

A Comparative Study of Russia's Relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia during Medvedev's Presidency, 2008-2012

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Abstract

After Russia's presidential elections in 2008, Dmitry Medvedev took office as Vladimir Putin's preferred successor and shortly thereafter announced a reordering of Russian foreign policy intentions and actions based on the principles of international law, multi-polarity, non-confrontation with foreign countries, and protection of all Russian citizens in and out of the country. According to Russian foreign policy schools of thought, Medvedev was portrayed as a western-oriented liberal who insisted on improving Russia's relations with Western countries because of the perceived common security threats and the need for greater economic and political liberalization. This foreign policy prioritization led to changes in Russian foreign policy attitudes toward the Middle East and Moscow's relations with key regional powers. To understand the underlying factors and the consequences of this policy shift, the following two central research questions were analyzed: 1. What were the top priorities and goals of Russian foreign policy under Medvedev? 2. What kind of changes did Medvedev's main foreign policy priorities bring to Russia's relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia? In order to test the main hypothesis of this study which postulated that "economic development as Russia's top foreign policy priority during Medvedev's presidency led him to adopt a western oriented approach and to revise relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia", the authors examine the principles and patterns of Russia's foreign policy, its foreign policy actions in the Middle East, and the nature of its relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia during Medvedev's presidency. The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the emergence of a power vacuum in this country, followed by the beginning of Arab Spring in 2010, Saudi fears of the establishment of a new regional balance of power system in favor of Iran, gradually intensified the

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rivalry and hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is significant to note that one of the most important factors that must be considered in the new round of competition between these two Middle Eastern countries is the nature of these countries' relations with the great powers and particularly with the United States and Russia. The super powers' rivalry in the Middle East has had a great impact on the foreign relations of the regional powers.

The main purpose of the present paper is to analyze Russia's relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia from 2008 to 2012. The reason for selecting this time period is that under Medvedev, Kremlin adopted a somewhat different and western-oriented foreign policy approach. Medvedev had been known as a more liberal politician who called for increased cooperation with Western countries, especially the United States. His goal was to encourage more high-tech investment in the country, more transfer of advanced technology in order to facilitate economic modernization of Russia. Consequently, Moscow's relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia were transformed during this period, because Medvedev was trying to avoid a confrontation with the West. Therefore, Medvedev had to distance himself from Iran as a country which was accused by the West of seeking to change the status quo. In contrast, the gradual movement to Saudi Arabia's position which was viewed as a close regional ally of the United States was expected to show that Medvedev had no intention to adopt a confrontational foreign policy approach toward the Middle East. A lesson to be learnt by the regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia is that in their relations with the great powers, they must consider the possibility of short-term and unanticipated changes in the foreign policy priorities of even their most reliable allies. The need to be vigilant against any minor changes in bilateral and multilateral relations is evident. It is shown that Iran's relations with Russia changed during Medvedev's leadership because he was to a certain degree prepared to sacrifice Moscow's ties with Iran in favor of improving its relations with the United States. Medvedev chose to expand its relations with US regional allies and to put a distance between Russia and the countries which had hostile relations with Washington. Examples of his less-friendly policy actions in relation to Iran include his concern over Iran's nuclear program in the second half of 2009, his decision to delay the completion of the construction of Bushehr power plant, and finally his foot-dragging and reluctance to proceed promptly in the delivery of the S-300 missile systems to Iran based on a bilateral contract signed by the two neighboring countries. In comparison, Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia, which had been expanding following Putin's visit to Riyadh in 2007, continued flourishing under Medvedev. Incidentally, the desire to improve Russian relations with

Saudi Arabia was in contrast to the US President Obama's policy that specified the White House would act cautiously concerning its military intervention in proxy wars in the Middle East. His administration was keen to resolve the hostility between Iran and all Arab States including Saudi Arabia which had suffered further deterioration since 2003. This shift in Obama's attitude toward Iran irritated Saudi Arabia. Medvedev's readiness to improve relations with the pro-Western Arab States, and Riyadh's decision to expand relations with other great powers helped improvement in Russia's dealings with Saudi Arabia.

Finally, the conclusion of this study is that under the leadership of Medvedev, unlike Putin's presidency, Kremlin's goals of achieving higher economic development and improving relations with the West led to a gradual aloofness in Russia's relations with Iran and a relative closeness in relations with Saudi Arabia. Medvedev had a tendency to avoid confrontation with Western countries, and to strive for greater integration in the international system. However, he did not succeed in lessening Russia's oil and gas dependency, and enhancing its international and regional position.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Iran, Medvedev, Middle East, Moscow, Putin, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Security Threats.