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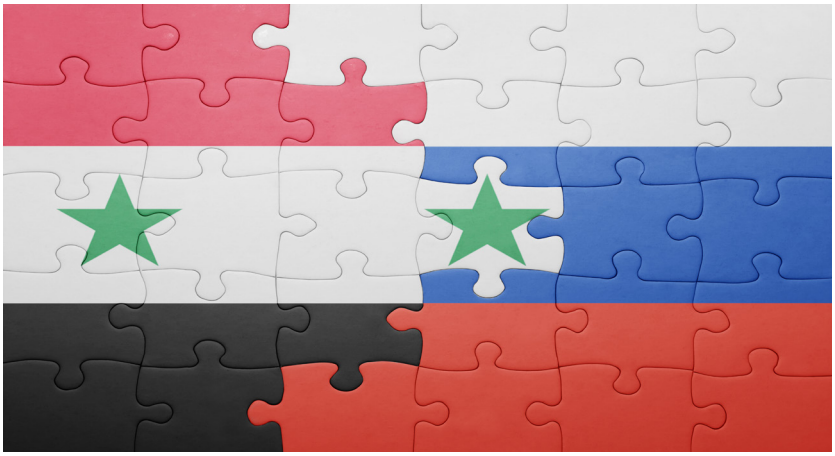
Russia's Diplomacy in the Middle East : Back to Geopolitics



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Russie.Nei.Visions

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- – *The US policy in the Middle East in the context "Arab Spring"*, Moscow, International relations, 2015.—335 p.
- – *The Syrian Crisis and Russia's Approach to the Gulf*, Gulf Research Center, 2014.—30 p.
- – *Russia and the "new elites" in the « Arab spring" countries: prospects and opportunities for cooperation*, Moscow, RIAC, Working paper No V, 2013.
- – *Russia and USA in the Middle East: a rival partnership*, Moscow, Rus'—Olimp, 2011.—351 p.

Abstract

Moscow's approach to the Middle East has undergone real changes from Soviet times to the present day: it evolved from creating zones of influence against the background of confrontation with the West (USSR) to seeing the region through the prism of mainly economic interests (1990s), and, finally, to Moscow's current pragmatic view. The latter, in essence, is a fusion of the previous two stages, with the Middle East serving Russia as a springboard for military and political manoeuvres in its confrontation with the West, while at the same time being seen as a potentially promising market for Russia's modern weaponry, engineering and heavy trucks. Moscow also approaches this region today as a potential source of finance, in the form of loans and investment.

Moscow's pragmatic approach to the Middle East is now being tested by the Syrian crisis. Russia's military and political moves in Syria have raised a host of important questions. To what extent do they accord with Russia's wider regional interests, and bolster its authority in the Arab (Sunni) world? What should Russia's long-term interest in this region be, with long-term interests, by definition, not being bound to individual politicians—in Russia as well as in Middle Eastern countries? This article is an attempt to trace the evolution of Russian policy in the Middle East and to judge what effects Russia's approach to the Syrian crisis might have on the position it occupies in the region.

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Introduction

Many analysts are apt to compare Russian policy in the Middle East over the last decade with traditional Soviet policy—decisive, relying on force (as in the Syrian crisis) and most importantly, defining itself in opposition to that of the "collective West" (United States (US) and European Union (EU)). But this is true only to a certain extent: in fact, throughout the 2000s, we are dealing with a fusion of elements from Moscow's Soviet era (Cold War) policy with ones from its almost polar opposite, the Middle Eastern policy of democratic Russia in the 1990s.

It is also important to recognise that in both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, Soviet/Russian policy towards Middle Eastern issues has always been conditioned by the state of Moscow's relations with Western countries, particularly the US. Indeed in the Cold War, the USSR opposed Western interests in the region through its allies and clients, regardless of the costs, whereas in the 1990s Russia tried to profit economically from its interactions with the countries of the region, an approach that relied, to a great extent, on solidarity with the West in relation to Middle Eastern conflicts. The actions Russia has taken during the Syria crisis are now crucial to its future in the Middle East, with Moscow and Western political elites disagreeing deeply about the nature of the crisis.

Below, we take a closer look at the peculiarities of Moscow's approach to the Syrian question, which now exerts a greater influence than any other factor over the formation of Russia's Middle Eastern policy. Russian initiatives in Syria (military and political) raise a host of important questions. To what extent do they accord with Russia's wider regional interests, and bolster its authority in the Arab (Sunni) world? What should Russia's long-term interest in this region be, with long-term interests, by definition, not being bound to individual politicians—in Russia as well as in Middle Eastern countries?

This publication has been translated from Russian by Cameron Johnston.

Pragmatism with an anti-Western Bent

Unlike under the Soviet Union, Russia's post-Soviet leadership does not aim to secure and expand its sphere of influence in the Middle East by binding "client" states to it through dependence on military-technical cooperation or economic aid. In other words, Moscow is not out to create its own sphere of influence in the region.

It is worth remembering that during the Cold War, Moscow's cooperation with certain Arab countries in these areas was made to serve the logic of opposing the West and the idea of "building socialism in the developing world". In essence, the countries of the region were divided into "pro-Western" and "pro-Soviet" camps. The USSR extended its clients favourable terms when supplying them with weapons and financing their infrastructure, mainly through loans. In many cases, too, it was clear that the loans would not be repaid—"first politics, then economics" went the logic. Today, Russia tries to interact in these areas, first, with all regional countries that are capable of paying (unlike the Soviet Union, which was denied access to certain markets, like the rich Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf) and second, on a strictly commercial basis.

One may recall that regarding the Middle East in mostly economic terms,—as a market for its goods[1] and a source of finance in the form of loans and credit[2]—became the defining feature of Russian policy in the 1990s, during the Presidency of Boris Yeltsin. To a great extent, this perception lives on into the present day. Indeed, after the West imposed sanctions on Russia in connection with the Ukraine crisis, Moscow tried to turn for loans to the Arab monarchies of the Gulf, but without success,

1. Mainly different types of weapons to most Arab countries: from fighter aircraft and surface-to-air missile systems to Syria, Algeria and Iraq to infantry fighting vehicles to Kuwait, UAE (United Arab Emirates), the Palestinian National Authority and so on; vehicles and equipment, heavy trucks to Egypt, Syria, UAE and so on.
2. The sovereign wealth funds of the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar have entered into partnership with the Russian Direct Investment Fund; Russia has received credit from a number of Gulf monarchies; efforts have been made to establish a cooperation mechanism between the Russian financial system and Islamic banking—for more detail see "Rossiya zamenit zapadnye kredity islamskim financirovaniyem" [Russia Replaces Western Credits with Islamic Financing], Rossiysko-Arabskiy Delovoy Sovet [Russian-Arab Business Council], 29 June 2015, available at: www.russarabbc.ru.

because of differences with these countries over the Syrian crisis at that time.

Alongside this perception, Moscow has in recent years begun to see the Middle East more and more as a zone of confrontation between Russia and the West, as relations between Russia and the US & EU have deteriorated. A revival of the earlier Soviet way of seeing the region might be discerned, then, but without the former alliances that Moscow enjoyed with its "traditional clients" from the Cold War era, such as Libya, Syria, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq and Yemen. Out of these countries, links in the traditional sense survive only with Syria. Cooperation with all the others occurs on a commercial basis, with Arab countries being free to choose their partners in the military and economic spheres without considering their geopolitical affiliation.

Apart from Syria, a Russian approach of "first politics, then economics" may also be seen in relation to Iran: as far as one can judge, Moscow is counting on forging a stronger partnership with Tehran by taking advantage of the formally anti-Western positions that dominate the Ayatollah's policy. Iran is seen in the Russian MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) as an important pole in the future "multipolar world".[3] The relationship is also about mutually beneficial economic cooperation and a certain amount of coordination in the military and political spheres. And all this despite the fact that now, when the sanctions are lifted, Iran will return to energy markets. That will contribute to reducing world prices of Russia's most important exports (oil and gas), as well as limit their volume, including those going to Europe. Such is the combination of motives and tools that Russia brings to its Middle Eastern policy.

It should also be recognised that in Russia's socio-political realm, which is thoroughly dominated by pro-Kremlin TV channels, nostalgia is evoked both for the era of Soviet policy in the Middle East and for its leaders, "the USSR's reliable partners in the Arab world", like Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, the Assad family in Syria and so on. Their overthrow, usually attributed to America, is seen as the root cause of the appearance and growth of radical Islamism across the region. The TV audience is fed a simple message: democracy does not work in Arab countries and authoritarian rulers are therefore preferable to Islamists.

3. "Rossiyskiy ekspert: Iran i Rossiya—osnovnye polyusa mnogopolyarnogo mira" [Russian Expert: Iran and Russia—the Main Poles of the Multipolar World], Iran.Ru, 26 June 2015, available at: www.iran.ru; V. Gordeev, "Vizit Putina v Iran zavershilsya odobreniyem 35 sovmestnykh proektov" [Putin's Visit to Iran Ended with 35 Common Projects Being Approved], RBK, 24 November 2015, available at: www.rbc.ru.

It should be noted, however, that in practice, Moscow is pragmatic and ready to work with all the governing groups in these countries. Russia's relations with Egypt after the "Arab spring" are instructive in this regard: in 2012-2013, Russia successfully cooperated with the moderate Islamist Mohamed Morsi, despite the fact that the "Muslim Brotherhood" was formally banned in Russia. After Morsi was overthrown, Moscow worked even more fruitfully with the man who had removed him, Field Marshal-President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who had initially positioned himself politically and ideologically as the polar opposite of the Islamist Morsi.[4]

Such pragmatism is characteristic of Vladimir Putin's presidency. When he took power in 2000, he picked partners in the Middle East in line with his foreign policy imperative, which was the fight against terrorism (this was the time of the Second Chechen war). It was precisely on the basis of their common front against terrorism that Russia's relations with Israel progressed so well, including in the period just after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Indeed, they improved to such an extent that Arabist circles in Moscow began to get a little worried (both the expert community and, partly, the MFA). In May 2001, for example, worried by the "pro-Israel bent" of Russia's Middle Eastern policy, the then leader of the parliamentary fraction "Fatherland-All Russia" in the State Duma, Yevgeny Primakov, undertook an "explanatory tour" of a series of Arab countries with the Kremlin's permission. Many analysts regarded his mission as an attempt to restore Russia's position in the Arab world as a counterweight to the USA and the West, in the spirit of his U-turn over the Atlantic in a sign of protest at the beginning of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) bombing of the Serbian army. It is noteworthy that some of Primakov's statements during his tour were not always met with comprehension in the Russian MFA.[5]

The view that Primakov exerted real influence over the elaboration of the Kremlin's Middle Eastern policy from the middle of the 2000s is largely correct in our opinion, despite the fact that he was Chairman of the Russian Chamber of Commerce, a position seemingly unconnected to foreign policy. His influence was bound up with a number of factors. Firstly, it was based on his authority as "the leading specialist on Middle Eastern countries" and a theorist and practitioner (former Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs). Secondly, it rested on his extensive contacts in

4. "Putin podderzhal generala Sisi v bor'bye za prezidentstvo" [Putin Supported General Sisi in the Battle for the Presidency], *BBC*, 13 February 2014, available at: www.bbc.com; "Egypt's Sisi Vows Muslim Brotherhood 'Will Not Exist', *BBC*, 6 May 2014, available at: www.bbc.com.

5. A. Sborov., "Evgeniy Primakov zagovoril proarabski" [Yevgeny Primakov Has Begun to Speak in a Pro-Arab Way], *Kommersant*, No. 105, 20 June 2001, available at: www.kommersant.ru.

elevated bureaucratic circles, especially in the MFA, where he left loyal followers after his departure. Thirdly, and most importantly, it came from the growing divergence in Vladimir Putin's policy away from Western countries, largely because of the first crisis over Ukraine in 2004-2005. It was for this last reason that Primakov's line found an ear in the Kremlin, which is not to say that he was always directly involved in developing Russia's Middle Eastern policy. The serious differences in opinion between Primakov and the government over certain fundamental developments in the region should not be discounted. For instance, he robustly challenged the idea of the "Arab spring" being an "externally inspired" phenomenon, mainly caused by the United States. On the contrary, he argued that the USA, like Russia, had been caught unawares by the scale of the protests in Arab countries.[6]

If in 2004-2005, these differences with the West expressed themselves in the rhetoric used by Russia's leaders and representatives,[7] by January-February 2006, Moscow had taken its first practical step. It acknowledged Hamas's (the "Islamic Resistance Movement's") victory in the Palestinian elections, reneged on the international boycott of the Hamas government that had been provisionally agreed within the "Middle-Eastern quartet" (USA, Russia, UN (United Nations), EU), refused to recognise it as a terrorist organisation and even invited representatives of Hamas to visit the Russian capital in March 2006 (these visits later became a regular feature).

In other words, as in Soviet times, it was in the Middle Eastern arena that the differences between Moscow and the West began to assume a practical form. It was not long before Russia's partial return to the Soviet model of regarding the Middle East as a zone of conflict with the West

6. Answering a question posed by a correspondent from "Rossiskaya Gazeta", Yevgeny Primakov said the following: "It was a complete surprise. And not only for me, for everyone: for the Americans, for the Europeans, for the Arabs themselves... Demonstrations against an authoritarian regime in one country were possible. A coup somewhere might have been expected. But that a wave would brake over the whole region—nobody could anticipate that". V. Snegirev, "Ochen' Blizhniy Vostok" [Very Middle East], Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 8 August 2012, available at www.rg.ru.

7. For instance, after the terrorist attacks in the Dubrovka theatre in October 2002 and in Beslan in September 2004, V. Putin started to talk about "Washington's support for terrorists in Russia". Here are his words: "We did not understand the complexity of the processes at work in our country and in the world at large... We showed weakness. And the weak get beaten. Some people want to tear off a 'juicy morsel' from us, others are helping them. They help believing that Russia, as one of the world's greatest nuclear powers, still presents a threat to someone. So that threat needs to be eliminated. And terrorism, of course, is a way to achieve these goals", Obrashcheniye prezidenta Rossii Vladimira Putina [Address of Russian President Vladimir Putin], 4 September 2004, available at: http://kremlin.ru. See also: the documentary "Prezident" [President], Rossiya1, 26 April 2015, available at: http://russia.tv.

received confirmation: in the rocket war (July-August 2006) between Hezbollah and Israel, Russia's position was interpreted both within the region and outside it as inclining more towards Hezbollah and Lebanon than Israel, which had suffered an unprovoked attack from its northern neighbour. Then, one might recall, one of the accusations levelled at Russia by Israel and the West was that Russian missiles supplied to Bashar al-Assad's government had found their way into the hands of Hezbollah and were raining down on the Israelis. A year earlier, in an interview with the Israeli Channel-1, Vladimir Putin had said that he would continue supplying Syria with missile systems which, in his words, "merely complicate the work of the Israeli air force" but do not disrupt the balance of power in the region. "You (Israelis) can no longer fly over Bashar al-Assad's presidential palace", the Russian president stressed.[8]

8. "Putin V: Rossiyskiye PZRK zashchityat Siriyu ot Izrailya" [Putin V: Russian Man-portable Air Defence Systems Protect Syria Against Israel], *RBK*, 21 April 2005, available at: www.rbc.ru.

The Syrian Springboard in an Internal Russian Context

The "Arab Spring" that unfolded in 2011 initially forced Western countries to choose between supporting the status quo and upholding democratic principles ("the people have the right to rise up against a dictatorship to form their own government"), but the Russian leadership faced no such dilemma. In Moscow, the majority view held that the "Arab Spring" was the result of "manipulations and interference by Western countries" (yet another "colour revolution")[9] with the aim of changing the status quo in the Arab world in line with "Western strategic interests". Even if it observed formal neutrality (non-interference in the processes underway in the countries of the "Arab spring"), therefore, the Russian leadership generally criticised and condemned the mass protest movements in these countries. But although it held to the argument that "protest movements are illegitimate, and the authorities (dictators and autocrats) legitimate", Moscow only came out openly in support of the authorities in one country—Syria.

Why in this case alone did the Russian leadership get involved in a conflict in an "Arab Spring" country, thereby demonstrating that geopolitical calculus trumped all else? Arguments revolving around Russia's need for the naval base at Tartus or which appeal to the decades-long "special relationship" between Moscow and Damascus explain a lot, but not everything. It is enough to note that in the early stages of the conflict, the leaders of the Syrian opposition tried to convince Russia to support the protest movement against Assad,

9. In October 2012, Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister said: "The 'Arab Spring' represents the shoots of those seeds that George Bush junior sowed when he promoted the idea of a 'greater Middle East' and democratisation for the whole area. Today, we are reaping the fruits of his policy, for this obsession with changes imposed from outside according to external precepts was never backed up with plans or long-term or even medium-term forecasts and assessments". V. Vorob'ev, "Za I Protiv. Sergey Lavrov o vneshnepoliticheskikh vragakh, o vozmozhnoy voynye mezhdu SShA i Iranom i mnogom drugom" [For and Against. Sergey Lavrov on Foreign Policy Enemies, a Possible War Between the USA and Iran and Much More Besides], Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Federal'niy Vipusk No. 5918 (245), 24 October 2012, available at: http://rg.ru.

promising to acknowledge and respect all Russia's basic rights in the country.

The real explanation for the Kremlin's pro-Assad position, in our view, lies elsewhere: the height of the Syrian crisis (the transition from peace to civil war) at the end of 2011 and the start of 2012 came at a dramatic moment when power was being transferred in Russia itself, Vladimir Putin was returning to the Kremlin and his PR-team was drawing a direct line between the protest movements in Arab countries and those in Russia (the Bolotnaya square protests).[10] It followed, then, that these movements were inspired by a "worldwide conspiracy" (America and Europe), that the West was trying to "subdue" Syria, after which it would "deal with Russia". That was why preserving "Bashar al Assad's legal government" was seen as serving Russia's basic interests. In this way, Russian TV drummed up support for Assad as a symbol of sovereign Russia's opposition to the "aggressive West". In essence, the authorities were using the infamous political strategists' trick for launching a popular mobilisation—"uniting the nation in the face of an external threat".

This portrayal of the Syrian conflict as Bashar al Assad's legal government facing down "external aggression"—first from the West and then from ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) terrorists-jihadists—did not include such "details" as the centuries-long clashes between Sunni and Shia within Syria and across the region. Similarly, this is what Vladimir Putin had in mind when he said that the Syrian conflict was not about Sunni and Shia but about the fight to restore Syria's sovereignty against external enemies and their "minions" inside the country.[11] That is why Russian television generally presented a black and white picture of what was happening in Syria: the lawful government in Damascus and the forces opposing it, labelled "terrorists", some of them (the "moderate opposition") supported by the West.

In the battle between "good and evil" in Syria, therefore, Russia was and is on the side of "good", whereas the West, along with its

10. S. Neverov, "Pochemu v Rossiyu nye pridyot arabskaya vesna" [Why the Arab Spring is not Coming to Russia], Nyezavisimaya Gazeta, 10 February 2012, available at: www.ng.ru.
11. "Putin v eksklyuzivnom interv'yu: Rossiya mirolyubiva, camodostatochna i nye boitsya terroristov" [Putin in an Exclusive Interview: Russia is Peace-loving, Self-sufficient and does not Fear Terrorists], Vesti.ru, 11 October 2015, available at: www.vesti.ru; "Putin: RF ne budyet vvyazyvat'sya v mezhreligioznye konflikty v Sirii" [Putin: Russia Is Not going to Get Bogged Down in Inter-religious Conflicts in Syria], RIA Novosti Ukraina, 11 October 2015, available at: http://rian.com.ua.

regional allies (Turkey, as a member of NATO, and Arab monarchies of the Gulf), is more on the side of "evil" because it supports the forces that oppose "Bashar al Assad's lawful government". Propaganda is used to establish some sort of link in the information space between US allies like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, on the one hand, and terrorist groups like "Islamic State" and "Jabhat al-Nusra", on the other. Moreover, it is not rare in Moscow to hear people directly accuse Washington of "being involved in the creation" of these terrorist groups. You mostly hear such things on television from deputies and pro-Kremlin experts but not often from senior government representatives. However, that does not change the heart of the matter, namely the thesis that "Western and Middle Eastern sponsors" are behind terrorist groups in Syria is widely accepted in Russia's ruling circles.

As you can see, this picture of what is happening in Syria is highly adapted to the ways in which the internal (Russian) audience understands Russian foreign policy as a whole: "the country is defending its sovereignty on all fronts in the confrontation with the aggressive West"—be it in Ukraine or Syria. These clichés, one might add, are a long way from the realities of what is happening in Syria, where several conflicts are overlaying one another at the same time: namely the fight of part of the Syrian people against Bashar al Assad's authoritarian regime (the fight for democracy), which also expresses itself in the religious split between the Sunni majority across Syria and the Alawite Shia minority that has usurped power in Damascus (the Sunni-Shia confrontation); and, finally, the Syrians' (Assad's armies and opposition forces, including moderate Islamists) fight against incoming jihadists, represented by "Islamic State" and Jabhat al-Nusra.

The dominance of this black and white portrayal of events, it appears, greatly complicates the work of the Russian diplomatic service. It must look for negotiating partners among the Syrian opponents of the Assad regime, the majority of whom are officially labelled "terrorists" by Moscow television. The Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, made waves in December 2012, for instance, when he spoke of the need to take the Syrian opposition into account: "We need to face the facts, the trend is for the regime and the Syrian government to lose ever more control over ever greater swathes of territory. Unfortunately, a victory for the Syrian opposition cannot be ruled out". His statement whipped up a storm of

indignation in the Duma, and to a lesser extent the Kremlin, which explains why it was officially disowned by the Russian MFA.[12]

12. S. Smirnov, "Rossiyskiy MID poschital nyesushchestvuyushchim zayavleniye Bogdanova po Sirii" [Russian MFA judged Bogdanov's comment on Syria to be immaterial], Vedomosti, 14 December 2012, available at: www.vedomosti.ru.

Between dogma and reality

It would be wrong to say, however, that officials in Moscow do not understand what is really happening in Syria. Certain circles not only grasp the truth, but are also trying to find solutions that would not disprove the official black and white interpretation of the Syrian conflict.

Moscow does not deny, therefore, that the Syrian regime needs to liberalise (democratise), but insists on Bashar al Assad's involvement in this process. They give examples of steps that have been taken in this direction: "alternative" presidential elections held in the summer of 2014, the legalisation in Damascus of groups of intellectuals who are critical of the regime, the freeing of some political prisoners, and so on.[13]

Most revealing of all was the attempt in 2015 to create a "Moscow platform" for the intra-Syrian negotiations, bringing together opposition figures who were essentially palatable to Assad. Two meetings of members from the so-called Syrian "patriotic opposition" were held in Moscow, with a view to their subsequent involvement in negotiations with the Syrian government. The meetings were attended by representatives from the so-called "legal opposition", which consists of intellectuals and businessmen living in Damascus who criticise certain aspects of Bashar al Assad's policies, but not his regime as a whole. True opposition groups, united in the National Coalition, ignored the Russian MFA's repeated invitations to take part in "Moscow platform" discussions.

In the end, the attempt to create a "patriotic group of Syrian opposition politicians" in Moscow and to present it as a plausible partner in negotiations with the Assad government did not come off. The most one can hope for from the negotiation process, which is now set up through the UN, is for individual members of the "Damascus opposition" to take part in the negotiations with the Assad government in Geneva, either as a "third force" or as part of the united delegation of the Syrian opposition. In order to take part in the negotiation process, the main opposition groups were

13. "Interv'yu zamestitelya Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii G.M. Gatilova germanskomu zhurnalu 'Der Shpigel', opublikovannoye 14 fevralya 2016 goda" [Interview of the deputy Russian Foreign Minister, G. Gatilov with the German newspaper "Der Spiegel", published on 14 February 2016], Embassy of the Russian Federation in the German Federal Republic, 15 February 2016, available at: https://russische-botschaft.ru.

formed in Riyadh. They are made up of members of rebel groups fighting against the Assad regime and ISIL on the battlefield.

Decision makers in Moscow also clearly understand the challenges presented by the Sunni-Shia dimension of the Syrian conflict. This is reflected, among other things, in the regular visits to Russia by members of the ruling families of the Arab monarchies of the Gulf, who are often received at the highest level. The latter sometimes take the initiative in stepping up contacts with Moscow, with the aim, at times, of trying to convince the Russian leadership to alter its position in the Syrian conflict (stop supporting Bashar al Assad and distance itself from Shia Iran) in return for financial and economic windfalls and privileges.[14] Moscow, it seems, tries to avoid political discussions and concentrate on the economic aspects of cooperation with the Arab monarchies. It is clear, then, that Moscow is trying to reap the economic benefits of cooperating with the monarchies but not to the detriment of its geopolitical priority, which determines Russia's approach to Middle Eastern issues.

At the same time, the Kremlin seems to recognise, that the regular visits by Arab monarchs are prompted not only by the official agenda of talks in Russia, but also by their disillusionment with the policy of the Obama administration. This disillusionment reached its peak after the so-called "chemical deal" with Bashar al Assad's government, which was given official form at Moscow's initiative in the UN Security Council at the end of 2013.

To elaborate: in August-September 2013 Obama promised to launch missile and airstrikes on Syrian army positions in retaliation for the widespread use of chemical weapons in the suburbs of Damascus (August 2013). Instead, Washington agreed with Moscow to settle for the destruction of the stocks of chemical weapons controlled by the government, made a deal with it and thereby gave legal standing to Bashar al Assad as the most important partner in the agreements, a man who had previously been considered a pariah. Politicians in the Arab monarchies believe that this led to the radicalisation of the anti-Assad opposition on the battlefield, strengthened the Islamic State, allowed it to take off and gave rise to Assad's armies' successful offensive against its enemies. In other words, disillusioned with Washington's position, the Arab

14. "Saudovskiy prints Bandar pred'yavlyal Putinu ul'timatum?" [Has Saudi Prince Bandar Given Putin an Ultimatum?], *TsentrAziya*, 27 August 2013, available at: www.centrasia.ru.

monarchies stepped up their attempts to reach a common understanding with Moscow, as a centre of power that has to be reckoned with.[15]

15. S. Erlangerdec, "Saudi Prince Criticizes Obama Administration, Citing Indecision in Mideast", *The New York Times*, 15 December 2013, available at: www.nytimes.com; M. Weiss "Russia's Return to the Middle East", *The American Interest*, 13 December 2013, available at: www.the-american-interest.com.

An Aerial Attack with Multiple Targets

All things considered, the Russian VKS (aerospace forces) operation that began at the end of September 2015 and formally ended on 14 March 2016 pursued more than its officially declared aims ("fighting against terrorist groups" and "reinforcing Bashar al Assad's position as a partner in the fight against terrorism"). It was also meant to change the balance of power on the battlefield in favour of the Syrian government and so bolster its position in the negotiations that would come, sooner or later. Moscow also took advantage of the political vacuum (the breakdown of the "Geneva-2" negotiation process) and the military-strategic vacuum (the absence on Syrian territory of military infrastructure belonging to countries in the American-led international coalition and zones where Syrian, and, therefore, Russian aircraft were forbidden to fly). After a Russian bomber was shot down by Turkish fighter jets in October 2015, Russian aerospace forces deployed surface-to-air missile systems around Latakia, which in effect closed the Western portion of Syrian airspace to aircraft from coalition countries. By doing so, Russia became the most important military factor in Syria.

The crisis in Syria became a symbol of indecisiveness and the inability of the Western coalition and Arab countries to deal with the problem (either on a humanitarian or a military level). Thus the arrival of Russian aerospace forces gave Moscow the chance not only to demonstrate decisiveness (within its own conception of the nature of the crisis) and military power, but also to transform the crisis itself into an opportunity to reposition Russia in the world on new terms. It is logical to suppose, that Moscow hoped, that a side effect of its growing involvement in the Syrian crisis would be to significantly increase the level of mutual understanding between the Kremlin and Western political elites, above all in relation to Ukraine, given their "common fight against terrorism". At the very least, involvement in Syria would give Moscow the opportunity to overcome its political isolation on the world stage, that had been caused by the conflict in Ukraine.

It quickly became clear, however, that the Russian vision of events in Syria and its actions on the battlefield were at odds with what the countries of the US-led anti-ISIL coalition considered right and proper. One should

recall that from the very first days of Russia's airstrikes, the leaders of Western countries and Arab states started to accuse Russia of hitting not ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra positions, as was agreed in September at a meeting in New York of the US and Russian presidents, but the positions of moderate Syrian rebel groups fighting against the Assad regime. That is to say, the International coalition's allies, those who in the coalition's preferred future would replace the Assad regime as part of a political transition (as a result of negotiations). Political circles in coalition countries latched on to the supposition that Moscow's real strategy in Syria was to "weaken as much as possible or even destroy anti-Assad rebel groups on the field of battle". Then, Moscow would supposedly present the international community with that very same black and white picture, according to which there are only two actors in the Syrian drama—Assad and ISIL terrorists.

In the context of their interpretation of events, the countries of the international coalition refused, in effect, to cooperate with Russia. This, in turn, led to Moscow's hopes that it could reach a greater mutual understanding with the West over Ukraine to crumble. It is worth adding to this the "higher price" that Russia paid for its involvement in the conflict in the form of terrorist attacks (the downing of the civilian airliner with Russian tourists on board over Sinai and other smaller terrorist incidents), and the shooting down of the Russian SU-34 bomber by Turkish fighter jets, which killed two people. Besides the main overlapping conflicts in Syria that we have already noted, a new burgeoning conflict arose between Russia and Turkey. This was hardly thought likely before the Russian operation began, because, formally at least, Moscow and Ankara were fighting against a common enemy, ISIL.

It is important to stress that in this new confrontation, Turkey has won the almost complete support of NATO states, which criticised Russia's actions in Syria. That translates into a deepening of the division between Moscow and the North Atlantic alliance as a whole, not only over Ukraine, but also over Syria. To this might be added the growing cooperation between Turkey and Saudi Arabia (one might say all the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf) against the Assad regime and ISIL. Among other things, Ankara and Riyadh's declarations insist on them having their own "plan B" in case the ceasefire and the negotiation process in Geneva ("Geneva-3") fail. This plan, according to the information available, presupposes a whole range of military measures right up to the deployment of Arab and Turkish ground forces to support the moderate rebel groups. Were this plan to be put into effect, it would mark a new stage in the escalation of the Syrian conflict. It is in this light that one should see the

classification of Shia Hezbollah (allies of Russia in Syria) as a terrorist organisation by the Arab League.[16] The political and ideological groundwork has thereby been laid for Arab countries to take comprehensive action on the Syrian battlefield under the same pretext that Russia used before—"fighting against terrorism".

Together, all these factors attest to a politically unfavourable turn of events for Russia over Syria. All things considered, acting according the logic that "military success leads to political success" could only go so far. It could do no more than allow Russia to ward off the threat that Assad's government might be deposed and facilitate his armies' advance towards strategic points occupied by the enemy—Aleppo, Homs, Hama and others, thereby giving Assad's army forward momentum. The conclusion, then, is that it is in Russia's strategic and political interest to engage in the negotiation process now, even at the cost of halting the successful advance of government forces in Syria. That is because the next stage in the escalation of the conflict would likely exact a much higher cost from Russia; the number of sides opposing it could increase significantly. Moscow's flexibility should come as no surprise either. In the interest of launching the negotiation process, Moscow consented to the participation of a range of organisations, on the side of the opposition, which it is inclined to categorise as "terrorist", such as "Jaysh al-Islam", "Ahrar ash-Sham" and others.

16. "Arab League Labels Hezbollah Terrorist Organization", *Reuters*, 11 March 2016, available at: www.reuters.com.

In search of an exit strategy

It is clear that Moscow saw and continues to see an intra-Syrian negotiation process as the way to achieve a stable and lasting solution to the Syrian conflict. At the beginning, however, the question was: who should the parties to the negotiations be in order to guarantee that Russia could maintain its presence in Syria (whether with Assad or without him) and that its strategic interests there would be observed?

Any scenario involving the "Moscow platform" (some sort of negotiations between the Assad government and a "convenient" opposition open to compromise) was doomed from the very beginning, since it was rejected both by the rebels and by all Arab countries. This manifested itself especially clearly in the second round of negotiations in April 2015 in Moscow, when the disagreements even between members of this "Damascus opposition" spilled out into the open.[17]

This coincided with a sharp upturn in the rebels' military operations against government forces in Syria. The resulting threat to the Assad government in Damascus was one of the main reasons for the start of the Russian VKS operations, in coordination with ground-based units of the Syrian government, Iran and Hezbollah. Moscow hoped to use force to create new and favourable conditions for negotiations, which could confirm its success on the battlefield.

This strategy, however, came at a high political cost: the West and Arab countries stepped up their criticism of the Russian VKS operations, accusing the Russian military not only of hitting the "moderate opposition" but also of "indiscriminate bombardment" of infrastructure, leading to the death of civilians. Moscow denies these charges but is not able to completely ignore them. In the end, the burden of military, political and public relations costs grew ever heavier. A solution was found in swiftly-convened negotiations in an acceptable format—under the aegis of the UN but with Russia and the USA making the running.

Nevertheless, the move towards a ceasefire and negotiations, endorsed unanimously by the members of the UN Security Council in resolution 2268 (26 February 2016), was not greeted with any great satisfaction by

17. "Siriytsy v Moskve nye dogovorilis' o edinoglasii" [Syrians in Moscow did not Agree on Unanimity], *BBC*, 10 April 2015, available at: www.bbc.com.

Russia's allies in Damascus and Tehran. There are several explanations for their dissatisfaction, the most important being the forced halt to their ground forces' successful offensives in a number of strategically important areas (Aleppo, Hama, Daraa).

Notwithstanding the fact that the Syrian government delegation arrived on time in Geneva in the middle of March (under pressure from Russia), several steps were taken in Damascus on the eve of the talks which were interpreted by the Russian side as contradicting its own position. One of these was Bashar al Assad's professed intention to "liberate the whole of Syria's territory from terrorists". It was publicly criticised by the Russian Representative to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin.[18]

What are the conditions and agreements on solving the Syrian crisis that Moscow might consider to be acceptable and presentable to a Russian audience as victories? Above all, reaching an agreement in a direct exchange between the Russian and US leaders, which could be presented as "Russia overcoming its political isolation, forcing the USA to recognise Russia's importance in the world". Secondly, securing Bashar al Assad a strong position in Western Syria and in the negotiations in Geneva. Thirdly, formally launching the negotiation process itself. Fourthly, a host of measures to prevent losses in Russian personnel and equipment on Syrian territory.

The first three conditions had been met by the middle of March 2016, which allowed Vladimir Putin to move towards the fulfilment of the fourth, the announcement of the partial withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria. Given the forward momentum of Assad's army and the formal beginning of the negotiation process in Geneva, the stage had been set ("Russia forced all sides to engage in peaceful talks") for this decision to be presented to the Russian audience as a victory. The motive behind this decision, in our view, was to avoid getting involved in a new stage in the Syrian conflict in which the regional players might put their "plan B" into effect, as well as to take the heat out of the international community's criticism of Russia's actions.

It is also true to say that Putin's decision was partly motivated by the tension that had arisen between Moscow and its allies on the battlefield, Damascus and Tehran. The latter supposedly tried to pressure Moscow with the aim of speeding up their offensive momentum in Syria.[19] In

18. "Russia Warns Assad Not to Snub Syria Ceasefire Plan", *Reuters*, 18 February 2016, available at: www.reuters.com.
19. Z.Karam, "Moscow's Drawdown in Syria Sends a Strong Message to Assad", AP, 15 March 2016, available at: http://bigstory.ap.org.

essence, then, they were trying to push Moscow into taking steps that might have provoked Turkey and Saudi Arabia to put "plan B" into effect, escalating the conflict still further. Against this background, the decision to withdraw some of Russia's forces looks like a compromise directed at Damascus and Tehran. It consists in the remaining forces being declared ready to fulfill missions in case of emergency (for instance, if military operations resume and there is a threat that the rebels will capture Damascus), while Russia's aerospace forces are expected to scale down their activities dramatically under normal conditions, especially with respect to offensive operations.

Conclusion

Russia's Middle Eastern policy over the last decade and a half has been characterised by a combination of elements from the traditional Soviet playbook (the Middle East as a zone of confrontation between the USSR/Russia and the West) and its opposite, the course followed under the Presidency of Boris Yeltsin (first economics, then geopolitics). This fusion allows Vladimir Putin to adopt a pragmatic stance towards regional issues. Russia might oppose Saudi Arabia in Syria, for instance, but cooperate with it over energy and arms sales.

It would be an exaggeration, however, to speak of some sort of long term Russian strategy in the Middle East. Russia's actions are determined, to a great extent, by the status of its relations with the world's leading countries, above all the United States, but they are also partly opportunistic: Moscow takes advantage of Washington's stumbles and failures in the region. This became particularly evident after the "chemical deal" was struck in 2013: disappointed with Washington's position, its Arab partners, as well as Israel at times, strove to establish a working relationship with Moscow, despite significant differences of opinion on certain key questions (the Arab monarchies, for instance, over Syria and Iran, and Israel over Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah and so on).

Russia's position on the Syrian conflict and the military action that it has taken, motivated in no small part by the Kremlin's internal political considerations, have the potential to complicate Moscow's relations with the monarchies of the Persian Gulf, among others. Whether this will come to pass depends on how the search for a political solution in Syria unfolds and what its results are. Moscow's decision to withdraw the "main part" of its forces from Syria has helped to ease the tension, as has Russia's avowed intention to cooperate with the monarchies, via OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), to restore normality to energy markets. The dissatisfaction of Arab elites with the Obama administration's policies has had the same effect.

For a long time to come, Russia's role in the region will be defined by the results of the Syrian settlement, Moscow's ability to strike a balance between Riyadh and Tehran (Sunni and Shia), as well as the foreign policy positions of the American administration that will take over the White House in 2017.

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