

# Russia's Middle East Policy

## Old Divisions or New?

PONARS Policy Memo No. 429

*Ekaterina Stepanova*

*Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Moscow*

*December 2006*

For years, Russia's role in the Middle East was viewed primarily through its relations with Iran, Iraq, and, more recently, Syria. In 2006, however, a nearly forgotten dimension of Russia's Middle East policy came to the fore with a new escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, this time in Lebanon. Russia has long played an extraneous role in the Quartet on the Middle East, the grouping composed of the United Nations, the European Union, the United States, and Russia. A more proactive Russia has now emerged, however, pursuing policies which, at times, are significantly different than those of the United States. Is Russian activity in the Middle East driven by new dynamics, or are old superpower rivalries in the region resurfacing?

### **Crisis in the Middle East: Beyond Terrorism**

The Israeli-Lebanese conflict and the political advance of Hamas in Palestine have highlighted broad security issues that go beyond conventional concerns of terrorism. One of these issues is the shifting balance between violent nonstate actors (including terrorist groups) and states that support this violence. The balance varies from region to region, but the global trend has steadily shifted in favor of politically and financially autonomous nonstate actors. The change from a state-oriented threat perception, which implied that pressure against state sponsors of terrorism is the best strategy for countering terrorism, is something that some governments have either slowly grasped or deliberately ignored. Even if militant nonstate actors and regional state actors in the Middle East have longstanding links and overlapping interests, it is a gross simplification to view the former as a mere proxy acting on the direct orders of the latter.

This is particularly the case when a state is relatively weak, compared to the non-state actor. Although the latter may retain militant potential and resort to terrorism – a source of concern to neighboring states – it can also be an important political actor, like Hizballah in Lebanon, representing a large domestic constituency. Of critical importance is not so much the relative strength of the state, in terms of the degree of its centralized control, but rather its functionality under given regional, political, economic, ethnic, and religious constraints. In a fragmented, multifactional, post-conflict state such as Lebanon, the state has to be relatively weak and decentralized in order to sustain political stability, intercommunal balance, and socioeconomic development, with its functions limited in many ways to those of an arbiter. It cannot be forcibly strengthened and centralized overnight without threatening its domestic functionality, restored with great difficulty after decades of civil war and interventions by regional meddlers. If the international community insists that the security functions of such a state should be radically enhanced, it must be ready to bear the main burden of such efforts.

Not only might a nonstate actor be strong enough to prevent the state from disarming it, its strength within society may be such that it cannot be destroyed without also destroying its civilian base and destabilizing the entire state by ruining its political and intercommunal equilibrium. Any solution to this dilemma requires balancing security and state functionality. This balance cannot be achieved by military means. It requires the domestic political transformation of major militant nonstate actors whose functions go beyond violence. Such a transformation should be supported by international security assistance to vulnerable state actors; some security guarantees to all parties concerned, including both Israel and its Arab neighbors; and efforts to limit directly destabilizing involvement by all regional meddlers. In the long run, however, these measures will be ineffective unless the remaining incompatibilities between the parties are addressed by reinvigorating the Middle East peace process, something which itself can be facilitated, in a broader regional context, by reducing violence in Iraq.

Indeed, the main cause of regional instability may be linked more directly to the impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, aggravated by the deteriorating crisis in Iraq, than to the specifically malevolent policies of *any* particular regional player. Lebanon prior to the 2006 war was a state recovering from protracted civil war and capitalizing on the end of Israeli and Syrian occupation. Against this backdrop, it appeared to be a relatively bright spot in terms of domestic stabilization, reconciliation, and socioeconomic development.

## **The Four Pillars of Russia's Middle East Policy**

Divisions over the Lebanese crisis surfaced at the 2006 G8 summit in St. Petersburg, which was overshadowed by events in the Middle East. G8 members differed in their opinions as to the causes of the war, their assessments of Israel's response, and their proposals on how to resolve the conflict. The United States exhibited almost unconditional support for Israel to defend itself against what President Bush labeled a "quartet of terror" – Hizballah, Hamas, Syria, and Iran. France and Russia, on the other hand, deemed Hizballah's hostage-taking and missile strikes unacceptable, but insisted that nonviolent options were not exhausted and that military escalation would only

aggravate the situation. They blamed Israel for overreacting, killing many civilians and destroying Lebanon's civil infrastructure. The nuances among the critics of Israeli intervention were minor; Russian president Vladimir Putin described Israel's reaction as "unbalanced," while European Commission chairman José Manuel Barroso referred to it as "disproportionate."

The array of opinions regarding Israel's intervention in Lebanon was remarkable, since it resembled so closely the range of opinions expressed before the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq. This suggests that disapproval of the Iraq war reflected a certain trend of opposition to military solutions to international disputes, rather than a short-lived concurrence of interests among the key detractors of the war.

Russia's position on the crisis was clearer than at any time in recent years and was based on four pillars. First, Russia views all parts of the Middle East conflict as interconnected and, therefore, calls for internationally-backed diplomatic action in order to deal with any manifestation of the conflict, whether Israeli-Lebanese-Syrian or Israeli-Palestinian. Russia condemned Hizballah's provocative actions in the UN Security Council but strongly supported Lebanon as a victim of Israeli intervention and insisted on UN control over any peace operation. Russia also attempted to re-animate the Arab League's idea to convene a comprehensive peace conference on the Middle East, but this was rejected by the United States and Israel.

Russia currently attempts to make use of its relations with Hizballah sponsors Syria and Iran to induce them to moderate their policies in the Middle East. Russia provides communication channels with both countries, particularly in crisis situations. Russia has also expressed its readiness to launch an investigation into Israeli claims of alleged transfers of Soviet- and Russian-made weapons to Hizballah via third-party nations.

Moscow could take advantage of the window of opportunity that has appeared in the war's aftermath to play an active role in reviving the Middle East peace process, particularly through the UN Security Council. Although Israel did not completely lose the war, its policy of unilateral action failed, which may exert a moderating effect on its position on several issues, including relations with Hamas and territorial disputes with Lebanon and Syria.

The second pillar of Russian policy is engagement with the major nonstate actors of the region. Russia views Hizballah as a key representative of the Lebanese Shia community, with the capability to undermine any conflict resolution efforts if it is left out of the stabilization process. It views Hamas as a major Palestinian actor that earned legitimacy through electoral victory. Neither Hizballah nor Hamas is listed by Russia as a terrorist organization, most likely because Russia's list only includes groups that directly threaten Russia's security. Russia does ban radical Middle Eastern groups known to mount or support terrorist activity against Russia and to have strong transnational jihadi connections (such as Ansar al-Islam and Jund al-Sham). However, Russia seeks to politically engage broader grassroots movements that are not just militant but involved in political, religious, social, humanitarian, and other nonviolent action.

While recognizing Israel's legitimate security concerns and supporting the 1989 Taif

Agreement calling for the disarmament of factional groups in Lebanon, Russia does not believe the full and immediate demilitarization of Hizballah is feasible. Instead, Russia sides with the Lebanese government's position that UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which calls for a permanent cease-fire and lasting solution to conflict, can only be fulfilled through peaceful dialogue and further political engagement with Hizballah.

The third pillar of Russia's policy is economic. Russia – the only major power not dependent on the Middle East for its energy supplies – has re-established economic links and developed new interests in the region, including cooperation with Israel in information technology, communications, energy, and the diamond trade, and military-technical, oil, and gas cooperation with Syria. The recent crisis has also demonstrated Russia's limited but re-emerging donor potential: Russia allocated \$10 million in emergency aid to Palestine in May 2006. Admittedly, this sum still cannot be compared to the volume of financial assistance that the EU (500 million euro in 2005 alone) and the United States (\$400 million) gave to the pre-Hamas Palestinian administration. Nonetheless, Russia's capacity to provide financial assistance makes it a stronger diplomatic player.

Finally, the humanitarian aspects of Russian policy have assumed growing importance, though Russia excludes a peacekeeping role. Russia's decision not to join UN peacekeepers in Lebanon was driven by a reluctance to intervene in a volatile conflict that involved Islamists as one of the warring parties, as well as a reluctance to place its peacekeepers in the line of fire without clear rules of engagement. Objective financial constraints and the need for a peacekeeping contingent to be acceptable to both sides further precluded Russia's involvement in peacekeeping operations.

Instead, Russia chose to concentrate on humanitarian response – a policy that proved to work well in Afghanistan. During the Israeli-Lebanese conflict, Russia sent \$1.75 million worth of emergency aid to Lebanon and conducted an effective evacuation of Russian and CIS citizens from the area. Extending its involvement from emergency relief to longer-term reconstruction assistance, Russia allocated the equivalent of \$20 million to deploy an engineering and de-mining battalion, guarded by ethnic Chechen soldiers, to repair roads and bridges. A decade ago, who could have imagined that Russia's involvement in postwar Lebanon would be similar to that of Sweden: eager to help in infrastructure repair but reluctant to send peacekeepers?

Growing humanitarian involvement is a new and promising direction for Russian foreign policy. In many regional contexts beyond Lebanon, it is more advantageous for Russia to be associated with humanitarian convoys than with armed peacekeepers, let alone military involvement. Even though it is too early to call Russia a major humanitarian power, it is becoming an active reconstruction contractor and a major emergency aid facilitator.

## **Conclusions**

In no way does Russia's position on the latest crisis in the Middle East justify warnings about the revival of Cold War-style regional confrontation. Russia is attempting to capitalize on its few relative advantages, including its ability to talk to all parties involved in the conflict, its geo-economic flexibility, and its role in the UN Security

Council, but it is not attempting to reposition itself as a regional superpower. Moreover, despite differences in dealing with Hizballah or Hamas, Russia and the United States share many objectives, such as a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine.

This explains why, in St. Petersburg, G8 leaders were not only able to unite behind a list of demands addressed to the parties of the Middle East conflict, but also considered some of its broader implications by adopting a Declaration on Stabilization and Reconstruction and calling on the UN to “make the best use of limited resources by focusing on the most vulnerable states.” Generally, the three tenets of Russia’s security cooperation with its G8 partners – countering proliferation, terrorism, and transnational crime – should be supported by a fourth: multilateral and functional, and legitimately humanitarian, reconstruction and possibly even broader peacebuilding efforts in semifunctional post-conflict states.