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## Russia and Eurasia Programme Seminar Summary

# Russia, the Middle East and Political Islam: Internal and External Challenges

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## Russia and the Middle East

### Roland Dannreuther

There is an instinctive tendency when looking at Russia's relations with the Middle East to focus on geopolitical aspects.

There are certainly forces in Russia which see the Middle East region in geopolitical terms. In relation to Syria and Hamas, for example, Russia's approach is resonant of Soviet policy, when attempts were made to destabilise the region and support anti-Western forces. For Russia, relations with Iran and Syria are a strategic card to play. Providing air defences, for example, is a useful lever to promote the importance of Russia in the Middle East, and emphasize the need to consider Russian interests. However, the strategic importance of the Middle East is subordinate to that of the near-abroad.

Russian domestic politics are also a factor. The Kremlin is concerned about outside involvement from the Middle East in Chechnya and the radicalisation of the North Caucasus. Saudi Arabia described the Chechen war as an 'inhuman' attack on the Muslim people. Many insurgents in Afghanistan say they were first radicalised by Russia's actions in Chechnya. The wars in the North Caucasus were a major factor in strengthening a negative perception of Russia in the Middle East.

Russia faced a major challenge to shift that perception, and in many ways has been quite successful. It has suppressed foreign organisations in the Caucasus which it perceived to be dangerous. Russia's opposition to the Iraq war increased its prestige in the Middle East. It has also worked hard to strengthen bilateral relations with many of the states, drawing on a legacy of positive relations during the Soviet period. There has been a targeted effort to represent Russia to the world as a multi-ethnic state which is sympathetic to Islam and not involved in a clash of civilisations. In 2003, Russia was allowed status within the Islamic Conference Organisation, and in 2005 it became a full member.

Another aspect is geo-economics. During the Soviet period this was largely disregarded. Russia now has a hardnosed approach – it is not interested in promoting relations if there is no clear economic return. Maintaining positive relations with countries under economic sanction can bring benefits as there is less competition to Russian exports.

However, this should not be overstated. Russia's economic relationship with more moderate actors in the Middle East is far more important. Its bilateral relationship with Turkey is worth \$18 billion. Russia is also a big market for Turkey and there has been a marked improvement in Russia-Turkey relations in recent years, because of energy, the Iraq war and increasing disillusionment in Turkey with the EU accession process.

Russia's relationship with Israel is also important. They cooperate over counter-terrorism, there is visa-free travel for Russians to Israel, exports total \$2.5 billion and Russia is part of the Middle East Quartet involved in peace negotiations. These factors push Russia towards a pro-Israeli position.

The energy dimension has been critical in improving Russia's relations with certain Middle East states, including Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia did not appreciate the way the Russian leadership branded all radicals in the North Caucasus Wahabis. Vladimir Putin visited Saudi Arabia in 2007, the first presidential visit to the country. Russia and Saudi Arabia are the two largest oil exporters in the world – Russia has used oil as a means to bring the countries closer together. Following his trip to Saudi Arabia, Putin went on to Qatar. Energy experts say that the formation of a 'gas OPEC' is not economically feasible because there is no spot price for gas. Russian officials know this, but discussion of cooperation in the gas market has helped to bring Russia closer to Qatar, Iran and Libya, and is part of a broad strategy to ensure the country's share of the gas market is maintained and Central Asian gas continues to be exported via Russia. The aim is to coordinate policy with key gas-producing countries so that they are not tempted to take market share from Russia in Europe. There are obvious limits to what Russia can do in this sphere. Algeria reneged on an agreement with Gazprom because of French pressure and also because it wanted to develop its own energy relations with Europe.

### **Alexander Pikayev**

If one compares Russia's policy on the Middle East now with the mid-nineties, one has the impression that Moscow is returning to Soviet approaches to the region. However, if you compare Russian policy now to that of the Soviet Union 25 years ago, we can see a sea change in attitudes. The changes in policy are significant and positive.

Russia's policy is no longer driven by ideological interests. The leaders are pragmatic, and this creates more opportunities. It has opened the way to establishing links with many countries, such as Saudi Arabia, which would

have been unthinkable 25 years ago. Soviet policy was framed by a bipolar view: the key foreign policy aim was to undermine US influence, and all other considerations were subordinated to this. Russia's interests may not necessarily coincide with those of the US, but contemporary Russia does not seek to harm American interests per se.

Russia has three major priorities in the region:

First, the Middle East has a bearing on Russia's domestic politics. One sixth of the population of Israel is Russian-speaking. The Networks of families and friends between the countries are vast. 200,000 Israelis still have Russian passports and can vote. When Russia still elected single-constituency Duma representatives (as opposed to deputies elected exclusively from party lists), these voters made a difference. For example, in Tula, which was traditionally part of the red belt, the Communists were concerned how the Israeli-Russian vote would impact on the result. Pro-Israeli groups are also influential in the Russian media. Big business also has strong connections with Israel. Even within government, there are a number of figures who are considered pro-Israeli and would not permit relations to deteriorate beyond a certain point. There is no interest in a return to Soviet policy vis-à-vis Israel.

This is also true of Russia's policy towards the Arab states. The pro-Arabic lobby is not as strong in business or the media. However, Russia has a substantial and growing Muslim population. There is a strong perception that radical Islam is funded from abroad, especially from Saudi Arabia. Immigration from the Caucasus to Turkey and Jordan in the nineteenth century is a significant factor today. It explains why King Abdullah is invited to Moscow so regularly. He is perceived as an important player in Chechnya. Russia tries to balance its relations with Israel and Arabic countries. In the 90s, Russian policy was perceived as being too pro-Israeli, and this created domestic problems.

The second priority is based on geopolitical calculations, which, as with the US, play a significant role in Russia's foreign policy thinking. The Arabic world is seen as an emerging pole in the multipolar system which will eventually replace the current unipolar order. Russia cannot ignore this. This does not mean Russia is investing resources to promote the emergence of this pole. Some Russian academics have questioned whether a unipolar world would be more secure for Russia than a multipolar one. Whatever the reality, Russia is aware that it cannot ignore these trends and needs to invest diplomatic capital to respond to them and capitalise on potential benefits.

The third driver of Russia's policy is business interests, particularly oil and gas. Gazprom's cooperation with countries of the Middle East received considerable attention. There has been discussion of a pipeline linking Turkey and Israel, which could carry Russian gas. Gazprom is also interested in a pipeline linking Nigeria with Libya across the Sahara. There has also been discussion of a 'peace pipeline' linking Iran, Pakistan and India. These projects are likely to be shelved. Some sort of gas consortium is not entirely out of the question; the development of LNG means a global gas market may emerge. It is significant that the proposal to develop a gas consortium came not from Russia but Qatar, which cannot be described as an anti-Western state.

It is often said that the Middle East is an important market for Russian arms exports. This is only true to a certain extent. Arms sales to the region are not a major factor in the Russian economy. They peaked at approximately \$8 billion, which is not a significant sum compared to Russia's overall external trade, and small as a proportion of its overall arms trade, accounting for about 20 per cent. In the Soviet period, Iraq was a major buyer of arms. This is now no longer the case. During the Soviet period arms exports were subsidised. Russia is not interested in returning to such an approach. Russia does not have a policy of selling arms to anti-Western countries per se; the aim is to sell to as many customers as possible. There are some constraints, however. Russia has shown restraint on Iran. The air defence systems promised have still not been delivered. This demonstrates that profit is not the only determinant of Russian policy.

There is a considerable community of Arabists amongst Russia's political elite and a high level of expertise in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov is of course the most famous example. Despite his current position, his influence on Russian thinking on the Middle East is much broader.

If we consider Turkey to be part of the broader Europe, Iran is the largest country in the Middle East in terms of population. Since 2002, its influence has been growing with the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan and regime change in Iraq. Iran is a key state for Russia – and the only state in the region whose sphere of interests overlap with those of Russia. Iran was an important player in efforts to bring an end to the war in Tajikistan and bring about rapprochement between President Rahmon and the Islamist opposition. Russia became an observer member of the Islamic Conference Organisation thanks to Iran's efforts. Iran is now expressing interest in becoming a full member of the SCO. Iran is also a significant trading partner

for the South Caucasus. Iran is a vital land route for Armenia, explaining why Gazprom built a pipeline from Armenia to Iran. There will also soon be a railway from Armenia to Iran financed by Russian capital. Both Moscow and Teheran are unhappy about Western involvement in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia is also growing concerned about Turkey's role in this region. Iran is seen as a possible balancer to limit Turkish influence in the South Caucasus.

### Questions and Discussion

The question of informal links between Russia's nuclear industry and Iran was raised. In the nineties Russia's MinAtom was active at the Bushehr nuclear power station. This was one of the few sources of income for the industry. Now the situation has changed and RosAtom's portfolio is full. It has projects in Bulgaria, China, India and within Russia itself. There are plans to build two dozen reactors, which is beyond its capacity. Against this background, nuclear cooperation with Iran in Bushehr is not so important. RosAtom is run by Sergey Kiriyyenko, who was an articulate member of the pro-Western group in the Kremlin in the early nineties. He is no pro-Iranian diehard. RosAtom is also keen to move into the US market. For these reasons, one can't see RosAtom as a pro-Iranian lobby within government. RosAtom was part of the deal with the US on Iran, including the so-called '1,2,3 agreement' which didn't come into force. The Bush administration initially portrayed Bushehr as a model for future cooperation, in which fresh fuel would be supplied from Russia and spent fuel returned to Russia, to ensure that none was used for reprocessing.

One participant asked how the overthrow of Saddam Hussein has impacted on Russian policy in the Middle East. Iraq was an important partner of the Soviet Union, and good relations continued until the 2003 invasion. Russia opposed the invasion and was angry that it was blocked from involvement in the energy sector after the collapse of the regime. There had been an understanding that Lukoil would be guaranteed entry into the Iraqi energy sector in exchange for Russian support of Security Council resolutions after the invasion. Al Maliki needs to build up the state. A considerable amount of state hardware is based on Soviet technology, so there is an interest in maintaining cooperation. Russia does not want to close the door to the new government. Iraq is a big state, based in a key area. Since the war, it has become the first major Arab nation to be ruled by a Shia majority. How this will affect overall relations in the region is not known. Russia supports Iraq's territorial integrity – it is not interested in the country splitting into three

statelets, believing that this would create a vacuum in a strategically important region. Sympathy for Iraq and its suffering is a common refrain in the Russian media.

A question was asked about how Russia would regard a nuclear Iran. Is this seen as a zero-sum game, as it is in the US? It was argued that Russia has moved away from zero-sum thinking. Iran can't be considered a card which can be conceded in return for improved relations with the West. Iran has its own significance as a regional player. At the same time, the speaker maintained, Moscow wants Iran to remain non-nuclear. It is hoped Iran will continue to cooperate with the international community, but at the same time Russia will continue to support sanctions to induce Teheran to pursue a positive policy. Bushehr is not part of the military infrastructure of the country. Russia will not act in any way which would go against its international obligations. There is much more concern in Germany than Russia about the impact of sanctions on Iran, it was argued. Total bilateral trade is equivalent to \$2 billion, which is not significant. Putin says that he does not currently see any evidence of an Iranian offensive nuclear weapons programme, and this has been supported by CIA sources.

On Russia-Iran relations, another expert argued that there is certainly distrust between the two on issues such as the Caspian Sea delimitation. Russia waters down Security Council resolutions. From the Iranian perspective, Russia is betraying Iran and taking a pro-Western line. The rejection of Russian proposals to enrich uranium inside Russian territory on Iran's behalf was embarrassing for the leadership in Moscow.

It was argued that the dominant view in Moscow is that Russia would win from an end to Iranian isolation. This would allow relations to develop; some businesses are holding back from investing in Iran because they are concerned about US sanctions. At the same time, Iran is a potential competitor as a gas supplier to Europe. However, Iran's massive gas reserves are largely in the south of the country. Northern Iran suffers from an energy deficit, so the country is a long way off being in a position to export large amounts of gas through Turkey to Europe. In addition, like Russia, Iran suffers from an inefficient domestic consumer base due to subsidies on gas, which means levels available for export are low. Consumption is high and the population growing. Without substantial reform of the domestic market, Iran cannot become a major gas exporter.

The question was raised whether Russia would be willing to forego profits from bilateral trade with Iran in order to support the US position. It was argued

that Iran is more important politically than economically. Compared with China or Turkey the economic relationship is insignificant – Japan, Germany, Greece and India have far greater economic interests in the country. Politically, however, Iran is Russia's most important partner to the south. The countries have important overlapping interests in the post-Soviet space and Russia cannot lose sight of this.

One participant pointed out that it is significant that the Kremlin-back television channel Russia Today is available in English and Arabic. This would never have happened in the nineties. It reflects a different domestic and global landscape. Initially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia sought to disengage from involvement outside its 'near abroad'. This changed with Primakov. Since 2000, there has been a much more determined policy of reengagement. There is no clearly defined policy to support any particular side in the region (pro-Arab/Israel/Iran). However, the importance of the domestic factor should not be forgotten.

## **Russia, Political Islam and the North Caucasus**

### **Ruslan Kurbanov**

The Caucasus is ethnically extremely diverse. There are over fifty ethnic groups. It is also politically very diverse. Every ethnic group has its own political model – the region has been described as a museum of political models and states.

Salafi Islam is not new to the Caucasus. It first appeared three hundred years ago from Yemen. The approach of radicals to Jihad is inspired by a desire to return to what they perceive to be the roots of Islam. The reason for radicalisation is not simply socio-economic. Poverty is not new to the South Caucasus. The main reason is the rapid atomisation of traditional societies as a result of modernity and a splitting up of the nuclear structures of society. This has created anxiety about a loss of identity and a desire to defend it from the effects of modernity and globalisation. Muslims who do not see a constructive way to preserve their identity within the modern world have been drawn towards radical thought. Many Muslims in the North Caucasus also face an absence of alternative ways of approaching Islamic thought. There is a lack of educational opportunity, and a basic lack of skills in social management. There is also a heritage of resistance in the Caucasus which



goes back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and did not stop in the Soviet period. This was consolidated by the first and second Chechen wars, especially given the brutal methods employed by Federal troops to stop the resistance, which provoked a violent response. The global Islamic revival has also played a part.

As a result of these processes, groups of young combat groups have sprung up which do not fear Federal troops, talk of Jihad or Islamic revival and exist outside the legal space. The propaganda of such groups is convincing for many young people. There has been a tendency for young intellectuals to join combat groups. Yasin Rasulov is one of the most important ideologues of political Islam, who has argued that young people must unite their efforts. Other key figures include Abu-Zahir Mantaev, Anzor Astemirov and Said Buryatsky. The result of these combat groups coming together has been the development of a new generation of radicals, whose consciousness has been globalised by the 'war on terror'. They have developed a new ideology of Jihad. These new intellectuals are the main forces driving proponents of Ichkerian separatism to abandon such ideas and instead fight for an Islamic Emirate.

A decentralised, leaderless cell structure has developed made up of young men who have left their homes to fight the Russian forces. The new generation is trying to unite with the global Jihad movement and support Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The latter are the model which these groups are trying to follow. This poses a challenge not only to Russia but to the wider Europe and Middle East.

### **Domitilla Sagramoso**

Radical political islam is no longer confined to a Chechen movement. Groups from Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan are coming together. This shows globalising trends. Many groups which used to identify themselves with more peaceful resistance have moved into a more general and violent movement. The main ideologues are Salafis, who emphasis the unity of worship and the need for Sharia law. This was absent from the Chechen resistance movement. The idea that fighters who do not follow the principles of Islam should be excommunicated has gained ground.

The influence from abroad cannot be underestimated, however local aspects remain relevant. The shock of communism and the experience of the collapse of society, compounded by a very challenging socio-economic environment has fed radicalism. The speaker disagreed with the first presenter that

economic factors were not important – the lack of economic prospects in the North Caucasus, especially when compared with marked growth in Russia as a whole since 1999, has provoked feelings of frustration and a distorted view of democracy and market liberalisation. The lack of adequate educational provision is also a factor.

There is a lack of bold, original thinkers who could advance a more modern view of Islam in the North Caucasus and undercut ideologues of religious resistance. A distinction should be drawn between those who choose to live according to Salafi principles and those who are willing to turn to violence to establish Sharia law. In Ingushetia the Islamic component is not as important as one would think. There is a great deal of frustration over the Prigorodnyi Raion (which is part of North Ossetia but claimed by Ingushetia). Radicalisation in the nineteenth century was always focused on resisting the threat of Russian invasion. A similar model applies to the Chechen war.

### Questions and Discussion

One participant asked to what extent combatants in the Caucasus are aware of the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. How strong is the radicalising effect of these conflicts? It was argued that traditional Muslims or Sufi Muslims are not interested in the conflicts in Iraq or Afghanistan. They are very internalised. The younger generation of Salafi Muslims accept the global approach. They see the problems in Israel/Palestine as part of a global struggle. The first Chechen war was part of a traditional resistance to Russia. But the influx of followers as the war developed started to transform the nature of the struggle. The more the West appears to be in conflict with the Muslim world, the more radicalised people will be, including in the North Caucasus. On the websites of young combat groups one can see constant references to the situation abroad.

A question was raised about the importance of traditional teachers of Islam (Ulema) in the Caucasus. Ulema were destroyed by Soviet power in the 1930s. The intellectual tradition of Islam was totally disrupted at this time. Attempts were made to maintain it underground. Ulema are not able to stop the radicalisation of young people. Even the moderate wing of Caucasian Islam was destroyed by the Soviet security services and policies.

One participant queried whether in addition to regional and global drivers of radicalisation, there was also a pan-Russian national movement? It was

argued that with the collapse of the Soviet Union regional spiritual codes started to develop. Russian Muslims are so divided that it is impossible to speak of a national movement. There are major differences between Tatar and Caucasian Muslims. Even in the North Caucasus, there is no single leader. Each republic has its own movement. The moderate elite supports this diversity. Even within Tatar Islam, there are divisions between trends in Siberia and Bashkiria. No one mufti can claim to unite all Muslims. Many ideologues tend to brand their opponents as Wahabis.

A question was raised about the quality of the political approach from Moscow to tackle the problem of radicalisation. It was argued that Russia has a very strong Institute of Oriental Studies, which was influential in the Soviet period. Now this expertise is neglected. Many central decision-makers don't distinguish between different kinds of Islam. There is little idea how to deal with this new generation of Muslims. They exist in a state of ignorance and fear. One of the presenters related how he had spoken to an official in Dagestan, and encouraged him to increase social projects and economic opportunities for young Muslims. He responded that it was not possible as this would merely encourage radical behaviour. The government, at both a national and local level, must follow the principle that Islam is not the problem but part of the solution. Part of the problem is that Moscow approaches radicalism exclusively through the prism of counter-terrorism.