

Russia's Comeback in the Middle East

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A little more than a decade after its humiliating exodus, Russia has all but reversed the setback from the United States' (us) invasion of Iraq in 2003. This December, Vladimir Putin engaged in what can only be described as a triumphant tour of the Middle East. From Syria, to Egypt, to Turkey, soon after consolidating a strategic partnership with Iran earlier this year, Moscow has positioned itself as a key player in the region's affairs.

Addressing his troops at the Khmeimim Air Base in Syria, Putin declared,

By helping the people of Syria to maintain their statehood, to fight off attacks by terrorists, you have inflicted a devastating blow to those who have directly, brazenly and openly threatened our country.

He, then, called for a redeployment of most of the Russian forces in Syria to their home bases, but also warned, "If the terrorists raise their heads again, we will deal unprecedented strikes unlike anything they have seen" (Presidential Executive Office 2017). However, this is not the end of Russia's strategic involvement in the region. Israeli military commanders are convinced that Russia has dug in its heels for the long term (*Jerusalem Post* 2017).

Counter-encirclement Strategy

It really began as an unexpected move that outflanked the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the then ongoing us–Russia confrontation in Ukraine. Cornered and with its back to the wall, the Kremlin pulled out a wild card by deploying a modest, but highly capable, combat force to Syria in the fall of 2015. The Bashar al-Assad regime was on its last legs, barely holding on to Damascus after losing control of most of the countryside and major urban centres like Aleppo.

A July 2015 agreement between the us and Turkey to coordinate anti-Islamic State (IS) air operations and develop a "safe zone" on Syria's northern border along Turkey suggested a robust emerging bridgehead for the anti-Assad insurgency. In August 2015, us officials even signalled the possibility of taking the fight directly to the Syrian Arab Army "to help defend against any attack on the us-trained Syrian rebels" (Stewart 2015).

At a second and equally crucial level, Russia's military intervention ensured that Iranian interests remained aligned with Russian geostrategy. The 2015 Iranian nuclear deal had opened an opportunity for the West to deepen its economic engagement with Iran and weaken the security services and conservatives, especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). There were also expectations during the months after the nuclear deal of a softening in Tehran's commitment to Damascus as part of a larger trade-off with the West. Russia's decision to intervene occurred in this fluid context and altered the terms of the contested debate between the conservative hardliners and the liberal reformers inside Iran on the merits of a confrontation with the us over Syria.

We have subsequently learnt that it was Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei who sealed a joint plan to salvage Syria. This was followed by a July 2015 visit to Moscow by Qasem Soleimani, an IRGC commander and Tehran's main strategist for Syrian operations, who assured the Russians that the deteriorating situation in Syria could be salvaged (Bassam and Perry 2015).

Finally, Russian perceptions were also shaped by the traumatic lessons of us-led interventions since the late 1990s,

particularly the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the 2011 NATO war in Libya. The latter had left a particularly sour taste in the Kremlin's mouth because the us and its allies had misused a United Nations Security Council mandate, endorsed by Russia, to go on and topple the Muammar Gaddafi regime. From the outset, Moscow's resolute stand on Syria, as Dmitri Trenin underscores, "was not so much about Syria or even the Middle East; it was about the global order" (2018: 48).

Stabiliser or Spoiler?

The seamless power transition in the Middle East—the shift from a us-dominated order to a multipolar setting—has actually been remarkable. Part of the reason for this is that Moscow has taken a broader view of the region and its interlinkage with Russia's Greater Eurasia and world strategy rather than merely playing a spoiler. Russia's own 20-million-strong Muslim community has also given Moscow a more durable stake in the Middle East's stability. Aside from lawfully assisting the legitimate Syrian state in recovering its sovereignty and territorial integrity, Moscow has sought to promote a UN-centred conflict resolution process at Geneva with the main regional actors, including the us as well as a multilateral Russia–Turkey–Iran framework, through the Astana talks.

Interestingly, although Russia partnered with Shiite and Alawite forces in the Syrian war, this "did not push Moscow into the anti-Sunni camp in the Middle East." Take, for instance, Russia's transformation in its ties with Egypt, the largest Sunni country in the area (Trenin 2018: 4). Even more extraordinary is that Egypt's import of Russian weapons was made possible because of Saudi Arabia's financial assistance to Cairo (Surkov 2017). Paradoxically, then, for many Sunni regimes, Russia's military presence in Syria has "diminished the influence of Shiite Iran in Damascus, thus being the 'lesser evil'" (Trenin 2018: 104).

What has also shaped regional attitudes is the limited nature of Russia's footprint and Moscow's refrain from

interfering in long-standing intramural disputes, such as those between Iran and Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia, especially in the Yemen conflict, Iraq and Turkey vis-à-vis the Kurdish question, and Israel and Syria, especially on the Golan Heights and Hezbollah. Despite its formidable air defence systems in Syria, Russia has not provided the Syrian military with complete authority over use of these capabilities to fend off Israeli bombing in south-western Syria. Neither has Russia provided Iran with the type of offensive weapon systems that could complicate the US's regional interests and forward deployments or distress Israeli military planners.¹

As Fyodor Lukyanov observes, "Moscow in no way supports Iran's anti-Israel zeal." Neither does it favour "escalation between Iran and the Gulf monarchies" (Saunders 2017). An underappreciated factor in the Kremlin's posture is also the presence of 1 million Soviet émigrés in Israel (16% of the population), an influential Russian-speaking diaspora that favours close ties with Russia (Trenin 2018: 88–89).

Russian diplomats have been even more forthright in projecting their country as a constructive actor. "It is virtually impossible to talk about a comprehensive peace settlement without mediation or establishing bridges between the main players." And, Russia was actively assuming such a role (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2017). On this score, at least, there is more continuity with the old Soviet approach, which, as former foreign minister and Russia's leading Arabist Yevgeny Primakov attests, "never sought to undermine" the pro-US Arab states "from within, nor did it try to turn Egypt, Syria, or Iraq against them." So, while "Moscow had its interests in the Middle East ... they were protected without exploiting the ongoing disputes between Arabs" (Primakov 2009).

Unlike the Soviet Union, however, Russia has acquired even more flexibility in engaging with regional actors because it is no longer constrained by the dilemma of picking sides between nationalist and communist groups. The absence of any serious dispute between Russia and key

regional actors is a posture that the Kremlin is keen to maintain.

Apart from the balance of power calculations—that is, ensuring that no single power or bloc assumes regional preponderance—Russia appears equally interested in a regional order centred on restoring state authority, institutional capacity and maintaining the existing political boundaries. In the Russian world view, the only reliable antidote to Islamic extremism and sectarianism is a strong secular state. Again, this has been a continuous strand in Russian policy. The Soviets had actively cooperated with Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt and Hafez al-Assad's Syria, secular regimes that eschewed political Islam, sometime fiercely, as a ruling ideology. But, Russian scholars also admit that these traditional linchpins for Moscow have lost ground, particularly economically, and Russia needs to widen its engagement, particularly with regional powers like Iran and Turkey, as well as maintain stable ties with Israel and Saudi Arabia (Khlebnikov 2016).

Putin's decision to intervene enabled a break from NATO's encirclement that had confined Russia to a defensive role in Eastern Europe. It salvaged Russian influence in the Middle East, and, thus, recovered the geostrategic depth that had been eroded since the collapse of Soviet power. But, it also upheld a rules-based order, which had been trifled with by a series of cavalier and destructive interventions by the US since the 1990s. Having restored some equilibrium by arresting the extremist surge unleashed by the 2003 Iraq war and the Arab Spring, Russia has plugged a leadership vacuum that was threatening to disorder other parts of Eurasia as well.

In the Middle East itself, Russia appears far more status quoist than the revisionist and ideological impulses of many local actors. And, its geopolitical presence mutes some of the reckless security-seeking behaviour of regional states, while also providing many with an option to balance their foreign and security policies. However, Moscow does not seek "to play the role of the world's gendarme" (RT 2017) and recognises that establishing a new order in the

Middle East is predicated on some form of cooperation with the US.

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NOTE

- 1 The Russian transfer of S-300 air defence missiles in 2016 is intended to protect Iran from air attack.

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