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Alternative Superpowers and the Middle East

**Part I: Russia and the Middle East:
A possible partner for peace?**
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Introduction

The US is currently facing significant challenges in the Middle East and its power and influence in the region could be under threat. This is mainly because of its prolonged conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and its failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as broader geo-political dynamics which have strengthened other actors on the international stage. In this context, there is a question to be asked about the role of *alternative superpowers* asserting their authority in the Middle East. This paper examines Russian ambitions to fill this emerging power vacuum and assesses how Russia may use the opportunity to increase its own strength and influence in the region.

Russia has recently benefited from an economic boom due to high oil and gas prices and a legacy of superpower status that lingers on from the Soviet era. Together, these factors have driven a newly assertive foreign policy agenda in recent years. In this context, Russia could potentially identify the Middle East as a fertile area to challenge US hegemony and assert its own credibility as a global power. Declining US prestige in the region, combined with the potential opportunities for much needed investment in the Russian economy, could drive Russia to pursue an increasingly active policy in the Middle East which would inevitably impact on the balance of power in the region. Furthermore, the election of a new Russian president, although largely viewed as the natural heir to Putin, has raised the question as to whether Russia's foreign policy priorities will be newly defined.

This paper seeks to analyse the main trends and driving forces of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East tracing their policy through the early 1990s and assessing to what ends Russian influence in the region will likely be used. The paper argues that Russia's main foreign policy objectives in the region are threefold; (i) asserting Russian power status (by presenting itself as an alternative power base to the US), (ii) securing investment in the Russian economy from oil rich Gulf states and (iii) minimising Islamic opposition to Russia's actions in Chechnya. Russia's pursuit of these policy objectives has meant that its involvement in the region is not always

constructive. Moscow has developed alliances with Iran and Syria, with lucrative arms deals and political alliances, and its diplomatic efforts to legitimise Hamas have made efforts to bring about an Israeli-Palestinian agreement increasingly difficult. These policies are in direct opposition to those actors who are seeking peace in the region and in many cases challenge Israel's security and the stability of the Middle East.

Given the change in leadership and subsequent potential for a change in direction, coupled with the urgent need to strengthen the current peace process, this paper recommends that the UK and its allies should pursue a policy aimed at encouraging Russia to play a more constructive role, despite the more immediate challenges that such efforts would encounter. It offers a series of recommendations on how Russia could adapt its current policies in order to make it a more constructive player in the region and the peace process specifically. Most importantly, Russia must shift its alliances away from rogue actors who threaten the peace process, towards those striving to engage in talks and bring peace and security to the region. It also explores a number of ways that the UK and its allies could encourage Russia to revise its policy in the Middle East, specifically focusing on steps that the UK and international community could take, like supporting a Moscow Middle East conference, to help meet Russia's growing search for status and prestige.

The collapse of the Soviet Union - Russia in transition

Russian foreign policy has undergone periods of upheaval and change but nonetheless there are ongoing trends that are helpful in explaining Russia's current priorities and analysing how they may change in the future. One of the most significant overarching trends in Russian foreign policy is how it is inextricably tied to Russia's domestic political and economic condition.

During the Cold War, a centralised system of economic and political management was one of the factors that allowed the Soviet Union to pursue the aggressive, expansionist and at times confrontational foreign policy which characterised

the Soviet imperial period. The breakdown of the Soviet Union resulted in the collapse of the Soviet economy and political system thereby eroding the solid domestic foundation which served as the basis for its foreign policy .

In the years following the Soviet Union's collapse, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and, in the first years of his rule, Vladimir Putin, were primarily concerned with domestic affairs. For most of the 1990s Russia had a very unstable economy and a fractious political system. These internal weaknesses meant Russia carried little clout on the world stage and devised modest and defensive foreign policy objectives aimed at protecting Russia's most immediate interests, specifically managing relations with the states of the former Soviet Union (FSU). The legacy of these internal weaknesses continued into the early years of Putin's Presidency, with oil below \$20 per barrel and capital flight still plaguing Russia, his foreign policy, like Yeltsin's, was basically a cautious one.

In the Middle East, the narrow parameters of Russian policy meant that the Arab-Israeli conflict was an afterthought in Moscow. Yeltsin endorsed the US-supported OSLO I (1993) and OSLO II (1995) agreements between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as the Israeli-Jordanian Peace Treaty of 1994, but had no other involvement in the processes or agreements themselves. The Arab-Israeli conflict did not directly impact on immediate Russian interests in the region, specifically focused on former FSU states, and therefore Russia did not invest either significant time or resources in its resolution.

Russia's engagement with other regional actors was also limited during this period and there was little interaction with traditional Soviet allies like Egypt and Syria. This was because they were costly international alliances, in both material and political terms, that Russia could no longer sustain. In Israel, Russia's limited engagement with its enemies in the 1990s was welcomed as a form of neutrality and consequently helped overcome the legacy of hostility between the two countries.

The fact that the Middle East is a region close to Russia's vulnerable southern borders meant that the primary focus of Russian policy during this

period was its relations with Iran and Turkey. These were the two Middle Eastern countries that could most negatively affect Russia's "soft underbelly" - the newly independent states of Transcaucasia and Central Asia – and therefore they were the two countries where Russia felt its immediate interests in the region were most closely tied.

In the case of Turkey, there was initially strong competition over these newly independent regions, particularly evident during the 'activist period' of Turkish President Turgut Ozal (1991-1993) when Russia and Turkey almost went to war over Nagorno-Karabakh¹. In the mid 1990s, despite improving economic relations, Russia and Turkey were at odds over alleged Turkish aid to the Chechen rebellion against Russia and over alleged Russian aid to the Kurdish rebellion against Turkey. However, by the late 1990's the two countries adopted a more cooperative relationship, beginning with the "Blue Stream" natural gas agreement of December 1997 under which Russia became the major supplier of natural gas to Turkey.

In the case of Iran, there was a tacit alignment between the two countries beginning under Yeltsin in 1991. This was based primarily on the fact that Iran was a crucial player in ensuring that calm was maintained along Russia's bordering Central Asian neighbours, clearly demonstrated by Iranian support in quelling the civil war in Tajikistan (1997) where it played a major role in mediating an end to the conflict. Iran was also an important ally because of the symbolic value of securing the friendship of a Muslim country willing to keep a low profile over Russian actions in Chechnya, especially during the first Chechen war of 1994-1996. Iran, in turn, valued Russia as a secure source of arms to help rebuild its forces after the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) and was a good customer for Russian arms and nuclear reactors. The two countries differed over the division of ownership over the Caspian Sea and disagreed on what were the optimal routes for oil and natural gas from Central Asia, but overall relations were friendly and continued to improve under Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin.

The early years of Putin's leadership were a continuation of his predecessor's. Putin's foreign policy was driven by the need to ensure the stability of the newly independent Central Asian and Transcaucasian republics and minimise Islamic opposition to Russia's policies in Chechnya. As part of this strategy, Putin took relations with Iran a step further when in 2000 he broke Russia's promise to end all arms exports to Iran when existing contracts ran out in 1999 by unilaterally abrogating the 1995 agreement between US Vice-President Al Gore and Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin. Furthermore Putin invited Mohamed Khatami, the President of Iran, for a state visit to Russia in March 2001 as a symbol of the close ties between the two nations.

Reassessing Russian priorities in the Middle East

When Putin became Prime Minister in 1999 and President of Russia in 2000, he moved quickly to consolidate his domestic power base. He did so by bringing the Russian media under state control, establishing a dominant supportive party in the Russian parliament, exiling or imprisoning anti-Putin oligarchs and later creating a youth group, Nashi, to disperse anti-government demonstrations. It took Putin until 2004 to complete these domestic changes, during which time Russian foreign policy remained cautious and narrow in scope.

By 2004 Putin had succeeded in bringing his domestic political opponents under control and had been re-elected to a second term as Russia's President with a massive majority. The Russian economy was improving and oil prices were rapidly rising. All this created the necessary domestic conditions for Putin to reassess Russian global strategic priorities and broaden the scope of Russian foreign policy. Putin's reformed policy agenda was driven by three main objectives: first, he sought to restore Russia's status as a great power, mainly through presenting Russia as an alternative power base to US hegemony; second, Putin sought to diversify the source of Russia's economic strength beyond its declining stocks of

natural resources; and third, Putin continued to use foreign diplomacy as a tool through which to minimise external criticism of his actions during the second war with Chechnya (1999-).

In the midst of Putin's attempts to reassert Russian prestige and power internationally, two events in the Autumn of 2004 dealt a severe blow to his ambitious project: the Chechen seizure of the school in Beslan that led to the loss of 332 Russian lives in a bungled rescue operation (September 2004) and the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine which brought to power an anti-Russian president whom Putin had publicly opposed (December 2004). Both events made Russia look weak and Putin reacted by dramatically increasing efforts to enhance Russia's international status by asserting Russian power further afield.

Putin turned his attention to the Middle East, which he saw as potentially fertile ground for Russia to assert its diplomatic credentials. The Middle East offered Putin an opportunity to pursue his twin goals of (i) raising Russia's international status by challenging US hegemony and unilateralism and (ii) offering key investment opportunities needed to help develop the Russian economy. These competing interests did at times come into conflict but Putin sought to pursue a Middle Eastern foreign policy that balanced the two without compromising too heavily on either.

Russia also sought to exploit the US's increasingly weak position in the region as a result of the ongoing insurgency in Iraq and the revival of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Putin did so by courting the leading 'rogue' states and actors in the region - Syria, Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah - all self-declared enemies of the US whom the US sought to isolate and marginalise.

Following Hamas' victory in the Palestine Legislative Council elections in January 2006, Putin called the event "a very serious blow" to American diplomacy in the Middle East. Almost immediately thereafter, noting that Hamas was not on Russia's terrorist list, he invited a Hamas delegation to Moscow, thus breaking away from the policy line of the Quartet, of which Russia was a part, along with the US, UN and EU, which had set clear conditions for international engagement

with Hamas. Putin, who was widely praised in the Arab world for the invitation, justified the meeting by arguing that Hamas appeared ready to accept the Quartet's principles and he wanted to do his bit to help them complete the transition. This first visit was followed by another official visit in March 2007 by Khaled Mashal, the exiled Hamas political leader based in Damascus. By the time of Mashal's visit, the international community, including Russia, were in little doubt that Hamas were not reforming or moderating and initial Russian justifications for engaging with Hamas were publicly criticised. The visit was a significant diplomatic snub to the international community, and was perceived as a Russian attempt to raise its own profile in the region at the expense of peace and security between Israel and the Palestinians. However the diplomatic cost of breaking with the policy of the Quartet on the issue of Hamas was compensated for by Putin succeeding in getting Hamas to downplay the Chechen issue, with delegation leader Khaled Mashal stating after his first meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, that the Chechen separatists were "an internal problem of Russia".

Russia's policy towards Hezbollah, a group also not included on Russia's terrorist list, again demonstrates an attempt by Russia to court those actors that the US and wider international community seek to marginalise. Six months after the Hamas visit to Moscow, when war broke out between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, Russia openly opposed sanctions against Hezbollah's main sponsor Syria at a meeting of the G-8 in July 2006. During the war, the Russian leadership issued a statement criticising Israel for its "excessive actions" and expressing general concern about the sudden escalation of violence on the Israel-Lebanon border. The statement failed to condemn Hezbollah for its role in precipitating the violence. In the aftermath of the war, Russia did send a group of engineers to rebuild bridges destroyed in the conflict but refused to participate in the formation of the UNIFIL military contingent which was tasked with ensuring that Hezbollah disarm. Reportedly this was because it did not think Hezbollah's disarmament was "possible" but it also perhaps signalled that Moscow did not consider disarmament important.

As well as establishing close ties with rogue non-state actors in the region, Putin also moved to improve relations with Syria, isolated in Washington and Europe because of its interference in Lebanese affairs and allowing insurgents to enter Iraq. In January 2005, in the wake of President Bashar al - Assad's visit to Moscow, Putin agreed to waive 90% of Syria's debt to the Former Soviet Union and also agreed to sell Damascus surface to air missiles and anti-tank missiles, some of which Syria transferred to Hezbollah who used them in its Summer 2006 war against Israel.ⁱⁱ Moscow also did its best to prevent sanctions from being imposed on Syria following the February 2005 assassination of President Rafik Hariri in Lebanon despite pressure from European allies and the US to hold Syria to account for the killing and Moscow was slow to offer its support to the international tribunal set up to investigate the assassination.ⁱⁱⁱ

Russia also concentrated on cementing relations with Iran despite widespread international anxiety about its nuclear programme. Following the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the rapid US capture of Baghdad, for a short while it looked as though the US would remain the major power in the region and Russia temporarily felt it prudent to fall in line. Fearing that the US might also turn on Iran, Putin pressed Iran to reveal information about the secret nuclear installations that had come to light in December 2002 and backed the European Union negotiations with Iran which offered the Islamic Republic major economic incentives if it refrained from continuing its nuclear enrichment programme. As a further possible sign of cooperation, Russia also postponed the date for the completion of the Bushehr nuclear reactor, a contract for whose construction had been signed in 1995, and delayed signing an agreement to send nuclear fuel to Iran for the reactor.^{iv} While Russia was seen to be broadly cooperating with the international community's policy towards Iran, efforts were made to use this new-found leverage over Iran to drive a wedge between the US and EU and put pressure on the NATO alliance. Putin sided mainly with EU-led initiatives, rather than tougher US sanctions and criticised the continued US presence in Iraq, finding common cause with

France and Germany, who had also opposed the invasion.

Russia's cooperation over Iran was short lived and after the destabilising effects of Beslan and the Ukrainian elections, Russia changed course, choosing once again to flagrantly defy the international community. In February 2005 Russia approved the long-delayed agreement to supply nuclear fuel to Iran's Bushehr nuclear reactor. Then following the decision of newly elected President Ahmadinejad to break off talks with the EU over Iran's nuclear programme in August 2005, Moscow did its best to delay discussions of sanctions against Iran at the UN Security Council. In October 2005 President Ahmadinejad called for Israel to be "wiped off the map" and denied the Holocaust. Despite international outrage at such declarations, in November 2005, Moscow, seeing Iran as its key anti-American ally in the Middle East, signed an agreement with Tehran to provide it with sophisticated short range missiles to protect its nuclear installations against a possible Israeli or American attack. In exchange, Iran continued to hold back from offering any criticism on the ongoing second Chechnya War. Putin's Iran policy had therefore succeeded in achieving the twin goals of challenging US hegemony in the region and simultaneously managing to minimise Islamic criticism of Russia's policy in Chechnya.

In order to advance his objective of promoting and protecting Russian economic interests, Putin has in recent years worked hard to establish closer ties with Gulf States and secure major investment in Russia's banking and space industries and for joint investment projects in oil and natural gas. Russia's backing of Syria, Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran, came into conflict with Putin's efforts to improve ties with the Sunni states of the region who felt threatened by Iran's rising hegemony. Consequently, prior to visiting Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan in February 2007 (the first ever visit of a Russian President to these states), Russia finally agreed to UN Security Council sanctions against Iran in December 2006, and following his trip, Moscow also agreed to further sanctions in March 2007. During the Spring and Summer of 2007, Russia conspicuously delayed sending the

promised nuclear fuel to Iran, making the dubious claim that the oil-rich Persian Gulf country had not made the necessary payments.

Following the publication of the United States National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran in December 2007, which erroneously argued that Iran had given up its nuclear weapons programme in 2003 and hence was not an immediate threat^V, Moscow went ahead with the sale of the nuclear fuel and the shipments were completed by February 2008. Even as Moscow was helping Iran develop its nuclear capability, Putin was also continuing to appease potential Arab allies by offering to build nuclear reactors for the Gulf States and Egypt in their efforts to keep up with Iran. This balancing act was important to Russia given Putin's concern over the need to diversify the Russian economy ready for when it surpasses the peak of oil and natural gas production.

Since 2002, Putin also sought to enhance Russia's role and presence in the Middle East through membership of the Diplomatic Quartet on the Middle East, along with the UN, EU and US. Russia's role in the Quartet has been ambiguous and its membership has been driven more by Russian ambitions to be a key player in regional developments, rather than the common goals or priorities of the other Quartet members. The most obvious demonstration of this has been Russia's engagement with Hamas since 2006 which has been in violation of the Quartet's stated position on the issue. The Quartet seems to be viewed by some Russian policy makers as an instrument to challenge the unrivalled power of the US in the region, demonstrated by Moscow initially opposing Tony Blair's appointment as Quartet Special Envoy in June 2007 because of fears that he would be too inclined to support the US position.

Meanwhile, despite Putin's claims of having special ties with Israel, demonstrated by his decision in 2003 to be the first Russian leader to travel to Israel, relations between the two countries have deteriorated dramatically during his term in office. On a number of specific issues, bilateral relations between Israel and Russia remain close. There are currently over one million Russian citizens now living in Israel and Russia is the home to the

world's third largest Jewish community, generating extensive cultural relations between the two countries. Russian-Israeli trade has hit the level of two billion dollars a year (including high-tech trade that Russia actively sought) and the two countries are in negotiations over a visa free agreement to expedite tourism. However, the fact that Russia has become a major supporter of Iran, a country pledged to Israel's destruction, as well as Hamas and Hezbollah, has damaged the diplomatic relations between Russia and Israel. Israeli cabinet minister Meir Shitrit went so far as accusing Russian President Vladimir Putin of "stabbing Israel in the back" after inviting a Hamas delegation to Moscow.^{vi} Israel has frequently expressed their frustration with Russian policy in the region, including in high level meetings such as those conducted during Olmert's visit to Russia in October 2006. When Russian diplomats presented offers of mediating in various areas of the Arab-Israeli peace settlement, Israeli leaders often rejected them outright. Russian representatives have been denied invitations to crucial events despite their Quartet membership, as was allegedly the case with the Sharm al-Sheikh summit in 2005. Putin's strategy has been to try and isolate bilateral relations between Israel and Russia from the wider regional policies that he is pursuing, but Israel has so far seemed reticent to separate the two.

In evaluating Putin's policies in the Middle East, it is clear that he has made Russia an active player in the region again. Moscow has improved ties with Iran and Syria and made some important business deals with the Gulf States, however his alliances have lost Putin influence in Israel and have undermined any potential Russian role as a credible mediator in the Middle East peace process.

Prospects for the Future

The election of a new leader would in most cases symbolise the potential for great change in the direction of a country's foreign policy. However in Russia this does not seem likely to be the case. Newly elected President Dmitry Medvedev who came to office in May 2008, is widely thought of

as the hand-picked successor to Putin and seems neither willing nor able to deviate much from the policy path laid out for him by his predecessor. Given Putin's efforts to rebuild Russian influence in the Middle East by supporting rogue states and non-state actors such as Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah, it remains doubtful that Medvedev will seek to reverse Russia's course and support more moderate regional forces in general and the current Arab-Israeli peace process in particular.

Successive Russian leaders have seen Russia's rise in power as being very closely interlinked with the US's decline and Medvedev does not appear to be any exception. It is likely that this will mean that Russia will pursue a foreign policy in the Middle East that continues to be based around opposition to the US and support for those groups and states that threaten US interests in the region. Moreover, Russia has not, and does not, seem to be influenced by European interests in the region. This was exemplified by Putin's decision to host a Hamas delegation and his continual courting of Syria, despite Syria's continued meddling in Lebanon and support for Hezbollah, in direct opposition to British, French and US pressure. Furthermore, Putin's diplomatic protection of Iran at the United Nations and his supply of increasingly sophisticated weapons to Iran is one of the clearest examples of Russia's resistance to external pressures in relation to its Middle Eastern affairs. If Russian policy continues on this trajectory, Russia's potential to play a more constructive role in the future seems unlikely.

However, there does still remain the possibility that as Medvedev settles into his role, he may grow more confident in his own ability to mould policy beyond Putin's reach. In this context, he could explore alternative policy options to improve Russia's international standing. With the potential power vacuum created by the end of Bush's Presidency and transition to a new administration, the appeal of becoming an *alternative*, rather than an *opponent*, to the US could become a more viable policy objective for Russia. In the future, Russia's search for status could be closely linked to it playing a role as an alternative power broker to the US in one of the foremost issues in the region – the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Helping

secure a resolution to this seemingly intractable conflict could help cement Russia's place as a world leader and regional player. Russia's recent attempts to host a Middle East peace conference, viewed by many as just another example of Russia's search for international prestige, could in fact be an example of this change in direction. If Russia were to decide to play a more constructive role in the peace process and the region, there are several policy options it could pursue:

- Russia could help stabilise the region as a whole, making it a more conducive to achieving a peace deal, by withdrawing its support for Syria and Hezbollah. Russia's arms sales to Syria and their subsequent transfer to Hezbollah fighters in southern Lebanon, is a key factor that adds to the instability along Israel's vulnerable northern border and the volatility of the region as a whole. One tangible shift in policy that could transform the nature of Russia's engagement in the region would be to end Russian arms deals with Syria. Russian leverage over Syria, as a result of Syrian dependence on Russian arms, could also be used to encourage progress in the renewed Israeli-Syrian peace talks. The recent decision by Syria and Israel to engage in indirect talks through Turkish mediators could be supported by Russian action to encourage Syria to take the necessary steps towards concluding successful negotiations.
- One of the key areas where Russian policy in the region would have to change is with regard to Iran. Iran still depends on Moscow for the bulk of its sophisticated weapons, in particular, Iran needs the SAM-300 anti-aircraft system to provide long-range defence for its nuclear installations against a possible US or Israeli attack. Reportedly, negotiations for supply of these weapons systems are currently underway. Moscow could use Iranian reliance on Russian arms as a negotiating tool to try to curb Iranian nuclear ambitions and limit its uranium enrichment programme in line with the goals of the UN Security Council. Moscow would need to be seen to be taking a more hard-line approach on the Iranian nuclear

issue and could not continue in its present role of being the protector of Iran's interests on the international stage. Overt diplomatic ties must be loosened as well as less well reported defence and fuel deals being severed.

- Russia's policy towards Hamas has obviously been at odds with the international community. Russia could review its policy of supporting Hamas and work with the international community to strengthen President Abbas and support his efforts to reach a peace agreement with Israel. Given the relatively close ties that Russia has with Hamas, the Russian leadership could exert genuine pressure on Hamas to recognise Israel and renounce violence, threatening to cut off diplomatic support for the Palestinian organisation if it failed to do so. Using its leverage over Hamas, Russia could potentially also help broker conditions for a renewed National Unity government between Fatah and Hamas which could serve as a crucial step in advancing the peace process.

If Russia is to play a bigger role in the region, it is important to ensure that efforts to achieve peace and stability in the region are not disrupted as a result. Britain and its allies should be investing significant efforts in trying to ensure that Russia's growing influence is used to positive and constructive ends, rather than allowing Russia to disrupt the process from the sidelines. Britain and its NATO allies, given Russia's energy-based economic boom, have relatively few levers of influence to encourage Russia to play a more active and constructive role in the Middle East. However, they should be receptive and encouraging of any positive steps taken by Russia.

The restoration of Russian prestige can be expected to remain a major goal for Russian policy makers in years to come. It is in this context that Putin has been very keen on hosting a Middle East summit in Moscow - something that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's March 2008 visit to the region was aimed at preparing. There are doubts as to what such a summit could achieve in the wake of the Annapolis conference and with the focus currently fixed on the bilateral peace talks

between Israel and the Palestinians. However, developments in the region may mean that another peace conference could be a good way to revive the fragile peace process in coming months. In which case, Britain and its NATO allies, currently rather cool to the idea of a Moscow summit, might be willing to consider it, provided that Russia re-examine some of its other Middle East policies. Israeli hostility to this idea would arguably be reduced if the conference was seen as part of wider Russian efforts to moderate its role in the region and if it happened in tandem with Russia reviewing some of its key regional alliances.

It remains to be seen whether Medvedev's Presidency symbolises a shift in strategic foreign policy in Russia. Most suspect that it will not, but whilst there is still potential for change, the international community should remain receptive to a more involved and cooperative Russian administration. With reference to the Middle East, the steps outlined above could be important incentives for a change in Russian policy toward the Middle East peace process. It is, of course, a very open question as to whether such incentives would promote the desired changes in Russian policy in the Middle East, nonetheless, given the fact that the Arab-Israeli peace process is in need of strengthening, such an effort by Britain and its NATO allies is well worth considering.

i The Nagorno-Karabakh War took place from February 1988 to May 1994, in the small ethnic enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan, between the predominantly ethnic Armenians (backed by the Republic of Armenia) against the Republic of Azerbaijan. During the war, Russia and Turkey backed rival parties with Russia supporting Armenia and Turkey supporting Azerbaijan.

ii See article for further details on arms transfer between Russia and Hezbollah <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/752155.html>

iii Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated on 14 February 2005 when explosives were detonated as his motorcade drove through the Lebanese capital, Beirut. On 6 February 2006, both the United Nations and the government of Lebanon agreed to a proposal establishing a Special Tribunal for Lebanon to investigate the assassination. The investigation is still ongoing and it is conducted under the supervision of the United Nations and led by the independent investigator Daniel Bellemare. It has been widely speculated that the Syrian government is linked to the assassination

iv In 1995 Iran signed a contract with Russia to resume work on the partially-complete Bushehr plant, installing into the existing Bushehr I building a 915MWe VVER-1000 pressurized water reactor, with completion expected in 2007. The project was delayed and Russia completed its nuclear fuel deliveries to the plant in 2008.

v In December 2007 the United States National Intelligence Estimate judged with "high confidence" that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003, with "moderate confidence" that the program remains frozen, and with "moderate-to-high confidence" that Iran is "keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons." The report downplayed Iran's continuing nuclear enrichment program and its construction of advanced intermediate range ballistic missiles and US officials have since argued in 2008 that the report gave the "wrong impression" of Iranian nuclear ambitions.

vi http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4701312.stm

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