



# MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

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## CHINESE HAJJIS

China dispatched a record-breaking 9,700 citizens to participate in this year's pilgrimage to Mecca, and perhaps 5,000 more traveled through third countries such as Pakistan. As recently as twenty years ago, only one or two hundred Chinese Muslims went on Hajj.

Although it is hard to estimate the number of Muslims in an avowedly atheist country, conservative estimates put China's Muslim population at more than ten million, and perhaps more than twenty million. This year's official hajjis hailed from ten different ethnic groups and eight regions across China; they relied on the state-organized China Islamic Association to coordinate visas, charter the required 31 planes to Saudi Arabia, and arrange for lodging and accommodation. The Chinese government established the China Islamic Association in 1991 to monitor and moderate Islam in the country. Twenty medical workers and fifty imams joined this year's pilgrims to provide physical and spiritual support.

The increased numbers reflect Chinese officials reaching out to their Muslim populations after years of neglect and repression. The fear that Middle Eastern extremists could network with Chinese Muslims, or could inspire Uigur separatists to fight harder, helped persuade the Chinese government to adopt a more active position. As the Saudi government is keen to develop closer ties with China, the two governments agreed that from now on they will bar Chinese travelers from making pilgrimage except through Chinese government channels, giving both countries control over what happens during the annual pilgrimage. ■-GB

## RED DAWN

By Haim Malka

Russian support for a December 23, 2006 UN Security Council resolution threatening Iran with sanctions hardly means Russia has become a force for stability in the Middle East. Immediately after signing on to a broad international effort to pressure Iran to drop uranium enrichment and reprocessing, Russia rang in 2007 by delivering sophisticated surface-to-air missile systems to Iran, which the Islamic Republic will allegedly deploy around its key nuclear facilities. Though the weapons delivery does not violate the latest UNSC resolution, it certainly violates the spirit.

Russia's actions in the Middle East go far beyond mere pursuit of national interests. Its aggressive effort to regain its old Soviet glory in the Middle East not only challenges the United States at every turn, but also further destabilizes the region. Russia is not using its growing influence to help solve crises such as the Iranian nuclear standoff, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Instead, the Kremlin seems bent on preserving a certain degree of instability in the Middle East in order to serve Russian interests. Just the right amount of instability ensures premium prices for crude oil, a bustling market for Russia's arms industry, and perhaps most importantly, a return to holding a pivotal geopolitical role.

If there is a key driver for Russia's comeback around the globe, it is high oil prices. The security premium that many analysts see built into the price of oil over the last couple of years may be largely psychological, but it has also created a windfall for energy producers—and Russia is the world's second-largest oil exporter, just behind Saudi Arabia and more than double third-place Norway. Beyond oil, fears of an emerging gas cartel remain a concern. Russia's state-controlled Gazprom supplies a quarter of European gas consumption, and the company is on the prowl in North Africa. The giant recently signed memoranda with Algeria and Egypt to coordinate natural gas production, giving Russia even more influence over international gas markets. With Russia's economy heavily dependent on energy exports and the country in need of investment to develop

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## AMRE MOUSSA AT CSIS

On December 7, the Middle East Program hosted a talk by Secretary-General of the Arab League Amre Moussa. The speaker addressed a wide range of issues including Iraq, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Lebanon and the ongoing crisis in Darfur. At the end of his comments, Moussa said, "Still, an honest broker role is open for the United States and only the U.S. can do that. That's why we hope that the honest broker role will be resumed by the United States. And I believe the intention is there. The capacity is there. The situation calls for that." To watch the event or read the entire transcript, please visit the program's website at [www.csis.org/mideast](http://www.csis.org/mideast). ■

new reserves, Russia's continued economic growth relies on high energy prices, which Middle Eastern instability and tension help drive up.

Beyond the energy sector, Russia's arms industry is back in black after a long decline. The sales go beyond the Russian-built Kornet anti-tank missiles and rockets that Hizbullah used against Israeli forces in last summer's war, and far beyond the relatively limited sales to troublesome governments such as Iran and Syria. A recently signed \$7.5-10 billion deal with Algeria is set to break all records for post-Soviet military sales. It will boost nearly every sector of Russia's defense industry including aircraft, air defense, armored vehicles, and shipbuilding. The mammoth sale will also allow Russia to compete in Asian markets as well.

Russia's deal with Algeria is helping spur an arms race across North Africa. Morocco, which is a moderate-income oil consumer instead of a large oil and gas producer, has already indicated its desire for a more modest Russian arms deal. Libya, emerging from its shell of isolation, is also expected to launch its own Russian buying spree to modernize its armed forces. Ironically, Russian sales drive even more Russian sales, and the strange thing is that the Russian weaponry is best suited for fighting other armies at a time when North African states face their greatest threats from internal radical movements. Meanwhile, the arms buildup draws money away from needed social spending in countries with large cadres of unemployed youth.

More alarming than Russia's role in the conventional buildup is its long-standing business in the nuclear field. It is difficult to see how Russia will sacrifice its strategic and economic interests in Iran for the sake of greater regional stability. Indeed, the latest Security Council resolution aside, Russia has been a consistent impediment to efforts to impose stricter sanctions on Iran. Attempting to project itself as the voice of reason and diplomacy, Russia is portraying itself as a key mediator in the standoff, when in fact it could be more accurately described as an antagonist. The longer the brinkmanship lasts, the better for business and the more central Russia's role as broker becomes. The Kremlin revels in this pivotal position as any former great power would.

Beyond Iran, which has received Russian nuclear know-how for over a decade, prospects for future Russian deals across the region look promising. Recent announcements that several Middle Eastern and North African states intend to pursue nuclear technology, including Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco, stand to expand Moscow's client base. Yet even if business is business, a nuclear arms race in the Middle East holds out the threat of catastrophic consequences, from which even Russia will not be immune.

Rising tension in the Middle East has helped keep oil prices high, opened the door to Russian arms sales, and allowed Russia to reassert itself as an increasingly vital regional broker. The Middle East has enough problems without Russia stoking the flames. While Russia sees its short term interests served by persistent low-level turmoil in the region, Russia needs to be reminded that the instability it fosters can easily spiral out of control and lead to conflict beyond anyone's imagination. ■1/9/07

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## Links of Interest

CNN's Anderson Cooper [interviewed Jon Alterman](#) about the execution of Saddam Hussein.

CNN's Jon Roberts [interviewed Jon Alterman](#) about the Iraq Study Group.

On January 8, CSIS hosted members of the House Armed Services Committee for a [discussion on Iraq](#).

The official website of the [Saudi Hajj Ministry](#).

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