



Russia's Policy in Syria and the Middle East:

Determination, Delight, and Disappointment

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Part I

Russia's Engagement Strategies in the Middle East

Russian Strategic Goals in the Middle East

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Russian strategic goals in the Middle East cannot be divorced from Russian grand strategy more broadly. In other words, Russia does not pursue a *sui generis* Middle East policy specific to that region but coordinates its actions in accordance with its overall approach to world affairs.

There are certain overarching Russian foreign policy goals that guide how the Kremlin sets and defines its agenda for different regions of the world. Whether governed by tsars, commissars or presidents, any Russian leader—and Vladimir Putin is no exception—must deal with the twin challenges posed by Russia's geographic position: extensive and vulnerable land borders coupled with choke points that, in hostile hands, cut Russia off from engagement with the larger world. The traditional Russian approach to these two problems was to push the borders of Russian influence outward to secure the vulnerable core heartland and take control of the various nodes connecting Russia to the rest of the world.

These geographic realities have inculcated in the Russian political elite a particularly realist, zero-sum way of looking at the world—and post-Soviet Russian governments have sought to salvage from the wreckage of the Soviet collapse Russia's position as one of the world's great powers.

For what purpose?

First, to help Russia remain one of the agenda-setting, rather than agenda-taking, nations of the world. The Russian view is that, in international affairs, there are countries that set the agenda and there are countries that have agendas imposed on them from outside. Russia fears a world in which the United States, a united Europe, or a Chinese superpower might be in the position to dictate to a weakened Russia how it should run its internal affairs or what role it should play in global economic and political affairs—and that the terms under which Russia would have to exist in this world order would not be favorable to Moscow or take into account the preferences of Russia's current elites and interest groups. Of particular concern is a scenario where Russia would lose the ability to control its own natural resource endowment, which would be laid open for exploitation by others.

To forestall this, Russia must retain the ability to project power and influence over the extended Eurasian space—not simply the region defined by the former Soviet Union, but also East

¹ This paper reflects personal views only.

and South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Russia must have the appropriate mix of military instruments, to be sure, but also be able to utilize economic and informational instruments of statecraft—to be able to defend its interests and insist on consideration of items on its agenda, and to be able to support and defend its partners, allies, and proxies. At the same time, Russia seeks to incentivize other key international stakeholders to uphold its great power status by showing that a central Eurasian “node” within the international system under Russian management contributes to the peace and prosperity of other major powers. In other words, China and Europe benefit more from having a strong Russia maintaining the middle linkages of the east-west and north-south corridors than from having them subject to disorder. More recently, Russia has again put forward the proposition that Moscow can, on its own or in partnership with others, help to counterbalance the United States or at least provide a credible option for countries seeking to hedge against Washington and its increasing unpredictability in world affairs.

To keep Russia as a great power, Moscow needs to obtain the technological and financial resources for continuing economic development and modernization. If other powers seek to restrict Russian access to these resources as part of an influence strategy, then Moscow must find new sources of capital and technology unencumbered by “strings” that are designed to restrict or hamper its great power status or its ability to project influence and power.

The Middle East, therefore, factors into Russian grand strategy in a number of areas. Geographically, the region abuts the strategic greater Black Sea and Caspian Sea basins and is integral to Russia’s ability to maintain its lines of communication to the Persian Gulf (most critical for the north-south corridor) as well as to the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. The Middle East is one of the regions of the world where Russia can demonstrate its relevance as an agenda-setting power, and into which Russia can credibly project a modicum of military power. Coordination with the energy-producing states of the Middle East is vital to Russia’s plans to utilize oil and gas revenues for its own development, while the countries of the region are also customers for the products of Russia’s military-industrial and atomic energy complexes. Finally, states like Israel or Saudi Arabia, which have been disinclined to support U.S. and EU sanctions on Russia, are potentially important sources of technology and finance for the Russian economy.

The challenge, of course, is translating grand strategic imperatives into workable policies. Importantly, there is no single unified Russian foreign policy but different factions and groups promoting different approaches. There are different possible “vectors” in Russian foreign policy—that is, there are different countries and regions that are seen as more important, or as preferred partners, for achieving Moscow’s goals, and there are different “sectors” (government and non-governmental organizations), each with their own interests and preferences. Policy options emerge from the joining of a vector with a sector.

In the case of the Middle East, there are a variety of vectors. There are the vectors that view the region in instrumental terms, as a means to influence policy toward larger players—the United States, Europe, or to a lesser extent China. Then there are the proponents of particular countries in the region—whether Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, or Syria—being the focal point of Russian policy. There are different sectors at play, each with different agenda items. Not only are there functional and regional divisions within different parts of the government—among and within the Foreign Ministry, the Defense Ministry, and so on—but there is the reality of different factions represented within the Presidential Administration. Beyond the central government, certain regional governments, particularly the ethnically Muslim republics, are players in the development of Russia’s Middle Eastern policy, as are the state and private business sectors—energy companies, the energy services sector, the atomic power industry, the space complex, military-industrial firms, mining and resource companies, the agricultural sector, and the investment community. Finally, the Orthodox Church and the Islamic and Jewish communities also have perspectives and interests to be considered.

This reality produces a variety of competing, overlapping, and contradictory policy impulses. A pro-Iranian vector, for instance, has developed around those elements within the government establishment that believe friction between Iran and the United States serves Russian interests; energy firms that seek to take advantage of Western sanctions to gain concessions in Iran and/or keep Iranian energy from competing with Russian sales in Europe; the military-industrial complex, which benefits from arms sales to an Iran worried about a military assault by the US or the Saudis; and elements within the Defense Ministry that rely on Iranian ground forces to support the intervention in Syria. However, too close a relationship with Iran creates friction in Russia's relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia. Similarly, Russia's relationship with Turkey is defined by strains over Syria and Turkey's continued role as a key NATO ally, but also by the opportunities that come from having Turkey emerge as a new transit country for Russian energy and the prospect of a condominium in the greater Black Sea region.

In some cases, different parts of the Russian establishment implement different foreign policies in the region. At a certain point, however, policy contradictions must be resolved, usually under the direction of the President. For instance, continued disagreements over Russia's final position vis-à-vis an OPEC production freeze (with different factions arguing for and against a freeze) was resolved in dramatic fashion by having Energy Minister Alexander Novak fly back to Moscow from Vienna on December 6, 2018, to confer directly with President Putin and return with a final decision.

Generally, the overarching approach of the last few years has been to push for satisfactory compromises between different positions and find a way to "square circles": to avoid a situation where Russia must make a definitive choice between competing partners and options. Thus, Russian attempts to navigate the complicated thicket of the Iran-Saudi Arabia-Israel triangle or the vicissitudes of the Syrian civil war and its different factions (and outside patrons such as Turkey, Iran, and Qatar) involve transactional diplomacy and efforts to define red lines, deconfliction zones, and spheres of influence.

Moscow is presiding over the effort to de-escalate the Syrian civil war and establish deconfliction zones between the various factions and their outside patrons. Russia has inserted itself into the volatile Kurdish issue, which involves both a Kurdish zone in Syria vis-à-vis Turkey and efforts to clarify a final status between Iraqi Kurdistan and the government in Baghdad. Russia has played a major role in sustaining the Iran-Iraq-Syria "Shi'a Crescent," but is also involved in direct talks with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates over how to maintain the fragile balance of power in the region. Egypt and Israel both now have their own lines of communication with the Kremlin and see Vladimir Putin as a reliable statesman who does what he says and follows through on his commitments. This assessment is shared by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who seems prepared to forge a new strategic axis with Russia on energy, Eurasian security, and the future alignment of the Middle East. Moscow has hosted meetings of the various Libyan factions, Palestinian political parties, Kurdish representatives, and members of the Syrian opposition, and Middle Eastern leaders regularly journey to Moscow to confer with the Kremlin.

Russia has been able to reestablish its presence because after two decades of U.S. transformational efforts, every country in the region is now more interested in stability. The Russian approach has been to recognize that long-term solutions are not possible at present. Instead, Moscow's efforts are focused on jury-rigging a series of compromises: the deconfliction zones in Syria; attempting to square the circle of de facto Kurdish self-government in Syria with a Turkish security zone; maintaining a balance between Sunni and Shia interests in Syria and elsewhere in the region; and guaranteeing Iran's ability to reach its Hezbollah proxies in Lebanon while allowing Israel to enforce its red lines. In essence, Russia offers a nineteenth-century vision of spheres of influence and balances of power—with Moscow as the essential outside negotiating partner and guarantor.

Thus, the twenty-first century Russian approach is to act as the "hedge bet" for the regimes of the region to balance against America's preferences and escape America's conditionality. The

Kremlin offers itself as a more reliable mediator than Washington and proffers equipment and capabilities that Washington is reluctant to provide. This in turn makes former Cold War adversaries in the region—especially Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel—more open to developing a new relationship with the Kremlin while maintaining its influence with governments like Iran that are hostile toward the U.S.

This not only reinforces Russia's position as an "agenda-setting" power, but also makes every country in the region invested in the maintenance of Russia as a great power capable of exercising influence and projecting power. Moreover, Russian efforts in the Middle East are preparing the ground for an attempt to replicate this pattern in East Asia. Russia's policy in the Middle East, therefore, is directly connected to its efforts to restore its position in the international system.

This paper draws upon work in:

Nikolas K. Gvosdev and Christopher Marsh, *Russian Foreign Policy: Interests, Vectors and Sectors* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013), esp. 27-66 (concept of sectors and vectors) and 293-334 (background on the Middle East).

Nikolas Gvosdev, "Russia's Hand Is Visible Everywhere in the Middle East," *National Interest*, September 12, 2017.

Nikolas Gvosdev, "Russia's Word Increasingly Means More in the Middle East Than America's," *World Politics Review*, October 6, 2017.

Nikolas Gvosdev, "How the Middle East Became Russia's Game, Not America's," *National Interest*, November 22, 2017.

Nikolas Gvosdev, "Russia's Strategy in the Black Sea Basin," *War on the Rocks*, August 2, 2018.

Regionalization as the Key Trend of Russia's Policy on Syria and in the Middle East

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The upgrade of Russia's role in Syria as a result of its military campaign since 2015 has helped bring Russia back to the Middle East. While few now doubt that Russia is in the region to stay, the main question is in what forms and to what extent. The military capacity Russia has demonstrated in Syria has not been matched either by its overall leverage and ambition in the Middle East or by its limited economic power. Thus, while military engagement in Syria catalyzed a relative increase in Russia's influence in the broader region, it is not alone sufficient to explain it. Rather, this qualitative upgrade resulted from Russia's evolving ability to grasp, accept, and adjust to the key process that had gained momentum by the late 2010s and is *endemic* to the region—the *regionalization* of politics and security in the Middle East. This trend manifests itself in the growing role of regional powers, factors, and dynamics. The focus of this paper is on the broader trend of regionalization of Russia's policy in the Middle East in the late 2010s; the benefits and constraints of this process, as illustrated by conflict management in Syria; and its implications for the West.

Regionalization

The regionalization of Russia's Middle East policy has taken at least a decade and a half to evolve. For Russia, it has been an incremental, gradual process that has involved expanding its range of regional partners from just a few at first, to several, then to many, and later to almost all regional players, while also trying to maintain its distance from intra-regional strife (a so-called *multi-vector policy*). This required and depended on a high degree of pragmatism, rejection of any ideological schemes, cultural relativism, readiness to treat regional partners as equals, and selective opportunism. Since the mid- to late 2000s, these features have been reinforced by another qualitative shift in Russia's approach, which proceeded from the gradual stabilization of its domestic conflict in Chechnya (achieved mainly by reliance on local traditionalist ethno-

confessional Muslim actors, mostly former rebels, as an imperfect response that was nevertheless superior to transnational jihadists). This course at home stimulated a shift from a harsh anti-Islamist stance abroad to a more nuanced approach to reformist political Islam, both in and out of government, in the Middle East. Subsequently, it further evolved into a readiness to selectively reach out to Islamist armed opposition actors other than transnational jihadists, if this was in the interests of conflict resolution.

Against this background, Russia's side-picking and firm support for the Assad regime throughout the civil war (which culminated in Moscow's direct military engagement from 2015) initially appeared to cut against and potentially undermine Russia's otherwise multi-vector course in the Middle East. However, Russian policy on Syria evolved in such a way as to stimulate, rather than impede, Moscow's strategy of "playing on all fields." In fact, the main difference between Russia's pre-Syria and post-Syria balancing act with regional actors is that now it could do this with more partners and as a more influential player in the Middle East.

Back in 2015, the main drivers of Russia's military engagement in Syria had little to do with the region itself. Syria was largely instrumentalized to serve broader Russian foreign policy goals—as a trump card in its troubled relations with the West post-2014 and as a showcase of prevention of regime change by force, especially through potential Western intervention (in the post-Libya context), coupled with some degree of concern about global anti-terrorism. Increasing Russia's regional influence in the Middle East was not a primary driver at that time, but rather more of a bonus if everything else worked out. In practice, however, Russia's engagement in Syria, by putting an end to further "somalization" of the country and shifting the balance in favor of the central government, did catalyze an upgrade of Russia's standing across the broader region. This in turn stimulated Moscow's growing interest in the Middle East per se.

The regionalization of Russia's Middle East policy continues to evolve in three main directions:

(1) New types and areas of Russia's regional influence, especially in the economic sphere and in conflict management beyond Syria;

(2) A qualitative shift from a primarily Western-centric to a more region-centric approach to the Middle East—a recent tendency distinct from (and more strategically significant than) the mere diversification of Russia's regional contacts that has been going on for many years;

(3) Identification and more active pursuit of Russia's own interests in regional partnerships in the Middle East—something that requires an actor to have a certain weight in the region, which Russia has now acquired.

Benefits

The regionalization of Russia's approach to the Middle East has both benefits and inherent limitations, both of which are well illustrated by the latest stage of Russia's engagement in and beyond Syria in 2018–early 2019.

In the Syrian context, the most direct product of regionalization has been the Astana ceasefire/de-escalation process co-brokered by Russia, Turkey, and Iran since 2017 and which involves both the government and various opposition actors, including non-jihadist armed groups. Intransigent as Moscow may be seen in the West in the context of Russia–U.S./Russia–West relations, in the Middle Eastern context, Russia has quickly learned the art of compromise and flexibility with regional partners on Syria (especially with Turkey and Iran, but also with Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Iraq, etc.).

This approach has proven resilient to the periodic shocks that have tainted relations with key regional powers over Syria, such as Israel's role in a Russian military plane shoot-down during a Syrian response to an Israeli air raid on Latakia in September 2018 or an earlier shoot-down of a Russian bomber jet by Turkey in November 2015. The resulting temporary freeze in bilateral

relations did not, however, prevent Russia and Turkey from launching the Astana format slightly more than a year later. By late 2018, the two were working together on the situation in the largest remaining concentration of a mix of more moderate Islamist actors, mostly allied with Turkey, and jihadist forces in Syria's northwestern Idlib province. In another sign of flexibility, Russia made Damascus postpone a major military offensive in Idlib to accommodate Turkish interests. Turkish President Erdogan's remark at the November 2018 celebration of completion of the offshore part of the TurkStream gas pipeline from Russia to Turkey about bilateral relations "having already been through all kinds of tests" could equally apply to Russia's relations over Syria with *both* Tehran and Tel Aviv. It also applies, *ante factum*, to a new test of the Astana format's resilience posed by the regional implications of President Trump's announcement on December 19, 2018 of a U.S. withdrawal from Syria.

Even if slow or incomplete, the withdrawal brings an end to the U.S. buffer between Turkish and Kurdish forces in northern Syria. This has led Turkey to contemplate a major offensive against the Syrian Kurds' main military force (People's Protection Units) and even "taking over" from the US by laying claim to areas to the east of the Euphrates. However, this is also the case when the very complexity of the regional/local set-up itself balances and constrains any regional stakeholder, such as Turkey. The departure of the U.S. forces, who had been the Syrian Kurds' key ally on the ground, has actually pushed the latter closer to Damascus. Both Egypt and Russia stand ready to mediate their talks with the Syrian government and, if needed, serve as guarantors of the results (Russia can potentially even mediate between Damascus, the Syrian Kurds, and Turkey itself). This would imply progress toward intra-Syrian settlement.

In parallel, the advance of al-Qaeda-linked "Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham" in Idlib in early 2019, at the expense of the more moderate armed Islamists, has produced consolidation of jihadist targets in the province, providing Damascus with a perfect excuse to finally strike against internationally recognized terrorists. It also allows Moscow to use its support for such an offensive as timely leverage over Ankara, especially in view of the potential mass inflow of refugees from Idlib to Turkey, should the latter raise its ambitions too high in Kurdish-populated areas and to the east of the Euphrates upon the U.S. departure.

Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. special forces from Syria may have been surprising, but it encapsulated a longer, gradual decline of the U.S. role or interest in Syria. However, even prior to that, no state, including the United States, or group of states could "pull the plug on Astana" (using the words of the U.S. special envoy on Syria, Ambassador James F. Jeffrey). What distinguished the Astana format as a product of a thorough regionalization was that it was beyond U.S. or other external control from the start and that nothing serious, beyond or at the UN, has been able to be mounted on the Syrian issue without Russia, Turkey, and Iran ever since. Even if there is a lack of progress on the Syrian Constitutional committee or the broader UN track, Astana will persist for as long as needed, with an expanded range of regional observers, to help sort out emerging issues among the brokers and parties on the ground (a need reinforced by implications of the U.S. departure from Syria's northeast), ensure and improve coordination, complete the de-escalation zone experiment, etc.

The benefits of regionalization of Russia's policy in the broader Middle East context can be illustrated by the fact that of all the great powers, it is Russia that has the best relations with Turkey—despite supporting opposite sides in the Syrian civil war. Russia also steadily continues with mission impossible: maintaining good relations with both Iran and Israel as two constants of Russia's Middle East policy. It has upgraded its outreach to most Gulf states and has developed some of the best relationships ever with Egypt under President al-Sisi. Russia is not a lead mediator on Libya or Yemen, but it is in demand as a mediator by key local parties and has managed to carve a diplomatic niche for itself in both cases. It is also modestly active on the Israeli-Palestinian case and improves its working relations with Iraq and Lebanon. Last but not least, for

the first time in decades, Russia is set to capitalize on its new diplomatic and military influence to improve its economic prospects in the Middle East.

Limitations

On the political and security side, regionalization can produce a more technical Astana ceasefire/de-escalation process, but it is not sufficient to produce Geneva, i.e. a substantive, long-term, and broadly internationally recognized UN-level solution to the Syria problem. While relatively effective, the Astana process has inherent limitations, as it was meant to help improve basic security conditions and prepare technical grounds for Geneva, not to address the key substantive issues of the Syrian political settlement. All other negotiating tracks and initiatives, such as the Moscow-sponsored Sochi Congress in January 2018 as an incomplete Track 2 or the Istanbul summit on Syria that brought together Russia, Turkey, Germany, and France in October 2018, have largely been activities undertaken to somewhat fill the void “in the meantime” as the Geneva process stumbles.

Cooperation with regional Astana partners has also cost Russia dearly on the way to Geneva. Obstacles to linking the Astana process to the UN talks came not only from the Syrian opposition or their regional or Western sponsors, but also from inside the Astana format. On the formation of the Constitutional committee, reluctance to accept the UN-composed part of the committee members’ list came from Damascus and Tehran. On the Kurdish issue, it is Turkey that remains fiercely opposed to having the largest Syrian Kurdish faction join the negotiations. Russia, for its part, has no intention of spoiling—and cannot afford to spoil—relations with its two main regional partners, Iran and Turkey, by radically intensifying political pressure on any of them regarding Syria.

Thus far, however, Russia has appeared to be able to live with these regional limitations, which it takes as “rules of the game,” as a natural progression of different and often conflicting regional powers’ interests and dynamics. This approach is also greatly facilitated by Russia’s lack of vital interests in this region (as well as in any other region outside post-Soviet Eastern Europe/Eurasia).

In the meantime, Moscow will continue to search for a political solution on Syria that is acceptable not only to Damascus, but also internationally, and recognized both at the UN level and across the broader Middle East. What often escapes international observers is that, in contrast to the region’s republican strongmen (al-Assad in Syria, al-Sisi in Egypt, or Haftar in Libya), Moscow is generally ready to accept and even back more representative, inclusive, and pluralistic systems in any of the region’s conflict zones. It keeps working on its own substantive input based on UNSC Resolution 2254, suggested its own draft of the new constitution (offering some major revisions rather than cosmetic amendments to the 2012 constitution), and is open to the idea of a “unitary decentralized” system (often raised by opposition members during their meetings with Russian diplomats).

Against this background, while the zigzags of the Trump administration’s erratic and inconsistent Syria policy (from annual demonstrative air strikes to an abrupt decision to withdraw U.S. forces) cannot critically alter the mainstream course of events on the ground, Washington’s lack of coherence and strategic vision on Syria *is* a major problem when it comes to the search for a UN-level political solution. In short, progress in Geneva still requires some form of active and constructive U.S. engagement.

On the economic reconstruction side, Russia itself can only contribute a very small share of the estimated US\$300–400 billion required for Syria’s reconstruction within the next 10–15 years (not to mention that post-conflict reconstruction and development beyond its own territory has generally not been Russia’s strong point). But as a lead military and diplomatic actor on Syria, Russia now co-owns the problem and cannot simply disengage from post-conflict reconstruction

without losing part of the reputational capital it gained through its engagement. While part of the required aid may come from the Gulf powers (with some, such as the UAE and Bahrain, slowly warming up to Damascus) and informal interest from private mid-size European companies is also on the rise, the scale of the problem requires broader internationalization of Syria's post-conflict reconstruction—another reason why Russia has a vested interest in putting the UN-level Geneva talks on track.

In sum, while Syria was a catalyst in bringing Russia “back” to the Middle East, Russia's atypically high-profile role on Syria has been more of an *outlier*, in terms of level, scale and side-picking, and is unlikely to be replicated elsewhere in the region. At the regional level, Russia will continue to pursue regionalization and develop and balance its plethora of regional partnerships with:

- (1) Some upgrade of its role in conflict management elsewhere in the region (in Libya, Yemen, and, to some extent, the Israeli-Palestinian context);
- (2) Modest, but growing economic role slowly approaching that of a mid-size actor;
- (3) Security role limited to ensuring the minimal presence in the region that is required as a back-up to Russian diplomatic and economic activity, with the more specific function of a security guarantor in Syria.

Implications for the West

What does a combination of visible but limited increase in Russia's influence in the Middle East with growing regionalization of its Middle East policy imply *for the West*?

On the one hand, the significant and relatively balanced regionalization of Russia's approach to the Middle East has become one of Moscow's few comparative advantages in the region and something in which it fares better than the West. The regionalization of Russia's policy has been a process profound and genuine enough to ensure that this policy is no longer mainly a “function” of its relations with the West. Regardless of what the United States and/or its European allies want or do, individually or collectively, Russia will keep trying to get the most out of its limited but upgraded influence, pragmatic approach, and diversified outreach to regional partners. The latest vivid illustration, in the Syrian context, has been the limited direct impact on Russia's mainstream course even of President Trump's December 2018 decision to withdraw militarily from Syria. Its significance for Russia has not been so much *per se* or in the bilateral US-Russia context as in its effect on the standing and policies of Moscow's main regional partners on Syria, especially Turkey (but also Iran and, to an extent, Iraq, Israel, Egypt, and the Gulf states).

On the other hand, the good news is that a combination of (a) profound regionalization and broad diversification of Russia's Middle East policy with (b) its relatively limited resources and pragmatic ambitions defies and excludes a return to any “grand” Cold War-style hegemonic or revisionist policies and approaches. It also does not leave much, if any, potential for direct confrontation between Russia and the collective West in the region. As the role of the United States and other Western powers in the Middle East has been gradually but steadily in decline, it is not with Russia that the West's real problem in the region lies. Instead, it is precisely with the difficulty of accepting and adapting to the growing regionalization of politics and security in the Middle East.

Not Getting Any Easier: Putin's Middle East Balancing Act

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Although Moscow played a significant role in the Middle East during the Cold War, it largely retreated from this region during the 1990s, when it had to focus on more pressing domestic political and economic issues stemming from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since Putin's arrival in power at the turn of the 21st century, however, Moscow's role in the Middle East has steadily increased, to the point that some now see Russia's influence there as being stronger than America's. And unlike the Soviet era (at least before Gorbachev), when Moscow mainly allied with "revolutionary" Arab Nationalist regimes against "reactionary" pro-American ones, Putin has built up good relations with every Middle Eastern government and opposition movement (except for jihadist ones like Al Qaeda and ISIS). What is especially remarkable is that under Putin, Moscow has been able to build and maintain good relations with all these Middle Eastern actors despite their many disputes with one another.

Specifically, Russia now has good relations with anti-American actors such as Iran, the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah, Fatah, and Hamas, but also with traditionally pro-American ones such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan. Though they have not been without drama, Moscow's relations with Turkey now appear to be better than American and European relations with it. At the same time, Moscow maintains good relations with Kurdish forces in Syria, which are anathema to Turkey. Despite Putin's objections to the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq that overthrew Saddam Hussein, Moscow subsequently built up good relations with the elected government in Baghdad that the US helped install. At the same time, Moscow has good relations with the Kurdish Regional Government, which is often at odds with Baghdad. Similarly, Moscow maintains good relations with opposing forces in the civil wars in both Libya and Yemen, and with opposing sides in the dispute between Qatar, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, on the other.

This has not only been a remarkable diplomatic accomplishment both for Russia and for Putin so far, but also holds the prospect for an even greater Russian role in the region going forward. As Russian observers have often noted, Moscow's ability to cooperate with everyone in the Middle East (except the jihadists) means that it can more readily help the region's opposing parties resolve their conflicts than Washington, which cannot or will not cooperate with Iran and its allies. Just as Washington's ability to work with both Israel and Egypt in the 1970s, when Moscow did not even have diplomatic relations with the Jewish state, resulted in both Tel Aviv and Cairo turning to the US

to help them reach a peace agreement, these observers argue, Moscow's present ability to work with all sides in the Middle East's many conflicts while the U.S., especially under Trump, cannot or will not means that Moscow is now in a better position than Washington to help opposing sides in the Middle East resolve their differences.

Yet while Moscow's ability to talk with all sides does conceivably give it a greater ability than Washington to resolve the Middle East's many conflicts, Russia's efforts to do so have not proven successful thus far. This is because the ability to talk with opposing sides does not guarantee success in mediating between them. Another condition needs to be present: the opposing sides in an ongoing conflict must no longer wish to pursue it and instead desire to resolve it. During the 1970s, Washington's mediation between Israel and Egypt was able to succeed because both parties wanted a peace agreement. By contrast, at least one of the opposing parties among whom Moscow is now trying to mediate in Syria and elsewhere prefers to keep on fighting rather than make any of the concessions necessary for a peace agreement.

There is another important difference between Washington's mediation between Israel and Egypt in the 1970s and Moscow's conflict resolution efforts now. While the US was willing and able to provide substantial economic assistance to both parties (which it is still providing over four decades later), Moscow has shown no sign of doing so. Indeed, Moscow's conflict resolution proposals for Syria openly call for Western and Gulf Arab states to pay for post-war reconstruction efforts—something that they have not yet shown much interest in doing.

Moscow's failure thus far to actually resolve any of the Middle East's conflicts does not, however, seem to have prevented it from increasing its influence there. Indeed, most of Moscow's Middle Eastern partners seem less interested in seeking Moscow's (or anyone else's) help in resolving conflicts with their adversaries than in having good enough relations with Russia that Moscow does not support (and may even restrain) hostile policies on the part of those adversaries. Some of Moscow's Middle Eastern partners have tried to persuade Moscow to stop supporting their adversaries altogether. Putin, though, has made it clear that he will not stop cooperating with certain partners (such as Iran) even if others (such as Saudi Arabia) can provide significant economic rewards for doing so. Not only would curtailing Russian relations with one state at the behest of another make Russia appear like something less than a great power, but Putin may calculate that it is precisely Moscow's support for both sides in a dispute that gives each an incentive to pursue friendly relations with Russia, for fear that Moscow might support the other side even more if it does not.

And it must be said that this Russian foreign policy logic has succeeded. For example, while neither Israel nor Saudi Arabia is pleased that Russia cooperates with Iran and Iran is not pleased that Russia cooperates with Israel and Saudi Arabia, all continue to cooperate closely with Russia. Many other such cases could be cited. There was, however, one instance when this logic appeared not to work: Putin's apparent belief that Russia could intervene in Syria in support of the Assad regime yet maintain good relations with Turkey's Erdogan, who opposed this, was proved false when Turkey shot down a Russian military aircraft in November 2015. Yet despite the continuation of Moscow's intervention in defense of the Assad regime, Russian-Turkish relations revived in mid-2016 and have grown even closer since then. Thus, while Moscow's belief that Russia could maintain good relations with opposing parties simultaneously at first appeared misplaced in this one case, it has been vindicated since then.

Still, there are inherent risks for Moscow in attempting to pursue good relations with opposing sides simultaneously without being able—or perhaps even willing—to resolve the conflict between them. Middle Eastern actors may feel obliged to continue cooperating with Moscow despite its support for their adversaries, but nobody appreciates having to do so—with the result that some may take steps to limit or hedge against Russian influence. Even when America's traditional allies pursue good relations with Moscow (which they may do partly to encourage Washington to provide them with greater support), Russia's continued backing of their adversaries means that they will

continue to cooperate with the US however annoyed they become with Washington over either its criticisms of their foreign or domestic policies or over what they consider insufficient American support. If they perceive that Moscow is inclining more toward their adversaries, they are likely to seek increased cooperation with Washington in response.

Anti-American actors, of course, are neither willing nor able to increase cooperation with the US in response to their irritation with Moscow over its support for their (often pro-American) adversaries. Moscow may even see its anti-American partners as having no other option but to continue cooperating with Russia. Still, such a Russian attitude risks its anti-American Middle Eastern partners undertaking forceful “surprise moves” aimed at creating *faits accomplis* that Moscow has no choice but to accept and perhaps even support. Pro-American Middle Eastern actors can also do this, of course—often to the dismay not just of Russia, but of the US and others.

The escalation of conflict in the Middle East poses risks for any outside power seeking to become or remain influential there, but this risk may be greater for Russia than the US. The US has a set of allies in the Middle East as well as a set of adversaries there. When U.S. allies are in conflict with U.S. adversaries, Washington has no doubt about which side to support. But Russia’s practice of supporting opposing sides means that those sides that can turn to the US will do so, thus limiting Russian influence. An Iranian conflict with either Israel or Saudi Arabia would result in the latter two seeking (and undoubtedly receiving) American support. This would leave Russia with the choice of 1) supporting Iran and risking losing influence in Israel or Saudi Arabia to the U.S.; 2) supporting Israel and Saudi Arabia alongside the US and risking losing influence in Iran (as well as risking the Iranian government being severely weakened or even decapitated); or 3) attempting an “even-handed” policy that risks alienating both sides as well as ceding the initiative to the US if it becomes strongly engaged in supporting its allies against their adversaries.

Furthermore, while Putin has been more successful than the Soviets were during the Cold War in cooperating with established actors in the Middle East, there is one way in which Putin’s policy is not as flexible as the USSR’s. During the Cold War, the Soviets usually benefited when a pro-American regime was overthrown and replaced by an anti-American regime that saw Moscow as an ally (the one great exception was, of course, Iran in 1979). Today, Putin’s Middle East policy of allying with status quo forces is vulnerable to two possibilities if an established regime is overthrown: either it will be replaced by a pro-American regime (which now seems unlikely, but did seem possible in 2011 when long-time pro-American authoritarian regimes appeared likely to be replaced by relatively pro-American democratic ones) or it will be replaced by an anti-American Islamist regime that is also anti-Russian. In other words, while the USSR could—and did—benefit from revolutionary change in the Middle East, Putin has so firmly allied himself with maintaining the status quo in the region that it is difficult to see how Moscow can benefit from revolutionary change there. Nor will it necessarily benefit Russia if Islamist forces that are anti-Western as well as anti-Russian come to power. Indeed, given the possibility that Islamist regimes in the Middle East could support Islamist forces that already have a following among Muslims in Russia, the rise of Islamist forces in the Middle East potentially poses a much greater threat to Russia than to the U.S.

Thus, while Putin has succeeded in increasing Russian influence in the Middle East partly by being willing to support opposing sides in its various conflicts without being able (or perhaps willing) to mediate them, Moscow will have a much more difficult time balancing opposing sides if these conflicts significantly escalate or if any of the current Middle Eastern regimes are replaced by hostile revolutionary ones. The tendency for long-lasting wars to lead to revolution among one or more of the opposing parties only makes the policy of seeking to endlessly balance among opposing parties instead of resolving the conflicts between them appear even more fraught with risk in the long run.

Russia in the Middle East: Is There an Endgame?

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Moscow's Syria intervention has entered its fourth year. Prior to the intervention that began in September 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin had labored for at least fifteen years to bring Russia back to the Middle East. Yet the intervention officially restored Russia to its position as a critical player in the Middle East and made Putin a regional powerbroker.

Few in the West expected Russia, with its declining economy and pre-existing involvement in a war in Ukraine, to intrude militarily in Syria and save Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad from an imminent fall. The intervention itself also differed from typical Kremlin behavior. A limited military engagement closely tied to coercive diplomacy and work with regional partners, it has been an air campaign with a naval component, rather than a traditional battle waged by ground forces. It has therefore raised myriad questions for Western analysts and policymakers, perhaps the most persistent one of which is: what is Russia's endgame in the Middle East?

From the Kremlin's perspective, however, the game is ongoing; it has no defined end. The Kremlin is primarily concerned with its own survival, which it views as intrinsically connected to its relationship with the West—Moscow blurs the line between domestic and foreign policy in its search for great power status. Putin has multiple goals in the Middle East, but fundamentally, his Syria intervention was about upending the U.S.-led global order. Kremlin activities across the region share the same aim: to undermine the US and bolster Moscow's position in the region by deterring the West and maintaining low-level conflict. This is the lens through which policymakers should view Moscow's activities. Rather than look for a static endgame, policymakers should focus on countering the Kremlin's negative influence. Despite Moscow's many difficulties, it has staying power in the region and its influence will not wither away on its own any time soon.

Why the Middle East Matters to Moscow

The Middle East and North African region has always mattered to Russian rulers. This context frames the Kremlin's current activities. The Eastern Mediterranean mattered to the Kyivan Rus, which the Russian state at its inception claimed as a progenitor, as the state envisioned itself as the heir to Constantinople, the "Third Rome," with the divine mission of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Religious interests persisted in Imperial Russia, which also used the Middle East as an arena of competition with the West and for securing naval access in the Black Sea and in the Mediterranean in pursuit of great power status. Putin's Syria intervention is unique in many ways, but it is Russia's second major incursion into the Levant since 1772.¹ The Soviet Union played a major role in the Middle East during the Cold War, attempting to stymie U.S. energy and trade interests in the region. Russia retreated briefly from the Middle East under Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, but even then it never completely left.

In the post-Soviet period, great power status and desire for equal treatment by the U.S. in the Middle East continued to go hand in hand. An April 1996 meeting between Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin is illustrative. Yeltsin, according to recently declassified archives, came in angry because he believed the US was trying to marginalize Russia in the region. Clinton used the term "equal partnership," which appeared to pacify Yeltsin, and said Russia could play an important role through its influence over Syria and Hezbollah.²

Putin's Approach to the Region

Once Putin succeeded Yeltsin, he worked steadily and consistently to bring Russia back to the Middle East. Putin's approach to the region became the extension of Primakov's vision of a "multipolar" world. Indeed, it was Primakov who led Yeltsin to believe, prior to his April 1996 meeting with Bill Clinton, that the US was trying to marginalize Russia in the Middle East.

Putin's interests in the region were primarily political, but also economic. Russia's January 2000 Foreign Policy Concept defined Moscow's priorities in the Middle East as being "to restore and strengthen positions, particularly economic ones," and noted the importance of continuing to develop ties with Iran. The same document highlighted "attempts to create an international relations structure based on domination by developed Western countries in the international community, under U.S. leadership." The most recent version of this document, from November 2016, also highlights the importance of the Middle East in Russian foreign policy and names "external interference" (a euphemism for the US) as a major cause of regional instability.³ Together, these documents show continuity in the Kremlin's thinking about the respective roles of Russia and the West in the region.

Unlike the Soviet Union, Putin's regime has been unencumbered by ideology, working instead to build and maintain ties with virtually every major actor in the region. Through Putin's efforts, Russia has regained political, diplomatic, and economic influence, showing his pragmatic approach to be more successful than the Soviet Union's ideology-focused one.⁴ Thus, Putin balances good relations with Sunni and Shia powers, as well as Israel, even as he favors the anti-American Shia forces in the region.

¹ Simon Sebag Montefiore, "Putin's Imperial Adventure in Syria," *The New York Times*, October 9, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/09/opinion/putins-imperial-adventure-in-syria.html>.

² "Declassified Documents Concerning Russian President Boris Yeltsin," Clinton Presidential Library, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569>; James Goldgeier, "Bill and Boris: A Window into a Most Important Post-Cold War Relationship," *Texas National Security Review* (August 2018), <https://tnsr.org/2018/08/bill-and-boris-a-window-into-a-most-important-post-cold-war-relationship/>.

³ "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248.

⁴ Robert O. Freedman, "From Khrushchev and Brezhnev to Putin: Has Moscow's Policy in the Middle East Come Full Circle?" *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 5 (2018).

A2AD Strategy

To date, Moscow has achieved significant influence in the region. Politically, diplomatically, and militarily, the US now has to contend with Russia in the Middle East to a degree it has not had to for decades. From the very beginning of Moscow's intervention, Russian operations suggested a strategy to deter the West and protect Assad and Russian assets, rather than consistently fighting ISIS. Thus, Moscow deployed advanced weaponry such as the Pantsyr short-range air defense system and the Almaz-Antey S-400 high-altitude Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) system to the Khmeimim airbase and later to the northwestern city of Masyaf, along with the KRET Krasukha-S4 ground-based electronic warfare system. It has also deployed the K-300P Bastion P coastal defense missile and the 9K720 Iskander ballistic missile system. Moreover, as Russian military expert Roger McDermott writes, the Krasukha-S4 deployment also mattered with regard to field testing the system in operational conditions.⁵ Indeed, McDermott writes that since 2009 Moscow has consistently invested in modernizing its electronic warfare capabilities, with the overall aim of asymmetrically challenging NATO on Russia's periphery "and maximi[zing] its chances of success in any operation against NATO's eastern members."

Moscow's most recent and controversial transfer—of the S300 to the Syrian Arab Army, after the same army ostensibly downed a Russian reconnaissance IL-20 plane, for which Moscow blamed Israel—continues to raise many questions.⁶ Yet beyond the details, the transfer sent a political message—it was an assertion of Russia's regional dominance. The S300 also fits within the overall A2AD strategy and potentially gives Moscow more leverage over the West and its allies.

To date, Moscow has achieved partial success with its overall A2AD layout, as the US and its allies are still able to operate. It has also boosted Russia's arms sales by using Syria as a testing and advertising arena for its weaponry. More to the point, Moscow's activities demonstrate consistent commitment and intent to deter the West and project influence across the Mediterranean. At the same time, Moscow is increasingly deploying indirect methods, such as using private contractors like the Wager group, to give itself plausible deniability.

Search for Port Access

After the Arab Spring, Moscow stepped up its overall maritime efforts. On July 26, 2015, Russian Navy Day, Putin announced Russia's maritime doctrine until 2020. He also set the goal of expanding Russian naval capacities from "regional" to "global blue-water." Two years later, Putin announced Russia's new naval doctrine, which echoed these ideas.⁷ At best, Moscow's blue-water ambitions are years away from becoming a reality. Shipbuilding has historically been among the most corrupt

⁵ Roger N. McDermott, *Russia's Electronic Warfare Capabilities to 2025: Challenging NATO in the Electromagnetic Spectrum* (Estonia: International Center for Defense and Security, 2017), https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2018/ICDS_Report_Russias_Electronic_Warfare_to_2025.pdf; Roger McDermott, "Russia's Network-Centric Warfare Capability: Tried and Tested in Syria," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 154 (October 30, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-network-centric-warfare-capability-tried-and-tested-in-syria/>.

⁶ Roger McDermott "Moscow's S-300 Double Bluff in Syria," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 142 (October 10, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/moscows-s-300-double-bluff-in-syria/>.

⁷ Order of the President of the Russian Federation of July 20, 2017 No. 327 "Ob utverzhdenii Osnov gosudarstvennoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii v oblasti voenno-morskoj deiatel'nosti na period do 2030 goda," <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201707200015?index=0&rangeSize=1>.

sectors of Russia's military-industrial complex. Multiple other problems, such as outdated facilities, also plague the Russian navy, and Western sanctions have added to these difficulties.⁸

But the Russian navy should not be dismissed. One way that Moscow can overcome these difficulties is by securing port access that allow for the use of smaller ships—or at least gaining access to them. Indeed, Moscow continues its long quest for port access in the region. In December 2017, Putin signed a law to expand Tartus and Khmeimim in order to cement Russia's "permanent" presence.⁹ Beyond Syria's ports, Moscow looks to Egypt and Libya, as well as to North Africa more broadly. Securing port access—rather than investing in building ports—is a pragmatic, cost-effective approach.

Despite its multiple problems, the Russian navy has made improvements since 2008. Moscow's efforts to control the Black Sea are paying off, and from there it can project its influence in the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and beyond. Indeed, Moscow can now deploy a permanent force on the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, sometimes mere presence is relevance, as was the case with the Russian aircraft carrier Kuznetsov in Syria.¹⁰ Moscow aims to exert naval superiority in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean, and in recent years Russian officials have increasingly spoken of the Russian navy in the context of non-nuclear deterrence.¹¹ Perhaps more to the point, Moscow's steps show its persistent perception of threat from NATO and desire to deter the West. This intent continues to color Moscow's Middle East activities as it works methodically to deny the West sea access.¹²

US Allies Hedging Their Bets

Assad remains in power, confident of Moscow's and Tehran's support. Putin has ensured Russia's permanent military presence in Syria for at least the next 49 years and boosted Russia's regional arms sales. Moscow's partnership with Iran shows no signs of abating, as their joint interest in opposition to the US continues to override the differences between them. Indeed, Moscow's entire Syria strategy is predicated on a partnership with the Islamic Republic, which bears the bulk of the costs in Syria.

America's regional allies continue to feel uncertain about U.S. commitment to the region and hedge their bets. For Putin, engaging traditional U.S. allies holds multiple benefits. It is part of his friends-with-everyone, ultimate-arbiter policy, which straddles his political and economic interests. In this context, Egypt and Turkey have moved closer to Moscow.

⁸ Paul Goble, "Any Russian Naval Expansion Is Many Years Away," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 7 (January 18, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-naval-expansion-many-years-away/>; Ihor Kabanenko, "Russia's Shipbuilding Program: Postponed Blue-Water Ambitions," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 59 (April 18, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-shipbuilding-program-postponed-blue-water-ambitions/>.

⁹ "Putin Signs Law Allowing Expansion of Russian Naval Facility in Syria," *RFE/RL*, December 19, 2017 <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-signs-law-syria-tartus-naval-facility/28946167.html>.

¹⁰ Anna Borshchevskaya and Jeremy Vaughan, "How the Russian Military Reestablished Itself in the Middle East," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 17, 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-the-russian-military-reestablished-itself-in-the-middle-east>.

¹¹ Igor Delanoe, "Russia Has a Deadly Plan to Defend the Black Sea," *The National Interest (blog)*, February 27, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russia-has-deadly-plan-defend-the-black-sea-24678?page=0%2C1>; "Russian Navy to Focus on Strategic Non-Nuclear Deterrence—Commander-in-Chief," *TASS*, January 1, 2018, <http://tass.com/defense/983872>.

¹² Stephen Blank, "Russia's Middle Eastern Position in 2025," *Jamestown Foundation*, November 20, 2018, https://jamestown.org/program/russias-middle-eastern-position-in-2025/#_ednref82.

Turkey has long since come around to Putin's position on Assad, due in part to Erdogan's fear of Kurdish nationalism, a fear stoked by Moscow's long-standing ties to the Kurds, and in part to Erdogan's own anti-Westernism. It is no coincidence that the PYD opened an office in Moscow in February 2016, during a temporary standoff in Russian-Turkish relations after the Turkish government downed a Russian jet in late 2015. Moreover, Erdogan knows that Putin can turn on and off the flow of Russian tourists, so important to Turkey's economy. Erdogan's ongoing discussion of the purchase of an S-400 from Moscow, regardless of whether it leads to an actual transfer, demonstrates Turkey's shift towards Putin, who has more leverage over him than vice versa.

Egypt has been the cornerstone of American regional security policy for decades, but Putin has managed to pull Cairo closer to its orbit through arms, nuclear energy, and economic deals, while Russian tourists make a significant contribution to the Egyptian economy. In September 2016, Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu described Egypt as Russia's most important partner in North Africa,¹³ and policymakers should not rule out the possibility of Russia flipping Egypt.¹⁴

Saudi Arabian King Salman's historic visit to Moscow in October 2017 is further evidence of Putin's growing sway in the region. Moscow's recent agreements with Morocco, including on nuclear energy,¹⁵ are another example. They also highlight the broad geostrategic scope of Putin's goals in the region. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu made more trips to Moscow than to Washington during Obama's presidency, while the Gulf countries have added incentive to cooperate with Moscow on global oil prices now that the US has emerged as the world's top crude oil producer. Moscow's success in the region has contributed to Moscow's recent push into the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa.

What's Next in Syria?

Now that Putin has helped ensure Assad's victory, he is turning to stabilizing Syria on its terms. Russia has no resources to contribute to Syria's reconstruction and is actively lobbying other potential donors, primarily Europe, to do so, attempting to use the refugee issue as leverage. As a whole, the West is not eager to contribute to Syrian reconstruction, which leaves non-Western options. To get funds, Moscow will need to set a broader agenda in the region and engage partners to demonstrate its long-term commitment to the region.

The Kremlin remains committed to Assad whom it enabled for years. Yet with Assad in power, a war criminal who is responsible for the vast majority of civilian deaths in Syria and the rise of terrorism there in the first place, the possibility of violence will always lurk just beneath the surface. Nor would the majority of Syrian refugees want to return to Syria as long as Assad remains in power, largely due to safety concerns. There is a real possibility of war between Israel and Iran in Syria in the near future. US policy vacillated from a decision to remain in Syria and continue working with Syrian Democratic Forces, who control the vast majority of Syria's oil and gas reserves and critical infrastructure, to a snap decision by President Trump to withdraw.

¹³ "Defense Ministers of Russia and Egypt Held the III Session of the Joint Russian-Egyptian Military Cooperation Commission," September 5, 2016,

http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12094751@egNews.

¹⁴ Anna Borshchevskaya, "Could Russia Flip Egypt?" *National Interest*, June 21, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/could-russia-flip-egypt-26367>.

¹⁵ "Russia and Morocco Sign Agreements to Inaugurate Military and Security Cooperation," Middle East Monitor, October 12, 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20171012-russia-and-morocco-sign-agreements-to-inaugurate-military-and-security-cooperation/>.

"Morocco and Russia to Sign Nuclear Deal," *The North Africa Post*, October 5, 2018, <http://northafricapost.com/25700-morocco-russia-to-sign-nuclear-deal.html>.

Moscow could hardly contain its glee at Trump's announcement and quickly expressed concern that the US may not leave after all.¹⁶ This reaction shows how much US policy matters in the region and how much Moscow wants to see the US leave. The decision to withdraw only elevates Moscow's position as a critical power broker in Syria. As one senior Egyptian official told me, "Syria is a battle for credibility," and many in the region perceive Russia as winning. In this context, Libya is another crucial area of growing Kremlin influence that has the potential to emerge as a focal point if Moscow gains enough credibility in Syria.

Conclusion

Paradoxically, Russia has been a relatively weak great power throughout much of its history. Expansion brought poverty to its people and continual insecurity to the state. War victories often came at costs far greater than those to Western European countries. Authoritarianism prevented economic and political liberalization that could have led to improvements. But Russia's sheer size and ability to mobilize an impressive military force made it a political player to be reckoned with. In times of greater state weakness, the Kremlin has often become more aggressive abroad to help shore up domestic legitimacy, while the search for superpower status has colored Moscow's activities since Russia's inception as a state. This perspective should give pause to analysts who dismiss Russia as merely weak.

In the Middle East, Putin had a plan from the very beginning but also remained flexible and adapted to circumstances. On balance, he has achieved many key objectives, largely due to the West's limited engagement and his own commitment. Putin's Syria adventure has yet to play itself out. But to date, Putin has managed to largely outmaneuver the United States.

Many point out that Putin's Russia cannot deliver development—the mark of a truly great power, at least in the Western sense of the word. But from the Kremlin's perspective, the game is primarily about staying in power and outflanking the US. In this context, a permanent state of low-level, managed conflict in the Middle East is to Moscow's benefit because it necessitates Moscow's presence, giving the latter a way to create dependence on the Kremlin by keeping conflicts unresolved. Moscow appeals to the self-interest of the region's leaders, who feel comfortable dealing with Putin, covet Russian weaponry, and hedge their bets in the face of uncertain U.S. policy. And unlike in their dealings with the US, there is no Foreign Corrupt Practices Act to regulate Middle East officials' engagement with Moscow. Thus, even if not all of its plans pan out, Moscow will continue to wield influence in the region, to the detriment of regional stability and U.S. interests there. The only antidote to Putin's influence in the Middle East is robust and consistent U.S. commitment to the region, backed by the credible use of force when necessary. Indeed, when talking of Moscow's endgame, analysts too often forget that for years the US has had little game of its own. Until that changes, Putin's Russia will remain the one-eyed king in the valley of the blind.

¹⁶ Neil MacFarquhar and Andrew E. Kramer, "Putin Welcomes U.S. Withdrawal From Syria as 'Correct,'" *The New York Times*, December 20, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/20/world/europe/putin-trump-syria.html>

Part II

Russia's Military Involvement in Syria and its Impact

Russian Combat Operations in Syria and Their Impact on the Force

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Russia's expeditionary campaign in Syria will heavily influence the future development of the country's armed forces, proving a transformative experience. After more than three years of fighting, and perhaps an equal number of public withdrawal announcements, the Russian forces are only further entrenching their presence in Syria, indicating that they intend to stay for years to come. Moscow considers the war to be a victory for the Russian-led coalition, but the Russian General Staff is more interested in the experience gained by Russian commanders, air crews, and the military industrial complex. As the fighting subsides, Syria is becoming more valuable as a training pipeline for the Russian military and a testing range for Russian equipment. Beyond the geopolitical gains Russia sought to attain, Syria is a crucible for the evolution of Russian operational concepts, tactics, and new capabilities, though the Russian conduct of the war equally reveals enduring weaknesses and the long road that remains for Russian plans to modernize the country's general-purpose forces.

Russian performance in Syria reveals a substantial evolution from the nadir of the Soviet mass mobilization army that Moscow wielded like a cudgel prior to the New Look military reforms launched in 2008 and the 2011 State Armament Program. The Russian General Staff continues to bloody the Russian armed forces in Syria as one continuous operational-strategic exercise under real-world conditions. Yet the Russian campaign reveals several enduring weaknesses: including a deficit of enabling intelligence and reconnaissance infrastructure, the absence of smart weapons, poor coordination among services, and overreliance on firepower to compensate for a lack of precision. Russian commanders are in the integration phase of adopting an information-driven approach to combat operations, seeking the ability to engage in 'non-contact warfare,' and using knowledge gained in Syria to shape the rest of the force via exercises at home.

The Russian campaign in Syria also demonstrates that Russia is still able to project power to regions beyond its near abroad, though with notable logistical constraints. The matter was very much in question prior to 2015. Russia remains one of the few powers capable of independent expeditionary operations, leveraging its own forces, proxies, mercenaries, and allies. However, this capacity for expeditionary operations is not scalable. Limitations in military transport aviation, and little in the way of dedicated sea lift, impose structural constraints. Moscow has avoided mission creep, eschewing ownership of the battlefield or a prolonged stabilization campaign, in part because

these are not realistic options. Even retaining a modest contingent of 4,000-5,000 in Syria imposed logistical strain. These constraints notwithstanding, Moscow was able to save the Syrian regime, degrade the opposition, and succeed in coercive diplomacy against other actors.

Legacy Aircraft, Changed Force

At the outset of Russian combat operations in September 2015, the Russian Aerospace Forces had little combat experience and were armed almost exclusively with unguided weapons. Throughout the conflict, the Russian contingent consisted primarily of a mixed aviation wing typically fielding 30 tactical aircraft, 16-20 helicopters, air defenses, a force protection garrison, transport aviation and specialized reconnaissance aircraft. The air wing flew an average of 40 sorties per day, with occasional spikes in activity, though good statistics are difficult to come by, as Russian public announcements are rife with hyperinflated figures. Most of the bombing in support of Syrian forces and associated militias was executed by modernized Soviet workhorses, including Su-24M2 bombers and Su-25SM strike aircraft. Their next-generation replacements—Su-34 bombers, Su-30SM heavy multi-role fighters, etc.—participated to a much lesser extent, supported by a veritable village of defense contractors to monitor their performance. Thus, the Russian air campaign in Syria was in part the last hurrah of the modernized and reorganized Soviet Air Force.

Despite the older aircraft, the Russian contingent in Syria proved qualitatively a different force from previous conflicts. Unlike the Russia-Georgia War in 2008, during which Russia lost six aircraft in five days, four of them to friendly fire, the Russian air wing in Syria suffered relatively few combat losses in its more than three years of operations. Most of the Russian casualties were among helicopter crews, the result of transport aircraft crashes accidents or high profile incidents with other countries, such as the Turkish shooting-down of a Russian Su-24 in November 2015. Russian forces lost five aircraft due to accidents, with only one shot down in combat. Of twelve helicopters lost, about half were due to mechanical failure or mortar strikes against forward staging airbases. In comparison, the Syrian Air Force suffered fifteen aircraft losses in combat operations during the same timeframe.

Part of the initial Russian challenge was wishful thinking during the first State Armament Program (SAP 2011-2020): believing that Gefest-SVP, a targeting and datalink upgrade for legacy aircraft, would make unguided bombs much more accurate. This fantasy was born of a desire to save money by making better use of Russia's stockpile of unguided munitions. Unlike during exercises, Russian aircraft worked at altitudes far too high to make apt use of this targeting system, resulting in large dispersal and substantial collateral damage during bombing strikes in cities. There is evidence to suggest indiscriminant, and at times intentional use of weapons without consideration for the civilian population.

In general, Russian bombs were far too large (and far too dumb) for the targets, resulting in poor accuracy and overkill. Russian Aerospace Forces found themselves unable to hit small or moving targets and could not effectively counter maneuvering formations. Russian combat helicopters were forced to compensate for the air force's glaring gaps in capability, absence of targeting pods, and dearth of precision-guided munitions. Drones, albeit mostly older Israeli variants and relatively basic Russian designs (Orlan-10), proved invaluable for targeting and assessing battle damage. Russian drones provided affordable intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capability, though their lack of armament proved to be a critical limitation.

The Russian General Staff spent years focusing on non-contact warfare, eyeing precision and standoff weapons as the modern way to conduct a war, but this vision oriented procurement towards long-range strike systems and air defenses. The former, composed of new air launched, land based, and sea based cruise missiles was viewed as strategic conventional capability. While the latter, long range air defenses, missile defense, and low frequency radars were an equally strategic investment to counter U.S. air superiority. The Russian General Staff had not prioritized a technologically

sophisticated air force, in part because it is a military that thinks about land-based firepower and mechanized warfare first. Airpower has typically been conceived of as a tactical supporting arm, rather than a strategic arm to reshape the battlefield, in the way an expeditionary aerospace power like the United States might employ it. Departing from historical patterns, the Russian Aerospace Forces found themselves in the lead role in Syria, as the Russian General Staff's primary instrument, with no combined arms army formations to support.

Seeking to stick to an economy of force mission, there was little in terms of a Russian ground force for air power to interact with. Instead the Aerospace Forces found themselves backing a cobbled together menagerie of Syrian forces, militias, and other groups. Russian officers and forward air controllers supposedly worked to glue air and land operations together, but there was a visible lack of coordination between services. Aerospace Forces planned sorties without much consideration for the ground units they were supposedly supporting. The campaign in Syria thus compelled the Russian General Staff to examine enduring organizational problems which inhibited joint operations. By 2017, newer aircraft, like the Su-34, composed the bulk of Russia's air wing. The command and control, along with improved reconnaissance assets were there, but technology is hardly a solution for service culture, and lack of staff planning experience. Hence the operation in Syria is likely to leave a strong impact not just on future capability acquisition, but on the force. Syria allows the Russian General Staff to observe areas where what they believed will work in theory is demonstrably dysfunctional in practice.

Differential Hardening

The Russian campaign in Syria substantiated the Russian military's philosophy to force design, training, readiness, and modernization: a reformed and upgraded military, even if it fielded legacy Soviet equipment and munitions, was sufficient for successful operations and attaining desired political ends. Russian "good enough" in the early days of the campaign was a stop-gap solution. The lessons learned would serve to drive change in procurement and force structure. Combat experience gained in Syria helped settle an important debate in the Russian military on the trajectory for the current State Armament Program (2018-2027): new platforms or new weapons. The Russian General Staff concluded that upgraded platforms can take in information, link with new systems, and deliver the latest-generation weapons, proving effective on the modern battlefield. Hence, the focus of future procurement appears to be on key capabilities—hypersonic weapons, cruise missiles, guided bombs, and the like—rather than next-generation planes and tanks.

Syria became a proving ground for important concepts like recon-strike and recon-fire contour, which would link Russian strike systems and land-based fires with sensors in real time. These were Soviet concepts, never brought to fruition. The Russian military has long sought to dispense with its blindness at operational depths and develop the kill-chain necessary to leverage a panoply of strike systems and fires available to the force. Syria began to drive tactical innovation. According to Anton Lavrov, a Russian military expert, instead of strikes in pairs, Russian aircraft switched to single-aircraft sorties. Later on, they would go on hunts for targets of opportunity, rather than hitting pre-planned targets or simply following instructions from ground control. Strikes were monitored by drones, allowing the aircraft to return and re-strike a target multiple times if needed. Russian forces also began operating at night, including helicopters, a long-held tactical advantage of Western militaries.

Beyond the war itself, Russia has yielded a treasure trove of information on how to prepare for a high-end conventional conflict against the United States. Russian electronic warfare systems and air defense units have likely built up a database of coalition aircraft signatures, gathering information from interactions with 5th-generation stealth aircraft, U.S. ships, submarines, etc., all of which provide invaluable data. Being front and center for two U.S. cruise missile strikes in 2017 and 2018 gave Russian forces a much better understanding of how to prepare for cruise missile defense.

It is difficult to assess how much information Russian units may have amassed on U.S. capabilities and operational patterns, including the potential efficacy of their own systems. Syria is the one part of the world where Russian forces interact on a daily basis with their Western counterparts, enabling them to shore up future capabilities, redesign equipment, or simply rework existing assessments of the potential force matchup, i.e., how well they might fare in an actual conflict against NATO.

In Syria, the Russian military also sought to send a message of its own. Firing more than a hundred cruise missiles of various types—from ships, diesel submarines, and strategic bombers—the Russian General Staff signaled its newfound ability to deploy conventional weapons with strategic significance. No less important is the fact that many of these systems are intended for the delivery of non-strategic nuclear weapons. By employing these strike systems in Syria, despite the absence of any discernible battlefield need, the Russian military was not simply testing them, but also seeking to make an impression on the United States. Employing such capabilities was meant to establish Russia's coercive credibility vis-à-vis the United States, such that in the event of a crisis Russia could effectively impose costs, or manage escalation in the midst of hostilities.

In order to avoid an expanded ground force commitment or the political costs of casualties inherent in ground assault operations, Moscow employed a sizable mercenary contingent in Syria. Wagner Group, which gained notoriety fighting in Ukraine, had grown in size to several battalion tactical groups in Syria, perhaps numbering 1,500-2,000 strong. This mercenary outfit was used as a principal assault force and in support of Syrian units, fighting in several battles between 2016 and 2018, including Palmyra. The Syrian battlefield is characterized by a low density of forces, poorly trained units, and low morale. Several battalions of experienced mercenaries, well-paid, well-equipped, and with staying power on the battlefield, made a difference for Russian operations. In between operations, Wagner Group sought to finance itself by wresting captured energy infrastructure from Assad's opponents or Kurdish forces in the east of the country. Some operations suffered publicized blowback, such as the ill-fated February 7, 2018, assault east of Deir ez-Zor. Yet Wagner's operations have only expanded geographically, and now include a number of African countries.

The Syrian generation of Russian officers

Syria could prove the most important conflict for furthering Russian military thinking since World War II, as it is one of the few wars seen as a victory by the Russian establishment. An entire generation of officers has returned from this campaign seeking to distribute lessons learned across the force via exercises and leverage their credibility to drive change. In three-month stints, the bulk of Russia's senior officer corps has been rotated and intentionally bloodied in Syria, including military district commanders, combined arms army commanders, officers in charge of divisions, etc. More than seventy percent of Russian tactical aviation crews have seen combat duty in Syria, while many helicopter pilots and long-range aviation crews have flown combat missions in Syria. The Russian navy has too had opportunity for frequent interactions with U.S. forces, working out logistics, communications, and firing land attack cruise missiles into the conflict zone.

Syria is changing what could be perceived as ossification in the Russian armed forces at the tactical level, putting theory and concepts into practice and nudging the Russian military out of their tactical malaise. The Russian armed forces have historically found success at the operational level of warfare, while often proving deficient when it comes to tactics. Poor training, munitions, maintenance, communications, and intelligence had led to an overreliance on firepower in place of tactical innovation, with the whole at times adding to less than the sum of its parts. Though the Russian military has often—by virtue of operational art and better strategy—beaten a tactically better force, this has come at a great human cost on the battlefield.

Although tactics are irrevocably tied to technology and must evolve with time, for decades Soviet and post-Soviet Russian thinking had been informed by the experiences of World War II more

so than any other conflict. When conceptualizing future war, military establishments too often reach for the past instead of looking forward, marrying freshly procured technology with tactics and operational concepts from former wars. The ongoing war in Syria, while admittedly not a major ground war, or a conflict against peers, may work to pull Russian military thought into the present.

Russia in the Middle East: (Re)Emergence of a New Geopolitical Shatter Belt?

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During the Cold War, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was a zone of intense geopolitical competition between the U.S.-led and Soviet-led blocks. Each sought to achieve influence in order to control transportation routes, secure energy supplies, and sell armaments. Until its final years, this bipolar world saw cycles of competition and conflict. The First Gulf War (1990-1991) marked the end of this period, as the Soviet Union, on the verge of collapse, was a mere spectator to the conflict. From this moment until at least 2003, the US was the sole superpower capable of projecting large-scale hard power in the MENA region, and was therefore able to act in accordance with its national goals and interests.

The events of the Iraq War from 2003 gave some vague indication of a possible change. Vladimir Putin, in his first term as President of Russia, had promised to restore at least some of Russia's international prestige. Russia, alongside other countries, including France and Germany, openly opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Suspicion of U.S. intentions, as well as Russian engagement in international affairs, peaked during the period of the so-called Arab Spring, when Russia began to position itself as a counter-weight to U.S.-led foreign policy.¹ This period of branded revolutions was

¹ See, for example, the Foreign Policy Concepts of the Russian Federation from the year 2013: http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186 (accessed January 9, 2019).

seen as masked geopolitics that threatened Russia's current and future interests and goals in the region.² Russia's passive reactions to Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011 were replaced by active counteractions in Syria by 2015. However, the groundwork for this change had been laid years earlier.

Soon after Vladimir Putin's initial election success in 2000, a number of observable changes occurred in Russia's international relations and foreign policy. Russia joined international bodies and created organizational mechanisms for developing knowledge and relationships. Information "security" (SWOT analysis of information) and international broadcasting also changed. The combination of a more focused political will with economic recovery thanks to higher oil prices enabled Russia to take a more ambitious and active stance in international affairs than had been the case during the Yeltsin years.

In September 2000, with the passing of the Doctrine of Information Security,³ Moscow embarked on a more consistent and concerted effort to communicate on and about Russia and impact global information flows. One of the results of the discussion and the creation of the doctrine was the establishment of further international broadcasting instruments to compete for global attention and influence. Russia Today (now RT) has been successful in influencing the international audio-visual landscape, and in some circles has come to symbolize Russian attempts to accumulate soft power.⁴ Relevant to this paper, RT Arabic, launched in May 2007 with some 500 staff (including 100 journalists) with the aim of focusing on Russia's relations with the Middle East, started with a potential audience of 300-350 million viewers.⁵ By the time it entered the Arab satellite TV market, RT Arabic was competing with some 280 existing TV outlets.⁶

In addition to international communication and broadcasting, attempts have been made to shape relations through physical interaction. Russia has to some degree been able to utilize its Islamic identity—its centuries-old interactions with the Muslim world⁷ and indigenous populations of Muslims—as the basis for a relationship.⁸ These interactions are facilitated through Russia's creation of organizational bodies as well as Russia seeking membership of existing international bodies in the Islamic world. Organizations created in and by Russia have become increasingly engaged in Islamic affairs since 2005. GONGOs such as the Russian International Affairs Council and the Gorchakov

² A.V. Koromaev, Yu.V. Zinkina, and A.C. Khodounov, *Sistemnyi monitoring globalnikh i regionalnikh riskov: Arabskaia vesna 2011 goda* (Moscow: URSS, 2011); D.Yu. Bazarkina, E.A. Vinogradova, A.V. Manoilo, E.N. Pashentsev, and G. Simons, *SshA, Siria i Iran: Libyiskii Stsenarii Povtoriaetsia* (Moscow: Goriachaia Linia—Telekom, 2012); E. Primakov, *Blizhnii Vostok na stsene i za koolisami* (Moscow: Rossiskaya Gazeta, 2012).

³ There have been modified versions of this doctrine—see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation, 2016, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2563163 (accessed January 10, 2019) for a version from 2016.

⁴ Vassily Klimentov, "RT, Russian Soft Power in Images," *Ina Global*, 2013, <https://www.inaglobal.fr/en/television/article/rt-russian-soft-power-images> (accessed October 10, 2018); Maxime Audinet, "RT, Russia's Voice to the World," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 8, 2017, <https://mondediplo.com/2017/04/08RT> (accessed October 10, 2018)

⁵ BBC Monitoring, "Russia Reaches Out to Arab World Through TV," *Arab Media & Society*, 2007, <https://www.arabmediasociety.com/russia-reaches-out-to-arab-world-through-tv/> (accessed October 10, 2018)

⁶ Alan L. Heil, "Rate of Arabic Language TV Start-Ups Shows No Sign of Abating," *Arab Media & Society* (2007): 1-8, 1.

⁷ "Russia and the Muslim World," *Geopolitica*, 2013, <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/article/russia-and-muslim-world-0> (accessed October 10, 2018).

⁸ Yasar Yakis, "Russia and the Islamic World," *Arab News*, May 22, 2017, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1103421> (accessed October 10, 2018). Estimates vary, but one estimate is that there are 17 million Muslims living in Russia (i.e., 12 percent of the population).

Foundation have engaged with Middle Eastern questions.⁹ Other groups also exist, such as the think tank Group of Strategic Vision—Russia-Islamic World, founded by former Prime Minister Evgeny Primakov and former President of Tatarstan Mintimer Shaimiev in 2006 after Russia joined the Organization of Islamic Cooperation as an observer.¹⁰ These groups help foster relationships between Russia and the MENA region, as well as develop information and knowledge on the region. A more formal level of diplomacy and interaction takes place in international organizations, such as the Declaration of Cooperation with OPEC¹¹ or the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, where Russia has been an observer state since 2005.¹² Russia's success or failure in diplomacy and influence is often viewed through the lens of a contextual relationship with rivals in the MENA region, especially the United States.

Geopolitics and the Middle East

Geopolitics is a contested term with regards to its definition and perception. To understand the politics of geopolitics, both perception and outcomes are relevant. "Geopolitics is not just a way of seeing. It is also the actions and outcomes that simultaneously transform spaces, places and politics."¹³ Thus, geopolitics can be seen as both a practice and a representation.¹⁴ Not long after the end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, Brzezinski noted that the United States needed to gain and retain control of Eurasia in order to ensure its global dominance.¹⁵ Part of this task was to prevent any one particular actor or constellation of actors from emerging that would be capable of challenging U.S. global hegemony. At the beginning of the new century, Cohen noted that the number of major global and regional powers was increasing, while global and regional organizations were gaining strength.¹⁶ However, he did not consider this sufficient to eliminate disturbances in the international system, given that global terrorism and irredentist wars were causing considerable turmoil.

Kelly noted that many 20th-century wars between major powers originated in shatter belts, a very specific term in geography and political science.¹⁷ What started as local turmoil could rapidly evolve into a serious conflict between the powers involved, as happened with World Wars One and Two, as well as Vietnam. "Frequently, such tension zones are strategically positioned and are relatively close to great power territories or allies."¹⁸ Cohen noted that "a shatter belt is caught

⁹ See, for example, Gorchakov Fund, "Dynamics of Russian-Iranian Relations Was Discussed at the International Conference in Tehran," 2017, <https://gorchakovfund.ru/en/news/view/dynamics-of-russian-iranian-relations-was-discussed-at-the-international-conference-in-tehran/> (accessed January 10, 2019) or RIAC, "Project: Security System in the Middle East," <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/projects/regional/middle-east/> (accessed January 10, 2019).

¹⁰ "Group of Strategic Vision 'Russia-Islamic World,'" Russia-Islamic World, <http://rusisworld.com/en/about/>, (accessed October 10, 2018)

¹¹ See OPEC, "OPEC Secretary General Meets Ambassador of the Russian Federation," https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/4931.htm (accessed January 10, 2019).

¹² See Organization of Islamic Cooperation, https://www.oic-oci.org/page/?p_id=179&p_ref=60&lan=en (accessed January 10, 2019) for further details.

¹³ Colin Flint, *Introduction to Geopolitics*, 3rd Edition (London: Routledge, 2017), 302.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

¹⁶ Saul B. Cohen, "Geopolitical Realities and the United States Foreign Policy," *Political Geography* 22 (2003): 1-33.

¹⁷ Philip L. Kelly, "Escalation of Regional Conflict: Testing the Shatterbelt Conflict," *Political Geography Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1986): 161-180.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

between the conflicting interests of adjoining Great Powers.”¹⁹ Attempting a clear definition of the term “shatter belt,” Kelly described it as a “two-tiered structure of conflict: the local layer, characterized by political turmoil, social and economic depression and fragmentation, and strategic minerals and passageways; and the international, distinguished by great power competition for footholds among various states of a region.”²⁰ There has been some continuity in terms of the evolution of a shatter belt and its destabilizing effects in the 21st century. For a shatter belt to emerge, there needs to be a context of competition or conflict among different actors in a country or region.

The first issue to examine is: what are Russia’s interests and motivations in the MENA region, seen from the perspective of Russia and others? Kozhanov’s 2018 Chatham House report on Russian policy across the Middle East listed a number of factors, many of which were related to geopolitical competition. Although some mention was made of economic factors—such as the international oil and gas markets—driving Russian engagement and influence, the majority of factors were connected to “a challenge to US and EU interests,” the confrontation with the West, avoiding international isolation, and countering Western sanctions, as well as putting pressure on the West, Russian suspicion of the Arab Spring, and catering to the domestic political constituency (by increasing Russia’s perceived international prestige).²¹ However, this ignores a number of indicators, including the fact that Russian engagement in the MENA region began before the current tensions with the US and the EU (see below).

The above assessment of the factors influencing Russia’s increased engagement in the MENA region is vastly different from Dmitry Trenin’s analysis. Russia certainly sees itself as a global player, which to an extent requires an active presence in key global regions like the MENA. Trenin states that Russia’s key objectives in the region include: containing and reducing Islamic extremism and radicalism in other regions that have the potential to expand into Russia and the post-Soviet neighborhood; building long-lasting geopolitical alliances with friendly regimes and forces in the region by supporting them; establishing a modest Russian military presence in the region; expanding the market opportunities for Russian arms, nuclear industry, oil and gas, and food; attempting to attract foreign investment in Russia, especially from the rich Gulf States; and supporting energy prices by coordinating policies with the primary energy producers in the Gulf.²² Over the past decade, Russia has incrementally increased its presence and activity in the MENA region along the lines suggested by Trenin.

Russia began its diplomatic push into the MENA region in 2008, when, among other things, it offered Syria and Egypt nuclear power stations and re-established its military presence in the Mediterranean Sea by putting the Syrian port of Tartus back into operation.²³ One of the results of Russia’s increased activity and interaction in the MENA region has been increasing influence. During Vladimir Putin’s 2017 tour of the Middle East, Ishaan Tharoor observed:

he exhibited the kind of clever strategic policymaking that the US is simply not doing in the region....What you’re seeing is Russia steadily coming in and re-building ties,

¹⁹ Saul B. Cohen, *Geography and Politics in a World Divided*, 2nd Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 85.

²⁰ Kelly, “Escalation of Regional Conflict,” 164.

²¹ Nikolay Kozhanov, “Russian Policy Across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods,” Chatham House Research Paper, Russia and Eurasia Programme, 2018.

²² Dmitry Trenin, “Russia in the Middle East: Moscow’s Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers,” Taskforce on U.S. Policy toward Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016.

²³ Geopolitica, “Russia and the Muslim World.”

asserting its influence, being an active player in the region—at a time when US policy in the Middle East is incredibly inconsistent and incoherent.²⁴

Thus, as U.S. presence and influence wanes, Russia has been successful at taking advantage of these specific circumstances and projecting itself as a consistent, reliable, and dependable actor that has demonstrated its willingness to stand by its allies and partners. Unlike in the Soviet era, Russia's current approach to relations with Arab states and building alliances is highly pragmatic. Putin's fourth term in office has led to predictions that we should "expect more Russian attempts to deepen its political, security and economic ties with the region."²⁵

The progress and success of Russian re-engagement in the Middle East has prompted some in the US to strategize about how to counter and roll back this progress. One such "thought experiment" related to pushing back Russia in the Middle East in 2018. Although the US considered "across the board competition" with Russia throughout the Middle East to be a mistake, a number of other steps were debated. These included increasing the number of U.S. troops in Syria, increasing aid to the "rebel" forces, and attempting to influence countries in Russia's "Near Abroad" in order to put pressure on Russia to leave the MENA as a U.S. sphere of influence (the logic being that this would "force" Russia to accept that any deal must have U.S. backing). Byman suggested that the "United States might also try to ingratiate itself with longstanding US allies, warts and all."²⁶ This implies putting such values as human rights, the rule of law, and democracy on the back burner. Such reasoning reveals the lack of a solid understanding of the on-the-ground situation, which has changed significantly in the last decade.

The Middle East as a Shatter Belt

The concept of a "shatter belt" has been applied to various contemporary crises and armed conflicts, including some of those in the Middle East. The Middle East is vulnerable for a number of reasons, among them the numerous religious and ethnic groups living in the region (creating opportunity for division) and the significant energy resources and global transportation routes present (providing a motivation for competition to control them).²⁷ Cohen noted that in the wake of the end of the Cold War, a major global and regional geopolitical restructuring took place. He described the 1991 Gulf War as a physical manifestation of the Middle Eastern disequilibrium, which since the conclusion of World War II had been a shatter belt region embroiled in inter-regional tensions and the Cold War rivalry between superpowers.²⁸ During the Cold War, the Soviet Union exerted a great deal of influence in the Middle East and North Africa; the Soviet collapse and the rise of the unipolar system witnessed a dramatic reduction in external military and economic influence in the region.²⁹ Thus, the

²⁴ World Staff, "Russia's Influence in the Middle East is Growing," *PRI*, December 14, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-12-14/russia-s-influence-middle-east-growing> (accessed October 10, 2018).

²⁵ Fadi Esber, "Arab World's Relations with Russia Will Only Grow Stronger," *Arab News*, May 9, 2018, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1299491>.

²⁶ Daniel L. Byman, "Pushing Back Russia in the Middle East: A Thought Experiment," Brookings, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/04/13/pushing-back-russia-in-the-middle-east-a-thought-experiment/> (accessed October 10, 2018).

²⁷ Saman Zulfqar, "Competing Interests of Major Powers in the Middle East: The Case Study of Syria and Its Implications for Regional Stability," *Perceptions* XXIII, no. 1 (2018): 212-148, 121-122.

²⁸ Saul B. Cohen, "Middle East Geopolitical Transformation: The Disappearance of a Shatter Belt," *Journal of Geography* 91, no. 1 (1992): 2-10.

²⁹ László Póti, "Russian Policies Towards the MENA Region," Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture Working Papers no. 9 (2018): 4.

end of the Cold War was seen as an opportunity to bring an end to regional instability by fostering a new regional balance of power.

However, regional order and stability has been severely compromised by specific events and trends, such as the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the progressive fracturing of the regional order caused by the Arab Spring. The result of these processes and events has been a relative decline in U.S. power and influence in the region, together with an increase in the power and influence of China, Iran, and Russia.³⁰ Russian foreign policy interests and goals in MENA have increased markedly from the 1990s, and Russia now plays an increasingly important and influential role in the region. Its geostrategic interests have been secured thanks to Russia's non-ideological foreign policy, economic assistance (nuclear power plants and loans) and military equipment sales, and opposition to U.S. interests:³¹

The modern Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is the epitome of a shatter belt. One decade ago, the MENA region was relatively stable by today's standards....In stark contrast, the MENA region today is exponentially more volatile: Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen remain mired in violent conflict, generating a degree of insecurity that is unprecedented in the region's modern history and revolutionary in its implications for regional and international order.³²

The US has played a significant role in the MENA region and beyond since September 2001. However, Anthony Cordesman is very pointed in his critique of the U.S. approach to the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. His critique centers on the fact that three successive presidential administrations have engaged in wars that have resulted in tactical victories yet have not had any clear strategy for ending these wars or bringing about stable peace.³³ The tactical and operational aspects of the armed conflicts in which the U.S. is currently enmeshed are harming its strategic interests and capacities, creating an opportunity for other powers to take advantage of the situation.

A clear example of a geopolitical shatter belt "laboratory" where Russia is one of the actors engaged in the struggle for influence is the Syrian conflict. Spyer notes that "the country's [Syria] civil war is over—and an entirely new one has started with the United States at the centre of it." He adds that, "since mid-2014, there have been two parallel wars taking place on Syrian soil."³⁴ The first involves domestic actors, the second regional and international powers. In Syria, a vast and complex array of alliances of convenience and necessity are taking a number of seemingly contradictory actions, with the result that the domestic conflict is entirely intertwined with the regional and international dimensions:

The new contests in Syria derive not from internal Syrian dynamics, but from the rival interests of outside powers pursued over the ruins of Syria: Turks against Kurds, Israel against Iran and its proxies, the United States against Iran, and now, potentially, Ankara against Washington. These external forces are all determined to gain

³⁰ P.E. Paraschos, "Geopolitical Risk in the Middle East and North Africa: Shatter Belts & Great Power Rivalry," *Japan Spotlight* (2017): 17-20; Zulfqar, "Competing Interests."

³¹ Póti, "Russian Policies," 13.

³² Paraschos, "Geopolitical Risk," 17.

³³ Anthony H. Cordesman, "Losing by 'Winning': America's Wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria," CSIS, August 13, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/losing-winning-americas-wars-afghanistan-iraq-and-syria> (accessed August 23, 2018).

³⁴ Jonathan Spyer, "Welcome to Syria 2.0," *Foreign Policy*, January 25, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/25/welcome-to-syria-2-0/> (accessed July 29, 2018).

advantage over one another in Syria. And so, even as Syria's two longstanding conflicts wind down, war and strife are not departing the area.³⁵

Political statements include numerous overt references to the geopolitical understandings and logic of the armed conflict in Syria. Russia (and the Soviet Union) has a long-term diplomatic and defense relationship with Syria, embodied in the lease of the Soviet-era naval base at Tartus. Russia became indirectly involved in the Syrian conflict at an early stage, supplying weapons, advising and training military personnel, and engaging in diplomacy. In 2013, Russia and the US pulled off a diplomatic coup that saw Syria divest itself of chemical weapons, thereby avoiding direct military action by the US. On September 30, 2015, Russia became directly involved militarily, staving off what seemed at the time to be the inevitable collapse of the Syrian armed forces.³⁶ Russia's geostrategic calculus after the regime change in Libya in 2011 meant that they were forced to act in Syria in order to preserve their influence and credibility as an international actor.³⁷ Besides Russia's geopolitical and geostrategic interests in the MENA region, the collapse of the Syrian government would have represented a significant domestic security risk to Russia, with the potential for the resurgence of terrorism.³⁸ This demonstrates the complex nature of the conflicts and tensions currently under way around the globe.

Initially, the Obama administration was strongly in favor of regime change as a precondition for any peaceful settlement of the conflict. Since it would have been difficult to persuade U.S. public opinion that direct intervention in Syria to achieve this regime change was necessary, more indirect efforts were made, sometimes packaged with a geopolitical message. Rhetorically, the US and its allies sought to justify the illegal presence of military forces in Syria as being necessary to fight ISIS. However, when President Trump indicated that he would like to see the rapid withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Syria, a more realist and honest answer was provoked. "He's not going to pull out until he has a solution that won't cede the field to Russia and Iran," Jim Hanson, the president of the Security Studies Group, a conservative think tank with ties to the White House, told the *LA Times*.³⁹ The same reasoning is found in a report that claims that the US is unlikely to persuade Russia to distance itself from Iran.

United Nations expert Richard Gowan described the complexity of the Syrian conflict as "the effect of unverified social media posts and slick state propaganda on a civil war wrapped in a proxy war inside a great-power war" that has resulted in a deluge of information of dubious quality.⁴⁰ Gregory Shupak from FAIR also characterized the Syrian War as a proxy fight at two different levels—among regional actors and global actors.⁴¹ To what level the conflict remains a proxy war is unclear,

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Sarah Lain and Igor Sutyagin, "III. The View from Moscow" in Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci (eds.), "Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict," Royal United Services Institute Occasional Paper, 2016, 17-24, 17.

³⁷ Póti, "Russian Policies."

³⁸ Zulfqar, "Competing Interests."

³⁹ David S. Cloud, Brian Bennett, and Tracy Wilkinson, "Trump Orders Pentagon to Prepare for Withdrawing U.S. Troops from Syria, but Some Advisors Push Back," *LA Times*, April 4, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-fg-pol-syria-trump-20180404-story.html#nws=mcnewsletter> (accessed April 5, 2018).

⁴⁰ Uri Friedman, "The 'CNN-Effect' Dies in Syria," *The Atlantic*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/03/cnn-effect-syria/554387/> (accessed March 7, 2018).

⁴¹ Gregory Shupak, "Media Erase US Role in Syria's Misery, Call for US to Inflict More Misery," FAIR, 2018, <https://fair.org/home/media-erase-us-role-in-syrias-misery-call-for-us-to-inflict-more-misery/> (accessed March 10, 2018).

especially as the United States is said to control 28 percent of Syrian territory.⁴² The year 2015 was a key inflection point: in the summer, the Syrian government was clearly in a strategic defensive position and at the point of collapse, and just before the Russian intervention, experts began to speak of a shatter belt at a tactical and operational level. “Any changes to the map of Syria’s conflict in the rest of 2015 will almost certainly occur in its ‘shatter belt’: those areas caught between the regime, armed opposition, and [the] self-proclaimed Islamic State.”⁴³ This labelling of the actors simplifies a much more complex reality in the physical domain. Who are the “armed opposition”? In reality, it is a very broad array of armed groups supported by an equally wide array of foreign powers that possess different interests and goals, in spite of such simplified value-laden statements as “fighting ISIS” or “supporting democracy.”

Conclusion

Russia became increasingly engaged in the MENA region already between 2006 and 2008, establishing means of international broadcasting (such as RT Arabic) and mechanisms for creating and maintaining political, economic, and diplomatic relationships (such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation). This engagement laid the groundwork for establishing dialogue and re-launching diplomatic efforts to influence actors and events. Russia’s success has also, to some extent, been a product of serious mistakes made by the US and EU, which set the scene for competition and conflict.

Some commentators (Kozhanov in a 2018 Chatham House report, for example) have misidentified the roots of geopolitical competition in the MENA region, dating it back to Putin’s re-election in 2012 and the increased tensions that resulted from the Crimea events in 2014. However, this view ignores such factors as the increased Russian suspicion of U.S. intentions during the regime changes of the Arab Spring (due to their similarities to the post-Soviet color revolutions) and increasing U.S. agitation at witnessing the erosion of their hegemony in the MENA region. The U.S.-led political, diplomatic, economic, and military actions in the region, especially in Iraq in 2003 and in the Arab Spring, created the “perfect” conditions for the emergence of a significant geopolitical shatter belt.

With the removal from power of a number of secular regimes that maintained stability among the varied ethnic and religious communities of the region through the application of hard power, large swathes of the region experienced economic and security collapse. This created a vacuum that is being filled by local, regional, and international actors vying for influence. Russia is one of those international actors; it has found itself defending its interests and seeking to expand its military, diplomatic, political, and economic influence. The shatter belt is most noticeable in Syria, which saw a U.S.-led coalition almost succeed in fomenting regime change in the summer of 2015. This prompted Russia to become directly involved in the conflict.

⁴² Spyer, “Welcome to Syria 2.0.”

⁴³ Yezid Sayigh, “Redrawing the Lines in Syria’s Shatter Belt,” Carnegie Middle East Centre, 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/06/25/redrawing-lines-in-syria-s-shatterbelt-pub-60484> (accessed May 29, 2018).

Putin's Masterpiece: Russia's Military and Diplomatic Role in Syria through Syrian and Iranian Eyes

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When Russian military forces deployed to Syria at the end of 2015, most observers saw it as a desperate Russian attempt to rescue a doomed ally, one that would most likely end in a quagmire. Instead, the Russian air force surprised observers in Syria and beyond by demonstrating the capability to accurately target strikes, a capability that only a handful of other air forces—in North America, Western Europe and Israel—possess. The Russians went on to advise the Syrian land forces about restructuring and acquiring a capability for maneuver warfare, to frame a pacification policy (including by reintegrating former enemies), and, perhaps most surprisingly of all (after the Ukrainian crisis), to shape a conflict resolution framework that Moscow apparently succeeded in imposing on its Iranian and Syrian allies.

This short chapter is an attempt to analyze perceptions of Russia's military and diplomatic role in Syria on the part of Iranian and Syrian diplomatic, political, and military actors. It also explores the factors that drove them to accept Russian leadership even in a context where Syrians and Iranians had very serious reservations about Russian decisions and plans. The analysis contained in this chapter comes largely from a series of interviews with Syrian and Iranian diplomats, officials, and military officers, as well as commanders and leaders of the Syrian armed opposition, carried out by a local research team in Syria in 2017-18.

The Impact of Russia's Airplanes and Advisers

Almost all interviewees acknowledged, sometimes grudgingly, that the intervention of the Russian air force was the key military turning point of the conflict. All opposition commanders admitted that it was simply impossible to resist this precise Russian bombardment for long, and that the impact was much greater than that of the volunteer militias sponsored by the IRGC (deployed from 2013 onwards). For their part, Iranian Revolutionary Guards advisors and commanders of Shia militias linked to the Revolutionary Guards claimed that the intervention of the militias mobilized by the Guards had been the real turning point in the war, providing the Assad regime with an aggressive infantry fighting force for the first time. They did, however, acknowledge that the Russian Air Force also played a key role.

The most important point of view, however, is that of the dignitaries of the Assad regime, since they were and are the Russians' key partners in ending the conflict. Almost without fail, Syrian

officials and officers rated the Russian intervention as the most decisive help they received, and throughout 2017 they continued to consider Russian support the most vital external aid to the Syrian regime, notwithstanding that Iran's support had been longer-lasting and that Iran had shown unflinching support for Assad himself. In 2018, when it appeared increasingly clear that the regime was winning the war, Western—and most importantly Israeli—air raids played an important role in convincing the regime that it would need Russian support over the long haul, as only Russia could help Syria build up more or less credible air defenses (see below).

Russian advisers to the Syrian regime appear to have played an important role in designing a reconciliation policy, implemented in areas recaptured by the regime's armed forces. This role was advertised in the Russian media and appears to have been based on Russian/Soviet experiences in Chechnya and Afghanistan, essentially guaranteeing former opposition commanders who agreed to cross over that they would be integrated into the regime's social framework. While it is harder to assess the impact of these new policies than the impact of Russian bombing, the Russians may well have contributed expertise that neither the Iranians nor the Syrians had. At the very least, the widely publicized episodes of opposition commanders reconciling with the regime (in the presence of Russian advisors) indicated to many opposition commanders that there was an alternative to dying under Russian bombs or being shot by IRGC-sponsored militias.

It took longer for the Russians to help the Syrian Arab Army develop or re-develop the ability to conduct maneuver warfare. The Syrian Arab Army might well have refined its tactical skills through years of continuous warfare.¹ However, in 2015 and 2016 the typical *modus operandi* of the army was still supporting frontal assaults by Syrian and foreign militias; the IRGC does not seem to feature maneuver skills, perhaps because it was only training militia and infantry.²

The militias trained by IRGC and Hezbollah proved to be aggressive and motivated, and to have tactical skills matching those of the best opposition units. Once Russian air strike capabilities were added to the mix, it proved enough to invert the course of the conflict. But the war would still have been very long, bloody, and destructive if during 2017 and 2018 the Syrian Arab Army had not started playing more of a leading role in the conflict, planning and carrying out complex operations aimed at cutting enemy-held areas into separate pockets. Russian advisors in the Ministry of Defense were major supporters of the idea that the Army should regain its leading role in the war, according to Syrian and IRGC officers alike. The Army and the militias would then besiege the pockets while offering more or less attractive surrender options to the encircled opponents. Once these new tactics were deployed successfully (from the battle of Aleppo onwards), the pace of Assad's reconquest of Syria accelerated dramatically.

Diplomatic Maneuver

Still, even with Russian airpower, aggressive militias, maneuver warfare, and relatively sophisticated reconciliation policies, the conflict could have endured for many years, especially in areas like the south and the north, where opposition supply lines into Jordan, Israel, and Turkey were short and supporting countries willing to pay and supply generously. To that point, Putin's Russia had achieved much through its intervention in Syria, not least the continued survival of the Syrian regime, but not enough to avoid a quagmire and being forced to remain committed to an operation in Syria that it could ill afford for many years to come.

¹ See Brian Betts, "Syrian Arab Army Tactics in the Countryside," South Front, May 2, 2016, <https://southfront.org/syrian-arab-army-tactics-in-the-countryside/> (accessed October 10, 2018). Although South Front is a website sympathetic to the regime, Betts' commentary is based on the video of a tactical action.

² "Threat Tactics Report: Syria," Tradoc, February 2016.

In order to achieve genuine victory in Syria, Putin and the Russian government needed to square the diplomatic circle of conflict resolution, co-opting at least some of the regional players and marginalizing the others. The opportunity presented itself with the failed July 2016 coup against Erdogan in Turkey, which soon saw a dramatic warming of Turkish-Russian relations. In a series of diplomatic efforts centered around the so-called Astana talks, the Russians first tried to propose a political transition that would result in a coalition government and the retirement of Assad, who was to be replaced with another (but more presentable) dignitary of the Syrian Ba'ath. At this stage, it is hard to say whether the Russians really believed their effort could succeed or whether they were simply laying the groundwork for the next stage of their diplomatic strategy. Interviews with Syrian officials, some quite close to Assad, suggest that the Russians were genuinely pushing for Assad's retirement. In the end, most parties involved rejected the Russian proposal of a political transition that would assign the presidency to a Ba'ath member. The talks nonetheless allowed the Russians to demonstrate a degree of good will and to establish intense diplomatic exchanges with some key regional players, such as Turkey and Jordan.

Russian diplomats skillfully played on Jordan's fear of the growing domination of the armed opposition in Syria by radical jihadist groups, such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda, and on Turkey's alienation from the Americans. Syrian officials, opposition commanders, and even a Turkish source within Erdogan's party all confirmed that by January 2018 the Russians had an agreement with the Turks that allowed them to play a key role in the resolution of the conflict (thereby gaining permanent influence in the post-war Syrian order) as long as they were able to purge the opposition of global jihadist elements and bring it under control. Under the terms of the agreement, the surviving Syrian opposition forces would concentrate around Idlib in the north and be given the choice of surrendering, integrating into the Turkish command in the Afrin area, or facing military annihilation. In 2018, the Turks cut off the Saudi supply lines through Turkey to pro-Saudi opposition groups in northern Syria, ensuring their own monopoly over supplying the opposition. The understanding with the Russians was that they would drive their client groups against the global jihadists and against the Kurds, who were allied with the Americans in northeastern Syria. Once the remaining opposition forces were thus "synchronized" under Turkish leadership, they would negotiate a political agreement with the Assad regime to end the conflict. As of fall 2018, the main hurdle left to overcome was the Turkish refusal to accept Assad remaining in power.

Various Syrian opposition sources in the south were in accord with Syrian government sources that the Jordanians agreed in late winter/early spring 2018 to cut off the opposition's supply lines and went as far as intercepting some supply convoys moving through their territory. Since 2016, Jordanian intelligence had been cooperating with the Russians to track "global jihadist" targets inside Syria, so for the Jordanians the 2018 agreement had been in the cards for a long time. With this, the only supply route left to the armed opposition was Israel, which remained keen not to be seen as too openly supplying Salafist groups and therefore allowed only a limited amount of supplies through. The Russian-sponsored agreements with Turkey and Jordan, in other words, largely cut off the Saudis and the other Arab Gulf states, who had been the most generous supporters of the opposition groups.

Overcoming the Resistance of Allies

Starved of funding, the Syrian opposition was on its knees as the end of 2018 approached. The Russians' 2017 plan, which had offered a coalition government under a Ba'ath president (but not Assad) now appeared a distant dream to many opposition groups that had earlier rejected it in disgust. What is less well known is that the Russian plan had initially been rejected even by Assad and most of his circle, as well as by the Iranians.

Syrian officials contacted in the latter part of 2017 all confirmed that Assad never agreed to retire, despite Russian pressure and the support of some of the regime's dignitaries, who saw it as a way to achieve peace and keep the rest of the regime intact. The issue lost urgency as the regime's

military victories rendered the original Russian plan out of date by spring 2018, although the Turkish government continued to demand Assad's resignation. Interviewees also suggested that many within the Ba'ath regime had reservations about sharing power with former opposition groups and resisted the idea of giving former oppositionists any key positions in government. Syrian officers contacted during 2018 suggested that even the temporary agreement between Russia and Turkey in late 2017/early 2018, which allowed the latter to establish a protectorate on Syria's borders, was seen negatively by the Assad regime, which—under Russian pressure—grudgingly accepted it to avoid deploying its own forces in the area. As of summer 2018, the Russians were trying to find a longer-lasting formula that would allow Erdogan to gain some permanent influence in Syria without directly encroaching on Syrian sovereignty.

Similarly, the Iranians, and especially the main Iranian actor in Syria, the IRGC, were initially incensed by Russian ideas of some kind of political-diplomatic settlement and insisted that the only acceptable solution was outright military victory. According to IRGC sources and Iranian diplomats, as well as to Syrian officials and military officers, the Iranians had little interest in reaching an understanding with the Turks. By the summer of 2018, however, the Iranians had rallied behind the Russians in putting pressure on the Syrians to accept or tolerate the Turkish occupation of a strip of Syrian territory in the north.

How did the Russians achieve this turnaround? One factor, of course, was the international isolation of Syria and the growing isolation of Iran. In comparison, Russia had a much stronger position in the international system. But more importantly, the Russians played well the cards they had. A typical example of the Russian ability to push its reluctant allies in the desired direction was the carefully calibrated granting of air defense and diplomatic cover to Syrians and Iranians. The Syrian air defense system was badly out of date and damaged by the conflict in early 2018; the Iranians did not have significant air defense capabilities in Syria either. The Russians, on the other hand, had deployed state-of-the-art air defense batteries around Latakia from the moment of their intervention, and these were later further strengthened. Moscow never used them to protect Syrians, Iranians, or Hizbollah from regular Israeli raids or from occasional American-Franco-British raids.

According to sources in the Syrian military, as air raids intensified and Syrian intelligence reported (during the preparations for the Eastern Ghouta operation of 2018) a plan to support an opposition counter-offensive in the south with a large-scale series of U.S. air strikes, the Russians first agreed to restore and upgrade the Syrian air defense system and then—in September 2018—to deliver to Syria the S-300 air defense system. In practice, the Russians improved Syrian capabilities without getting them anywhere close to what would be required to really keep the Israelis and Americans away. In this way, it only reminded the Syrians and the Iranians of how dependent they were on Russian military technology and Russia's status as a nuclear power (which makes a direct U.S.-Russia or Israel-Russia confrontation unlikely).

Russia in Syria: Reshaping the Global Order or Fighting Terrorism?

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In September 2015, Russia plunged into the Syrian civil war with bombing raids nominally aimed at the extremist and militant targets threatening Bashir al-Assad's regime. While the Russian-Syrian alliance dates back to the Soviet era and Moscow has had a modest military presence in Syria for years,¹ Russia's airstrikes—its first military action outside the borders of the former Soviet Union—caught many Russia-watchers by surprise. Vladimir Putin defended Moscow's air strikes by reference to the exigency of security situation: the need to disrupt the spread of international terrorism and defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). In the eyes of many observers, the Kremlin's argument did not hold water, prompting a debate about what Russia really wants in Syria. Some say Russian intervention is about projecting Moscow's power in the world, while others claim it is about bolstering Putin's popularity at home. For some, it is part of a strategy to strengthen Russia's foothold in the Middle East; for others, it is an instance of Moscow's ruthless opportunism, reaping dividends from the regional crisis.

Moscow's intervention in Syria is clearly about more than fighting terrorism, and Putin has ambitions beyond safeguarding a strategic ally. For the Kremlin, Syria represents a tactical theater in a broader strategy of anti-Westernism, while counterterrorism offers a tried-and-tested method for achieving desirable political objectives. In a nutshell, Moscow's main political "end" is a global Russia that holds a prominent place on a multi-polar international stage where the rules of the game are suited to the Kremlin. To accomplish this "end," Moscow has pursued a host of approaches to minimize the main threat thereto, namely the U.S. and the U.S.-led liberal international order. These include seeking to weaken the US in places of America's traditional influence, obstructing the spread of democracy, and disrupting alliances that bolster U.S. interests. Concurrently, it has promoted Russia's military, diplomatic, energy, and commercial interests abroad and sought to burnish the

¹ Ishaan Tharoor, "Why Russia Is in Syria," *The Washington Post*, September 11, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/11/why-russia-is-in-syria/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.12017f0e7502.

popularity of the Russian president at home. Although the Kremlin has relied on all available means, direct force—including “counterterrorism”—and disinformation have become the hallmarks of the Russian strategy. Moscow’s strategy has been based on tactical wins that take advantage of short-term opportunities and exploit the weaknesses or vulnerabilities of its opponents.

While this tactical and opportunity-dependent approach affords the Kremlin flexibility and the tactical benefits of surprise, thus offering Putin a comparative advantage in navigating regional instability and crisis, it is constrained by circumstances and incapable of producing enduring relationships and ties.¹ Absent deeper commitments and trust, Moscow will remain hostage to other actors’ interests, dynamics, and chances. And while Russia has proven capable of staging a show of high-tech weapons and force, it has shown little interest in addressing the root causes of instability and crises.

Exploiting Washington’s Retreat from Global Leadership and Furthering Russia’s Military, Economic, and Political Aims

Syria represents a clear example of America’s weariness with war and its growing reluctance to shoulder the costs and responsibilities associated with maintaining global order. Moscow has capitalized on Washington’s contraction of its military and diplomatic presence around the world to exert its own influence by exploiting regional weaknesses, instability, and crises. Russia’s “counterterrorism intervention” in Syria has sought to fill the gap left by the shrinking American footprint in the Middle East, as well as to promote an image of a weakened and faltering America. Russia’s coordinated information campaign has juxtaposed Washington’s failures in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen with Moscow’s decisive political and military gains in Syria. Despite U.S. diplomatic and limited military efforts, the Assad regime remains firmly entrenched, while the Syrian opposition and ISIS have ceased to be relevant players in the conflict. Moscow has declared that it is in the Middle East to stay and it will play a decisive role in any post-conflict settlement in Damascus.

Syria also represents a geostrategic opportunity for Moscow. Since the Soviet era, Russia has used facilities in the small Syrian port of Tartus, the only Russian naval outpost beyond the Bosphorus. While the utility of this naval base has been a matter of debate, it allows Russia to firm up its naval presence in the Mediterranean region. Having the opportunity to operate beyond its coastal waters is consistent with Russia’s global maritime ambitions (the port of Sevastopol is another case in point),² while having a permanent Russian naval presence in Tartus is essential for projecting Moscow’s power southward and westward.

Lastly, Moscow finds an important military-technological customer and an energy partner in Syria and, therefore, the Kremlin’s policy toward Damascus promises economic benefits. On the eve of the Syrian conflict, Moscow had billions of dollars of outstanding weapons contracts with Damascus³ and Russian businesses made heavy investments in Syrian infrastructure. The sale of weapons and weapons systems to Syria provides much-needed revenue to Russia’s military-industrial complex and solidifies Moscow’s position as a major arms supplier to the Middle East. It also provides Putin with additional leverage vis-à-vis the West. The S-300 surface-to-air systems that Moscow furnished to Damascus with the stated purpose of “fighting terrorists” have helped its ally to deter and intercept American air strikes and limit Israeli and Turkish military action. U.S.

¹ Ben Connable and Becca Wasser, “The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East,” RAND, 2018, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/05/the-limits-of-russian-strategy-in-the-middle-east.html> (accessed January 10, 2019).

² Edward Delman, “The Link Between Putin’s Military Campaigns in Syria and Ukraine,” *The Atlantic*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/navy-base-syria-crimea-putin/408694/>.

³ Tharoor, “Why Russia Is in Syria.”

withdrawal from areas rich in oil and gas would allow the Russian and Syrian presidents to secure a flow of cash from energy contracts, while Turkey's departure from Idlib is critical to Assad's retaking of this remaining pocket of resistance.

Halting International Democratization, Cementing Domestic Popular Support

The Syrian civil war has its roots in the "Arab Spring," which was initially interpreted by the Kremlin as an effort by Washington to curtail Russia's influence in the MENA region (the Middle East and North Africa).¹ The Russian government drew parallels between the protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen and the "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet space purportedly fomented by the West. Moscow's patronage of authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space and Syria has been driven by its fear of "color revolutions," a menacing symbol of the spreading liberal order threatening Putin's authoritarianism. The 2015 National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation places the threat of "intelligence and other activity by special services and organizations of foreign states" ahead of the threat of terrorist activities. Notably, the document links the emergence of ISIS and the spread of its influence in the Middle East to intrastate instability and conflict provoked by Western states' "practice of overthrowing legitimate political regimes."²

Putin's military adventurism and support for authoritarianism abroad has a deeper connection to the Russian president's domestic populism, essential for legitimizing his governance at home. The socio-economic and political transformation of post-Soviet Russia has foregrounded concerns about the legitimacy of the Putin government's political rule. A decade of economic growth fueled by rising commodity prices encouraged the emergence of a sizable urban middle class that began demanding better governance and democratization for their country. Before the 2014 economic crisis, the Kremlin could count on a social and political bargain with the Russian population in which they accepted autocratic governance in exchange for security and higher living standards. In the aftermath of the economic recession, which had a devastating impact on large segments of the Russian population, and the debacle in eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin needed both a distraction and a way to change the narrative from one portraying Russia as an occupier and aggressor to one presenting it as an important ally and contributor to global counterterrorism efforts. With limited Russian casualties, the Syrian war has offered the Kremlin a powerful card that has been effectively played in Russia's domestic politics. President Putin has used it to bolster national pride and rally popular support for his policies.

What about Fighting Terrorism?

Despite the politicization of the transnational terrorist threat and heavy propaganda about its tireless efforts to root out terrorist networks in Syria, the Russian leadership takes the risks associated with transnational terrorist activity seriously. It has channeled considerable resources into building up its domestic security and law enforcement structures and invested lavishly in sustaining security and counterterrorism cooperation in its immediate neighborhood and beyond. Between 2011 and 2015, between 900 and 2,400 Russian foreign fighters left their homeland for Iraq and Syria. In 2015, most of the mid-level commanders of Russia's Caucasus Emirate, an umbrella organization for Islamist insurgency in Russia's North Caucasus, defected to ISIS, which established an affiliate, Vilayat Kavkaz, in Russia. Russia's intervention in Syria gave a boost to homegrown radicalization, while ISIS claimed

¹ Alexey Malashenko, "Russia and the Arab Spring," Carnegie Moscow, October 2013, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/russia_arab_spring2013.pdf (accessed January 10, 2019).

² "Russian National Security Strategy, December 2015 – Full-Text Translation," IEEE, <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf> (accessed January 10, 2019).

responsibility for multiple terrorist incidents against Russian interests at home and abroad.¹ Concurrently, multiple jihadist cells autonomous from the Caucasus Emirate and which had been radicalized by ISIS online propaganda popped up in different parts of Russia.

In Syria, Moscow did see an opportunity to deal a blow to the Sunni extremist threat. However, the purportedly principal counterterrorism agenda was in fact secondary to presenting Russia as an active global player and frustrating the plans and interests of the US. Syria is not the first state where Russia has used counterterrorism tactics in pursuit of a broader counter-revolution strategy and anti-Western aims. It has done so in Central Asia, as well as, more recently, in Ukraine and Afghanistan. The Kremlin's dual agenda means that its regional counterterrorism projects have had a negligible impact on the root causes of security problems while furthering the political malformations responsible for engendering them.

Conclusion

In Syria, Russia has demonstrated its military resolve and ability to project its strength beyond the traditional post-Soviet theater. It has reinforced its presence in the Middle East, rebuilt its naval base, and strengthened its position as an arms supplier to the region. The Kremlin has prevented the collapse of Assad's regime and weakened Sunni extremism that has been threatening domestic security. Outside Syria, Russia's economic and energy deals and weapons sales have been pulling a number of U.S. allies—Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia—closer to Moscow. According to some analysts, even the Israelis have made overtures to Russia, reminding them of their interests in the Middle East.²

On the one hand, Russia's intervention in the conflict in Syria represents a record of solid military and political accomplishments,³ all achieved at a relatively low cost. In three to five years, MENA has transformed from a region where Washington's influence dominated to one where Russia has an enduring presence. On the other hand, the conflict will continue for years to come, not only between the Syrian government and opposition forces, but among the many states that have entered the Syrian front. The survival of the Assad regime will be impossible without access to Syria's oil and gas reserves in areas currently controlled by Washington. Since the United States appears to be determined to stay in Syria, the country will be transformed into yet another battlefield between global powers. The Russians will also have the difficult task of managing their own relations with different regional state and non-state actors (Iran, Israel, and Turkey, to name but a few), as well as among groups with a history of hostility and competing interests (Kurds, Sunnis, and Shias).

The Kremlin strategy has not only been largely myopic to these long-term challenges arising from regional cleavages and problems, but it has also been conducive to fostering the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of regional governments rather than resolving them. This will inevitably complicate post-conflict reconstruction in Syria, making Russia's long-term prospects in MENA far from certain. At best, it will be able to sustain a few existing ties and influence selected states' behavior, but it will be unable to set a regional agenda without risking being compelled to intervene in other states.

¹ "Chechnia oboshla Dagestan v reitinge nestabil'nykh regionov Severnogo Kavkaza," *Kavkazskii Uzel*, March 14, 2018, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/317689/>.

² Matthew R.J. Brodsky, "Beware Russia's Endgame in Syria," *Weekly Standard*, October 17, 2018, <https://www.weeklystandard.com/matthew-r-j-brodsky/beware-russias-endgame-in-syria>.

³ Steven A. Cook, "Russia Is in the Middle East to Stay," *Foreign Policy*, March 16, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/16/the-middle-east-needs-a-steady-boyfriend/>.

How can Moscow Support Syria's Reconstruction?

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Having won the war, Moscow seeks peace in Syria. Since political discussions in Geneva have stalled, Russia decided in 2018 to foster the economic agenda. While working to militarily beef up the regime, the Kremlin has also signaled that it is time to start the reconstruction phase, even in the absence of any political roadmap. Rightly or wrongly, Moscow believes that only a strong Syrian regime will be able to compel the Iranians to leave Syria. Iran's increasing footprint, which has fueled concerns among many countries in the region, may yet prove itself useful in attracting funds for Syria's reconstruction. By emphasizing the regime's victory and Tehran's growing influence in Syria, Moscow believes it will eventually compel former opponents to Bashar al-Assad to financially support the revitalization of the country in order to check Iran's footprint.

Russia's ambition to broker a peace deal and initiate reconstruction nevertheless faces several obstacles: Moscow's own limited resources, the reluctance of several actors—the regime, the EU and the US—to play according to Russian rules, the international sanctions on Syria, and Iran. Tehran believes that it was responsible for a significant part of the military victory and is therefore unwilling to leave Syria. President's Trump decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria is set to further complicate the politico-economic agenda Russia has been promoting. Moscow has made constant efforts to focus Damascus' and Tehran's attention on the political process in Geneva. However, the vacuum created by the U.S. withdrawal will fuel Syria's and Iran's appetites for more military conquests. It will also open the way for Turkey's pursuit of its goal of crushing the Kurds.

The Refugees: A Potential "Investment Magnet"?

During the summer of 2018, Moscow floated a plan to facilitate the return of the Syrian refugees. This initiative appeared in the double context of the stalled discussion in Geneva about the creation of the Constitutional Committee and the Helsinki summit between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. The plan was conveyed via a military channel, from Russian Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov to his U.S. counterpart. Sticking to its proactive stance on Syria, Moscow decided to take the other stakeholders by surprise with an initiative dealing with an issue—the refugee crisis—on which no one would expect a Russian proposal. Broadly speaking, the Kremlin was betting that only the return flow of Syrian refugees could decisively persuade the international community to lift the sanctions and instead send money to Syria to create the proper conditions for their resettlement. Russia also expected this process to give a new impetus to the negotiations in Geneva. Contrary to the EU, which demands political guarantees and a robust political roadmap for a transition in Damascus before

considering any investment in Syria, Moscow proposes that financial assistance should pave the way for the resettlement of displaced Syrians and eventually lead to an inclusive political solution. Russia's proposal was greeted with great mistrust by the US and European countries, while Syria's neighbors—chiefly Lebanon and Jordan—have been much more receptive.

Amman's and Beirut's eagerness to commence the return phase even in the absence of a political roadmap can be explained by the fact that the refugees are a serious burden on their respective economies. The nearly 970,000 displaced Syrians in Lebanon constitute almost one-quarter of the total population, while almost 670,000 refugees have settled in Jordan since the beginning of the Syrian conflict.¹ Moscow is relying on its working relationship with Amman and its growing links with Beirut to help achieve a *fait accompli* on the issue of the refugees, thereby creating a dynamic and a precedent. In late August, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri praised Russian President Vladimir Putin for his consistency—the two men met in Moscow during the Soccer World Cup in June—and acknowledged that the war had been won by the regime with the decisive help of Russia.² Last September, a Russian-Lebanese commission for the return of the refugees was created.

These developments have occurred in the context of a rapprochement between Russia and Lebanon. In February 2018, Moscow and Beirut signed a protocol that would have made it possible for the Russian navy to use Lebanese ports for light logistical operations. However, in the face of Western, and especially U.S., pressure, the Lebanese parliament rejected the text.³ The Syrian-Lebanese border, meanwhile, has been a growing theater of Russian military activity, with Russian soldiers seizing some checkpoints that the Lebanese Hezbollah had used for commerce and smuggling.⁴ Should Moscow's plan for the refugees' return take shape, it could open the path to greater military cooperation with Lebanese forces.

Jordan has also displayed a certain interest in Moscow's initiative. On October 15, it reopened the Nassib border checkpoint with Syria, which had been closed for three years. Amman has signaled that it aims to gradually reactivate its political relations with Damascus. In November 2018, a Jordanian parliamentary delegation visited the Syrian capital.⁵

For Turkey, which hosts nearly 3.5 million refugees, the stakes are different. The refugee issue represents a powerful lever of influence over the EU and Syria alike, and could be used by the Turks in further negotiations, including those on political aspects of the transition in Damascus. The Syrian regime, for its part, sees the mostly Sunni refugees as traitors and remains reluctant to have them return. Moscow has been attempting to overcome this reluctance by offering the "carrot" of the investment that would accompany refugees' return. Alongside this is a "stick" that Putin has mentioned on several occasions: Russian troops will not be remaining in Syria indefinitely. Should they decide to retreat in their bases in Tartus and Hmeimim—to which Moscow has access under a 49-year bilateral agreement—the vacuum would be filled with pro-Iranian forces, not an appealing prospect for the regime.

Were there a comprehensive and viable roadmap for a political transition in Damascus, the EU would be prepared to consider participating in Syria's reconstruction. Any other attempt to finance reconstruction is seen in Brussels and in most of the European capitals as a "blank check" to the regime. However, the Istanbul summit held on October 27 between French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Russian

¹ HCR website.

² See Hariri's interview with Euronews in late August: "Full Interview: Lebanon PM Hariri on the Syrian War, Putin as an Ally, and Hezbollah," *Euronews*, August 31, 2018, <https://www.euronews.com/2018/08/31/full-interview-lebanon-pm-hariri-on-the-syrian-war-putin-as-an-ally-and-hezbollah>.

³ Mohanad Hage Ali, "Our Comrades in Beirut", *Carnegie*, April 25, 2018.

⁴ "Hezbollah is Worried and Sending Intercessors," *Novaya Gazeta*, July 22, 2018.

⁵ "Jordanian Parliamentary Delegation Visits Damascus," *Roya News*, November 19, 2018.

President Vladimir Putin for the first time suggested a common will to outline a solution on the joint issues of refugees and reconstruction.

What Sources of Economic Relief?

Considering the scale of the destruction in Syria—assessed at nearly \$300 billion—no one country is willing or able to foot the bill. Russia cannot buy peace as the US did between Egypt and Israel in 1979. Despite its limited resources, Moscow plans to contribute to the reconstruction and provide assistance commensurate with its capabilities. In 2016, Moscow and Damascus signed an €850 million deal to rebuild and upgrade Syria's oil infrastructure (mainly extraction sites and refineries) and electrification networks.¹ Thirty-seven Russian companies took part in the latest edition of the Damascus International Fair in September, representing several sectors: agriculture, health, electronic, energy, and rail. Some Russian companies are already active in Syria (SoyuzNefteGaz, StroyTransGaz) and others could become involved during the reconstruction phase. Washington has threatened to sanction any Russian or Iranian companies that undertake reconstruction projects in government-controlled areas.² After the U.S. withdrawal, this will mean that virtually almost all Syrian territory will be subject to potential U.S. sanctions, including Kurdish areas. Thus, UralWagonZavod (rail), Almaz-Antei (electronic and defense), ODK (engines), and TechnoPromExport (energy infrastructures) are obvious candidates, since they are already under U.S. sanctions. ODK could provide gas compressor plants, while TechnoPromExport is allegedly considering building 4 thermic plants. OMZ might be interested in building a cement plant near Aleppo.³ In addition, the need to rebuild electrification networks could attract Inter RAO and the necessity to refit 2,500 kilometers of railway could present an opportunity for RZhD, although the latter two companies are not currently under sanctions.⁴

The Russians and Syrians are also exploring other possibilities for reviving Syria's depressed economy, including developing ties with Crimea. Both the peninsula and Syria are sanctioned territories, so their respective companies are somewhat immune to further sanctions. They are also geographically closer to each other than are Syria's ports to Russia's northern ports (4-5 days from Crimea to Syria compared to 24 days from Russian ports in the Baltic to Syria). Moreover, there is a relative complementarity between Syria's demand and Crimea's supply (rail equipment, pipes, agriculture, etc.). Crimean companies such as Selma and Fiolent (electro-technical) could export their production to Syria. A Syrian delegation visited the Yalta International Economic Fair in spring 2018⁵ and a Syrian-Crimean Chamber of Commerce was created in October 2018, while a Russian-Syrian maritime freight company should be created soon in order to foster the direct maritime route between Crimea and Syria.⁶ However, should the international sanctions be lifted in the future, these Crimean connections could deter Western companies from undertaking business in Syria.

Russia further envisions other sources of economic relief. In particular, Moscow is betting that the financial commitments made by Saudi Arabia to Iraq in February 2018 will eventually be echoed in Syria.⁷ Having lost the war, the only remaining way for the oil-rich Sunni monarchies of the Gulf to check the growing Iranian influence in Syria is to invest there. For Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, the fate of Bashar al-Assad no longer represents an immediate concern, whereas the entrenchment of Tehran's footprint does. Moscow is also counting on the fact that Turkish expansionism in northern

¹ "Rossiia potratit €850 mln na vosstanovlenie Sirii," *Kommersant*, April 25, 2018.

² "SShA prigrozili Rossii sanktsiiami za vosstnovlenie Sirii," *Vzgliad*, October 17, 2018.

³ "Vosstanovleniiu Sirii dobavit riskov," *Kommersant*, October 18, 2018.

⁴ "Posle voyny," *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, September 11, 2018.

⁵ "Syria Participates in Yalta International Economic Forum," SANA, April 19, 2018.

⁶ *Kommersant*, "Vosstanovleniiu Sirii."

⁷ "Saudi Arabia Pledges \$1.5 Billion to Help Rebuild Iraq," *Asharq al-Awsat*, February 14, 2018.

Syria may fuel the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) strategic frustrations. Turkey may promote political Islam in the territories it occupies in Syria, thereby supporting the Muslim Brotherhoods, which pose a threat to Abu Dhabi. In order to check their expansion, the Emiratis might eventually consider normalizing relations with Damascus—perhaps through the mediation of Bahrain¹—as a first step to providing economic assistance.² Also to this end, the Arab League could consider reintegrating Syria as a full-fledged member. The visit paid by Sudanese President Omar el-Bashir to Syria in December 2018 can be seen as a first move in that direction. This process is largely taking place independent of Russia, yet Moscow provided the plane for el-Bashir's visit to Syria, suggesting Moscow's interest in a reconciliation between the Arab League and Damascus.³ President's Trump decision to withdraw the American boots-on-the-ground from Syria is set to further boost the Turkish footprint in Syria, perhaps giving a decisive impetus to the normalization of relations between Damascus and its old enemies in the Gulf.

Conclusion

After seven years of conflict, there is no chance of returning to the status quo ante, a strong, centralized regime built around Ba'athist ideology. For many years, there have been local—and, in the case of the Kurds, regional—governing bodies. De facto, decentralization has been occurring in Syria since 2011. For the Kurds in Rojava, at least, federalism is not an appropriate solution in light of the model's poor record in the Arab world (Yemen, United Arab Republic). The reconstruction phase called for by Moscow, however, requires a degree of centralization to coordinate the efforts across the country. With its new initiative related to refugees, Moscow maintains the upper hand in Syria and sticks to its proactive stance on the crisis, no matter the shock and suspicion that this fosters in other stakeholders. However, the politico-economic agenda put forward by Moscow in 2018 in the aftermath of the Sochi Congress could be jeopardized by the consequences of the coming U.S. withdrawal from Syria decided by President Trump in December 2018.

¹ "Emiraty v polushage ot otkrytiia posol'stva v Sirii," *News.ru*, November 11, 2018.

² "UAE Companies Showing Growing Interest in Syria," *The Syrian Report*, December 24, 2018.

³ "Sudan President Lands in Syria in 1st Visit by Arab Leader," *The State*, December 16, 2018.