

# THE MENA REGION: A GREAT POWER COMPETITION

edited by **Karim Mezran, Arturo Varvelli**

preface by **Frederick Kempe, Giampiero Massolo**



ISPI



Atlantic Council



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THE MENA REGION: A GREAT POWER COMPETITION  
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## Preface

Frederick Kempe, Giampiero Massolo

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Over the last few years, a crisis of legitimacy has beset the liberal orientation of the post-bipolar world order, which has been reflected in the strain on the multilateral fabric of international coexistence, the functioning of international organizations, and even the institutions of individual states. Most recently, in particular, the signs of disintegration of the international order have multiplied. A sense of global withdrawal of the United States has contributed to the weakening of the international order created at the end of World War II also and definitively consolidated at the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, the growing power of China and the renewed assertiveness of Russia seem to be a prelude to a new phase of depreciation of Western impact on the rest of the world, if not the opening of a great competition for the redistribution of power and international status.

In the context of this global reassessment, the configuration of regional orders has come into question, illustrated by the extreme case of the current collapse of the Middle Eastern order. Such a phenomenon has been ongoing for several years, and has recently accelerated. This was particularly evident in the period after the uprisings that erupted in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2011, when the United States signaled its choice to rebalance resources and commitments abroad and away from the region. This choice shifted the regional balance of power and ultimately challenged the United States' effectiveness as the external provider of security in the area, leading to a power vacuum that other players have endeavored to fill. On the

one hand, the United States' choice has allowed for the ascent of regional actors: Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, Iran, Turkey, and Israel have each gained an increasingly prominent position on the Middle Eastern stage and become determinant in the fate of multiple MENA crises. As a result, competition over the MENA region has gradually – but steadily – extended to a much broader array of players than it used to be in the past. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, for instance, is having an impact on the many theaters where the two are fighting their proxy wars, especially in Yemen. Similarly, Turkey's ability to establish partnerships with different players in the region has expanded Ankara's network of allies in the Arab and non-Arab world, increasing its reach and influence and allowing Ankara to further pursue its ambitions. On the other hand, more importantly, the American choice to scale down engagement in the region has paved the way for Russia's resurgence.

From the end of World War II through the years of the Cold War, indeed, competition for influence in this important area was dominated by confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR). While assessing the actual impact of this competition on the MENA countries might be challenging, one can surely argue that the US-USSR confrontation in the Middle East shaped the region's security architecture for the years to come. Overall, the "Pax Americana" model applied to MENA region as well: the regional order that emerged after the end of World War II sanctioned the supremacy of the United States as the sole external provider and guarantor of security in the area. Over the last few years, the idea of a Russian "return" to the MENA region has captured increasing attention by policymakers and scholars throughout the region and beyond, to the point that today Moscow is seen as a major player in the area and set to take the place of the United States as the dominant power. The decision of former US President Barack Obama, in 2015, not to intervene in Syria, marked a watershed toward American strategic disengagement from the Middle East. Following a decade of relative absence from the region,

the symbolic date of the Russian resurgence coincided with Moscow's intervention in Syria in 2015. While the Russian return might not be considered as a surprise given Moscow's historical interest in the region, the responsibilities that Moscow is undertaking today are indeed unprecedented. Moving from the Syrian battleground, the Kremlin has gradually expanded its diplomatic reach, asserting itself as the mediator of all Middle Eastern crises. With this purpose in mind, Moscow has exercised great effort in establishing relations with as many sides as possible in each theater. The offer to mediate in the Yemeni crisis, the ability to talk to each of the main components of the Libyan puzzle, the rapprochement to Baghdad in the context of Iraq's reconstruction sided by close collaboration with the Kurdish galaxy at the same time, increased military and economic cooperation with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, all provide good examples of the wideness of Moscow's diplomatic reach. In the space of a few years, the Kremlin has been able to acquire diplomatic reach that currently appears to have few rivals in the region, to the point that Moscow could effectively hope to pursue a "Russian Pax" for the Middle East, in alternative to the Western one. However, over the last year, difficulties experienced by Moscow in effectively bringing the Syrian crisis to an end might push the Kremlin to scale down its ambitions.

In this framework, it seems that Washington might remain the main actor capable of influencing policy and affecting the course of events in the region. The United States' hesitation in acting on the declaration to withdraw from Syria and Afghanistan, still two epicenters of regional chaos, has shown that US strategic interests in the region have not disappeared, not least the threat of terrorism. On the contrary, the geopolitical weight, military capabilities, and economic power that Washington still enjoys in the region put the United States at a net advantage compared to any other players on this chessboard. It is up to the Trump administration, though, to decide to what extent to engage, keeping in mind that Russia as well as the regional powers will not hesitate to fill the void left in the wake of a US withdrawal.

The purpose of this report, published by ISPI and the Atlantic Council and edited by Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli, is to gather analyses from some of the main experts and commentators on Middle Eastern affairs and deepen our understanding of the potential consequences of American disengagement for the various countries of the MENA region. At the same time, this volume is meant to underline the growing role of Russia – and other regional actors – in the Middle East. The first part of the report will address the foreign policy choices pursued by Washington and Moscow for the MENA region, while the second part will focus on case studies of the two powers' policies in the countries beset by major crises and their interaction with emerging regional actors.

Frederick Kempe  
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*ISPI*

# 1. US Withdrawal from the Middle East: Perceptions and Reality

William F. Wechsler

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When Britain's Minister of State in the Foreign Commonwealth Office toured its "Protected States" of the Persian Gulf in November 1967, he conveyed an important message of reassurance. Yes, they had encountered embarrassing military setbacks in the region recently. And, of course, there were voices at home arguing that the financial resources being dedicated to securing the Middle East would be better used to improve the domestic economy. But any lingering perceptions of an impending British departure reflected only rumors, and certainly not any reality.

Indeed, the Minister confirmed that "there was no thought of withdrawal in our minds" and that Britain would remain in the Gulf "so long as was necessary and desirable to ensure the peace and stability of the area"<sup>1</sup>. By all accounts the Minister was honest in his representations of British intentions and sincere in his confidence that British promises would be kept. And yet, merely two months later, on 16 January 1968, the Prime Minister publicly announced that Britain would soon begin withdrawing all its forces East of Suez, to be completed by the end of 1971.

The United States, closing in on a quarter millennium since its declaration of independence, is now an old state with

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<sup>1</sup> W.R. Louis, "The British Withdrawal from the Gulf, 1967-1971", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2010, pp. 83-101.

a short memory. Most Americans, even including some who have helped craft US policies toward the Middle East in recent administrations, do not remember the details of what was immediately understood to be a terrible British betrayal of its longstanding local partners. The Gulf states, most of which are not yet a half century from their independence, are young but have longer memories. None of their leaders have forgotten.

Today it is the United States' turn to be confronted with questions about its withdrawal when visiting the Gulf and the wider Middle East. For many US diplomats and military officers in the region, such questions are baffling and their repetition frustrating. How can there be any doubts about the US commitment when there are so many US resources dedicated to the region? How can there be any question of American withdrawal when the United States has such clear national security interests at stake?

## **Perpetual American Interests**

Indeed, American policymakers' recognition of US national security interests in the Middle East has remained remarkably consistent across administrations ever since the region's energy resources began to be exploited, and especially since the United States took on the mantle of global leadership.

Some of these regional interests reflect the United States' wider understanding of its global security requirements. As with any part in the world, the United States has a strong interest in ensuring that no power in this region, either state or non-state, has both the will and capacity to directly attack the United States. As such, the United States has traditionally worked to ensure that no single entity could militarily dominate the wider Eurasian landmass, of which the Middle East is part, as such a power would inherently pose a direct military threat.

Over this same time period the United States also concluded that its global interests are best protected by promoting the liberal international order. This order represents a remarkably

idealist break from historic norms of oligarchical societies, authoritarian governments, mercantilist economies, and adventurist militaries. But, with some notable exceptions, the American approach to achieving these idealist aims has been largely defined by a realist reliance on incremental progress towards generational reform, and the clear willingness to compromise in the short term on matters of principle in support of longer-term improvements, notwithstanding the inevitable charges of hypocrisy.

Overall this mix of idealist and realist policies has been remarkably successful, as the post-World War II era has witnessed the greatest global advancement in the human condition ever recorded. And yet, nowhere has that realist acceptance of compromise and incrementalism been more evident than in the Middle East, where representative governments remain scarce, a near-term threat of interstate conflict persists, and many economies are still primarily organized for the benefit of those who rule.

This dynamic cannot be understood without first appreciating the region's unique role as a global energy producer. Oil remains the most important global energy source, representing over one-third of all energy consumption, ahead of coal and natural gas, and far ahead of all renewable resources combined<sup>2</sup>. No matter the rate of the energy transition, oil is going to remain a crucial part of the energy mix for at least the lifetime of anyone reading this, and most likely through the lifetimes of their children. Furthermore, although the effect is not nearly as direct as it was decades ago, a long-term increase in the market price of oil still negatively affects both global economic growth and inflation, and a long-term decline in prices would make energy producers unstable.

US policymakers must still grapple with these realities, notwithstanding the United States' newfound "energy independence". While breakthroughs in fracking and directional drilling

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<sup>2</sup> BP, *BP Statistical Review of World Energy*, June 2019, p. 11.

have doubled US production over the last decade<sup>3</sup>, this doesn't mean that the United States is now in a state of energy autarky. Increasing domestic production and the growth of renewable energy have indeed gone a long way toward mitigating the strategic risk of a foreign adversary cutting off distant energy supply lines in wartime, but they do nothing to protect the United States from increases in global oil prices. US oil companies do not offer American citizens discount pricing due to their nationality, nor do American consumers choose to pay above market rates for domestically sourced gasoline.

Unfortunately, global oil prices are not the result of an entirely free market, absent from any foreign government influence. This is because roughly four-fifths of the world's proven oil reserves are concentrated in the fourteen member states of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and about two-thirds of these are located in the Middle East<sup>4</sup>.

Saudi Arabia alone plays a particularly prominent role. It is naturally blessed with some of the cheapest oil in the world to find, develop, and produce. It possesses the second largest proven oil reserves (after Venezuela, which mainly has problematic extra heavy crude), maintains the second largest production (now to the United States due to fracking), and remains the oil market's global swing producer with spare capacity that allows it to make the tactical shifts necessary to influence market prices. These shifts are sometimes designed for global benefit, as when Saudi Arabia acts to prevent unwelcome price volatility in moments of crisis, and at other times are made to maximize the Kingdom's own long-term market position and revenues. As a result, Saudi Aramco is by far the world's most profitable company.

Even more unfortunately, the Middle East is a fundamentally unstable region of the world, beset with interstate military

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration, *Total Petroleum and Other Liquids Production – 2018* (last retrieved on 26 September 2019).

<sup>4</sup> OPEC, *OPEC Share of World Crude Oil Reserves*, 2018 (last retrieved on 26 September 2019).



rivalries and deeply challenged by internal tensions. Additionally, most of the region's energy resources have to move through one of two critical geographical chokepoints. The most important is the Strait of Hormuz that connects the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman, sandwiched between Iran, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. It is so narrow that ships moving through are restricted to one inbound or outbound lane, each only two miles wide. Through this tight passage transits about one-third of total global seaborne traded oil and, in total, over a fifth of the entire world's global oil supply. Over one-quarter of global liquefied natural gas trade also moves through the channel. Moreover, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the similarly narrow waterway between the coasts of Yemen and the Horn of Africa at the southern end of the Red Sea, itself accounts for just under one-tenth of total seaborne traded petroleum. It is painfully easy to disrupt the movement of tankers through these chokepoints, and it doesn't require a sizable military to shut it down entirely.

Given these energy and geographic realities, the United States has long identified four principal national security objectives that are specific to the Middle East: the region's energy resources must continue to be extracted, they must be able to move freely to consumers, regional stability should be supported, and regional prosperity should be encouraged. Ideally, perhaps, these American objectives could be realized by freeriding on another benevolent global power eager to provide them. Alas, no such option currently exists.

The steady extraction of the region's energy resources can be threatened either by military aggression from outside powers or by local rulers deciding to reduce production. Local rulers have in the past done so both directly for political purposes and indirectly through anti-competitive policies designed to maximize producers' revenue at the expense of global economic growth. This US objective requires the United States to seek to prevent any one power, regional or external, from dominating local production decisions – a concern that becomes immediately pressing if that power is an American adversary.

This helps explain why the Middle East was relevant to the US fight against Nazi aggression during World War II and was a critically contested area for great power competition during the subsequent Cold War with the Soviet Union (USSR). It also helps explain why the United States has felt its interests threatened, at various points in time, by pan-Arabist movements, the Iranian revolution, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and the more recent rise of Salafi jihadist non-state actors. For the same reasons, American planners today are growing increasingly concerned by growing Russian influence and Chinese presence across the region.

After those energy resources are extracted they must then be allowed to move freely to buyers around the globe, their destinations primarily determined by market conditions rather than imposed by political diktats or diverted by military threats. American policymakers still remember the powerful impact of their own restrictions on energy shipments to Japan before the attacks on Pearl Harbor. And in 1973 the American people quickly came to appreciate the consequence of any failure to ensure the unfettered flow of energy when OPEC imposed a formal boycott of nations that were seen to support Israel during the Yom Kippur War, resulting in gas rationing across the United States and contributing to a global economic recession.

This threat became even more immediate after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Iran's geographic position means that it will always have the ability to threaten the security of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. After the revolution, this power changed hands from the pro-American Shah who helped maintain maritime security to an anti-American regime that brazenly threatened it.

Furthermore, the 1980 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan then convinced the United States that Moscow was "now attempting to consolidate a strategic position that poses a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil"<sup>5</sup>. The result was the

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<sup>5</sup> J.E. Carter, "State of the Union address 1980", Joint Session of the 96th US

Carter Doctrine, which declared that “an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force”<sup>6</sup>. Critically, this policy was then accepted and enforced by the next administration, across American partisan lines. In 1987, after the Iran-Iraq war expanded to the Gulf and Iran began attacking non-combatant shipping, President Reagan announced:

Our own role in the Gulf is vital. It is to protect our interests and to help our friends in the region protect theirs [...] Let there be no misunderstanding: we will accept our responsibility for these vessels in the face of threats by Iran or anyone else. If we fail to do so [...] we would abdicate our role as a naval power. And we would open opportunities for the Soviets to move into this chokepoint of the free world’s oil flow [...] If we don’t do the job, the Soviets will, and that will jeopardize our own national security as well as our allies<sup>7</sup>.

The US Navy has consistently maintained its role as the leading guarantor of freedom of navigation in the Gulf ever since. And as the US military refocuses for an era of great power competition and makes plans for future conflict scenarios, it no doubt recognizes the potential utility of keeping an American hand on the throttle of Middle Eastern energy bound for China. Along similar lines, our war plans need to reflect the critical importance of ensuring that US naval forces based in the Mediterranean can always transit unmolested through the Bab el-Mandeb and into the Indo-Pacific region.

In addition to protecting the sea lanes, the United States has also traditionally sought to promote wider regional stability, recognizing that the region was awash with inherently fragile

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Congress, Washington, DC, 23 January 1980.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> R. Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Venice Economic Summit, Arms Control, and the Deficit”, White House Television office Video, 15 June 1987.

governing systems, unstable domestic social structures, and numerous interstate rivalries. Of course, this is a generalization, but one that explains far more than it obscures. The United States has been particularly concerned whenever threats arise either to the region's energy rich areas or to Israel, which was long the sole local supporter of the United States' idealist vision of a liberal international order. This also meant working to deny the USSR (and then Russia) a significant diplomatic or security role in the region, as its objectives were seen to be antithetical to both regional stability and to global US interests.

With notable exceptions that largely date back to the early Eisenhower administration, US presidents generally looked askance at casual calls to shift borders, change regimes, or support domestic unrest. And even in these early years of growing American involvement in the region, the United States quickly shifted its approach from supporting British covert operations in Iran during the first year of Eisenhower's presidency to opposing British, French, and Israeli aggression in Egypt just three years later.

Indeed, for decades since American efforts to promote stability have typically sought little more than to sustain the prevailing regional *status quo*. To this end, the United States has been repeatedly required to help resolve local crises, lead diplomatic negotiations, maintain a carefully calibrated regional military balance of power, and deter aggression from aspiring regional hegemons. Given the region's underlying volatility and the personal style of diplomacy favored by its leaders, this has required administration after administration to devote a disproportionate amount of its most precious resource, the personal time and attention of the US President.

When such efforts were successful, such as with the peace process between Egypt and Israel, American presidents tended to resolve conflicts with agreements to withdraw forces, restore borders, formally recognize the *status quo*, and improve diplomatic relations – all facilitated by the provision of increased American economic and military assistance. Even when US military force

had to be used it was typically restrained in its scope and limited in its objectives to reinforcing instead of upending the *status quo*. In this way, George H.W. Bush's Gulf War successfully restored international borders while keeping in power both the monarch that was saved and the dictator that was defeated.

The US commitment to the *status quo* in the Middle East was so resolute that American efforts to promote democracy, human rights, and religious tolerance in the region were especially modest, even in comparison with efforts in other regions of the world with similarly authoritarian traditions. They were therefore ineffectual. In this area American agency was certainly limited but its political will was even more lacking. The United States' historical reluctance, compounded over decades, to quietly encourage its Middle Eastern partners to adopt goals for even gradual change or to take even largely symbolic reforms was deeply unfortunate. This repeated failure by the United States to apply its own preferred mix of idealism and realism by persuading its regional partners to act in their own enlightened self-interest helped allow the conditions for continued domestic unrest. It thus contributed to the growth of both Shia and Sunni extremism, to the rise to power of both the Ayatollah Khomeini and Osama bin Laden.

This failure was seized upon by President George W. Bush to rationalize his Iraq war, particularly after the purported *casus belli* of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction proved non-existent. But his decisions to upend the regional *status quo* – invading Iraq, toppling the regime, occupying the country, and forcibly imposing a representative system of government – are most accurately understood not as a rectification of past American omissions but as a sharp departure from the traditional American approach to the region. And, compounding the exception, his decision was taken in the absence of a clear and present threat to either the US homeland (the reason for invading Afghanistan), the region's energy resources (which had triggered his father's earlier war against Iraq) or to Israel (which viewed Iran as the far greater strategic threat).

Indeed, the Bush Administration openly boasted that it had broken from historic American norms. As then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced in Cairo, “For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East – and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course”<sup>8</sup>. And yet in the end the American occupation of Iraq was widely seen both as a singularly unattractive model for democratization and as a destabilizing force for the region. The predictable result was the expansion again of Shia and Sunni extremism, in the form of Iranian interstate power and the Salafi jihadist movement. The Bush Administration’s deviation from longstanding norms was widely recognized to be a failure. The US foreign policy establishment then sought to return to those norms.

## **American Presence and Power**

The US military presence in the region has since declined sharply from the historically anomalous deployments under President Bush, but has sustained its traditional profile of “forward engagement” through routine exercises and temporary deployments, by working “by with and through” its partners and proxies, through a near-permanent allocation of at least one carrier strike group to the region, and by maintaining a series of military bases, typically with significant host nation subsidies.

Key elements of the US presence are focused along the region’s critical maritime lanes. At the bottom of the Red Sea just past the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, for instance, the United States has long operated out of Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. In 2014 President Obama agreed to a new twenty-year lease for those facilities at twice the previous annual expense, reflecting the base’s expanded operations. And along the Persian Gulf on the way to the Strait of Hormuz, key facilities include several

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<sup>8</sup> C. Rice, “[Remarks at the American University in Cairo](#)”, U.S. Department of State, Archive, 20 June 2005.

facilities in Kuwait, the headquarters of the US 5th Fleet in Bahrain, Al Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates, and Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, the largest American military base in the region<sup>9</sup>. And needless to say, when US forces deploy to the region they do so with training and equipment drawn from the world's largest military budget and most advanced arsenal.

The United States has also continued to use its position as the world's largest arms exporter to build relationships, balance power and thus attempt to prevent conflict. Of the seventeen nations deemed "Major Non-NATO Allies" under the US Foreign Assistance Act, seven are in the Middle East and North Africa (Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Tunisia) and two others (Afghanistan and Pakistan) are just to the east, but still part of the US Central Command's area of responsibility<sup>10</sup>. As a result, roughly half of global American military exports have gone to the Middle East in recent years<sup>11</sup>.

The United States' continuing forward engagement extends to its civilian diplomatic, economic, cultural, and economic personnel as well. In recent decades, the United States has routinely been involved, usually centrally, in almost every negotiation to resolve regional interstate disputes. Indeed, it has not been uncommon for American diplomats to become engaged in domestic debates as well in a number of Middle East countries. In most regional capitals, the American embassy is the largest and most active foreign presence, sometimes dwarfing its peers. Nowhere is this more evident than in Baghdad, where the US embassy is its largest in the world, was built at a cost of \$750 million, and at its peak housed about 16,000 persons.

A key priority for those American diplomats has been to promote local economic development, as general prosperity has

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<sup>9</sup> M. Wallin, "*U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East*", American Security Project, June 2018.

<sup>10</sup> 22 CFR § 120.32 - Major non-NATO ally, Legal Information Institute.

<sup>11</sup> P.D. Wezeman, A. Fleurant, A. Kuimova, N. Tian, and S.T. Wezeman, *Trends in international arms transfers, 2018*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2019.

long been recognized as the most effective driver of internal stability. The United States has done so for decades through the provision of billions of dollars in direct development assistance and by supporting the allocation of billions more through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The United States has sought to increase bilateral commerce as well, concluding free trade agreements with Bahrain, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman. These constitute a full quarter of all the countries in the world that have such agreements with the United States – and a majority of those outside of the Americas<sup>12</sup>. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, within the region only Israel and certain energy-rich countries on the Arabian Peninsula rank reasonably high on global rankings of per-capita economic production, global competitiveness, or human development<sup>13</sup>. The lack of economic opportunity combined with rapid population growth remains a recipe for long term volatility and thus future risk to regional stability and US interests. This risk further reinforces the need for continued US engagement.

Overall, therefore, the United States has relatively consistently recognized its national security interests across the Middle East and has steadily built an American presence sized and structured to be able to confidently protect those interests, notwithstanding the underlying instability of the region. Today, even though it is half a world away, the United States enjoys greater air and naval power, diplomatic and intelligence presence, and economic and cultural influence across the region than any other external power. Indeed, along most of these

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<sup>12</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative, [Free Trade Agreements](#), (last retrieved on 26 September 2019). Twelve of these agreements are with countries in the Western Hemisphere, and of the rest the only three non-MENA agreements are with Australia, Korea, and Singapore.

<sup>13</sup> See International Monetary Fund (IMF), [World Economic Outlook Database](#), (last retrieved on 26 September 2019); World Economic Forum, [Global Competitiveness Report 2018](#), (last retrieved on 26 September 2019); UN Development Programme, [Human Development Indices and Indicators: 2018 Statistical Update](#), 2018 (last retrieved on 26 September 2019).



factors the United States is stronger than most local actors as well. Moreover, it has demonstrated its ability to project land power into the region both rapidly and at large scale, and to be able sustain that presence for many years, a quality that no other nation possesses.

None of this US power has declined in recent years. No facts have changed that would fundamentally alter US interests. No other benevolent nation has magically emerged that might harmlessly replace the United States as the guarantor of stability and freedom of navigation. So how could any reasonable observer conclude that the United States is a waning power, likely to withdraw substantially in the years ahead?

Quite easily, as it turns out. The questions being posed today are less about American capability than about American will, leading to deep uncertainty as to whether the United States still defines its regional interests as it once did. And it is that very perception that is driving much of the turmoil in the region today.

## **A Question of Will**

There are many reasons for this perception, but one of the most fundamental is the deep strain of isolationism that still resides within the American public, exacerbated today by a weariness with the Middle East after seemingly unending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Of course, presidents have historically had little difficulty rousing Americans to fight an enemy abroad, especially if they feel directly threatened, such as in the darkest days of the Cold War and in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. But Americans tend to expect such fights to end with a clear victory over a relatively short period, and can sour quickly when they determine that the United States is stuck in a quagmire with little prospect of success. Moreover, polls have consistently shown that Americans do not want to sacrifice their own well-being for abstract US foreign policy objectives and would clearly prefer their tax dollars to be spent at

home for their own direct benefit rather than leave the country through foreign assistance.

Reflecting this, each of the last four American presidents came to office having promised, at least implicitly, that he would seek fewer global commitments than did his predecessor and, often specifically, that he would seek to do less in the Middle East. In the wake of the first Iraq War, a model conflict that drove President George H.W. Bush's approval ratings above ninety percent, Governor Bill Clinton nevertheless won the subsequent election by arguing that "it's the economy, stupid" and calling for a domestic "peace dividend" that would come from reducing overseas commitments. Eight years later Governor George W. Bush, long before he decided to remake Iraq in America's image, proposed a "humble" foreign policy and ridiculed his predecessor's commitment to nation building.

Eight years after that Senator Barack Obama won first his party's nomination and then the presidency, in no small part because he was the candidate most opposed to his predecessor's "dumb war" and most committed to bringing American troops home. And another eight years later, then-candidate Donald Trump campaigned against his predecessor's signature diplomatic agreement with Iran, while at the same time going even further than President Obama in his criticism of the war with Iraq. "It's one of the worst decisions in the history of the country", Trump explained to applause from a Republican primary audience in South Carolina. "We have totally destabilized the Middle East" he continued, "We spent two trillion dollars, we could have rebuilt our country"<sup>14</sup>.

These comments did not escape the notice of US partners in the region. They were generally reassured, however, by the commitments to the region made after Presidents Clinton and Bush took office. After a year working on a Middle East strategy (and a limited strike to retaliate against an Iraqi assassination

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<sup>14</sup> I. Schwartz, "Trump on Iraq: How Could We Have Been So Stupid?", *Real Clear Politics*, 17 February 2016.

attempt against George H.W. Bush) President Clinton adopted a “dual containment” policy against Iraq and Iran that signaled a fundamental continuity with his predecessor. Despite having deprioritized the focus on al-Qaeda after he took office, President George W. Bush sharply reversed course after 9/11. And while his occupation of Iraq represented an unnerving break from American policy traditions, the United States’ partners in the region nevertheless remained confident that their views on energy and Iran would continue to be well appreciated by a Bush-Cheney administration.

More recently, however, campaign rhetoric has become governing reality for US presidents. Only months after taking office President Barack Obama detailed his approach to the Middle East in a speech in Cairo, calling for a “new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect”<sup>15</sup>. The United States’ regional partners noted, however, that President Obama did not reference the mutual interests that had defined bilateral relations for decades, energy security and regional stability. In contrast, he stressed that “we do not want to keep our troops in Afghanistan” and reiterated campaign promises to “leave Iraq to Iraqis [...] and to remove all our troops from Iraq by 2012”<sup>16</sup>.

Moreover, President Obama told Iran that “my country is prepared to move forward without preconditions” with an understanding that “any nation – including Iran – should have the right to access peaceful nuclear power if it complies with its responsibilities under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty”<sup>17</sup>. He downplayed the longstanding US designation of Iran as a leading state sponsor of terrorism by describing it merely as one that “played a role” in acts of violence<sup>18</sup>. To President

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<sup>15</sup> B. Obama, “[Remarks by the President on a New Beginning](#)”, Remarks by the President at Cairo University, The White House Office of the Press Secretary (Cairo, Egypt), the White House President Barack Obama, 4 June 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Obama these ideas would fulfill promises he had made to his voters and reflected his personal focus on nuclear disarmament, since “when one nation pursues a nuclear weapon, the risk of nuclear attack rises for all nations”<sup>19</sup>. To leaders in Iraq, Israel and the Gulf, however, these were seen as breaking with past American precedents in a manner that was naïve and potentially dangerous.

President Obama went on to stay true to his promises, withdrawing US troops from Iraq on schedule in his first term and successfully reaching a controversial agreement with Iran on its nuclear program in his second, prioritizing that above confronting Iran’s malign behavior across the region. He spoke repeatedly about the need to “free ourselves from foreign oil” and at the same time announced a “pivot to Asia” that was clearly intended to also imply a pivot away from the Middle East<sup>20</sup>. These messages were received in the region.

Perhaps even more concerning, again from the perspective of the traditionally pro-American regimes in the region, was the growing inconsistencies in US policies, underscoring the perception of the United States’ increasing reluctance to play its traditional leadership role. President Obama famously announced a “red line” against the use of chemical weapons in Syria<sup>21</sup>, but then opted not to enforce it when tested. During the Arab Spring, he was perceived to be shockingly quick to discard Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a key American ally for decades, and to then welcome a government led by the Muslim Brotherhood. He steadfastly refused to intervene in the Syrian civil war even as Iran expanded its operations there, or to help defend the Iraqi government from the growing menace of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) – until Mosul

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> B. Obama, “[Transcript of President Obama’s Election Night Speech](#)”, *The New York Times*, 7 November 2012.

<sup>21</sup> B. Obama, “[Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps](#)”, The White House Office of the Press Secretary, the White House President Barack Obama, Washington, DC, 20 August 2012.

fell and the newly-declared caliphate was marching towards Baghdad.

As a result, Russia was allowed the opportunity to intervene militarily in Syria to protect its client, the first time it sent forces into combat beyond the former Soviet frontiers since the invasion of Afghanistan. Regional leaders recalled that not too long ago such aggression in the region spurred the American president to announce the Carter Doctrine. Now the president was content to predict that Russia would get “stuck in a quagmire”<sup>22</sup>. Many local leaders worried that this might mark a watershed in the path toward American strategic disengagement.

Many of these same leaders were so eager to see President Obama term’s end that they allowed themselves to believe that President Donald Trump would represent a return to normalcy. Instead, President Trump has already proven to be even more inconsistent and unpredictable, and even more willing than either of his last two predecessors to depart from longstanding American policy norms.

His policies in the region have seemed erratic, even to officials in his own administration. He committed at the beginning of 2018 to keep an open-ended US military presence in Syria, only to declare at the end of the year that he would withdraw those forces. He announced a national security strategy that focused on great power competition, but has also welcomed Russian involvement in the region, saying that “now it is time to move forward in working constructively with Russia”<sup>23</sup>.

He announced back in 2017 that “conditions on the ground not arbitrary timetables will guide our strategy” on Afghanistan and warned that “a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum that terrorists, including ISIS and al Qaeda, would instantly

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<sup>22</sup> A. Bell and T. Perry, “Obama warns Russia’s Putin of ‘quagmire’ in Syria”, *Reuters*, 2 October 2015.

<sup>23</sup> P. Rucker and D.A. Fahrenthold, “Trump vows to ‘move forward in working constructively with Russia’ after Putin denied election hacking”, *Washington Post*, 9 July 2017.

fill”<sup>24</sup>. But by 2019 he directed his administration to strike a deal that would pull all US troops out before he stood for reelection the following year. He later sought to sign a peace agreement with the Taliban at Camp David before canceling the meeting the day before it was to occur.

He flip-flopped on the rift within the Gulf Cooperation Council, first wholeheartedly supporting the isolation of Qatar before later welcoming its Emir to the White House. He has imposed a “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran after withdrawing from President Obama’s nuclear agreement, with no discernable plan for the predictable military requirements of such an approach. In the wake of an Iranian downing of an American unmanned aircraft in international airspace, President Trump first ordered a military strike on Iran but then called it off with only minutes to spare. Leaders in the region were left to debate what was more worrisome: that the United States was backing away from its campaign against Iran, or that the United States almost triggered a war with little consultation that would have left them on the front lines.

President Trump also has called into question the bedrock principles of longstanding US energy policies in the region. As a candidate, he argued that the United States should have seized ownership of Iraqi oil: “It used to be to the victor belong the spoils. Now, there was no victor there. But I always said, take the oil”<sup>25</sup>. And once in office he reportedly proposed this to the Iraqi Prime Minister, much to the chagrin of the administration’s policy experts<sup>26</sup>.

And perhaps most critically, President Trump has raised doubts regarding the longstanding US commitment to

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<sup>24</sup> D. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia”, National Security and Defense, Fort Myer, Arlington, VA, 21 August 2017.

<sup>25</sup> L.A. Caldwell, “Trump Said ‘Take the Oil’ From Iraq. Can He?”, *NBC News*, 8 September 2016.

<sup>26</sup> J. Swan and A. Treene, “Trump to Iraqi PM: How about that oil?”, *Axios*, 25 November 2018.

defending freedom of navigation in the Gulf. Under President Obama, there was no material diminishment of the US military presence in the region dedicated to protecting the maritime commons, and never any suggestion that the United States no longer saw this as a core responsibility. But it is worth quoting in full the remarks that President Trump gave in July 2019 at the Turning Point USA's Teen Student Action Summit:

I mean, we're fighting for countries that are so wealthy, some have nothing but cash. Nobody ever asks them, "Why aren't you paying us for this? Why aren't you reimbursing us for the cost?". But we now ask those questions. On the Straits – so we get very little oil from the Straits anymore. In fact, yesterday was very interesting. They said, "It's very interesting there are no USA tankers here. They're all from China, from Japan". China gets 65 percent of their oil from the Straits, right? Japan gets 25 percent. Other countries get a lot. And I said, "So let me ask you just a really stupid question". We hardly use it. We're getting 10 percent, only because we sort of feel an obligation to do it. We don't need it. We have – we've become an exporter. Can you believe it? We're an exporter now. We don't need it. And yet we're the ones that for many, many decades, we're the ones that policed it. We never got reimbursed. We police it for all these other countries. And I said, a while ago, I said, "Why are we policing for China? Very rich. For Japan? Very rich. For all these others?". And we're policing also for countries, some of whom we're very friendly with, like Saudi Arabia and others – UAE, others too. But why are we doing it without getting – why do we have our ships there and we're putting our ships in the site<sup>27</sup>?

These sentiments were undoubtedly welcome news in Tehran. A few months earlier Iranian leaders had begun to threaten the Gulf in response to the United States' "maximum pressure" campaign. When President Trump made these remarks, Iran was already widely suspected of attacking several foreign oil tankers – and just days earlier had seized a British-flagged tanker in the Strait of Hormuz.

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<sup>27</sup> D. Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at Turning Point USA's Teen Student Action Summit 2019", The White House, Washington, DC, 23 July 2019.

Iran continues to operate asymmetrically and with only the flimsiest of deniability, taking incremental steps up the escalation ladder to measure where the American red lines might be, since they are not clearly evident. As of this writing, President Trump has answered this question twice, first indicating that his red line would be the death of an American, and then writing that “any attack by Iran on anything American will be met with great and overwhelming force”<sup>28</sup>. So it is unsurprising that the Iranians have now seemingly decided to begin attacks on non-American oil infrastructure across the Persian Gulf, on the territory of longstanding US partners.

Only time will tell whether President Trump is able to de-escalate the current conflict while preserving US interests, or whether he will lead the United States into war with Iran, or whether he will go down in history as the president who fatally undermined the longstanding American objectives of protecting energy production and freedom of navigation in the Gulf. Leaders in the region believe that the last option, though unfathomable not very long ago, is now becoming increasingly possible. After all, as President Trump himself often reminds us, “I want to get out of these endless wars. I campaigned on that. I want to get out”<sup>29</sup>.

So, again from the perspective of traditional US regional partners, the last three American presidents each reversed longstanding elements of US policy toward the Middle East. President Bush acted to upend the *status quo* rather than reinforce it, and his failures in execution undermined regional confidence in American competence. President Obama, in their view, too often abdicated the United States’ unique regional leadership role, and when he did lead he did so in directions they thought unwise and contrary to mutual interests. And now

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<sup>28</sup> A. Ward, “Trump lowers the bar for attacking Iran after its president insults him”, *Axios*, 25 July 2019.

<sup>29</sup> D. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Trudeau of Canada Before Bilateral Meeting”, The White House, Washington, DC, 20 June 2019.



President Trump has forced them to question how much longer the United States will remain committed to protecting the region's energy resources and the sea lanes that undergird global energy markets. Despite the protestations of American ambassadors and generals, it looks to many like the United States is beginning down the road earlier travelled by the British. And that road ends in strategic withdrawal, whether or not this is currently recognized by US policymakers.

This perception is further exacerbated by the region's increasing skepticism about the basic tenets of the traditional liberal international order. Undemocratic leaders have long claimed that the American model of governance was not appropriate for their societies, but they have nevertheless long recognized the benefits that the United States accrues from it. Today, however, what they observe is that democratic systems in the West, including the current system in Washington, often lead to paralysis and polarization. Long-term thinking has given way to short-term, zero-sum politics, driving unpredictability and precluding any ability to plan for the future. Difficult decisions of governance become impossible, national budgets get tighter, and government's promises remain unmet. Elections are seen as drivers of domestic instability rather than societal consensus. The free flow of information is weaponized to pit one group against another. This is not a system that many regional leaders want to emulate, especially when they believe that in their environment representative systems risk empowering religious extremists.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated to them that the United States has lost its ability to lead the global security system, and the global financial crisis demonstrated that the United States has lost its ability to lead the global economic system. China seems to be doing very well without a commitment to representative government or human rights, and with a mercantilist approach to trade and a top-down plan to drive economic growth. One doesn't have to share these views to appreciate their resonance, especially in the Middle East.

## Resulting Ramifications and Risks

When it comes to the continuing US interests and overwhelming US power in the Middle East, the perceptions of American withdrawal do not begin to capture the reality. But perceptions can create a reality all their own, especially when regional leaders decide to act in response to those perceptions. And they have begun to do so.

Regional leaders have been forced to imagine what a region would look like in the absence of clear and convincing American leadership. The region's energy resources would be less secure. Iran would feel free to be more aggressive. Turkey would be tempted by its latent neo-Ottoman aspirations. The relative power of external powers like Russia and China would grow. Other regional actors – partners, competitors and adversaries alike – would feel increasingly unconstrained to advance their own interests. This, they reason, is the region after an American withdrawal.

Based on this perception and preparing for this future, leaders are predictably building their own unilateral capabilities, starting to use those capabilities to maximize their own relative positions, establishing new relationships within the region and spheres of influence in their near abroad, and hedging their partnerships with the United States by expanding relationships with other global powers. This dynamic will make the region – and those longstanding US interests – less secure.

In recent years governments throughout the region, and especially in the Gulf, have improved their own capacities to act, and not just through their ability to offer economic assistance. Arab governments' military spending has historically far exceeded their resulting military capacities, resulting in what has been aptly described as armies of sand<sup>30</sup>. But this is beginning to change. The best example is the UAE, which has built a

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<sup>30</sup> K. Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019.

meaningful set of air and special operations capabilities and has partnered effectively with the United States in Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere<sup>31</sup>. Iran has also improved its capabilities over the same period. Through their near-continuous engagement in Syria and Iraq, Iran's proxies have become more battle-hardened and Iranian military leaders have undoubtedly become more expert at ways to employ those proxies for their own ends.

Many nations of in the region have also invested heavily in cyber technologies, which they can now employ for information warfare purposes, including hacking into their rivals' computers and manipulating social media<sup>32</sup>. And there has been an explosion of government-sponsored media available across the region, used to further both their domestic and international objectives, including new satellite television news channels and various online platforms.

These new capabilities are not sitting on the shelf. Of course, the historical norm is that the adoption of new capabilities typically outpaces the wisdom in which they are employed. Therefore, the risks of reckless misuse and dangerous escalations that drive unintended consequences rise significantly during the transition period before leaders and their lieutenants gain experience. This risk further increases if those decision makers are themselves relatively new to power, the product of a generational shift in leadership. This unfortunately describes several countries in the region today, and given the expected lifespan of some of their counterparts, it will come to describe more in the years ahead.

Overall, Iran has thus far been the greatest beneficiary of the perception of American withdrawal, vastly expanding its regional power notwithstanding the crippling economic sanctions under the United States' "maximum pressure"

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<sup>31</sup> R. Chandrasekaran, "In the UAE, the United States has a quiet, potent ally nicknamed 'Little Sparta'", *Washington Post*, 9 November 2014.

<sup>32</sup> See O. Pinnell, "The online war between Qatar and Saudi Arabia", *BBC Arabic*, 3 June 2018; C. Bing and J. Schectman, "Inside the UAE's Secret Hacking Team of American Mercenaries", *Reuters*, 30 January 2019.

campaign. Today it operates both directly and indirectly through its growing array of proxies in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. It has substantially expanded its infrastructure used to threaten Israel despite the resulting Israeli air operations. Iran encourages and arms its proxies to fire rockets across international borders into Israel and Saudi Arabia, and it has expanded its ability to foment domestic unrest in countries like Bahrain. And it is now it is threatening the Gulf's energy resources and its critical sea lanes.

Other countries in the region are also operating beyond their borders in ways that would have previously been unlikely. Qatar has taken on an especially activist foreign policy, lending strong encouragement to the Muslim Brotherhood when it was in power in Egypt and supporting proxies in Syria and Libya, including those with links to Salafi jihadist movements. Qatar's regional foreign policy is generally aligned with Turkey's, whose forces are now operating across its southern border where they are occupying parts of Syria in order to establish a "safe zone" aimed at basing operations against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, a key partner for American operations against ISIS.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia are aligned against this pair, having imposed an embargo on Qatar and joined the military government in Egypt to support their own proxies in Libya. Saudi Arabia also launched a terribly indiscriminate air campaign against Houthi forces in Yemen, which continues to result in massive civilian harm. The UAE has special operations forces and proxies on the ground in Yemen and is building a series of military facilities across the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in Eritrea, Somaliland, and Puntland. Overall, internal Gulf conflicts have been exported to the Horn of Africa, with Qatar currently supporting Somalia and Djibouti and Saudi Arabia and the UAE providing substantial economic support to help resolve the disputes between Ethiopia and Eritrea and to further their own interests during the government transition in Sudan.

The expansion of Iran's malign activities has also resulted in growing cooperation between states that would have been unimaginable even a decade ago. Israel, which has cooperated with Egypt and Jordan on security matters for decades, is now reportedly exploring new intelligence and security relationships with the UAE, Bahrain and even Saudi Arabia. Both reflecting Russia's growing regional role<sup>33</sup> and as a hedge against a potential American withdrawal, local leaders are sharply increasing the tempo and the seriousness of their engagements with Moscow, sometimes appearing as if President Vladimir Putin not President Trump is their preferred interlocutor<sup>34</sup>. In a scene that would have been inconceivable in decades past, for instance, the party of the incumbent Israeli Prime Minister recently draped two large banners in front of its campaign headquarters, one showing him with President Trump and one with President Putin<sup>35</sup>.

China is also deepening its relationships in the region through its "belt and road" infrastructure investments, demand for oil, non-oil trade (it is already the UAE's most important such partner), and systematic increase in diplomatic engagement. China's diplomats organize their relations through a hierarchy of five types of partnerships, the highest two being "Strategic Partnerships" and, at the pinnacle, "Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships". In just the last five years China has expanded these relationships in the region dramatically. It now has "Strategic Partnerships" with Turkey (2010), Qatar (2014), Iraq (2015), Jordan (2015), Morocco (2016), Djibouti (2017), Kuwait (2018), and Oman (2018). And it has "Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships" with Algeria (2014), Egypt (2014), Iran (2016), Saudi Arabia (2016), and the UAE (2018)<sup>36</sup>. In 2017 China also opened its first overseas military base in the region

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<sup>33</sup> M. Katz, *When the Friend of My Friends Is Not My Friend: The United States, US Allies, and Russia In the Middle East*, Atlantic Council, May 2019.

<sup>34</sup> L. Sly, "In the Middle East, Russia is back", *Washington Post*, 5 December 2018.

<sup>35</sup> R. Wootliff, "Netanyahu touts friendship with Putin in new billboard", *Times of Israel*, 28 July 2019.

<sup>36</sup> J. Fulton, *China's Changing Role in the Middle East*, Atlantic Council, June 2019.

in Djibouti, which just happens to be in close proximity to the US base, Camp Lemonnier.

China is also a major exporter of technology to the region, and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Egypt each have telecommunication firms that have partnered with Huawei, notwithstanding Washington's stated concerns about the security of that company's 5G technology<sup>37</sup>. This diplomatic disagreement with the United States is likely to foreshadow greater disputes to come. As noted previously, an economically successful and technologically advanced China is perceived by many in the region to represent an increasingly attractive alternative model to the troubled American one. Moreover, it can offer nondemocratic governments in the region economic advantages without any governance or human rights conditions. More significantly, however, in the years to come China will also likely begin to export to the Middle East the technology-based systems it is building to help it control its own population. It will likely find eager buyers.

Once again, all of the elements of American power in the region have remained relatively steady, but recent history has led local leaders to question the American will to lead. That question is now prominent enough that it has driven a growing perception of American withdrawal. And that perception has driven actions that have predictably undermined longstanding US interests by threatening energy security and regional stability, and by welcoming in the United States' global peer competitors.

The biggest risk of all is that the perception of American withdrawal may become self-fulfilling. As nations in the region act and hedge in anticipation of American withdrawal, they are likely to encourage the circumstances that will eventually lead to it. And make no mistake, a full US withdrawal would be a disaster for the region and beyond.

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<sup>37</sup> A. Satariano, "U.A.E. to Use Equipment from Huawei Despite American Pressure", *The New York Times*, 26 February 2019.

## **2. Same Ends but Different Means: Change, Continuity and Moscow's Middle East Policy**

Mark N. Katz

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Russian President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy toward the Middle East has broadly pursued aims similar to those of the Soviet Union (USSR) during the Cold War. These aims include 1) undermining Washington's role in the region in order to promote Moscow's; 2) preventing Islamist forces in the region from growing strong enough to support the rise of Muslim opposition in Russia, other former Soviet republics, or countries elsewhere closely aligned with Moscow; and 3) seeking economic cooperation with the Middle East despite often competing with it in the petroleum sphere. But despite the broad similarities in Moscow's overall objectives in the Middle East, Putin's approach to achieving them differs from that of the Soviets. While the Soviets usually worked towards their Middle Eastern aims in opposition to US allies in the region, Putin has pursued these goals largely in cooperation with them.

### **Soviet Aims**

During the Cold War, Moscow strenuously sought to increase its own influence in the Middle East by undermining US influence there. There were even some instances of Moscow cooperating with conservative monarchies in the region such as those of the Imam of Yemen before his 1962 overthrow (after which

Moscow backed his opponents), the Emir of Kuwait, and even the Shah of Iran at times. However, the Soviets mainly sought to expand their influence at the United States' expense by allying with anti-American regimes and movements – especially the Arab Nationalist. Moscow gained influence in every country where an Arab Nationalist regime came to power: Egypt in 1952, Syria and Iraq in 1958, North Yemen and Algeria in 1962, and Libya and Sudan in 1969. Moscow also gained influence after the Middle East's sole Marxist-Leninist regime came to power in South Yemen in 1967. The Soviets also had warm relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), other Arab Nationalist and/or Marxist Palestinian movements, and similar opposition movements in Oman, Bahrain, Western Sahara, and elsewhere<sup>1</sup>.

Especially from the mid-1950s through the 1970s (i.e., the eras of Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev), the Soviets (and many in the West and elsewhere) believed that the USSR was gaining and the West was losing influence in the Middle East due to powerful indigenous forces at work there. European colonies and pro-Western conservative governments were giving way to pro-Soviet Arab Nationalist, Marxist, or other anti-Western governments. The Soviets also benefited from being aligned with Arab and Muslim public opinion, as well as most Middle Eastern governments (including ones allied with the United States), in opposing both Israel and American support for it<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, successful efforts on the part of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to raise the price of oil beginning in 1973 resulted in an economic windfall for the USSR, which was also a major petroleum exporter<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin*, London, Routledge, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> R. Khalidi, "Arab Views of the Soviet Role in the Middle East", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1985, pp. 716-19.

<sup>3</sup> Y. Gaidar, *The Soviet Collapse: Grain and Oil*, American Enterprise Institute, April 2007 (last retrieved on 1 July 2019).



But things did not always go Moscow's way in the Middle East during the Cold War. Moscow's support for both their regional adversaries and/or internal opponents resulted in some Middle Eastern governments (such as the Arab Gulf states) clinging tightly to the United States and the West despite their differences over Israel. Moreover, pro-Soviet governments in the Middle East often proved difficult partners for Moscow due to their rivalries with one another – as occurred among Egypt, Syria, and Iraq; between the Palestinians and various Arab Nationalist governments; and among the various Palestinian factions. In addition, the anti-Western governments and movements at first lionized Moscow for supporting their cause while Washington did not, yet over time some of these same governments and movements became critical of the USSR for “not supporting the Arabs as much as the United States supports Israel”. It was this sentiment, as well as the desire to reach a diplomatic settlement with Israel instead of trying to defeat it, that led to Egypt's conversion from a Soviet to an American ally under Gamal Abdel Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat<sup>4</sup>.

Furthermore, the “winds of change” did not always blow in Moscow's direction. The 1979 Iranian revolution that overthrew a pro-American government did not lead to the rise of a pro-Soviet one in its place (as had previously occurred after the downfall of other pro-American regimes in the Middle East), but rather to one that was hostile toward the USSR as well as to the West. Unlike Arab Nationalist governments and forces that mainly targeted pro-Western governments, the new regime in Iran supported Islamic revolutionaries who targeted Soviet along with Western allies in the region. In addition, the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89) led not only to widespread condemnation of the USSR within the Arab and Muslim worlds, but to the rise of virulently anti-Soviet Islamist rebel groups inside Afghanistan that Soviet forces could not defeat.

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<sup>4</sup> R. Khalidi (1985), p. 719.

Finally, just as Moscow benefited from Saudi/OPEC efforts to raise oil prices in the 1970s, Moscow suffered from Saudi endeavors to lower them in the mid-1980s. Saudi perceptions of Soviet hostility (including its invasion of Afghanistan and support for regimes antagonistic toward Saudi Arabia in Iraq, South Yemen, and Ethiopia) contributed to Riyadh's decision to forego profit maximization and pursue a "flood the market" oil production policy, which resulted in a prolonged period of low oil prices that gravely damaged the Soviet economy. Indeed, President Boris Yeltsin's first Prime Minister, Yegor Gaidar, saw this Saudi policy as the true cause of the collapse of the Soviet economy and the USSR itself<sup>5</sup>.

During the Cold War, therefore the USSR succeeded in taking advantage of several trends in the Middle East to extend its influence in this region from the 1950s through the 1970s. These included the rise of Arab Nationalism along with general anti-Western and anti-Israeli sentiment, and the increase in oil prices engineered by Middle Eastern oil producers beginning in 1973. But the Soviets also experienced several setbacks – some of their own making – during the 1970s and 1980s that not only hurt Moscow's influence in the region but also undermined the USSR itself. These included the willingness of conservative Arab states to rely on the United States for protection, despite their opposition to its support for Israel, due to their greater fear of the USSR and Moscow's regional allies; the defection of the most populous Arab state – Egypt – from the Soviet to the American camp in the 1970s; the rise of Islamist forces that were both anti-Soviet as well as anti-Western; and Saudi Arabia's ushering in a low oil price environment by "flooding the market" in the mid-1980s. Indeed, even after the breakup of the USSR and Russia's retreat from the Middle East, Russia was negatively affected both by various Middle Eastern sources supporting the Chechen opposition movement (which Russian officials and commentators often blamed on Saudi Arabia in particular) and

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<sup>5</sup> Y. Gaidar (2007).

by the continued low oil price environment (which led to acrimony between Russia and OPEC over Moscow's efforts to expand oil production)<sup>6</sup>. During this period between the decline of the USSR and the rise of Putin, Russia was less able to affect the Middle East than be affected by it.

## Putin's Aims

The full extent of Putin's ambitions in the Middle East did not become evident until after the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011 and the Russian intervention in Syria that began in 2015. His actions there were far more cautious at first. But since he first came to power at the turn of the century up until the present, the hallmark of Putin's approach to the Middle East has not been to support the "forces of change" as the Soviets did, but to support *status quo* forces instead. Putin thus set out to establish and maintain good relations with all Middle Eastern governments despite their hostility toward one another.

At first, Putin focused on seeking to remove negative Middle Eastern influence from Russia both through his effort to defeat the Chechen rebels (whom Moscow insisted were being supported by Sunni jihadists from the Middle East) and by pursuing good relations with Middle Eastern governments that (despite their differences) shared Moscow's fear of Sunni jihadist forces. When Putin first came to power, Moscow saw Saudi Arabia in particular as supporting the Chechen rebels, and seized upon the September 11, 2001 attacks as an opportunity to try to ally with the United States and the West against what it portrayed as the common, Saudi-backed Sunni jihadist threat. But around the time of the US-led intervention in Iraq, which was opposed by both Russia and Saudi Arabia, and the Sunni jihadist terrorist attacks on Saudi Arabia itself in 2003, Moscow switched from portraying Saudi Arabia as a common threat to

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<sup>6</sup> M. Katz, "Saudi-Russian Relations in the Putin Era", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2001, pp. 608-17.

the United States and Russia to portraying the United States as a common threat to Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the Middle East *status quo* in general. Since then, Moscow has emphasized that while Russia supports all existing governments in the region, US support for democratization and human rights (whether through military intervention or otherwise) has not advanced either of these goals, but has instead needlessly undermined existing governments and allowed jihadists to become stronger. While most traditional US allies in the region have continued to cooperate with the United States (Turkey being the most notable exception), this Russian argument is something that has resonated with them all and has helped promote cooperation with Russia<sup>7</sup>.

Unlike during the Cold War, pro-Western governments have not fallen and been replaced by pro-Russian ones. But Putin has sought neither this nor the lesser goal of persuading existing US allies to switch to becoming Russian allies. Even Turkey, whose purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense missile system has called into question its future in the NATO alliance, does not seem likely to become militarily allied to Russia against the West (Ankara continues to differ with Moscow over several issues, including the future of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, what to do about Syrian Kurdish forces, and the ongoing dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan)<sup>8</sup>. Instead, Putin seems to prefer that existing US allies in the Middle East increase cooperation with Russia economically and militarily (especially by buying Russian weaponry) and that they resist Washington's pressure to cooperate with Western sanctions against Russia over Ukraine and Europe-related issues. And in these aims, Putin has succeeded.

Some US allies in the region have hoped that by improving their ties to Russia, Moscow could be persuaded to reduce or even stop supporting their adversaries. Riyadh in particular had

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<sup>7</sup> A. Vasiliev (2018), pp. 344-97.

<sup>8</sup> G. Dalay, "Turkey and Russia are Bitter Frenemies", *Foreign Policy*, 28 May 2019 (last retrieved on 1 July 2019).

hoped that economic incentives from Riyadh would induce Moscow to distance itself from Tehran. Putin has made clear, though, that he will not distance himself from any one Middle Eastern state at the request of another. But to those uncomfortable with Moscow's close relations with their adversaries, Putin has indicated his willingness to compensate by increasing cooperation with them – even though this might discomfit a traditional Russian ally. In other words, while Putin has been unwilling to desist from cooperating with Iran at the behest of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), he has also been unwilling to refrain from cooperating with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE despite how this annoys Iran<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, unlike the United States and the USSR during the Cold War (and the United States ever since), which mainly allied with certain governments against their adversaries in the Middle East, Putin seeks to maintain “balanced” relations among them all despite whatever animosities they have toward each other. This gives opposing sides an incentive to court Russia despite each side's dislike of Moscow's support for the other. Moscow need not fear that this will harm relations with anti-American partners such as Iran, which are unlikely to turn toward Washington despite being displeased with Moscow – like Sadat did in the 1970s. Moscow's pro-American partners, of course, are hardly likely to give up their ties to Washington while Moscow continues to cooperate with their adversaries. But at a time when Middle Eastern states have, rightly or wrongly, come to doubt Washington's reliability as an ally (doubts that Moscow encourages), Moscow may calculate that they cannot afford to downgrade their ties to Moscow due to its support for their adversaries. Indeed, “the logic of the situation” may compel them to do more to court Moscow instead.

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<sup>9</sup> D. Trenin, *What Is Russia Up to in the Middle East?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018, pp. 111-12; M. Katz, *Support Opposing Sides Simultaneously: Russia's Approach to the Gulf and the Middle East*, Aljazeera Centre for Studies, 23 August 2018 (last retrieved on 1 July 2019).

Putin's approach to the Middle East therefore involves a combination of cooperating with all existing governments (i.e., supporting the largely authoritarian *status quo*) along with not taking sides in their various disputes (such as Israel vs. Iran; Saudi Arabia and the UAE vs. Iran; Saudi Arabia and the UAE vs. Qatar; etc.). In those Middle Eastern countries where there are ongoing internal conflicts and the central government is weak, Moscow also strives to maintain a balanced stance. While this is least true in Syria, where Moscow has firmly supported the Assad regime against its Arab opponents, Moscow has balanced itself between other antagonists in Syria's many ongoing conflicts, including between the Assad regime and Syrian Kurdish forces, between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds, and between Israel and Iran/Hezbollah. In Iraq, Moscow maintains good relations with both the Baghdad government and the Kurdish Regional Government. In Libya, Moscow recognizes the UN-sponsored government in Tripoli, but also supports its opponent, General Khalifa Haftar. In Yemen, Moscow has good relations with the Saudi-backed Hadi government but also with the Iranian-backed Houthis and the UAE-backed southern separatists<sup>10</sup>. As with inter-state tensions in the Middle East, opposing sides in these intra-state conflicts all have an incentive to court Moscow despite their aversion to its cooperation with their opponents.

But while this Russian practice of simultaneously supporting opposing sides may motivate them to court Moscow, it also inspires wariness of it. Putin has sought to overcome this problem by launching conflict resolution initiatives that capitalize on Russia's ability to talk with opposing sides, while the United States cannot or will not talk with some (such as Iran, the Assad regime, and Hezbollah). The most well-known of these is the "Astana process", which Moscow has been conducting with regard to Syria, but there are other conflicts that Moscow has also offered to mediate<sup>11</sup>. While none of these initiatives have yet

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<sup>10</sup> D. Trenin (2018), pp. 86-111; M. Katz (2018).

<sup>11</sup> E. Stepanova, "Russia and Conflicts in the Middle East: Regionalism and

succeeded, Moscow's reputation in the region as a more capable mediator than the United States would be greatly enhanced if it could resolve even one of them. But even if none of Moscow's conflict resolution efforts actually comes to fruition (as is very possible), just their indefinite continuation allows Russia to play an important diplomatic role in the region that the United States cannot do as long as it is unwilling and/or unable to talk with certain parties (or possibly even if it is).

It is in the realm of petroleum that Putin has taken longest to fashion a policy distinct from that of the Soviets. While Putin has always sought investment opportunities in the Middle East for Russian petroleum firms and investments from the Middle East in the Russian petroleum sector, when Putin first came to power there were sharp differences between Russia on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and OPEC on the other over Russia's unwillingness to join OPEC in limiting production in order to bolster oil prices. However, the steady rise in oil prices in the early XXI century up until 2008 served to mitigate these differences, since the value of everyone's petroleum exports was increasing. Tensions arose again, though, when oil prices fell from these highs and Russia remained unwilling to join OPEC in limiting production to bolster prices. But after the growth in American shale oil production was increasingly seen as a common threat to both Russia and OPEC, Moscow changed its position in 2016 and began to cooperate on limiting oil production through the OPEC+ format. According to some observers, Saudi-Russian negotiations are now the most important factor in determining OPEC+ policy on oil production targets<sup>12</sup>. Recent reports indicate, however, that despite this increased Saudi-Russian cooperation, the Saudis have sometimes been disappointed with Russia for not cutting back oil production as much as Riyadh has wanted or even as

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Implications for the West", *International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2018, pp. 35-57.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, J. Lee, "Russia Completes Its OPEC Takeover With Deal With Saudis", *Bloomberg*, 29 June 2019 (last retrieved on 1 July 2019).

Moscow has agreed to do<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, there has been an unprecedented degree of Saudi-Russian oil cooperation since 2016, which both parties feel strongly motivated to continue given the growing impact of American shale oil production on their petroleum export revenues.

During the Putin era, therefore, Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East has been successful in several ways. Unlike in the Soviet era, when Moscow had good relations with Soviet allies (though not always) and mainly poor relations with US allies, Moscow now has good relations with all governments in the Middle East. One benefit of this is that none of them supports Chechen or other Muslim oppositionists inside Russia. And instead of being at odds with Saudi Arabia and OPEC over oil production policy, Moscow is now cooperating with them on this issue. Like the Soviets, Putin certainly has not pushed the United States out of the Middle East. But while the Soviets may have hoped to do this, Putin has not made this a prime goal of Russian policy toward the Middle East. What he has done instead by having good relations with all governments in the region is to ensure that they are unlikely to cooperate with any US effort to push Russia out of the Middle East or out of the diplomacy related to the resolution of any dispute within it. So far, then, Putin's policy toward the Middle East has proven to be much more successful than Soviet policy toward the region during the Cold War.

## **The Future**

Putin, and perhaps even his successor, may be able to maintain Russian influence in the Middle East indefinitely by maintaining good relations with opposing sides simultaneously. If the United States, for whatever reason, decides to play a less active role in the region, Russia may be able to increase its influence in the Middle East even further. But just as there were forces at

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, T. Daiss, "[Cracks Begin To Form In Saudi-Russian Alliance](#)", *OilPrice.com*, 21 February 2019 (last retrieved on 1 July 2019).



work in the Middle East serving to limit Soviet influence there during the Cold War, there may now be some that could limit or even reduce Russian influence in the region over the course of the next decade or two.

While Putin's policy of supporting opposing sides simultaneously has been successful so far, no party is pleased that Moscow supports its adversary. In those cases where the United States and the West clearly support one side against another, pro-American governments have a strong incentive to continue cooperating closely with the United States even while they are increasing their cooperation with Russia. Putin's policy of supporting opposing sides simultaneously may then actually serve to bolster ties between the United States and those states that it strongly supports.

In addition, Putin (as was noted earlier) has been highly successful in keeping Chechnya and the status of Russia's Muslim population in general off the Middle East's agenda of concern. Middle Eastern governments and national movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah are not supporting Muslim opposition movements in Russia or elsewhere in the former USSR. Indeed, many have good relations with the Moscow-backed rulers of Chechnya, Tatarstan, and Russia's other Muslim autonomous republics<sup>14</sup>. But while Middle Eastern governments may feel no incentive to help Muslim opposition movements inside Russia, such movements may grow stronger as a result of conditions there – as press reports indicate may be occurring<sup>15</sup>. In other words: Moscow's good relations with Middle Eastern governments cannot prevent the rise of Muslim unrest inside Russia, and if it does, Middle Eastern governments may be unwilling or unable to help Moscow suppress such movements even if they do not support them.

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<sup>14</sup> M. Laruelle (ed.), *Russia's Islamic Diplomacy*, George Washington University Central Asia Program, 1 July 2019 (last retrieved on 1 July 2019).

<sup>15</sup> I. Berman, "Demography's Pull on Russian Mideast Policy", in T. Karasik and S. Blank (eds.), *Russia in the Middle East*, Washington, DC, Jamestown Foundation, 2018, pp. 319-37.

Further, while Saudi-Russian cooperation on oil is now better than it has ever been, its importance may be reduced by increasing competition from US shale and/or decreasing worldwide demand for oil due to the rise of renewable energy sources. These trends will not only reduce the income of Russia and other oil exporters, but also diminish Moscow's ability to play an active role in the Middle East.

Finally, just as the Soviet withdrawal from the Middle East at the end of the Cold War resulted less from the failure of Soviet policy toward the region than the failure of the USSR itself, Moscow may once again be forced to reduce its activity in the region more as a result of events outside the region than of Moscow's fortunes inside it. If the post-Putin transition (which must eventually take place) goes badly and domestic political turmoil occurs inside Russia, Moscow may be unable to pay much attention to the Middle East. But even if a post-Putin transition goes smoothly, the new leader, even if chosen by Putin himself and ruling in a manner similar to him, may simply have different priorities than his predecessor. If, for example, he determines that China's growing economic and military strength is far more of a threat to Russia than Putin seems to think it is currently, the new leader may decide that 1) cooperation with the United States and the West against China is vital for Russia; and 2) Moscow needs to adjust its policy toward the Middle East by distancing Russia from Iran, the Assad regime, and Hezbollah in order to promote cooperation with the West against what he sees as the common Chinese threat. On the other hand, if Russia remains at odds with the West and grows increasingly dependent economically on an increasingly powerful China, Moscow may have no choice but to subordinate its interests to China's in the Middle East (and elsewhere).

Putin's policy of seeking good relations with all governments in the Middle East has arguably allowed Moscow to gain influence in more countries in the region than the Soviet policy of aligning with anti-Western governments and forces against pro-Western ones. But while Putin has managed to maintain

good relations with opposing sides simultaneously, an escalation of any of the region's many conflicts (particularly ones between Iran on the one hand and Israel and/or Saudi Arabia on the other) may make continuing to do so difficult. Further, even if conditions in the Middle East remain favorable for Moscow, larger problems elsewhere may constrain Moscow's ability to take advantage of these conditions. These possibilities include the whipsaw effect of greater supplies of oil from American shale and less demand for oil due to the greater availability of renewable alternatives; unrest among Russia's growing Muslim population; larger geopolitical concerns arising either from the need to accommodate the West *vis-à-vis* China or China *vis-à-vis* the West, or – most dramatically – a political crisis in Russia arising from the post-Putin transition. What is more, any of these problems could arise even if the US' role in the Middle East declines.



### 3. The Astana Model: Methods and Ambitions of Russian Political Action

Andrey Kortunov

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Russian performance in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region can arguably qualify as one of the most spectacular foreign policy success stories of President Vladimir Putin and his team in recent times. With relatively modest investments in blood and treasure, Moscow has managed to turn itself from an almost invisible, marginal player into a power broker of international stature with influence on most of the region's actors. Russia has succeeded in making it near impossible to resolve many Middle East security problems without Moscow's involvement.

Russia's success calls for an explanation. One way to account for it is to argue that after a highly controversial US engagement in Iraq, former US President Barack Obama's administration was reluctant to engage in any interventionist operations in the MENA region. Washington limited its involvement in the region to the extent possible, leaving a political and military vacuum behind. Moscow made full use of the unique opportunity and filled the vacuum at a very low cost<sup>1</sup>.

Another explanation boils down to the assumption that Moscow was more efficient in the region than its Western adversaries due to a higher level of expert advice and intelligence feedback from within Middle Eastern countries. While US

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<sup>1</sup> D. Ross, "War on ISIL: How Obama Created a Middle East Vacuum", *Politico*, 10 January 2016.

leadership often relied on biased views of pro-Western dissidents and political immigrants, the Kremlin always had at its disposal a community of highly professional area studies academics and vast intelligence networks on the ground inherited from the early days of the Soviet advance to the region.

Yet another viewpoint asserts that the main comparative advantage of Vladimir Putin was consistency and coherence in his overall approach to the region. This approach rewarded Putin if not with sympathy, then at least with respect and a degree of trust not only from Russia's regional partners, but also from its opponents. Western powers, by periodically changing their positions on the most important regional problems, grossly undermined their credibility in the eyes of the region's political and military elites.

Some would argue that unlike many other overseas powers, Russia has managed to maintain good (or, at minimum, decent) relations with all sides in the major regional conflicts. Moscow has connections with Israelis and with Palestinians, with Shia and with Sunnis, with Turks and with Kurds, with Saudis and with Iranians, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and with Qatar, with General Khalifa Haftar and Chairman of the Presidential Council of Libya Fayeze al-Serraj. This unique position is directly linked to the relatively marginal status that Russia had in the region prior to the Arab Spring. After the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), Russia had not taken on multiple political or security commitments in the MENA region and, unlike the United States, it has not been constrained by any rigid alliances limiting its flexibility. Therefore, Moscow has been and still is better suited to play the role of a regional power broker than Washington.

## **A Shift in Strategy**

It seems that initially the Russian return to the MENA region had no goal of becoming such a power broker. The original plan had more to do with global geopolitics than regional alliances.

After the United States demonstrated its apparent inability to “fix” places like Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan, Moscow wanted to be seen as the bearer of a different, more practical, and more efficient approach to the region. This was particularly important after the Ukraine crisis in 2013 cast a dark shadow over Russia’s relations with its Western partners and, above all, with the Obama administration.

The Kremlin had to demonstrate to leaders at the White House that it could be a part of the solution, not a part of a problem. The idea was not to replace the United States in the Middle East, but to change the US approach to the region, most importantly to convince Americans that their enthusiastic support for the Arab Spring in 2011 had been irresponsible, shortsighted, and dangerous. This idea reflects the overall mental framework of contemporary Russian leaders, who believe that the real borderline in global politics today divides not democracy and authoritarianism, but order and chaos.

The hope of using Syria as an opportunity to limit the damage in US-Russian relations caused by the Ukraine crisis did not last for too long. The widely advertised US-Russian agreement on the elimination of chemical weapons in Syria in September 2013<sup>2</sup> failed to lead to a broader US-Russian agreement on the Syrian settlement. On the contrary, subsequent use of chemical weapons in Syria and the problem of attribution became yet another source of tensions between Moscow and Washington.

The peace plan painfully negotiated by US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in September 2016 collapsed just weeks after signing<sup>3</sup>. The Russian side accused the United States of failing to put the needed pressure on select groups within the anti-Assad opposition to make them abide by the terms of the ceasefire agreement – a task

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<sup>2</sup> US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “[Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons](#)”, 14 September 2013 (last retrieved on 23 September 2019).

<sup>3</sup> L. Wroughton, “[U.S. suspends Syria ceasefire talks with Russia, blames Moscow](#)”, *Reuters*, 3 October 2016.

that was arguably too difficult for Washington to handle successfully. Russians also complained that the United States did not manage to separate the “moderate” Syrian opposition from more radical factions gravitating toward Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and al-Qaeda. Again, it remains unclear whether the United States was in a position to compel such a separation. However, the main source of the Kremlin’s frustrations was the perceived unwillingness of the US military to work in any substantive way with their Russian counterparts. In the fall of 2016 in Moscow, it became popular to argue that the US Defense Department had managed to overrule the State Department, with the hawkish views of the former’s Secretary Ash Carter prevailing over the more moderate positions of the latter’s Secretary Kerry.

## **The Astana Process**

It seems that this bitter experience led Russia to seriously reassess the approach to Syria and to the region at large. After the failure to create a US-Russian alliance, the Kremlin focused its energy and diplomatic skills on building a coalition of regional players through peace talks on Syria in Kazakhstan’s capital – launching the Astana process in January 2017. Bringing Turkey and Iran to the negotiating table was an unquestionable diplomatic victory for Vladimir Putin, and the Kremlin labored to get major Arab countries interested in the new arrangement. The invitation was also extended to the United States, but US participation was no longer considered critical for the success of Russia’s strategy for Syria.

The practical results of the Astana process – reducing overall levels of armed violence in Syria – became observable in the short term<sup>4</sup>. However, Astana could never replace and was never intended to replace the UN-led Geneva dialogue on the

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<sup>4</sup> “Syrian war: All you need to know about the Astana talks”, *Al-Jazeera*, 30 October 2017.



political future of Syria. Why did the Astana process succeed where the Geneva talks failed? One explanation is the composition of the two models: Astana has served as a meeting point for predominantly regional players, while Geneva has convened primarily global actors in addition to select regional ones.

The Syrian National Dialogue Congress held in the Russian resort city of Sochi in January 2018 was an attempt to overcome, or at least to narrow, the gap between the two peace processes. On the one hand, successes in Astana and on the battlefield allowed the Congress to involve a wide range of ethnic, political, and religious groups supporting both Damascus and the opposition. On the other hand, if the announced “wide spectrum” of participants had really been assembled in Sochi, the Congress could have become an effective catalyst for the Geneva process, forcing the slow and uncompromising negotiators in Switzerland to move on from a dead end. The Sochi Congress, however, failed to reconcile the two models. Moreover, it demonstrated the limitations of what Russia could do in Syria and beyond while working primarily with regional rather than with global partners.

The current reality in Syria is that Russia, with all its allies, is capable of winning the war, but not peace. The post-war socio-economic reconstruction of the country will require resources that neither Moscow, nor Tehran, nor Ankara simply have<sup>5</sup>. The Gulf states have too many higher-priority problems of their own, including Yemen and Qatar. China is hardly ready to act as the main donor of post-war Syria. The United States – at least as long as President Trump remains in the White House – will not invest in Syrian reconstruction. There is the European Union, which has significant interests in the Middle East and financial opportunities for large-scale assistance and investment in post-war Syria. However, it is necessary first to bring all member states to an agreement. This could potentially

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<sup>5</sup> K. Calamur, “No One Wants to Help Bashar al-Assad Rebuild Syria”, *The Atlantic*, 15 March 2019.

happen in Geneva or within separate forums, like the Russian-Turkish-French-German summit in Istanbul in October 2018.

At the same time, Russia's increased engagement in the Middle East may risk the country's comparative advantage as an honest broker in the region. One of the most vivid manifestations of this trend is the military and political dynamics in Syria, where Russia currently enjoys the most preferential position. Over time, it becomes more and more difficult to maintain multiple intra-Syrian balances, most of which are becoming fragile and unsustainable. One should note that this has progressed as ISIS has been defeated – at least militarily. With ISIS gone, the glue holding together numerous players in Syria despite their conflicting aspirations and the deficit of mutual trust is evaporating.

## **A Sustainable Approach?**

Bashar al-Assad is growing more rigid and uncompromising in his dealings with the Syrian opposition, counting on its unconditional surrender to Damascus. Tehran, having fortified its position in Syria, is no longer willing to consider any significant self-restraint on the ground. Israel, fearful of the growing Iranian presence and Hezbollah's enhanced capabilities and counting on almost unlimited US support, tends to increase the scale and broaden the geography of its air strikes in Syria. Ankara is desperate to consolidate its gains in Syria's West and Northwest, building a buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian border. Syrian Kurds are anxious anticipating another betrayal of their cause by situational partners and unreliable allies.

Even if we assume that the current balances in Syria and in the region at large generally meet Russia's strategic interests, the question remains: are these balances sustainable even in the mid-term perspective? There are reasons to believe that the task of balancing the diverging interests of local and regional players will become increasingly difficult for Russia. Moscow may be forced to take sides, which will deprive it of its current

comparative advantage. If this happens, the challenge that the Kremlin confronts in the MENA region will be how to convert its recent military successes in Syria into more stable (even if less explicit and visible) political influence in the region.

The official Russian position on the desirable security arrangements in the region favors an inclusive collective security system. Such a system implies a Middle Eastern version of the European Helsinki process of the 1970s and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)<sup>6</sup>, with UN Security Council guarantees. One can assume that such an arrangement, if implemented, would indeed allow for a stable solution to numerous regional security problems, although in Europe itself OSCE did not prevent the Ukraine crisis in 2013. However, such a system is not likely to emerge in the MENA region anytime soon due to a number of formidable obstacles that Moscow is fully aware of.

First, an inclusive collective security system requires the participation of not only Arab, but also non-Arab states of the region: Turkey, Israel, and Iran. Today it is hard to imagine how one could achieve this goal or even to move in this direction, especially as far as Tehran is concerned. Of course, Russian leadership can claim that it has managed to incentivize Saudis and Iranians to work together on a very sensitive matter of oil production quotas within the OPEC+ arrangement. However, there is a difference between a problem-driven tactical alliance and a long-term institutional agreement. The latter is much more difficult to achieve given deep divisions in fundamental security perceptions between Riyadh and Tehran.

Second, the Arab world itself remains highly fragmented and hard to reconcile, most recent illustrated by the crisis around Qatar. The crisis has totally paralyzed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which under different circumstances could emerge as the core of a collective security system for the region.

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<sup>6</sup> Commission on security and cooperation in Europe, *The Helsinki Process and the OSCE*, <https://www.osce.org/about-osce/helsinki-process-and-osce> (last retrieved on 23 September 2019).

The League of Arab States looks even less suitable to serve as a prototype of such a system; its institutional capacities are too limited, and contradictions between its member states are too apparent.

Third, even if Moscow and its partners somehow managed to construct a collective security system in the MENA region, such a system would hardly be in a position to cope with threats and challenges generated by non-state actors. However, these are exactly the threats and challenges that are likely to shape the security agenda of the region in years to come. The concept of a new Westphalian arrangement for the Middle East has little to do with realities on the ground; nothing suggests the crises of state in the Arab world will be over anytime soon.

Thus, while a MENA collective security system might look great in theory, it is hardly attainable in practice. Are there any alternative regional arrangements that would suit Russia? For instance, could regional security be guaranteed by a non-regional hegemonic power? Historically, there would be nothing new in such an arrangement; the MENA region has always depended on non-regional hegemonies, be it the Ottoman Empire for a couple of centuries, Great Britain and France between the two world wars, The United States and the USSR during the Cold war, or the United States alone after 1991.

It is clear that Russia today cannot successfully perform as the non-regional hegemonic power – it lacks the needed military, economic and political resources. A renewed US hegemony should not encourage strategists in the Kremlin, given the sour state of the US-Russian relations today. For the same reason a US-Russian condominium over the region looks unattainable. One should also add that these days Washington appears to be on the path toward a gradual withdrawal from the region, due to a growing Middle East fatigue in the United States and to emerging US energy self-sufficiency. The odds are good that instead of taking on the burden of full-fledged regional hegemony, the United States will limit itself to continued support for Israel and persistent pressure on Iran.

A regional hegemonic power could theoretically replace the non-regional hegemon. In the MENA region, the most apparent candidate for this position is Saudi Arabia (or, rather, a combination of the Saudi resource base and the political ambitions of the UAE). For Moscow, such an option would be undoubtedly undesirable, as it would deprive Russia of its current comparative advantage of avoiding taking sides in regional conflicts. A consolidated hegemon-centered security system would force Moscow to take sides – between Riyadh and Doha, the Arab monarchies of the Gulf and the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Arabs and the Turks, and so on. Furthermore, ongoing developments in the region – such as the conflict in Yemen, the GCC stalemate, and the uneasy political transformation of Saudi Arabia itself – turn the concept of a regional hegemony into a purely hypothetical option.

Finally, Moscow, along with other non-regional players, could focus not on promoting a new MENA security architecture, but rather on geographical containment of regional insecurity. In other words, Moscow should accept a continuous Arab “time of troubles” as a historically predetermined phenomenon, on which external actors have very limited influence, if any influence at all. The goal should be not to try to “fix” the region, but to limit the negative implications of the Middle East’s troubles on other regions of the world. However, specifically for Russia this strategy is not likely to work. While the United States and China are located far away from the Middle East and could probably avoid the spillover effect of instability, Russia (as well as Europe) are simply too close to the theater to count on successful containment. The MENA region is directly connected to Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and even to predominantly Muslim regions of the Russian federation itself. The MENA instability is for Russia not only a foreign policy problem, but a domestic problem as well. Unlike the United States, Russia cannot “withdraw” from the region without creating a range of new security problems for itself. Besides, a strategic Russian withdrawal would inevitably nullify

all the Kremlin's accomplishments in the region achieved in recent years.

## **A Path Forward for Russia**

In this case, what is the future MENA policy that would secure Russia's interests in the region in the long term? How can Moscow maintain its regional presence without exposing itself to excessive political risks or to prohibitively high costs? Without trying to draw a detailed roadmap for Syria and beyond, one can offer a number of general principles to reduce risks and costs without withdrawing from the MENA region completely.

First, the Kremlin should proceed with the assumption that its role in the region – as well as the roles of other non-regional actors – will be limited. The current level of Russia's influence is not sustainable in the mid-term, not to mention the long-term future. This relative decline will happen not because Moscow will be replaced by Washington, Brussels, or Beijing as the powerbroker. It will take place because no external factors can significantly affect fundamental social, economic, and political changes in the MENA region since the beginning of the Arab Spring. It is likely that the region is only at the very beginning of a long transformation, in which regional dynamics are far more decisive than external influences.

Second, policymakers in Moscow must confess that there are no irreconcilable conflicts of interest between Russia, the West, China, and India regarding best-case and worst-case scenarios for the MENA region. An intense tactical competition for regional influence should not obscure the longer-term vision. All responsible external players should be interested in keeping the current borders of the region intact, countering international terrorism, curbing large-scale uncontrolled migration from the region, preventing nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) proliferation, and exploring economic opportunities with MENA countries. These common interests appear

to be broader and more strategic than situational rivalries; therefore, the latter should not overshadow the former. Russia should demonstrate more interest in and more commitment to “regional commons” than it does now.

Third, at this stage of the multifaceted and multidimensional MENA crisis it would be futile to look for any universal solution to regional problems. No “one size fits all” approach is likely to work. It appears more productive to take an incremental approach in looking for specific solutions to each individual conflict situation. For instance, in dealing with Yemen, which faces an approaching humanitarian catastrophe, the UN could take the leading role in terminating the civil war and rendering humanitarian assistance to the civil population. In Iraq, external players could limit themselves to coordinated support of the ongoing positive domestic developments in state-building and economic recovery. In Syria, where military clashes continue but fatigue of endless civil war is growing stronger within all the fighting groups, external players could focus on facilitating political compromises and isolating militant extremists, whatever side these extremists are fighting on. In Libya, where civil conflict persists, the immediate task could be preventing both horizontal and vertical escalation of the war, i.e. preventing its proliferation to neighboring African countries and containing the scale of the armed confrontation inside Libya proper.

Fourth, the importance of the MENA region for Russia notwithstanding, policymakers in Moscow should keep in mind that this region is not as central to Russia’s security and prosperity as Europe or Asia Pacific. It means that no victories in the Middle East can serve as substitutes or alternatives to addressing Russia’s more critical foreign policy challenges, such as Ukraine. On the other hand, it also means that Moscow can demonstrate more flexibility in dealing with MENA conflicts than in approaching other, more sensitive foreign and security policy matters.





## 4. Redistribution of Power in the Middle East: Moscow's Return to Syria

Chiara Lovotti

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In the last few years, the world has witnessed a gradual disintegration of the post-Cold War international order, exemplified by the so-called “Pax Americana”. Such a trend seems to be turning into a global redistribution of power, with a waning US role on one side, and a growing assertiveness of other powers (primarily Russia and China) on the other. Nowhere is this redistribution more visible than in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). As the 2011 Arab uprisings have largely demonstrated, the US policy of disengagement from the region has challenged Washington’s supremacy as the external provider of security, allowing other regional and international actors to aspire to this role.

Against this background, the Syrian Civil War is arguably the most eloquent case to analyze. As the humanitarian crisis was escalating in the early 2010s, President Barack Obama’s choice to scale down US engagement in the region and not to get involved in another troubled Middle East conflict has allowed a plethora of countries whose strategic interests were already converging on Damascus more room to maneuver. The interferences of Iran and Turkey, and to a lesser extent the Gulf monarchies and Israel, have proved to be increasingly determinant for the country’s fate. Most importantly, although a direct causal link between the different policies enacted by the United States and Russia in Syria cannot be established, it is difficult

to argue against the fact that Washington's decision not to intervene in 2013 created an opportunity for Moscow that the Kremlin did not hesitate to seize.

Since September 2015, the strenuous battle that Moscow engaged in in defense of President Bashar al-Assad has reverted the destiny of the country in Assad's favor; without Russia's military and political support to Damascus, the situation in Syria today would probably be very different. In some respects, we could even argue that the Syrian case depicts a paradox: while the United States' weight and influence in the country has historically been limited compared to that of Russia, Syria is probably the country where Washington's decision to not intervene has had the greatest impact, both on the domestic evolution of the conflict and in terms of fruits that other actors, and particularly Moscow, have been able to reap. In other words, the Syrian context seems to perfectly reflect the redistribution of power ongoing in the MENA region, where other powers, often perceived as "anti-Western", can interfere more easily.

However, questions remain over the future of Syria in such a scenario. Will Russia and the other regional actors be able to obtain the results they expected from their Syrian adventures? Can Moscow really hope for a "Russian Pax" in Syria? The first part of this chapter will deal with the origins of US-Russian "confrontation" over Syria and the redistribution of power that led to Russia's intervention in 2015; the second part will assess the feasibility and sustainability of a "Russian Pax" in the Arab country. While answering these questions might be tricky, it can be easily argued that the decline of the United States in the Middle East and the rise of old and new external players are tied up together.

## **At the Core of US-Russia Confrontation in Syria**

While competition between the United States and Russia (whether in its Soviet or post-Soviet dress) over the MENA region has dominated much of the debate of international

political studies since the end of World War II, in Syria this is a more recent phenomenon. A de facto colonial country under the French Mandate of 1920 after the partition and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, upon gaining independence in 1946 Syria was soon caught in between the Cold War rivalries and gradually aligned with the Eastern camp of the bipolar world order. On the one hand, post-colonial Syria was seeking international support and recognition, and it soon identified in the Soviet Union (USSR) the right “patron state” to develop close ties with, in order to avoid isolation and marginalization at the regional level. On the other hand, the USSR identified in Syria its closest ally among the Middle Eastern “confrontational states”: important commercial ties, sustained military collaboration and the possibility to establish naval military facilities on Syria’s Mediterranean coast were all crucial features in the development of this relationship. Most importantly though, post-colonial Syrian elites seemed to espouse the anti-imperialist, anti-Western cause that the Soviets promoted in countries of the so-called third world, thus creating a political affinity between Damascus and Moscow that could serve as a basis for the Kremlin to increase political influence in the entire “Near East” (*Blizhnyi Vostok*)<sup>1</sup>. With Damascus so closely tied to Moscow, US-Syria relations did not have much room to flourish.

However, with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the policy pursued by Moscow in the broader MENA region was substantially based on non-engagement, thus benefitting the United States, which remained the only external power able to determine the course of events in this area for a long time. With only one super power remaining on the global chess-board, between 1990 and 2001 Syria

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<sup>1</sup> For analysis on Moscow’s projection in the Middle East during the Cold War, see for instance A. McInerney, “Prospect Theory and Soviet Policy Towards Syria, 1966-1967”, *Political Psychology*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1992, pp. 265-282; E. Moshe, “The Soviet Union and the Syrian military-economic dimension: a realpolitik perspective”, in E. Moshe and B. Jacob (eds.), *Superpowers and Client States in the Middle East: The Imbalance of Influence*, London, Routledge Press, 1991.

and the United States cooperated to a certain degree on some regional issues (i.e. the Gulf War, Syrian-Israeli peace deal); however, a true friendship was never born. Several events in the 2000s – the escalation of international terrorism following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the subsequent US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was opposed by Damascus, and the reinforcement of the Damascus-Tehran axis – once again highlighted how distant the two countries were in regarding the developments that were unfolding in the region. Simultaneously, the “new Russia” took distance from Syria and appeared to lose interest in the fate of its former Arab ally. This was, however, an illusion that did not last long, as the Russian response to the Syrian crisis in the 2010s has unequivocally shown.

To some extent, the Syrian Civil War brought the country’s international history back to the surface, highlighting the contradiction of its relations with the United States on one side and Russia on the other. Since the spring of 2011, the conflict in Syria has posed a serious threat to both the Assad regime and to regional stability. As the crisis began to escalate irreversibly, both the United States and NATO made it quite clear that they did not wish to intervene militarily. Former US President Barack Obama’s reluctance to get involved most likely originated in the desire to keep his campaign promise to end the United States’ war in the Middle East, which was still being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite the brutal violence and violation of human rights perpetrated by the Assad regime in the battle of Aleppo in 2013,<sup>2</sup> Obama remained firmly convinced that a military operation would be a costly failure for the United States, which risked being unable to bring peace to the country anyway: too many armed groups were involved in Syria, supported by different and competing regional powers (Iran and Russia backing Assad and pro-regime forces; Turkey, Saudi

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<sup>2</sup> I. Black, “[Syria deaths near 100,000, says UN – and 6,000 are children](#)”, *The Guardian*, 13 June 2013.

Arabia, and Qatar backing different opposition forces). Instead, the President choose to focus US efforts on the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which in his eyes represented a greater threat to the homeland than the Syrian regime did. As two of Obama's former national security officials have stated, "Disastrous forays in Iraq and Libya have undermined any American willingness to put values before interests"<sup>3</sup>. Also, given Russia's and Iran's stakes in Syria, combined with the involvement of Turkey and the Gulf countries, he feared that any US intervention would only risk escalating the conflict.

Negotiations under the UN then proceeded without bringing about tangible results. At that time, the Russian voice in the UN Security Council (UNSC) was barely heard, and Moscow was limited to holding the UNSC hostage through its veto power. However, Russia's repeated vetoes to block resolutions condemning Assad's brutalities (including the alleged use of chemical weapons on the population) and threatening him with sanctions provided valid signals of Moscow's view for the future of Syria. Russia's interests and objectives were clear enough already: avoid any externally promoted regime change and keep shielding the Assad government from internal opposition as much as from accusations from Western powers. As the UNSC and the international community began to call upon Assad to step down, Russia was nervously observing the US-led NATO operations in Libya to overthrow Muammar al-Qaddafi's government, which the Kremlin's leadership considered to be an avoidable disaster. As argued by some Russian observers, "what Libya did was compelling a group of people in Russia, the elites and the general public, to say 'never again'"<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, while Libya was less of a reliable ally to Moscow, a regime change in Syria would mean losing a key strategic client and partner in

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<sup>3</sup> B.P. Usher, "Obama's Syria Legacy: Measured Diplomacy, Strategic Explosion", *BBC News*, 13 January 2017.

<sup>4</sup> F. Lukyanov, comment in "Talking point: the logic of Russian foreign policy. Marie Mendras and Fyodor Lukyanov join oDRussia editor Oliver Carroll for a debate in Paris", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 13 December 2012.

the Middle East, one that the Kremlin had long been establishing through ties to the Baathist elites and the Assad family in particular<sup>5</sup>. For Russia, this would have been unacceptable. As some scholars have argued, “the relationship between Syria and Russia is the last remnant of Soviet politics in the Middle East, [...] the final point of the post-Soviet presence in the region”<sup>6</sup>. Though at the time Russia’s official position still firmly excluded external military interventions, this position changed with the rise of the ISIS in June 2014.

The watershed in Syria took place in 2015, which turned out to be Moscow’s lucky year. Barack Obama’s hesitation gave his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin an opening that fit his agenda: restoring Russia’s privileged partnership with Syria and rebuilding Russia’s influence in the region (at the same time trying to relaunch Russia’s image *vis-à-vis* the West in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis). Over the course of a few months, Russia expanded its old military facilities in Latakia, and the first airstrikes launched by the Hmeimim base were symbolically made to signal Russia’s comeback in the Middle East. Justified by the fight against terrorism, the Kremlin boldly projected itself into the Syrian conflict, opposing the stance of the United States and many Arab and/or Muslim countries as well. Compared to most other external actors, Russia’s well-defined objectives and lack of hesitation in pursuing them greatly favored Moscow. However, as the conflict overall winds down (with the exception of the Idlib area, which has experienced a resurgence of violence in summer 2019, and the northeastern part of the country), can Russia’s military intervention be

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<sup>5</sup> Moscow and Damascus established increasingly close relations with the rise to power of the left wing of the Baath party, and especially Hafez al-Assad, in 1970. From then, Syria clung to Soviet support, while the Soviets did everything they could to ensure the survival of the Baathist regime. For deeper analysis on this, see K. Efrain, *The Soviet Union and Syria. The Assad Years*, New York, Routledge Press, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> R. Allison, “Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis”, *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 4, 2013, pp. 795-823.

deemed successful? Did the Russians obtain the expected results? The question is very complex, and it demands a detailed, multi-layered answer.

On the security level, in respect to Russia's primary goal of keeping Assad at the helm of the regime and shifting the internal balance of power back in favor of Damascus, the answer is yes. Four years since the start of the Russian operations, Assad has regained almost all of Syria's territories that had been lost to the rebels. The striking success of Russia's military was clearly not a favored solution for the United States, as it de facto nullified Washington's efforts to support the political opposition to Assad, rule out his role in Syria's future government, and push for a political transition<sup>7</sup>. With respect to the micro security level, however, Russia's campaign results are less triumphant. Several areas in the country are yet to be reclaimed by the regime, including the crucial area of Idlib, and continue to pose a challenge to internal stability. Moreover, at the time of writing in September 2019, as the situation in the northeastern part of the country is rapidly escalating with Turkey and the United States ready to cooperate on the possible establishment of a "safe zone" to protect the Turkish-Syrian border, an appeasement of tensions still seems a distant goal.

Sticking to the military realm, another success that Moscow has achieved relates to a growing interest in Russian military power by US allies in the region. The Syrian campaign in fact allowed Moscow to project its military power to a broad range of spectators. While the Russians do not enjoy the same advanced military technology of the United States, given the perception of waning US leadership in the MENA region in the wake of Donald Trump's election to President many US allies have begun to look to Moscow for security provision,

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<sup>7</sup> Then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told reporters: "The US wants a whole and unified Syria with no role for Bashar Assad in the government. The only issue is how that should be brought about". See "[Rex Tillerson reaffirms US commitment to Syrian peace, rules out Assad in future government](#)", *DW*, 26 October 2017.

including Iraq, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey<sup>8</sup>. While the US State Department has repeatedly warned its allies in the region against acquiring Russian technologies, threatening potential penalties through the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) of 2017<sup>9</sup>, many of these countries seem to have indulged in buying Russian weaponry. However, the agreement signed in July 2019 by Russia and Turkey, a NATO member, on the purchase of Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile system is yet another signal of Moscow's ability to exploit international tensions and fill power vacuums.

Beyond military successes, Moscow's gains in the field of international diplomacy represent Russia's greatest achievement, and yet potentially another challenge to the United States. Since the escalation of the war in 2015, the Russians have demonstrated their ability to move quite easily from the military to the political table. The so-called Astana process, which reached its thirteenth meeting with the last round of negotiations in August 2019, has been the ace in the hole of Russia's Middle East strategy. Russia, a country that only fifteen years before was laying at the margin of global politics, was able to orchestrate peace talks over one of the most severe crises in the world. Although the points of discussion remain closely linked to those of the UN-led peace process held in Geneva (cease-fire, political transition, refugee issues), a parallel mechanism was settled in Astana, where Russia served as the protagonist alongside its partners Turkey and Iran. The Kremlin's great diplomatic effort in establishing relations with as many sides as possible in Syria's crisis, including traditional US allies in the Middle East, has fostered the perception in Washington that Russia was exploiting the Syrian crisis to reestablish its Soviet great power status and compete with the United States. However, Russian behavior today seems to have little to do with Moscow's posture

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<sup>8</sup> See quote from Alexander Mikheyev, CEO of Rosoboronexport, in "Russia encroaches on US war industry in Middle East", *DW*, 31 August 2018.

<sup>9</sup> US Department of the Treasury, *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act* (last retrieved on 26 September 2019).



in the Soviet era: rather than attracting Syria towards its Soviet-communist, anti-Western sphere of influence, Moscow seems to be more interested in cementing its status as the only possible mediator of Syria's crisis, the valuable and trusted actor that everyone should refer to.

Since its military intervention, the Kremlin has been able to acquire a level of diplomatic weight that, in light of perceived American disengagement, appears to have few rivals for now. From this position, Moscow can effectively hope to pursue a "Russian Pax" for Syria. Nonetheless, doubts remain over its feasibility and potential for success.

## **A "Russian Pax" for Syria?**

While redistribution of power in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab uprisings has brought Moscow to be actively involved again in Syria, Moscow's apparent dream of becoming the real powerbroker of the Syrian peace may remain just that: a dream. Is a "Russian Pax" really desired by Moscow and, if so, is it sustainable? Will Russia be able to reap the fruits of its military adventure in Syria? Being impossible to give a net answer to these questions, it may be useful to instead outline some of the most critical fields where Russia's strategy is most at risk: the internal security/political level, the economic level, and the diplomatic level.

On the internal security/political level, concerns remain over the final success of the Russian-led peace. Opposition to Assad has weakened but not disappeared, as the escalation of violence in Idlib in the summer of 2019 has demonstrated. Moreover, the Russian-Turkish-Iranian agreement so far has had rather modest objectives, focusing on ceasefires, de-escalations and tactical military deals instead of opening an inclusive debate on a future political solution for Syria. On the thirteenth round of negotiations, a constitutional committee was declared to be established to convene in Geneva, although there was no indication on who should sit around this table. To this end, the

continuation of Assad's grip on power will be a divisive element not only within Syria, but also between Russia and the US, given their opposite positions on the future role of the Syrian President. Despite limits, Astana however remains vital to Moscow's Syrian projection; even more so today, as the contribution of European and Western powers to the reconstruction of the country might be subordinated to progresses in the peace talks.

In regard to the economic level, the argument over reconstruction in Syria is in fact growing increasingly urgent. Russia's future engagement in this dossier, however, is unknown, as it is difficult to imagine that Moscow's fragile economy will be able to provide for a sustained assistance to its Arab ally. Although Russia and Syria have a long history of economic relations, which were reinforced in the 2000s in the frame of Putin's policy of rapprochement with the region and the establishment of bilateral organizations aimed at developing business and trade ties between the two countries<sup>10</sup>, reconstruction in Syria demands ways and means that Moscow can hardly afford. Despite this, Moscow (alongside China) seems to be determined to seize fruitful opportunities as Western powers hesitate, conditioning their engagement in rebuilding Syria on the departure of Assad. The United States in particular prefers to provide assistance for humanitarian efforts rather than reconstruction. Moreover, in response to regime brutality since 2011, the United States has tightened already existing sanctions on Syria, blocking US firms from engaging in transactional dealings involving Syria. Despite limited means and the fact that economics represents a mere adjunct to politics in Russia's strategy<sup>11</sup>, reconstruction is yet another arena Moscow will try to enter.

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<sup>10</sup> See Syrian-Russian Business Council, <http://srbc-sy.com> (last retrieved on 26 September 2019).

<sup>11</sup> C. Hartwell, "Russian Economic Policy in the MENA Region: A Means to Political Ends", in V. Talbot and C. Lovotti (eds.), *The Role of Russia in the Middle East and North Africa: Strategy or Opportunism?*, European Institute of the Mediterranean, Euromesco Joint Policy Study 12, 2018.

At the international diplomatic level, Russia undoubtedly enjoys a net advantage due to its ability and will to talk to opposing sides of the conflict, while Washington refuses to engage with the Iranians and the Assad regime. At the same time, however, Russia's policy of supporting opposing sides might lead some to believe that Moscow is an actor to be wary of<sup>12</sup>. While this might be a necessary (albeit not sufficient) guarantee that Russia will have a spot at the winner's table, the complex relationships that Moscow has established with different regional powers (Turkey, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and North African countries) may at some point overstretch the Kremlin's reach, and threaten the sustainability of the "Russian Pax".

In this regard, one of the most problematic points in Russia's strategy is represented by Iran, for a variety of reasons. The first and most significant has to do with Syria's future political outlook. On the one hand, the Russians seem to know that a withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria would hardly be feasible: Iranian boots on the ground may prove necessary to protect Assad from any possible resurgence against his regime. On the other hand, Iran's growing influence on the ground makes it difficult to manage a political transition that can satisfy the Syrian opposition, which remains firm on the refusal of any Iranian involvement in defining the future structure of the country. Furthermore, despite having succeeded in the shared goal of defending Assad's regime from its internal opponents, Russia and Iran have different visions for the future of Syria and its reconstruction. This friction could prove a challenge to Russia's strategy in Syria in the long run.

Secondly, Tehran's projection in Syria has worried the enemies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, most notably Saudi Arabia and Israel. If the Kremlin's strategy at this stage is aimed at maintaining a neutral position, talking to and forming partnerships with everyone (the recent Russian-Saudi agreement on oil

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<sup>12</sup> M. Katz, *When the Friend of My Friends Is Not My Friend: The United States, US Allies, and Russia in the Middle East*, Atlantic Council, May 2019.

production could be considered an example), Moscow might be put to the test if it is to collaborate with partners whose vision for the future of Syria is not perfectly aligned with that of the Kremlin.

Nonetheless, current tensions between the United States and Iran in the Gulf might end up strengthening the Moscow-Tehran axis. In fact, President Donald Trump's firm stance on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) toward Iran's nuclear activities could weaken Tehran economically, potentially empowering Russia's role in Syria even more: with a weaker Tehran, the strongest, most reliable partner of Damascus would remain Moscow. Despite the other challenges facing a "Russian Pax", such an evolution might end up increasing opportunities for Moscow to increase its influence in the region.

The complex relationship with Ankara is yet another point that risks overstressing the Kremlin's strategy in Syria. Despite their opposing views towards the Assad regime, Russia and Turkey have proved capable of putting their differences aside and have established solid cooperation on talks to find a political solution to the conflict. While Moscow's uncomfortable position as a mediator between Ankara and Damascus has so far managed to avoid an escalation between the two, the US-Turkey entente reached in summer 2019 to join forces and establish a "safe zone" along the Turkish-Syrian border – which would serve as a buffer to Turkey against the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), labelled a terrorist organization by Ankara – risks deteriorating the situation and increasing tensions between Ankara and Damascus. Finding itself stuck in between its two partners, Moscow might be forced to choose, with Damascus most likely prevailing. In addition, the US support of the Turkish cause might push the Kurds to seek Russia's protection, and perhaps even become for flexible in reaching an agreement with Damascus, of course under the mediation of Moscow<sup>13</sup>. All these factors may deepen the rift between

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<sup>13</sup> R. Mamedov, *Intel: Why a military confrontation between Turkey and the Kurds in Syria*

Moscow and Ankara, and potentially push the latter to look for support from the United States, its NATO ally. While trying to predict the future in Syria is a hazard, one could easily argue that mediating between Damascus and the regional stakeholders of the crisis will become increasingly complex for Moscow in the long run.

## Conclusion

In light of what has been discussed, a few conclusions can be drawn. First of all, while the United States has never fully engaged in Syria and has enjoyed a limited degree of influence over the country compared to other powers – primarily Russia and the USSR before it – its policy of non-intervention in the Syrian conflict has had a deep resonance. Secondly, among the actors that have stepped into the Syrian quagmire, Russia so far seems to be emerging as a winner, but, in many respects, a weak one. On the one hand, Moscow has undoubtedly achieved its primary goals and changed the fate of the Syrian conflict in favor of Damascus. On the other, however, Russia is weakened by its inability to singlehandedly affect the outcome of the crisis in Syria, the country in which it has invested the most. Mediation efforts remain difficult among the different stakeholders of the Syrian crisis. Even if Moscow was set to mediate between the United States and Iran over Syria's destiny, it is doubtful that the United States or Iran would accept that.

Overall however, and most importantly, Syria has demonstrated Russia's ability to seize opportunities spontaneously emerging from the contexts like the Syrian one, and exploit them by fitting them into its broader strategy of projecting power overseas. For now, this strategy appears to be paying off: one could hardly argue against the fact that Moscow has become one of the main international actors with a stake in the

region, and is likely to remain active in the Middle East and North Africa for the years to come. This is true even outside Syria, as opportunities emerge all over the region and Moscow grasps for them. Fostering a dialogue with Moscow should be made a priority of Western powers' Middle East policies – particularly the United States and European countries – in order to find a shared security approach for the region based on cooperation rather than confrontation.

## 5. Iraqi-Russian Relations amidst US Security-Focused Engagement

Abbas Kadhim

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Iraq has a long and complicated history with the United States, and security and military engagements have been the primary driver of the relationship. Iraq's relations with Russia, on the other hand, have been more transactional and economically-oriented. At a time when there are signs of US disengagement from the Middle East and North Africa while Russian and Chinese activities in the region are increasing, it is useful to trace the past US and Russian strategies in Iraq and assess how the United States could better tailor its strategy toward Iraq in the future in order to achieve durable outcomes that would bring benefits to both sides such as a responsive government, a thriving economy, and security.

### **Background: Iraq's Relations with Russia and the United States**

Iraqi-Russian relations are a continuation of the Iraqi-Soviet relations that were re-established in 1959 after the collapse of the Baghdad Pact and the establishment of a republic in Iraq on the ruins of the Hashemite Monarchy, which was in place from 1921 to 1958<sup>1</sup>. For the next forty years, Iraqi-Soviet re-

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<sup>1</sup> The Baghdad Pact was a defensive organization founded in 1955 to promote political, military and economic goals of its members (Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan

lations developed rapidly as Iraq continued to depart from its traditionally strong relations with the West. By the mid-1970s, the Soviet Union (USSR) was the main arms supplier to Iraq, and cooperation between the two countries rapidly developed to include education, agriculture, industrial capacity, and energy. Iraqi oil found an important market in the USSR and the Eastern European Bloc, while Soviet oil companies entered the Iraqi energy sector to cooperate with Iraq's state-owned oil company after the nationalization of Iraq's oil industry in 1972-73.

Meanwhile, the United States' policy toward Iraq has taken many turns since Iraq became a republic, many of which have been reactive. US policy shifted dramatically following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990<sup>2</sup>. After forming a coalition of thirty nations to expel the Iraqi forces from Kuwait, the United States led a robust international diplomatic effort to isolate Iraq and impose the strongest economic and political sanctions the UN Security Council (UNSC) ever imposed on a country. The sanctions were proposed initially to the UNSC as a non-military measure to force former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to withdraw his forces from Kuwait, which had he annexed and called "Iraq's Nineteenth Province". However, the sanctions remained in place even after the liberation of Kuwait, while their rationale and purposes evolved over the years – from the dismantling of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, to the destruction of ballistic missiles, to the completion of reparations payments to Kuwait and other third-party victims of the 1990 invasion. Throughout the 1990s, the economic sanctions were augmented by limited air strikes of mixed purposes.

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and Great Britain). Its final formation was disrupted by the Iraqi 1958 *coup d'état* which was led by General Abdul-Karim Qassim. It was modeled after the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and for a similar purpose, namely to prevent the expansion of Soviet influence in the Middle East.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of US policy toward Iraq, see A. Kadhim, "Opting for the Lesser Evil: U.S. Policy toward Iraq 1958-2008", in R.E. Looney (ed.), *Handbook of US-Middle East Relations*, London, Routledge, 2009, pp. 467-83.



Eventually, US policy evolved to include regime change as a stated goal, after Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, which stated: “It should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime”<sup>3</sup>. However, this law stopped short of authorizing the president to use military force to cause regime change in Iraq. It allowed the president “to direct the drawdown of defense articles from the stocks of the Department of Defense, defense services of the Department of Defense, and military education and training”, and to provide up to \$97 million for Iraqi opposition groups to undertake efforts to topple Saddam Hussein.

To use US military might to remove the Iraqi regime from power, President George W. Bush needed Congress to pass an Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF). In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the political will to do so was found. Congress passed the AUMF Against Iraq Resolution of 2002, which authorized the president “to use the Armed Forces of the United States as he determines to be necessary and appropriate in order to: (1) defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq; and (2) enforce all relevant UN Security Council Resolutions regarding Iraq”<sup>4</sup>. President Bush used this resolution to invade Iraq in March 2003.

The United States invasion of Iraq altered Iraqi-Russian relations dramatically. Iraq became subsumed in the US sphere of influence, leading to a great reduction of Iraqi-Russian economic and political cooperation. This reversal of roles compelled Moscow to change its post-11 September cooperation

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<sup>3</sup> 105th Congress Public Law 338. From the U.S. Government Printing Office, “[Iraq Liberation Act of 1998](#)”, page 112 STAT. 3178, Public Law 105-338 (last retrieved on 6 July 2019).

<sup>4</sup> 107th Congress Public Law 243. From the U.S. Government Printing Office, Page 116 STAT. 1498, Public Law 107-243 “[Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq Resolution of 2002](#)” (last retrieved on 6 July 2019).

with the United States, which included Russia's support for the US "War on Terror", the invasion of Afghanistan, and even US counterterrorism activities in Russia's own hemisphere.

Russia strongly opposed the US invasion of Iraq and objected to handling the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime outside of the framework of the UN Charter. Speaking at a joint news conference alongside French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, Russian President Vladimir Putin told journalists: "The faster we go along the path as set down by international law, the better it will be. The longer we delay a resolution within the UN framework, the more it will look like a colonial situation"<sup>5</sup>. However, Putin agreed to cooperate with the new Iraqi government and the United States and said that Russia was ready to "forgive Baghdad some \$8 to \$12 billion in debt", as requested by the United States<sup>6</sup>.

Russia had a \$3.5 billion, twenty-three-year deal with Iraq to rehabilitate Iraqi oil fields, including the West Qurna oil field – one of the world's largest oil deposits – and was expecting development rights to Majnoon oil field and other locations. Additionally, Russian companies had a large share of work in all other sectors in Iraq. Putin's acquiescence to help the US-installed post-Saddam government in Iraq was aimed at protecting all these economic and geostrategic interests.

## **Full US Engagement in Iraq and Regional Challenges (2003-2011)**

While it is commonly argued that establishing a democracy in Iraq was not an original goal of the 2003 invasion, several US laws such as the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 and the 2002 Iraq AUMF explicitly emphasized the establishment of democracy as a goal to accomplish in Iraq. For example, the 2002 AUMF

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<sup>5</sup> "Putin, Chirac, Schroeder Discuss Post-Saddam Iraq", *PBSO NewsHour*, 11 April 2003 (last retrieved on 20 July 2019).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

reaffirmed the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 as having “expressed the sense of Congress that it should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove from power the current Iraqi regime and promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime”. Furthermore, Congress stated in the 1998 Act:

It is the sense of the Congress that once the Saddam Hussein regime is removed from power in Iraq, the United States should support Iraq’s transition to democracy by providing immediate and substantial humanitarian assistance to the Iraqi people, by providing democracy transition assistance to Iraqi parties and movements with democratic goals, and by convening Iraq’s foreign creditors to develop a multilateral response to Iraq’s foreign debt incurred by Saddam Hussein’s regime<sup>7</sup>.

This call for establishing a democracy in Iraq was received with great enthusiasm by some members of the Bush administration, who envisioned an Iraq that would be a model for the Middle East. Despite the invasion’s rough start, the process of building a democratic framework for Iraq began almost immediately with the selection of a Governing Council representative of all ethno-sectarian groups to promote inclusive governance. Moreover, a transitional administrative law was drafted and signed by the Governing Council, and a cabinet was selected to govern as a provisional administration and prepare for the election of a constituent assembly to write a permanent constitution. By the end of 2005, Iraqis wrote and ratified the first permanent constitution since the Monarchy (which was from 1921 to 1958), and in 2006, they had their first democratically elected parliament and government in forty-eight years. Other democratic practices, including civilian control over the military and the peaceful transfer of power, were established for the first time since Iraq became a republic in 1958.

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<sup>7</sup> “Iraq Liberation Act of 1998”..., cit.

As Iraqis began assuming political power and taking control of their country, a passionate debate over the future of relations with the United States began to take shape among the political elite and social circles of Iraq. The question was: should Iraq continue to host US military forces and grant them immunity against prosecution under Iraqi laws, under a negotiated status of forces agreement, or ask the United States to withdraw from Iraq? Although there was an equally strong argument for both sides of the debate, the outcome was pre-determined in favor of the US withdrawal. Having been designated as an occupation force in UN Security Council Resolution 1483 on 22 May 2003, the United States could not end the occupation and secure legitimacy for the Iraqi government unless all American troops serving in Iraq were withdrawn. The withdrawal of US troops on 31 December 2011 was also a fulfilment of a campaign promise made by President Barack Obama, who opposed the war in Iraq. The talks between Iraq and the United States that led to the withdrawal were essentially a joint effort to end the US military presence in Iraq.

From the early days of the occupation, the United States was not the only player in Iraq. Several regional players entered the conflict as spoilers. Iran saw Iraq as both a threat and an opportunity. A strong, independent, and democratic Iraq would stand in the way of Iranian plans to create a contiguous sphere of influence to the Mediterranean. For that purpose, Iran needed to drive the United States out of Iraq, ensure a friendly government was in control of the country, and maintain a strong level of influence on Iraqi domestic and international policies. The American course of action was perfectly compatible with the Iranian strategy. When the United States forces departed from Iraq, they left a fragile state divided among ethno-sectarian political neophytes with mutually exclusive visions for the Iraqi state. These factors, combined with its weak security forces, made Iraq exactly what Iran preferred it to be: a market for Iranian goods and a vulnerable neighbor that was barely strong enough to carry its own weight and thus could not push back against Iranian intrusion.

With official US declarations about the intent to make Iraq a model for the Middle East, other leaders in the region, especially among the Arab neighbors of Iraq, were determined to prevent a ripple effect. Saudi Arabia and Syria were instrumental in the effort to make the American project so painful that it would not be repeated elsewhere. From the negative media coverage to allowing extremist religious messages to be announced in mosques and public gatherings, some of Iraq's neighbors were complicit in the violence and terrorism that plagued Iraq for years. Terrorist financing was another menace that came from some Gulf countries without any serious governmental efforts to prevent it. The words of Prince Turki al-Faisal, former director of Saudi Arabia's intelligence service and former ambassador to the United States, are very revealing:

Saudi leaders would be forced by domestic and regional pressures to adopt a far more independent and assertive foreign policy. Like our recent military support for Bahrain's monarchy, which America opposed, Saudi Arabia would pursue other policies at odds with those of the United States, including opposing the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in Iraq and refusing to open an embassy there despite American pressure to do so. The Saudi government might part ways with Washington in Afghanistan and Yemen as well<sup>8</sup>.

Prince Turki's words appeared in an article that threatened Saudi retaliation against a looming US veto of a Palestinian statehood petition to the United Nations, and which was carefully timed to come out on the tenth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, which were carried out by a group of nineteen al-Qaeda members (fifteen of them Saudi citizens). It was a flagrant message that the US partnership with Saudi Arabia is a double-edged sword for the West. Prince Turki cited Saudi Arabia's "opposing the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki", which included,

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<sup>8</sup> Prince Turki al-Faisal, "Veto a State, Lose an Ally", *The New York Times*, 11 September 2011.

*inter alia*, media attacks on the Iraqi government and its armed forces that played into the hands of terrorism. Saudi Arabia feared that a successful story of transition from tyranny to democracy in Iraq would create an American desire to replicate the process in other areas, which would leave the Saudi royal family as a despotic anomaly in the region.

The Saudis were also anticipating another threat from Iraq: the increase of Iraqi oil production to levels that could replace Saudi Arabia's output as the highest OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) exporter. Iraqi officials had revealed their intention to reach 10 thousand barrels per day (mbpd), which would challenge Saudi's export levels. Being the top OPEC exporter earned the Saudis more than high revenues. Their status as top exporter was also a strong reason for the international community to tolerate domestic transgressions against human rights and their longstanding exportation of extremist religious ideology which has given rise to an assortment of terrorist organizations worldwide. Saudi stability has been important in ensuring the continuing flow of its share of oil exports to the market, so the international community has been willing to look the other way as the Saudis continued to undermine security in many parts of the world. Iraq's success in exporting 10 mbpd or more would have challenged the Saudi status of being "too big to fail". The Saudis realized this potential and did all they could to prevent it.

## **The Challenges Posed by Syria and ISIS**

In the case of Syria, the Iraqi government claimed it had solid information that Bashar al-Assad's regime was in fact facilitating the training, financing, and travel of foreign terrorists to Iraq and that it continued to do so until the beginning of Syria's civil war. Assad was another despot who feared being a candidate for regime change if the neoconservatives in Washington succeeded in democratizing the Middle East, and he too spared no effort to hinder the progress of Iraqi democratization. The

United States had less leverage with Assad than with the Saudis; therefore, the Syrian regime continued its malign activities against Iraq for many years, until the Syrian uprisings in 2011 gave Assad and his intelligence establishment bigger fish to fry at home.

Despite Assad's malign activities and at the risk of alienating the United States, the Iraqi government maintained a neutral position toward Syria's internal conflict, which played into the hands of Russia and Iran, who wanted to protect the Syrian regime from collapse. The Iraqi position was not without a reasonable cause, however. The Iraqi government saw the opposition to Assad as an assortment of extremist groups – backed by Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf Arab countries – that included a few terrorist organizations whose victory would assure further activities to destabilize Iraq. As much as the Iraqis wanted Assad to go, they viewed him as the lesser evil. Iraqi fears indeed materialized on 10 June 2014, when Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), a terrorist group that took advantage of Assad's weakness and established a stronghold in eastern Syria, launched an attack on the Mosul province of Iraq and succeeded in the following months in taking control of almost one-third of Iraqi territory. It cost Iraq thousands of lives to liberate these territories, and the cost of reconstruction is estimated at \$88 billion<sup>9</sup>.

Facing this existential threat from ISIS, and having not received the F-16 fighters it ordered in September 2011, Iraq approached Russia for a quick supply of jet fighters. Five second-hand Russian SU-25 jets were delivered by late June 2019<sup>10</sup>. As the war to defeat ISIS continued, Iraq joined Russia, Syria, and Iran to form a joint intelligence-sharing cooperation coalition which was announced in September 2015, with a joint information center in Baghdad to coordinate their operations

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<sup>9</sup> M. Chmaytelli and A. Hagagy, "Iraq says reconstruction after war on Islamic State to cost \$88 billion", *Reuters*, 12 February 2018.

<sup>10</sup> C. Poccock, "Frustrated Iraqi PM Buys Russian Fighters", *AINOnline*, 27 June 2014.

against ISIS. The coalition invited the United States to join, but the request was denied. While acknowledging Iraqi sovereignty, the United States voiced serious concerns about the goals of the newly established coalition. Colonel Steve Warren, spokesman for the US coalition against ISIS, said: “We recognize that Iraq has an interest in sharing information on ISI[S] with other governments in the region who are also fighting ISI[S]. We do not support the presence of Syrian government officials who are part of a regime that has brutalized its own citizens”<sup>11</sup>.

Meanwhile, Russian-state owned and private energy firms, such as Gazprom, Rosneft, and Lukoil, are investing heavily in Iraq. Gazprom, Russia’s third-largest oil producer, started its operations in Iraq in 2010 in the Wasit Province to the east of Baghdad. In the summer of 2012, the company began working on two other projects in the northern Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Unlike their American counterparts, Russian companies have less transparency requirements and more flexibility to cut operating costs, not to mention their lower security concerns, which give them a strong competitive advantage in Iraq.

## After the American Pax?

Since the 1991 war to liberate Kuwait, the region has been under a permanent shadow of violent conflict. The Middle East, and particularly Iraq, has not been the beneficiary of the “American Pax” or its prospects, if any existed since. There have been two major wars on Iraq, led by the United States, along with several *ad hoc* bombardments and twelve years of crippling economic sanctions, mostly implemented and enforced by US military mechanisms and for security-related purposes.

All this history created in the minds of Iraqis an image of the United States as a belligerent nation rather than a peacemaker. Against this backdrop, US engagement with Iraq since 2003 has

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<sup>11</sup> J. Mullen and Y. Basil, “Iraq agrees to share intelligence with Russia, Iran and Syria”, *CNN*, 28 September 2015 (last retrieved on 20 July 2019).



been very difficult to process by the generations of Iraqis who lived through these decades. Added to this pre-existing negative accumulation are renewed words and actions that support the expectations of war over the claims of peacemaking. As a result, the United States may be surpassed by competitors who arrive in Iraq and the region as business partners with interests that have no use for military means to protect them. World economic powers, such as China, Korea, and some European countries, have enjoyed greater trust and better access than the United States.

Unlike the Gulf Arab states, Iraq has a history of military prowess that ruled out the need for foreign military bases or defense agreements with Western powers. This is both a matter of longstanding military policy and national pride. The Iraqi forces are not what they used to represent in the regional balance of powers, but this reality has not altered the Iraqi choice of self-reliance. As the decision to end the presence of US forces in 2011 and the battle against ISIS demonstrated, Iraq values its independence more than the guarantees of military alliances with strong powers. The Iraqis did the heavy lifting and made the majority of the sacrifices to liberate their territories and accepted a minimum support from the international coalition, which they framed as a duty of the international community to help Iraq defeat a threat to every country in the region and beyond. Iraqi leaders never stopped reminding everyone that they fought and defeated ISIS on behalf of the world.

In the absence of a strong defense commitment from the United States, Iraq is following a security strategy that is based on stepping up the readiness of its armed forces and avoiding any entanglement in regional conflict. When Iraq's military – which was inadequately trained and equipped by the United States to handle interior threats in the period of reform following the invasion – proved to be incapable of meeting the ISIS-era challenges, Iraqis did not surrender or run to foreign militaries to protect them, but rather mobilized a more powerful force from Iraqi volunteers in a matter of days and put

their security capabilities on track again. This resilience sets Iraq apart<sup>12</sup>.

Iraq's unique history and tradition of strong independence demands that the United States treat Iraq differently than some of its regional allies. Iraq cannot be reduced to the status of a protectorate or a junior partner. Even if future conditions forced Iraq to accept this status, it would be short-lived. In the past, Iraq compensated for the lack of strong Western alliances by resorting to a partnership with the USSR and the Eastern Bloc. In the current competitive system, Russia stands as a ready and willing alternative that is not going to be incompatible with Iraq's major regional ally, Iran. For durable relations, the United States must treat Iraq as a valued partner, akin to that of Israel or Turkey – a status that allows Iraq a margin of independence and autonomy.

This partnership must also be multidimensional, where the interests of both sides are equally enhanced, and the dividends are distributed to the satisfaction of both sides. In the absence of full US engagement with Iraq, there will not be an American monopoly on the country's economic and political relations. In the coming decade, Iraq will become more integrated in the Asian market and the grand plans Russia, China, and India are implementing in the Middle East<sup>13</sup>. Whether it will build its own port in Basra or use Kuwaiti ports, Iraq will soon be a link and passageway between the Gulf, the West, and the East; as the Road and Belt Initiative is shaping up and other regional plans, such as Kuwait's Silk City, begin to integrate the region economically.

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<sup>12</sup> In the days that followed the ISIS invasion of Mosul, the Iraqi military collapsed and left the country in a defenseless state. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani issued a fatwa (religious edict) calling on all Iraqis to join the Iraqi Armed Forces and defend the country. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi men heeded the call and took up arms to fight the terrorist group. For more about the fatwa and its aftermath see, A. Kadhim and L. Al-Khatteeb, "What Do you Know About Sistani's Fatwa?", *The Huffington Post*, 10 July 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Iraqi leaders consider the large economic plans as opportunities to provide employment for Iraqi labor and chances for Iraq to expand its economy, which is fully reliant on oil revenues at the present time.

Iraq's traditional relations with Russia will continue to thrive not only in the energy sector, but in many other economic and infrastructural sectors as well. The imperative question, in these strategic decisions, will be how Iraq can balance its relations between an economically oriented East and a militarily oriented America.



## 6. Russia and the United States in the Cases of Egypt and Libya

Andrey Chuprygin

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The topic of love-hate relations between the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR)-turned-Russia in the Middle East has occupied a significant part of the discourse on international relations in the region since times long gone. Not only has this standoffish confrontation shaped the political backdrop of regional developments, more often than not it has also contributed to the domestic environments in both the United States and Russia, from the economical to the social to the political discourse. From this perspective, one should evaluate every endeavor undertaken by both actors with consideration to the resonance this or that statement or step was intended by leaders to create within their home constituencies.

The history of “mutually assured participation” by both the United States and Russia in the Middle East originated in the aftermath of World War II, when the USSR gained access to a seat in the “winner’s club” and transitioned from the status of the “Enfant Terrible” of the established world order to a fully-fledged superpower with nuclear capabilities and an appetite for adventurism. And the Middle East, with its vast reserves of hydrocarbons, strategic geographic position, and, importantly, its centrality in the Mediterranean Basin, see the natural place of interest for the leadership in Moscow. Also of importance was the Islamic factor, given the domestic policies toward the significant number of Muslims living under the umbrella of the USSR.

Just as Moscow began scrutinizing London's activities in the MENA region, Washington began monitoring Moscow's moves, trying to anticipate and/or stall the advancement of the USSR in the enigmatic world of *One Thousand and One Nights*, despite full knowledge of the odds being in favor of Russia due to proximity and the influence of the Eastern Orthodoxy.

The US-USSR rivalry over the region was shaped by several distinctive issues such as the influence on the emerging independent states, shaping daily political agendas, flimsy collaboration "in ways that would nudge the locals toward an armed peace"<sup>1</sup> and, of course, control over and use of the Arab-Israeli conflict through a number of agents in place.

It is not useful to resort to nostalgic reminiscences of the "bipolar" world, nor to indulge in blaming the monopolar construction of the international system, as much has already been written on this subject. The focus of this chapter is on the return of Russia to the South Mediterranean, namely Egypt and Libya, in the wake of what is commonly referred to as the Arab Spring.

Usually when discussing the recent reentry of Russia into Middle Eastern politics the narrative revolves around President Vladimir Putin's ambitions to become a key figure in international arena. Without diminishing the role of the longstanding Russian President, however, we posit that the new policies of Russia in the Middle East and thus the renewed sparring between Russia and the United States in and around Egypt and Libya actually started with the ascent of Yevgeny Primakov to the position of Russian Prime Minister. Primakov, with his unwavering position toward proactive policies in the Middle East, contributed significantly if not decisively to the assertive return of Russia in MENA politics<sup>2</sup>. This began against the backdrop

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<sup>1</sup> G.W. Breslauer, *Soviet Strategy in the Middle East*, New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: E.M. Primakov, *Confidential: Middle East Frontstage and Backstage*, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 2006, p. 376. "The events of recent years require Moscow's focus on more proactive participation in resolving Middle Eastern problems.

of the NATO incursion in former Yugoslavia which was and still is felt as a great fiasco for Russia in the European continent.

And of course, just as Moscow's analysis is that Washington is "hiding" behind everything that damages Moscow's interests, the Kremlin's activities might be seen by Washington as an anti-American reaction everywhere it matters. Frankly speaking, there is no smoke without a fire, and there is a certain level of justification of Russia's suspicions toward United States, and the reciprocal feeling is not without its reasoning as well. The sequence of events in the Mediterranean in the twenty-first century may be considered as a good example of the return of both Moscow and Washington to the *modus operandi* of the infamous Cold War.

The transition started as a result of the war on terror waged by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. For a brief period of time, Moscow and Washington were united by the operation in Afghanistan; the best of counterterrorism partners they seemed to be. The counterterrorism discourse appeared to become a venue for constructing close cooperation, if not rapport, between the two major players wielding power in the greater Middle East, if not the whole of the Western Asia. The fissures appeared in 2003, when the United States invaded Iraq under what Russia saw as dubious pretexts. Even then, the rupture might have been avoided were it not for the fact that the US administration allowed Shia authorities to execute ousted Iraqi President Saddam Hussein (which rang extremely loud alarm bells in Moscow) and spectacularly failed to organize the civil life of Iraqi society in the aftermath of invasion, thus paving the way for the emergence of various violent extremist groups.

This served for Moscow as an example of "American ignorance" in Middle Eastern affairs, and the Russian powers that

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There are good reasons for the success [of the Middle Eastern course]: Russia has unblemished traditional ties with Arab countries and Iran; relations with Israel have dramatically improved while maintaining fundamental policy toward resolving the Middle East conflict on a fair, accommodating basis".

be decided that the “bull in a china shop” tactics of the United States in the region not only threatened to ignite violence in the Middle East, but also aggravate the security situation along the borders of Russia. However, the afore-mentioned tactics of United States had a measured benefit for Russian policy by creating a semi-angelic image for Moscow, and still today Moscow “seeks to present itself to countries in the region as a pragmatic, nonideological, reliable, savvy, no-nonsense player with a capacity to weigh in on regional matters by both diplomatic and military means”<sup>3</sup> as a total contrast to the US.

Now once again, the confrontation between the United States and Russia in the MENA region requires further study. Undoubtedly the main contested theaters are the two local actors traditionally on the forefront of regional politics: Egypt and Libya. Though the nature of US-Russian relations differs in each case, one thing remains constant, and that is the importance of each country in shaping policies in MENA post-World War II and beyond, with the special focus on the Mediterranean.

For the sake of practicality, each case will be examined separately.

## Egypt

The US-USSR contest for primacy in Egypt started immediately after the withdrawal of Britain from Cairo. Egypt at that time was a prize worth taking risks for. As the Arab wisdom went, “what happened in Egypt, happened in the Middle East”. After the exit of Britain, a trove of opportunities opened in front of whoever was successful in replacing the “old colonial” as the source of influence on the Nile.

The historical contest carried on with the USSR gaining the upper hand in the 1950s and dramatically losing it in the

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<sup>3</sup> D. Trenin, *Russia in the Middle-East. Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, April 2016, p. 4.



1970s. The loss of Egypt in the beginning of the 1970s was effectively the beginning of the end for Soviet supremacy in the region, which up until that point had been reinforced by its status as the main military backer of Cairo.

Much has been published debating the reasons for Russia's loss and the United States' gain in momentum in the Middle East in the late 1970s through early 1980s, from failed military operations on the part of the USSR to the prowess of US diplomacy. In our understanding the truth was at once more mundane and unexpected.

The old USSR leadership constructed their presence in the Middle East around discourse on the historical fight against the enemy of the working class, thus relying on the two socialist pillars of the time, namely, the construction of heavy industries in the client countries to create an able-bodied working class, and the enhancement of their military to ward off imperialist aggression and put a lid on any possible dissent. This attitude was supposed to mobilize a united front of anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist forces. This could not have been farther from the reality. The so called "Arab socialist" elite was not interested in these globalist goals (with the exception of a few idealistic revolutionary figures of Michel Aflak's<sup>4</sup> calibre). The threat of a Zionist foe was used as a pretext to periodically mobilize constituencies for a fight for the motherland, diverting the population's attention from the domestic agenda and introducing along the way martial law, which was of great help in curbing dissent. The modernized and beefed-up military was better at defending regimes from internal threats than external ones. Meanwhile, periodic wars with Israel became a sort of political ritualistic feeding of the egos on both sides of the Arab-Israeli divide, and served to bring in financial aid. Then all at

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Aflak was a Syrian philosopher, sociologist, and Arab nationalist. His ideas significantly influenced the development of Baathism and its political movement and he is considered by some to be the principal founder of Baathist thought.

once, “Egypt needed peace with Israel for the sake of Egypt”<sup>5</sup>, as the war became economically unfeasible. This fact was totally missed by Kremlin, as was the multiplying factor that follows.

The Kremlin failed to see that the same Arab elites were more interested in spending their ill-gotten wealth shopping in Europe and the United States, to the extent that names like Harrods, Galerie Lafayette, and Fifth Avenue became more influential than any other considerations in shaping the daily life and affinities of the powers that be in the Middle Eastern countries. Consumerist priorities became more powerful than ideological constructs. One has to acknowledge that US policymakers saw these inconsistencies early on and effectively exploited them in daily interactions with Middle Eastern counterparts. Thus, consumerism and not ideology won the day. Of course, there were other important reasons like problems inside the Warsaw Pact, the declining economy of the USSR, and the demise of the latter in 1991, but the initial failure of the USSR and prevalence of the United States in the autocratic secular elitist Middle East was hidden in European and American shopping malls.

Since the deconstruction of the USSR and Moscow’s retreat from all issues connected to the Middle East, Russian involvement in Egypt effectively shrank to meager “scientific and cultural” cooperation. However, during the same period a new phenomenon by the name of Russian tourism came into being. During the 1990s, thanks to newly obtained freedom of travel, Russian citizens quickly joined the vanguard of overseas vacationers. In the Middle Eastern countries Russia effectively snatched the leading position from the Germans and became the primary supplier of tourists to Egypt. This led to an interesting paradox in which Russia provided Egypt with financial influx, enabling the latter to pay for American goods and maintain its position in the Western marketplace. Of course, it was

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<sup>5</sup> T. Kuehner, *The U.S. and Egypt since the Suez Crisis*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 28 July 2009 (last retrieved on 14 June 2019).

by far not the only factor but nevertheless it played a significant role in keeping Egypt's economy afloat.

In the framework of a new Kremlin policy of making friends in the international system in the 1990s, Cairo was initially assigned a minor role as an unenthusiastic heir to the strategic partnership formed between Russia and Egypt's [President] Gamal Abdel Nasser. Moscow at that time controversially reached rapprochement with Israel and customarily assigned all its goodwill to the alliance with their former "Zionist" enemy, even though "the Israeli elite ha[d] perceived Russia as a country of alien values and alien political culture, while in Russia there are still vestiges of domestic anti-Semitism and suspicion toward Israel as an American satellite"<sup>6</sup>. It was difficult for the Kremlin to formulate any significant role for Egypt in their political agenda at that time, outside the Israeli narrative. Except, of course, as a favorite touristic destination.

The same was true for Cairo. Egyptian leadership until 2011 did not recognize Russia's role in the region except as a nominal counterbalance against US monopoly to be occasionally used as a negotiating chip. That meant that Moscow could have been replaced by any ambitious-enough party, which in its turn defined a complete prevalence of Washington as a leading international interlocutor in the MENA and Mediterranean political and economic discourse.

Thus, during the period from 1990 to 2011, an interesting triangle was formed, with Moscow providing Egypt with an instrument for political blackmail (the threat of a "return to Russia") in talks with Western counterparts, and cash from tourism which in turn Egypt used to purchase goods and commodities which were supplied by United States. Everything seemed to be going smoothly except for the 2011 uprisings later called the Arab Spring and the growing Russian ambitions based on Yevgeny Primakov revivalist approach to the role of Russia in the Middle East and North Africa.

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<sup>6</sup> T. Karasova, "Russian-Israeli Relations, Past, Present, and Future: A View from Moscow", in Z. Magen and V. Naumkin (eds.), *Russia and Israel in the Changing Middle East*, Tel Aviv, INSS, 2013. p. 53.

The “winds of change” were also fueled by several mistakes made by American policymakers during this period. First, there was a misinterpretation of the nature of the protests. It was assumed that Egyptian youth went to the street seeking democratic changes and protesting against political reprisals and the dictatorship of President Hosni Mubarak and his clan, while in fact the slogans were mainly economic with certain references to free democratic reforms, again inside economic context. Second, there was a misunderstanding of the role of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was perceived as a light of democracy in the dark tunnels of tyranny in Egypt – an approach that persists to this day and interferes with the process of US policy decision making. Third, the reach of the Egyptian armed forces was dramatically underestimated by the United States. And last, but not least, the inability of Western leadership to overcome the propaganda inertia in maintaining the *coup d'état* narrative and playing the hand of regional Islamist groups in attacking the government of al-Sisi<sup>7</sup>. One might take a note as well of the impact of the United States’ sudden abandonment of its long time “preferred dictator”, Mubarak, which left a lot of people in the region wondering.

At the same time, the consistent, if not overtly headstrong, character of the Russian attitude toward the Egyptian stage of the Arab Spring came to fruition in strengthening the political ties between the two countries. It did not hurt as well, that both leaders saw a lot of similarities in their beliefs and modus operandi. And let’s not forget the psychological factor: Russians are famously adept at not taking a patronizing stance *vis-à-vis* their counterparts, irrespective of their geographical origins; and Moscow consistently proselytizes belief in the sanctity of the existing regimes, a position which finds rapport with all Middle Eastern leaders, including those in Egypt.

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<sup>7</sup> M.W. Hanna, “Getting Over Egypt: Time to Rethink Relations”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2015, vol. 94, no. 6, pp. 67-73.

## Libya

The case of Libya differs in so many ways from that of Egyptian that it needs to be examined from a different perspective.

If before the “Green Revolution” of President Muammar al-Qaddafi Libya was a prize contested between Italy and Britain, with the USSR and United States on the fringes, after Qaddafi’s ascent to power Libya started to become what might be called a one-man show, with practically all major powers keeping their distance. The main reason of course was the fact that due to his ambitions, populist approach, and theatrical disregard of the established rules of conduct in the international milieu, Qaddafi soon became what might have been called the “boogeyman of the century”. He was accused of everything from the aiding the terrorist organization Palestinian Jihad, to financing and arming the Irish Republican Army IRA, to the Lockerbie disaster<sup>8</sup>. Nobody wanted to be directly associated with him.

There were international contracts in Libya’s military and oil sectors which were somewhat significant, the main competition in the military sphere being between the USSR and France in mobile air defense, Italy and Czechoslovakia in armor, and Bulgaria in construction, etc. The USSR, though maintaining a careful non-partisan position, had for a period of time a number of advisers in-country, but without any significant success due to several factors, not the least of these being that Libyans did not like to be advised on anything. The United States at the time was more preoccupied with the Israeli-Palestinian

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<sup>8</sup> On 21 December 1988, aircraft N739PA was destroyed by a bomb while flying the transatlantic leg of the route of Pan Am Flight 103, killing all 243 passengers and 16 crew – a disaster known as the Lockerbie bombing. Libyan intelligence officer Abdel Basset al-Mighrani was sentenced to life in prison in connection to the attack. There are still contradicting views on Libyan involvement, though Qaddafi took responsibility in 2003. In addition to flaws in the prosecution’s evidence, there were strong suspicions that the General Command of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine was the actual perpetrator.

issue than the realities of the Maghreb, and was not too involved outside of its policy of sanctioning Libya under any pretext available which, to be frank, never had any real impact in Mediterranean affairs and never affected the USSR's position in North Africa. Even as "[...] tension mounted in late 1985 and early 1986 between the United States and Libya, the Soviets stressed Israel's synchronization of maneuvers to coincide with US threats against President Qaddafi"<sup>9</sup>, which demonstrates Moscow's priorities at the time.

Everything changed in 2011. Much analysis of Libya post-2011 has relied extensively on the dominant narrative of the Arab Spring, so much so that there is a dearth of out-of-the-box thinking on these issues. Thus, it became a given that the revolution in Libya was the direct extension of movements in Tunisia and Egypt. While not factually wrong, it is an oversimplification to describe the event in terms of a disenfranchised population revolting against a despot in the quest for a democratic future. From the beginning it was quite confusing to Russia to watch the population of the country with the highest standards of living on the continent protesting. Many in the Kremlin are still unsure of the origins of the uprising. This narrative is important to understand the policies of Russia in Libya and how and where they differ from the policies of the United States and its European allies. The understanding in the Kremlin is that it was a *coup d'état* that went wrong, and not a popular revolution. There were several factors influencing this assessment. They include the idea that Qaddafi was becoming too influential in Africa and Mediterranean in his newly acquired image of a "dove" in the region, propped up by unrivaled financial resources. There is also suspicion about a false-flag political operation in Egypt, which put Muslim Brotherhood to power and then crushed them under the heel of the military. Whatever the reason, the resulting civil war in Libya became the focus of the North African, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean politics,

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<sup>9</sup> G.W. Breslauer (1990), p. 231.

and as such a new stage for competition between Russia and the collective West, with the United States as the driving force.

Of course, one might point out the fact that leaders in Washington have been going out of their way to show that they are distancing themselves from Libya, while Russia at every opportunity sends strong messages that it talks with all parties involved in the Libyan conflict without preference for any particular one. But the fact that Libya is becoming the center-stage of the Mediterranean and, by extension, the Middle Eastern policies of the international community sow the seeds of educated doubt regarding the nature and extent of US and Russian involvement in the country's affairs.

Moscow in fact has been hosting different Libyan visitors from the cities of Tripoli, Misrata and Tobruk, sending overt signals that former Qaddafi general Khalifa Haftar and his self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) are priority number one. However, Washington has always been the destination preferred, if not always easily reached, by the same people – including Haftar, who, being an American citizen, holds hopes for the political and material support of his country of citizenship.

The internal political and military division in Libya into the two main camps – with Haftar and the LNA on one side, and the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) on the other – mirrors the political rift in the broader Middle East. Namely, Qatar and Turkey versus the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. This division is reminiscent of the power play between major international actors in and around Syria, Iraq, and Palestine, especially given the Israeli involvement in the North African country<sup>10</sup>. This distribution of players indicates beyond a doubt that contrary to their articulated neutrality, both Russia and United States are in fact active forces in the Libyan conundrum.

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<sup>10</sup> J. McQuaid et al., “The Same, Yet Different: United States and Gulf State Interests in the Post-Arab Spring Maghreb”, *CNA*, February 2017, pp. 26-27, 33-34.

## Conclusion

To summarize, since 2013-2014, Russian policies in the region were revitalized, driven by two factors. First, after two decades of ignorance, Moscow desired to reassert its historical position (to receive its dues), and thereby persuade the West to be more compliant to the demands of the Kremlin. Second, the risks connected to the large Muslim population in Russia demanded the mitigation of tensions on one hand, and the curbing of anti-regime and anti-secular Islamist flare-ups in the far-flung southern borders of the country, where there is an understanding that “post-Soviet states regard Russia as at worst a hostile power and at best a pragmatic partner”<sup>11</sup>, but not a reliable ally.

Russia missed a lot of the action in between 2001 and 2014, while the US, having been proactive during this period in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, committed along the way a number of diplomatic and military mistakes. These led to a number of problems, which Russia is now using to its advantage by pointing out the “inadequacy” of US policy in the MENA region. Furthermore, Moscow in fact became suspicious of Washington ability and desire to resolve what Moscow considered the top priority issues, like regime-toppling and Islamist proliferation.

Having said this, there is also a difference of principles in Russia’s approach to the Middle East which sets it apart from the United States. Russia is not trying to impose its worldview on its counterparts, which sets Moscow apart from the liberal proliferation doctrine of the Western alliance and gives it the status of preferred partner to the authoritarian regimes of the MENA region. On the other hand, Russia is able to provide only limited economic support, and not more than the occasional veto in the UN Security Council politically. This severely impedes Russia’s influence in the highly mercantile world of Middle East and North Africa.

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<sup>11</sup> D. Trenin, *It’s Time to Rethink Russia’s Foreign Policy Strategy*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 25 April 2019.



The other side of the divide things looks exactly the opposite. While the US-led Western alliance is quite attractive in that it represents the great riches of the dreams of the dedicated consumer, the US commitment to discourse on “democratic liberation from oppressive rulers” seriously hampers the future of US relations with the regional elites.

Possibly this explains why both Russia and the United States are trying to take more or less equidistant positions from opposing parties in the regional political milieu. Both actors exploit to the maximum the counterterrorism agenda, more often than not throwing terrorist labels at questionable issues. Both parties are persistently trying to play the savior, while differing on what exactly they are saving the region’s peoples from. In the end, one cannot but help but wonder whether the United States and Russia are playing the Middle East, or being played by it.



## 7. Turkey's Russian Roulette

Gönül Tol, Ömer Taşpınar

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Despite repeated warnings from the United States, the first shipment of the Russian-made S-400 air defense missile system landed in Turkey amid great fanfare in July 2019. Turkish TV channels live-streamed the landing of the missile parts. Turkey's Defense Ministry announced via twitter that the first component had arrived at the Murted Air Base in Ankara. Columnnists, analysts, and TV commentators – pro- and anti-Erdoğan alike – hailed the delivery of the missile system as the “country's liberation from the West”.

The US response followed several days later, when it officially expelled Turkey from the F-35 stealth fighter jet program in retaliation. Turkey, one of the largest F-35 export customers, had planned to buy one hundred jets. It was also involved in the F-35's production as one of eight partner countries that joined the program in 2002, manufacturing some nine hundred parts for the plane. But Turkey's missile defense agreement with Russia turned into a deal-breaker for the US Department of Defense, which argued that the introduction of the S-400 in Turkey provides Russia an intelligence collection platform that could compromise the F-35's sophisticated stealth technology. The delivery could also prompt sanctions under the *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act* (CAATSA) passed in Congress in 2017 to punish countries that make large purchases of Russian military hardware.

The delivery of S-400, a system designed to shoot down NATO airplanes, marks the most significant rupture in Turkey-US ties

in many decades. It comes at a time when Washington's concerns over Russian influence at home and abroad run high. Many in the US capital think that the sale of the S-400 to a NATO ally is the latest in a long saga of Russian efforts to chip away at the United States' preponderance of power. Others fear that the worst is yet to come, warning that Russia will strike the biggest blow when Turkey pulls out of NATO, which is seen as more likely today than ever before.

Given the complete breakdown of trust in Turkey-US relations in recent years over a number of problems and the potential for new ones on the horizon, a Turkish decision to leave NATO or a NATO decision to officially downgrade its military partnership with Ankara are now well within the realm of possibility<sup>1</sup>. But Ankara and NATO are not there yet. The Turkey-Russia alliance is still fragile and results primarily from these countries' alienation from the West. As such, Russia and Turkey's respective relationships with the Western world will determine the future course of their own cooperation.

## **Turkey's Relations with the West**

Turkey has historically had a complicated relationship with the West. The founders of the modern Turkish Republic anchored Turkey in Europe and the wider West after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In the eyes of Turkey's first President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, civilization meant Western civilization and under his leadership the newly proclaimed Turkish Republic embarked on the most ambitious cultural westernization project ever witnessed by the Muslim world. Turkey became one of the first countries, in 1959, to seek close cooperation with the European Economic Community (EEC), the forerunner of the

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<sup>1</sup> Turkish President Erdoğan has reportedly threatened to leave NATO in his discussions with Trump on the margin of the G-20 Summit in Osaka during their meeting on July 24, 2019. Source: C. Lee, L. Caldwell, and C. Kube, "[Trump asks GOP senators for 'flexibility' on Turkey sanctions](#)", *NBC News*, 24 July 2019.

European Union. In 1987, Turkey applied to join the EEC. Yet, Turkey's relations with the West remained ambiguous. Even as the new nation-state endeavored to erase its Ottoman past, a certain level of distrust of the West remained in the collective memory of Turkish leaders. Turkey, like Russia, was never colonized by the West. Yet, unlike Tsarist Russia, the death of the Turkish Empire had not been an internal affair. It was a product of military defeat and humiliation by Western powers – an agonizingly slow expiration culminating with the Treaty of Sevres in 1920 partitioning what was left of the empire among the victors of World War I.

Today's Turkey is often described as a country deeply polarized between Islamists and secularists. What is often overlooked in this misleading, binary representation is the fact that powerful historical symbols like Sevres still unite Islamists and secularists around the main driver of Turkish politics: nationalism. That Turkish nationalism often takes an anti-Western form should not come as a surprise. While Kemalists are disappointed with an EU that never rewarded Turkey's secularization and westernization, Islamists never nurtured high hopes about joining an entity they always considered as an anti-Turkish Christian club. What has remained a constant in modern Turkish history has therefore been a sense of righteous indignation *vis-à-vis* the West.

Turkey's anger with the West, however, seldom gained a clear anti-Russian dimension for three important reasons rooted in history as well as in current strategic dynamics. First, there is the important historical fact that the Turkish war of national independence in the early 1920s was partly waged with Russian support. Second comes the favorable image of the Soviet Union (USSR) in the eyes of the Turkish left and even within Kemalist military circles during the Cold War – particularly in times of crisis in Turkish-American relations. And third is, the recent dynamics of rapprochement. Since the end of the Cold War, Turkey's growing frustration with both the European Union and the United States has fueled the current

nationalist-secularist strategic vision known as Eurasianism; an anti-American, Russophile movement with roots that date back to the 1930s.

For anyone who takes history seriously, it is important to remember that Atatürk received military and financial support from the Bolsheviks during Turkey's war of national independence against Western imperialist forces. In fact, until Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin's territorial demands in 1945, Ankara tried hard to avoid picking sides between the West and the USSR. Neutrality was no longer an option during the Cold War as the bipolar balance of power took shape in the international system. Turkey was simply too geographically close for comfort to the USSR and had no alternative but to join the transatlantic alliance and benefit from collective defense.

Turkey lobbied hard to become a member of NATO and valued its place in the alliance, but by the 1960s and 1970s the extreme ideological polarization of Turkish politics resulted in important foreign policy ramifications. As the Turkish right became strongly anticommunist, Turkey's Kemalists slowly gravitated toward the center-left. In time, some within the left-wing spectrum of the Kemalist establishment even developed a soft spot for Moscow. In fact, each time Turkey came to be disappointed with Washington, as happened most famously in 1964 in the wake of the Johnson letter<sup>2</sup>, Ankara flirted with the idea of realigning its grand strategy. The idea of Turkey joining the Non-Aligned Movement had a romantic appeal in the eyes of the Kemalists even if it was outside the realm of *realpolitik*. In practice, this meant Turkey's frequent frustrations with the West

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<sup>2</sup> US President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 letter delivered an ultimatum to then Prime Minister İsmet İnönü: if Ankara launched an operation to defend Cypriot Turks in Cyprus, Turkey would not be allowed to use US weapons and would not be defended by the United States in the event of a possible Russian intervention – breaching the commitment to collective defense. The ultimatum was not well-received in Turkey, and a subsequent CIA cable stated that "Johnson's letter has done more to set back United States Turkish relations than any other single act".

never gained a blatantly anti-Russian dimension. From socialist intellectuals nurturing revolutionary dreams to Kemalist generals harking back to Atatürk's legacy of "full independence", the USSR represented to Turkey a necessary pole of resistance to American imperialism.

With the end of the Cold War, Turkey entered a new phase in its relations with the West as the strategic center of gravity shifted to the Middle East. There was now even more room for frustration with the West and particularly Washington because of Turkey's unresolved and rapidly deteriorating Kurdish problem. The 1990-91 Gulf War exacerbated this problem. Ankara led the initiative to establish a safe zone in northern Iraq to send back the five hundred thousand Iraqi Kurds who had fled the war into southeastern Turkey and convinced its allies to join the effort. Ironically, the UN-established no-fly-zone in northern Iraq ultimately undermined Turkey's security. The lack of central authority in northern Iraq in the aftermath of the Gulf War enabled the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which had been waging a war against the Turkish state since the 1980s, to establish training grounds in and stage operations against Turkey from the region. US support for the Iraqi Kurds frustrated the Turks, who believed that their concerns about Kurdish separatism fell on deaf ears. These concerns became one of the main drivers of Turkey's decision not to grant the US military access to Turkish airspace and bases in the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, which in turn led to a breakdown of trust between the two allies.

In the meantime, Turkey's frustration with the EU grew as well. The biggest shock came when the EU included the former Warsaw Pact countries, as well as Cyprus and Malta, in the enlargement process launched in the 1990s while excluding Turkey. The European Union cited Turkey's deteriorating human rights record and the country's faltering democracy, often referring to the human rights abuses by Turkey in its fight against the Kurdish militants, which reached new heights in the 1990s. Ankara saw the EU decision to extend membership to

former Warsaw Pact countries, which in Ankara's view were in no better place in terms of democracy than Turkey, as a double standard and accused the transatlantic alliance of turning a blind eye to Turkey's security concerns stemming from the Kurdish question.

This anti-Western resentment, along with several domestic dynamics, led to the rise of Eurasianism, a Euroskeptic, anti-American, and Russophile movement that included among its ranks socialists, nationalists, and Kemalists in the 1990s<sup>3</sup>. Eurasianists called for a pro-Russian orientation in Turkey's foreign policy, arguing that Turkey had to abandon its pro-Western foreign policy and make Russia its most important ally. In 2002, General Tuncer Kılınç, then Secretary General of the National Security Council, declared that Turkey should work with Russia and Iran against the EU<sup>4</sup>. In the mid-2000s, despite relative improvement in Turkey-EU relations with the beginning of negotiations over Turkey's accession as an EU member state, Eurasianism within the Kemalist establishment did not disappear. To the contrary, it reached new heights. Ultra-secularists opposed to the rising Justice and Development Party (AKP) within the military and judiciary considered American and European support for "moderate Islam" and a "Turkish model" for the greater Middle East as an attempt to erode Kemalist secularism and national unity in favor of Kurdish rights and political Islam. Ongoing resentment with Washington over the Kurdish question in Iraq and at home coupled with domestic polarization over secular and nationalist identity fueled the search for an anti-American and anti-EU alternative in foreign policy.

Eurasianism has made a comeback in Turkey as frustration with the West has reached new heights in the last few years.

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<sup>3</sup> Ş. Aktürk, "The Fourth Style of Politics: Eurasianism as a Pro-Russian Rethinking of Turkey's Geopolitical Identity", *Turkish Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2015, pp. 54-79.

<sup>4</sup> S. Kınıkloğlu, "The Anatomy of Turkish-Russian Relations", *Insight Turkey*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2006, pp. 81-96.



The US decision in 2014 to airdrop weapons to the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), considered to be a PKK-affiliated terrorist organization by Turkey, proved to be a turning point in Turkey-US ties. From the US perspective, the US action came after months of failed efforts to convince the Turks to do more in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). President Barack Obama's administration grew increasingly frustrated over Turkey's turning a blind eye to ISIS's activities within its borders. To Washington, supporting the YPG's fight against ISIS in the northern Syrian town of Kobane became a necessity. Ankara, for its part, felt betrayed by its NATO ally's decision to arm its arch-enemy.

The conflict in Syria posed further complications for Turkey-US ties. Ankara felt neglected by Washington when Russia vowed to retaliate after Turkey downed a Russian jet for violating its airspace in 2015. Shortly after the incident, Russia announced an end to charter flights between the two countries, a ban on Russian businesses hiring any new Turkish nationals, import restrictions on certain Turkish goods, and restrictions on Russian tourists' travel to Turkey<sup>5</sup>. Turkey, worried about a Russian military retaliation, urgently called a NATO meeting to discuss contingency plans in preparation for collective defense. Ankara asked its NATO allies to maintain their Patriot missile defense systems along the Turkish-Syrian border, as Germany and the United States had planned to withdraw their own Patriot batteries deployed in Turkey. Washington and Berlin went ahead with the withdrawal despite Turkish appeals, strengthening views in Ankara that the US-led alliance was not committed to Turkey's defense.

Another key moment in Turkey-US relations came in 2016 when a clique within the Turkish military led a coup attempt against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In Ankara's view, the United States was neither fast nor clear enough in

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<sup>5</sup> "Russia Slaps Economic Sanctions on Turkey Over Jet Downing", *Defense News*, 28 November 2015.

condemning the coup attempt, while Russian President Vladimir Putin called Erdoğan immediately and offered the support of Russian Special Forces deployed in a nearby Greek island<sup>6</sup>. Turkey blames the US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen for orchestrating the coup and has demanded his extradition ever since. The United States has refused the request so far, arguing that the decision is up to the courts and that Turkey has failed to produce hard evidence tying Gülen to the coup attempt. To Turks, the US stance on Gülen has proved what has seemed evident to them all along: that the United States was behind the coup.

By the time anti-Americanism reached new heights in Ankara, Turkish policymakers had also resigned themselves to the fact Turkey would not become an EU member anytime soon. The accession talks that started in 2005 stalled shortly thereafter when Germany and France started circulating the idea of a “privileged partnership” for Turkey instead of full membership. The 2004 EU decision to grant membership to Cyprus, despite the fact that Greek Cypriots voted against unification the same year in a UN-sponsored referendum, proved to be another strategic blunder in the eyes of Turkey. The island has been divided between the Greek Cypriot south and Turkish north since a Greek *coup d'état* followed by a Turkish intervention in 1974. Rewarding the Greek side with EU membership further complicated Turkey's accession talks as Cyprus now holds veto power over the issue. In addition to talks of “privileged partnership”, the Cyprus question thus remains a major source of nationalist backlash against the EU in Turkey.

All this frustration over the West's approach has built up and greatly emboldened the Eurasianist view in Turkey to the degree that a growing section of the population came to support the government's decision to purchase Russian S-400 missile defense system despite repeated warnings from the United

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<sup>6</sup> P. Stewart, “U.S. officials wonder: Did Turkish leader's coup memories drive Russia arms deal?”, *Reuters*, 18 July 2019.

States that the system is not interoperable with NATO systems and that Turkey would face sanctions if it moved ahead with the delivery. In a recent survey by an Istanbul university, 44 percent of respondents supported Turkey's decision to purchase the S-400, while only 24 percent said otherwise<sup>7</sup>. Beyond the popular backlash, there is also a clear trend toward Eurasianism at the level of the political elites and establishment. More and more people within the Turkish military, opposition parties, and government circles make the argument that Turkey should not rely on the United States entirely for its security needs and instead turn to Russia.

## Russia's Complicated Relations with the West

Russia has felt equally alienated from the West. Like Turkey, Russia saw itself as part of Europe<sup>8</sup>. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, ordinary Russians longed to be recognized as fellow Europeans and some viewed Russia as more European than the former Warsaw pact countries<sup>9</sup>. The Russian leaders aspired to join all major European institutions including NATO and the EU. The first President of post-Soviet Russia, Boris Yeltsin, made joining these European institutions his country's main goal. After becoming President in 2000, Vladimir Putin pursued a similar approach *vis-à-vis* Europe. He saw the EU as a key partner for Moscow.

From the European perspective, Russia was eligible to join the continent's second-tier bodies but not NATO or the EU. Western officials thought that problems with Russia's economic and democratic transition disqualified Moscow from

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<sup>7</sup> M. Aydın et al., *Türk Dış Politikası Kamuoyu Algıları Araştırması 2019 Sonuçları Açıklandı* (Turkish Foreign Policy Public Opinion Perceptions Survey 2019 Results Announced), Kadir Has University, 4 July 2019 [in Turkish].

<sup>8</sup> A. Foxall, "Russia used to see itself as part of Europe. Here's why that changed", *Washington Post*, 18 June 2018.

<sup>9</sup> D. Trenin, "Russia's Post-Soviet Journey", *Foreign Affairs*, 25 December 2016.

membership in these institutions. Thus, the 1990s came to be regarded by many Russians as a “period of national humiliation” before Europeans, which in turn boosted Russian nationalism<sup>10</sup>. The decision in 2004 to include the Baltic States and several former Warsaw Pact countries in the EU and NATO heightened Russia’s sense of encirclement and added to its frustration. Many within the Kremlin felt betrayed, since they believed Washington had made promises not to expand NATO after Moscow agreed to German reunification.

The US-led invasion of Iraq also played a significant role in Russia’s relations with the West. Moscow’s opposition to the war marked a dramatic departure from the rapprochement between the United States and Russia following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. Moscow, vulnerable to international terrorism itself, became one of the strongest supporters of the US-led war on terror. Russia not only endorsed the war in Afghanistan but also accepted US involvement in antiterrorist activities in the Caucasus. Russia-US rapprochement reached such heights that US Senator Joseph Biden, former Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, argued that “No Russian leader since Peter the Great has cast his lot as much with the West as Putin has”<sup>11</sup>. The invasion of Iraq, however, changed everything. By electing to act unilaterally, the United States was interpreted as asserting its position as the center of a unipolar world. Russia, once again, felt its voice – and its veto at the UN Security Council – did not count, and was determined to stand up to this display of unilateralism.

Thus, to the surprise of many in Washington, Russia under Putin’s leadership began to reassert its right to ensure that the countries in its immediate neighborhood remained out of the Western orbit<sup>12</sup>. When, shortly after the invasion of Iraq, the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> T. Ambrosio, “The Russo-American dispute over the invasion of Iraq: international status and the role of positional goods”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 57, no. 8, 2005, pp. 1189-1210.

<sup>12</sup> A. Foxall (2018).

“color revolutions” – a series of popular uprisings that toppled governments in former Soviet republics including Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan – replaced pro-Kremlin leaders with pro-Western ones, Russia accused the West of plotting these anti-regime protests<sup>13</sup>.

Russia's shift away from the EU became more visible after conflict erupted between Georgia and Russia over the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008. The EU suspended negotiations with Russia on a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and launched a program to cultivate closer economic and political ties with six former Soviet republics<sup>14</sup>. EU-Russia relations degraded further after protesters toppled the pro-Russian government of President Viktor Yanukovych of Ukraine in 2014 and Russia responded by annexing Crimea. In retaliation, the EU imposed economic sanctions on Russia. Many people in Russia believed the sanctions were aimed at “weakening and humiliating Russia” and rallied around the Kremlin's foreign policy<sup>15</sup>.

The events of 2014 hastened Russia's Eurasian turn in search of strategic influence in a geography stretching from Ireland to Japan. Moscow dropped its official policy of identifying Russia as part of a “global Europe” and embraced the view that Russia constitutes a civilization in its own right, apart from Europe<sup>16</sup>. Like Turkish Eurasianism, the revived Russian Eurasianism had its roots in the early XX century. It originated among the Russian emigrant community after the Bolshevik revolution in the 1920s and promoted the idea that Russia has a unique identity with Slavic and Turkic roots<sup>17</sup>. In post-Soviet Russia, Eurasianists supported the cultivation of close alliances with India, Iran, and Japan, and enlisting Turkey in the struggle

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<sup>13</sup> N. Bouchet, “Russia's “militarization” of colour revolutions”, *CSS Policy Perspectives*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1-4.

<sup>14</sup> A. Foxall (2018).

<sup>15</sup> D. Trenin (2016).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ş. Aktürk (2015).

against the US-led Atlanticist bloc. Russia's growing frustration and disappointment with the West, following similar Turkish dynamics, gave Russian Eurasianism a much more assertive vision. The time seemed ripe for further rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow, two disgruntled powers expecting more respect from the West.

## **Putin's Turkey Opening**

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 provided a golden opportunity for the Eurasianists and proved to be a turning point in Turkey-Russia ties. The Turkish Parliament's decision not to allow the United States to use Turkish territory in the war showed Russia that Turkey was a weak link in the Western alliance, which would pursue an independent policy if necessary. Russia started to court Turkey's Euroskeptics. A conference titled "Turkey's Relations with Russia, China, and Iran at the Eurasia Axis" was held at Istanbul University in 2005. The event brought together retired Turkish General Tuncer Kılınç, who advocated closer ties between Turkey and Russia against the EU, Turkey's anti-Western Labor Party leader Doğu Perinçek, the Deputy Chairman of Turkey's main opposition party, the People's Republican Party (CHP), and the former Russian Ambassador, Albert Chernishev.

In the meantime, an attack in the Russian republic of North Ossetia removed a major irritant in Turkey-Russia ties. On 1 September 2004, Beslan School in North Ossetia was taken over by dozens of militants demanding freedom for nearby Chechnya. They held over 1,100 people as hostage, more than half of them children. After a three-day siege, 330 people were killed<sup>18</sup>.

This traumatizing terrorist attack changed the dynamics of Turkish-Russian relations. The two countries agreed to work

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<sup>18</sup> B. Chappell, "'Serious Failings' By Russia In Deadly Beslan School Siege, European Court Says", *NPR*, 13 April 2017.

more closely in the “fight against terrorism”. Russia promised to rein in PKK activities within its borders, while Turkey pledged not to support Chechen organizations<sup>19</sup>. This was a significant shift in policy for both parties. The Kurds had historically played an important role in Russian efforts to exert its influence in the Middle East and restrain Turkey’s influence, and during the Cold War, the USSR established close relations with Turkey’s Kurds in particular. In the 1970s, the PKK was established as a Kurdish nationalist organization with Marxist-Leninist roots with Soviet help. In response, Turkey turned a blind eye to Moscow’s own struggles against separatists when, after the Cold War, Chechnya launched a coordinated campaign for independence leading to two bloody wars. Russia opposed Chechen independence on the grounds that Chechnya was part of Russia, but the Chechen separatists enjoyed strong support in Turkey. The Beslan school attack, however, turned a new page and paved the way for much stronger counterterrorism cooperation between Ankara and Moscow.

At the time, Turkey still saw its relations with Russia as a tool to exert pressure on its Western allies to extract concessions in various areas. Eurasianism, and its promotion of pro-Russian foreign policy as the country’s new geopolitical outlook, was still a relatively marginal vision in early 2000s. By 2015, however, Eurasianism became a significant political force due to accumulating tensions in relations with the EU and United States. After a ceasefire between Turkey and the PKK broke down and tensions between Turkey and the United States peaked due to the latter’s cooperation with the YPG in Syria in 2015, nationalists led by Labor Party leader Doğu Perinçek, who had long promoted closer ties to Russia, threw their support behind President Erdoğan<sup>20</sup>. From 2015 onwards, Eurasianism was adopted as the strategic vision of the ruling coalition. This shift

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<sup>19</sup> M. Yetkin, “Rusya ile sıkı işbirliği” (“Close cooperation with Russia”), *Radikal*, 21 July 2005 [In Turkish].

<sup>20</sup> Ö. Temena, “Ergenekon’dan Erdoğan’a: Kızıl Elmal” (“From Ergenekon to Erdogan: Red Apple!”), *Gazete Duvar*, 23 October 2017.

coincided with Russia's turn to Eurasia. In the official Foreign Policy Concept adopted by the Kremlin in 2016, Russia promotes "Eurasian integration process" at the expense of the EU<sup>21</sup>.

Joint frustration with the West has been the main driver behind Turkey-Russia partnership. What started as a modest trade cooperation in the 1980s acquired a political and strategic dimension as tensions with the West grew. Despite their competing military and political interests in Syria, Russia and Turkey have been cooperating diplomatically over the conflict. Moscow and Ankara, along with Tehran, launched the Astana process in order to negotiate a ceasefire and implement de-escalation zones throughout the war-torn country. In another sign of burgeoning cooperation between Ankara and Moscow, the two countries marked the completion of the offshore phase of construction of a gas pipeline underneath the Black Sea, which aims to pump some 31.1 billion cubic meters of gas from Russia to Turkey annually<sup>22</sup>. Trade between Turkey and Russia in 2018 increased 37 percent from 2017, reaching \$13.3 billion and making Turkey Russia's fifth biggest trading partner in the first half of 2018<sup>23</sup>. Russia is also building Turkey's first nuclear reactor<sup>24</sup>. The two countries are cultivating close defense ties as well, as demonstrated by the aforementioned delivery of the S-400 missile defense system to Turkey, prompting the US decision to kick Turkey out of the F-35 program. The S-400 purchase has triggered a debate in Western capitals over whether Turkey is abandoning its seven-decade strategic alliance with the West.

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<sup>21</sup> A. Foxall (2018).

<sup>22</sup> "Erdogan, Putin celebrate key step in Russia-Turkey gas pipeline", *France 24*, 19 November 2018.

<sup>23</sup> "Turkey becomes Russia's 5th biggest trading partner in H1 2018", *Daily Sabah*, 8 August 2018.

<sup>24</sup> T. Karadeniz, "Erdogan, Putin mark start of work on Turkey's first nuclear power plant", *Reuters*, 3 April 2018.



## A Turkey-Russia Strategic Alliance? Not Yet

Delivery of the S-400 missiles is indeed a watershed in Turkey's relations with NATO. Turkey-Russia relations could evolve into a strategic partnership in the future if Turkey's relations with the West strain further. But Turkey is not there yet. Turkey-Russia relations remain fragile. Despite their diplomatic cooperation in Syria, Turkey and Russia are on opposing military fronts, with Russia backing Bashar al-Assad's regime and Turkey supporting the opposition. The Syrian province of Idlib, the last remaining opposition stronghold, remains a flashpoint for Turkey-Russia relations over Syria.

Russia wants the Assad regime to eventually take control of Idlib and remove what it sees as extremist Islamist militants from the region. Turkey insists that Idlib must remain under rebel control in order to prevent further flows of refugees into Turkey and give the Syrian opposition more leverage in a peace settlement<sup>25</sup>. As part of a deal struck with Moscow in 2018, Turkey pledged to remove extremist factions from a 15-20 km buffer zone around Idlib, temporarily averting a Russia-led invasion by regime forces. But Ankara has failed to uphold its end of the deal. A hard-line Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham shattered the agreement by gaining control of key crossing points in the region. Russia and Turkey blame each other for the failed agreement: Moscow urges Turkey to deliver on its promise, while Ankara accuses Moscow of failing to prevent a regime offensive<sup>26</sup>.

The two countries are at loggerheads in Libya as well. Turkey backs the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya's capital Tripoli and provides military aid to Islamist groups aligned with the GNA in the current conflict. Meanwhile, Russia backs the GNA's opponent, General

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<sup>25</sup> C. Gall and H. Saad, "Huge Wave of Syrians Flee Intensified Bombing on Last Rebel-Held Province", *New York Times*, 30 May 2019.

<sup>26</sup> H. Foy and L. Pitel, "Russia and Iran take Turkey to task on Syria terror groups", *Financial Times*, 14 February 2019.

Khalifa Haftar, who has waged war against the Islamists as well and threatened to attack Turkish interests. Haftar accused Ankara of backing his rivals after he suffered a major setback in his offensive to seize Tripoli in April 2019<sup>27</sup>.

The dispute over oil and gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean is another point of conflict between Turkey and Russia. Cyprus has discovered natural gas in areas off the south of the island. Turkey argues that Cyprus, an EU member, does not have rights to unilaterally explore for gas and must share gas revenue with the Turkish Cypriots. At the same time, Ankara has been carrying out oil exploration missions itself. Russia has historically supported the Greek Cypriots and developed close defense ties. In the recent flare-up, Moscow sided with the Greek Cypriots and asked Turkey to respect the sovereignty of Cyprus<sup>28</sup>.

The two countries differ in their approach to Crimea as well. Russia's annexation of Crimea shifted the military balance in the Black Sea to Turkey's disadvantage and increased Ankara's reliance on NATO. President Erdoğan criticized Russian intervention in Ukraine, with which Ankara is seeking closer defense ties, and said that Turkey does not recognize Russian annexation of Crimea, which hosts Turkic-speaking Tatars opposed to Russian annexation<sup>29</sup>.

Russia-Turkey rivalry is also evident in the Caucasus. Turkey has longstanding ethnic and historical links to the region. The defeat of the Ottomans in much of the region and the Russian campaign against its Circassian population led to the mass migration of Caucasus Muslims to Turkey. These communities and their descendants, who still live in Turkey, influenced Turkey's policy *vis-à-vis* the conflicts in the Caucasus in the 1990s. The conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh pitted Turkey's

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<sup>27</sup> "Haftar vows attacks on Turkish assets in Libya", *France 24*, 29 June 2019.

<sup>28</sup> A. Zaman, "Eastern Mediterranean crisis balloons as Turkish drill ships multiply", *Al-Monitor*, 9 July 2019.

<sup>29</sup> "Turkey won't recognize Russia's unlawful annexation of Crimea: President Erdoğan", *Daily Sabah*, 9 March 2016.

age-old Armenian enemies against the ethnically Turkic state of Azerbaijan. Armenia remains Russia's most staunch ally in the Caucasus, although Russia seeks to retain its influence in Azerbaijan as well, making the region vulnerable to competition between Russia and Turkey.

Finally, Russia and Turkey remain at odds on in the Balkans as well, where the two countries historically supported opposite sides of region's ethnic and religious divide. All these dynamics clearly illustrate that Moscow and Ankara disagree on almost all issues of regional and strategic significance. In other words, a Eurasianist Turkey may very well be frustrated with both Washington and Brussels, but its military arrangement with Moscow does not automatically translate into harmony based on shared national interests in relations with Russia.

## **Where Do We Go from Here?**

As a corollary, Washington still has considerable leverage in relations with Turkey. In fact, one can argue that the future of Turkish-Russian relations in great part will depend on how President Donald Trump's administration handles the S-400 crisis with Ankara. It is now up to the White House and its relations with Congress to determine the path to follow. On the day the S-400 shipment arrived in Ankara, both Republican and Democrat leaders of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee declared the purchase "a troubling signal of strategic alignment with Putin's Russia"<sup>30</sup>.

Under CAATSA, individuals or entities that engage in a "significant transaction" with the Russian defense or intelligence sectors will face a broad array of sanctions. The most severe of these would involve cutting off Turkish entities from US financial institutions, effectively making it impossible for

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<sup>30</sup> United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, "[Bipartisan Leadership of Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees Condemn Turkey S-400 Acquisition](#)", Press Release, 12 July 2019.

Ankara to raise money through international lenders or investors. Milder steps would target individuals by denying them US visas, freezing their assets, and banning all banking and foreign exchange transactions with them. While no final decisions have been made at the time of writing, Congress appears to be ready for a middle-of-the-road approach with specific sanctions targeting Turkey's defense industry.

President Trump has conditional veto power over CAATSA and appears determined to appease both Congress and Erdoğan by pursuing a path of negotiation rather than sanctions. It seems Trump's mercantilist instincts are driving him to revive the F-35 sale to Turkey in order to avoid a \$10 billion loss and sell the Patriot missile system to Ankara in return for a pledge that it not activate the S-400s. To reach a deal, Trump even seems willing to include sweeteners such as a free-trade agreement with Turkey.

This might indeed be the constructive and rational path for Washington to follow. Punishing Turkey too severely could bring about precisely what is feared in NATO circles and turn a tactical military arrangement between Ankara and Moscow into a potential strategic realignment. Yet, a constructive and pragmatic approach from Washington requires a constructive and rational partner in Ankara. So far Erdoğan has not budged. He has shown no flexibility on the activation of S-400s scheduled for February 2020. In the case that reports of his threats to withdraw from NATO and to close the Incirlik airbase are true, this further illustrates his plan to play hardball with Washington. His growing nationalist rhetoric about a military operation in northeast Syria, where YPG militants are still actively cooperating with US special operations forces, also does not bode well for Turkish-American relations.

His last meeting with President Trump in Osaka seems to have left Erdoğan reassured that the United States will not impose CAATSA sanctions and that even if it does, the US President has the power to suspend or waive them altogether. But relying on a demonstrably impulsive President Trump to

save Turkey from the judgement of US Congress is a highly risky strategy. In any case, if President Trump is to waive sanctions mandated by Congress, he will need a face-saving excuse. So far Washington seems to have wisely reached the conclusion that there is room for negotiations with Turkey. However, this should create no complacency. Ankara needs to strike a more constructive tone. Turkish-American relations are on the brink of a historic crisis. Erdoğan, Trump, and the US Congress have a choice: escalation or damage control. With some rational thinking, there is still time for the latter.



## 8. Russia's Strategy Toward Iran and the Gulf

Nicola Pedde

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Russian influence in the Gulf area has historically been limited, despite the old ambition to open up a “sea outlet” to the Indian Ocean. Iran has always been the great bulwark hindering Russian penetration in the region, despite a period of sharp Iranian decline between the XIX and XX centuries. This decline occurred within a context characterized by increasing domestic and regional conflicts. The rivalry between Russia and Iran has especially occurred in the northern provinces of Iran in the Caucasus region. The progressive annexation of these provinces by Russia transformed the Caucasus into the main sphere of common interest between Russia and Iran. The special relevance of this region has survived the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) into the contemporary era.

The relationship between Iran and the USSR and then Russia needs to be understood in the context of the Anglo-Russian military occupation of Iran in World War II, the territorial annexation by Russia of the province of Azerbaijan, the beginning of Iran's special relationship with the United States during the Cold War, and especially the *coup d'état* of 1953 that overthrew the government of Iranian Prime Minister Mosaddeq.

After 1963, the USSR succeeded in establishing a friendly relationship with Baathist Iraq, which gradually deteriorated at the turn of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the subsequent war between Iran and Iraq in 1980-88. The USSR criticized the

1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and supported the UN resolution that led to the country's liberation.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at the end of December 1979 led almost all of the Gulf monarchies to finance or support the Islamist resistance of the mujahadeen, jeopardizing relations between the USSR and the regional countries. The aftermath of that painful war – especially Saudi Arabia's role in supporting the regional Islamist forces – had a strong influence on Russian security even after the fall of the USSR. This is exemplified by the long crises in the Caucasus and, above all, in Chechnya.

Russia's role in the Gulf region continued to be modest throughout the 1990s, suffering further marginalization in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States and the subsequent US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Russian relationship with Iran improved slightly during the 1990s, leading to technical and economic collaboration in many areas, first among them the Iranian nuclear program. Thanks to Russian collaboration beginning in 1995, Iran would eventually complete construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant.

The relationship between Moscow and Tehran, however, will never grow in proportion, remaining modest both on the level of the bilateral trade balance and on the political level, treated by both countries as more of an instrument of policy toward the United States than a real bilateral relationship. The civil war in Syria triggered by the Arab Spring of 2011 clearly established the limits and scope of the Russia and Iran's divergent interests in the region, despite the military cooperation between Moscow and Tehran on the ground.

After decades of Russia's historically modest political and military influence in the Gulf region, the possibility now seems to emerge of increasing economic relevance, especially in the energy sector. Thanks to the establishment of the so-called OPEC+, in fact, Russia and Saudi Arabia have defined a new alliance built on the common desire to exercise joint control



over oil production, in order to stabilize the prices of hydrocarbons within margins suitable to meet the economic development strategies of the regional countries.

## **The Caucasus and Relations between Iran and the USSR**

The relationship between Iran and the Caucasus has always been intense and problematic. The vast region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea represents for Iran not only the natural geographical offshoot of the Alborz and Zagros mountain ranges, but also a strip of Iranian land arbitrarily removed from the integrity of the vast former Persian empire. Deep historical roots therefore bind Iran to the Caucasus, and in particular to Azerbaijan, which, despite the fact that Iran has long ceased to claim it as part of its territory, has always been considered by Tehran as a sort of lost province.

In the modern era, Iran's relations with the Caucasus were traumatic during World War II, when the USSR invaded Iranian Azerbaijan in 1941 with the intent – later failed – to create an autonomous satellite state for Moscow<sup>1</sup>. Although the parenthesis of the occupation was resolved with the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iranian territory, the perception of an existential threat on the “northern front” (including the border to the east of the Caspian Sea) determined Iranian foreign and defense policy for more than forty years. This benefited the long and intense alliance of Iran's Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi with the United States, and facilitated the transformation of Iran into a pillar of defense for Western interests in the region.

The Caucasus, originally of almost exclusively geographical interest to Iran (linked to the possibility of representing a natural corridor for connection with the Anatolian peninsula and the European continent), has over time assumed a strategic and

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<sup>1</sup> E. Koolae and M. Hafezian, “The Islamic Republic of Iran and the South Caucasus Republics”, *Iranian Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3, June 2010, pp. 392-393.

economic interest, representing not only the border between two competing and increasingly cumbersome empires, but also the outlet and crossroads of goods and peoples of the region.

Starting from the beginning of the XX century, the hydrocarbon market became a key regional issue, assuming an increasingly important role over time. For over forty years Iran feared that the USSR could have the same expansionist ambitions as Tsarist Russia, which considered the Caucasus and the eastern borders of the provinces of Mazandaran and Khorasan to be potential points of access for the notorious “outlet to the sea”<sup>2</sup>.

The USSR, however, had already abandoned any ambition in that direction, defining a policy of good neighborly relations that, in fact, would never provide any real threat to Iran before or after the revolution. The Cold War, therefore, saw the interests of the United States and the USSR essentially opposed on Iranian soil without ever really involving Iran. This enabled Tehran to practice a particular form of “non-alignment” that was in reality very unbalanced ideologically to the West and collaborative with Moscow.

Iran’s relationship with the Caucasus changed again between the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s with the collapse of the USSR and the birth of the independent states with whom today’s Islamic Republic of Iran shares its northern borders.

The effects of the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War were eventually replaced by tensions generated by the establishment of new regional balances, as in the case of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno Karabakh, which forced Tehran to define a new line of regional policy. This progressively led Iran to share most of its prerogatives with Russia, while at the same time strengthening relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia.

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<sup>2</sup> R. Ibrahimov, “[A Battle of Influence in the Caucasus](#)”, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 22 June 2017.

## **Relations between Russia and Iran Represent a Temporary and Selective Convergence of Interests**

The chronicle of events in Syria and the evolution of synergies that have allowed Bashar al-Assad's regime to advance its offensive since the first months of 2016 illustrates the real nature of the relationship between Russia and Iran. The support provided by Russia and Iran to Syria has been read by many as part of a reformulated alliance that would see Moscow and Tehran fully share not only the tactical but also the strategic objectives of their intervention alongside Bashar al-Assad.

Despite appearances, however, the history of Russian-Iranian relations has never been particularly constructive or peaceful, neither in the Tsarist era nor in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Both in the monarchic and revolutionary epoch, therefore, the general Iranian attitude toward the USSR has been characterized by fear of further territorial and political ambitions, leading to the adoption of a cautious neighborhood policy which has never resulted in concrete political and commercial cooperation<sup>3</sup>. Particularly traumatic was Tehran's interpretation of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980, perceived for a long time as a preliminary maneuver of the Soviets for an expansion toward Iran, aimed at the historically important southern outlet to the sea, which the Russians had always included in the definition of their own ambitions of projection.

With the collapse of the former USSR and the disappearance of the direct threat represented by shared borders, relations between Iran and Russia evolved toward a certainly better and more constructive standing, but never rose to the level of a real alliance or shared strategic visions. A key determinant in Iran-Russia relations in the modern era has been both country's conflictual relationship with the United States.

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<sup>3</sup> M.A. Pier, "Russia and Iran: Strategic Partners or Competing Regional Hegemons? A Critical Analysis of Russian-Iranian Relations in the Post-Soviet Space", *Inquiries*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2012, p. 1.

At the economic level, the cooperation between Moscow and Tehran is characterized by marginal values in terms of investments and joint ventures. Thanks to the technological support of Russia, Iran has been able to complete and make operational the first and only nuclear power plant in the country, in Bushehr, although the general level of industrial cooperation between Russia and Iran has not increased significantly. Cooperation on the nuclear program brought Russia to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiating table in 2015 in strong support of the Iranian cause. However, as the crisis generated by the United States' unilateral exit from the agreement emerged, Russia took on a marginal role in defending Iran and securing the international commitments connected to the agreement<sup>4</sup>.

Military cooperation between Russia and Iran has never resulted in real synergy, as demonstrated by the absence of substantive military relations and very limited trade in defense technology and armaments. The case of Russia's supply of the S-300 anti-aircraft system to Iran, with its long delays in doing so, is in fact more of an example of Moscow's reluctance to establish a real policy of alliance with Iran than one of military cooperation.

The most recent case of the crisis in Syria also provides a lens through which to view relations between Iran and Russia. What has often been described as a strategic alliance in favor of victory by Syrian government forces is, on the contrary, the product of two divergent regional political visions and a complex formulation of military cooperation on the ground.

The defense of Syrian territorial integrity and the survival of the Assad regime is an absolute priority for the Iranians. For the Russians, the war in Syria represents an opportunity – for negotiation with the international community, to mark the limits of Western influence in the Middle East, and, above all, to exploit

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<sup>4</sup> B. Aras and F. Ozbay, "The limits of the Russian-Iranian strategic alliance: its history and geopolitics, and the nuclear issue", *The Korean Journal of Defence Analysis*, vol. 20, no. 1, March 2008, p. 51.

the conflict in order to soften the position of the international community on Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia<sup>5</sup>. To Russia, a potential resolution for Syria represents a variable with fewer factors of rigidity and a high negotiating potential with the United States and Europe.

Military cooperation on Syrian soil between government forces, Russians, Iranians and militias affiliated with Hezbollah is therefore regulated by a temporary agreement on the tactical level – it is necessary for all to win the conflict and restore the dominance of the role of Damascus – but at the same time is marked by an increasingly evident divergence on the strategic level, where the interests of each single actor tend to reveal themselves<sup>6</sup>.

In this context, the political friction between Iran and Russia created by the use of the Hamadan air base by Russian bombers engaged in on the offensive on the Syrian city of Aleppo is not surprising<sup>7</sup>. Iran's refusal to grant the Russians the prolonged use of the base, which Russia would have liked to transform into an advanced attack base for Syria (and potentially a deterrent in the Gulf area) increased tensions between the countries.

The Russian bombers' mission ended only six days in, when Iran abruptly revoked Russia's use of the base. The move followed a wave of parliamentary protests in Tehran denouncing the violation of the Constitution, which prevents the government from granting the use of Iran's bases to foreign forces. In addition to the protests, the about-face was motivated by accusations that Russia had released classified information by publicly acknowledging its extraordinary access to the base, an affront the strict discipline of Iranian military secrecy<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> N. Glebova, "Russia's Real Reasons for Partnering with Iran", *The National Interest*, 13 July 2019.

<sup>6</sup> M. Segall, *The Rocky Marriage of Convenience between Russia and Iran in Syria*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 29 January 2019.

<sup>7</sup> M. Khalaji and F. Nadimi, *Russia Uses an Iranian Air Base: Two Essays*, The Washington Institute, 17 August 2016.

<sup>8</sup> A. Barnard and A.E. Kramer, "[Iran Revokes Russia's Use of Air Base, Saying](#)

The relationship between Russia and Iran, in summation, has always been influenced by the countries' different perceptions of strategic and political regional priorities, and the most recent episodes of military cooperation in Syria represent no more than a pragmatic and temporary approach in pursuit of common tactical interests. At the strategic level, Russia and Iran demonstrate deep differences in their respective visions for Syria, and as such the relationship between the countries cannot be defined as a real alliance.

## **Russia, Iraq and the Gulf Monarchies**

Relations between Russia and the Gulf states – with the exception of Iran – have their roots in the not too distant past; in most cases, after the end of World War II. The Cold War period in particular shaped the USSR's role in the region, mainly in relation to Iran, a great ally of the United States and a dominant player in regional politics and security.

From 1963, with the rise to power of the Baath party in Iraq and the consolidation of an elite government of pan-Arabist tradition, the USSR began to invest heavily in the supply of arms to the country, turning it into the axis of its regional interests. Frightened by the support offered by the USSR to Iraq and, above all, by Moscow's endorsement of the annexationist policies repeatedly pronounced by the political leaders of Baghdad, Kuwait officially established diplomatic relations with the USSR in 1963, maintaining since then a particular link with Moscow completely different from that of the other regional monarchies<sup>9</sup>.

The persistent Iraqi threat led Kuwait to establish a political and military relationship of increasing intensity with the USSR, which, although in the framework of a special relationship with

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Moscow 'Betrayed Trust'", *The New York Times*, 22 August 2016.

<sup>9</sup> E. Melkumyan, *A Political History of Relations between Russia and Gulf States*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, December 2015, p. 2.

Iraq, led the two countries to sign a bilateral agreement in 1975 for the supply of Russian weapons and training to the military forces of the kingdom. Within this framework, Kuwait agreed to provide funding to Iraq over the eight years of war that divided Baghdad and Tehran in an effort to strengthen ties with the USSR by funding its main regional ally, which paradoxically represented the main strategic threat to Kuwait.

With the evolution of the conflict and the systematic attack of oil tankers from third countries, including both Iraq and Iran, Kuwait had no choice but to look toward the United States, re-launching a relationship that had been in crisis for some time.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan led to a sharp deterioration in the USSR's relations with the countries of the Gulf region. Saudi Arabia in particular, began to financially support rebel groups that opposed the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, providing the impetus for a first wave of global jihadists and that long and painful period of violence that led to the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States. The Soviet defeat in Afghanistan also amplified problems within the USSR's republics, especially among local Muslim communities, where tensions over Russia's activities in the region ignited conflicts of large proportion (as in the case of Chechnya).

The profound political changes that led to the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev and the end of the USSR clearly had an impact on the Gulf region. Just before the dissolution of the USSR, Russia hastened to establish or firm up diplomatic relations with most countries in the region, with the exception of Iraq. Russia decreased its historical relation with Baghdad in the aftermath of the 1990 invasion of Kuwait and supported the UN Security Council Resolution to reverse Iraq's offensive on the country, although Moscow stopped short of participating in the military operation against its former ally. Diplomatic relationships with Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, which were initiated around the mid-1980s, rounded out Russia's framework of regional relations.

The end of the Cold War and the fall of the USSR drastically reduced the relevance of the Gulf region for the Russian interests, which in turn decreased Russia's relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council for some years. Russia, engaged in conflict with Chechen separatists in the mid-1990s, suspected many Middle Eastern countries of providing financial support and arms to the Chechens, further limiting Russia's diplomatic relations in the region to the bare minimum<sup>10</sup>.

Russia's relationship with the Gulf region changed with the appointment of Vladimir Putin as President, when a clear shift in the federation's foreign policy was marked by the start intense contacts with each of the Gulf countries. Russia, in Putin's vision, returned to play an active role throughout the Middle East by pursuing a stabilizing policy in contrast with that of the United States and Europe. Thus defining its own priorities and policy projects, Moscow aimed at reclaiming a role in the region<sup>11</sup>. In this same period, Russia reinvigorated the relationship with Iran – especially in terms of collaboration on the controversial nuclear program – thus adopting a posture of challenge to the United States.

Relations with Qatar and the United Arab Emirates were also intensified, by way of promoting the defense industry and consolidating a small but significant local market for the production of Russian arms after years of serious crisis<sup>12</sup>. Between 2000 and 2003, the relationship with Saudi Arabia was revitalized, closing the painful page of the Chechen conflict and intensifying relations with Kuwait and Qatar, which were also bolstered by partnerships in the energy sector.

The US interventions in first Afghanistan in 2001 and then Iraq in 2003 did not change the direction of Russian policy in the region. On the contrary, Russia's role in the region was

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> "Russian Federation Foreign Policy Concept 2000" [in Russian], *Diplomatičeskij Vestnik* 8, 2000, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> A.V. Kozhemiakin and R.E. Kanet, *The Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 1997, pp. 171-172.



reinvigorated by the growing difficulties the United States encountered in the local conflicts. The first decade of the XXI century saw a steady increase in the intensity and breadth of relations between Russia and the Gulf countries, with whom Moscow has signed numerous cooperation agreements initiating a profitable series of both bilateral and multilateral commercial actions through the GCC.

The general framework of relations between Russia and the Gulf, however, went into crisis in 2011, with the rise of the regional phenomenon known as the Arab Spring. Russia initially remained neutral with respect to the crises that emerged in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain, defining them as “internal problems” of the states. When Syria’s stability began to falter, however, Russia openly accused the GCC countries of fomenting protests and providing support to the opposition.

The defense of Bashar al-Assad – and Russian naval bases at Tartous and Latakia – became a priority for Moscow, and the Syrian crisis marked a new watershed in regional relations. Moscow began to blame both Saudi Arabia and Qatar for supporting Wahhabi militants within the Syrian opposition, and in September 2015 decided to intervene militarily alongside the Syrian, Iranian, and Lebanese forces in support of the Assad regime. Participation in the long Syrian civil war drastically cooled Russia’s relations with Qatar, while those with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates retained a dimension of moderate normality.

The second decade of the XXI century has, in this way, marked a new change in Russia’s capacity to manage its relations with the Gulf region, moving from the expansive and clearly positive phase of the previous decade to a dangerous standstill built around the support of Bashar al-Assad and the alliance with Iran.

## **The Revitalization of Energy Relations through OPEC+**

The most recent development in relations between Russia and the Gulf region was marked in 2019 by the signing of the Charter of Cooperation within OPEC+, which established the launch of a large-scale oil partnership with the aim of linking production strategies to the achievement of common economic objectives. This agreement was reached through a long and complex political negotiation initiated by the historical visit of King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud to Russia in September 2017<sup>13</sup>.

The agreement was signed in Vienna on 2 July 2019 by the fourteen countries that make up OPEC – Algeria, Angola, Ecuador, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Nigeria, Republic of the Congo, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Venezuela – as well as the new partner countries that make up the Non-OPEC Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee (JMMC) – Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Brunei, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mexico, Oman, Russia, Sudan, and South Sudan.

OPEC+, established in December 2016 as a partnership between the OPEC and JMMC countries, aims to link global oil production strategies and define agreed-upon price ranges for crude oil, and its operation has so far been regulated by a biannual declaration of cooperation.

After more than two years of positive and continuous cooperation, the OPEC+ countries decided to institutionalize the association by making it permanent, leading to the unanimous vote in favor of the Charter of Cooperation.

OPEC Secretary General Mohammed Barkindo stressed that the Charter is not and cannot in any way be equated with an international treaty, although its effectiveness has been deliberately indicated as having no expiry date by the signatories<sup>14</sup>. This is

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<sup>13</sup> M. Bennets, “Saudi King to Make Historic Visit to Russia”, *The National*, 30 September 2017.

<sup>14</sup> H. Ellyatt, “OPEC+ deal can last ‘until death do us part,’ Saudi energy minister

an important clarification, especially from the point of view of international law, suggesting the delicate context in which the agreement was reached<sup>15</sup>.

Although the Charter was signed with the unanimous vote of the representatives of OPEC+, there was no lack of divergence over the drafting of the agreement. Iran in particular objected many issues it considered potentially controversial. Tehran was not so much opposed to the general approach aimed more at defining a policy of curbing oil production until at least 2020, but rather the operating mechanism of the paper itself.

In the opinion of Iran, which signed the document only after a long and laborious negotiation, the agreement reached within OPEC+ risks transforming the association into a duopoly led by Russia and Saudi Arabia. In particular, Iranian leaders emphasized, the common interest in production cuts that today allows for peaceful cooperation by the association could change in a short time as a result of unpredictable variables, which therefore requires a mechanism of adjustment and compensation to ensure the continuity of the agreement, as Tehran has requested since the beginning of the negotiation<sup>16</sup>.

Iran submitted its own specific case to the debate preceding the signing of the Charter, pointing out how the sanctions imposed against it by the international community differentiates Iran's situation from those of the other members of the consortium. Iran signed the agreement only at the end of a long discussion behind closed doors, the terms of which are still confidential but have clearly reassured Tehran about the operating mechanism of the agreement, and above all, compensation.

According to rumors leaked on the sidelines of the signing ceremony of the Charter, the conditions imposed by Iran for its concession concern the inclusion in the final document of

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says", *CNBC*, 9 September 2019.

<sup>15</sup> S. Reed, "Russia and Opec Draw Closer on Oil, Joining Other Producers to Manage Market", *The New York Times*, 2 July 2019.

<sup>16</sup> G. Sharma, "Idea of a Saudi-Russian Led Mega Oil Cartel Appears Fanciful", *Forbes*, 30 July 2018.

explicit clauses guaranteeing the internal decision-making process of OPEC, with the clear commitment not to make its role secondary within the wider structure of OPEC+.

The signing of the OPEC+ Charter of Cooperation has thus been welcomed with moderate optimism by its signatories, at least until it is possible to concretely assess its real capacity to hold the delicate balances that it intends to regulate, especially those of Iran but also those within the GCC, which has long been affected by a deep crisis.

## Conclusion

Russia, and the USSR before it, has never been able to define a substantial strategy for penetrating the Gulf region, bearing from the beginning the weight of its historical responsibilities and errors in the conceptualization of its regional role. Long preoccupied by managing the relationship with Iraq, which served as a mechanism for deterrence against both Iran and the United States, by the 1980s the USSR had to face the heavy consequences of its involvement in Afghanistan, hindering Moscow's regional relations for a long time.

Despite the resurgence of its role in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR – which for a decade allowed Russia to build a promising framework of political, economic, and strategic relations in the Gulf region – the outbreak of war in Syria changed the dynamics again, freezing much of the progress achieved in the previous decade.

In 2019, with the signature of the OPEC+ initiative, Russia returned to play a central role in regional cooperation, defining above all with Saudi Arabia the margins for a new framework of collaboration that, although technically limited to the energy sector, could evolve in competition to the United States' regional interests<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> R. Mammadov, *Growing ties with Russia could strain Saudi-US relations*, Middle East Institute, 5 February 2019.

## 9. Avoiding Zero-Sum: Israel and Russia in an Evolving Middle East

Scott B. Lasensky, Vera Michlin-Shapir

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Since the end of the Cold War, and particularly under Vladimir Putin, Russia's relations with Israel have transformed dramatically. From open hostility, confrontation, and proxy warfare, Jerusalem and Moscow now maintain a cooperative, politically effective, and even friendly relationship that compartmentalizes points of friction and avoids crossing red-lines *vis-à-vis* Israel's bedrock alliance with Washington. Even in Syria, where conditions have been ripe for a clash, Israel and Russia have worked out an arrangement that allows them to coordinate their actions while pursuing their differing vital interests.

Against the backdrop of “converging and conflicting” strategic and security interests, the two countries have qualitatively improved diplomatic, economic and cultural ties – the latter deriving partly from the outsized expatriate Russia-speaking population that lives in Israel<sup>1</sup>.

The two countries share a number of overlapping interests and, for its part, Israel has largely managed to avoid zero-sum tradeoffs with respect to Russia's confrontation with the West over Crimea and Ukraine. Israel has maneuvered within the confines of its American alliance, while at the same time adapting to Russia's reemergence as a global and regional player.

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<sup>1</sup> The term is borrowed from O. Raanan and V. Michlin, *Israel-Russia Relations: Mutual Esteem or Cold-Eyed Utilitarianism?*, The Arena, Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, 14 October 2018.

Since Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015 saw its military operating on Israel's northern flank – a dramatic development not seen since the days of Soviet support for Egypt under Nasser and Sadat – Russia has been very high on Israel's national security agenda. Jerusalem faces the twin challenges of deconfliction – as a military clash with Russia in Syria would be calamitous – and the pursuit of its self-declared “Campaign Between the Wars”, which aims to roll back Iranian and Hezbollah entrenchment in a weak and broken Syria.

Israel maneuvered a calculated response when Moscow faced a major confrontation with Washington and intense international opprobrium in 2014-2016, and maintained this posture even as countries began seeking rapprochement with Russia<sup>2</sup>. Until now, Jerusalem has managed its ties with Russia largely through bilateral channels – including enhanced and frequent dialogue between the leaders of both countries. But with the increasing likelihood of an all-out victory by Bashar al-Assad's regime – and the semi-permanent Russian role this may entail – Israel's approach is taking on a more multidimensional appearance. This was recently illustrated by the June 2019 trilateral dialogue in Jerusalem between Israeli, American, and Russian national security advisors.

The meeting symbolizes a further development in the new phase of Israeli-Russian ties. Israel adapts to Moscow's enlarged role in the Middle East and is simultaneously drawn into the new international game played in the Middle East by Russia and the United States. In contrast with the sense of crisis that took hold following Russia's initial military intervention in Syria in 2015, the national security advisors' meeting suggests that Israel has the potential to play a bridging role – however limited – between the two superpowers.

From the Israeli perspective, the Jerusalem trilateral was “an achievement for Israel's policy, which has succeeded in navigating between Moscow and Washington's interests and in being

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

a party to the superpowers' dialogue on the future of Syria and on Iranian intervention in that country"<sup>3</sup>. However, a word of caution is in order, as Israel might be punching above its weight by exposing its core national interests to the volatile relations between the United States and Russia.

It is useful to assess the regional and international context behind Israel's flexible and adaptive posture toward Russia. Israel is neither a marginal actor nor a decisive player in determining Russia's fortunes in the region and beyond, but will continue to play an important role. Should Russia's re-entry into the region's security and political affairs advance further, or should Russia's tensions with the United States and the West worsen, then Israel will face new dilemmas that could potentially limit its steadily deepening ties with Russia.

This chapter examines the historical context of Israeli-Russian relations, including the dramatic impact wrought by the Syrian civil war; assesses the central role of Israel's alliance with Washington; reviews current Israeli and Russian priorities; and concludes with an analysis of overlapping interests and sources of tension.

## **Back to the Future: How Moscow and Jerusalem Rediscovered Each Other**

In the aftermath of World War II, with the defeat or exhaustion of traditional European powers, the acceleration of decolonization, regional flashpoints like Korea, and an emerging Cold War, Israel and the Soviet Union (USSR) initially enjoyed relatively positive relations. Moreover, under Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin, Moscow voted in favor of UN General Assembly Resolution 181, which partitioned Mandatory Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, and Moscow was the first to grant *de jure* recognition to the State of Israel. Moscow's bloc of votes

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<sup>3</sup>Z. Magen, "The Trilateral Israel-US-Russia meeting: Motives and Ramifications", *INSS Insight*, no. 1178, 23 June 2019.

was not insignificant, and neither was its consent to a Czech arms deal that was vital during Israel's fight for existence in the 1948-49 Arab-Israeli war. The young Jewish state enjoyed full diplomatic relations with the USSR, which had also played an important role in the defeat of Hitler and the fascist regimes that sought to annihilate the Jewish population in Europe and beyond.

But relations were complicated, and not only due to Israel's increasing alignment with the West in the Cold War. Tensions were exacerbated by increasingly harsh Soviet policies against the USSR's large Jewish population, which after the Holocaust was the largest Jewish community in the world outside of North America, and far larger than the Jewish population of Israel in its early years.

Over time, Cold War alignments led to a complete deterioration of Israeli-Soviet relations. Moscow decided to break off diplomatic ties with Israel in 1967, and the Soviets were heavily involved in arming Egypt and Syria – at times even fighting on behalf of Egypt – and generously supported Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian cause. Aside from a periodic opening in the 1970s that allowed for limited Jewish emigration from the USSR, Israeli-Soviet relations remained fraught until the last days of the Cold War.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War opened the way for a transformation. The first and most impactful sign was Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's termination of restrictions on Jewish emigration, which led to a flood of immigrants to Israel numbering in the hundreds of thousands, a development that reshaped Israeli society and brought with it enormous gains in human capital.

The collapse of the USSR allowed Russia and Israel to reestablish formal diplomatic relations. However, Russia turned inward and assumed a greatly reduced role on the international stage as it faced enormous governance and economic challenges at home. Moscow's international focus turned mainly to its immediate neighborhood of former Soviet states – its “near abroad”.



The era ushered in by President Vladimir Putin led to a gradual shift in Russian behavior, and with it Moscow's reemergence as an assertive international player. As Putin sought to reassert and diversify Russian power, he began to view Israel as an opportunity. Particularly in his second term in office, Putin has looked for ways to draw closer to Israel without giving up key levers of international and regional influence, such as Moscow's close relations with Iran – a perennial challenge to both Israel and the United States – or its continued support for Palestinians in international fora.

Putin traveled to Israel in 2005, and again in 2012 – a journey no Soviet leader ever made – visits that included religious elements connected to the Russian Orthodox Church's footprint in the “holy land” – a major source of domestic legitimacy for Putin<sup>4</sup>.

Further promoting cultural and historical ties between the two states, Israel established a war memorial in the coastal city of Netanya commemorating the Red Army's defeat of Hitler, the only such memorial outside the former Soviet sphere and a visible and public gesture that was not lost on Russia. The move was interpreted as Israel de facto siding with Russia in its ideological struggle against what Moscow sees as an attempt by East European countries to rewrite the historic memory of the Soviet victory and sacrifice in World War II, although Israel has never formally addressed this sensitive issue.

As relations improved, the two countries entered into a visa waiver arrangement in 2008 that had a dramatic impact on people-to-people and economic ties and led to a surge in travel. As relations warmed, Israel's standing in Russia also changed, with state-controlled media beginning to report on Israel in more positive terms – for example, even referring to Israel's “right to

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<sup>4</sup> See “Владимир Путин посетил Русскую духовную миссию в Иерусалиме” (“Vladimir Putin visited the Russian Spiritual Mission in Jerusalem”), Kremlin press release, 28 April 2005; see also J. Krasna, *Moscow on the Mediterranean*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 7 June 2018, p. 11.

defend itself” in coverage of Israeli-Hamas fighting in Gaza<sup>5</sup>.

Still, alongside this thaw in relations there existed on-going tensions, most notably related to Moscow’s continued arms sales to Israel’s adversaries, voting against Israel in international fora, and refusal to back away from its close ties with Israel’s arch-enemy Iran.

In 2011, the popular uprisings across the Middle East led to a confluence of events that challenged both countries, albeit in different ways. Moscow’s deep suspicion of US and Western intentions spiked with the US-led military operation in Libya and the overthrow of Muammar al-Qaddafi, which unfolded alongside Hosni Mubarak’s fall in Egypt. Meanwhile, Israel became increasingly nervous about the empowerment of Islamist and populist movements throughout the region, which Israeli leaders often viewed as hostile to the Jewish state. So, on one level, Moscow and Jerusalem drew closer together, and yet even the convulsions of the Arab Spring did little to bridge the gaping divide over Russia’s close ties with Iran.

## **Syria**

During the Cold War, Syria was a major flashpoint and irritant in relations between Moscow and Jerusalem, in contrast to the current situation, which presents a more nuanced and multi-dimensional impact on each country’s interests. Although it is far from clear if there is any commonality in terms of Russia’s and Israel’s end-game approach in Syria, for the time being the conflict is the principal issue – perhaps even more than Iran – defining the relationship. In essence, the bilateral relationship is increasingly derivative of how the conflict in Syria unfolds.

As Syria’s public protests began peacefully in 2011 and soon met with brutal repression by the Assad regime, Israel took a neutral approach toward the civil conflict and did not pick a side in the war. As the situation worsened, violence escalated,

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<sup>5</sup> O. Raanan and V. Michlin (2018).

and the country's institutions began to crumble, Israel acted swiftly to reinforce its northeast frontier with Syria on the Golan Heights and the tri-border area with Jordan, but otherwise kept its distance from the drama that was unfolding inside its traditional adversary to the north.

Russia's reaction could not have been more different. Moscow acted early on to shield the Assad regime from international criticism and blocked any opening for legitimizing international intervention. Russia repeatedly vetoed UN Security Council actions on Syria, and was able to constrict international mediation efforts – including the mission of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan – in ways it felt would not threaten Assad's hold on power. As the civil war escalated, Moscow ramped up its economic and military support for Damascus, doing so with a tepid reproach from the United States and few meaningful sanctions, due to the US administration's hesitancy to more forcefully challenge Moscow while it was still engaged in a large policy of engagement.

Moscow faced little push-back for its obstructionism and assistance to the Assad regime, in part also because Washington believed Assad's fall was inevitable – particularly following the Damascus bombings in the summer of 2012 that targeted key regime figures. All the while Israel maintained its role on the sidelines, unsure if the Syrian opposition could deliver a fatal blow to Assad, yet unwilling to be seen as favoring a regime that was committing mass atrocities – not to mention conscious of the decades of hostility between the countries.

Over time, as the Syrian state disintegrated and the country's borders became porous and lawless, Israel began to miss the predictability that had long defined its heavily fortified but largely peaceful Golan frontier – an arrangement negotiated by then US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1974, with the assent of the USSR<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> According to the terms of the 1974 US-negotiated agreement, the UN peace-keeping force that would be established (United Nations Disengagement Observer Force, UNDOF) would draw from troop contributing countries “who

Israel took measures to physically reinforce its border with Syria, reportedly maintaining quiet channels with – and providing limited assistance to – rebel groups along the border to ensure stability and prevent Iranian or Hezbollah forces from gaining a toehold there. Syrian violations of the 1974 disengagement agreement became increasingly frequent, including military operations in areas near the Golan frontier where arms were to be limited. The UN peacekeeping force was suddenly caught in the cross-fire, and suffered from attacks by Syrian rebels and troop withdrawals.

Israel occasionally took limited military action inside Syria, usually to stop major weapons transfers. As chaotic as the Syria situation was becoming, Israel enjoyed some strategic benefits, including the weakening of its traditional adversary Assad, the re-direction of Hezbollah's attention away from Lebanon's border with Israel, and the international effort to remove Syria's weapons of mass destruction – an enormous relief for Israel, given the state's decades-long concern about chemical and biological weapons stockpiled by the regime in Damascus.

The Syrian equation changed dramatically with the US-led international intervention against the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in late 2014, and then even more so a year later with Russia's military intervention on behalf of the Assad regime.

Active Russian military operations in Syria meant an entirely new strategic and tactical situation for Israel. On the one hand, Russia intervened on the side of Assad, Hezbollah, and Iran; Israel's worst enemies. Moreover, Russian intervention created new uncertainties about further escalation in Syria, increased the likelihood that the Assad regime would be saved, and suddenly raised the possibility of a broader surge in Russian involvement in the region. On the tactical level, Israel would no longer enjoy a virtual monopoly on its ability to deploy air

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are not permanent members of the Security Council". See "[Separation of Forces between Israel and Syria](#)", United Nations Peacemaker, 31 May 1974, (last retrieved on 27 September 2019).

power or missile strikes in Syria; it would have to deconflict with Moscow<sup>7</sup>.

On the other hand, it created an opportunity to engage Russia as a new and committed player in Syria and the larger regional equation at a time of enormous flux and uncertainty. Israel viewed Moscow as having the capability and influence to shape outcomes in Syria. It viewed Russian intervention as driven by Moscow's desire to reassert its global role – and thereby divert attention away from Ukraine – as well as the specific purpose of saving the Assad regime, a long time Russian ally, from collapse<sup>8</sup>.

As Dmitry Adamsky has written, in war games conducted by leading Israeli think tanks that simulated military conflicts with Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria, Russia emerged as a pivotal broker with a unique ability to escalate or de-escalate confrontations<sup>9</sup>.

From late 2015, Russia and Israel avoided pitting themselves against each other in a zero-sum game and promoted both military and diplomatic channels of coordination and deconfliction. However complex, deconfliction had a good chance of success from the beginning given that both countries core interests could still be pursued. “Russia went into Syria and is there now to make sure that Assad remains in power. It isn't there to save Israel, or to harm it”, according to Dorit Golender, a former Israeli ambassador to Moscow. “Israel, for its part, has spelled out that we cannot remain indifferent to certain scenarios in

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<sup>7</sup> *Coping with the Russian Challenge in the Middle East: U.S.-Israeli Perspectives and Opportunities for Cooperation*, Kennan Institute, Woodrow Wilson Center, 3 June 2019, p. 20, “From Israel's perspective, having a permanent Russian military presence and anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities on its northern border put significant constraints on the unfettered freedom of action Israel has enjoyed previously in Syria and increased the potential for Iranian entrenchment in the country under the Russian umbrella”.

<sup>8</sup> A. Yadlin, “Russia in Syria and the Implications for Israel”, *INSS Strategic Assessment*, vol. 19, no. 2, July 2016.

<sup>9</sup> D. Adamsky, “Putin's Damascus Steal”, *Foreign Affairs*, 16 September 2015; see also J. Krasna (2018).

Syria involving Hezbollah and Iran. The Russians understand that, so the coordination process operates perfectly”<sup>10</sup>.

Once Israel was able to reliably manage deconfliction, it sought out more ambitious goals with regard to Russia: understandings that would prevent further Iranian or Hezbollah entrenchment in Syria, especially in areas near the Israeli frontier. This continues to be the key driver in Israel’s approach to Syria *vis-à-vis* Russia, more so than end-of-conflict considerations<sup>11</sup>.

But the relationship can quickly be tested, as it was in September 2018 when Syrian ground forces – in a failed attempt to target Israeli aircraft – mistakenly shot down a Russian military transport plane, killing over a dozen Russian personnel. The initial tone out of Moscow was sharp and critical of Israel, blaming Jerusalem for putting Russian troops at risk, while Israel blamed Assad’s forces. Following intensive contacts, Moscow and Jerusalem managed to defuse a situation that could have led to serious damage. In the spirit of preserving once-again warm relations, Russia facilitated the return of the body of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldier Zachary Baumel, who went missing in 1982 during the Battle of Sultan Yacoub against the Syrian army.

## International Context

Well before Russia’s full-blown military intervention in Syria, Moscow’s international position changed dramatically with its annexation of Crimea and its intervention in Ukraine’s east. Against the backdrop of its warming ties with Russia, Israel faced a serious dilemma when the Crimea crisis erupted. Rather quickly, Jerusalem decided that its equities were best served by

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<sup>10</sup> O. Raanan and V. Michlin (2018).

<sup>11</sup> As Udi Dekel has written, Israel is relying on Russia to remove the Iranian forces and the Shia militias from the border area, in exchange for Israel’s not attacking regime forces. See U. Dekel, “[Southern Syria: Familiar Story, Familiar Ending](#)”, *INSS Insight*, no. 1072, 5 July 2018.

staying out of the sudden East-West confrontation. For example, it failed to vote in the UN General Assembly in February 2014 when more than one hundred countries voted in favor of condemning Russia's annexation – despite lobbying by the United States – but at the same time it worked to maintain good relations with Ukraine, support Kiev in later votes, and absorb a surge in Jewish emigrants fleeing war-torn Ukraine<sup>12</sup>.

Israel's response to the Crimea crisis in early 2014 – well before Moscow's intervention in Syria – is one of the starkest examples of the differentiated approach Israel would adopt, an approach that fundamentally sought to avoid conflict with Moscow without jeopardizing Jerusalem's vital alliance with Washington. Hence, for instance, Israel has sought to avoid addressing the question of Russia's illiberalism and other international policies. Nonetheless, Jerusalem is "sympathetic to Washington's concerns about Russian global malign activity and restricts the scope of its security contacts with Russia accordingly"<sup>13</sup>.

## **The Centrality of the United States**

Any consideration of Israeli-Russian ties must also consider the centrality of the United States in Israel's national security concept. For Israel, its alliance with the United States remains

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<sup>12</sup> The authors were serving in official government roles at this time. Co-author Lasensky was serving at the time as a Senior Policy Advisor to the US Ambassador to the UN. The Israeli government ostensibly explained its no-vote in the General Assembly as the result of a Foreign Ministry strike that was underway. Nonetheless, it was widely viewed inside and outside the US government as a deliberate decision by Israeli leaders, and consistent with Israel's low-key and non-condemning posture toward Moscow. Later international incidents, like the Skripal assassination attempt in the United Kingdom – and Israel's decision not to join in the international outcry – further reflect this policy of avoiding criticism of Russia. On steps Israel took to balance a perceived tilt toward Russia on the Ukraine conflict, see also S. Frantzman, "Ukraine Thanks Israel for Support on Crimea at UN", *Jerusalem Post*, 29 November 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Kennan Institute (2019), p. 15.

preeminent among its foreign relations, overshadowing virtually all other relationships.

Israel's military is heavily reliant on US defense systems, with annual US military aid close to \$4 billion. The two countries share their most closely guarded intelligence with each other, including cooperation on counterterrorism, extremist Islamist groups, and Iran. Washington's diplomatic weight shields Israel in numerous international fora. Israel "sees the continuity of American military dominance in the region as crucial to its security and to regional order"<sup>14</sup>.

Nearly a half-century of American leadership in brokering Arab-Israeli peace, despite some lackluster outcomes in recent years, has left a legacy of strategic advances for Israel—most notably its peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, which are further entrenched by a web of relations with Washington.

Bilateral economic ties continue to expand rapidly, especially in the technology sector, and rival Israel's trade with Europe, which was traditionally more central to the Israeli economy. The United States is also home to the largest Jewish community outside Israel – numbering around six million – which is as vital for Israeli diplomacy as it is for the Jewish state's identity and its recognized position at the center of the Jewish world. People-to-people ties stretch well beyond the Jewish community, with American Evangelicals representing yet another source of support and connectivity for Israel.

The overall bilateral relationship is so institutionalized and so deeply intertwined socially and economically that it has easily weathered the turbulence of political disagreements, including most recently the breach between Israel and the Obama Administration over the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, or periodic disagreements over China that have cropped up regularly since the late 1990s.

Since President Donald Trump came into office in 2017, Israel perceives the alliance to have consolidated even further,

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<sup>14</sup> Kennan Institute (2019), p. 3.



as the White House has sought repeatedly to demonstrate – in word and in deed – that it stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Israel on the widest possible range of issues. The Jerusalem embassy move and Trump’s Golan recognition are just two examples. Nonetheless, Trump’s posture on Syria has also caused concern in Israel, such as the sudden White House announcement in December 2018 of an imminent US withdrawal or the uneven responses to the Syrian regime’s use of chemical weapons.

## **Israeli Interests**

Israel has long nurtured a multi-tiered set of relations with other regional and global actors, including Turkey, India, China, and Russia. Israel has diplomatic, strategic, and economic reasons to diversify its foreign relations as much as possible, and does not see this as being in conflict with its outsized alliance with Washington.

Israel has a particularly strong interest in cultivating ties with powers that have leverage over its fiercest adversaries, especially Iran, which provides another rationale for Israel’s rapprochement with Moscow. In Russia’s case, the combination of its influence in Iran and its newfound central role in Syria make Moscow an even more attractive interlocutor for Israel. Iranian involvement in Syria has been at the heart of the dialogue between Russia and Israel, with the former hinting that it could rein in Tehran’s role in the context of a conflict-ending settlement and bring about the withdrawal of all foreign forces. At the same time, Israel is able – through its close coordination with Washington and support for its “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran – to wield pressure on Tehran from other quarters, not to mention its own covert military campaign<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> U. Dekel and C. Valensi, “[Russia and Iran: Is the Syrian Honeymoon Over?](#)”, *INSS Insight*, no. 1171, 27 May 2019.

There are other interests at play, including the still sizable Jewish community in Russia, as well as the economic and cultural ties that come with Israel's burgeoning population of approximately one million citizens born in the former Soviet states.

## **Russian Interests**

Russia's ties with Israel and its reemergence in the Middle East are based on several interests. First, saving the Assad regime serves a number of important strategic and reputational interests. Second, asserting its involvement in the Middle East also serves Russia's interest in breaking its international isolation stemming from Crimea and Ukraine – i.e. to “trade displeasure with Russia's East European policies for its Middle East accomplishments”<sup>16</sup>. Although failing so far to achieve such an objective, it remains a motivation for Russia. Even short of success, the mere shifting of international attention, or the appearance of a crisis elsewhere, helps ease the isolation that befell Russia following its actions in Crimea and Ukraine.

Third, Russia feels isolated by US- and Western-led alliance networks, including NATO, the European Union, and Washington's alliances in East Asia, and has an interest in creating alternative diplomatic channels that chip away at this sense of encirclement. Therefore, warming ties with Israel – probably the Middle East's most Western-allied actor – clearly serve Russia's interest in this respect. Put differently, maintaining positive ties with Israel – Washington's closest ally in the region – allows Putin to project a message that Russia is not isolated<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Z. Magen, S. Fainberg, and V. Michlin-Shapir, “[Russia in Conflict: From the Homefront to the Global Front](#)”, *INSS Strategic Assessment*, vol. 19, no. 3, October 2016.

<sup>17</sup> The same can be said for Moscow's role as a member of the Middle East “Quartet”. However marginal, the Quartet nevertheless gives Moscow a hook to engage in regional conflict resolution processes.

Fourth, Syria, and the region more broadly, also touches on Russia's interests in countering Islamist extremism and terrorism. Though as Anna Borshchevskaya notes, in reality, the terrorist threats Israel faces are very different from Russia's, and Moscow often makes instrumental use of the terrorist threat to stress its shared interests with Israel and Western powers<sup>18</sup>.

Last, Moscow's intervention in Syria demonstrates that the Russian military is capable and can project power effectively<sup>19</sup>. Russian officers have gained important combat experience, and Syria has also served as a "demonstration of a wide array of Russian weapons platforms", which helps promote weapon sales in the Middle East and beyond<sup>20</sup>.

Some Russian analysts see the Russian return to the Middle East in a broader geopolitical context. They explain that Russia is disappointed with the West and its perceived rejection of Moscow and understands that relations cannot be repaired. Therefore, Russia has made a strategic, rather than tactical, turn to the East, including to the Middle East<sup>21</sup>.

On the surface, Russia's interests in the Middle East appear to collide with Israel's. As Borshchevskaya explains, "Putin's regional policy [...] is primarily driven by zero-sum anti-Westernism to position Russia as a counterweight to the West in the region and, more broadly, to divide and weaken Western institutions. Israel, unlike Russia, is a pro-Western democracy"<sup>22</sup>. Hence, in Syria, Russia backs the coalition that consists of Israel's worst enemies – Iran and Hezbollah. And yet, in its relationship with Israel, Russia has demonstrated that it is willing and able to avoid being party to a zero-sum approach. Hence,

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<sup>18</sup> A. Borshchevskaya, "Putin's Self-Serving Israel Agenda", *Foreign Affairs*, 13 April 2017.

<sup>19</sup> A. Yadlin, "Russia in Syria and the Implications for Israel", *INSS Strategic Assessment*, vol. 19, no. 2, July 2016.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> D. Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018, pp. 135, 52.

<sup>22</sup> A. Borshchevskaya, *The Maturing of Israeli-Russian relations*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, in FOCUS Quarterly, Spring 2016.

Russia and Israel have been able to pursue a practical approach to compartmentalize and limit their cooperation, especially *vis-à-vis* Syria.

## Overlapping Interests vs Sources of Friction

The extent to which Russian and Israeli interests overlap – in Syria and beyond – is considerable. As explained earlier, both countries share a deep suspicion of revolutionary political change wrought by the “Arab Spring;” both share a desire to counter any gains by Islamists; both benefit from expanding people-to-people, economic, and deep-rooted cultural ties; and both share interests in maintaining diversified foreign policies that give them flexibility and additional bargaining power with their adversaries. In Syria, Israeli and Russian interests do not necessarily align, but the two countries have demonstrated since 2015 that they can reach limited understandings about the core interests on which neither will compromise – for Russia, bolstering the Assad regime’s grip, and for Israel, keeping Iran and Hezbollah off its frontier and unable to expand their entrenchment in Syria.

Beyond Syria and the strategic agenda, the two countries also share a common interest in “historical memory” in terms of World War II and opposing fascism and Nazism, even if this commonality is deeply complicated by the USSR’s own history of hostility, bias, and conflict with Israel and the Jewish people.

Sources of friction are never too far from the surface. The boundaries, thresholds, and red lines that trigger military responses – related most notably to Hezbollah and Iran – are viewed differently by Moscow and Jerusalem<sup>23</sup>. Iran, in particular, as both a consumer of sophisticated Russia arms and Israel’s primary regional adversary, is perhaps the most challenging

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<sup>23</sup> A. Kortunov and M. Duclos, “Иран на Ближнем Востоке: часть проблемы или часть решения?” (“Iran in the Middle East: part of the problem or part of the solution?”), Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), 13 May 2019.

issue. Russia's continued voting patterns in international fora – particularly on the Palestinian issue – also remain deeply problematic for Israel.

## **Conclusion**

Russian-Israeli relations have transformed dramatically since the end of the Cold War. Confrontation, animosity, and zero-sum calculations have evolved into a multi-faceted bilateral relationship that compartmentalizes points of friction and avoids crossing red-lines *vis-à-vis* Israel's bedrock alliance with Washington. On many levels, it has become a cooperative, at times even friendly relationship, despite the severity of differences on questions like Iran and Syria.

Israel does not see itself as a decisive player in determining Russia's fortunes in the region and beyond, but will continue to play an important role in the Syria arena as it assertively confronts attempts by Iran and its allies to deepen their entrenchment. Avoiding a clash with Moscow is critical for Israel. But should Russia's reentry into the region's strategic and political affairs advance further, or should Russia's tensions with the United States and the West worsen, Israel will face starker choices about limiting its deepening ties with Russia.



# Conclusions

Karim Mezran, Emily Burchfield

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Talk of a “Russian return” to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) amidst perceptions of American “withdrawal” from the region has held the attention of policymakers and scholars alike. For this reason, this volume has brought together some of the foremost experts on MENA issues to produce analyses on the likelihood and potential consequences of American disengagement from the region, the growing role of Russia and other regional actors, and how shifting power dynamics play out in the countries experiencing major crises.

As the chapters of this volume have indicated, Russia’s involvement in the region is neither a new nor a homogenous phenomenon. Russia has enduring strategic interests in the region that have been served through a range of foreign policies. And while one of those interests does indeed appear to be challenging US dominance, it does not appear that Moscow stands ready to take on the burden of hegemony in the region, or that it even wants to. Russia has a strong interest in maintaining diversified foreign policies that provide flexibility and additional bargaining power with their adversaries, as well as various platforms for both hard and soft power projection in the region and beyond.

The United States is not a declining power by any metric, nor have enduring US interests in the MENA region – ensuring the free flow of energy resources and preventing the growth of state or non-state actors antagonistic to the United States – diminished. The United States’ military, intelligence, and diplomatic

presence in the region remains unmatched by any other external power. And yet, perceptions of American abandonment of the region run high, spurred by surprise announcements from the US President of troop withdrawals in Syria and Afghanistan.

Thus, perceptions of the United States' impending exit from the Middle East are not driven by uncertainty over US capabilities or capacities, but rather by doubts about US commitment. Political will to engage in the region is waning, and the region's leaders have begun to confront what their future might look like without clear American leadership and prepare accordingly.

Though there is not yet a "vacuum" to fill in the Middle East as the United States has not actually scaled back its presence, anticipation of a US withdrawal has seen several actors begin to hedge their bets and seek rapprochement with Russia. This turn has been helped along by President Vladimir Putin, who has skillfully inserted Moscow into the affairs of almost every country in the region. Putin's approach differs greatly from that of the United States: he prefers to maintain balanced relations among all the regional actors, no matter the hostility toward each other, rather than take sides. This incentivizes each country to pursue relations with Russia regardless of Russia's ties to their rivals – no actor wants to be the only one out of Moscow's circle.

Russia's current approach in the Middle East is one of cooperation with existing – largely authoritarian – governments, and mediation between them in their many disputes. Moscow has friendly relations with the United Arab Emirates on the one hand and Qatar on the other, with Iran and Saudi Arabia and Israel. This policy of cooperation and mediation is applied in the region's countries in the throes of civil conflict as well. Syria is an excellent example: Moscow cooperates militarily with Assad and his Iranian allies, but also cooperates diplomatically and deconflicts with external powers opposing them in the war, including Turkey, Israel, and the Kurds. Moscow has succeeded in making it impossible to hold negotiations or take any steps to end the conflict without its participation, or more often, leadership.



Bolstered by its success in achieving its objectives in Syria, Moscow has expanded its reach throughout the region, projecting itself as a power broker in most Middle Eastern crises. Russia routinely establishes contacts and channels of communication with all sides in a conflict and offers its services as a mediator. This has been seen in Yemen, where Sergey Lavrov has proposed to broker peace talks; in Libya, where Moscow maintains diplomatic relations with the Government of National Accord while allying with Khalifa Haftar's, ensuring a prominent role in conflict mediation for Russia; in Iraq, where Moscow works in close collaboration with both the central government in Baghdad and the Kurds in the energy and infrastructure sectors; and in Turkey, Iran, and Egypt, where Russia's expanding diplomatic, economic, and military relations provide further examples of Russia's expanding role.

Russia has tried to portray itself as a powerful mediator committed to preserving stability in the Middle East, and has succeeded in making it near impossible to resolve many crises without Moscow's involvement. However, it is unclear whether Russia can actually deliver on its promises to guarantee stability in the region. Russia seems to value projecting diplomatic power over actually resolving conflicts, and no matter its commitments to brokering peace, it may not have the capacity or capabilities to do so.

As some of the authors pointed out, Russia's approach to the region may not be sustainable. Escalations in the region's interstate conflicts (especially between Saudi Arabia or Israel and Iran) may force Russia to pick sides and risk its strategy of maintaining relations with all, and unending intrastate conflicts risk draining Russian resources. Russia's own domestic economic woes, exacerbated by US and Western sanctions; unrest among Russia's growing Muslim population; potential flareups in Ukraine; and larger geopolitical concerns may all turn Russia's attention away from the region, especially under a new president in the eventuality of Putin's demise.

Thus, Russia is perceived as a power broker committed to stability in the Middle East, while its economic, military, and diplomatic capacity may limit its capability to live up to this role; and the United States is perceived as scaling back its commitments in the region despite continued interests and investments and superior capacity to guarantee regional security. Russia does not stand poised to overtake the United States as the hegemon in the region, but its power-projection activities in the region repeatedly threaten US interests. The analysis in this collected volume can help readers understand both the potential and limitations of Russia's role in the region and the various ways it manifests in different MENA countries and help policymakers make informed choices, whether they be to confront or cooperate.

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