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ABSTRACT

Russian policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has undergone significant changes since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Moscow's actions in the region have begun to acquire a less ideologically driving and more pragmatic character. However, the Arab Spring and conflict in Ukraine have underscored a more aggressive policy on the part of Russia, the quintessence of which was military intervention in an armed conflict far from its borders, in Syria. Largely Russian intervention to Syria was a tool for Kremlin to resolve internal problems, and a bargaining chip in relations with global and regional actors. At the same time the declining in public interest in foreign policy, as well as the high costs of military presence in the Middle East, in the short term will force the Kremlin to respond to demands from domestic audiences. The resolution of this problem will define the future of Russia in the MENA region. It will either be an 'honest broker' in regional conflicts, or have to be content with the role of 'junior partner' to Washington, Beijing or other actors.

Introduction

For a long time, interest in the Middle East in general, and in Russian policy in the Middle East, in particular, remained minimal. Relatively little research has been devoted to this subject in the Russian academic literature. In general, in the hierarchy of Russian foreign policy, the Middle East was located below Europe, the United States, China, and even the countries of Southeast Asia.

In the 1990s–2000s, a book by orientalist Alexei Vasilyev, 'Russia in the Middle East: From Messianism to Pragmatism',¹ was perhaps the only comprehensive study of Russian politics in the Middle East. In this work, the author reflected on the role that Russia would play in the region following the collapse of the Soviet Union. From his point of view, the new Russian Federation could play a special role in the region, overcoming all the disadvantages of the Soviet system.

When the Soviet Union appeared in the Middle East after the Second World War, it was perceived as an 'ally, carrying with it an insecure, but lesser evil'.² It was perceived as an ally because it could be asked for help in confronting the West, and as evil because the communist ideology is deeply hostile to the Muslim world. But it was still the lesser evil, since the USSR was clearly unable to dominate the region, not only economically, but also politically. 'The

intervention in Afghanistan, became the highest expression of both the Messianic idea, and the absurd confrontation with the USA and paralysis in decision-making'.³

The new Russia, with its refusal, at least in the 1990s–2000s, to intervene, and with its official atheism, was able to create a new base for understanding and cooperation with the countries of the Middle East. In addition, according to Vasiliev, ‘the space of Russia and the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States], is a zone of cohabitation of nations with Christian and Muslim roots … therefore, Russia could play the role of a bridge between the world of Islam and the world of Christianity’.⁴ The restoration of diplomatic relations with countries of the region, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and other monarchies on the Arabian Peninsula, as well as the granting of observer status for Russia within the Organization of Islamic Conference (now the Organization of Islamic Cooperation), serve as confirmation of this role.

The early events of the Arab Spring noticeably revived interest among the Russian academic community not only in the region as a whole, but also in Russian interests in the Middle East. One of the first works devoted to how the wave of protests that swept through the Arab world influenced Russian positions in the region was the book ‘The Middle East, the Arab Awakening, and Russia: What’s Next?’.⁵

According to the authors of that collection, the contours of the future political configuration of the region confirm the validity of Russia’s policy at the time, which first and foremost valued the idea of mediation, and of forcing the parties to conflict into intra-national and inter-civilizational dialogue. Given the highly uncertain conditions in this geopolitical region that is extremely important for Russia, the most constructive approach remains a purely pragmatic one, with an emphasis on economic benefits for Russian companies, both state-run and private, the development of regional security structures and mechanisms and the strengthening of spiritual bonds between Muslims and Orthodox Christians in Russia and the Middle East.

The authors of the article ‘Russia and the “new elites” of the countries of the “Arab spring”: opportunities and prospects for cooperation’ published by the Russian International Affairs Council, wrote about the vulnerability of Russian politicians in the Middle East.⁶ The authors claim that, as a result of the events of the Arab Spring, Russia found itself in a situation without an ‘airbag’, and a significant part of its assets collapsed with the collapse of the region’s regimes.

The main circumstance, which, according to the authors, contributed to these developments, can be reduced to the four main components of Russian policy on the Middle East. Firstly, Russia is initially oriented only to interaction with ruling regimes, excluding contacts with opposition parties. Secondly, Russian policy in the region is devoid of conceptual and informational flexibility. Thirdly, in the past decades Russia has returned to the dominant line of confrontation with the United States and other Western countries (that is, to the model of traditional Soviet policy). Finally, Russian policy in the Middle East has a limited area of successful interaction—mainly military and technical cooperation—which is another factor limiting Russian cooperation to the established state powers in these countries.⁷

The rapid growth of attention of the Russian audience to the Middle East, was strongly promoted by the start of military operations in Syria by the Russian Aerospace Forces at the end of 2015. This event has reinvigorated the discussion of Russian interests in the Middle East.



In particular, Dmitry Trenin, from the Moscow Carnegie Center, sees Russia's main goal in the Middle East under Vladimir Putin's administration as raising Russia's status and securing for it the role of significant external power in one of the most unstable regions of the world.⁸ Among the important efforts to that end was the provision of Russia's military presence in the region and on its borders, the expansion of the Russian presence in regional arms markets and the maintenance of energy prices by coordinating actions with key suppliers of oil and gas.⁹

Russian orientalist Alexey Malashenko draws attention to the fact that deterring and weakening Islamic extremism, the influence of which could spread to the territory of Russia and its neighbours from the republics of the former USSR, plays an important role in Russia's foreign policy.¹⁰ From his point of view, the rise of Islamism has resonated with the Russian Muslim population and encouraged the development of radical Islamist opposition movements within this community.¹¹ The official line in Moscow is that the Arab Spring—and perhaps also those Western powers that have helped advance it—has stirred up dissent among Russia's own Muslim community. Farid Salman, head of the Council of Ulemas of the Russian Federation, which is loyal to the state, has said that the 'Arab revolutions are having a negative influence on Russia's Islamic community'.¹² In keeping with the official ideology, he said he considers religious Muslim dissidence, something stirred up by 'Russia's geopolitical adversaries, and by agents of influence at work in the Muslim community under various masks'.¹³

In the course of the discussions of religion, we have also said that the Middle East, along with the Balkans, were historically zones of resettlement of Orthodox Christians outside Russia. In many respects, this predetermined the fact that it was the 'Orthodox question' that, for many centuries, was an important factor determining Russia's foreign policy in both regions. However, in view of the fact that Moscow's positions on the Balkan Peninsula in recent years have been significantly undermined. All this has contributed to the need for Russia's active participation in maintaining its presence in the Middle East and preserving its reputation in the eyes of Middle Eastern Christians.¹⁴

Nikolay Kozhanov, from Chatham House, also draws attention to the fact that one of the circumstances affecting Russian policy in the Middle East after the events in Ukraine in 2014, and the deterioration of relations between Russia and its main trade and economic partners in the European Union was the attraction of investments to Russia from the Gulf monarchies. Nevertheless, the common denominator of discussions in the Russian academic community regarding the Russian presence in the Middle East boils down to one important thesis. In the 2010s, the trend was for Russian leadership to conduct a more pragmatic and even opportunistic policy in the Middle East¹⁵; Russia finally abandoned any ideological component to its policy in the region. However, this change has not solved other important problems: the lack of a long-term strategy in the region, the focus on situational interests, as well as the serious domestic limits and opportunities within the country, that determine the temporary nature of the Russian presence in the region.

From ideological to pragmatic interest

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to major changes in Russian foreign policy and its priorities. In the early 1990s, Russian domestic politics, for the first time in decades, if not

centuries, took priority over external policy. It is impossible to consider the foreign policy of Moscow in general, and in the Middle East in particular, without taking into account the internal context and as well as Russia's relations with its main external partner - the West. The Russian Prime Minister in the 1990s, Yevgeny Primakov, noted that 'at that time the Middle East in general was out of the zone of our interests. The most important were relations with the United States. It was clear that the Middle East could not attract Russia's attention. On the one hand, there was no Cold War there, and on the other hand, there was no stability in Russia, and the authorities were those who did not believe that Russia could be a great power'.¹⁶

In the post-Soviet period, when all of the new state's forces were geared towards the development of the institutions of a market economy, domestic realities, as well as the end of the Cold War, shaped the contours of Russian foreign policy. Its priority was to enter Western political, economic and financial structures. This was confirmed by the 'main provisions of the concepts of Russia's foreign policy' adopted in 1993, according to which the goal of the country's foreign policy was to maximize the conditions for the successful implementation of 'democratic and economic reforms'.¹⁷ Thus, Moscow adopted a stable course for accelerated integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, and attention to the Middle East was relegated to secondary status.

This orientation towards Western institutions, in turn, predetermined the extremely pragmatic policy that Moscow began to pursue towards the Middle East. This does not mean that Moscow ceased to pay attention to what was happening in the region; that is far from the case, for developments in the Middle East remained important to Russia. However, one should keep in mind two important aspects that shaped Russian foreign policy. First, as noted by Igor Ivanov, the last foreign minister under Boris Yeltsin, the psychology of the 'superpower' was rather unacceptable for the Russian leadership.¹⁸ Secondly, Russian presence throughout the world was primarily based on the availability of resources. Deputy Foreign Minister Viktor Posuvalyuk, in an interview with *Le Monde Diplomatique*, assessed the situation: 'Indeed, we are now weak and our financial resources are limited. We can no longer give unlimited credits to our allies. We do not have a mandate from the Russian people to supply an infinite number of weapons'.¹⁹

However strange it might seem at first glance, the new Russia had its own advantages over the Soviet Union, among which the rejection of the ideology of its foreign policy line should be singled out. This rejection has led Russia to define its presence in the Middle East in a fundamentally different way. Obviously, there was no attempt to revive Soviet influence, and in general, nor was it needed by anyone. However, the Russian leadership managed to build working relationships with all countries in the Middle East which the Soviet Union could not boast of. It was in the 1990s that Russia restored diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, which had been interrupted in the 1930s after the Soviet leadership killed its own ambassador to Riyadh, Karim Khakimov, who was considered a close friend of the Saudi royal family. In the 1990s, relations were also restored with another influential country in the region, Israel, which had been interrupted after the Six-Day War in 1967.

In other words, the absence of any ideological components to its foreign policy allowed Moscow to adopt a balanced position in the Middle East, maintaining simultaneous working relations with all countries in the region. At the same time, the Russian leadership was well aware that Russia was not in a position to become the main partner

for most Arab countries. It was obvious, that the United States had become the absolute hegemon in the Middle East and the guarantor of the regional order. Moreover, Washington, at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries has been a strategic partner for all key regional actors—Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Weakened by wars, sanctions, and internal problems, Iran and Iraq were unlikely to present any serious threat.

In this context, Russia, up to the beginning of the Arab Spring, tried to develop its trade and economic ties with the countries of the region, gradually expanding the sectors of possible cooperation in the interests of both sides. Russia saw its role in conflicts in the Middle East as exclusively intermediary. For example Moscow has exerted its strongest efforts to resolve the situation in Iraq by diplomatic means, beginning in the 1990s and ending with the invasion of Iraq by the US-led coalition forces in 2003. The Russian leadership made enormous efforts to resolve the situation around the Iranian nuclear programme, and also extended support to Syria in the second half of the 2000s. In those years, George W. Bush accused Damascus of complicity with terrorism, while it seemed that Syria was doomed to follow the fate of Iraq.

Nevertheless, the main credo of Russian foreign policy in the 1990s and 2000s was, ‘do no harm,’ which can be interpreted as follows: Moscow’s actions in the Middle East should not negatively affect Russia’s relationship with its main foreign policy partner, the West. In this regard, the case of the settlement of the situation around Iraq in the mid-1990s is very illustrative. After Saddam Hussein moved troops to the border of Kuwait in 1994, Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev visited Baghdad and persuaded the Iraqi leadership to begin withdrawing troops from the border. The initiative of Moscow, supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, provoked discontent in Washington, as it ‘limited the choice of pretext and time for striking Iraq’.²⁰ However, the Russian minister was no less severely criticized inside his own country. In particular, the chairman of the State Duma’s international affairs committee, Vladimir Lukin, said: ‘We once again dreamed of the laurels of world peacekeepers, and it is precisely our passion for showing-off that destroys us … As a result, we managed to spoil what we should treat more carefully—working relations with the US administration’.²¹

Such a cautious policy in the Middle East was typical for the Russian leadership before the Arab Spring, and, to be more precise, before the protests on Bolotnaya Square in Moscow. After all, even at the very beginning of protests and demonstrations in the Arab world in 2011, Russia played the role of a ‘passive spectator,’ trying to keep itself out of what was happening in the Middle East. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, who in 2011, was Russia’s ambassador to Cairo, said that ‘our policy line has been very cautious. We did not want to offend anyone’.²²

Principles of foreign policy

In 2010s, Russia put an emphasis on bilateral relations in its overall foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa. The economic component of these relations became the main component and increased along with the improvement of foreign economic relations, although these were still far from perfect. The construction of nuclear power plants, contracts in the energy and military-technical sphere, along with the launch of satellites, show that Russia can potentially be a partner for the countries of the region.

Nevertheless, the Middle East continues to play a secondary role in Russian foreign policy. Even after deploying Russian troops into Syria, Moscow cannot boast of having a long-term strategy for the region. The policy pursued is in many ways extremely situational and is aimed at benefiting from the current political moment.

Moscow's actions in the Middle East and North Africa are largely conditioned by the three principles that guide the Russian leadership: pragmatism, opportunism and maintaining simultaneous relations with all regional actors. In other words, Russia should not be viewed as part of any kind of alliance, its policy is free of messianism, and pragmatic interest is the determining factor in Russia's cooperation with any country in the region.

Consequently, after Russia's intervention to Syria Moscow has pursued neutrality towards the most pressing issues in MENA region in recent years. In the Kurdish problem, Yemeni conflict and the Gulf crisis, among the most acute issues that the region has faced in recent years, Russia has taken an equidistant position from all parties to the conflict. Even the constant bombing of Syria by the Israeli Air Force has not elicited any reaction from the Kremlin. The only exception is a case where, as a result of Israeli air strikes, a Russian aircraft IL-20 was shot down by Syrian air defence systems in September of 2018.

The rather neutral position of the Russian leadership towards MENA conflicts has at least three explanations.

Firstly, they are aware of the limitations imposed by Russia's own resources, which allow limited opportunities to assume leading positions in the region in the long term. In fact, participation in the Syrian conflict can be considered as limiting Russia's opportunities, constraining the interests of the Russian leadership towards the rest of the regional problems. Moreover, the Russian presence in Syria is already becoming burdensome for Moscow, forcing it to seek exit strategy in Syria.

According to the main economic indicators, Russia cannot be the main actor of the polycentric world, and specifically in MENA, irrespective of its role in Syria. This is largely due to the fact that, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has focused primarily on cooperation with Western countries. The European Union, as the largest economic partner, occupies a leading place in the country's foreign trade structure, despite the ongoing sanctions policy towards Moscow. In January– December 2019, the European Union accounted for 41.7% of Russian trade, while 32% is with Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) countries, 12.1% with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, and 14.2% with other countries.²³

The trade share of MENA countries over the past three years remains minimal. Perhaps the only country in the region with which Moscow has relatively close trade and economic ties, is Turkey, despite the conflict provoked by an incident with a downed Russian plane in the Fall of 2015. Major changes have yet to be realized, even since Vladimir Putin announced a 'turn to the East' during his visit to China in 2014.²⁴

Another difficulty in Russia's relationship with MENA countries is associated with Russia's limited export capacity. The basis of Russian exports remains fuel and energy products, whose share in the commodity structure of exports amounted to 62.1% (in 2019).⁶³

It is no coincidence that the dialogue between Moscow and the countries of the region largely boils down to interactions in the energy sector. The discussion of energy projects ranges, from the purchase of a stake in Rosneft by the Qatar Sovereign Fund, to Saudi

Aramco's attempts to invest in the Russian gas project, Arctic LNG-2, to building nuclear power plants in Egypt (El Dabaa) and Turkey (Akkuyu). Such projects form a platform for the negotiations that Moscow conducts with the countries of the region.

The only export alternative to Russia's energy cooperation with MENA countries is military-technical cooperation. However, in this case, the limits on the sale of Russian weapons to the region are obvious, confined to a traditional partnership with Algeria and, to some extent, with Egypt and Iraq. According to SIPRI,²⁵ in the entire Middle East, across all countries and contracts, Russia sells only 8.2% of the exported arms and military equipment. This is due to both the limited capacities of the Russian military-industrial complex and an inability to compete with the United States for arms markets in the Middle East.

Secondly, the Russian leadership recognizes the temporality of Russian presence in MENA. In fact, the region helped fill the vacuum in Russian foreign policy at a time when relations with the West were strained after conflict in Ukraine. In other words, one could predict a sharp weakening of Russian interest in the Middle East immediately after normalization of relations with the European Union.

Here we must bear in mind that the roots of the Russian military presence in the Middle East, and above all in Syria, lie in domestic politics. It would be counterproductive to assess Russia's policy in MENA in isolation from Europe, Ukraine and the events inside Russia following the annexation of the Crimea. In this regard, at least three main reasons can be seen as forcing Russia to take part in an armed conflict far from its own borders. For one, there was the need to achieve political mobilization around the ruling regime in Russia. By mid-2015, the political effect of the annexation of Crimea began to diminish. Moreover, the post-Crimean period was also characterized by a very difficult legacy for Russia in the form of an unsettled conflict in eastern Ukraine. Of all the options available to Moscow in relation to Donetsk and Luhansk, the Russian leadership has chosen the most unprofitable scenario: it provoked a conflict, from which it subsequently decided to distance itself.

Thus, by mid-2015, the country needed a new wave of patriotic mobilization, which could be achieved through successful military operations abroad, as was the case after the war in South Ossetia in 2008, or after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. A similar effect was observed within the framework of the Syrian campaign, after which the number of people with a positive opinion of the course pursued by the authorities began to increase. This was especially true considering the forthcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for autumn 2016. Moreover, for the Russian authorities, it was fundamentally important to prevent a repetition of the events of late 2011 to early 2012, when the elections to the State Duma ended with mass protests in Bolotnaya Square.

Another factor concerns the need to overcome the economic frustration of Russian society in the post-Crimean period. The period 2015–2016 marked the peak of the financial and economic crisis that Russia faced after the sanctions imposed by the West. The deficit of the Russian budget in 2015 reached 2.4% of GDP, increasing to 3.5% the following year.²⁶ At the end of 2015, there was a decline in the growth rate of the Russian GDP. By autumn 2015, this indicator dropped to the lowest level since 2009, when the country was experiencing the consequences of the global financial crisis.

At this juncture, it was extremely important for the Russian leadership to reorient the people's attention from the internal economic problems to the foreign policy agenda. In

this regard, the anti-terror component of the Russian campaign in Syria was very attractive. As a matter of fact, owing to the threat from the Islamic State, the Russian leadership managed to justify to its own population the need to increase spending on the needs of the military-industrial complex. Moreover, the very fact of the Russian budget deficit began to be associated not so much with the failed foreign policy line towards the West and Ukraine, but with the need to resist international terrorism, while the rest of the world community apparently preferred to remain silent at best.

The final factor explaining the Russian deployment in Syria was the goal of preventing Russia's isolation and to 'coerce' the West, chiefly the United States, into dialogue with Moscow. Vladimir Putin's speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2015 was of fundamental importance in this regard. The essence of his speech, boiled down to the fact that Russia had regained the status of a 'superpower' whose opinion needed to be considered, a status that had been lost after the collapse of the USSR. It is surprising that such an assertion found a response among the majority of the Russian population²⁷; however, it required the Russian leadership to take specific actions aimed at visibly acting upon this thesis.

Thirdly, the explanation of Russian leaders' preference for restrained engagement with MENA is mistrust of all regional actors. The important role here is played by the fact that Russia's (and previously the USSR's) relations with MENA countries were difficult and ambiguous. The interaction between these countries has a history of ups and downs, severe conflicts and sharp warnings. A good illustration of this is Vladimir Putin's visit to Israel in 2005, during which the Russian president asked Prime Minister Ariel Sharon: 'I am a new person in the Middle East, what is the first advice you could give me?' The answer was: 'Never believe anyone'.²⁸ The conflict with Turkey at the end of 2015, which was interpreted by Vladimir Putin as a 'stab in the back,' only reinforced the mistrustful attitude of the Russian leadership towards the elite of the Middle East.

The bargaining strategy

In general, it can be noted that since the beginning of its military intervention to Syria in 2015, the Russian leadership has been able to resolve a number of important tasks, both in domestic and foreign policy. First, it managed to address certain domestic challenges. The actions of the Russian military in Syria, received a generally positive reaction 'from the Russian population, humiliated by long years of neglect by the West'.²⁹ There was a rise in the popularity of President Vladimir Putin, even as the country fell into a period of economic crisis and the standard of living declined for the majority of citizens. Undoubtedly, the main reason for this development was his firm position in the Crimea crisis. Nonetheless, the engagement in Syria, which fit Putin's credo 'we leave no one behind,' added to the Russian president's popularity.

Here we should not forget the internal political context in which Putin returned to the presidency in 2012. It should first be noted that Russian society was extremely sensitive to the events in Yugoslavia in 1999, Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011. The 'silent' position of the Russian leadership and its inability to stop NATO's military operations in countries 'friendly' to Russia were perceived by the majority of the population (especially the part that votes for Putin) as a sign of weakness.



Also the correspondence dispute between Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin about UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which introduced a free flight zone in Libya, showed support for Putin's position. According to surveys by the 'Levada Center', 53% supported the position of Vladimir Putin, who rejected the adoption of Resolution 1973, whereas only 13% agreed with Dmitry Medvedev, who condemned Qaddafi's actions.³⁰

The presence of the Russian military in Syria has become a relatively effective, but extremely costly, method of forcing dialogue between Moscow and international community. In terms of its relations with global actors Russian government managed to dilute the discussions about the situation in Ukraine with a Middle Eastern agenda, on which the Kremlin felt more flexible. Gradually, however, this strategy began to become less profitable.³¹

In terms of relations with regional actors, they are interested in Russia primarily as a force potentially capable of influencing the Syrian regime, Iran, Khalifa Haftar in Libya, or the Houthis in Yemen etc. At the same time, an important circumstance that significantly hampers Moscow's role as a 'regional broker' is the ever-decreasing value of its leverage on its 'allies' in MENA countries.

The most revealing case is its relationship with the Syrian regime. The preservation of the Baath regime, as well as the military bases in Hmeymim and Tartous, does not automatically mean a victory for Russia. Tactical successes have not resolved the strategic task, which the Russian leadership is still trying to address. Moscow has not been able to capitalize on the Syrian campaign to mitigate sanctions, or normalize relations with the West. In other words, by the begining of 2020s Kremlin is still trying to convert its military advantages into diplomatic.

Though the regime of Bashar al-Assad can be considered the winner in the civil war, this does not guarantee Moscow a comfortable presence in post-conflict Syria. Moreover, in the course of the armed conflict, the value of Moscow for Damascus was the military assistance rendered to it, which was unmatched by other forms of influence. However, with the transition to the post-conflict phase, the significance of the military factor will steadily decrease, bringing to the fore the financial and economical aspects of cooperation.³²

Under these conditions, balancing strategy in Syria requires more subtle politics from the Russian leadership. Cooperation with the European Union or Gulf states on the economic reconstruction of Syria, which is necessary for Moscow, forces the Kremlin to put pressure on the Syrian regime. However, the Syrian regime has failed to take any steps regarding political reforms or transitional justice despite tattempts to pressure by Russia.

To date, the Syrian military and security services have total superiority over all other groups in Damascus. At the same time, it is this part of the ruling elite in Syria that is least interested in even cosmetic reforms of the existing political system. In this regard, it is obvious that the Syrian political establishment would find it absolutely unacceptable to reach a deal in which it will have to share its power with the opposition in return for economic assistance from the EU or Gulf states.

In turn, Moscow's chances of reaching a compromise with the United States also decreased after Donald Trump came to power. During Barack Obama's administration,

the focus of American politics in the Middle East was on confronting international terrorism in general and ISIS in particular. From this point of view, Iran could hypothetically have become an ally of Washington in the fight against terrorism. However, since the beginning of 2017, the situation has changed drastically. The confrontation with Iran and its presence in the region has became the cornerstone of the US Middle East strategy under Trump. This situation has significantly affected the agenda of the Russian-American negotiations, once again confirming that no significant positive changes can be expected in this direction. On the Middle East agenda, Washington is seeking to discuss three topics with Moscow: the Iranian presence in Syria and the Middle East, post-conflict Syria—the US is clearly trying to stipulate the possibility of maintaining its participation in political processes—and the issue of Palestinian-Israeli settlement.

It is also unlikely that Russia will exert pressure on Iran in Syria to please the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The leadership of the Iran is extremly ‘inconvenient partner’ and negotiator for Moscow,³³ but Russia’s ability to confine Iran’s presence in Syria is limited. On the one hand, Moscow still needs Tehran’s proxies on the ground for as long as the war continues, even as it tries to squeeze them out of certain areas. On the other hand, Russia has few effective tools to force Iran, its proxies and/or ‘pro-Iran forces’ to leave Syria. Russia could theoretically advocate for the withdrawal of groups such as Hashd al Shaabi, Afghan and Pakistani fighters and Hezbollah in exchange for concessions to Iran in Syria or elsewhere. Yet there are other local forces supported by Iran such as the National Defense Forces or Local Defense Forces by Syrians, to which Tehran is unlikely to end its support.

The complete removal of pro-Iran forces from Syria is not attainable under current circumstances. The nature of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) project in Syria is an important factor here. A British researcher of Iraqi origin, Aymenn al-Tamimi, uses the example of the Local Defence Forces (LDF) to show that the IRGC project in Syria, originally aimed to take the armed forces system under its control not through domination, but via integration into it, eventually becoming an inseparable part of it. ‘LDF can be described as a joint project of the Syrian military and the IRGC, with officers from both sides featured in the command structure,’ he claims.³⁴

The possibility of Iran’s withdrawal from Syria became even more illusory when Iranian Defence Minister Amir Khatami signed a military cooperation deal between Iran and Syria after a meeting with Bashar al-Assad in 2018.³⁵ All of these circumstances make the achievement of any agreement on Syria without the participation of Iran impossible.

Nevertheless, Russian bargaining strategy in the Middle East allowed it to strengthen ties with MENA countries. Moscow’s increasingly principled position on Middle Eastern issues, which has manifested itself through its voting pattern on Syria in the UN Security Council since 2012, and later through military intervention in Syria in 2015, has pushed regional actors into closer, albeit forced, dialogue with Russia.

At the initial stage Russian intervention to Syria hampered the development of relations with a number of Middle Eastern countries, such as the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Russian support for al-Assad strained their relations with Moscow. Nevertheless, by 2017, in GCC, there was a feeling that if they were looking for solutions to ‘the Syrian riddle’, then it should be done not only in Washington but also in Moscow.³⁶



Russia does understand the importance of the current moment. Opportunities for cooperation, primarily in the economic, energy and military-technical spheres, were the result of its active military-diplomatic participation in Middle Eastern affairs. Naturally, an important role was played by a certain geopolitical vacuum, which emerged since the United States failed to formulate its position regarding the processes of reconfiguration of the Middle Eastern order after 2011. No longer able to act as a guarantor of the existing status quo in MENA, and also not having a clear strategy on how the new security architecture in the region should look, Washington essentially left no other choice to local elites but to diversify their foreign policy connections.

The best example of this diversification of partnerships is the relationship between Moscow and Riyadh at the present stage. Without having any illusions about Saudi Arabia's reorientation from the United States towards Russia, one can say that a few years ago it was difficult to imagine such an obvious increase in the interest towards each other. The Saudi leadership did not hide its disappointment with the actions of the Obama administration in the Middle East.³⁷ The situation is similar in the case of Yemen. Since 2018, Riyadh significantly intensified dialogue with Moscow in search of ways out of the Yemeni crisis. According to the Saudi leadership, Russia could play an important mediating role between the pro-Saudi government of Mansour Hadi, Southern Transitional Council in Aden, and the Sana'a authorities under the control of the Ansar Allah movement.

In turn, Moscow is interested in strengthening the financial and economic component of Russian–Saudi relations. The Russian leadership has repeatedly expressed its dissatisfaction with the fact that most of the agreements affecting economic and military-technical cooperation remain at the memorandum of understanding level. In other words, Russian interests have been largely determined by internal difficulties caused by the regime of sanctions. Under the recent conditions, in which Russia has had difficulties with its key trading partner, the European Union, it has been forced to look for an alternative. In this regard, strengthening the position of Muhammed bin Salman, who has taken the course of diversifying foreign policy and foreign economic relations, has proven very useful.³⁸

The weak point of Russia's bargaining strategy, whereby Moscow is seeking to convert its political advantages into economic benefits, is its very high costs. First of all, there are the casualties suffered by the Russian military in Syria, which creates an unfavourable information background for the Russian authorities. According to the official data of the Russian Ministry of Defence, as of the end of September 2019, 108 Russian servicemen were killed as a result of hostilities in the military operations in Syria which started on 30 September 2015.³⁹ As for the losses of military equipment, during the campaign, Russia lost eight aircraft and six helicopters in Syria.⁴⁰

Moreover, the Russian military presence in Syria entails economic losses. According to the official statistics, for 30 months (from 30 September 2015 to 28 February 2018), Russia spent about 3.06 USD billion on military operations in Syria, which corresponds to 0.2% of Russian GDP.⁴¹ Similar figures are cited by the Russian political party 'Yabloko', which in early 2018 calculated the costs of the Russian presence in Syria. The calculations included five parameters,⁴² as well as the Syria campaign carried out by the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier. If the cost of the Syrian operation is calculated according to this method, as of 2 March 2018, it will amount to 2.6–3.8 USD billion.⁴³

Of course, the costs incurred by Russia for a military operation in Syria are significantly lower than the amount of money spent in Syria by the US. According to The International Business Times of 14 March 2016, the US had spent 11.5 USD million a day since August 2014 in the fight against Islamic State.⁴⁴ However, given the difficult socio-economic situation in Russia, all of these costs force Moscow to look for ways to minimize them, which remains a challenge for the Kremlin.

Russia was able to play a crucial role in Syria, but **only** in Syria. To be realistic, one should recognize in advance, that ‘in the Middle East as a whole, by virtue of economic circumstances, it cannot play first fiddle, especially to be a conductor, no matter what the role of Syria is’.⁴⁵ For MENA countries, the main partners for economic cooperation are still the United States, Western Europe, China and India. In the economic sphere, Russia remains in the second and even third tiers. On one hand, this circumstance leads Moscow to fear that a decrease in its military presence in the Middle East, may result in a further weakening of economic ties with the regional countries.

On the other hand, the desire to find common positions with the West remains an essential vector of Russian foreign policy.⁴⁶ In this regard, Mike Pompeo’s visit to Sochi in May 2019 seems to be interesting; this visit was expected by Moscow. After the report to the Commission by Special Prosecutor Robert Muller in March 2019 about the lack of collusion between Donald Trump and Russia during the 2016 election campaign, a window of opportunity opened up in Russian–American relations, at least until the next US election in 2020. Perhaps the main result the Kremlin and the White House learned from Muller’s report is that contacts with the Russians will eventually cease to be considered ‘toxic’. This, in turn, increases the chances of a return to Russian–American dialogue on the broadest agenda. We should not forget that the withdrawal of Russian–American relations from the crisis stage was one of Trump’s electoral promises; two and a half years of his presidency do not yet give reasons to doubt the fulfilment of his promises.

It is not surprising that in this context, Mike Pompeo’s visit to Russia and his meeting with Vladimir Putin became a kind of indicator of the further trend in the development of relations between Russia and the United States. Pompeo stated ‘I’m here today because President Trump is committed to improving this relationship’ before the talks in Sochi.⁴⁷⁴⁸

If we talk about compromises on international issues, they are quite visible both from the Western and Russian points of view. After 2014, Moscow acquired a lot of foreign policy commitments and made a number of decisions based on the inevitable escalation of a conflict that was costly for both the Russian economy and Russian society. A vivid example is Russian involvement in the Middle East, which is not of high value for the Russian leadership.

But at the same time, throughout recent Russian and Soviet history, the Middle East, as well as Afghanistan, Venezuela and North Korea, begin to occupy a more prominent place in Russian foreign policy, but only in the event of hopelessness and escalation of conflict with the West. In the case of normalization of relations with the West, there is no doubt that the Russian leadership will be more compromise on the Middle Eastern agenda.



Hostage to domestic agenda

Another important aspect that determines the Russian presence in MENA is public perceptions within Russia itself. Foreign policy takes into account, and will take into account Russian public opinion, sympathy or antipathy towards one or another socio-political or religious groups, and towards one or another country or regime. Therefore, Russian citizens' perceptions of the Kremlin's actions abroad play an important role in how the Russian leadership formulates its tasks and priorities in the region.

Of course, one should not overestimate the importance of public opinion when the Kremlin makes foreign policy decisions. However, if during the first two presidential terms of Vladimir Putin, the people voted for the current government out of satisfaction with their socio-economic position, then by 2013 and especially in 2014, it became clear that the practice of 'buying voters' is no longer possible. In this regard, the foreign policy agenda began to gradually oust the internal political agenda from the screens of Russian TV channels and in the discourse of Russian officials. That change quickly yielded its results. According to surveys of the Public Opinion Foundation, shortly after the annexation of the Crimea, Vladimir Putin became 'the country's main moral authority'.⁴⁹ And the approval rating of the Russian leader reached a historic maximum by the middle of his third presidential term, primarily due to foreign policy decisions.

Here, it is necessary to clarify how Russians understand the essence of the country's foreign policy. As Levada Center expert Denis Volkov notes, according to the majority, it all comes down to the fact that Russia's intervention in Syria protects the legitimate regime of Bashar al-Assad from terrorists and helps the Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine in the Donbass. With the same good intentions, it 'annexed' Crimea, and has now built a huge bridge there, while also paying pensions to the inhabitants of the peninsula. In the opinion of its population, Russia helps other countries, while receiving some problems in return. All such engagements cost money that could otherwise go to the salaries and pensions of ordinary citizens and contribute to the overall improvement of the standard of living.⁵⁰

This trend is confirmed by public opinion polls. The Russian population is still inclined to interpret the Russian presence in Syria through the prism of 'friend or foe' (Figure 1). In many ways, the special perception of Bashar al-Assad by Russian society as an ally of Russia predetermined Russia's position on Syria. When Vladimir Putin was elected for his third presidential term in 2012, the people expected him to realize his stated principle that 'We do not let our friends down,' and to prevent external interference in Syria. This special attitude of Russians towards Bashar al-Assad is also found in their opinion about the purposes of the Russian military operation in Syria.

According to a poll by the Levada Center, the majority of citizens (58%) said that the government, with the help of the army, sought to neutralize and eliminate the threat posed by potential spread of military actions by Islamic radicals and terrorists in the Russian territory. However, at the same time, 27% of Russians believed that a group of Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria defended the government of Bashar al-Assad to prevent a chain of 'coloured revolutions' 'provoked by the United States, around the world.' In addition, another 9% believed the task of Moscow was to support the regime of Bashar al-Assad in the fight against the opposition. These prevailing views among Russian citizens are the result of the use of narratives by the political elite. In

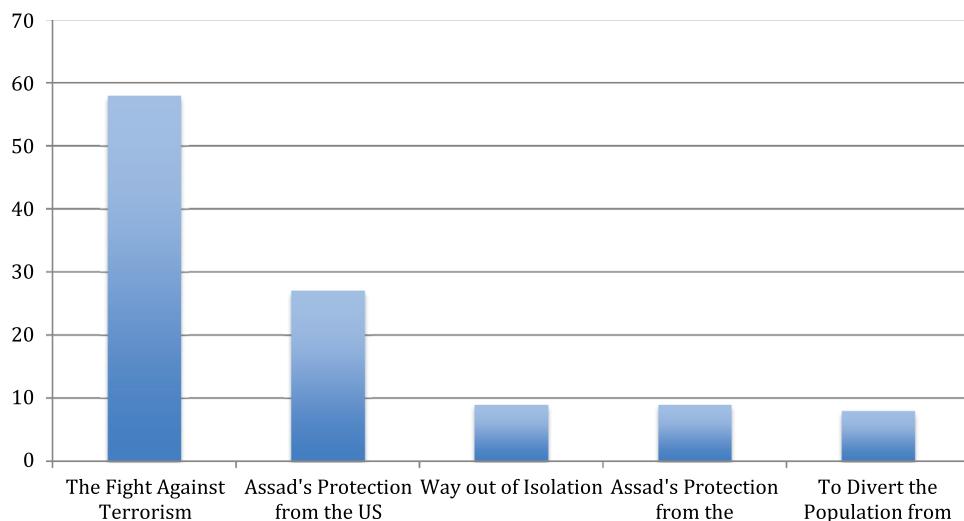


Figure 1. What was the reason for the beginning of Russian air operations in Syria?. Source: 'Russians approve withdrawal of troops from Syria more than the start of the campaign', *Levada Center*, 4 April 2016 <<https://www.levada.ru/2016/04/04/vyvod-vojsk-iz-sirii-rossiyane-odobrili-bolshe-nachala-kampanii/>> (20 December 2018). Note: Own elaboration of data.

November 2015, President Vladimir Putin formulated the objectives of the operation as follows: 'Clear Syria of militants, terrorists and protect Russia from possible terrorist attacks'.⁵¹ However, he clarified that there was also another task, 'to stabilize the legitimate power and create conditions for the search for a political compromise'.⁵²

Over time, however, a high percentage of citizens, who believed the purpose of the Russian military presence in Syria is to protect the 'friendly' regime, began to pose a problem for the Kremlin. Because, in such a formulation of the problem, the progress and failures of al-Assad would automatically mean the successes and failures of Russia itself in the eyes of its own citizens. This reasoning, in turn, is a trap for Moscow, whose interests are far from being identical to those of Damascus. In this regard, repeated statements by Vladimir Putin on the withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria, at a time when the Syrian regime continues to struggle against its opponents and US President Donald Trump actively uses extremely hostile rhetoric against Damascus, finds no basis among all segments of Russian society. This dynamic, moreover, largely explains the change in the narrative explaining the Russian presence in Syria, as soon as the Kremlin was confronted with the problem of withdrawing from the Syrian conflict. Over time, the Russian leadership increasingly began to shift the society's attention to the fact that it does not care about the fate of the Baath regime, and that Russia's presence in Syria is not connected with the fate of Bashar al-Assad.

Here, we should bear in mind another important point, related to the growing fatigue of Russian citizens with the foreign policy agenda. An indirect confirmation of this can be the results of a public opinion poll conducted at the end of 2017. The majority of citizens called 'the withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria', the most important event in 2017, more popular than 'the construction of the Crimean bridge', and even the nomination of Vladimir Putin's candidacy for the presidential elections of 2018 (Figure 2).⁶⁴

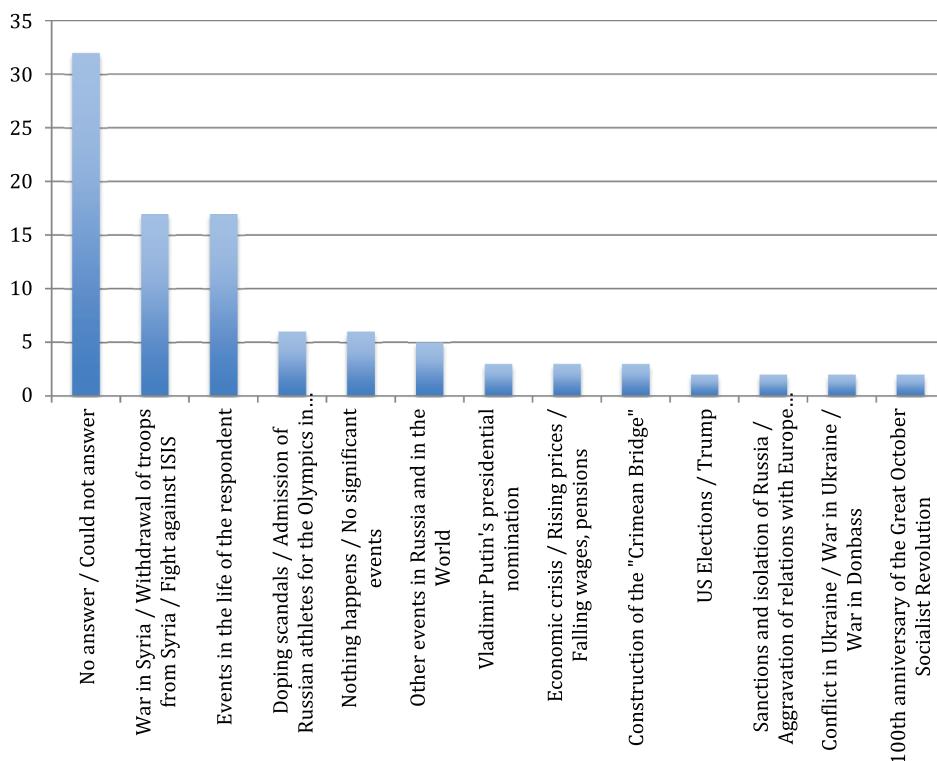


Figure 2. The most important events of 2017 in the opinion of Russians. Source: 'Syria and Dope', Levada Center, 1 February 2017 <<https://www.levada.ru/2018/02/01/siriya-i-doping/>> (20 December 2018). Own elaboration of data.

Apparently, the announcement on the withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria in December 2017 coincided with Putin's election campaign. It was important for him to show that Syria is not Afghanistan, just as the second Chechen war was not the same as the first one. The Syrian operation was planned to be short-term, but those plans did not hold. After three years of Russian military involvement in the Syrian conflict, most Russians still consider it justified, but fatigue from pictures of a distant war have accumulated, and constant reports of victory cause misunderstanding regarding the meaning of the continuation of hostilities among the inhabitants. In this regard, it was important for Vladimir Putin to use the Syrian issue in his election campaign, as long as interest from the population remained. According to the Public Opinion Foundation, the percentage of those who closely followed the situation in Syria declined from 30% in October 2015 to 24% in October 2017.⁵³

At the same time, this trend demonstrates the population's fatigue from foreign policy. As noted in the Levada Center poll, 'as economic problems build up, and especially after announcement of the increase in the retirement age, recurrent critical voices are being heard during focus-group interviews and public opinion polls. First came decreasing interest in foreign policy, fatigue and apathy towards developments in Ukraine (by mid-2015) and Syria (by mid-2016). Next, a critical attitude towards Russia's participation in these conflicts surfaced'.⁵⁴

The current mood is particularly in contrast with the population's perception of the Kremlin's foreign in 2014–2017. In the mid-2010s, such costs did not cause much indignation. On the contrary, in those years, separate events, such as the 'accession' of the Crimea or the bombing of Syria, caused the majority of Russians to be enthusiastic and proud of the country's revitalized military power. People were pleased that Russia, for the first time since the collapse of the USSR, was returning to the club of 'great powers'.⁵⁵

The state of foreign policy has garnered less and less understanding and support from Russian citizens during the fourth term of Vladimir Putin. In accordance with the results of surveys of the Public Opinion Foundation presented in June 2019, the interest of Russian citizens in foreign policy has noticeably decreased in recent years.⁵⁶ For the first time since the beginning of 2015, when this question was asked for the first time, the proportion of those not following foreign policy slightly exceeded the proportion of those interested.

At the same time, the most sceptical about foreign policy are the youth. Among the young population of Russia, 38% of respondents see Russian foreign policy as more failures than successes, and only 32% think the opposite. From 60% in 2017 to 48% in 2019, the share of those who consider Russia's foreign policy successful has decreased, while the share of those who called it unsuccessful increased from 17 to 23%.⁵⁷

In general, among the achievements cited, people most often call the 'military operation in Syria',⁵⁸ 'incorporation of Crimea', the conclusion of contracts with other countries and 'our weapons, new developments'. Among the failures were the following: 'cannot deal with Ukraine', 'quarrelled with all European countries, sanctions', 'too much participation in Syria'.⁵⁹

The survey results reflect the growing scepticism of the Russian populace in relation to the stories of the central TV channels about Russia's achievements abroad against the background of the description of the turmoil in Ukraine and in Europe. 'Against the background of the continuing decline in own revenues, the growing social and environmental problems, people are less and less interested in who defeated the Russian troops and their allies in Syria, how important Turkey's purchases of S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems are and how gracefully Moscow retorted the Japanese claims to the Kuril Islands. The Russians hope that the leaders of the country, and especially the first person, will deal with pressing problems: pensions, landfills and lawlessness of police officers, the solution of which were postponed for the sake of victories on external fronts'.⁶⁰

Changes in the perception of Russian foreign policy by its population are not yet a fundamental rejection of basic principles and ideas about the role of Russia in the world, and in MENA in particular. However, it can be stated that the population is increasingly tired of foreign policy, along with unresolved economic problems and unpopular socio-economic reforms within the country, and this will force Russia to seek a way out of the Syrian conflict. At the same time, it is of fundamental importance for the Kremlin that such a decision looks justified from a reputational point of view, and does not damage Russia's image in the eyes of both its own population and the world community.



Conclusion

Russian policy towards MENA after the collapse of the Soviet Union, evolved in a more pragmatic direction. It dropped the prefix ‘pro,’ as it was no longer ‘pro-Arab,’ nor was it ‘pro-Israel.’ In principle, Moscow tried to serve its own interests.⁶¹ After attempts to identify Russian policy in the region in a similar vein to Washington, it became clear that the interests of both the United States and Russia in the region are different, although not in conflict. The key problem of Russian foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union is that it still cannot formulate any alternative to the regional order that the West offers. In Soviet times, communism was such an alternative (regardless of the question of whether it was good or not, it was an alternative). Russian foreign policy entered an ideological vacuum that has not been filled for more than two decades.

This, in turn, predetermined an extremely reactionary Russian foreign policy, especially in the post-Soviet space and in MENA countries. Russia is not yet able to formulate an agenda on its own, and its actions are nothing but a reaction to the actions of the West. It is no coincidence that almost all statements of Russian officials, as well as news reports on federal media regarding Syria, the Islamic state, etc. mention the destructive role of the United States. Russian policy in the region is presented exclusively as a response to Washington’s ‘short-sighted’ policy. As a result, the lack of any independent and creative foreign policy agenda results in Russia losing its influence from year to year in the strategically important post-Soviet space.

In this regard, Russia will have to learn to distance itself from US policy towards MENA, in the sense that it abandons positioning itself in conflict with Washington and takes its own position. Due to economic circumstances and limited resources, Russia is not able to occupy a leading position in the region and compete on an equal footing with the United States, China or the European Union. Perhaps the most favourable option for Moscow, given its capabilities and intentions, could be the role of an ‘honest broker’⁶² in conflict resolution, as former Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev said. However, this will require the Kremlin to seriously revise its basic ideas about the role of Russia in the world in general, and in MENA region in particular.

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