

A Reset in the Middle East

By [Martin Malin](#)

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The Middle East is smoldering again as renewed talk of an attack on Iran is making headlines. If there were an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities, it would mark the beginning of a new era of violence and proliferation in the Middle East. The United States and Russia must work together to reverse the deteriorating security situation.

Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev should announce they will co-sponsor a conference to establish ongoing negotiation of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. The negotiations should include separate tracks to discuss diplomatic relations and territorial and other resource issues in the region. The initial goal should be exploratory: to discuss the conditions under which political agreement on a zone free of weapons of mass destruction would be possible.

Such talks will be highly sensitive, and the process could quickly become bogged down. The linkages between issues are complex. The existence of a regional diplomatic process will not immediately convince Iran to reverse course and abandon its uranium enrichment activities or other programs of concern. Nor can we expect that Israel will soon declare and dismantle

its nuclear weapons.

This raises the question of whether U.S. and Russian interests coincide enough to commit to working together now and in the future.

Skeptics might dismiss the notion of cooperation between Washington and Moscow on the Middle East because Russia has little interest in helping the United States solve its Middle East problems. But they forget that Chechnya is located less than 900 kilometers from Tehran. One-seventh of Russia's citizens are Muslim — a population with ties to Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and other parts of the Arab world.

Radicalism and political turbulence in the Middle East inevitably reverberate in Russia. For both Russia and the United States, the ongoing battle against terrorism is a top national security priority. Russian leaders view Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq as training grounds for anti-Russian terrorists.

Russia also shares the U.S. interest in nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction and has supported successive rounds of UN sanctions against Iran. For its part, the United States has consented to Russia's role in supplying low-enriched uranium to fuel the Bushehr nuclear power plant and transferring the spent fuel from Iran.

Although Moscow and Washington have competitive energy interests in the Middle East, both benefit from placing regional stability and nonproliferation above short-term profits. Indeed, stability in the Middle East is a prerequisite for maintaining reliable energy markets in the region. Russia's interest in energy cooperation with Iran — for example, in the development of Iran's vast reserves of natural gas and oil refining — will be impossible to pursue at acceptable costs if nuclear concerns continue to grow.

In the mid-1990s, the United States and Russia sponsored a regional diplomatic process that collapsed when the parties reached an impasse over how to approach the discussion of a nuclear-free Middle East. At the time, Washington and Moscow were not sufficiently close or engaged to keep the parties at the table.

The stakes are higher today and sufficient to command the necessary attention and cooperation. Neither capital can advance its strategic interests over the long haul in the Middle East without the cooperation of the other in reducing the risk of nuclear proliferation.

The United States and Russia can turn today's Middle East crises into tomorrow's negotiating points, but only if they work together — and stay together for the long term.

Martin Malin is executive director of the Project on Managing the Atom at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Evgeny Artyukov is a student associate at the Belfer Center's Project on Managing the Atom.

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