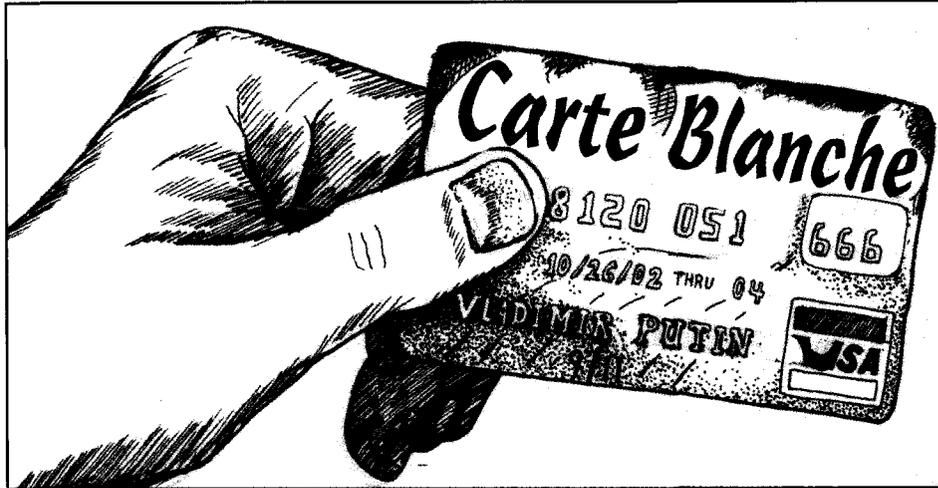


Giving Up Saddam

Russia and “Regime Change” in Iraq

by Wayne Allensworth



From October 23 to October 26, 2002, all of Russia—and much of the world—was focused on the Dubrovka theater complex in Moscow. A band of Chechen terrorists had seized the complex during a performance of the popular musical *Nord Ost*, holding a group of about 750 hostages captive as the band’s leader, Movsar Barayev, nephew of a Chechen field commander killed by Russian forces, demanded that President Vladimir Putin order the withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya. The terrorists initially released some hostages, while a series of Russian luminaries attempted to negotiate the release of others, eventually persuading the captors to allow doctors into the theater to treat the ailing and the elderly. Meanwhile, official sources claimed that the terrorists had threatened to begin shooting the hostages on the morning of the 26th if the authorities did not respond to their demands.

The crisis ended in the deadly storming of the theater by Russian Special Forces on the 26th and the death of the terrorists—as well as of at least 128 hostages, who fell victim to the “knockout gas” used to disable the terrorists before the assault. Kremlin spokesmen quickly tied the Moscow crisis to a series of recent terrorist acts around the world, claiming, once again, that the war in the breakaway Chechen republic was part of the global “War on Terror” that U.S. President George W. Bush had declared after the September 11 attacks. The subsequent release of an audiotape, which most experts believed to be a statement by Osama bin Laden, seemed to confirm that: The tape hailed the attack in Moscow as part of a global *jihād* against the “enemies of Islam.”

Putin’s Kremlin had lobbied the Western powers, especially the United States, to include Chechnya as a legitimate theater in the War on Terror, having pledged Moscow’s support for the U.S. military’s attack on Afghanistan as well as a general attack

on global Islamic terrorist networks. The White House had already muted criticism of the Chechen “antiterrorist operation” (as Moscow’s official spokesman dubbed the war) but had continued to call for a “political solution” to the Chechen problem. This time, however, the administration seemed to respond: By mid-November, Moscow was expecting Washington to include Chechen lobbying groups in the West on its list of terrorist organizations, while Washington appeared to signal that it would no longer pressure the Kremlin to conduct talks with Chechen insurgents.

The signals were timely: On November 8, Moscow had voted to accept a compromise resolution on arms inspections in Iraq. The latest version of the Iraq resolution hammered out by Washington, Moscow, and Paris (France had also been a particularly outspoken holdout) seemed to ensure that the Bush administration would at least go through the motions of consulting with the U.N. Security Council before launching an assault on Baghdad. A team of U.N. inspectors would determine whether Iraq was complying with the resolution. In theory, at least, the United States could not attack Iraq without any U.N. involvement (though, if a “serious” violation of the resolution occurred, Washington threatened to act without waiting for the Security Council’s approval).

It had been clear from the outset that Moscow was not primarily interested in international law or the United Nations’ role in sanctioning a war: Moscow simply desired to carry out the “antiterrorist” operation in Chechnya unhindered and to defend Russian economic interests in Central Asia, the Caspian Sea/Trans-Caucasus, and the Middle East. Throughout October and November, Russian media had reported that Moscow was ready to “give up” Saddam Hussein in exchange for Washington agreeing to protect contracts secured by Russian oil firms to develop Iraq’s oil reserves. (Iraq has the second-largest known oil reserves in the world.) Especially important to

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Moscow was the position of Lukoil, a largely state-owned company that had secured a contract (offered by Baghdad in the late 1990's in an effort to win Russian support for lifting economic sanctions on Iraq) to develop Iraq's promising West Kurma oil field. Most Moscow observers had taken a statement by ex-CIA director James Woolsey that U.S. companies and a post-Saddam government would work "side by side" with Russian firms, should Moscow help to push Baghdad toward a "decent form of government," as a signal that the Bush administration was ready to bargain.

The Kremlin and Russian oil interests had reportedly been contemplating the possible benefits of "regime change" in Baghdad for some time, even as Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov publicly defended Baghdad and Russian firms profited from the U.N.-sponsored "oil for food" program. Iraq owes Russia about seven billion dollars, and repayment has been seriously hindered by economic sanctions. Russian media have reported that the Kremlin is increasingly concerned about projected budget shortfalls, with parliamentary and presidential elections (in 2003 and 2004, respectively) on the horizon. Moreover, Putin had been promising pay hikes for the military and public-sector workers as well as pension increases for Russia's growing legion of retirees. Clearly, the sanctions would not be lifted, and the Americans would find a way to replace Saddam Hussein, with or without Russian help. Thus, Russian oil firms were eager to develop the Iraqi oil deposits, which would help fill Russian budget coffers and aid Putin's reelection campaign. Moscow was increasingly frustrated by the sanctions as well as by the Iraqis: The cumbersome Iraqi bureaucracy was reportedly hindering their exploration and development efforts. Some key players in the Kremlin and in Russia's oil sector began to wonder whether regime change, if it came about under suitable conditions for Russia, might not be such a bad thing.

Russia's relationship with Iraq was an outgrowth of the Soviet Union's efforts to counter American influence in the Middle East. In the early 1950's, Stalin, after recognizing a newly established Israel in 1948, increasingly viewed the Jewish state as an American satellite. The Soviet dictator had sought a foothold in the Middle East since the end of World War II. As the United States strengthened its ties with Israel and expanded its influence in Iran, Moscow reoriented itself toward the Arab states, and military advisors and technicians from the Soviet Union and Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe trained Arab military personnel, while the Kremlin provided economic-development aid and equipped the Arab states' armed forces. By the mid-1960's, the Soviets had settled into the Middle East as a supplier of military hardware and technology to the Arab states as well as of training, education, and technical expertise. Moscow suffered setbacks, however, as Arab forces were defeated in the 1967 Six Day War, the United States increased its influence among "moderate" Arab states, and Washington backed Iraq during its war with revolutionary Iran in the 1980's.

Ironically, American efforts to undercut Soviet influence on Saddam Hussein make the United States a likely source of the "weapons of mass destruction" about which Washington became so concerned following the Gulf War—and which helped to bring about the horse-trading with Moscow over the November 2002 U.N. resolution on weapons inspections.

Though the United States provided support to both sides in the Iran-Iraq war, most U.S. support went to Iraq, since an Islamic regime in Tehran was considered the larger threat to U.S.

interests in the Persian Gulf. American companies reportedly exported biological and chemical agents that could be used to develop weapons, including "weaponized" anthrax. (Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, one former U.N. weapons inspector claimed that Iraqi officials had admitted to him that they had used anthrax strains purchased from an American company to develop biological weapons.) The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also reportedly sent samples of various germs, including anthrax and West Nile virus, to sites in Iraq later identified by U.N. weapons inspectors as part of the Iraqi weapons program. According to American media sources, these exports continued until about November 1989, in spite of reports that Iraq was using chemical and biological warfare against both the Iranians and the Kurds.

At the same time, U.S. companies supplied Iraq with electronic hardware and other equipment that could be used to develop and manufacture nuclear weapons and delivery systems, including missiles. Specialized computers exported to Iraq, for example, could be used to simulate nuclear testing, avoiding easily detectable nuclear blasts. Baghdad, which had previously relied on Moscow for its conventional military hardware, also began purchasing U.S. military equipment during the 1980's.

The collapse of the Soviet Union further diminished Moscow's influence in the region. In the Middle East, Moscow was perceived as an undesirable partner. It was clear that post-Soviet Russia—impoverished, technically backward (something that had been demonstrated as early as the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, when Western-armed Israeli units defeated the Soviet-equipped Arabs in less than a week), and distracted by her own internal problems—was not the superpower that the Soviet Union had been. Perhaps equally important to former Arab client states, Moscow was now demanding hard cash for military equipment (Soviet-era military hardware was in need of modernization, and some was simply obsolete) and for training and educating Arab military officers, scientists, and technicians. This provided an opening for ex-Soviet republics, including Belarus and Ukraine, both of which have been accused of selling military hardware to Iraq in violation of U.N. sanctions. The former Soviet states, for instance, offered to modernize older Soviet equipment for far less cash than the Russians were demanding.

By the time Boris Yeltsin resigned in December 1999 and Putin took office, Russia had three remaining venues in the Middle East through which to reassert herself as a great power and protect her economic interests: Iraq, where Moscow wanted to defend its oil interests (and Baghdad has seen Moscow as a counterbalance to Washington); Iran, still largely isolated from the West, where Russia became a source of arms, nuclear know-how, and technical assistance; and in the Arab-Israeli conflict, where Moscow, still welcomed by the Palestinian leadership, insisted on playing a role.

September 11 gave Russia a chance to play superpower once more: Washington needed Russian help in mounting its military operations in Central Asia, particularly in sharing intelligence on Afghanistan (apart from the Soviet war in the 1980's, Russia had backed the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance) as well as in securing airspace for American jets. Convinced that the Bush administration would act with or without Moscow's help, Putin played the "terrorist" card—his only strong one in an otherwise weak Russian hand. At the same time, the Kremlin was looking ahead to postwar scenarios in Central Asia, the Trans-Caucasus and Caspian Basin, and the Middle East. Moscow was certain that Washington would not be economically disin-

terested in several theaters of a projected “war” that offered access to Central Asian and Caspian oil and gas deposits and the Iraqi oil reserves. (The Kremlin had anticipated that President Bush would use the War on Terror to settle the score with his father’s nemesis.)

Last fall’s mini-crisis over the Republic of Georgia shows how Moscow has played its hand. American policymakers have used the antiterrorist campaign as a pretext for stepping up U.S. intervention in the Trans-Caucasus republic. Washington, for example, recently sent military personnel to Georgia to “train and equip” Tbilisi’s military forces as part of an effort to combat Chechen insurgents allegedly linked to bin Laden’s terrorist network in Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge region. (Bin Laden himself was, at one point, even rumored to be hiding out in Georgia.) Washington also appeared to be concerned with propping up the regime of ex-Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze. The Kremlin did not object, to the surprise of many Moscow pundits and the apparent irritation of some within the Russian military. Putin, as part of his effort to win Western approval of his war in Chechnya, had repeatedly claimed that the Chechen insurgents—some of whom had been trained in Afghanistan—were using Georgia as a base to launch operations against Russian forces in Chechnya. Washington thus cast the American presence in Georgia as simply another part of the antiterrorist campaign. Meanwhile, Putin’s Kremlin waited for the right opportunity to use its influence in Georgia to gain some concession from the Americans.

Washington’s shift in focus from Afghanistan to Iraq—coupled with Tbilisi’s apparent reluctance to act in the Pankisi Gorge—gave Moscow the opportunity it was seeking. Washington needed Moscow’s backing at the United Nations and wanted Russian support—or, at least, only a formal protest—in the event of war. With the Iraq crisis brewing and Washington mounting a public-relations campaign to justify a potential assault on Baghdad, Moscow threatened Georgia with war. On the first anniversary of September 11, Putin warned: “If the Georgian leadership cannot create a security zone in the re-

gions of the Georgian-Russian border” (Pankisi Gorge borders Russian territory) “and does not put an end to bandit sorties and attacks on contiguous regions of Russia,” then Moscow “reserves the right to act in accordance with Article 51 of the U.N. Charter, which enshrines every U.N. member’s” right to “self defense.” If Washington could mount preemptive strikes on states that harbored or supported terrorists, Russia could, too. Russian pundits claimed that the Kremlin was apparently attempting to use the Georgia-Pankisi problem to reassert its influence with Tbilisi and as a bargaining chip in the horse-trading over a U.N. resolution on Iraq.

Moscow did not want to lose its influence in Georgia, Central Asia, or Iraq. For years, Lukoil has been promoting a Russian route for transporting Caspian Sea oil and gas, while Western companies, backed by Washington, have proposed a route through Georgia to NATO member Turkey, bypassing Russia and diminishing Moscow’s influence on developing and transporting the Caspian deposits. Moscow seemed to be signaling that it wanted a role in developing the Caspian transport route—and that it could destabilize Georgia if Washington refused to come to terms. The same veiled threat could be made elsewhere: Washington needs Russia’s continued help in Afghanistan, where the U.S.-backed post-Taliban regime is negotiating with the former Soviet Central Asian states and Washington’s ally Pakistan over a proposed natural-gas pipeline.

Russia cannot browbeat Washington and does not carry the international weight she once did, so she plays her cards in Central Asia, the Trans-Caucasus, and the Middle East. The War on Terror and the Bush administration’s impending war on Iraq gave Moscow a chance to use its relationship with Baghdad to try to secure Russian influence there after the fall of Hussein and to reestablish itself as a force in the region. In the meantime, the Kremlin has cultivated Iran and is still a party to the Arab-Israeli “peace process”: Moscow can always play those cards later. The Kremlin may still complicate Washington’s Iraq plans, depending on how secure it feels about its chances in a postwar scenario; for now, however, Putin is playing the only game in town. Giving up Saddam was easy. c

Mississippians

John Nixon, Jr.

Looking back now on my origins
There in the early part
Of last century and the people
I knew, kinsmen and neighbors,
None deigning to resemble
Even a sibling—let alone
Anyone else in the world—
Looking back now, I see
We were all characters waiting
On porches of cabins and mansions
For Bill or for Eudora
Or Tennessee to come along
And write us up. Or down.