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# Russia in the Middle East

## Exploring Russia's regional relationships and influence

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### **Executive Summary**

The recent regime changes, power shifts and conflicts in the Middle East pose not only a regional security dilemma, but also an international one. The Middle East holds particular focus for international cooperative efforts to curb nuclear and chemical weapon proliferation, essential to the project for building confidence in further moves towards global nuclear disarmament. Russia is an essential partner for other states within the international community in strengthening non-proliferation measures in the region, so that it is important to consider how other states can best engage Russia in any strategy to achieve this.

The official stance of Western nations on Middle East issues, particularly concerning Iran and Syria, is well outlined and has been, for the most part, unanimously agreed upon. Russia appears isolated over its divergence from this strategy. Perhaps due to its Soviet past, Russia's goals in and for the region have been under scrutiny and consequently stirred up overt accusations that it blocks positive intervention. This paper seeks to outline the Russian

position and address some of this ambiguity, with a specific focus on Iran and Syria.

Russia's relationship with the Middle East has a long history. Its involvement is no longer driven by Soviet ideology, based primarily on imperialism or economic empire. The collapse of the USSR severely diminished the nation's sphere of influence within the region, a trend that accelerated with the 2003 Iraq War; Iraq had been one of its strongest partners since the 1950's. Today, attempts to extend Russian influence are more modest and driven by the desire to protect security and stability in its neighbouring region.

Russia's resistance to intervention in the Middle East lies in part in its strategic defence of sovereignty and its claim that long-term solutions there can only be achieved through the confines of international law and the principles of the UN Charter.

Russia also values its ties with Iran, a strategic state with sway throughout the region. Certainly, the former Syrian Vice President, Abdul Halim Khaddam, claims that this Iranian "sphere of influence"

stretches from Lebanon to Afghanistan, including Syria, Iraq and the Palestinian movement.<sup>1</sup> Khaddam also describes Russia's relationship with Iran as symbiotic: Iran relies on Russia's power of veto within the UN Security Council, while Russia can pursue "an interest in being a superpower through the Middle East" through Iran. However, it is far too extreme to put all of Russia's policy down to such an anachronistic realpolitik-based outlook. Russia would otherwise have done a better job in protecting Iran in the United Nations Security Council if its sole purpose was gaining power in the region.

### Disagreement on the Iranian Strategy

*"[The transfer of] this situation from the negotiations track to the track of forcible sanctions would not be in anyone's interests. We consider additional sanctions absolutely counterproductive."* – Sergei Lavrov

Russia has demonstrably diverged from Western tactics when it comes to addressing concerns in the Middle East. In Iran's case, the most obvious difference lies in the use of sanctions. Divisions between Russia and China from the rest of the E3+3 (also known as the P5+1) have persisted. Western states continue to call for Russia to stand by a dual-track strategy of negotiations alongside an escalator of heavy economic sanctions. However Russia remains outspoken in its criticism of calls to further tighten unilateral sanctions.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has stated that adding to the severe punitive trade and economic sanctions already imposed by the United States and Europe would only serve to isolate Iran and push them away from negotiations. Rather, the international community should actively be offering relief from sanctions. Lavrov elaborated further, stating that "[the transfer of] this situation from the negotiations track to the track of forcible sanctions would not be in anyone's interests. We consider

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Bowen, 'Syria's Future and Iran's Great Game', *The Majalla*, 17 September 2012, <http://www.majalla.com/eng/2012/09/article55234032>

additional sanctions absolutely counterproductive".<sup>2</sup> Lavrov suggests the western strategy underestimates the symbolic significance of Iran's nuclear program to its national prestige, and it is unlikely that a long-term resolution can be gained through resorting to brute force or pressure. The Russians also believe that the sanctions are not as efficient as it would seem – attributing the economic troubles faced by Iran at present to a result of flaws within the domestic economic policy as well.

The Russian media appears to believe that the West wants to exacerbate internal Iranian tensions in order to fuel the ongoing protests and in this way perhaps incite regime change without the use of military intervention.<sup>3</sup> Russia has labelled the very latest sanctions on Iran as 'overt blackmail' and warned that if these were to affect Russia's business it would directly affect their relationship with the United States.<sup>4</sup> It is thus evident that disagreement on strategy between the United States and Russia in the Middle East threatens further aggravation on the relationship between the two nations, and could undermine prospects for follow-on arms control between them.

Since the E3+3 talks with Iran commenced, Russia has been conducting separate bilateral meetings with Iran. In more recent discussions concerning Iran's nuclear program, Putin has reiterated Russia's strong support for Iran's right to develop a civilian nuclear program. Nevertheless, given Iran's proximity to Russian borders and Russia's troubled relationship with other Islamic republics in and to

<sup>2</sup> Robert Bridge, 'Russia supports Iran's right to civil nuclear energy- Putin', *Russia Today*, 07 June 2012, <http://rt.com/politics/russia-iran-sanctions-un-cooperation-us-268/>

<sup>3</sup> Сергей Строкань, 'Президент Ахмадинежад попал под санкции', *Коммерсантъ*, 10 October 2012, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2040729>

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Saul, 'Exclusive – Russian Firm to Halt Iran Ship Work as Pressure Grows', *Reuters*, 05 September 2012, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/09/05/uk-russia-iran-shipping-idUKBRE8841A420120905>

their south, Russia has a strong interest in preventing Iran, or any other country in the region, from acquiring nuclear weapons as well as any other proliferation in the region.

Russia also has a role as one of the four co-sponsors of the Helsinki Conference to establish a nuclear weapon and WMD-free zone in the Middle East. The latest disagreement between the United States and Russia over the announcement of a delay to the Conference shows Russia as seeing itself as a defender of the process in a manner that will go down well with the Arab states. Yet, there appears to be “more convergence than disagreement” over interests in the Middle East between the two states, particularly on issues such as “the rise of political Islam” as well as non-proliferation.<sup>5</sup>

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, has reassured its partners that Russia remains committed to the E3+3 process and “in no way withdraws from the collectively approved position of the [E3+3] group”.<sup>6</sup> In an effort to demonstrate a united front, Russia backed a resolution drawn up by the Western powers in the group of six at an IAEA Board of Governors meeting on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September.<sup>7</sup> The resolution advocated peaceful methods and called for Iran to immediately agree to a framework deal with the IAEA to address suspicions over the potential existence of suspected military dimensions of its nuclear program. The resolution’s attempt to increase pressure on Iran came after further threats by Israel to launch a pre-

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Rojansky, ‘For U.S., Russia, Interests Trump Rhetoric in Middle East’, *World Politics Review*, 18 September 2012, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12343/for-u-s-russia-interests-trump-rhetoric-in-middle-east>

<sup>6</sup> Transcript of the Address by Sergey Ryabkov, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation: Questions and Answers, 07 September 2012, [http://ceness-russia.org/data/page/p910\\_1.pdf](http://ceness-russia.org/data/page/p910_1.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Fredrik Dahl, ‘Russia, China Join West in Iran Rebuke at U.N. Nuclear Meet’, *Reuters*, 12 September 2012, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/09/12/uk-nuclear-iran-iaea-idUKBRE88B0FU20120912>

emptive attack and the latest quarterly IAEA report, in which it was revealed that Iran had doubled the amount of uranium enrichment centrifuges at its Fordow nuclear facility.<sup>8</sup> However Russia still maintains that it does not see any “indications of a military nuclear programme in Iran”, according to a statement made by Sergei Ryabkov only last month.<sup>10</sup> In response to a challenge to this view based upon the Annex of the IAEA’s November 2011 report that detailed potential military dimensions of the Iranian program, he qualified his statement saying that Russia saw “no signs” that Iran had made any decision to acquire nuclear weapons.<sup>12</sup> He did admit, however, that Iran had “diminished the space of transparency” by refusing to comply with the IAEA’s Additional Protocol and the modified version of code 3.1. of the Subsidiary Arrangements General Part to Iran’s Safeguards Agreement, but stated that it is Russia’s “firm conviction” that where the Iranians do cooperate “they cooperate...in good faith”, and that the IAEA reports also reveal that no

<sup>8</sup> Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran  
Director General, IAEA, 30 August 2012, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2012/gov2012-37.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Fredrik Dahl, ‘Russia, China Join West in Iran Rebuke at U.N. Nuclear Meet’, *Reuters*, 12 September 2012, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/09/12/uk-nuclear-iran-iaea-idUKBRE88B0FU20120912>

<sup>12</sup> Mark Fitzpatrick, Director of the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Programme at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, countered this in a Q&A session at the 2012 Moscow Nonproliferation Conference later in September by citing the Annex of the IAEA’s November 2011 report that detailed observations of the potential military dimensions of the Iranian program. Transcript of the Address by Sergey Ryabkov, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation: Questions and Answers, 07 September 2012, [http://ceness-russia.org/data/page/p910\\_1.pdf](http://ceness-russia.org/data/page/p910_1.pdf); Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran  
Director General, IAEA, 08 November 2011, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2011/gov2011-65.pdf>

nuclear material has been unaccounted for.<sup>13</sup> So it seems that while believing it would be wrong not to recognize the steps that Iran *has* taken to cooperate, Russia is also attempting to persuade Iran to increase its cooperation and fully comply with the IAEA in order to alleviate concerns and bestow full confidence in the peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program.

### Noninterventionist Policy

*Russia claims that progress in the Middle East depends upon maintaining the 'supremacy of law'.*

Russia has actively opposed international intervention in the domestic affairs of states, and more specifically is wary of what it perceives as the US' modern imperialist attitude towards intervention and regime change on the basis of what it claims to be humanitarian intervention.<sup>14</sup> This concern is exacerbated by the invitation to former Soviet republics to join NATO. In February 2012 Russian Deputy Defence Minister, Anatoly Antonov, expressed this concern over Russian encirclement by claiming "the deployment of the US missile defense system in Europe is an attempt to tip the balance of power in the region. Ever since the end of the Cold War, the US has been moving its strategic weapons closer to Russian borders".<sup>15</sup> While Russia would not deploy military forces to resist any US military

intervention in the Middle East, it may however irreparably damage relations.<sup>16</sup>

Learning from the aftermath of the intervention in Libya, which left them with a bitter sense of betrayal, the Russians will undoubtedly be less likely to cooperate in the future.<sup>17</sup> During the Libya crisis, Russia felt that its views were ignored after it helped to pass a UN Security Council resolution that created a no-fly zone as well as including other measures that allowed for military action to be used to aid in the protection of Libyan citizens. However, it was then seen that their support had been taken advantage of as a means to oust Gaddafi and overturn his regime.<sup>18</sup> Russia will now be adhering more stubbornly to its principles in order to remain in a position of authority and prevent a repeat of such actions.<sup>19</sup> Dimitri Simes, President of the Center for the National Interest has cautioned that, "if you understand Putin's psychology, the last thing you want to do is to put him publicly in the corner if you want his cooperation".<sup>20</sup> Simes continues—mirroring what Kremlin officials are probably thinking—that the Obama administration is simply using Russia as an alibi for its own hesitation to intervene in Syria.<sup>21</sup>

Russia and China have vetoed three United Nations Security Council resolutions to put pressure on Assad. It is important to emphasize here that this is

<sup>13</sup> Transcript of the Address by Sergey Ryabkov, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation: Questions and Answers, 07 September 2012, [http://ceness-russia.org/data/page/p910\\_1.pdf](http://ceness-russia.org/data/page/p910_1.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Flavia Krause-Jackson and Hans Nichols, 'UN's Ban Presses Obama to Accept Iran into Talks on Syria', *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 19 June 2012, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-06-19/uns-ban-presses-obama-to-accept-iran-into-talks-on-syria>

<sup>15</sup> Andrei Ilyashenko, 'U.S. Missile Shield in Europe Hampers other Disarmament Efforts', *Voice of Russia*, 10 February 2012, <http://english.ruvr.ru/2012/02/10/65733646.html>

<sup>16</sup> Lucky Gold, 'Russia Analyst: Russia Wouldn't Resist Intervention in Syria', *Amanpour*, 09 July 2012, <http://amanpour.blogs.cnn.com/2012/07/09/russia-analyst-russia-wouldnt-resist-intervention-in-syria/>

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*

<sup>18</sup> Tai Adelaja, 'Dialogue of the Deaf', *Russia Profile*, 18 June 2012,

<http://russiaprofile.org/international/60137.html>

<sup>19</sup> Vladimir Frolov, 'Russia Profile Weekly Experts Panel: Will Putin and Obama Reset the "Reset"?', *Russia Profile*, 22 June 2012,

[http://russiaprofile.org/experts\\_panel/60297.html](http://russiaprofile.org/experts_panel/60297.html)

<sup>20</sup> Vladimir Frolov, 'Russia Profile Weekly Experts Panel: Will Putin and Obama Reset the "Reset"?', *Russia Profile*, 22 June 2012,

[http://russiaprofile.org/experts\\_panel/60297.html](http://russiaprofile.org/experts_panel/60297.html)

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

not due to any particular loyalty to the current regimes in Syria or Iran; neither the Assad nor the Ahmadinejad regime hold close personal ties to Putin.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of the regime, Russia's actions would remain in keeping with these principles, and the maintenance of healthy ties with the nations in the neighbouring region of the Middle East would be of equal priority. Above all, Russia is desperate to avoid military action in the region. In the case of Syria, one of the main reasons for caution is to prevent further complications that could lead to long-term problems in the region as well as even greater loss of life, as occurred in the handling of Libya and Iraq. Putin has urged nations not to allow human lives to become "the currency of exchange in geopolitical games".<sup>23</sup> In regards to Iran, Lavrov warned that a use of force would shut down any hope of talks succeeding and entrench Iranian resistance. He went on to urge continued focus on negotiations and conveyed hope that the ideas Russia will be putting forward in the next meeting between the six nations' deputies will be able to move the talks ahead.<sup>24</sup>

Russia also claims that any such intervention or military action would undermine international law and lead to regional chaos and a disruption of global order. Putin recently re-emphasized the importance of the UN Charter in the management of global affairs and has invoked its principles in the justification of Russian vetoes of any use of force in UNSC resolutions, saying, "these principles guide us to settle all problems through negotiations, without

<sup>22</sup> Dmitri Trenin, 'What Will Putin do in Foreign Policy?', *Diplomaatia*, May 2012, [http://www.carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=48275&solr\\_hilit=Iran](http://www.carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=48275&solr_hilit=Iran)

<sup>23</sup> 'Use of Force in Bypass of UN will Cause Chaos, Putin Warns', *Russia Today*, 26 September 2012, <http://rt.com/politics/use-politics-un-putin-012/>

<sup>24</sup> 'Russia's Lavrov Hopes there will be no Attack on Iran', *Voice of Russia*, 10 October 2012, [http://english.ruvr.ru/2012\\_10\\_10/Use-of-force-against-Iran-will-result-in-wrapping-up-talks-on-Iran-s-nuclear-programme-Lavrov/](http://english.ruvr.ru/2012_10_10/Use-of-force-against-Iran-will-result-in-wrapping-up-talks-on-Iran-s-nuclear-programme-Lavrov/)

resorting to outside intervention", especially when dealing with such delicate political situations.<sup>25</sup> Early last month, Lavrov presented a speech to the Russian Federation Council, and in taking this sentiment a step further, he declared that "arbitrary interpretation" of the Charter could pose a "threat to the world order".<sup>26</sup>

Russian strategy in the Middle East relies on the defence of the 'supremacy of law' and is driven by fears that intervention will cause political instability and exacerbate radicalism.<sup>27</sup> President Putin has repeatedly advocated a united front to calm political tensions and warned that "violence only begets violence", admonishing suggestions from the Qatari Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani calling upon Arab nations to intervene in Syria.<sup>29</sup> A speech issued in September, during the presentation of a letter of credence from 21 new ambassadors to the Russian federation reiterated the message that using force to

<sup>25</sup> 'Use of Force in Bypass of UN will Cause Chaos, Putin Warns', *Russia Today*, 26 September 2012, <http://rt.com/politics/use-politics-un-putin-012>

<sup>26</sup> 'Russia to Defend UN Charter Principles with Regard to Syria, Iran – Lavrov', *Voice of Russia*, 10 October 2012, [http://english.ruvr.ru/2012\\_10\\_10/Russia-to-defend-UN-Charter-principles-with-regard-to-Syria-Iran-Lavrov/](http://english.ruvr.ru/2012_10_10/Russia-to-defend-UN-Charter-principles-with-regard-to-Syria-Iran-Lavrov/)

<sup>27</sup> John Bonar, 'West Stuck in Outdated "Block" thinking on Russia, says FM Lavrov', *BSR* 11 October 2012, <http://www.bsr-russia.com/en/international-relations/item/2445-west-stuck-in-outdated-block-thinking-on-russia-says-fm-lavrov.html>

<sup>29</sup> 'Presentation by Foreign Ambassadors of their Letters of Credence', Kremlin Transcript, 26 September, 2012, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/4446>; Peter Leonard, 'Putin Condemns Bloody Regime Change in Middle East', *Seattle Times*, 26 September 2012, [http://seattletimes.com/html/nationworld/2019264432\\_apeurussiaputin.html](http://seattletimes.com/html/nationworld/2019264432_apeurussiaputin.html); Speech of President of Russia Vladimir Putin at the Presentation of Letters of Credence by Foreign Ambassadors, Russian Embassy Press Release, 26 September 2012, <http://www.rusemb.org.uk/press/865>; 'Russia's Putin Speaks out against Unilateral Intervention', *Reuters*, 26 September 2012, <http://af.reuters.com/article/libyaNews/idAFL5E8KQ6I520120926>

incite regime change could only lead to further complications.<sup>30</sup>

*“Let me stress that basing ourselves on international law is the only possible way to conduct affairs in the modern world. No good comes out of attempts to substitute unilateral or bloc-based action for the universal principles in the UN Charter, or to bypass the Charter and use force. Such actions carry the risk of destabilization and chaos, and in such circumstances no crisis management is possible. Events of late have once more confirmed that our view is correct.”<sup>33</sup>*

Putin is most likely referring to the recent death of US Ambassador to Libya, John Christopher Stevens, which he denounced as a horrific act and a violation of the “international Convention and international law”.<sup>34</sup> However, he implied this was a direct result of US actions fanning the flame of unrest, and has likened the military action taken by NATO in Libya to “a Medieval Crusade”.<sup>35</sup> The supply of arms and encouragement to the Syrian rebels is seen as a similar mistake:

“We have warned of the need to tread carefully, not impose any force... which leads to chaos. And what

<sup>30</sup> ‘Presentation by Foreign Ambassadors of their Letters of Credence’, Kremlin Transcript, 26 September, 2012, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/4446>; ‘Russia’s Putin Speaks out against Unilateral Intervention’, *Reuters*, 26 September 2012, <http://af.reuters.com/article/libyaNews/idAFL5E8KQ6I520120926>

<sup>33</sup> John Bonar, ‘Putin Stresses UN Charter is Basis for Russia’s Position on Syria’, *BSR*, 27 September 2012, <http://www.bsr-russia.com/en/international-relations/item/2432-putin-stresses-un-charter-is-basis-for-russia-s-position-on-syria.htm>

<sup>34</sup> ‘Vladimir Putin’s Comments on Events in Libya’, Kremlin News, 13 September 2012, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/4411>

<sup>35</sup> Matthew Rojansky, ‘For U.S., Russia, interests Trump Rhetoric in Middle East’, *World Politics Review*, 18 September 2012, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12343/for-u-s-russia-interests-trump-rhetoric-in-middle-east>

do we see now? A situation much like chaos.” – Vladimir Putin<sup>37</sup>

Of course, such a principled position simultaneously serves Russian national security interests; a Westphalian global system affords some protection from Western influence permeating Russian borders and allows it to conduct its domestic affairs as it sees fit. Russia strongly believes that every state has the right to manage its domestic affairs without outside encroachment. Also Russia would invariably guard an international system that affords it significant influence as a key member of the exclusive UNSC, therefore any acts of intervention that defy the UN Charter or the rules of international law can be seen to directly challenge their position of supreme authority in the global arena.

### **The Russian Strategy for Iran and Syria**

*Diplomacy, negotiations, mutual compromise and a ‘step by step’ process.*

Therefore, the Russians believe that diplomacy and negotiations are the only way to reach long-term sustainable solutions; military strike would rule out any change of dialogue. The Russian position is that only if Iran’s concerns are heard and a mutual deal with face-saving clauses for both primary actors (the US and Iran) are discussed can there be any progress. *In simple terms, there needs to be more carrot and less stick.*

The strategy that Russian negotiators have put forward in the talks between the E3+3 and Iran embody the principles of mutual compromise and a ‘step by step’ process. These proposals have been described by Ryabkov as: “an arrangement where the full scope of the Iranian rights, including the right to enrich, is formally recognized by the international community in exchange for full and comprehensive

<sup>37</sup> ‘Putin against Extremism’, *Voice of Russia*, 26 September 2012, [http://english.ruvr.ru/2012\\_09\\_26/Putin-against-extremism/](http://english.ruvr.ru/2012_09_26/Putin-against-extremism/)

international control over their nuclear program”.<sup>40</sup> This would include Iran’s adoption of the IAEA’s Additional Protocol and the modified safeguards code 3.1 as well as “the continuous implementation of their safeguards agreement”.<sup>41</sup> Russia believes that this would provide the transparency that the international community needs in order to establish confidence in the Iranian program. The sequencing of these actions is critical. Russia has emphasized not only the importance for Iran to do more in terms of cooperating with the IAEA, but also in making the first step in this reciprocal process as a gesture of goodwill and confidence building.

Vladimir Yevseyev, director of the Public Policy Research Centre in Moscow, believes that if Iran were to start by implementing a short-term suspension of its enrichment facilities (the Russian delegation proposed a three-month period) the E3+3 would have no choice but to make a reciprocal concession.<sup>42</sup> From Iran’s perspective, this is a challenging request, because it has done this in the past and for a longer time, without reciprocal offers from the E3, and they now believe that they will only achieve their objectives through recognition of their right to a nuclear program (and fuel cycle).

Putin’s most recent, and unanticipated move, was to put forth the notion of enlisting Iran’s help in the resolution of the Syrian crisis.<sup>43</sup> Critics fear that Iran’s involvement in the international efforts to resolve

<sup>40</sup> Transcript of the Address by Sergey Ryabkov, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation: Questions and Answers, 07 September 2012, [http://ceness-russia.org/data/page/p910\\_1.pdf](http://ceness-russia.org/data/page/p910_1.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*

<sup>42</sup> Mike Shuster, ‘Russia Opposes Iran Acquiring Nuclear Weapons’, *NPR*, 23 May 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/05/23/153350781/russia-opposes-iran-acquiring-nuclear-weapons>

<sup>43</sup> Flavia Krause-Jackson and Ilya Arkhipov, ‘Russia Seeks Iranian Aid in Ushering out Syria’s Assad’, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 07 June 2012, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-06-06/russia-seeks-iranian-aid-in-ushering-out-syrias-assad>

the Syrian crisis may complicate rather than aid the relationship with the E3+3.

## Arms Trade

*International concerns have been voiced over Russia’s arms deals in the Middle East.*

US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton has enraged the Kremlin by blaming Russia for exacerbating violence in Syria by providing weapons and attack helicopters to the Assad government. It is well known that Russia is the main supplier of arms to both Iran and Syria, and while it maintains that they are for defensive purposes, with the civil war still raging in Syria, Russia’s decision to continue supplying the Assad government appears highly controversial.

In 2008, Israeli General Amos Gilad pointed out that, after all, even if the weapons Russia provides are defensive, the influence of their delivery is strategic: “It increases their sense of self-confidence, creates the feeling that someone is behind them and that leads to greater support for terror from those countries.”<sup>45</sup> Former Syrian Vice-President Halim Khaddam has also gone so far as to accuse Russia (alongside Iran) of deliberately attempting to foil the revolution in order to gain control of the Middle East “especially in terms of oil”.<sup>46</sup>

The more recent accusation against Russia by Turkey of smuggling military communication equipment on board a civilian aircraft is likely to sour relations between Russia and countries such as the United States and Israel. However, Russia has vehemently denied this accusation. Military analyst, Alexander Goltz, also provided more insight into this incident, claiming that this was not an official delivery and

<sup>45</sup> ‘Russia’s Role in Middle East Discussed’, *Kommersant*, 10 April 2008,

<http://www.kommersant.com/page.asp?id=878514>

<sup>46</sup> Andrew Bowen, ‘Syria’s Future and Iran’s Great Game’, *The Majalla*, 17 September 2012, <http://www.majalla.com/eng/2012/09/article55234032>

therefore it was either being smuggled or was a secret government operation.<sup>47</sup>

Russia has also more recently been discussing renewing arms transfers to Iraq. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki met with President Putin and Prime Minister Medvedev in October in Moscow to discuss collaboration in various fields, although potential defence projects, including the negotiation of a \$4.2 billion arms deal, were the main topic on the agenda.<sup>48</sup> Since the Gulf War and the removal of Saddam Hussein from power, Iraq has been mainly acquiring arms from the United States. Alexei Malashenko, from Carnegie Moscow, believes that this could be another means to further Russia's influence in the Middle East.<sup>49</sup> Unfortunately for Russia, the deal signed in October was called off due to suspicions of corruption in Maliki's team.<sup>50</sup> However, Russian analyst and head of the Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade, Igor Korotchenko, believes the real reason was pressure from the United States.<sup>51</sup>

### Russian Economic and Security Priorities

*Russia's long-term goals in the Middle East are more closely oriented towards security and the maintenance of stability.*

Russia has undergone a significant shift from economic to security priorities within the Middle

<sup>47</sup> 'Это была или контрабанда оружия, или секретная операция российского правительства', *Kommersant*, 11 October 2012, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2042028>

<sup>48</sup> 'Iraqi PM Floats Defense-tech Deal with Russia', *Ria Novosti*, 08 October 2012, [http://en.ria.ru/military\\_news/20121008/176489949.html](http://en.ria.ru/military_news/20121008/176489949.html); 'Iraq Cancels \$4.2bn Russian Arms Deal over "Corruption"', *BBC*, 10 November 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20278774>

<sup>49</sup> James Brooke, 'Russia Seeks to Rebuild Influence in Iraq', *Voice of America*, 15 October 2012, <http://www.voanews.com/content/russia-seeks-to-rebuild-influence-in-iraq/1526771.html>

<sup>50</sup> 'Iraq Cancels \$4.2bn Russian Arms Deal over "Corruption"', *BBC*, 10 November 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20278774>

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*

East. The Russian drive for authority is rooted in the desire to maintain control over stability more than by a search for profit.

Russia will invariably aspire to further its economic interests and seek to increase levels of trade, and sees its close relationships with Syria and Iran as an important gateway. Its economic ambition is much less ambitious compared to that of the former Soviet Union. Apart from its trade of arms, trade mostly consists of agricultural produce, and is at a relatively modest level.

Russia has withdrawn a significant arms contract signed in 2007 to sell Iran its S-300 missile defence system, and Russian business with Iran has dropped with sanctions. For example, the Russian Maritime Register of Shipping (RS) has ceased the provision of safety and environmental standards verification services for Iranian vessels, upon which Iranian vessels are dependent for insurance and access to international ports.<sup>52</sup>

Stanislav Belkovsky, on the other hand, argues that its desire for influence in the region is more *psychological* than economic: Russia's hold on its power in global politics, it fears, is "slowly diminishing" and it feels "furious and frustrated".<sup>55</sup> Is Russia therefore attempting to outweigh the United States for influence in the region?

This is highly unlikely. Firstly, such a strategy would be impractical: Russia simply no longer commands the same level of economic or political power as the Soviets once did in the region. Secondly, Russia's strategies are grounded in pragmatism rather than ideology (despite lingering anti-American sentiment in Moscow). Additionally, with a heavy domestic

<sup>52</sup> Jonathan Saul, 'Exclusive – Russian Firm to Halt Iran Ship Work as Pressure Grows', *Reuters*, 05 September 2012, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/09/05/uk-russia-iran-shipping-idUKBRE8841A420120905>

<sup>55</sup> Tai Adelaja, 'Dialogue of the Deaf', *Russia Profile*, 18 June 2012, <http://russiaprofile.org/international/60137.html>



agenda concerning the economy and changing socio-political setting in Russia, Putin's main focus is on creating stability and security at home and in the surrounding region. As for foreign policy under Putin's leadership, it is unlikely that Russian politics will change significantly with his re-election. Fyodor Lukyanov, believes that this term will see him, overall, in a more restrained role.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

Economic interests clearly factor into Russia's decision-making in the Middle East, but are not the primary influence. Rather, Russia's long-term goals in the region are more closely oriented towards security and the maintenance of stability, based upon the rule of law and respect for sovereignty. In addition to combating piracy and drug trafficking (especially coming out of Afghanistan), one of Russia's main goals is to counter extremism and terrorism within the region.<sup>59</sup> Muslim populations within Russia (around 20% of the overall population) renders this a particularly sensitive issue. What is more, the USSR's past dealings with the Middle East have also given Russia a particularly acute sense of the need to tread carefully in the handling of political transitions and Russia is able to appeal to established international law to uphold the current balance of power in global politics.<sup>63</sup> Finally, in courting Russia within the E3+3 process over Iran's nuclear program and over the Helsinki Conference on a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East, Western states would do

<sup>56</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, 'Results of Medvedev, Prospects for Putin', *Russia Today*, 17 February 2012,

<http://rt.com/politics/columns/unpredictable-world-foreign-lukyanov/putin-medvedev-president-elections/>

<sup>59</sup> 'Russian President to Fight Extremism in Middle East', *Vestnik Kavkaza*, 26 September 2012,

<http://vestnikkavkaza.net/news/politics/31859.html>

<sup>63</sup> Matthew Rojansky, 'For U.S., Russia, Interests Trump Rhetoric in Middle East', *World Politics Review*, 18 September 2012,

<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12343/for-u-s-russia-interests-trump-rhetoric-in-middle-east>

well to consider joint interests in stabilising the region through collaborative strategies.

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