

RUSSIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST: MOSCOW'S OBJECTIVES, PRIORITIES, AND POLICY DRIVERS

DMITRI TRENIN

In the broader universe of Moscow's foreign policy, the Middle East generally ranks after the United States, Europe, and China and Asia. The Kremlin again sees Russia as a great power on a global scale, and as such it cannot ignore a region so close geographically, so rich in hydrocarbons, and so unstable socially and politically as the Middle East. Moscow's withdrawal from the Middle East under then president Mikhail Gorbachev at the start of the first Gulf War marked the decline of the Soviet Union's superpower status. Russia's reappearance as a player in the Middle East under President Vladimir Putin has the aim of restoring the country's position as a great power outside of the former USSR. With the start of the military intervention in Syria in 2015, and the U.S.-Russian diplomatic effort that accompanied it, the Middle East has become a key testing ground for Russia's attempt to return to the global stage.

To recap, Putin's general objective in the Middle East is to establish Russia's status and role as a major outside power in one of the world's most volatile regions. Other key objectives include:

- Containing and diminishing Islamist extremism and radicalism that might otherwise expand into Russia and its immediate post-Soviet neighborhood, and greatly enhance the potential for Muslim extremism there;
- Supporting friendly regimes and forces in the region, and building lasting geopolitical alliances with them;
- Establishing a modicum of Russian military presence in and around the region;
- Expanding Russian presence in the region's arms, nuclear, oil and gas, food, and other markets;
- Attracting investments into Russia, particularly from the richer countries of the Persian Gulf;
- Supporting energy prices by coordinating policies with the principal oil and gas producers in the Gulf.

Moscow's current priorities include engineering a Syrian peace deal jointly with the United States; expanding ties with Iran to benefit from the lifting of sanctions; furthering relations with Egypt, Iraq, and the Kurds in both Syria and Iraq, to create an axis of partners from Tehran to Cairo; establishing, to the extent possible, pragmatic relations with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states; and staying in close touch with Israel.

Thus, the principal drivers of the Kremlin's policies in the Middle East are geopolitical. Moscow's concern for domestic stability is also important. The Russian Federation includes several predominantly Muslim republics, from Chechnya and Dagestan in the North Caucasus to Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in the Volga River basin. The country's overall population is 12 percent Muslim. Immigrants from Muslim countries in Central Asia and Azerbaijan number in the millions, with many of them in Russia illegally. Traditionally non-Muslim Russian areas, from the Urals to the Far East, are "greening" with the number of Muslims there rising due to the arrival of

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dmitri Trenin is director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, and has been with the center since its inception. He also chairs the research council and the Foreign and Security Policy Program.

migrants from the Caucasus and guest workers from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Extremist militants still active in the North Caucasus have pledged allegiance to the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Radical ideology is spreading across Russia; and since the 1990s, terrorism is a constant threat all over the country, particularly in the major cities.

Present-day Russian activism in the Middle East builds upon historical experience. For over two centuries, Russian foreign policy was focused on displacing the Ottoman Empire from the Black Sea region and the Balkans. Persia was de facto divided between Russia and Britain into respective zones of influence. St. Petersburg's designs on Constantinople and the Turkish Straits were a main reason Russia joined World War I. The Soviet Union's active involvement in the Middle East began in the mid-1950s, and soon resulted in an intense rivalry with the United States. A number of Arab countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, South Yemen, and Syria, were, for a period of time, Soviet clients and quasi-allies in the Cold War. The Soviet Union helped establish the state of Israel, but later became disappointed with it and backed Israel's Arab foes and the Palestine Liberation Organization.

These historical memories are anything but forgotten. Today, the Russian foreign and security policy community contains a number of experts on the Middle East, mostly Arabists. The late Yevgeny Primakov, their dean and a former prime minister, foreign minister, and director of foreign intelligence, remained influential in the Kremlin until his death in 2015. The Syrian war, and particularly Russia's direct involvement in it, has again pushed Russia's diplomats and intelligence officials to the forefront of Moscow's foreign policy preparation and implementation. More than ever before, they are now joined by the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff personnel.

For the Russian military, still in the process of its post-Soviet transformation and modernization, Syria has staged a comeback to the premier league, if still on a relatively small scale. They have to fight, for the first time, in an Arab country, mostly from the air and sea. For the Russian defense industry, countries in the Middle East and North Africa are important customers. In 2015, they accounted for 36 percent of Russia's defense deliveries, second only to Asia (42 percent). Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and Syria have been Moscow's principal arms customers for decades.

Russian arms manufacturers hope that the performance of Russian weaponry in the Syrian war, as well as Putin's staunch backing of his ally in Damascus, will boost the prestige of their products in the region and win new clients, particularly among the Gulf states.

Other vested interests include the Russian nuclear industry, represented by Rosatom, which has built reactors at Bushehr in Iran and looks for new contract there. Rosatom is also working on projects in Turkey and Jordan. A Russian private oil company, Lukoil, is active in Iraq. Russian gas company Gazprom is Turkey's main supplier of natural gas and has had plans for a pipeline going to Southeast Europe via or close to Turkey. Qatar and Iran are, alongside Russia, key members of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum. As a major oil producer, Russia has an interest in reaching out to Saudi Arabia and other OPEC countries from the region. Russia is also a top supplier of grain to Egypt. Until 2015, several million Russian tourists went on vacation each year to Turkey and Egypt. Russians have a major interest in technological cooperation with Israel, a country with which they enjoy visa-free travel.

RUSSIA'S KEY PARTNERS

Historically, Russia's main contacts in the Middle East used to be Turkey and Iran. In the quarter century after the end of the Cold War, Russia and Turkey made a spectacular transition from age-old adversity to mutual respect and understanding, despite the many differences. Russian-Turkish partnership in their common neighborhood looked a possibility. However, it all changed abruptly in November 2015 as Turkey downed a Russian warplane over the Syrian border, and Moscow, in retaliation, imposed economic sanctions on Ankara.

For the foreseeable future, Moscow and Ankara are likely to be rivals or even adversaries. The Russian intervention in Syria, which was the actual cause of the rupture—the air incident was a pretext—has undercut Turkey's policies in its near neighborhood and materially damaged its interests in Syria. As long as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan remains in charge and Russia stays on its present course, the Russian-Turkish relationship will be an exercise in conflict management, at best. Bilateral economic ties, which were reasonably strong prior to the incident, have much diminished, owing to the geopolitical clash.

Russia's relations with Iran remain complex. There is a baggage of historical mistrust, primarily on the Iranian side. For its part, Russia supports Iran's combative stance vis-à-vis the United States, but it has joined the West in insisting that Tehran keep its nuclear program certifiably peaceful, and supported the requisite sanctions at the UN Security Council. Moscow is a major weapons supplier to Iran, but one time, to Tehran's great dismay, it canceled the delivery of an already purchased air defense system as part of a deal struck with Washington and lobbied by Israel. Russia has a history of constructive relations with Iran regarding in particular the post-Soviet space, does not consider either Hezbollah or Hamas to be terrorist organizations, and Moscow and Tehran are de facto allies in the Syrian war. Yet, Iran's ruling ideology and its regional agenda, built around Shia-Sunni and Iranian-Saudi competition, are largely foreign to Moscow; in turn, Moscow's objectives and ways of reaching them are not fully shared by Tehran.

Russia's relations with the Saudis are testy. During the Cold War, the two countries did not even have diplomatic contacts. During the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan, the Saudis were among the main donors to the mujahideen. Since the end of the confrontation, the Russians have been concerned about the Saudi's financial support for re-Islamization of the former Soviet space and the spread of radical Wahhabi ideology there. The Saudis and the Russians are also competitors in the oil market. Some Russians credit—or blame—the Saudis for their contribution to the fall of the Soviet Union, as a result of driving down the oil price in the mid-1980s.

Currently, the main point of contention between the Russians and the Saudis is Syria. Yet, there are more contacts between Moscow and Riyadh than ever before. The Russians and the Saudis have demonstrated a degree of pragmatism when dealing with their differences and capitalizing on their points of agreement, such as the support for the Abdel Fattah el-Sisi government in Egypt and the wish to see oil prices stabilize and move up. For the Saudis, the Russia connection is part of a general diversification of their foreign policy away from overreliance on the United States. Yet, given the deep distrust between the Saudis and the Russians, their relationship is unlikely to become too close. Iran is also a factor limiting the rapprochement. Moscow, however, may be more open to arming some of the smaller Gulf states that on their own cannot be seen as a threat to Iran.

From the mid-1950s until 1972, Egypt was the mainstay of the Soviet geopolitical construct in the Middle East. The relationship warmed significantly after the arrival to power of General el-Sisi. Putin sees the Egyptian leader as the only viable option capable of bringing a modicum of stability to the Arab world's biggest nation. Egypt has also resumed major arms purchases from Russia—paid for with Saudi-provided money. Even lax security at the Sharm el-Sheikh airport, which led to the bombing of the Russian passenger plane over the Sinai in October 2015, has not produced a cooling of relations. Russia issued an advisory to its holidaymakers to avoid Egypt, but this restriction is likely to be lifted, even in the summer of 2016, once Moscow is satisfied with security measures at Egyptian airports.

Syria is the only Arab country whose friendly relations with Moscow have not been broken since the 1950s. During the last two decades of the Cold War, then president Hafez al-Assad was a staunch ally of the Soviet Union. In the 1990s and the 2000s, the relationship became more distant but still friendly. The conflict in Syria, which broke out in 2011, has given it a wholly different quality. Moscow first backed President Bashar al-Assad to push back against the destabilizing influences of the Arab Spring and the U.S.-led support for a regime-change path toward democracy, and to buttress the UN Security Council's role as the only international authority to allow the use of force.

Thus for Moscow, its involvement in Syria is about issues much bigger than Syria. However, by having embraced the Assad regime as a wartime ally, Russia is working to turn Syria into its geopolitical foothold in the region. Geographically, Syria is positioned between Moscow's other allies: Iran, Iraq, and the Kurds to the north and east, and Egypt to the southwest. These countries, stretching from the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean and Red Seas, would form a new axis of Russia's friends in the region.

Iraq is part of that group. It was also a Soviet client—albeit, as an oil producer, much more independent of Moscow than other client states. Having failed to save former president Saddam Hussein from his fateful mistakes in the past, Moscow is now interested in expanding arms, energy, and other links to the Shia-dominated administration in Baghdad. In parallel, it is also expanding relations with the Kurdish autonomy in Iraq and with the Syrian Kurds who are fighting for their autonomy.

The dramatic reversal of Russia's relations with Turkey has freed Russia's hands in the Kurdish-related issues.

About one-fifth of Israel's population consists of Russian speakers. At the emotional level, the relationship between Russians and the current generations of Soviet-born Israelis is intimate. Vladimir Putin is also arguably the most Jewish-friendly Russian leader in history. Official anti-Semitism is a thing of the past. Of course, Israel and Russia do not always see eye to eye—for example, on Iran, Hamas, or Hezbollah—but they share a basic realpolitik-influenced view of international relations, have little time for short- or medium-term democratic transition in the Arab world, and see Islamist terrorism as their major enemy. Moscow's transformed relations with Israel constitute one of the most fundamental reversals in Russia's foreign policy compared to the Soviet period.

In the Middle East, Russia does not have permanent allies, like Israel for the United States. All Moscow's alignments are situational and conditional, serving primarily Russia's regional interests or its larger world-order goals. The Russians do not want to repeat the mistake of completely siding with one party in a conflict. Thus, they maneuver constantly, engaging in tradeoffs when necessary: in recent years, Moscow stopped major arms deliveries to Iran, as part of an understanding with the United States, and to Syria, to avoid undermining relations with Israel. Moscow also feels confident that it can navigate between Tehran and Riyadh.

OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

Developments in the Middle East over the past five years—the Arab Spring and its failure; the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State; civil wars in Syria and Yemen and state failure in Libya; the nuclear agreement with Iran; and the rupture with Turkey—have opened new opportunities but also created a number of challenges for Moscow's foreign policy. The Kremlin has responded with a much more active approach to the region than since before the end of the Cold War.

Essentially, Moscow seeks to present itself to countries in the region as a pragmatic, nonideological, reliable, savvy, no-nonsense player with a capacity to weigh in on regional matters by both diplomatic and military means. As a major outside power, Russia offers itself as a credible partner to those

seeking to diversify their foreign policy. Right up to the conflict with Turkey over the downed warplane, Russia prided itself as a country that was in close touch with everyone in the region: Iran and Saudi Arabia; Israel and Hezbollah; Turkey and Syria. Even today, this is still largely true—with the exception of Ankara, relations with which remain broken.

Russia's military operation in Syria has raised its regional profile greatly. Its use of force came in response to the challenge of a likely overthrow of the Assad regime and eventual takeover of Damascus by the Islamic State. Such a triumph for Islamic extremists would have encouraged their sympathizers across the Muslim world, including Central Asia and Muslim communities in Russia.

Moscow has adopted a logical but inevitably risky strategy. First, save Assad by helping him defeat his non-Islamic State enemies, which are usually referred to in the West as moderate opposition groups. Second, once these opposition forces are sufficiently softened up, agree on a cease-fire between them and Damascus and hold inter-Syrian negotiations presided over by Russia and the United States. Third, co-broker a peace deal in Syria guaranteed by Moscow and Washington. Fourth, put together a broad coalition of Russia, the United States, European countries, and regional countries—including Iran, Iraq, and Syria—to fight and defeat the Islamic State.

Between the end of September 2015 and March 2016, Moscow has accomplished step one and is in the process of implementing step two, which will lead to step three. The Russian Aerospace Forces and navy have performed better than expected by many; their battlefield casualties have been minimal (seven servicemen have died so far and one plane was downed by Turkey). Moscow has avoided the Afghanistan-style quagmire that many predicted, and has refused to be drawn into the Shia camp against the Sunnis. It strengthened ties to the Kurds, continued to court Egypt, and managed to remain on speaking terms with the Saudis and the Qataris. The only geopolitical accident that has resulted from Syria was the collision with Turkey. True, Russia lost an airliner with 224 passengers two weeks into the Syria campaign, but Russia was not spared terrorist attacks even when it was not waging war outside or even inside its own territory. Within Russia itself, several plots by Islamic State-friendly groups have been prevented.

When ordering the Syria intervention, President Putin made his position clear. Russia would not be left alone by Islamist extremists even if it chose to stay away from the fighting in Syria and Iraq. “When a fight is inevitable, you have to hit first,” Putin said—and he acted accordingly. He elected the risks of action over those of passivity. Whether this approach will pay off depends on Moscow’s warcraft, statecraft, and resources.

THE UNITED STATES: A RIVAL AND A POTENTIAL PARTNER

From the Kremlin’s viewpoint, U.S. policies in the Middle East, beginning with the administration of former president George W. Bush, have been fundamentally misguided and resulted in utter and colossal failure. “Do you realize now what you’ve done?” Putin asked rhetorically in his September 2015 speech at the UN General Assembly. Russian officials and their advisers generally blame Americans in the Middle East for being naive and inconsistent (encouraging swift transition to democracy at the time of the Arab Spring, and then flirting with the so-called moderate Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood); treacherous (sticking with Egypt’s then president Hosni Mubarak, a loyal ally, for almost thirty years and then abruptly withdrawing their support for him as uprisings began in Tahrir Square); and cynical (leaving a mess for others to clear up and denying U.S. responsibility after botched interventions in Iraq and Libya).

Proudly nonideological, the Russians themselves are conservative in the sense that they basically support the existing states and borders in the region, no matter how artificial and arbitrary those may be; they prefer ruling authoritarians to revolutionary chaos, not to speak of Islamist radicals; and they reject regime change, particularly induced from abroad, and favor a gradual opening of political systems. Russia has no design and no model for the Middle East. It is frankly pursuing its national interests there: security, geopolitical, and economic.

Contrary to widespread U.S. impressions, the Russians do not see President Barack Obama’s hesitancy to use force in Syria as a weakness to be exploited, but rather as prudence of someone who realizes—better perhaps than many of his compatriots—the limits of American power in the region. In return, they managed to get Damascus to agree to chemical disarmament, which Moscow jointly implemented with Washington amid the

Syrian civil war in 2013–2014. The Kremlin has also appreciated the Obama administration’s constructive approach to relations with Iran, and, despite the Ukraine crisis, continued to cooperate with Washington to reach the nuclear agreement with Tehran in 2015.

Today, Moscow sees its co-sponsorship with Washington of the Syrian peace process as a major positive development, both in terms of what it means for pacifying Syria and the region, and for elevating Russia’s global status. One major objective of the Russian policy is to involve the U.S. military, not just the State Department, into close day-to-day cooperation with Moscow on Syria. Finally, the Kremlin presents its fight against the Islamic State as a latter-day analogy of the anti-Hitler coalition, and would want to see the United States as a co-equal ally—though not the leader—in a grand antiterrorist front.

Generally, Russians see the United States as being largely focused on maintaining its global dominance as it is being increasingly challenged by others. At the same time, they note that Americans are becoming more aware of the need to tend to their domestic problems. This creates a major dilemma for U.S. policymakers, which demands difficult tradeoffs. Russia is of course competing with the United States for a measure of influence and presence in the Middle East, as well as for the opportunities to be used there, but it does not seek to replace the United States, for example, as an ally to Israel or the Gulf states, both for paucity of resources and the lack of superpower ambitions.

RUSSIA’S RESOURCES AND COMMITMENTS

Russia’s means are limited, particularly when the country is experiencing the worst crisis it has experienced since the 1990s. The Kremlin has achieved a lot of traction, in Syria and elsewhere, with only modest means. The Syria operation’s costs (around \$500 million, so far) are essentially comparable to an ongoing military exercise and require no special budget. In Egypt, Iran, and Iraq, Russia gives diplomatic support to the local governments while offering to sell them arms and the other few products that it exports. When peace finally comes to Syria, Russia may also offer its services for rebuilding the war-ravaged land: its own postwar reconstruction of Grozny is a credible recommendation.

Russia has to be economical with its foreign policy commitments. It has to work for a solution in Syria: the failure of its diplomatic efforts would raise costs, for Moscow can ill afford to simply let Assad fall. The Russians will seek to make sure that whatever replaces the current regime in Damascus, Syria will remain a friend, willing to host a Russian naval and air presence in its territory. Russia needs to cooperate closely with Iran, but Moscow will avoid an alliance with Tehran, which would tie Russia's hands. In Iraq, the Russians will balance between Baghdad and the Kurdish autonomy in the north—this may be paralleled by a future arrangement between Damascus and the Syrian Kurds. Russia will continue with a most careful approach to anything touching on Israeli interests, from Hamas in Gaza, to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, to Iran. In the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, Moscow will maintain a position of an impartial team player in the so-called Quartet (the EU, the UN, the United States, and Russia), allowing Washington to carry the unenviable burden of leadership.

LESSONS DRAWN SO FAR

It is premature to draw lessons from Russia's involvement in Syria, which is continuing and may yet turn out to be either a brilliant success or a dismal failure. In a very preliminary fashion, here are some early observations about what the Kremlin may have learned:

- Decisiveness and consistency pay off: Preempt the enemy rather than risk being surprised by it. Better attack the bad

guys in their nest than be a sitting duck for them. Build loyalties and do not desert one's allies, but never become a hostage of one's own clients.

- Foreign military operations require domestic public support: The Russian public tends to look at operations such as in Syria through the prism of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan. Russian people need to be reassured it will not turn into a quagmire resulting in numerous casualties.
- Ground operations and open-ended commitments are to be absolutely avoided: On foreign soil, Russia needs to leave ground combat operations almost entirely to its local allies and support them from the air—by providing weapons, air defense as necessary, intelligence, military advice, and technical support. Thus, local alliances are essential.
- Military activities need to be closely coordinated with diplomatic actions: There can be no purely military solutions to the issues involved in the Middle East conflicts, but few political solutions are available without sufficient backing by force.
- Keep communications channels open to all parties: In the geopolitical kaleidoscope that is the Middle East, allies and adversaries change all the time.

For Russia, the Syria operation is a down payment on future engagements. In the next five years, Moscow should expect more emergencies where force may have to be used. At the top of the list are Afghanistan and Central Asia.

TASK FORCE ON U.S. POLICY TOWARD RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND EURASIA

The task force will assess the strengths and weaknesses of U.S. and Western policy toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia since the end of the Cold War and offer a set of guiding principles for a durable U.S. policy framework. The task force is a joint effort with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and is supported, in part, by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.



@CarnegieRussia



facebook.com/CarnegieRussia

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, India, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.

© 2016 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

Carnegie does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.



@CarnegieEndow



facebook.com/CarnegieEndowment