

Skilfully exploiting the rigid US policy of “might is right”, Russia is taking over the role the USSR once held in the Middle East. The push no longer comes from ideology, but rather from business, in particular the

How does Putin rate in the Middle East?

STRATEGY 2

by Piero Sinatti

areas of energy and armaments. And consensus regarding Putin’s pragmatism continues to grow, not only in Arab countries but also in Iran and even Israel

“In all of your dealings, you have shown yourself to be a leader, a man who loves justice and truth”. Saudi King Abdullah ibn Abd el Aziz greeted President Vladimir Putin with these words on the occasion of his February 11th visit to Riyadh, which was the first time a Russian head of state has ever set foot there. These words not only revealed oriental ceremoniousness but also a new phenomenon: the rapid growth of post-Soviet Russia’s role and its president’s rating throughout the Middle East, especially in the Arab world. Before that, some more serious words had been spoken; those of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on the eve of his trip to Russia: “The Russians should change their constitution to allow President Putin to run for office a third time. Russia needs Putin...he knows well the situation in Russia, and in the world. He understands everything. Let him stay”. “Vremja Novosti” October 30, 2006). And on the following November 2nd in Moscow the Egyptian President (who had been in the USSR forty years earlier during an internship as a young Nasserian Army officer), issued a verdict that seems to be shared by the rest of the Arab world: “Russia has taken back its role in the Middle East”.

In February this year, Jordanian King Abdallah ibn Hussein expressed similar appreciation for Moscow’s role in the region, welcoming the Russian president to Amman, following his visit to Doha, the capital of Qatar, and the third stop on the trip that began in Riyadh. In the ultra-modern capital of the emirate (headquarters for the High Command of the United States’ Armed Forces in that region), Putin was welcomed with full honours by the Emir, Hamad bin Khalida al-Thani. Two months earlier, during his visit to Moscow (December 19, 2006), Syrian President Bashar el-Assad declared: “Our strategic dialogue with Russia is based on the fact that Russia is carrying out a more effective role in the Middle East (...) and it must become the sponsor for the peace process in the Middle East and execute this role successfully”.

Moscow’s New Middle East Policy

In the backdrop of Moscow’s multi-polar strategy, the Arab Middle East (along with the Arab extension of North Africa) and more generally the Muslim world (with Iran in the lead) has secured both a place and a role at the forefront. Firstly it is because the Muslim world is *inside* the Russian Federation, among the areas of

Northern Caucasus and the Volga, and is also bumping up against its borders (Iran, Turkey, and central Asia).

In the second place, it is because Moscow's major competitors in the international energy market are found in that world, from Algeria to Saudi Arabia to the emirates of the Persian Gulf to Iran. Russia – the great energy power and number one global exporter of gas – and Saudi Arabia – the number one exporter of crude oil – are, in fact, interested in finding a point of convergence and agreement with these countries on the subject of energy.

And so it was that after Putin's visit of March 8-9, 2006 to Algeria, and successive meetings, Gazprom and the Algerian State-owned company Sonatrach agreed to cooperate in the

areas of exploration, infrastructure and the gas industry, and to agree on gas production policies and prices.

A plan was outlined for Moscow (by Iran) for a hypothetical OPEC-type organisation for gas-producing countries, which up to this point Moscow has excluded, mostly due to technical reasons (transportation, contract duration). Thirdly, it's because Russia is interested in participating in the exploration of gas and crude oil extraction in the top producing Arab countries and Iran, by furnishing technical components, machinery, systems and technology to build infrastructure in this sector (including oil and gas pipelines), and for which a significant increase in this region is foreseen. In Qatar (among the top world producers of gas) Russian companies have expressed their intent to participate in a massive project (with a cost of 10 million dollars); the construction of the "Dolphin" gas pipeline destined for the Gulf area.

During his visits to Saudi Arabia and Qatar in

_In the backdrop of Moscow's multi-polar strategy, the Arab Middle East and more generally the Muslim world has secured both a place and a role at the forefront. Below, Putin during his visit in Jordan



February, Putin was accompanied by key Russian entrepreneurs (and oligarchs), including Vagit Alekperov (Lukoil), Aleksei Miller (Gazprom), Oleg Deripaska (Russkij Aljuminij), Dimitri Pumpjanskij (Metallurgy company which builds pipes), Vladimir Evtushenkov (Holding System - electronics, telephony, electricity), Vladimir Jakunin (RZhD, railways and railroad machinery). Cooperation with Riyad began in 2004, when the Russian oil company, Lukoil, obtained a license for exploration and extraction in the area known as "Block A", near Gawhar, one of the largest gas-oil repositories in the world.

The Arms Market

In fourth place, Russia sees in the Arab area one of the greatest outlets for its arms industry. This was also the case during Soviet times, but in quite another form. Russia was the number one arms exporter to

developing countries in 2005 with sales of 5.5 billion dollars, and sold 6.5 billion dollars' worth the following year – a record. This year its sales portfolio is expected to reach 5.5 or 6 billion, as predicted by the conference of the government and the Industrial Defence Complex (OPK) held on March 20th. After a number of technical (and political) meetings which followed Putin's visit to Algiers last year, agreements were reached at the end of March 2007 for Algeria to acquire arms supplies worth more than 7 billion dollars: latest-generation warplanes, tanks, missile systems, armoured vehicles and cannons, and possibly two battleships. And so it is that Algeria (for which Russia has cancelled more than 4 billion dollars in debt carried forward from the USSR's budget) has jumped into first place among the client countries of Rosoboroneksport, the government agency and arms exporting

There are at least two reasons for Russia's interest in the Middle East. Firstly it is because the Muslim world is inside the Russian Federation and is also bumping up against its borders. In the second place, it is because Moscow's major competitors in the international energy market are found in that world



monopoly controlled by former chekist Sergei Chemezov. And negotiations have begun with the other countries in the area which Putin visited last February regarding the sale of armaments: a new model of tank for Saudi Arabia, helicopters for Qatar and Jordan. These are countries that have traditionally been clients of Western suppliers in this sector. At the end of last August, Moscow had sold a total of 1.3 billion dollars worth of war-planes to Yemen.

Syria

During Assad's visit to Moscow, Syria (Moscow's chief ally in the region during the

Soviet era) signed an agreement for the construction of a liquid gas factory near Palmyra and a 324-kilometre tract of the "Pan-Arab Gas Pipeline" which crosses its territory. And it has agreed (since that visit up to last March) to the purchase of an unspecified number of bombers, short-range anti-aircraft missile systems and submarines for a price tag of approximately 1 billion dollars.

In recent years Damascus had already purchased Russian arms and spare parts, mostly in the short-term missile sector (anti-aircraft and anti-tank).

Here, the *biznes*, or the deal, is more difficult. It is not without reason that Moscow has been stubbornly opposed by the USA and Israel and risks more sanctions similar to those that have already been inflicted on some of its companies (beginning with Rosoboronekспорт) for the sale of arms to countries that are included on the USA's black list, such as Venezuela, Iran and

_Putin (below: with Saudi king Abdullah) has started arms sales negotiations with nearly all the Middle Eastern countries he visited last February: these countries are historically Western clients





Syria itself, which Israel also includes on its list of worst enemies, and which is included by the US Department of State on its list of rogue States.

Syria is accused of supporting international groups considered to be terrorists, such as Hamas and the Lebanese Hezbollah (God's Party), as well as competing with Iran to destabilize not only Iraq, but the entire Middle Eastern region.

Nuclear and Railroad Capabilities

After Algeria, Putin visited Morocco last September, and was welcomed with full honours and hospitality by King Mohammed VI. Rabat is interested in the construction of a nuclear plant that could possibly be entrusted to the Russians. Egypt and Saudi Arabia are also interested in nuclear facilities.

Moreover, Moscow has proposed that Egypt participate in the Glonass satellite navigation system, in the most advanced hi-tech segment of Russian industry, specifically the cosmic-space sector.

Finally, the appointment of the Russian railroad monopoly RZhD to construct part of the 5,000 kilometres of railway with which Riyadh would like to equip itself seems almost certain. That deal is worth 1 billion dollars.

Old and New Threads

It is obvious that Moscow is re-tying the old threads that were broken when the Soviet Union collapsed. It wants to "regain its previous standing, in particular its economic position",

_Russia has also recently drawn up profitable sales agreements with the Emirs of Qatar (above: in a meeting with President Putin). He has sold helicopters to Qatar as well as Jordan

as stated in one of the first documents issued on foreign policy by Putin's presidency. It wants to re-conquer old clients from the Industrial-Military Complex (former VPK, now known as OPK) and the Soviet energy industry, in other words, the countries (and movements). More specifically it wants to re-establish contact with those nations that during the Cold War were listed by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to be in the "anti-imperialist" realm: Algeria, Libya, Egypt (before pro-Western Anwar Sadat changed routes), Syria, the PLO and Yemen.

Iraq also belongs to this group, but Moscow now considers it to be a lost cause, especially after the fall of such an historic client and anti-imperialist partner to the Soviet Union, the now defunct President Saddam Hussein. Post-Soviet Russia had agreed to some advantageous contracts with him in the first years of the millennium in the areas of energy and industry and for the creation of infrastructure, including those linked to the exploitation of the giant oilfield Qurna-2, in Southern Iraq which had been granted to the Russian company Lukoil Overseas. It will be difficult for Moscow to return, even if the war should end. Presumably, Iraq will become part of the area controlled and influenced by the USA



Grazia Neri_Tass photo (3)

_Algeria is one of the leading customers of Rosoboronekspport, the arms export agency run by Chezumov (above). Relations with Israel have also undergone a radical change (right: Israeli PM Olmert)

At the same time, Putin's Russia is weaving *new* threads. It is moving in on the area of *Sunnite* monarch-ruled Arab countries that have historically been classified as Western-leaning and "moderate", if not closely linked to the USA: from Morocco to Jordan, including the countries of the Arab peninsula which are home to American bases and command centres (Saudi Arabia, Qatar) and who are huge suppliers of crude oil to the West, specifically to the USA, or that are important financial partners (Saudi Arabia).

During the Cold War they belonged to the hostile "imperialist camp", according to Soviet strategists.

Today the approach toward the Middle East is altogether different. For Moscow, the region is no longer the meeting point between two opposing factions. It is a giant market that, moreover, is in need of stability. Putin, like his Chinese colleague Hu Jintao, does not make distinctions between regimes, institutions and orientations in foreign policy, nor does he worry about democracy and human rights. He does not pass judgment, impose conditions or exert pressure. And this is just what the moderate Arab regimes, from Cairo to Riyadh, like.

What counts here is *biznes*, profit. The days are

long gone when the USSR ran itself into the ground in the name of the anti-imperialist cause by donating arms, industrial facilities and equipment to "friendly countries" or by granting sales on credit that would never be repaid.

Russia no longer exports ideology, nor (presumed) missions of salvation. It does not even look for confrontation. It negotiates with everyone. It is in search of opportunities and deals. Not to mention stability in an area to which it feels, and is, close.

Israel

The perception of Israel has changed radically, as have relations with the Jewish state. It is no longer branded – as it was during the Soviet era – as Zionist. In 1991 diplomatic relations were re-established and affairs were normalised, passing to economic and financial co-operation, with an area in which hundreds of former Soviet and Russian citizens who have emigrated to Israel over the last thirty years operate, and whom Putin has many times called *our compatriots*. There are about 1 million Russian-speaking Israelis, almost 20% of the population.

In 2005 trade between the two countries was estimated at about a billion and a half dollars. The supply of Russian energy is very important to the Jewish State. In April of 2006, Russians launched a satellite that the Israelis use to control the territories of enemy countries. And active cooperation between their respective security and intelligence forces has

been established, especially in the fight against terrorism.

At the same time, Jews in Russia never had so much space for freedom (the ability to assemble, freedom of the press and religious liberties), activities (financial, cultural) and mobility. The days of the notorious Article 5 on Soviet passports (indicating ethnic origin), discrimination and limited entry (to university, government and party institutions) is long gone.

On October 17, 2006, to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the beginning of diplomatic relations between his country and the Russian Federation, Israeli Premier Ehud Olmert (whose own father is originally from the Russian city of Samara) spent three days in Moscow, welcomed with pomp and cordiality by Putin himself. Olmert, quite frankly, had spoken of the need for sanctions in relation to Iran and had criticised the sale of Russian arms to Teheran and Damascus, some of which (the anti-tank missiles) would probably be used against Israel by the Lebanese Hezbollah. After confirming co-operative relations with Moscow, the Israeli leader recognised that "Russia is a great power, which is becoming more and more influential in international affairs" ("Izvestia", October 19, 2006).

Pragmatism and Ideology

President Putin's pragmatism, sustained by growing proceeds from the exportation of raw materials, mostly gas and oil, is the card that Moscow is most willing to play in the Arab world. It prioritises Russia's financial interests, but it also touches on the political realm, beginning with the changes that have occurred in recent years in southern regions of the Middle East and in the Muslim world overall. These changes have at their base the diffusion of Islamic fundamentalism (not to be identified in its entirety with terrorism) on the one hand and on the other the ideology of Bush Jr. and his circle of "neo-conservatives", with their paradoxically Trotskyite theories regarding the exportation of democracy, even by military means, as a guarantee (or *conditio sine qua non*) of peace, development and a more efficient fight against terrorism in the entire Middle Eastern region.

Obviously it is an ideology that goes hand in hand with the desire to control energy supplies in areas which possess the majority of the world's supplies, Iraq and the Middle East.



Springing forth from these factors was the USA's adventure in Iraq in March of 2003 and its disastrous outcome, which is obvious to anyone: a civil-religious war (between Sunnis and Shiites and inside the same camps) which turns out hundreds of victims each day, and reinforces Al Qaeda's international terrorist activities, allowing them to set up operations in that country. Not to mention the possibly irreversible fragmentation of Iraq along ethnic and religious lines.

This is a destabilising element for the entire Middle Eastern region, which is a threat to the same "moderate" leading groups, such as the Saudis. Not to mention a severe decline in the standard of living and the general impoverishment that now exists in that country, from which approximately 1 million people have escaped since 2003.

All of this has reduced the USA's rating, authority and credibility in the entire region, even among its allies, despite its status as a military and economic superpower.

The results achieved - the political elections and the creation of "democratic" institutions that Washington strategists and their European soldiers had boasted about - seem to be paltry, to say the least. And the support that Washington gave to Shiites and Kurds for their politics was at the expense of the Sunnites. Putin and a group of Russian businessmen had predicted these outcomes and tried to dissuade the USA from its aggression in Iraq, keeping a much needed distance from the Bush Jr. Administration.



Grazia Neri / Jass photo (2)

_The Palestine issue is one of the highest-ranked on Russia's Middle Eastern agenda. Above: Foreign Minister Sergej Lavrov meets a Hamas delegation (left: members of the delegation)

Last February in Moscow, on the eve of Putin's departure for Riyadh, the Secretary General of the Arab League, Amr Mussa, expressed to the Russian President a perception about Russia that is extremely widespread in the Arab world and among its leading groups: 'Relations between Russia and the Arab world are flourishing today and we greatly appreciate Russia's policy in the Middle East. The policies of other countries in our region have not proven to be successful. Russia is one of the few countries with a policy that distinguishes itself for its comprehension of the reality of our region'. (M.K. Bhadrakumar, "Asia Times", www.atimes.com, February 17, 2007)

The Palestinian Issue

The Palestinian issue is one of the top items on the Russian agenda for the Middle East, and along with the USA, the European Union, and the United Nations it makes up the "Quartet" that has the duty of finding solutions for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The USSR was one of the major supporters of Yasser Arafat's PLO, on a political-diplomatic-military (arms supplies) level, as well as on a financial one. In return, the PLO was considered to be an important regional point of reference for Moscow's "anti-imperialist" and

"anti-Zionist" policies in the Middle East. The end of the USSR destroyed those links with the Palestinians. Putin has re-woven the threads, while removing any form of ideology that may have remained. The objective is to re-launch Russia's presence and influence in the region, not by feeding the conflict, but rather by taking on the autonomous role of mediator to re-open the peace process and reduce tensions in the entire Middle Eastern region.

Recognition of Hamas

Russia's acknowledgement of Hamas as a government force needs to be interpreted within this context. This occurred in March of 2006 when a Hamas delegation, which had won the elections two months earlier and formed the government of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), arrived in Moscow on invitation from the Russian government. Hamas leaders, including its top man, Khaled Meshal, met with the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergej Lavrov. It was this legitimisation that Israeli Premier Olmert and the US Department of State criticised so harshly, classifying Hamas as a "terrorist group".

The embargo by the USA, the European Union and Israel, with the suspension of aid, was intended to issue a blow to the government that had been constituted with a parliamentary vote by the movement.

Russian leaders thought differently: Hamas had won the election, it had become a governing force and as such it had become a necessary interlocutor; one which should not be negotiated with, but neither should be made more radical through isolation.

Lavrov invited Hamas to "set down arms" to "moderate" its politics, to "recognise Israel and to respect all of the previous agreements made by official Palestinian and Israeli representatives". He also stated that he was aware that the movement could not "change itself overnight".

During the initial contact, Lavrov said he had seen encouraging signals, like a willingness to "sustain the road map to which the international community has entrusted the Middle East peace process". For this reason, Moscow invited Syria, the main sponsor of Hamas in that region, to participate. Immediately afterwards, Putin conferred in Moscow with the Palestinian president, Mahmud Abbas, the big loser in January's vote,

and pushed for an accord between Fatah and Hamas. That was the starting point for re-opening the peace process.

Russia and the Israeli-Lebanese Crisis

After recognising Hamas, Moscow distinguished itself as a mediating force during the course of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis that took place in the summer of 2006. If on the one hand it condemned the actions of Hamas and the Lebanese Hezbollah against Israel (missiles that were launched on populous Israeli cities and the kidnapping of Tzahal soldiers), on the other it stigmatised "Israel's disproportionate use of force" (heavy bombings of inhabited cities and Lebanese civil infrastructure). Moscow, with its intense political-diplomatic activity, provided a contribution that was anything but secondary, both to the international conference for the regulation of that conflict, held in Rome on July 26, 2006 (which brought together foreign ministers from the USA, Russia, Great Britain, France, Italy, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt as well as UN and EU representatives), and to the process that brought about the UN

resolution the following August 11th. It imposed an end to both the Israeli bombings of Lebanon and Palestine and the Lebanese missile launches on inhabited Israeli cities, a ceasefire by the Lebanese Hezbollah and the dissemination of an international peacekeeping force led by the United Nations throughout the areas of conflict in order to maintain Israel's borders.

"Russia believes", declared Lavrov, "that a military solution is impossible in such a deeply rooted conflict like the one taking place in the Middle East".

On that occasion, Moscow asserted itself as a counterweight to the American tendency (for the benefit of Israel) to "monopolise diplomatic activities surrounding the crisis" (Lavrov). It was also because of Russia (who had found sympathetic interlocutors in some European countries such as France, Italy and Germany) that the conflict was frozen, preventing it from

_In a key interview to the Arab TV channel Al Jazeera, Putin reiterated his intention to bring Israel, the Palestinians and all the other Arab States to the negotiating table



joining the chaos that was ongoing in Iraq, thereby preventing additional, deadly consequences for the region.

Russia decided not to involve its armed forces in the UN peacekeeping initiative. Instead, it sent forces to Lebanon to repair destroyed roads and bridges. More specifically it sent engineer corps that were protected by a military contingent made up exclusively of Chechnyan soldiers under the command of the current President Ramzan Kadyrov. It was an astute message for the Islamic Arab world, signifying that the Russian-Chechnyan conflict was over and that Chechnya was an integral and active member of the Russian Federation. After all, it had already been for quite some time that Russia had achieved the stoppage of any type of support from Arab countries, not to mention Hamas, for the Chechnyan separatists, whose leaders had been eliminated in the two years prior.

Moscow Favours The International Conference

During the meetings in Riyad, Doha and Amman, Moscow proposed an international

The de-stabilisation in Iraq is viewed by Moscow as not only a danger to the Middle East, but also to Russia itself. It could have negative implications for Russia, among the Muslims who live there and in nearby and bordering countries. This is why Putin has taken a direct interest in the stabilization of the Middle East

conference with participation from Israel and Palestine, and *all* of the countries in the region, beginning with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, as well as the Arab League and the Quartet of mediators, and Syria and Iran. In a very important interview released by the Arab TV network Al Jazeera (February 10) Putin declared: "We need to move forward with new ideas, consolidate our positions and establish a dialogue that will allow us to listen to one another".

Recent Developments

There were many meetings between the parties responsible for making Russian foreign policy and the Palestinians before, during and after Putin's visit to the Arab peninsula and Jordan. There, the head of the Kremlin reinforced Russia's proposals: an end to the embargo by the USA, EU and Israel against the PNA, the Palestinian National Authority, the renunciation of violence, adherence to previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements and recognition of Israel by Hamas.

And with regard to the confrontation between Hamas and Fatah, which degenerated into open, armed conflicts last December, Moscow once again exercised the role of negotiator, in order to avert a civil war. Lavrov supported Saudi mediation, crowned by the success of the February 8th conference called by King Abdullah in Mecca. Hamas and Fatah agreed to end the conflict and create a united national government, run by a leader from Hamas (Ismail Haniyeh) and including ministers from both sides.

This compromise bore fruit. Last March, Israel and the PNA re-established relations, agreeing to periodic talks. And this past April 1st, Israeli Prime Minister Olmert invited Arab leaders – specifically the Saudi sovereign – to Israel for a "confrontation of ideas". He also added that the latter would be "surprised by Israel's positions, which for the moment cannot be revealed publicly".

Russia Is Also Muslim

One thing must not be forgotten. There are about 15-16 million Muslims in the Russian Federation. Four years ago Russia was admitted as an observing member to the OIC (Organization of the Islamic Conference), an organisation that unites all Islamic countries. With a bit of stretching of history, Putin and other Russian leaders present their country as

a model of peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims (prevalently Sunni). According to their version, Chechnya was simply a parenthesis and the Russian-Chechnyan conflict was political, not religious. Another indicative particular: Muslim personalities from the Federation are always included in the Russian delegations that visit Muslim countries; the Presidents of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, Mintimer Shajmiev and Mustafa Rakhimov are two examples. They govern two regions which not only feature a majority of Muslims, but are also among the most industrially advanced in the Federation, and unlike northern Caucasus, for example, they represent the possibility of a peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims. Muslims have their own central and regional religious administrations (*mufti*) and also receive government financing. One of their duties is to patrol against Islamic insurgencies. Running down the Volga fault line, like a zipper that joins European Russia to Siberia, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan have a great deal of geopolitical influence.

The de-stabilisation in Iraq is viewed by Moscow as not only a danger to the Middle East, but also to Russia itself. It could have negative implications for Russia, among the Muslims who live there and in nearby and bordering countries. Russia itself is in the cross-hairs of Al Qaeda terrorism, as demonstrated by the fatal attacks on Russian diplomats in Baghdad (June 2006) and Russian technicians in Algeria (March 2007). Therefore, Russia is directly interested in stability for the Middle East. For this reason it is asking for a “new approach” based on dialogue among *all* interested parties, rather than force to resolve the ongoing conflicts. Russia favours the withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq and the transfer (also foreseen by Bush Jr.) of full power to the Iraqis themselves, in order to “personally ensure the safety of their own country”. To achieve these objectives, it will be necessary not only for the international community to be involved, but *all* of the countries in the region as well, including rogue States like Iran and Syria. Bush Jr.’s decision to increase the US contingent in Iraq goes in the opposite direction – according to Putin. Still the genesis of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the *conditio sine qua non* to alleviate tension in the entire region. For this



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reason – again, according to Putin – a Palestinian State must be formed as soon as possible and all of the countries in the region, first and foremost the PNA, must recognise Israel and its right to exist as a Jewish State. In this process, Putin does not consider one negative factor: the Iranian leadership, which is adventurist and unreliable not only for the way it manages the construction of its nuclear industry, but for its illogical threats against Israel and the episode of the kidnapped British sailors as well. And on the other front, even if they also appear to be adventurist and counter-productive, there are the thinly-veiled threats from the USA to strike Tehran militarily. Moreover, the influence of the radical Iranians over extremist groups and lunatic fringes in the region (Hezbollah Shiites; Hamas) must be considered. And the relations between Tehran and Moscow seem to be breaking down due to the nuclear issue. But that’s another story.