

Russia—A Partner for the U.S. in the Post-Saddam Middle East?

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Introduction

Following the bombing of the Moscow Metro in early February 2004, Russian President Vladimir Putin, responding to U.S. President George Bush's expression of condolences and solidarity with Russia, stated in a letter to Bush that Russia would remain a "stable, reliable and predictable" partner for the U.S. [1] Yet a review of the Russian record under Putin raises questions about the Russian president's assertion. This essay, after briefly analyzing the central thrust of Putin's domestic and foreign policies, will examine four areas of possible U.S.-Russia cooperation in the Middle East: 1) the war on terrorism; 2) the Arab-Israeli conflict; 3) Iraq; and 4) Iran, to determine whether, in fact, Russia has been a reliable partner for the U.S. in the past and could be in the future.

Putin and his policies

One of the most striking aspects of the Putin presidency has been his ability to bring quasi-independent players in Russian domestic and foreign policy under much tighter centralized control. Putin has all but eliminated the political influence of oligarchs and taken over their media outlets. He has also replaced the head of the Ministry of Atomic Energy, who had a habit of trying to make nuclear deals with Iran not approved of by the Kremlin and the director of the powerful gas monopoly, GASPROM, heavily involved in Turkey and Central Asia, and the leader of the Defense Ministry. Putin also changed interior ministers, set up plenipotentiaries to oversee Russia's 89 regions, and consolidated Russia's arms sales agencies into Rosoboronoexport in an effort to gain greater control over a major source of foreign exchange. He also put a great deal of emphasis on improving Russia's economy, not only through the sale of arms, oil and natural gas (the Russian economy has been blessed with high oil and natural gas prices during much of his first four years in office) but also by expanding Russia's business ties abroad. Indeed, business interests have played an increasingly significant role in Putin's foreign policy.

Making Putin's task easier was the support he received from the Duma, especially from his Edinstvo (Unity) party—now the enlarged United Russia Party—in contrast to the hostile relations Yeltsin had with the Duma from 1993 until his resignation as Russia's President in December 1999. Indeed, in the Duma elections of December 2003, Putin greatly increased his support, weakening both the communist and liberal parties that were his main opponents.

Overall, Putin's central foreign policy aim has been to strengthen the Russian economy in the hope that, in the not too distant future, Russia might regain its status as a great power. In the interim he has sought to create an "arc of stability" on Russia's frontiers so that economic development can proceed as rapidly as possible. In theory at least, such a goal would appear to require a policy of increased cooperation with the economically advanced West.

At the same time, however, mindful of voices in the Duma—now represented most strongly by the Rodina (Motherland) Party that had been created by the Kremlin to weaken the Russian Communist Party—as well as in the security apparatus and the Russian Foreign Ministry unhappy at Moscow's appearing to play "second fiddle" to the U.S. after 9/11, Putin has from time to time asserted an independent position for Russia, as Moscow's behavior during the recent war in Iraq indicated. Indeed, Russian foreign policy sometimes looks like it is seeking to create the "multipolar world" advocated by former Russian Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, who is now a Putin adviser. Consequently, the tension between these two alternative thrusts of Russian foreign policy, cooperating with the U.S. but also competing with it, makes it difficult to determine whether Putin's Russia can indeed qualify as a reliable partner of the U.S. Nowhere is this clearer than in the war on terrorism.

The War on Terrorism

There is no question but that Russia proved helpful to the U.S. in its war against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban forces in Afghanistan. Russia provided useful intelligence^[2] and acquiesced in the U.S. establishing bases in Central Asia. Yet it should also be noted that by battling Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the U.S. did a major service for Moscow, which has feared radical Islamic penetration of Central Asia, which Russian strategists see as the "soft underbelly" of the Russian Federation. At the present time Putin has only one major Islamist terrorist problem in Russia—Chechnya. Unsuccessful in putting down the increasingly Islamist rebellion during his first three years in office, and embarrassed by the Chechen seizure of a Moscow theater in October 2002, in the Spring of 2003 Putin embarked on a new policy. This involved a referendum and new elections in Chechnya—both of which were seen as bogus by Western and even Russian observers—which brought into power in Chechnya a one-time Chechen opponent of Moscow, Akmed Kadyrov, whom Putin sought to legitimize in the Muslim world, along with Russian policy toward Chechnya. Putin's policy had two elements: 1) a warming of relations with Saudi Arabia, the most influential Islamic state and 2) a quest for membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Prior to the visit of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah to Moscow in September 2003, Russian-Saudi relations were, at best, mixed.^[3] Both countries had an interest in keeping oil prices stable—and high—but there were occasional tactical disputes on pricing and Russia was reluctant to limit its oil production, since it depended on petroleum for one-third of its state revenues. Regardless of this common interest, Chechnya soured the relationship. Moscow accused Riyadh of funding not only the Chechen rebels, but after 9/11 of funding other terrorist groups as well. Still, when Saudi Arabia itself suffered a major terrorist attack in May 2003, Putin seized on the opportunity and spoke out on the similarity of that attack to the ones in Moscow by Chechen rebels, stating "the handwriting is absolutely identical in both places. And the effect is absolutely comparable."^[4]

Putin's speech set the tone for the September 2003 visit of Crown Prince Abdullah. Putin, while also seeking—and getting—deals for Russian companies during the visit, had as his major goal the gaining of Saudi legitimization for Russian policy in Chechnya. Consequently a meeting was arranged between Crown Prince Abdullah, the *de facto* ruler of Saudi Arabia, and Chechen leader Kadyrov, who stated following the meeting that the Saudis had condemned what was happening in Chechnya and said that it had nothing to do with Islam.^[5] Kadyrov also was given an invitation to visit Saudi Arabia, which he did four months later, reportedly extracting from the Saudis promises that their charitable foundations would stop funding the Chechen rebels.^[6]

The other element of Putin's policy of securing Islamic legitimization for Russia's policy in Chechnya involved courting other key Islamic leaders and if at all possible, gaining membership

for Russia in the OIC. This effort accelerated during a Putin visit to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in August 2003. Malaysia was a key country in Putin's strategy because it was to host the next Islamic summit in October 2003 and would be the OIC leader until 2006. Besides securing deals for the sale of eighteen SU-30 fighter-bombers, Putin obtained the support of the outspoken Malaysian leader Muthahir Mohammed for Russian membership in the OIC.[\[7\]](#)

At the OIC meeting in Malaysia in October 2003 Putin made the Russian case for membership, noting that the number of Russian mosques had grown from 870 in 1991 to 7,000 in 2003 and that the twenty million Muslims "peacefully and productively" living in Russia disproved the theory of the clash of civilizations.[\[8\]](#) Putin also brought a number of Russian Muslim leaders to the OIC meeting including, of course, Chechen leader Kadyrov. As far as Chechnya was concerned, Putin noted that the situation there was "returning to normal" and in not-so-veiled criticism of the U.S., stated "some are involved in practicing terrorism. Others are using this situation for their own mercenary ends, as a tool of political pressure to achieve their own goals, which have nothing in common with the interests of Islam, with protecting human rights, or with international law in general."[\[9\]](#)

In examining Russian policy on terrorism, one can see, not unexpectedly, that Moscow was primarily following its own interests in the conflict. Exchanging information with the U.S. on terrorists and acquiescing in the establishment of U.S. bases in Central Asia helped Moscow subdue an Islamic threat close to its southern borders. On the other hand, Putin's cultivation of Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and other members of the OIC,¹⁰ while having the additional benefit of securing business deals for Russian companies, had as its primary purpose the legitimization by Islamic countries of Russian policy in Chechnya. One must also point out that in his comments to the OIC Putin appeared to be seeking to widen the gap between the Islamic world and the U.S.—not the actions a true partner would take.

Russia and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

From 1953 until the latter stages of the Gorbachev era, manipulating the Arab-Israeli conflict was a central aspect of Soviet strategy in the Middle East.[\[11\]](#) Moscow backed the Arab side, claiming that Israel was the tip of the American "imperialist wedge" threatening the Arab world. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, ideology as a factor in Russian foreign policy all but disappeared, and Russian national interests became the main factor determining Russian policy. At the same time the Arab-Israeli conflict became only tertiary to Moscow's main interests in the Middle East, which were Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Nonetheless Moscow's bilateral relations with Israel, which had begun to improve in the late 1980's under Gorbachev, took major strides. Trade rose to more than one billion dollars annually; Russian Jews could freely emigrate to Israel; there were extensive cultural relations with the more than one million Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel, making up the largest Russian diaspora outside the Former Soviet Union; and there was even military cooperation as Moscow and Tel Aviv cooperated in building an AWACs aircraft with Russia providing the airframe and Israel the avionics. Nonetheless, while Moscow during the Yeltsin years tended to take a backseat to U.S. diplomacy and took an even-handed position on the Arab-Israeli conflict, supporting Oslo I and Oslo II,[\[12\]](#) the Russian foreign ministry, which was filled with individuals nostalgic about Moscow's ties with the Arabs during the Soviet era, increasingly tilted Russian policy toward the Arabs, especially with the outbreak of the Al-Aksa Intifada in September 2000. As the U.S. tilted more to Israel, Moscow broke with Washington on Middle East diplomacy, choosing (along with the EU) to back Arafat as an important diplomatic actor in Arab-Israeli negotiations while both Israel and the United States have rejected him because of his links to terrorism. Similarly while the U.S. has shown considerable understanding for Israeli Prime Minister Sharon's plans to unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza Strip, Moscow has rejected Sharon's unilateralism and the construction of the security wall, urging a return to the "Road Map" of which Russia was one of the creators. These diplomatic positions together with Moscow's supplying of a nuclear reactor to Iran (a sworn enemy of Israel which has called for its

destruction), with another reactor being negotiated with Syria (another enemy of Israel), have considerably soured Israeli-Russian relations under Putin.

Under the circumstances, with Russia no longer seriously cooperating with the U.S. on the Arab-Israeli conflict—although the all-but defunct road map is still on the diplomatic table—can Moscow be considered a serious partner for the U.S. in Arab-Israeli diplomacy? The answer here is in the negative although Russia, at the margins, could possibly be helpful in two areas. First it could agree to supply troops to the multinational force in the Sinai, thus at least symbolically reinforcing the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty and freeing up some (but not all) U.S. forces for use in Afghanistan and Iraq. Second, were an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement ever to be reached—a very big if at the time of writing (February 2004)^[13]—Moscow could provide troops for a multinational force on the Golan separating Israel and Syria.

In sum, therefore, under Putin Moscow has not proved to be a particularly reliable partner for the United States in the Arab-Israeli conflict, although at least at the margins, Moscow could be helpful if it provided troops for peacekeeping activities.

Russia and Iraq

Prior to the Anglo-American attack in March 2003 that overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein, Putin had two central goals in Iraq. The first was to obtain the more than eight billion dollars owed to Russia by Iraq. The second was to support the development of major Russian business ties with Iraq, especially Moscow's oil companies. Such deals however (other than oil for food purchases) could only take place when U.N. sanctions against Iraq were lifted. Consequently Moscow energetically pushed for the lifting of sanctions until the war broke out.

Nonetheless as the U.S. moved inexorably closer to war in 2002, Putin faced a clear dilemma—how to maintain good relations with the U.S., while at the same time protecting Russia's extensive business interests in Iraq and its hopes for future contracts there. As the crisis deepened, however, Putin saw some benefits flowing to Russia. Oil prices shot up from \$25 per barrel to an average \$38 per barrel, giving Russia an economic windfall. Under the circumstances, the Russian leader adopted a dual strategy. First, he sought to prevent the war by calling for the UN Security Council to legitimize any decision to go to war. Second, he sought to prolong the crisis as long as possible so as to keep the extra income flowing to the Russian economy. This, in turn, would keep Russian growth rates high, would enable Moscow to pay off some of its international debts (thus enhancing its international investment climate), and would provide enough extra spending power to get Putin not only through the Duma elections in December 2003 but also through the Presidential election in the Spring of 2004.

Moscow sought to maintain contact with the United States the Hussein regime and, discretely, with the Iraqi opposition so that no matter who emerged on top in Iraq, Russia would continue to have access to Iraqi oil. Hussein, however, was less than happy with Moscow's policy and, in December 2002, canceled the lucrative contract Lukoil had received to develop the West Qurna oil field, although he left the contracts with Machinoimport and Zarubzhneft in place. Nonetheless, by also floating the possibility of up to \$40 billion in new trade deals, he sought to entice Putin to give him greater support.^[14]

Interestingly enough, as the war approached, U.S.-Russian relations did not immediately suffer. In part this was due to the fact that the leading forces opposing a U.S.-British attack on Iraq were the French and Germans, and this provided diplomatic cover for Moscow, and in part it was due to the fact that the U.S. kept hoping for Russian support, or at least neutrality, during the war, hinting that it would in return respect Russia's economic interests in Iraq. Nonetheless, once Putin publicly sided with French leader Jacques Chirac, U.S.-Russian ties began to deteriorate.^[15] The situation was to worsen once the war broke out in late March. Putin, while not being forced to veto a resolution calling for UNSC support of the war, because the U.S. decided not to seek such

a UN resolution, nonetheless spoke out sharply against the Anglo-U.S. attack, calling it the most serious crisis since the end of the cold war, and asserting that it was "a direct violation of international law, and a major political mistake that could cause the International Security system to collapse."^[16] Russian-American relations were further hurt by credible reports that Russia had secretly sold military equipment to Iraq, including night-vision goggles, anti-tank missiles, and devices to interfere with U.S. GPS positioning systems.^[17] In addition, the Russian ambassador to Iraq accused U.S. forces of shooting at a Russian convoy exiting Baghdad; the Kremlin protested a U.S. military spy plane flying over Georgia; and the Duma postponed action on an arms control treaty.^[18] Putin also, perhaps hoping to further prolong the crisis, demanded a cease-fire during the first week of the war, as U.S. forces encountered unexpected resistance.^[19]

In seeking to explain Putin's apparent hardening of policy during the war, there are several possible explanations. First, with the Duma elections drawing closer, and the Russian public strongly against the war,^[20] Putin did not wish to leave the issue solely in the hands of the opposition communist party, especially since his own party, United Russia, was at the time running into problems.^[21] Secondly, with the Muslim world opposing the war, Putin may have felt that a strong anti-war position could both win Moscow friends in the Muslim world and also assuage Russia's twenty million Muslims, many of whom are unhappy with his policy in Chechnya. Indeed, Putin asserted, "Russia has a community of twenty million Muslims and we cannot but take their opinion into account. I fully share their concerns."^[22] Finally, with Germany and France also strongly opposing the war, Putin may have felt that the newly created Franco-German-Russian bloc of states could serve as a check on U.S. unilateralism, and Russian opposition to the war would strengthen the prospects of a multipolar world.

In any case, Russian behavior during the war was clearly not that of a partner. This was to change in the post war period, albeit only at the margins, and primarily for Russian, not American, reasons. Thus immediately after the war Moscow supported the U.S.-sponsored Security Council Resolution 1483, which, while leaving the U.S. fully in control of Iraq, did provide a role, albeit an unclear one, for the United Nations in the form of special representative, and both lifted sanctions on Iraq (except for arms) and noted the goal of the resolution was for the Iraqis to manage their own national resources^[23]—thus holding out the hope for Moscow that its oil companies and business interests could obtain lucrative contracts.

Even though Iraq appeared to be becoming increasingly unstable following the passage of UN Resolution 1483, with car bombings and attacks on U.S. forces and the American-supported Iraqi police, Moscow continued to pursue its business interests there. Thus, following a call by the United States for the countries holding Iraqi debt to waive all or part of it so the country could get back on its feet, Moscow responded by offering to waive part of the Iraqi debt—in return for contracts for Russian companies. This was achieved during a visit to Moscow by Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim, head of Iraq's governing council, who noted after discussions with Putin "We received a generous promise to write off the debt, or at least part of it." In return, he noted, "We will be open to all Russian companies."^[24] Immediately thereafter, the Iraqis began negotiations with Lukoil on the West Qurna oil field, and Moscow hinted that Russian companies would soon be investing in Iraq. In observing Russian behavior, a senior U.S. State Department official commented:

"At least so far, they're taking a positive approach in the Iraqi debt although they obviously have broader commercial interests—which they are articulating openly—that they hope will be satisfied at the same time."^[25]

Meanwhile, Russia was already selling to Iraq locomotives, taxis and motorcycles, and in February signed a \$10 million deal to send Iraq air-conditioned buses.^[26] Thus, from Moscow's perspective, one of its goals, increased business dealings with Iraq, was being achieved, with the promise of more contracts to come; and all this was being done despite Moscow's being banned by the U.S. from the first round of Iraqi reconstruction contracts.

In evaluating Russia's behavior during and after the Iraqi war, it is clear that during the war Moscow's words and actions made it more of an opponent than a partner of the United States. In the post war period, however, by offering to partially lift Iraq's debt and even invest in that country—albeit in return for business contracts—Moscow was helping, even in a small way, in the stabilization of Iraq, which was a major U.S. goal. Still, this was being done for Russian, not American, purposes.

This is another case, as in intelligence cooperation against the Taliban, where the U.S. is helped when Russia acts, not to assist the U.S., but to secure its own interests when they coincide with those of the U.S.

Russia and Iran

Iran, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, has been Moscow's closest ally in the Middle East, and despite some friction over the Caspian Sea, relations grew stronger following Putin's rise to power. At the time Yeltsin stepped down as Russia's President, there was a great deal of Russian-Iranian cooperation. Russia and Iran were cooperating in maintaining the shaky cease-fire in Tajikistan, were aiding the Northern Alliance in their battles against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and were jointly supporting Armenia against Azerbaijan, which neither Russia nor Iran wanted to emerge as a major force in Transcaucasia.^[27] Russia was Iran's primary supplier of weaponry, including supersonic jets, tanks, and submarines, and Moscow was also building a nuclear reactor complex for Iran at Bushehr. The CIA reported that Russia was also covertly aiding Iran in the development of ballistic missiles, such as the Shihab III with a range of 1,300 kilometers, which could hit U.S. Middle Eastern allies such as Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

There were, of course, problems in the relationship. The first dealt with the division of the Caspian Sea. Iran held out for 20 percent—even though its coastline was only 12 percent. Russia, however, moved to divide the seabed into national sectors, as indicated by its agreement with Kazakhstan in 1998 under Yeltsin and with Azerbaijan in 2001 under Putin. The second problem dealt with the routes for the export of Caspian oil and natural gas where Russia and Iran were potential rivals.

Putin, by mounting a major military exercise on the Caspian Sea in 2002 following a 2001 clash between Iranian gunboats and BP ships exploring for oil, clearly demonstrated that Russia would brook no opposition to its primary role there.^[28] Nonetheless that has been the only serious conflict of interest between Iran and Russia during the Putin era. Iran's tacit support for Russian action in Chechnya was probably a factor leading Putin to renege in November 2000 on the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement that Russia would cease selling arms to Iran by 2000, once all existing arms contracts had been completed.^[29] Needless to say, that Russian action angered the U.S. and raised questions as to whether Russia could be trusted.

While that was a serious irritant in U.S.-Russian relations, the more pressing issue has been Moscow's construction of a nuclear reactor complex for Iran at Bushehr, which the U.S. fears will expedite Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons.^[30] Washington has offered Russia considerable sums of money to forego the project but so far to no avail. The U.S. has also sanctioned a number of Russian companies it found dealing with Iran but this has not helped either. In looking at Moscow's unwillingness to cooperate with Washington on this issue there appear to be four central reasons. First, the sale of the reactor earns hard currency for Russia, and Putin cannot be sure that at a time of escalating deficits in the U.S., even if President Bush promised large sums of money to Russia, that the U.S. Congress would allocate them. Second, once the first reactor is operating, Iran has repeatedly hinted to Moscow that it will purchase up to five additional reactors. Third the Bushehr reactor, and the factories in Russia which supply it, employ a large number of Russian engineers and technicians and thus helps keep Russia's nuclear industry alive—something Putin hopes will help not only earn Russia much needed hard currency but also help in

the high tech development of the Russian economy. Finally, by standing firm on Bushehr, Putin could demonstrate to domestic audiences Russia's independent policy vis-à-vis the U.S. as both the Duma and Presidential elections neared.

Yet such a policy held dangers for Moscow. First, as noted above, it served to alienate the United States, despite constant Russian protestations that the Bushehr reactor would only be used for peaceful purposes. Second, especially as revelations emerged about the extent of the Iranian nuclear program, Moscow ran the danger that either the U.S. or Israel, might attack the Bushehr reactor. The problem became especially serious for Russia in December 2002 when it was revealed in a series of satellite photographs that, in addition to Bushehr, Iran was building two new nuclear facilities, one a centrifuge plant near the city of Natanz and the other a heavy water plant near the city of Arak. Initially Russia downplayed the development, with the Director of Minatom, Alexander Rumantsev, stating that the photos taken of the plants were not sufficient to determine their nature, and, in any case, that Russia had nothing to do with the two plants. Other representatives of Minatom said Russia was ready to supply the long-awaited nuclear fuel to Tehran—but only if the Iranians guaranteed return of the spent fuel to Moscow. Rumantsev, however, said Russia was ready without conditions to supply nuclear fuel to Iran.[\[31\]](#)

By February 2003, however, Rumantsev was hedging his position, noting "at this moment in time: Iran did not have the capability to build nuclear weapons."[\[32\]](#) By March 2003 with an IAEA team visiting the two plants, Rumantsev had further changed his position and asserted that Russia could not tell whether Iran was secretly developing nuclear weapons: "While Russia is helping Iran build its nuclear plant [at Bushehr] it is not being informed by Iran on all the other projects currently underway."[\[33\]](#)

Following its initial successes in the Iraq war, the U.S. stepped up its pressure on Russia to halt the Iranian nuclear weapons program. In response, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov noted in an Interfax interview at the end of May 2003 that Russia wanted all Iranian nuclear programs to be under the supervision of the IAEA.

Then, following the Bush-Putin talks in St. Petersburg in early June when Bush was at the height of his international influence, Putin asserted that the positions of Russia and the U.S. on Iran were closer than people thought. However, he added that "the pretext of an Iranian nuclear weapons program (could be used) as an instrument of unfair competition" against Russian companies.[\[34\]](#)

By early June 2003 it appeared that the U.S. was making two demands on Russia, vis-à-vis the Bushehr reactor. First, while the U.S. wanted Russia to end all support for Bushehr, at the minimum, the U.S. argued that Moscow should not supply any nuclear fuel to the Bushehr reactor unless Iran agreed to send all used fuel back to Moscow. Second, Moscow should also withhold the nuclear fuel until Iran signed an additional protocol with the IAEA permitting that agency unannounced visits to all Iranian nuclear facilities. On the latter issue, both the G-8 (of which Russia is a member) and the EU have also been pressuring Iran. Indeed, the G-8 statement issued in early June noted: "We urge Iran to sign and implement the IAEA Additional Protocol without delay or conditions. We offer our strongest support to comprehensive IAEA examination of this country's nuclear program."[\[35\]](#)

The question, of course, was not only how far Iran would go to comply, but also how far Russia would go to pressure Iran. In this there appeared to be some initial confusion in Moscow. While British Prime Minister Tony Blair asserted that Moscow had agreed not to deliver nuclear fuel until Iran signed the IAEA protocol, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Alexander Yakovenko, stated that Moscow would only freeze construction on the Bushehr plant if Iran refused to agree to return all spent nuclear fuel to Russia, and that Iran was not required to sign the protocol, because "the protocol is an agreement that is signed on a voluntary basis."[\[36\]](#)

Meanwhile, perhaps to deflect some of the U.S. pressure, Minatom Minister Alexander Rumanstev announced on June 3, 2003 that the Bushehr reactor would be completed in 2005, not 2004 as originally planned. While he blamed the delay on the need to replace the reactor's original German parts, it could well be that this was an important gesture to the U.S. Then, on September 12, the IAEA, of which Russia is a member, gave Tehran a deadline of October 31 to provide full information about its nuclear program to show that it was not secretly building nuclear weapons, and furthermore urged Iran to freeze its uranium enrichment program. While the tough wording of the message prompted the walkout of the Iranian delegation from the Vienna IAEA meeting, the question now became how Russia would react to the situation. Interestingly enough, at the time, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Kislyak tried to soft pedal the IAEA report by saying Iran should not see the October 31st deadline as an ultimatum.^[37] However, in September a dispute between Russia and Iran had broken out over who would pay for the return of the spent fuel from the reactor, with Iran demanding that Russia pay for it and Moscow refusing. Complicating matters further for Putin on the eve of his visit to the U.S. in late September, was the U.S. sanctioning of a Russian arms firm (Tula Instrument Design Bureau) for selling laser-guided artillery shells to Iran.

Fortunately for Putin, Bush's position at the time of the summit was considerably weaker than it had been when the two leaders last met in June. As noted above, guerrilla warfare had erupted in Iraq and the U.S. was having trouble dealing with it. Indeed, Washington turned to the U.N. in an effort to get additional troops, along with monetary aid to rebuild Iraq. Along with a sputtering American economy, Iraq had become a major issue in U.S. politics, as Bush's standing in U.S. polls dropped sharply. Consequently, while Bush raised the issue of Iran with Putin, the most he could extract from the Russian leader was the somewhat vague statement that "It is our conviction that we shall give a clear but respectful signal to Iran about the necessity to continue and expand its cooperation with the IAEA."^[38] In addition, Bush proved unable to get Putin to agree to cease construction on the Bushehr reactor.

The ball, however, was taken out of Moscow's hands by the EU, which sent a delegation to Tehran in late October. The delegation succeeded in extracting from Iran in return for a promise of high tech trade cooperation, its promise to temporarily stop enriching uranium and sign the additional protocol as well as to inform the IAEA of its past nuclear activities. Moscow hailed the Iranian action and the head of the Iranian Security Council Hassan Rowhani came to Moscow on November 11th to formally announce that Tehran was temporarily suspending the enrichment of uranium and was sending that day a letter to the IAEA agreeing to the additional protocol.^[39] Moscow exploited the visit saying that Iran was now in full compliance with the IAEA, and Putin said that now Russia and Iran would continue their nuclear cooperation.^[40] Indeed, Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexandr Yakoveko, eyeing the possibility of the sale of additional reactors to Tehran, something discussed during the Iranian delegation's visit, said Russia would now "do its utmost to expedite the completion of Bushehr."^[41]

In part because of Russian (and EU) pressure, the Board of Governors of the IAEA in November 2003 decided not to refer Iran's nuclear program to the U.N. Security Council. Nonetheless it did warn Iran against developing nuclear weapons and threatened to consider "all options available" if Iran continued to conceal information about its nuclear facilities.^[42] The U.S. took a tougher stance with John Bolton, Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, warning that the U.S. was ready to use all options against rogue states believed to be developing weapons of mass destruction. Bolton also voiced skepticism that Iran would abide by its commitments to the IAEA.^[43]

Bolton's skepticism soon proved to be well taken because less than two months later the revelations about Pakistan's nuclear proliferation policies, including to Iran, led IAEA Chief Muhammed ElBaradei to warn about the collapse of the non-proliferation system, and the U.S. to call for closing a loophole in the nuclear non-proliferation treaty to prevent countries, such as Iran, from acquiring materials for their national atomic energy programs that could be used to build

nuclear weapons.[\[44\]](#) In addition, IAEA inspectors found that Iran had hidden, among other things, an advanced P-2 centrifuge system that could be used for enriching uranium, along with a program for producing polonium 210 which could be used as a neutron initiator for nuclear weapons.[\[45\]](#)

Meanwhile, as these revelations emerged, Moscow seemed confused on how to react. Minatom's Deputy Minister, Valery Govorukhin, played down EIBaradei's warning of the possible collapse of the international nuclear non-proliferation system, and hailed Iran's cooperation with the IAEA.[\[46\]](#) By contrast, however, his superior Alexander Rumantsev, supported EIBaradei, calling the situation "extremely unpleasant" and went so far as to say that Russia, along with other countries, was going to give "active consideration as to whether work on the establishment of national fuel cycles should be terminated in non-nuclear countries"[\[47\]](#)—something that would have struck a serious blow against Iran's nuclear aspirations. At the same time, however, the U.S. during a visit to Moscow in late January 2004 by John Bolton, proved unable to get Russia's agreement to cooperation with an international effort to intercept shipments of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.

This rather confused Russian reaction to the Iranian nuclear effort provides a point of departure for an examination of how Moscow could become more of a partner to the U.S. in curbing Iran's nuclear weapons production program, over and above apparently delaying the completion of the Bushehr reactor, something Tehran has been complaining about.[\[48\]](#) First, Moscow must support U.S. efforts to stop the establishment of national nuclear fuel cycles in non-nuclear countries such as Iran. Second, Russia must join the U.S. effort to intercept WMD shipments in the air and on sea. Third, Moscow must, if it provides the fuel for Bushehr, not only demand the return of all spent fuel to Moscow, but also agree to the stationing of international inspectors at Bushehr to ensure that no fuel is secretly taken away to be enriched in Iran's centrifuge program. Finally, Russia must crack down hard on 'rogue' companies that have been selling nuclear fuel and equipment to Iran, as has recently been revealed.[\[49\]](#)

If these actions are taken, Moscow, albeit belatedly, could begin to prove its trustworthiness as a partner for the U.S. Whether Moscow would agree to take these steps, however, remains to be seen.

Conclusions

On the basis of Russian behavior in the war on terrorism, Arab-Israeli diplomacy, Iraq and Iran, can it be concluded that Russia is a suitable partner for the United States, as Putin has claimed? On the basis of Russian foreign policy behavior in these areas under Putin, the answer would appear to be in the negative. In the war on terrorism, while Russia supplied intelligence information to the U.S. and acquiesced in the establishment of U.S. bases in Central Asia, the reasons were not so much to help the U.S. as to aid Moscow in its own war on terrorism and, when given the opportunity to score political points at America's expense at the OIC conference in October 2003, Putin did not hesitate to do so, thus revealing the continuing thread of anti-Americanism and multipolarism evident in Putin's diplomacy even as he claims to be a partner with the U.S.

In the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Putin has chosen to side with the EU rather than the U.S., on such questions as dealing with PLO leader Yasser Arafat and supporting Israeli Prime Minister Sharon's policies including creating the security fence and considering a unilateral pull-out from Gaza.

In the case of Iraq, Moscow sided with France and Germany, rather than the U.S. in opposing the Anglo-American attack of March 2003. Even worse Moscow's secretive supply of arms and its caustic behavior during the war, were clearly not the acts of a partner. While, after the war, Russia did support UNSC Resolution #1483, and, in response to U.S. requests, did offer to waive

part of Iraq's debt, these actions were taken primarily to enhance Russia's business prospects in Iraq, not to help the U.S.

Finally, while the leadership in Moscow appears increasingly confused as to how to handle the revelations about Iran's atomic energy program which increasingly appears aimed at developing nuclear weapons, Moscow has not taken decisive action in curbing its nuclear assistance to Tehran. A desire for hard currency, jobs for Russia's nuclear engineers, and a wish to demonstrate its independence of the U.S. seem to dominate Putin's thinking.

These observations indicate that despite all the talk of a Russian-American partnership Moscow has not behaved as a true partner. Where the two countries' interests have coincided, as in the war on terrorism and in stabilizing post-war Iraq, the Russia and the U.S. have worked in parallel. However, in the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the struggle for influence in the Muslim world, and Iran, the two countries have acted at cross-purposes.

In sum, therefore, it can be argued that Russia has emerged, in the Putin era, not as a partner to the U.S. but more as a competitor. In that sense, it has adopted a position somewhat similar to that of France. However, there is one central difference. France is a liberal democracy with which the United States shares common values. By contrast Russia's democracy is rapidly eroding. True partners tend to share values. In this sense not only has Putin's Russia demonstrated through its behavior that it is not a genuine partner of the U.S., it has also done so through scorning the values of a democracy.

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About the Author

Dr. Robert O. Freedman is Peggy Meyerhoff Pearlstone Professor of Political Science at [Baltimore Hebrew University](#), and Visiting Professor of Political Science at [Johns Hopkins University](#). He is the author of four books on Soviet foreign policy, including *Soviet Policy Toward the Middle East Since 1970*, the third edition of which was published by Praeger Press in 1982, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1991, and *Soviet-Israeli Relations Under Gorbachev*, published by Praeger in 1991. A past president of the Association for Israel Studies, he is also the editor of 14 books on the Israel and the Middle East, including *Israel in the Begin Era* (1982), *Israel Under Rabin* (1995), *The Middle East and the Peace Process* (1998) and *Israel's First Fifty Years* (2000). Dr. Freedman has served as a commentator on [National Public Radio](#), the BBC and the Voice of America, and is a consultant to the [US State Department](#) and the CIA. He has also been a member of U.S. government delegations that went to Moscow and Beijing for discussions with Russian and Chinese scholars and government officials on the Middle East, and he led a US mission to Uzbekistan to discuss the establishment of U.S.-Uzbek cultural relations.

In 1989, Dr. Freedman was a member of a [Brookings Institution](#) delegation that went to Tunis for discussions with Palestinian leaders about the peace process. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he participated, as the American representative, in two conferences in Europe with European political leaders and scholars who dealt with the problem of improving U.S.-European cooperation in the Middle East. Dr. Freedman is currently completing a book on Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and has begun work on a book on U.S. policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict in the second Bush Administration. His edited

book, *The Middle East Enters the 21st Century*, was just published by the University Press of Florida.

Dr. Freedman received his BA from the University of Pennsylvania in Diplomatic History and his MA and Ph.D degrees from Columbia University in the field of International Relations. He recently delivered a paper on the Bush Administration's policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict at the annual meeting of the Association for Israel Studies. The paper was published in the Summer 2002 issue of the *Israel Forum*.

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