



# DURHAM MIDDLE EAST PAPERS

BETTER THAN BEFORE:

COMPARING MOSCOW'S COLD WAR AND PUTIN ERA  
POLICIES TOWARD ARABIA AND THE GULF

**Mark N. Katz**

**Durham Middle East Paper No. 96**

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ERA POLICIES TOWARD ARABIA AND THE GULF

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# DURHAM MIDDLE EAST PAPERS

INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EASTERN AND ISLAMIC STUDIES

## BETTER THAN BEFORE: COMPARING MOSCOW'S COLD WAR AND PUTIN ERA POLICIES TOWARD ARABIA AND THE GULF

Mark N. Katz

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I am grateful for the opportunity that being awarded the 2018 Sir William Luce Fellowship provided to research and write this paper in the idyllic setting of Durham University. Special thanks are due to Lord Richard Luce, Ambassador Richard Muir, Professor Anoush Ehteshami, Professor Martyn Evans, and Mr. Francis Gotto for their support of my project. I would also like to apologize for having cited so many of my own publications here. But I have been studying this subject since 1982, and it is in these that I have stored up what all I have learned about it, including from numerous conversations I have had over the years in Arabia and the Gulf, Russia, and elsewhere.

## BIOGRAPHY

Mark N. Katz is Professor of Government and Politics at the George Mason University Schar School of Policy and Government. He is the author of *Russia and Arabia: Soviet Foreign Policy toward the Arabian Peninsula* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), and numerous journal, newspaper, and other articles about Moscow's relations with Arabia and the Gulf since then. He is currently a member of the Scientific Advisory Council of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. Links to many of his publications can be found on his website: [www.marknkatz.com](http://www.marknkatz.com)

## INTRODUCTION

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In comparing Soviet era and Putin era foreign policies toward Arabia and the Gulf, a striking similarity emerges. In both eras, Moscow's foreign policy has been characterized not so much by a grand design but by an opportunistic approach that seeks to have good relations simultaneously with both anti-Western and pro-Western actors, including those bitterly opposed to each other. At the heart of Moscow's approach both then and now has been an effort by Moscow to balance between opposing parties and thereby derive benefits from both. Moscow's logic in both eras seems to have been based on the expectation

**“THIS WILL SHED LIGHT ON THE ENDURING NATURE BOTH OF THE FOREIGN POLICY GOALS THAT MOSCOW PURSUES IN THIS REGION AND OF THE MEANS BY WHICH IT DOES SO...”**

pursuing a revolutionary foreign policy and in the Putin era when Russia has been pursuing a status quo-oriented foreign policy. This will shed light on the enduring nature both of the foreign policy goals that Moscow pursues in this region and of the means by which it does so. I will argue, though, that Putin has been more successful at this approach than the Soviets were, but that it still involves important limitations and risks for Moscow.

Moscow, of course, has not just pursued this balancing between adversaries strategy in Arabia and the Gulf, but has done so in other regions—or would certainly like to. Nor is Russia the only great power to have adopted this approach. The question being addressed here, though, is how successful Moscow has been in pursuing this approach in this one key region.

I will first describe the similar balancing efforts that Moscow pursued (sometimes successfully and sometimes not) during both the Cold War and the Putin eras toward the countries of this region: Saudi Arabia; the smaller Arab Gulf states; the Yemen(s); and Iraq and Iran. I will then examine the broader similarities in Moscow's foreign policies toward the region during both eras, and discuss their strengths and weaknesses then and now.

**“...HOW SUCCESSFUL MOSCOW HAS BEEN IN PURSUING THIS APPROACH...”**

that governments and other actors will calculate that they are better off having good relations with Moscow despite its support for their adversaries since Moscow might well support those adversaries even more otherwise.

This paper will show how Moscow has often pursued this “balancing between adversaries” approach in Arabia and the Gulf both in the Cold War when the Soviet Union was

# SAUDI ARABIA

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## *Soviet Era*

Moscow first recognized the government of Abd al-Aziz Al Sa'ud in 1926, seeing him as a fellow ally against British imperialism. The relationship, though, went dormant in 1937-38 when Stalin recalled his emissary (a Soviet Muslim) to Moscow, had him arrested and then executed, and King Abd al-Aziz refused to accept a replacement for him.<sup>1</sup> Later, after both Stalin and Abd al-Aziz had passed away, Moscow attempted to restore relations on several occasions beginning under Khrushchev in the mid-1950s, but these all proved unsuccessful until 1990.

Over the years, Moscow advanced numerous arguments to try to persuade the Saudis to do so, including that the Kremlin and the Kingdom were both critical of Israeli policy and of American support for the Jewish state, and even that Washington was more likely to take Saudi Arabia seriously if the possibility of Saudi-Soviet cooperation was real.

Between the mid-1950s and 1990 when Saudi-Soviet relations actually were restored at the end of the Cold War, there were several occasions when this goal seemed about to be achieved but something always happened to prevent it.

Saudi-Soviet relations were reportedly on the brink of being restored when in August 1956 King Sa'ud fell out with Nasser, whom Soviet support for was growing. Similarly, a Saudi-Soviet rapprochement—possibly including Saudi arms purchases from Moscow—was on the brink of occurring when Arab Nationalist revolutionaries overthrew the North Yemeni monarchy and initially called for revolution throughout the entire Arabian Peninsula. For several years, the Saudis supported the royalists fighting against the Egyptian- and Soviet-backed republicans in a civil war there.

In the latter part of the 1970s, Crown Prince Fahd appeared willing to allow the normalization of Saudi-Soviet relations, but the 1977-78 Soviet-Cuban intervention in the Horn of

Africa set back this prospect. It was revived in 1979, but the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan that began at the end of 1979 ended it for over a decade.<sup>2</sup>

In April 1984, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Sa'ud al-Faysal laid out four conditions necessary for the restoration of Saudi-Soviet relations: 1) a complete Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan; 2) an end to hostile Soviet propaganda against Saudi Arabia; 3) the withdrawal of Soviet and allied forces from Ethiopia and South Yemen; and 4) freedom for Muslims to practice their religion in the USSR.<sup>3</sup> At the time, it appeared that none of these conditions would ever be met. But a few short years later with the changes brought in under Gorbachev, they all were. Even then, relations between Moscow and Riyadh were not restored until September 1990, just after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Saddam's action profoundly threatened the Kingdom. Not only did Moscow refuse to support him (as it had Nasser's earlier intervention in North Yemen), but Soviet leader Gorbachev began supporting UN Security Council resolutions aimed at reversing Saddam Hussein's actions. And so in the face of a dire threat to Saudi security that the USSR was siding with the Kingdom on, Saudi-Soviet relations were finally restored.<sup>4</sup>

What the successive failures of Soviet efforts just to restore diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia showed is that while Moscow genuinely sought improved ties with the Kingdom, before 1990 it did not prioritize doing so enough to forego supporting the Kingdom's regional rivals or undertaking actions itself that Riyadh found highly threatening. It is not difficult, then, to understand why these Soviet efforts failed. Indeed, what seems more surprising is that Moscow actually thought it could take actions Riyadh found threatening and yet improve relations with the Kingdom anyway. And yet this is exactly what Putin has managed to do.

## *Putin Era*

Despite the restoration of Saudi-Soviet relations in 1990, ties between Moscow and Riyadh did not even enjoy the temporary warmth that Russian relations with the West experienced in the early 1990s. Indeed, there are Russians who even now believe that Saudi Arabia played a large part in bringing about the collapse of the Soviet Union through causing a military stalemate for Soviet forces in Afghanistan by its aid to the mujahidin, and through gravely weakening the petroleum export dependent Soviet economy by ramping up Saudi oil production which resulted in a prolonged low oil price environment.<sup>5</sup> In the 1990s and early 2000s, numerous Russian officials accused the Saudis of supporting rebels in Chechnya and other Muslim regions of Russia. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks in the United States, Putin frequently emphasized how fifteen of the nineteen bombers were Saudis, and tried to get Washington to

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view Saudi Arabia as a common threat to both the US and Russia as a result of the support from sources within the Kingdom for Al Qaeda and the Chechen rebels.<sup>6</sup>

But after the deterioration in Russian-American relations that followed the Bush Administration’s pullout from the 1972 Soviet-American Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the US-led intervention in Iraq, Putin reversed course and started pursuing improved relations with Saudi Arabia against what he described as a common American threat.

The visit of Crown Prince Abdallah to Moscow in 2003 ushered in a new era of friendly relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia. Putin himself visited Riyadh in 2007 with a large delegation of Russian businessmen seeking Saudi trade and investment.

The Saudis seemed willing to oblige, but only if Moscow distanced itself from Riyadh’s regional rival, Tehran. The Saudi theory about Putin’s motivation was that he was mainly interested in money, and so if Riyadh made clear that it did not want Russia selling weapons or other sensitive items to Iran but also that Riyadh was willing to surpass Tehran as a trade and investment partner for Moscow, Putin would comply with Saudi wishes. This expectation, though, was inaccurate. Putin wanted improved relations with

the Kingdom, but was not willing to give up much, if anything, in terms of Russia’s relations with Iran to achieve this.<sup>7</sup>

Saudi-Russian relations deteriorated when the “Arab Spring” spread to Syria, and Moscow and Riyadh found themselves on opposite sides with Russia defending the Assad regime while Saudi Arabia (among others) supported Sunni Arab opposition forces fighting against him. What especially bothered Riyadh was that Moscow’s actions in Syria were enabling Iran to maintain influence in that country.<sup>8</sup> After having been courted by Putin earlier in 2015, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) initially felt betrayed by the initiation of Russia’s direct military intervention in Syria that began in September 2015 and the subsequent weakening of the Syrian opposition forces that Riyadh had been supporting.<sup>9</sup>

Since 2016, though, Saudi-Russian relations have improved. This has been partly due to Russia joining Saudi Arabia and other OPEC members in cutting back oil production in order to prop up oil prices that had fallen as a result of the expansion of American shale oil production. This was definitely a Russian concession to Riyadh, as Moscow had refused previous Saudi calls for it to join OPEC in cutting back production. Another factor leading to improved relations has been a change in Saudi strategy toward Moscow: instead of

holding back on trade and investment with Russia until it distanced itself from Iran, Riyadh has gone ahead with increasing these. Especially noteworthy has been the recent Saudi expression of interest in buying S-400 air defense missile systems from Russia at a time when Moscow has only sold the less sophisticated S-300 version to Tehran (and even then after much delay).<sup>10</sup>

Finally, not only has Riyadh “agreed to disagree” with Moscow on Syria while cooperating elsewhere, but the Saudis seem to have accepted Moscow’s logic that if they truly fear Iran in Syria, then Riyadh is better off if Russian forces are there to constrain Iran than if they are not.



## SMALLER ARAB GULF STATES

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### *Soviet Era*

The one Arab Gulf state that Moscow had good relations with after its independence was Kuwait. But not at first; indeed, just after Kuwaiti independence in 1961, the Soviet Union—that then had close ties to the anti-Western regime in Iraq, which laid claim to Kuwait as rightfully belonging to it—twice vetoed Kuwait's application to join the United Nations on the grounds that its security agreement with the UK meant that it was not “really” independent. But after a change of regime in Baghdad led to a falling out with Moscow, the Soviets did recognize Kuwait in 1963 and allowed it to join the UN. Soviet-Iraqi relations would later recover, and the Kuwaitis were especially dismayed in 1973 when Moscow gave verbal support to an Iraqi border incursion against Kuwait and when Soviet-Iraqi military ties increased. Kuwait's reaction to this, however, was to court Moscow through seeking to buy Soviet arms, and so give the Kremlin an incentive to restrain Iraq. The first deal took several years to negotiate and was smaller than

initially foreseen, but was finally agreed to in 1977. After that, Kuwait went on to buy more Soviet arms during the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> The relationship reached new heights in 1987 when Moscow accepted Kuwait's request to register some of its oil tankers with the Soviet flag (others were registered with the American one) in order to deter further Iranian attacks against them during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>12</sup>

Good relations with Kuwait provided several benefits to the USSR. First, Kuwait actually paid for the weapons and other goods it bought from the USSR, unlike so many of Moscow's radical allies. Second, Moscow was able to hold out its good relationship with Kuwait as an example of how other conservative Arab monarchies could similarly benefit from relations with the Soviet Union. Third, Moscow saw Soviet prestige as being enhanced through being seen by a pro-American government such as Kuwait as being able to moderate the behavior of a pro-Soviet adversary such as Iraq.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, of course, the Soviet Union did not succeed at this in August 1990 when Iraq

invaded Kuwait. Up to this point, though, Moscow benefited from the Kuwaiti government courting the USSR through arms purchases and other means in the belief that the USSR could and would do this.

Moscow attempted to establish relations with Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates when they became independent in 1971, but was largely unsuccessful. Bahrain and Qatar refused even to establish diplomatic ties while the UAE did agree to do so, but not to exchange embassies. Moscow's vocal support for the South Yemeni backed Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf and the Bahrain National Liberation Front was not reassuring.<sup>14</sup> It was only in the Gorbachev era when Moscow's foreign policy toward them had clearly become non-threatening that the UAE and the USSR finally exchanged embassies in 1986-87, and diplomatic ties were established between the USSR and Qatar in 1988 and Bahrain in 1990 (when Saudi-Soviet ties were restored).<sup>15</sup>

The Soviet attitude toward Oman was particularly negative in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of two interrelated factors: the close ties between Oman on the one hand and the UK, US, and the Shah of Iran on the other, and the expectation that the South Yemeni-backed Marxist insurgency in Oman would succeed. Soviet commentators seemed genuinely shocked when Oman (with British, Iranian, and Jordanian military support) defeated what had been renamed the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (a title reflecting its diminished aspirations vis-à-vis the rest of the Gulf) by 1976. This really did seem unusual at a time when Marxist insurgencies were succeeding elsewhere during the 1970s. Soviet hopes for the Omani revolution briefly revived after the departure of Iranian troops from there in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, but quickly subsided when these proved fruitless.<sup>16</sup> Soviet-Omani ties were finally established in 1985 in a move that reflected Omani confidence that South Yemen was no longer a threat as well as a desire to show a degree of diplomatic independence vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia.<sup>17</sup>

### *Putin Era*

Russia has had generally good relations with all the smaller Gulf Arab states under Putin. From Moscow's viewpoint, its best relationship has arguably been that with the UAE—as was shown by the signing of a UAE-Russia “Declaration of Strategic Partnership” by Putin and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed on 1 June 2018.<sup>18</sup> While the UAE regards Iran as a mortal threat and is unhappy with Russian support for Tehran, the UAE has still purchased large quantities of Russian weapons as well as traded with and invested in Russia.<sup>19</sup> This is an example that Moscow wants others—especially Saudi Arabia—to emulate.

Russia does not trade all that much with Bahrain, but values highly its relationship with Manama. While Iran has provided verbal (and perhaps other) support for opposition forces from the island nation's Shi'a majority seeking to change the policies of Bahrain's Sunni monarchy, Moscow has expressed support for the latter. In doing so, Moscow seems to be trying to set a "good example" for the West and the Arab Gulf states: just as Moscow supports the legitimate government of Bahrain against its opponents, they should support what Moscow constantly refers to as the legitimate government of Syria against its.<sup>20</sup>

Moscow's ties with Qatar have been more contentious at times. Like some Arab governments, Moscow has seen Qatar as a supporter of Islamist groups, including ones from Chechnya earlier and Syria more recently. Russia has also seen Qatar's massive liquefied natural gas exports as undercutting Russian gas sales. Yet Moscow has also sought, and received, large-scale investment

## “MOSCOW'S TIES WITH QATAR HAVE BEEN MORE CONTENTIOUS...”

from Qatar. Perhaps as a result of this, Moscow has pursued an even-handed approach in the dispute between Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt on the other. Putin offered to mediate in this dispute, but Saudi Arabia and its allies have not shown much interest in this offer from Russia (or similar ones from Kuwait and the Trump administration). Like the West, Russia genuinely does not wish to choose between the two sides as it wants to continue enjoying the advantages of doing business with both.<sup>21</sup>

Moscow's ties with Oman have also been good, though relatively quiet.<sup>22</sup> While Russian relations with Kuwait have also continued to be good, Kuwait has not put as much emphasis on relations with Russia as have Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar.<sup>23</sup> After the trauma of being occupied by Saddam Hussein's forces in 1990-91 which Moscow was unable to prevent, Kuwait has relied principally on the US and Saudi Arabia for protection.

## THE YEMEN(S)

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### *Soviet Era*

The Soviet Union was deeply involved in the affairs of North and South Yemen during the Cold War. Moscow had established ties to the Kingdom of (North) Yemen in 1928 which went dormant in the late 1930's until they were revived under Khrushchev in 1955. Moscow even sent military assistance to the monarchical government,<sup>24</sup> but very quickly recognized the declaration of the Egyptian-backed Yemen Arab Republic when it was proclaimed in September 1962. From then until the withdrawal of Egyptian forces from Yemen following the Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Moscow provided weaponry and logistics support for Nasser's large-scale intervention to protect the republicans from the Saudi-backed royalists.<sup>25</sup> Because Moscow saw Nasser as its main ally in the Middle East and because Cairo supported the Nasserist opposition to British rule in what would become South Yemen (then known as South Arabia), Moscow too favored them instead of the Marxist opposition there. It was

only because British forces targeted the Nasserists more and Egyptian support for them ended with Egypt's withdrawal from the North that the Marxists were in position to seize power when the UK withdrew from the South at the end of 1967.<sup>26</sup>

After the Egyptian withdrawal, royalist forces surrounded the republicans in what became known as the "Siege of Sana'a." The republic, though, was saved due to a Soviet airlift and also to the royalists falling out with one another. But over the course of the next few years, Soviet influence with the republicans declined as they made their peace with Saudi Arabia while Moscow focused on competing with China for influence in Marxist South Yemen. In 1978, the leadership struggle in the South was won by pro-Soviet leader, Abd al-Fatah Isma'il, who wanted to "export revolution" to neighboring countries. He backed the National Democratic Front opposition fighting against the government in the North, and in 1979 war ensued between the Saudi/US-backed North and the Soviet-backed South. The US agreed to sell arms

to Saudi Arabia to be transferred to North Yemen, but the Saudis (who were as fearful of a well-armed North Yemen as they were of a well-armed South Yemen) proved unwilling to actually make the transfer. North Yemeni leader 'Ali Abdallah Salih reacted by asking the USSR to provide weapons—which Moscow not only agreed to but actually delivered in late 1979–early 1980. Thus it came to be that North Yemen received Soviet military support in fighting and defeating the Soviet/South Yemeni-backed NDF insurgency by 1982—and Moscow gained influence in non-Marxist North Yemen while retaining it in Marxist South Yemen.<sup>27</sup>

This process was aided by Moscow when it cooperated with the ouster and exile to the USSR of the pro-Soviet South Yemeni leader, Isma'il, who wanted to export South Yemen's revolution, and his replacement by 'Ali Nasir Mohammad, a more moderate pro-Soviet leader who wanted to improve relations with Saudi Arabia, Oman, and later North Yemen. Apparently worried that 'Ali Nasir might be too moderate, the Soviets allowed Isma'il to return to South Yemen in 1985, perhaps for the sake of political "balance." Whatever Moscow's motive, this resulted in disaster: in January 1986, a short, intense civil war took place in which Isma'il and several of his associates were killed, 'Ali Nasir and some of his associates fled to North Yemen, and Moscow at first seemed utterly confused about whom to support.

It ended up, though, supporting 'Ali Salim al-Baidh, an Isma'il supporter, but the ruling party was greatly weakened.<sup>28</sup> With Gorbachev's retreat from the Third World and the end of Soviet support for South Yemen, al-Baidh agreed to the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. As I learned through my participation in a conference sponsored by the Yemeni Foreign Ministry in Sana'a in 1992, both northerners and southerners regretted the downfall of the Soviet Union, the end to Soviet military and economic assistance, and the ability to play Moscow off against Washington and Riyadh.<sup>29</sup>

(Power was to have been shared between Salih and al-Baidh, but the former quickly gained the upper hand. Al-Baidh and his supporters tried to reassert South Yemeni independence in 1994, but this effort was defeated by Salih in conjunction with Islah, a party that groups powerful northern tribes with Islamist elements linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.)<sup>30</sup>

### ***Putin Era***

Moscow did not show much interest in Yemen during most of the Putin era. Unlike his Soviet predecessors, Putin was not interested in providing weapons to customers who could not pay or engage in economic relations where there was little prospect of gain for Russia.

When the Arab Spring came to Yemen in 2011, Moscow supported the Saudi-backed plan to transfer power

from the increasingly beleaguered Salih to his vice president, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi. But Salih, who remained in Yemen, soon joined forces with his erstwhile adversaries, the Houthis in Yemen's far north, and drove the Hadi government out of Sana'a, forcing it to flee first to Aden and then to Riyadh—which launched a military intervention in Yemen in 2015 against the Houthis.<sup>31</sup>

Iran has supported the Houthis, though the latter are by no means under the control of the former. Moscow, by contrast, has continued to recognize the Hadi government (as has most of the international community). Yet while most countries withdrew their embassies from Sana'a after it was overrun by the Houthis, Russia maintained its for quite a while. As with Moscow's friendly ties with the besieged Bahraini monarchy, Moscow's continued recognition of the Hadi government may be intended to set an example of working with established, "legitimate" governments facing domestic opposition that it wants others to follow with the Assad regime in Syria. On the other hand, Houthi delegations have been received in Moscow and enjoyed favorable coverage in the Russian media. Doing this might be intended as a message to Saudi Arabia that if the Kingdom continues supporting the Assad regime's opponents, Russia could behave similarly in Yemen.<sup>32</sup> Still, the Houthis are not the only Yemeni oppositionists that Moscow has been talking with. Moscow maintained good relations with Salih up until he was killed by the Houthis in December 2017 when he was reportedly about to break with them and work with the Saudis in order to regain power.<sup>33</sup>

Whether intended as such or not, the presence of former South Yemeni President 'Ali Nasir Muhammad at the 2017 and 2018 Valdai Club conferences on the Middle East in Moscow was seen as a sign that Russia also looks favorably upon the resurgent independence movement in the South. Moscow has offered to help mediate a settlement among the warring Yemeni parties, but Putin does not seem willing for Russia to become as deeply involved in Yemen as it is in Syria.

## IRAQ AND IRAN

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### *Soviet Era*

Unlike the Arab world with which Tsarist Russia had only episodic contact, Russian-Persian relations stretch back for centuries, with Russia gaining increasing advantage over Iran in the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>34</sup> Soviet-Iranian relations between 1917 and 1941 were marked by episodes of contention as well as cooperation too numerous to discuss here.<sup>35</sup> Iran became one of the first Cold War crises when the Soviet Union, unlike Britain, proved unwilling to withdraw the forces they had sent to occupy Iran after Germany invaded the USSR to ensure that Tehran did not ally with Berlin. Moscow's support for Marxist secessionists in Iranian Azerbaijan did not help improve relations either. While this incident became a Soviet-American crisis, the Soviets withdrew their forces more as a result of the Iranian government signing an agreement granting oil concessions to the USSR which the Iranian parliament then refused to ratify after the completion of the Soviet withdrawal.<sup>36</sup> The 1953 episode in which the nationalist prime minister,

Mohammad Mosaddeq (whom Washington and London regarded as pro-Soviet, but whom Moscow actually had little regard for),<sup>37</sup> was ousted with the help of the British and American governments resulted in the Shah moving closer to the Western camp. Moscow was not at all pleased when the pro-Western monarchies in both Iran and Iraq joined the anti-Soviet Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1955.<sup>38</sup>

Moscow established diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Iraq in 1944, but relations were not close due to the monarchy's strong ties to the UK. The 1958 revolution in Iraq, though, brought to power an Arab nationalist regime in Baghdad that saw the West and Israel as its main opponents and the USSR as an ally against them. But with Moscow's clear favorite Arab Nationalist leader being Egypt's Nasser with whom Baghdad was usually at odds, Soviet-Iraqi relations did not proceed smoothly. There was even a severe downturn in them during the Ba'th Party's brief first period in power in 1963. Better relations developed after the Ba'th

came to power again in 1968, but there were always tensions in them because each pursued policies that the other disliked, including the Ba'th regime's violent suppression of the pro-Soviet Iraqi Communist Party and the USSR's establishing close relations and even selling arms to Kuwait, which Baghdad claimed rightfully belonged to it.<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, despite his pro-Western orientation, Moscow managed to establish good working relations with the Shah and provided economic assistance to Iran in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>40</sup> The downfall of the Shah in 1978-79 gave rise to hope in the USSR (and fear in the West) that the demise of his pro-Western regime would lead to the rise of a pro-Soviet one—as had been the standard pattern when pro-Western Third World regimes collapsed during the Cold War up until then. Instead, the Shah was replaced by an Islamic revolutionary regime led by Ayatollah Khomeini who was anti-Soviet as well as anti-Western. Soviet-Iranian relations deteriorated further when the USSR invaded Afghanistan, just to the east of Iran, in December 1979, and even further still when Moscow's ally, Saddam Hussein, invaded Iran in September 1980.<sup>41</sup> Moscow at first tried to distance itself from Saddam's action in an effort to improve ties to Iran, but when the tide of war turned and Iranian forces moved into Iraqi territory, the Soviet Union provided significant support to Baghdad.<sup>42</sup> But far from this making Iraq more subservient to Moscow, Saddam took advantage of Western and Arab Gulf fears of Iran to improve relations and receive various forms of support from them too.<sup>43</sup>

By the time the war ended in August 1988, Baghdad had relatively good relations not just with the USSR, but also with the West and the Arab Gulf states. But, as noted above, these turned sour when Saddam invaded Kuwait two years later. At that point, Gorbachev was not willing to defend Saddam, but instead supported (though did not join) the coalition that expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait.<sup>44</sup> The end of the Iran-Iraq war combined with the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the death of Khomeini set the stage for Gorbachev and then Yeltsin to improve relations with Khomeini's successors.<sup>45</sup>

### *Putin Era*

While Russia was largely inactive in Arabia and the Gulf in the 1990s, Russian foreign policy under Yeltsin did pay attention to both Iran and Iraq. During the 1990s, Moscow sold arms to Tehran and agreed to complete the Bushehr nuclear reactor that the German firm Siemens had begun but ceased work on after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Tehran, though, was not happy that Moscow promised the US to limit its military cooperation with Iran in the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement (named after the American vice president and Russian prime minister who signed it) that was supposedly

secret but the general terms of which were well known.<sup>46</sup> And under the direction of long-time Soviet Arabist Yevgeny Primakov as Yeltsin's foreign minister and then prime minister, Moscow rebuilt its ties with Saddam Hussein. Moscow called for the end to UN Security Council sanctions against Iraq imposed after it invaded Kuwait but took advantage of their continuation to sign oil agreements that were to come into effect after their lifting as well as conduct large-scale sub rosa trade with Baghdad.<sup>47</sup>

In 2000, not long after he became president, Putin renounced the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement and a large Russian arms sale to Iran was proclaimed. Many saw the emergence of a Moscow-Tehran alliance, yet relations stalled over continued differences over how to divide the Caspian Sea (and its petroleum riches) after the breakup of the USSR, and seemingly endless delays in Russian work on the Bushehr nuclear reactor. In addition, Moscow feared that the reformist Iranian president, Khatami, was willing to improve relations with Washington at Russia's expense, while Tehran feared that Putin was willing to improve relations with the US at Iran's expense.<sup>48</sup> Russian-American relations did improve after Putin supported the Bush Administration in the wake of 9/11, but Putin fell out with the US over the Bush Administration's policy toward Iraq. While Putin (like many of America's Western allies) expressed opposition to the principle

of intervention without UN Security Council approval, Moscow also seemed just as concerned about the potential loss of Russian contracts Moscow had signed with Baghdad after the downfall of Saddam and US unwillingness to guarantee that the new government would honor them.<sup>49</sup>

Yet despite its objections to the US-led intervention, Moscow cultivated good relations with the new government of Iraq that the US set up. Moscow did not openly compete for influence in Baghdad either with the US before its 2011 withdrawal or with Iran afterward when each was the predominant external power there. Russian petroleum firms have acquired an important stake in Iraq, and Baghdad has become a major buyer of Russian arms. The Shi'a dominated Iraqi government views positively the Russian-Iranian intervention to prop up the Assad regime in Syria, and even provides some support for it. Russia (along with many other governments) also has good relations with the Kurdish Regional Government in the north where Russia has also acquired oil interests without unduly antagonizing Baghdad which wants to assert its authority over this region.<sup>50</sup>

Tensions in Russian-Iranian relations persisted into the 2000's over issues such as continued delays in Russia completing the Bushehr nuclear reactor, Moscow cancelling the sale of S-300 air defense missile systems under Medvedev, increased Russian

## “A NUMBER OF ISSUES DIVIDE MOSCOW AND TEHRAN...”

cooperation with Iran's adversaries Israel and Saudi Arabia, and Russia's voting in favor of UN Security Council sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program (Moscow argued that it acted to water these down, but Tehran wanted Russia to veto them outright).

Russian-Iranian relations have grown closer, though, when both Moscow and Tehran gave support to the Assad regime in suppressing its opponents beginning in 2011, Russia finally completed the Bushehr nuclear reactor in 2012, Russia directly intervened in Syria beginning in 2015 in support of the beleaguered Assad regime and its Iranian supporters, and later agreed to deliver the S-300s to Iran after all.

Still, a number of issues divide Moscow and Tehran, including their continued inability to agree on how to divide the Caspian, Moscow's close relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia (including the galling prospect of Moscow selling S-400s to Riyadh when it has only sold S-300s to Tehran), differing approaches to the conflicts in Bahrain and Yemen, and—now that the battle against Assad's Arab opponents has largely been won—differing views about the future of Syria.<sup>51</sup>

## BROADER COMPARISONS

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In both the Soviet and the Putin eras, Moscow's foreign policy toward Arabia and the Gulf has not been limited to supporting anti-Western governments and movements, but has usually sought good relations with pro-Western governments as well. When there has been tension or conflict between regional actors, Moscow's policy in both eras has usually been neither to side definitively with its anti-Western allies against their pro-American adversaries nor to remain neutral. Instead, Moscow has often sought to avoid choosing between adversaries, but to cooperate—sometimes even militarily—when it can with both sides simultaneously. Further, Putin has done this more consistently than his Soviet predecessors (who sometimes did side with one party against another, as it did with South Yemen and guerrilla allies against Oman in the late 1960s and early 1970s).

Moscow's success at balancing between adversaries, of course, has depended on opposing parties within the region cooperating with Moscow

while it is also cooperating with their adversaries. But no regional actor in Arabia and the Gulf, or any other region, likes it when an external power supports its adversaries. This can result in a regional actor not cooperating with Moscow and relying on Moscow's adversaries (principally the United States) instead, as was seen with Saudi Arabia during the Cold War when Moscow's collaboration with the Kingdom's adversaries resulted in its not responding favorably to Moscow's overtures but clinging to Washington instead. But as was also seen, Moscow has managed to cooperate with adversaries simultaneously in Arabia and the Gulf during both the Soviet and Putin eras. And there are reasons for why this can happen, as Moscow undoubtedly anticipated since it has pursued this strategy so often.

Pro-Western governments have obviously turned to America and the West for support when Moscow supports their adversaries, as Saudi Arabia and others have done. But some have calculated that even when receiving support from the

US, they are better off cooperating with Moscow also in order to give it an incentive to restrain their regional adversaries, or at least not support them in their aggressive ambitions. Absent such a friendly relationship with it, they often fear, Moscow may have much less incentive to restrain these regional adversaries. And a pro-Western government may also hope that having friendly relations with Moscow is more likely to cause doubt among their anti-Western adversaries about whether Moscow will support or oppose their hostile actions against it.

Anti-Western actors, of course, are not at all pleased when Moscow has friendly relations with their pro-Western adversaries in the region. But while they may be unhappy, they may—as Moscow well understands—have little choice but to accept the situation. After all, they are hardly likely to be willing or able to turn to the West for arms in response to Moscow selling arms to pro-Western governments. Turning to another anti-Western power for support might be an option, but there have rarely been any of those during either the Soviet or Putin eras that do not also have or seek good relations with the pro-Western governments of the region, upon which they have been dependent for oil supplies (the one exception was when China supported Yemeni Marxists in South Yemen in the late 1960s and early 1970s—a factor that may have led to Moscow's decision not to balance between Aden and Muscat but to support the former for fear of losing influence to Beijing). Their best option, both they and Moscow may calculate, has been to “grin and bear it” in response to Moscow's friendly ties with pro-Western regimes since they do not really have any other place to go.

Moscow, then, has sought to play the role of great power balancer between regional antagonists giving both sides a strong incentive to court Moscow for support against the other, thereby allowing Moscow to derive benefits from each continuously—so long as Moscow can continue this balancing act. Thus, Moscow has refused Saudi offers of dropping its arms sales and other forms of support for Iran in exchange for far greater economic benefits from Riyadh than Tehran can provide since doing so would not allow Moscow to play the great power balancing role that it seeks.

Putin, though, has been much more successful at this than the Soviets were. This is because in addition to supporting rival governments in the region, the Soviets also supported (even if more rhetorically than substantively in some cases) the internal opponents of the governments it was simultaneously seeking to have good relations with. Further, the monarchies of the region in particular had reason to doubt Soviet professions of friendship after Moscow quickly embraced the Arab Nationalist officers who ousted the Iraqi monarchy

in 1958, and even more dramatically in 1962 when Moscow's Egyptian ally, Nasser, and Yemeni Arab Nationalist officers ousted the North Yemeni monarchy with which Moscow had friendly enough ties with to have sent military advisers to. It appeared that Moscow wanted to improve relations with the region's monarchies in order to more easily overthrow them. Even the Soviets, though, eventually recognized by the early 1980s that supporting Marxist opposition movements that were unable to succeed was counterproductive.

Putin, by contrast, has not supported anti-government opposition forces either in the Arab Gulf monarchies or Iran. He has instead emphasized how Russia is a firm supporter of the status quo in this region, unlike the US whose 2003 intervention in Iraq and 2011 one in Libya resulted in chaos, and whose withdrawal of support for Mubarak in Egypt in early 2011 was followed by the rise of a Muslim Brotherhood leader the next year whom many Gulf Arab governments saw as a threat. Much like the USSR used to support the internal opposition to established governments in the region during the Cold War, it is the United States that has done so more recently—thereby making Moscow, in the Russian account, a more reliable ally to the region's authoritarian governments.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, while Gulf Arabs generally are fearful of Iran's intentions in Syria and unhappy with Russia for allying with it there, they often favorably

compare Putin's steadfast support for Assad with America's lack of support for Mubarak.<sup>53</sup> Putin, though, has got involved with opposing parties inside those countries (Iraq and Yemen in this region) where governments are weak and opposition groups control large parts of the country. But just as with Putin's approach to the governments of the region, his approach to the various forces in countries where governments are weak is not to side with one group against another, but to balance among them all (except jihadist groups) and thereby give them each an incentive to cultivate Moscow.

The fact that Putin is not supporting the internal opponents of the region's stronger governments partly explains why he has been more successful than the Soviets were in having good relations with them. As noted earlier, while the Soviet Union pursued a revolutionary agenda in this region, Putin pursues a status quo one—and so it is not surprising that pro-Western as well as anti-Western governments find Putin a far more congenial partner than the Soviets. But why has Putin pursued a status quo policy in this region? He is not doing so everywhere; in Europe in particular, he is pursuing a revisionist agenda that includes support for anti-democratic nationalist parties.<sup>54</sup> This may simply be because unlike the Soviets, Putin has no illusion that regime change in Arabia and the Gulf will serve Moscow's interests.

The Soviets were optimistic that political change in Arabia and the Gulf (as well as the Middle East in general) would benefit them through bringing to power Arab Nationalist or even Marxist regimes that would be more amenable to Moscow's influence than whatever they replaced.<sup>55</sup> They initially expected that the 1979 Iranian Revolution would eventually have this result, and were quite disillusioned when it became clear that it would not. Putin, by contrast, is highly pessimistic about how political change in this region will affect Russian interests, since he sees the downfall of any of the region's existing authoritarian regimes—especially as a result of American-backed democratization efforts involving forceful regime change—as leading to chaotic situations in which jihadist forces thrive, or even to the rise of a jihadist regime.<sup>56</sup>

Yet while Putin's not supporting the internal opponents of the more stable governments in Arabia and the Gulf is undoubtedly reassuring to them, his support for their regional rivals is not—so making his ability to get along with

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them all while balancing them against one another a remarkable diplomatic accomplishment. And it is certainly possible that the logic of states being better off working with Russia despite its close ties to their adversaries than not doing so and risking even greater Russian support for them will continue to hold. Nevertheless, there are limitations as to how successful this approach can be, and there may even be risks of its breaking down. One limitation has to do with pro-Western governments of the region: even though they see that it is better to work with Moscow despite its aid to their adversaries, they are hardly likely to relinquish their ties to America and the West so long as these are willing to support them. Indeed, an additional reason for them to cooperate with Moscow is to motivate Washington in particular to do more for them because it fears losing influence in the region to Russia.

The Gulf's one avowedly anti-American government, Iran, is obviously not—as Moscow well knows—willing or able to turn to the US for support against Russia. But it does mean that Tehran is constantly wary of Russia, as the

negative Iranian Foreign Ministry reaction to Putin's May 2018 call for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Syria demonstrated.<sup>57</sup> Ironically, the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear accord which has caused a rift between the US and its European allies may create an opportunity for Iran to cooperate with Europe,<sup>58</sup> which could reduce Iranian dependence on Moscow. And all governments in the region want to cooperate with China. For even if, as is likely, Beijing also seeks to avoid choosing sides between the region's rivals but cooperate with them all, China offers one significant advantage over Russia: China buys oil from the region while Russia competes with the countries there in selling it. And with its much larger economy, China's influence in the region could well dwarf Russia's if and when Beijing chooses to exercise it—especially considering Russia's own economic dependence on China.

But independent of these possibilities, there is one serious risk to Putin's approach. Maintaining balance between adversaries indefinitely is not easy. While Putin wants to take advantage of these rivalries to give both sides an incentive to court Moscow, he does not really want them to boil over into conflict that brings in the US and possibly others in on one side. Yet by simultaneously working with Iran on the one hand and the Arab Gulf states (as well as with Israel) on the other, Putin may actually contribute to the outbreak of just such a conflict which could weaken Russian influence—especially with America's traditional allies in the region if the US strongly supports them against Iran while Russia does not.

Moscow, though, seems highly self-confident in its ability to keep on balancing between adversaries in Arabia, the Gulf, and the broader Middle East indefinitely. Indeed, one of Russia's most prominent foreign policy analysts, Dmitri Trenin, recently wrote, "Russia does not ignore the Middle East's treacherous divides: it knows that falling into them can be fatal. It seeks instead to straddle them, forming relationships with opposing parties on the basis of overlapping interests. Russia is busy promoting its own interests with all its partners, fully aware of those parties' own interests. To a significant degree, it works."<sup>59</sup> But a policy of balancing between adversaries cannot be sustained if doing so serves to exacerbate conflict to the point that it undermines the balance.

Resolving conflict between adversaries would be one way to minimize, if not eliminate, this problem. And indeed, Moscow advertises how its good relations with Iran compared to America's poor ones makes Moscow a better interlocutor for the Arab Gulf states in doing so.<sup>60</sup> The ability to talk to different sides in a conflict, though, does not mean that an external great power can actually

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resolve it. Moscow's inability to bring about a settlement between the opposing parties in the Syrian civil war after years of trying testifies to this. And here, it is not just that Moscow cannot get Syrian opposition groups to accept the Assad regime (even though they have been largely defeated), but it cannot get the Assad regime to make any meaningful concessions to the opposition.

That being the case, it is difficult to see how Moscow could get American-supported governments in the region to make any concessions to Iran, or to get a defiant Iran that is in a far stronger position than Assad to make any concessions to them.

Further, since Putin derives his influence in the region from endlessly playing off rival forces against each other, it is unclear that he has the will even if he had the ability to resolve conflicts between them and thereby reduce Russia's leverage over them. Thus, even though Putin has pursued a balancing between adversaries policy in Arabia and the Gulf more successfully than his Soviet predecessors, it appears to be the only policy—with all its attendant limitations and risks—that Putin is both willing and able to pursue in this region.



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