and territorial integrity, adheres to peaceful forms of conflict resolution, and which would be open to foreign governments. Despite its own arms sales, Russia cites the need for regional arms control and the fight against international terrorism. According to Russia’s proposal, this “collective security system” also would help resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Losyukov recently indicated that Moscow is resubmitting not only Iran’s, but also Pakistan’s bid for membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This last point, concerning Pakistan, marks a new departure and a concession to China, as well. Presumably the quid pro quo would be Chinese support for Iranian, and maybe Indian membership. Similarly Nikolai Bordyuzha, Director of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO-Moscow’s defense alliance in Central Asia) has urged that Iran be invited to join the CSTO, giving it a voice in the defense of Central Asia under Russian supervision. Moreover, should Washington use force against Iran then that, in turn, would threaten security in Central Asia.

Despite its denials, Russia also is upgrading the quality of its arms sales to Iran, hinting broadly at forthcoming sales of S-300 anti-air missile defense systems, on top of prior sales of the TOR-1 missile defense system (which would serve to complicate any foreign air strikes on Iran). Discussions are underway about leasing modified KA-32 helicopters and selling the RD-33 engine for Iranian fighters, so that they could power supersonic fighter jets, which Iran developed to replace an earlier generation of US F-5 models. These deliveries supposedly will “strengthen stability in the region.” Russia further claims that Iran is not an “outcast,” but a perfectly normal state, so there is no reason why it should not sell Iran “defensive” weapons. Mikhail Dmitriyev, Director of the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation, claims that if Moscow does not sell Iran arms, then other states will. Thus, Russia will be ousted from that market. In other words, if Russia stops selling Iran weapons, then Iran will make a deal with
America, and Washington will supplant Russia in Iran’s arms market. Indeed, Russia needs arms sales to Iran, because in 2007 it suffered major reverses: Chinese purchases fell, Algeria revoked its contracts with Moscow, and much publicized delays occurred in naval arms sales to India. The strong appreciation of the ruble against the dollar and 12% inflation in 2007, combined to make Russia’s 2007 sales appear stronger than they actually were. (17)

As part of its policy to gain nuclear footholds throughout the Middle East, Moscow has begun sending nuclear fuel to the Bushehr reactor, claiming that because Iran is buying this fuel and is supposed to return spent fuel to Russia, Iran has no “objective need” for generating its own nuclear fuel or for enriching uranium. Even so, Iran merely pockets the fuel and moves forward. (18) And, as Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni notes, these actions are “inconceivable,” given Iran’s threat to Russia and all the former Soviet republics. (19) Still more incredible is the fact that Russian military leaders cite Iran’s program to develop intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) as a threat to Russian security, thereby justifying threats to withdraw from the INF Treaty (Intermediate Nuclear Forces), while Russia continues to give Iran all of this support. (20) After Iran tested an IRBM in February 2008, Lavrov disingenuously complained that, “We don’t approve of Iran’s continuously demonstrating its intentions to develop its missile industry and continue uranium enrichment. … From the point of view of international law, these activities aren’t forbidden. However, it’s necessary to take into account that the past years have shown a number of problems related to Iran’s nuclear program.” (21)

• Meanwhile, Moscow also has offered thirteen other Arab states nuclear reactors to allay their fears about Iran’s intentions. (22)

• Russia promotes the formation of a gas cartel that Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria might join, and Iranian leaders have supported this action. Putin has advocated such a cartel since 2002, when he proposed a Russian-dominated CIS gas cartel, and this goal subsequently has driven Russian gas policy in the CIS. (23) In 2006, Putin reiterated this initiative, calling for an “energy club” at the annual SCO summit, where Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad seconded his remarks. (24) Indeed, Ahmadinejad’s support for close cooperation in the “gas sphere” was part of a readiness
to “cooperate closely” with Russia in Iraq, the Persian Gulf, Central Asia and the Caucasus.” (25) Iranian politicians welcome a cartel because it could provide a more enduring basis for consolidating a longer-lasting Russo-Iranian political relationship to support Iran’s nuclear program against America and Europe. (26)

- Russia steadfastly supports Syria against UN efforts to investigate and censure Damascus for supporting the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Russia’s support for Syria’s suzerainty over Lebanon perpetuates Lebanon’s divisions, precludes its real statehood, and renders it a haven for terrorists, whose presence generates war with Israel and benefits Iran. Despite Lebanese pleas to Moscow to use its influence to persuade Syria to stop interfering in Lebanon’s domestic affairs, that outcome is unlikely. (27) Indeed, Lavrov recently hypocritically (and somewhat illogically) urged Syria to assume responsibility for Lebanon’s internal situation, as a means of ensuring Lebanese stability and independence. (28)

- Russia’s overall policy toward Syria is complex. On the one hand, it shields Syria from outside pressure regarding Lebanon and support for Hezbollah. On the other hand, Russian diplomats evidently have been acting as couriers and possibly mediators for some time, bringing messages back and forth from Jerusalem to Damascus. While the content of these messages remains unknown, apparently Russia is laying the groundwork for another Middle East peace conference, which would take place in Moscow and focus on the issue of making peace between Israel and Syria, as well as resolving the Lebanon issue among Beirut, Jerusalem, and Damascus. Israeli officials regard this plan as a slippery slope that would distract the parties from the key issue, which they believe to be peace with the Palestinians. (29) Russian media claim that it was Russian diplomacy that first launched the idea of a large Middle Eastern peace conference like the one in Annapolis in November 2007, and further that Russian emissaries (namely Yevgeni Primakov and Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Saltanov) were responsible for putting the issue of peace between Israel and Syria on the agenda and getting Saudi Arabian and Syrian envoys to come to Annapolis. (30)

- Russian officials apparently believe that being Syria’s patron demonstrates Moscow’s relevance to the Middle East as an indispensable great power and confirms its
possession of levers that could advance the peace process along with Russian political, economic, and strategic interests in the region. (31) Certainly, Russia’s political links to Syria are increasing its economic ties and investments there. (32)

• Russia also has proposed its own version of Palestinian unity: calling on Hamas to support the Palestinian Authority headed by Mahmoud Abbas, while dealing openly with Hamas; and advocating Israeli-Palestinian negotiations with the Palestinian Authority and simultaneously Hamas’ participation in negotiations with Israel. (33) Russia urges that neither side engage in violence and views its relations with Israel as an important precondition for success in stabilizing the region. (34)

• Russia has intensified contacts with, and presumably recruitment or penetration within the Palestinian security services. Obviously, Moscow seeks a permanent voice and influence within those organizations and the larger Palestinian movement. Apparently, this is meant to compensate for Washington’s exclusion of Moscow from Iraq.

• Russia’s Navy is reconstituting the old Soviet Mediterranean naval Eskadra (Squadron) that operated permanently in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, Syria’s base at Tartus figures again in future Russian strategy. (35)

• Russia wants America to set a date for leaving Iraq. (36) More broadly, this accords with Russia’s efforts to enhance the UN’s role in Iraq and to limit America’s ability to act. Since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, we have seen a consistent Russian effort to elevate the UN as the ultimate authority of Iraq’s destiny. Yet Russia has little to show for its efforts to obtain energy contracts, influence over Iraq’s future disposition, or markets for arms sales. Thus, it is not surprising that Putin now says that differences among states over Iraq should remain in the past. (37) Russian observers portray the US invasion of Iraq as exemplifying America’s disregard for the UN and Russia, as well as its readiness to use force in violation of international law and norms. Russia’s policies aim to reduce Washington’s opportunities for disregarding Russian interests. (38) Therefore, Moscow argues that America must be resisted through multipolar avenues like coalitions of states and by reinstalling the UN as the sole legitimate arbiter of the decision to use force in cases other than self-defense. (39)
This policy is not altruistic. Russia’s leadership seems to covet equal status with the US and, at one point, considered excluding other states to achieve this status. A foreign policy think tank close to the Russian Administration produced a 2004 strategy for Russo-American relations, which called for a strategic objective of a US-Russian alliance where Russia would receive the status of non-NATO ally equal to that of South Korea, Australia, and Israel. It formulated scenarios in which Russia and America alone would set up jointly recognized criteria for the permissive use of force, including preemptive strikes when the Security Council is blocked. Russia would obtain recognition of its priority in the CIS, including US help for protecting Russian minority rights in the Baltic states, and Russia would be invited to participate in a program of close cooperation to revitalize Iraq’s economy, infrastructure, health, education, and military forces, along with “maximum consideration to the interests of Russian oil companies in the development of Iraqi energy resources.” This would ensure “close cooperation of a future Iraqi government export oil policy with the Russian Federation.”

According to this document, Russia also would have been invited to participate in a Persian Gulf security system. Agreement would have been sought with Washington not to obstruct the participation of Russian energy companies in Iran (including nuclear energy); neither would Washington object to certain kinds of conventional arms sales to Iran which, of course, would be guaranteed rights to a full nuclear fuel cycle. (40)

Obviously, Washington could not even dream of accepting this program. Therefore, the strategy paper envisions that Russia would engage other states and would act unilaterally to constrain US options in the Middle East. Consequently, it is not surprising that Lavrov warned in May 2005 that if thwarted in Iraq, Russia would seek to enhance its interests throughout the Middle East, most notably in the Palestinian-Israeli process and the overall Arab-Israeli peace process. (41)

- Russia refuses to enter what it falsely claims is a US-inspired war of civilizations or holy alliance against Islam. (42)
- Finally, Russia strongly opposes any policy of democracy promotion in the Middle East.
While some of these initiatives might amount to the outlines of a coherent policy, taken together they are inherently contradictory. Russia opposes proliferation, yet refuses to end its own program with Iran and offers other regional governments nuclear technology. It advocates Palestinian unity, peace, and stability around Israel, yet arms the very forces that would reignite armed conflict there. Meanwhile, it champions Syria, a state that has shown neither any public interest in peace, nor in withdrawing from Lebanon. It has no solution for Iraq, but insists that Washington leave with no plan for the future. Russia apparently wants to play on both sides of every local issue, but to what purpose? There is no discernible future vision of the Middle East in Russia’s policy. These contradictions can be resolved only by recognizing that Russia’s Middle East policy serves its extra-regional interests, not a vision of regional order. Moscow’s policies here aim not at a coherent regional order, but rather to serve its larger global interests: constraining American power, enhancing Russian power and wealth (e.g., through a gas cartel and arms sales), and demonstrating that Russia is a great power that must be included in the resolution of issues in a region that its current leaders (and its Soviet predecessors) view as an area where its vital interests are engaged.

Viewed in this light, Russian policy makes more sense; it demonstrates that Russia has no compelling reason to espouse a vision of Middle East order. Instead, Russia’s status and power must be acknowledged and constantly engaged in regional events, while the projection of American power into the region is constrained, limited, and frustrated. Managed instability, possibly the most one can hope for, suits Russia because it then can maximize its presence and influence through energy and arms sales. Moscow also resists any enlargement of the democratic sphere in the Middle East, lest it generate reverberations in and around the CIS or Russia itself.

Thus, Russia is busily creating tactical alliances with Arab states and engaging with Israel, even though these tactical relationships add up to a regionally inconsistent strategy. What matters to Russia is that it continues to be a player in the game, not resolving issues. As long as this managed instability can continue without further wars or third party nuclear proliferation, Moscow happily will exploit it by using its great power
diplomacy, maneuvering in the UN, and utilizing arms sales, energy, and economic activities to prevent Washington from organizing a pro-American bloc in the region. Obviously, the key state for Russia in this policy and strategy is Iran. And with Iran comes Syria, Iran’s partner and the recipient of Russian arms, bought on credit (despite Russian claims that it would no longer engage in such practices and could not afford to do so). Syria’s example evidently is a precedent. Moscow also seeks permanent economic niches and markets in Gulf countries and the broader Middle East, through arms sales and the provision of nuclear power to gain influence and counter Iran.

Frankly, Russian interests suffer when there is Western-led movement towards resolution of any of these conflicts or a change within the Arab states in a democratic direction. Likewise, Russia seemingly wants to recreate something like the Rejectionist Front of the late 1970s and 1980s, where it sponsored Iran, Iraq, and Syria against America’s Middle Eastern policies. Obviously, Russian policy is not a prescription for regional stability. Those who hope that Moscow might be a better alternative than Washington will be disappointed once again, if not angered, by Russia’s continuing to resort to traditional great power views and practices that seek to use the Middle East and its peoples for broader and wholly self-serving purposes.

Source Notes:
(2) Alex Fishman, “Nuclear on a Silver Platter,” Tel Aviv, Yediot Aharonot, in Hebrew, 20 Dec 07, Foreign Broadcast Information Service Central Eurasia, Henceforth FBIS SOV, 20 Dec 07.
(5) Moscow, Vesti TV, in Russian, Broadcast of Joint News Conference of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Armenian Foreign Minister Vardan Oskanyan, 5 Dec 07, FBIS SOV, 5 Dec 07.

(6) Moscow, Agentstvo voyennykh novostey Internet Version, in English, 26 Dec 07, FBIS SOV, 26 Dec 07.

(7) Moscow, Interfax, in Russian, 28 Nov 07, FBIS SOV, 28 Nov 07.


(9) Moscow, Agentstvo voyennykh novostey Internet Version, in English, 5 Dec 07, FBIS SOV, 5 Dec 07; Moscow, Interfax, in English, 4 Dec 07, FBIS SOV, 4 Dec 07; Moscow, ITAR-TASS, in English, 30 Oct 07, FBIS SOV, 30 Oct 07; Inga Kumskova, “What Will Moscow ‘Present’ Tehran With?,” Moscow, Moskovskiy komsomolets, in Russian, 1 Nov 07, FBIS SOV, 1 Nov 07.

(10) Moscow, Vremya novostey, in Russian, 11 Sep 06, FBIS SOV, 11 Sep 06.

(11) Transcript of Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov Interview to Turkish Media, Moscow, 29 May 06, www.mid.ru.


(13) Moscow, ITAR-TASS, in English, 27 Dec 07, FBIS SOV, 27 Dec 07.


(16) Moscow, ITAR-TASS in Russian, 20 Dec 07, FBIS SOV, 20 Dec 07.

(17) Pavel K. Baev, “Moscow Raises Stakes in Iran Game,” Eurasia Daily Monitor, 8 Jan 08.


(20) Vladimir Z. Dvorkin, “Too Soon to Relax: the Report of the American Intelligence Community on Iran is Greatly Alarming,” Moscow, Nezavisimaya gazeta, in Russian, 26 Dec 07, FBIS SOV, 30 Dec 07; Moscow, ITAR-TASS in English, 26 Feb 07, FBIS SOV, 26 Feb 07.

(21) “Iran Begins to Use Uranium in Advanced Centrifuge Tests,” Ibid.


(24) Moscow, NTV in Russian, 15 Jun 06; FBIS SOV, 15 Jun 06.


(28) Moscow, ITAR-TASS, in English, 23 Jan 08, FBIS SOV, 23 Jan 08.

(29) Vitaly Portnikov, “Primakov’s Mission,” Tel Aviv, Vest (Vesti-2 Supplement), in Russian, 15 Nov 07, FBIS SOV, 18 Nov 07; Ira Kogan, “Reconciliation on Two Fronts,” Tel Aviv, MIG Internet Version, in Russian, 4 Dec 07, FBIS SOV, 30 Dec 07; Moscow ITAR-TASS, in English, 24 Dec 07, FBIS SOV, 3 Jan 08, “Russia Says It Will Host Forum If Mid-East Starts to Stabilize-Foreign Ministry,” Interfax, 6 Jan 08; Baraq David, “Israel Says It Opposes Russian Plans for Moscow Peace Summit,” Tel Aviv, Ha’areetz Internet Version, in English, 20 Dec 07, FBIS SOV, 30 Dec 07.

(31) Open Source Committee Analysis, Russia Seeks Political, Economic Dividends From Syria Ties, FBIS SOV, 15 Nov 07.

(32) Ibid.

(33) Vladimir Radyuhin, “Russia Backs Abbas, Talks to Hamas,” The Hindu, 1 Aug 07; Avi Isacharoff, “Hamas official: Russia Invited us to Moscow in Coming Days,” Ha’Aretz.com, 3 Aug 07; Moscow, Interfax, in English, 21 Jan 08, FBIS SOV, 21 Jan 08; Moscow, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Internet Version, in English, 23 Jan 08, FBIS SOV, 23 Jan 08.

(34) Ibid.

(35) Montreal, Middle East Newsline E-Mail-, in English, 17 Dec 07, FBIS SOV, 29 Dec 07, “Interview With Russian Ambassador to Israel Petr Stegnly by Alexei Osipov, Tel Aviv, Novosti nedeli, in Russian, 20-26 Dec 07, FBIS SOV, 31 Dec 07.

(36) “Russia Says Date for Troop Withdrawal From Iraq needed,” RIA Novosti, 23 Jan 08.

(37) Interfax Russia & CIS Diplomatic Panorama, 4 Jul 05, FBIS SOV, 4 Jul 05.


(39) None of those arguments, of course, is accepted with regard to Russia’s war in Chechnya or to Russia’s peacemaking operations in the Caucasus. There, no tolerance for foreign intervention is the normal discourse of Russian politics.


(41) Moscow, Interfax Russia & CIS Diplomatic Panorama, 12 May 05, FBIS SOV 12 May 05.
