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## RUSSIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

### THE RUSSIAN BEAR IN MIND



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# Eyeing the Peninsula

## A review of Moscow's diplomatic toolkit in the Arab Gulf

Ilias Mitrousis

While Russia reemerges as a key player in the Middle East, its diplomacy currently reaches to almost every country in the region.

Moscow realizes that a surge in its –always weak– relations with the Gulf States can serve well both its economy and its foreign policy agendas, thus contributing in cementing its presence. In turn, the Gulf States also seem eager to further develop bilateral economic ties for their own interests. In this context, an ambitious but careful rapprochement is unfolding via three main vehicles: investments, energy diplomacy and arms sales.



**T**HE FAILURE OF the Obama administration to back Egyptian President Mubarak at the dawn of the Arab Spring's upheavals and its reluctance to engage decisively in the Syrian conflict, caused a substantial loss of credibility in the eyes of its Gulf partners. That phenomenon was reinforced by the inconsistencies on Trump's approach towards the Arab Muslim world during its early presidency and its handling of the Qatar crisis. Russia, as the new emerging power in the region appears more than happy to fill this credibility vacuum for its own political and economic reasons. Further, its 'ideologically-free' post-Cold War foreign policy and the absence of democratization-related criticism –contrary to the US– perfectly fit with the Gulf countries' partnership preferences. Although Russia's geopolitical objectives are mostly antithetical to those of the Gulf States, all sides have so far tried to 'compartmentalize' their affairs and engage via economic and energy diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> By choosing neutrality over regional rivalries and by presenting itself as a pro-status quo, non-confrontational and pragmatic business partner, Moscow succeeds in two fronts. Firstly, it cultivates new economic ties with the Gulf States without risking its other regional allies and partners, such as the Syrian regime and Iran and vice versa.<sup>2</sup> And secondly, as its involvement in the region continues to grow, Russia may find itself in the convenient position of reaping gains from other players' conflicts. For instance, by choosing not to side with any particular flank during the recent Qatar crisis, it succeeded in safeguarding its expanding economic relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, which constitute the so-called 'Quartet', as well as to capitalize on the Qatar's endeavor to diversify its relations with other important actors in the region.<sup>3</sup>

The newly built ties between Russia and the Gulf States need to be examined initially through the lens of financial diplomacy and co-investment projects between the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) and Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWF) from the Gulf. By pledging to, or actually investing in RDIF-funded infrastructural, energy, agricultural and commercial projects, the Gulf States seek to raise their prospects of influencing Moscow's future decision-making in areas of concern.<sup>4</sup> Russia in this regard, welcomes the cooperation between SWFs, even if it indeed realizes that potential leverages over key projects may hamper its maneuverability capacity in the region. The rationale behind Moscow's flexibility on the issue is directly correlated with the impact of the western-imposed sanctions upon its economy. Consequently, the attraction of foreign direct investments, is of paramount importance. For instance, the 2013 agreement between RDIF and Abu Dhabi's Department of Finance to jointly invest in RDIF-led infrastructure projects, constitutes a significant example of how Russia intends to support its economy.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) has agreed to invest up to 5\$ billion in an RDIF-led Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) project in the Arctic.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, as businesses are thriving with the Emiratis after the acquisition of significant stakes in Russian Helicopters and Gazpromneft-Vostok (2017 and 2018, respectively), the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) has managed to position itself within the Russian market by acquiring assets in the banking, infrastructure and energy sectors whose worth exceeds \$2.5 billion. Moscow sees partners in the Gulf States that are both less willing to align themselves with the imposed sanctions, and keen on investing in the Russian economy by anticipating high returns.<sup>7</sup>

In parallel with the emerging 'SWFs' diplomacy', Russia also pursues strong interaction in the energy sector. By that, it seeks not only to deepen financial ties, but also to get access to funding and key technologies that the western-imposed sanctions make



difficult to reach. Moreover, partnering with leading Gulf companies –especially Saudi and Qatari ones– in the LNG sector may potentially increase the Russian companies' involvement in regional projects, thus enhancing its potential to expand its activities even further to eastern energy markets.<sup>8</sup> However, the country's primary motive for engaging in energy diplomacy is the stabilization of the oil prices. The 2016 OPEC agreement on oil production cuts, spearheaded by the Saudis and Russians, brought significant gains for both players. First and foremost, the lack of serious fluctuations, along with a more or less stabilized price above \$50 p/bbl is translated into a much-needed surplus for Moscow. Furthermore, high prices combined with a relatively weak Rubble contribute substantially to its competitiveness in international markets. That way, Russia aspires on the one hand to help its economy recover from the past four years' losses, and on the other, to shield it from future shocks.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, the evident close Saudi-Russian coordination within the OPEC+ framework might generate further economic partnerships between them. The latest agreement on new oil production cuts, also points to that direction.<sup>10</sup> However, it is noteworthy that due to the 'opportunistic' nature of their warming relations, cooperation between them is vulnerable to various changes in factors stretching from the players' individual agendas, to the changes of the future market conditions.

Similarly to the financial and energy engagements, the sale of military equipment to the Gulf States is also used as a mean of Russian diplomacy. Even though the Gulf States are overwhelmingly attached to the western arms industry, the recent US reluctance in deliveries has led them to pursue a diversification in providers. Russia in its behalf, sees that as a double opportunity. Elevating the arms trade with the Gulf countries, gives Russia a chance to compete with the West, while at the same time it can prove to be a useful vehicle towards more comprehensive cooperation in security matters.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the purely business-oriented nature of Russian arms sales allows the Gulf States to use it as leverage in an attempt to lure the Americans 'back in business'. In any case, despite practical limitations posed by the tight relationship between the Gulf States and the US, the increased interest for Russian arms indicates the reception of Russia as a legitimate partner in the field. Telling examples of this tendency are the already stroke arms deals with the UAE as well as the expressed interest on Russian S-400 air-defense missile system from Saudi Arabia and Qatar respectively.<sup>12</sup> Further, that particular reverse on decades of Gulf's armament policies, may benefit the Russian agendas in terms of partial geopolitical influence and economic gains.

In conclusion, the Russian overture towards the Gulf States is rather defined by economic motives. Each side recognizes that possibilities for extended political partnerships are limited due to the existence of conflicting geopolitical commitments. The employment of financial tools in the Russian-Gulf relations has so far generated a steadily growing interconnectivity that favors all parties. However, despite the



current maneuverability that Moscow enjoys, potential changes in the region's volatile political landscape might bring it before considerable foreign policy dilemmas. It remains to be seen how and within which framework will Russia and the Gulf States navigate towards durable long-term cooperation.

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RUSSIA'S

return

INTO NORTH AFRICA  
IS cemented upon  
arms, energy  
and grain



Katia Zagoritou

As part of Russia's strategy to reassert itself as a major global power, Moscow has recently intensified and strengthened its ties with the regimes of North Africa, most notably with Egypt and Algeria, through trade, military-security cooperation and energy. The need to establish itself as a strong and reliable partner and to take advantage of the new economic opportunities in the region –especially in light of the extensive western sanctions since 2014– as well as its strategic and security concerns are among the driving forces for Russia to deepen its presence therein.

**LAST MONTHS WERE PARTICULARLY** fruitful and auspicious for the relations between Russia and Northern African countries, specifically Algeria and Egypt. A major partnership and strategic cooperation agreement aiming at deepening bilateral ties in various sectors was signed between Vladimir Putin and Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi in October during the latter's visit in Russia.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, a joint counter-terrorism military drill was held in late October in Egypt, the third of its kind.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Russia is examining the creation of a joint military venture with Algeria, following the latter's request during the visit of the Russian Senator Viktor Bondarev in Algiers in November.

These recent developments mirror Russia's return in the region of North Africa since the mid-2000s. While it has taken several forms, it is centered mostly in cooperation and partnerships in the fields of energy, military and trade, the last one including arms trade, nuclear and gas deals, agriculture products trade, technical assistance and tourism. Besides their intrinsic economic value, trade agreements and energy investment are used as instruments of influence and as means for further strategic objectives by the Kremlin.

Russia's comeback in North Africa could be viewed as part of an overall policy aiming at establishing itself as a global power. Politically, it would challenge the West by establishing a Russian foothold in its orbit of influence, since North Africa has been interacting mainly with the EU and the US. In economic terms, the region is presenting major opportunities for forging partnerships, expanding cooperation and investments – considering the impact of the oil price's drop and the Western sanctions on Russia. For Northern African countries, which are seeking security, economic stability and development as well as enhanced diplomatic standing, cooperation with Russia would serve their objectives.

Materializing Putin's statement on the willingness to increase cooperation with the Muslim world in 2003, Russian officials multiplied their visits to Northern African states in order to pave the way for further cooperation and used the debt forgiveness diplomacy, by erasing parts of Algeria's and Libya's Soviet-era debts in 2006 and 2008 respectively, in return for contracts and weaponry deals.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than applying a standardized approach, Russia tends to deal with each state separately according to its features and its importance for the Kremlin.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Moscow is gaining influence in the region by seizing opportunities and taking advantage of western procrastinations and vacuums as in post-coup Egypt. Indeed, rapprochement between Russia and its Cold-War era ally has been particularly fostered after the 2013 military coup d'état and the subsequent suspension of significant US military assistance.

Military-security cooperation between the Kremlin and North Africa, one of the main fields of Russia's deepening presence, is particularly developed. It is noteworthy that Algeria and Egypt are among the top five buyers of Russian powerful weaponry, for which Russian operations in Syria have undoubtedly served as advertisement. Although US-Egyptian relations have improved since Donald Trump's election, the conditionality of the US military aid over Cairo's human rights record has annoyed Egypt which views Moscow as a reliable ally pursuing a de-ideologized policy.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Egypt is rather seeking to supplement US with Russian support than replacing it, considering Cairo's aim to diversify its sources of support as part of its pursuit for a more independent foreign policy.

Regarding Algeria, its heavy demand for Russian weaponry is linked to the historical ties between the two countries since the Algerian war of independence. Currently, half of the Russian arms exported in Africa are purchased by Algeria, which has undertaken



a serious arms acquisitions program, in order to control its turbulent neighbors, especially in the south. Moreover, its partnership with the Kremlin could serve as a diplomatic leverage regarding its differences with Morocco over the Western Sahara issue.

Yet military cooperation goes beyond the arms trade, expanding in military and technique as well as within the counterterrorism field. In particular, Egypt's first naval drills with Russia in the post-Soviet era were held in 2015, followed by joint military exercises in 2016 and 2018. Furthermore, a five-year agreement allowing the joint use of each other's airspace and military airbases was signed in 2017, while a ten-year agreement allowing Algerian military to use the Russian Global Navigation Satellite System was signed last June.<sup>6</sup> Lastly, a counterterrorism agreement was signed with Morocco during the first visit in fourteen years of Morocco's King in Moscow in 2016. From Russia's perspective, engagement in the fight against international terrorism is seen as a means to enhance its international standing, alongside a basis for new partnerships, whilst for Northern African states, facing terrorist threats, cooperation in security is of vital importance.

Russia perceives North Africa, particularly Egypt, as potential area for energy investment and penetration. Aiming at promoting its civilian nuclear technology, Moscow signed an agreement in 2017 for the construction of the first nuclear power plant in EL-Dabaa in Egypt. Similarly, Russian agreements over nuclear central plants in Algeria and Tunisia alongside a memorandum of understanding regarding the peaceful use of nuclear in Morocco were inked.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, grain trade has a prominent place in Russian strategy in the region, given the structural dependence of Northern African countries on international markets to meet their nutritional needs. Realizing the importance of the markets of North Africa, Russia –the world's largest wheat exporter currently– has enhanced its cereal production and competitiveness, and orchestrated wisely its grain diplomacy in order to become the major wheat supplier in the region. Indeed, Egypt –world's leading importer of wheat– absorbs 25% of overall Russian wheat exports since the mid-2000s, whilst Algiers and Rabat examine the possibility of trade in the sector.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Algeria's consideration to purchase Russian wheat threatens to unseat France from its position as Algeria's major wheat supplier.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, trade of food products between Russia and Morocco is of great importance, Rabat being Moscow's leading supplier of frozen sardines, tomatoes and citrus fruits. Additionally, the creation of a Russian industrial zone in Egypt's Port Said could constitute a hub of Russian goods ready to spread in other African markets.

Last but not least, tourism has been important in strengthening Russian presence in the region. Russia views tourism as an area through which the Kremlin could gain further influence, considering the impact of tourism on state economy. Egypt has been an important Russian destination for years until the bombing of a Russian aircraft in 2015; the



suspension of Russian direct flights for almost three years resulted in a tenfold increase of Russian tourism in Tunisia, while Morocco has also expressed intention to attract Russian tourism.<sup>10</sup>

In brief, Russia's return in North Africa is expanding in several fields, revealing a strategy in progress, mainly driven by its aim to establish itself as a serious partner for cooperation and to exert political influence. The Kremlin appears determined to forge long-term relationships in the region, as indicated by the nature of its deals and projects therein. Overall, Northern African states embrace the Russian involvement since they seek to diversify their partnerships and enhance their regional standing. However, given the historical dependence of the Northern African regimes on the West, and the West's stance, alongside the region's volatility, it remains to be seen how these relations will evolve.

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# RUSSIA

in

# LIBYA

## Geography, interests and stature

Charalampos Tsitsopoulos

After Syria, Libya is the second Mediterranean country where Russia has been increasingly asserting itself. Before the Arab Spring, bilateral ties were neither close nor indifferent. Rather, the Russians viewed Libya as a Mediterranean outlet from where to promote their energy interests, sell weapons and challenge Western dominance in the Mediterranean, whereas Gaddafi played Russia against the West in order to make the greatest profit possible. Amidst the country's chaotic civil war, Russian ambitions have not changed much. In contact with both governments, Russia has an eye to co-shaping Libya's political future, while continuing to thwart Western energy and geostrategic plans.

**O**N THE EVE of the western intervention in Libya, Russian-Libyan ties were positive but nebulous. While Russia viewed the country as a convenient place from where to resist Western plans in the Mediterranean, the former Libyan leader viewed Russia as a deterrent to what he perceived as incessant American meddling in the country's affairs.<sup>1</sup> The relationship was never consummated: Libya's offer to Russia of a naval base in Benghazi seems not to have been seriously contemplated, while a Gazprom offer to buy the totality of Libya's oil and gas available for exports never materialised.<sup>2</sup> Plans for trade agreements in exchange for Moscow's cancellation of \$4.5 billion of Libya's Cold War debt suffered the same fate. Slightly before the UN resolution that paved the way for the Libyan intervention, Russia lost more than \$4 billion after Libya cancelled the supply of anti-missile systems and a Sirte-Benghazi railway.<sup>3</sup>

Although Russia did not veto UN Security Council Resolution 1973, the manner in which the anti-Gaddafi campaign escalated convinced Russia that Western motives exceeded avoiding a humanitarian debacle. Russia was thus quick to try to get on the good side of Prime Minister Al-Thani, at the time the only internationally recognized leader. And while to some extent it succeeded, Al-Thani's government was soon replaced by the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA). When in early 2015, a separate government was set up in the east of the country by military commander Khalifa Haftar, Russia was quick to cultivate ties.

### Strategic patience

A widely espoused narrative portrays Russia's conduct in Libya as driven primarily by 'spoiling' instincts. While great power competition is certainly more often than not informed by such motives, a closer look at Russia's Libyan policies reveals a more complex reality. While it is true that, from Russia's standpoint, the Libyan campaign was a betrayal of the trust shown towards Western countries –by means of not vetoing Resolution 1973– Russia's subsequent moves have hardly been anti-Western. Russia is working closely with Khalifa Haftar's government in the east, which is often portrayed as an obstacle to national unity and UN plans. Yet Haftar is a former US resident with connections to the CIA. Russia's preference for him is better explained within other contexts: firstly, the Russian administration's preference for military strongmen in situations, where power vacuums or chaotic security environments are taking shape or are already a reality. While

comparisons with Syria made by some, border on hyperbole, it is true that in terms of stability Russia has perennially seen secular, military strongmen as preferable to militants of foggy origin. Secondly, the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), based in Tripoli, is seen by Russia as comprising multiple political and military agendas, while been only one part of a possible future Libyan government of unity. It is indicative that Moscow has never severed communication with the GNA but has merely insisted that it is il-



legitimate if it does not incorporate figures from the Tobruk-based one too. Thirdly, not only Russia but western countries such as France and Italy are rumoured to have carried out operations in areas controlled by Haftar. Tobruk is thus evidently far from a front in a Russia-West proxy war. Rather it is a point where regional and international alignments occur outside the context of a black-and-white war. Fourthly, Haftar is indeed much more pro-Russian than any other Libyan high-ranking figure at the moment. In this sense, he is more conducive to the promotion of Russia's economic interests. For example, an early 2017 Rosneft – Libya's National Oil Corporation (based in areas under Haftar's control) to redevelop Libyan oilfields could only have been concluded with Haftar.

Finally, and quite importantly, Russia also views Libya through the lens of regional alignments. Putin's increasing ability to converse with a vast array of regional players has been no secret. Libya could well be an opportunity to solidify alignments and closer relations being forged: Saudi Arabia has generally been supportive of the deployment of Russian forces, as have the United Arab Emirates. And it goes without saying that Egypt has been very supportive of Russia as the stakes for the former are high: driven by its anti-Muslim Brotherhood mindset, it wishes to limit the scope of the MB in Libya and control Salafi movements in the country.<sup>4</sup> For some, Libyan policies are also seen as part of a greater Middle East strategy on the part of Russia, whose main objective is to bolster a budding alliance with Egypt.<sup>5</sup>

Russia is thus playing a very careful game<sup>6</sup>: knowing it's too soon to throw its full weight behind any one side, it maintains channels of communication with all actors. It does so because it understands that a unity government, where Haftar will lead or hold an important office would be of much greater value than a mere campaign to engineer a total victory for him.<sup>7</sup> It also avoids making any major enemies.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Russia has been combining the promotion of its own interests with a more cooperative stance with the international community: this is evident, for example, in its willingness to abide by a UN arms embargo (although this has recently been questioned).

Apart from consolidating its position in the Mediterranean, while being seen as cooperative, one could hardly rule out a larger, long-term calculation: by attempting to mediate between all sides, Russia could well be trying to enforce the narrative, whereby whatever the US breaks, Russia can fix.<sup>9</sup> The political dividends of succeeding in this attempt might even surpass the more immediate and tangible benefits of a Libyan settlement.

### **Energy and arms**

In terms of more mundane pursuits, Russia can hardly ignore Libya's oil reserves and their proximity to Europe. Production from the country's high quality reserves might have plummeted since the beginning of the uprising, but Libya still has the largest reserves in Africa. In addition, companies from Italy, France, Austria and the US have engaged in joint ventures with the National Oil Corporation, in what seems to be a new scramble for Libya. By getting involved in Libya's oil sector, Russian companies can obviously make great gains. But in the long run, they could also gain leverage over Europe, by controlling part of Libya's gas exports.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the future contours of Libya's energy industry will inescapably be shaped by political developments. The announcement of a parallel National



Oil Corporation (in a region containing around 70% of the country's reserves) by Haftar's forces in mid-2018 is testament to the fact that Libyan politics and energy are bound to be inextricably linked.

A similar picture emerges regarding arms sales. The nature of Libya's post-war government will determine its procurement policy. Yet, it is worth bearing in mind that Russian interest in arms sales to Libya might exceed immediate short-term benefits: given closer relations with Egypt and massive past arms sales to Algeria (Russia having sold Algeria half of its total African exports),<sup>11</sup> Russia might view Libyan arms sales as a way to solidify strong relations with the three most strategically important North African countries. It is thus no coincidence that arms sales have only been discussed in the context of a potential construction of military bases by Russia.

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# VLADIMIR'S

## very

# Syriious

# BETS

Stella Athanasoulia



When President Trump ordered a missile attack in Syria in April 2018, in response to an alleged Russian-backed regime chemical attack, many saw the return of the Cold War “missile crisis-moment” and warned of the prospect of a bleak escalation that could lead even to a global nuclear disaster. In December 2018, the crack of doom does not seem to be coming soon, but neither does a solution to the Syrian imbroglio. What we rather see is the UN peace process faltering, the US leaving the scene, while Vladimir Putin is reaping the benefits of his military and diplomatic tactics in the region.

**NDEED, THE RUSSIAN INTERVENTION** in Syria can be judged as a series of successful bets.

It spearheaded the return of Russia in the Middle East, as part of a long-term foreign policy strategy that is not new. Access to the warm waters of the Mediterranean, projection of power through the naval base of Tartus, demonstration of high-tech weaponry, peace-oriented diplomacy whilst keeping open communication channels with all actors: all these aim to lead to the recognition of Russia as an indispensable regional and global actor and have been greatly served by the Syrian campaign.

But at the time of the intervention, Russia was a lot more isolated internationally and Assad was at his weakest, despite the Iranian support.

Completely changing the landscape of the war and the distribution of forces meant saving Russia's last resort of influence in the Middle East in order to rebuild its image regionally and internationally.

Putin is known to be very preoccupied with the Islamist danger, the main narrative behind the Syrian intervention, dating back to his own past in Chechnya. He often expressed his fear of Sunni Islamist extremism and of the risks that jihadist groups pose to Russia, "with its large, indigenous, Sunni Muslim population".<sup>1</sup> This and the fear of state collapse witnessed with the end of the Soviet Union drove the decision to side with Bashar.

Assad's survival would mean that the nightmarish scenario of an Islamist takeover would never materialize, not even that of a moderate but empowered Sunni element. This political objective has been reached. Assad may not have complete control of the Syrian territory, but it's now clear that he cannot lose this war.

The near-total eradication of ISIS in the country is primarily a result of the US "Inherent Resolve" campaign, rather than the Russian campaign, however Putin hasn't missed opportunities to congratulate his own forces and the Syrian army for the elimination of terrorists.

### **Military high-tech show off**

Militarily, Russia has achieved a lot with a relative low cost in manpower and resources, especially compared to the Americans and French who spent millions in equipment and personnel.<sup>2</sup>

The combined operations, favourite modus operandi of the Russians, complemented the air campaign, and made easier through the airbase of Hmeimim in the south of Lattakia and the bases of Tiyas and Shayrat near Palmyra.

The campaign was a unique opportunity for Russian armed forces to demonstrate and test weaponry in a live battlefield and to gain operational experience on the ground.<sup>3</sup>

More than 600 types of weapons were used in the Syrian battlefields since October 2015, while more than 200 of them for the very first time. The arms sales were considerably boosted and the new weapons tested brought back billions of dollars in new sales.

By deploying its latest generation of anti-missile systems intended to secure the Russian military and strengthen Syria's air-defence capabilities, it established a no-fly zone to any unwelcome guests in the Syrian skies, and sent a clear signal to both Israel and the US.<sup>4</sup>



Despite moves that were considered provocative, such as the delivery of the S-300 to Syria, Russia has avoided any unwanted escalation with other actors, such as the US, Israel and Turkey. Although minor incidents occurred, all powers clearly chose détente over an uncontrollable escalation.<sup>5</sup>

The presence of the Russian flotilla off the Syrian coast also created much needed leverage among regional actors, mainly Arab states, that have come knocking on the Kremlin's door to advance their own agendas.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the military campaign bet was successful not only in creating leverage and bringing new customers to the arms industry, but also in providing crucial aid to the Assad regime, strengthening both men diplomatically.

### Sidelineing the UN

The diplomatic bet is equally paying off for Putin, although no real advance is made towards a political solution.

The Astana process that Russia, Turkey and Iran have put forward since 2017 imposed four de-escalation zones and delivered a deal to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe in Idlib in September 2018.

Astana runs parallel to the UN Geneva process, when it does not simply annul it, and in the latest, 11th Astana round so far, the UN envoy had all the reasons to bemoan a failed opportunity and to promise yet another breakthrough before he steps down in December 2018.

The thorny issues regarding the UN-backed process concern the members of a Constitutional Committee, where Assad staunchly refuses the inclusion of civil society, the exchange of prisoners and detainees, efforts to rebuild Syria and the return of refugees.

Another attempt was put forward with the Istanbul Summit on October 27 among the leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Turkey and despite the obvious limits in finding common ground, it repeated the need to respect Syria's territorial integrity and share the burden (and contracts) of the reconstruction.

Russia wants reconstruction to be detached from any agreement. However, with no clear political process in place, it is hard to see any country willing to invest in the rebuilding of unstable areas such as Idlib and the northeast Kurdish regions.<sup>7</sup>

The return of refugees and displaced is also to be discussed in the next round of talks, however it is difficult to imagine how the conditions of safety and security will be created for people to return if Assad remains.

### Keep Assad at all costs?

Assad's survival is of utmost importance in a future solution, as external players present very conflicting views.



While preserving the regime is priority for Russia, Putin would not sacrifice other very important bilateral relations only to keep Assad in power. Turkey for example, who is repeatedly asking for Bashar's removal, is the second biggest buyer of Russian natural gas.

Same goes with regards to Israel, one of the main players in the latest war unfolding in Syria: that of Israel versus Iran and its proxies. Iran may be a partner in pushing forward the Astana process but is not crucial enough for Russia's interests to jeopardise its relation with Israel; or with Saudi Arabia for that matter, another bitter enemy of Iran.

These diplomatic calculations may suggest that another Baathist option could be put on the table in case Assad was to exit the scene. Suhail al-Hassan, commander of the 'elite' Tiger Forces, has become something of a celebrity within pro-regime forces and is seen as a potential alternative. A ruthless warlord according to many, Hassan comes from the same minority Alawite sect as Assad and is allegedly responsible for some of the war's bloodiest atrocities.<sup>8</sup> However, Putin's open favoritism may turn out a mixed blessing, as the Assads have mastered the art of physically eliminating those deemed dangerous.<sup>9</sup>

### Getting rid of the US

Trump's announcement of a US withdrawal from Syria caught diplomats and defence specialists by surprise while many foreign and US politicians warned against the weakening of the US position in case this materializes.

With the US out of the picture and Putin's gains it is even harder to imagine how Moscow and Damascus can be compelled to make concessions towards a negotiated settlement that undermines their control.

Moscow will be critical to establishing the political and economic arrangements that will be required for stabilization and reconstruction. In short, any kind of post-conflict cooperation in Syria will have to get Russian green-light.<sup>10</sup>

By betting on the western failures in the Syrian chessboard, and deploying a careful military and diplomatic strategy to serve the Russian mid- and long-term aspirations, Vladimir Putin has by and large won the title of kingmaker in the Middle East

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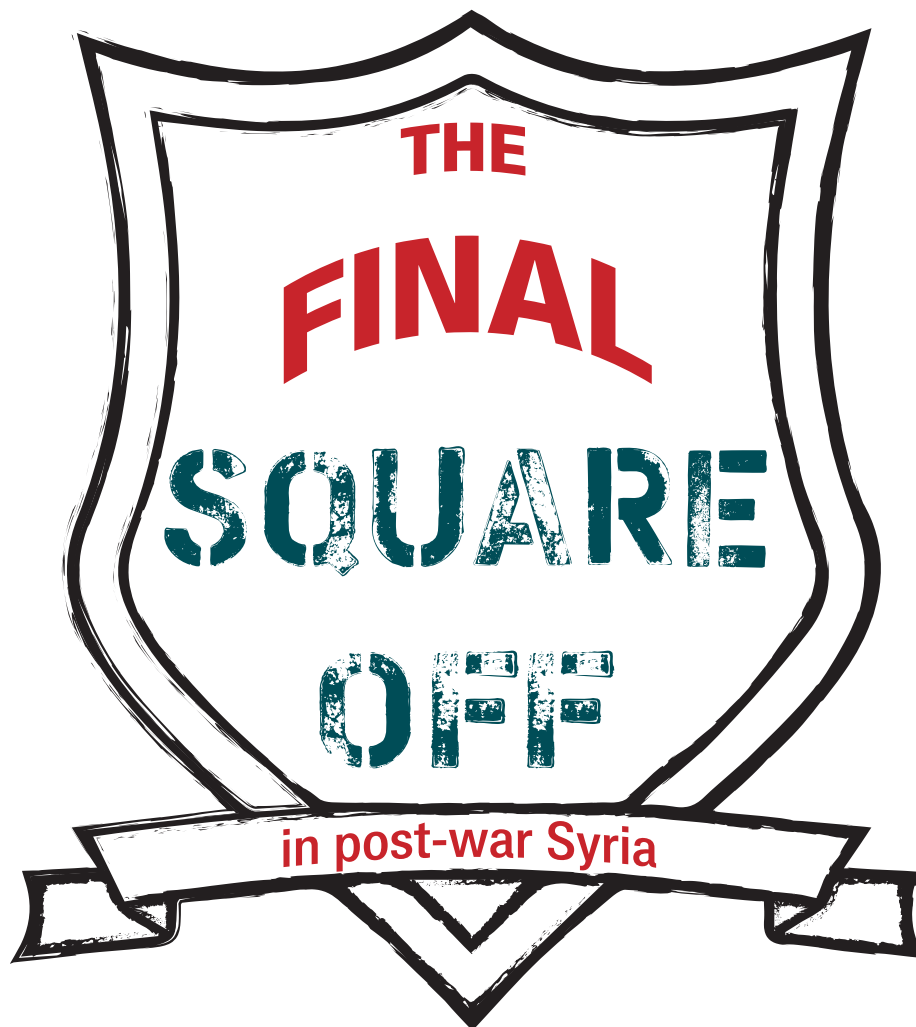
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## The triangle relationship of Russia, Iran and Israel

Alexandra Nikopoulou

Russia and Iran led the peace process in Syria by facilitating the Astana talks along with Turkey, whilst Israel, though neutral during the war, holds vital interests related to a potential extended Iranian presence there. How are the relations of the three states affected by the developments in Syria? Will cooperation between Russia and Iran as well as between Russia and Israel be disrupted by the competition between the two Middle Eastern states regarding Syria?

**A** **S THE NEXT DAY** is approaching for Syria, Russia and Iran hold conflicting interests that could lead them to a potential confrontation. On one hand, Iran wants to maintain a more permanent role in Syria and is thus investing in the rebuilding process in the country,<sup>1</sup> while Tehran has also deployed large numbers of arms, is providing funds to the regime and is also purchasing land which would secure a more permanent presence in Syria.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Russia plans on making investments on Syrian soil, while also maintaining strategic military interests, related to its bases in the country, such as the one in the city of Tartus. In 2018, the two found themselves at odds when Shia militias blocked the evacuation of Aleppo, and Russia attacked Syrian countries in order to force Iran to implement the deal.<sup>3</sup> Currently, Moscow is also engaging in talks with Washington, a move that is perceived with suspicion by Iran. However, despite U.S. efforts to convince Moscow into abandoning Iran within the Syrian context, Russia is not ready to do so, as Tehran has been, as of yet, one of its most important allies in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> One also needs to highlight the fact that through the prism of the U.S. withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal with Iran, the Iranian-Russian financial relations seem to be plummeting as Russian companies have adopted a more conservative approach regarding their business on Iranian soil and a strategy of “wait and see”.<sup>5</sup>

Israel, on the other hand, sees Iranian presence in Syria as a potential threat, since Tehran has not only strengthened the Assad regime, which managed to regain control of the territory along the Golan Heights in July 2018, but could also threaten its presence there in the future.<sup>6</sup> In an attempt to counter Iranian influence in the region, Tel Aviv has been targeting Iranian assets and is trying to confront Iran with missiles and air attacks. This strategy, however, could result in a rift in its relations with Moscow aiming at maintaining Iran’s role in Syria and at ensuring the sustainability of the Assad regime. Russia is not openly opposed to Israel targeting Iran in Syria and maintains a neutral stance towards the operations. Furthermore, Moscow is only concerned about the matter to the extent that a potential assault could cause Russian casualties, as such a development would deeply harm the Russo-Israeli relations.<sup>7</sup>

Another factor that has affected the relations between the three countries is the recent announcement by U.S. President Trump, regarding the withdrawal of American troops from Syrian soil following the defeat of the Islamic State. While the U.S. presence in the region was affecting the undeclared war between Iran and Israel, the above-mentioned decision has caused Israeli discontent as Tel Aviv feels isolated and left alone to counter the Iranian troops on Syrian soil. Israel was counting on the U.S. promise that American troops would only leave Syria when Iranian military would also withdraw from the region, and believed that U.S. presence was the one blocking further Iranian expansion.<sup>8</sup> Thus, this sudden move by President Trump was regarded as a betrayal for the Israelis. The latter is indeed providing more ground for Russia to expand its influence in the region. However, Washington would probably not leave Syria if it was not sure that its interests were secured. The U.S. are counting on the sanctions to stop further Iranian expansion, and, on top of that, they maintain open channels with Moscow that reassure them that Russia would not provide further support to Tehran.

Russia is currently at a crossroads. Despite maintaining good relations with both Iran and Israel, Moscow is aware that strengthening the ties with one of the two may lead to confrontation with the other. The same might occur concerning its decisions in Syria.



Iran is a traditional ally with whom Russia maintains a strategic cooperation, as Tehran is getting its arms supplies, sensitive nuclear and missile systems from Russia, such as the S-300 missile defense systems delivered to Tehran in 2016.<sup>9</sup> On top of that, the two powers led the peace process by facilitating the Astana talks along with Turkey and supported the Syrian government.<sup>10</sup> In parallel, Russia and Israel, despite Tel Aviv's close ties with Washington, maintained military and technological cooperation, as Israel exports arms and technology to Moscow.<sup>11</sup>

Moscow is open to cooperation and dialogue with Tel Aviv and is trying to promote communication between Israel and Iran, as a potential conflict between the two could harm Russian interests in post-war Syria.<sup>12</sup> Russia has acknowledged the significance of Iranian presence in the country, during talks with Israeli officials, whilst Israeli President Netanyahu has declared that Russia is not able to push Iran out of Syria on its own, offering, in that way, its support to Moscow.<sup>13</sup> Israel is highly skeptical regarding the outcome that a permanent Iranian presence could have regarding its security on the northern border of the country. Israel has the ability and the means to confront the al-Assad regime, however, it is not willing to face the Iranian troops on Syrian soil as they could harm its vital interests and its state sovereignty. Tel Aviv is aware of the negative consequences such a confrontation would have on its relations with Russia and is thus trying to avoid that by utilizing the rift in Russo-Iranian relations regarding who gets the lion's share in post-war Syria.

As the end of the civil war in Syria is drawing near, the players on the winning side, including Iran and Russia, are claiming their share. As for Israel, even though it did not support any faction in the war, it executed limited military operations targeting Iranian forces. As Iran has now gained ground in Syria and is establishing a long-term presence in the country, an open confrontation between the two is a possible option. Russia has been, ever since the beginning of the war, the only country involved in the region that maintained good relations with both Iran and the Syrian regime, as well as with Israel.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Russia, along with its allies, Iran and Turkey, was the main player in Syria, sidelining the Western forces. The outcome of the war was, thus, defined by peripheral powers and a global resurgent power rather than by the U.S. and the West. This gave Russia an advantage in increasing its influence

in the region, one that Moscow is not willing to lose in a potential face-off between Iran and Israel, where it is possible that Washington would also play a role.

Even though Moscow is open to enabling talks between Iran and Israel, it still aims at accomplishing its own financial and military strategic interests in Syria. This has disrupted its good relations with Tehran and has paved the way for closer cooperation with Israel. Tel Aviv is trying to make good use of the new parameters while also defending its vital interests against Iran. Although the results of the "power-shar-



ing” process in Syria remain to be seen, it is expected that Russia will maintain a modest position ensuring an ongoing cooperation with both Israel and Iran and an enhancement of its influence in the Middle East region, limiting, at the same time, that of the U.S. and the West, a strategic goal in itself.

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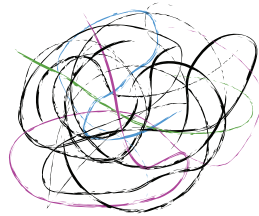


# RUSSIA & TURKEY

## Bros before foes?

Stavros I. Drakoularakos

Throughout the previous century, both Russia and Turkey were politically and diplomatically aligned with opposing camps. The New World Order established after the end of the Cold War brought forward the economic and especially energy features of a potential fruitful relationship. It seems that the developments of the “Arab Spring”, and particularly the Syrian civil war, coinciding with Russia’s increasing interest in the Middle Eastern region and with Turkey’s ongoing bout for leadership in the region, have created a new platform on which the two countries can reassess their common ground, albeit not without disagreements, trial and error, and shifting sine quibus non.



**B**OTH TURKEY AND RUSSIA are successor states to former empires perennially at odds throughout the 19th century. On opposite sides during the Cold War, Turkey had pushed for a rapprochement with the West due to the fear of the expansion of communist ideology through its territory. Nonetheless, the 1990s and the establishment of a New World Order ushered a new era of coexistence and cooperation, one anchored more on economic rather than political ties.

Turkey is the second largest consumer market for Russian natural gas and crude oil exports. It is energy dependent on Russia, with Iran coming in at second place. At the same time, Russia is dependent on having steady buyers for its energy exports, as the latter are the country's most important source of revenue. As a result, to an extent, both countries have managed to become co-dependent of one another. Moreover, the economic rapprochement between the two countries during the 1990s further developed with the growth of tourism from Russia to Turkey, with Turkish agricultural exports to the Russian market, as well as with the rise of Turkish entrepreneurs seeking business opportunities in Russia. However, it is of note that the trade balance between them remains in Russia's favour.<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect of the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey is found in both countries' preference for security establishment priorities over liberal ideas and the rule of law, at least domestically.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the further Turkey moves away from its traditional relations with the US and its EU accession process, the closer it gets to Russia as a political ally, eager to act as a mediator and refusing to act on imposed sanctions to Russia (i.e. the cases of Georgia, Crimea, and now Syria). For instance, in the case of the failed coup of 2016 against Erdogan, Russia openly supported his government and its subsequent measures,<sup>3</sup> while the US criticized them and refused to extradite Fethullah Gülen, who Turkey considered as the mastermind behind the coup. Finally, as a latest blow to US-Turkey relations, a deal was brokered for the contract of the S-400 Russian advanced surface-to-air missile system to Turkey. The critical matter for the NATO allies is that this system is incompatible with the currently used ones.<sup>4</sup>

The "Arab Spring" and the Syrian civil war, brought, at first, the two countries at odds, since Russia was adamant for President Assad to stay in power, and Turkey was openly supporting the Sunni opposition. However, Russian support enabled Bashar al-Assad to maintain his grip and pushed the Free Syrian Army (FSA) away from effectively endangering it. At the same time, the state of chaos gave the Kurds of the YPG the opportunity to secure their position and establish their territory in North-Eastern Syria. The latter did not sit well with Turkey who saw the rise of the Kurdish forces as a potential threat to its border integrity. What is more, the actions of Islamic State-related forces in Turkey forced Erdogan's hand, in desperate need of cutting off their access from and to Syria. Soon enough, Russia and Turkey



came to an agreement and found themselves mutually pushing for a power sharing endgame in Syria with Assad still in play.<sup>5</sup>

In order to secure a win-win situation for both parties, Russia turned a blind eye to Turkish operation “Olive Branch” on the Turkish-Syrian border and the then Kurdish-controlled Afrin region. With the Kurdish militias of the YPG forced into retreating, Turkey would effectively secure its new priorities in Syria: it would no longer support the Sunni-led opposition. Without, however, severing all existing links, the Sunni factor would not be a priority anymore.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the new order of the day would be for Turkey to make sure that the Kurdish factor loses its momentum, along with its US support. The above formed a new level of understanding and cooperation that was unavailable in the beginning of the Syrian affair.<sup>7</sup> The support from both Iran and Turkey for Russia to play a role in Syria awarded Putin the necessary clout for promoting Russia as a viable player for the resolution of the Syrian civil war. Hence, Russia maintains strategic interests in the Middle East, while a successful resolution of the Syrian matter can be used to show the US and the EU that it can play an important part in their backyard.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, the traditional Turkish strategic priorities in the region were established with the US as an ally, or at least as an enabler, in mind.<sup>9</sup> An alliance, or even a closer Russian-Turkish relationship would certainly be a bold move, one that Turkish foreign policy would have to be all in for and one could bring forth a new world order, a bit too soon after the previous one. Despite the alignment on the economic front and particularly on the Syrian one, it seems that Russia cannot yet fill the position that the US hold in Turkish matters in regard to the wider Middle Eastern region. While Russia cultivates a number of open fronts with the West, a potential Turkish shift to the Russian side could trigger a domino effect that would shift the carefully constructed balance of its foreign policy. The question remains whether any player has the clout, as well as the willingness, to move forward with a power play of such magnitude.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of the day, it seems that maintaining a geopolitical balance and holding on to both sides’ *acquis* remains at the crux of their foreign policy. Syria has turned into the perfect testing ground for Russian-Turkish relations to prove their tenacity and longevity. In spite of political disagreements and tactical mistakes, their relationship endures, ensuring that all parties come out of the Syrian situation pleased and confident without anyone endangering fragile foreign and other policy equilibria.

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**The  
Russian-speaking**

**community**

**in  
Israel**

**Eleni Panagiota Stoupa**

Among the Jewish communities all over the world, Russian Hebrews in Israel consist one the biggest migration collective. The two immigration waves from Former Soviet Union (FSU) have constructed and rebuilt the internal part of Israel due to their past Soviet experience and post-Soviet present, in multiple ways. For the Russian collective language constitutes a way of being in the world by maintaining and shaping parts of their national, cultural and social identity. In this framework, the rise of HebRush among immigrants, mediates verbal and nonverbal social interactions, cultures, habits and identities, by imprison human thought and, at the same time, release it.

### A small Russia in the Middle East

**A**LIYAH IN HEBREW MEANS 'ascent' or 'going up', reflecting the moral as well as the physical perspective of the movement. In the same way that the believer is raised through reading the Torah, Jews are also raised by moving back to Israel. In this regard, the word aliyah is assigned to diaspora immigrant Jews, who are going back to the Land of Israel, reverberating the context of Jewish migration to Israel. Consequently, according to Deborah Golden, aliyah represents "the remaking of the Jewish self", which could be accomplished through the Law of Return.<sup>1</sup> After Israel's Declaration of Independence in 1948 and the authorization of Israel's statehood, on the 5th of July of 1950 the Law of Return was enacted, which gave Jews all over the world the right to immigrate to Israel.

In the past 20 years, the largest immigrant community that has moved to Israel consisted of newcomers from the Former Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> During a period where most of the Western countries received refugees from the Soviet Union, the year 1970 marked the date of the first immigration movement, where more than 160.000 people moved from the Soviet Union to Israel. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, these past numbers were replaced by the amount of almost one million immigrants arriving in Israel from the Former Soviet Union.

The dynamic carried by the Russian collectivity inside Israel is, according to Julia Lerner, inextricably linked with experiences that embody their Soviet past, as well as the post-Soviet present.<sup>3</sup> The Russian community that lives in Israel is an amalgam of different historical and cultural experiences, which incorporates and represents differently the process of migration and integration. During the first wave, people had a stronger Jewish identity and were more attached to Zionist ideology. They shared a strong will to leave the Russian culture in the past, to learn Hebrew and embrace the process of Israelization. On the contrary, the newest immigration wave came from a demolished Soviet Union, where most people had abandoned Judaism practices, did not speak Hebrew and did not share the same Zionist feelings of the previous wave. Instead, they were trying to escape the general state of chaos after Fall of Nations in 1989 and to ensure a better life for themselves and their children.<sup>4</sup> Along with their belongings, immigrants brought with them their memories, their habits and, of course, their culture.

#### Language as a culture

Words, phrases and meanings are shaped and reconstructed within the time and space that they are used. They change context, forms and sounds through their social interaction with human beings. Therefore, language is innately social, a source of communal actions and practices; an unseparated part of culture. In Alechandro Duranti's words language



should be considered first and foremost as a cultural practice, an action that requires and simultaneously creates ways of being in our world.<sup>5</sup>

For the Russian community in Israel, a way of being in the world and in their new reality came through language. The second immigration movement arrived with a strong ethnic sense along with a superiority impression of Russian language. As a consequence, a formation of an autonomous ethnolinguistic community created, full of its own social media and networks, political representation and economic structures, based on home cultural values and Russian language.<sup>6</sup> For the Russian community in Israel, the framework of its existence was integration, a strategy, where bilingualism consist the basis for a bicultural character, in which the minority group maintains its cultural nucleus by expanding angles of skills and social networks and identity.<sup>7</sup> In this framework, HebRush signifies an emerging lingo among immigrants and an example of linguistic hybridity; it incorporates and mixes at the same time words, phrases and cultures.<sup>8</sup> Russian and Hebrew, as home and host languages sway from private to public spheres, by sharing the same space, or replacing it with another. They are used in turns or mixed in different situations, which shapes, presents and reflects individual sense of belonging.

If the usage of the national language underpins the incorporation of the nation, therefore, the presence of another group and their values, influences elements of social and national identity. Russian-speakers in Israel experience their past and their present concurrently and maintain it through language creating a multicultural perspective and identification. The speaking and mixing of two languages on a daily basis demonstrate a multidimensionality inside the process of incorporation and (self-)identification. The social and cultural identity immigrants have, reflects a multiculturalism, which shares the same space as language. Depending on the context, sometimes the Russian language and identity would be stronger, and in other times, the Hebrew language and identity would become dominant. A post-modern fragmentary identity has taken shape in a national and cultural level, which becomes perceptible through the rise of HebRush. Therefore, the national, social and cultural identity of Israel is comprised of an alloy of different way to address 'who I am'.

Like culture, language is not something stable and frozen in time and space. Instead, both change over time through experiences and social interaction. By the same token, this kind of social systems are shaped, recreated and redefine through their dialogical association with humans. If language consist of both the cage and the key to freedom, the recognition of language as a collection of evolutionary history surpasses this paradox.<sup>9</sup> HebRush entails an evolution in time, history and culture that captures Russian-speaking immigrants and liberates them at the same time.



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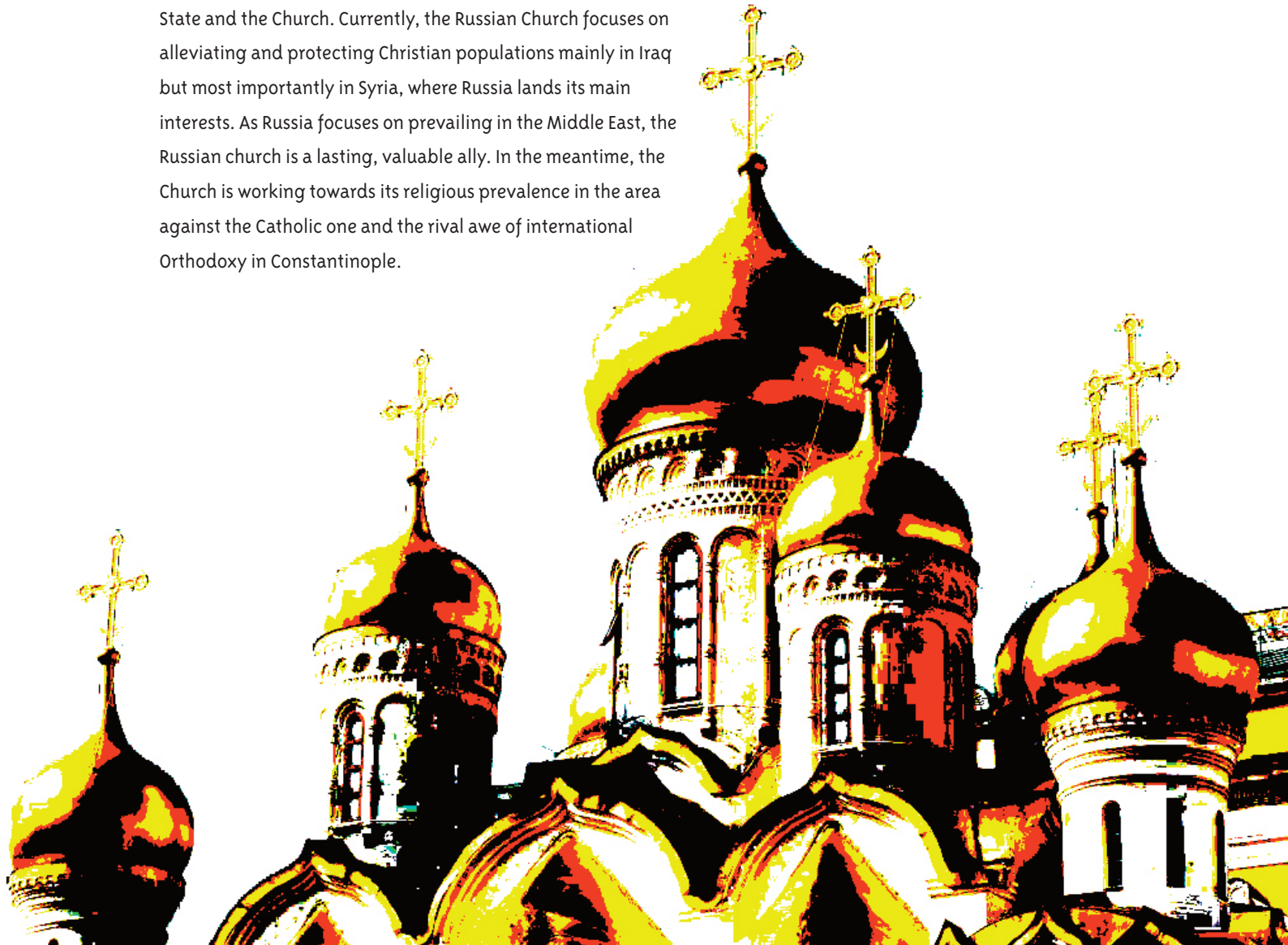


# The Russian Patriarchate in the Middle East

## Reclaiming an old prestige

Maria Kourpa & Charitini Petrodaskalaki

The ancient struggle for primacy in the Orthodox population of the Middle East has led to a close alliance between the Russian State and the Church. Currently, the Russian Church focuses on alleviating and protecting Christian populations mainly in Iraq but most importantly in Syria, where Russia lands its main interests. As Russia focuses on prevailing in the Middle East, the Russian church is a lasting, valuable ally. In the meantime, the Church is working towards its religious prevalence in the area against the Catholic one and the rival awe of international Orthodoxy in Constantinople.



### The Past

**C**HRISTIAN ORTHODOXY WAS ALWAYS CONSIDERED a mean to expanding Russia's sphere of influence abroad; this was particularly true since the annexation by the Ottoman empire of the territories where the majority of the Christian Orthodox population resided, including its four Patriarchates, leaving the Russian Church as the only one free from Muslim authority.

Imperial Russia was willing to be portrayed as the protector of the "enslaved" Orthodox Christians. It is noteworthy that, in exchange for some generous donations, the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1562 officially recognized Ivan the Terrible as "Tsar and Sovereign of all Orthodox Christians east to west all the way to the Ocean".<sup>1</sup> Yet, this started to become a reality after the Treaty of Kucuk Kaynarca in 1774, when Russia gained the right to protect and intervene on behalf of the Orthodox population of Moldavia and Walachia, and, through the course of the 19th century, it was extended to include the entire Greek Orthodox population in the Levant. However, after the Russian defeat at the Crimean War in 1853, Pan-Orthodoxy emerged as an alternative cultural and political vision of unification and modernization of Orthodox Christianity.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that it did not challenge the primacy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, but rather sought to direct it, while financially supporting the other Patriarchates and Eastern churches.

The First World War presented an opportunity for liberation of the other Orthodox Patriarchates, and Russia obtained an unofficial confirmation from its allies regarding its right to annex Istanbul and the Straits in case of victory; this would mean that it would have under its direct control the Ecumenical Patriarchate, thus officially becoming the Head of Orthodoxy. It seems that there were no plans of annexation of the Holy Land, where Russian pilgrims had gained free access to since the 1700s, or any other Patriarchates. Nevertheless, the Russian Revolution of 1917 put the position of the Russian church at home at risk, and led to the withdrawing of financial support to other churches.

While at first the Russian Church struggled for legitimation under the Soviet government, due to the Church's active cooperation with the regime during the Nazi invasion in 1943, it regained some privileges, including the right to elect a Patriarch to the vacant throne, followed by a permission to re-establish its influence in the Orthodox world in 1944.<sup>3</sup> The Soviet government saw an opportunity to expand its influence and control over the countries with Orthodox population, divided now into many nation-states, by supporting the Russian Church and the latter's historical fight for primacy within Orthodox Christianity. In this context, Patriarch Alexii paid some unprecedented visits in 1945 to the other Orthodox Patriarchates, more specifically to Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria. He also offered them financial assistance, in an effort to strengthen his claim as the true Orthodox leader. However, he was only partially successful, as he managed to reestablish a spiritual and financial connection with the Patriarch of Antioch; the other Patriarchs retained their strong connections with the Ecumenical Patriarchate and refused his deliberations.

### The Present

Ever since the fall of the fall of Soviet regime, the Church is gradually enjoying a more powerful political role and has reclaimed its past glory during Putin's leadership. Vladimir Putin's view on Russian hegemony includes any strategic player that could possibly



add to its influence, and religion is a strong soft power with extended popularity among people. For the time being, Russia presents the aid to Christians in the Middle East as a historical mission and a traditional practice for the country that was only briefly deactivated during the 20th century.

Kirill of Moscow, the Patriarch of Russian Church, is a man that supports Russian authority in world politics. The Patriarch of Moscow is promoting the Russian overture in the Middle East, while enjoying his own political role.<sup>4</sup> Since 2009 and until his ordination, Kirill visited the majority of the Arab countries with Christian presence and emphasized the importance of protecting them against Islam. Kirill also counts on the Middle East churches' alliance to secure his position as the Head of international Orthodoxy, thus discrediting the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, who is still recognized as *primus inter pares*.

As soon as the Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict began, Kirill has been openly supporting Bashar Al-Assad, presenting him as the sole alternative to Islamic 'terrorists', while, at the same time, he intensified the Church's presence in Syria, along with the Russian army. The Patriarch offered his eulogies to the invasion in Syria, declaring a "Holy War" against terrorism and declaring Kremlin as the "third Rome" that will liberate Christianity in the region.<sup>5</sup> Kirill approved of Assad's support from the Christian leaders of Syria, who stand massively by him from the beginning of the conflict, afraid of a Christian 'genocide' by Islamist insurgents.<sup>6</sup> In addition, it seems that the traditional connection with the Patriarchate of Antioch still stands strong; Kirill has been paying regular visits there, notably to the Patriarch of Antioch John Yazigi X - an avid Assad supporter himself - while at the same time receiving Christian leaders in Moscow during the civil war in Syria.

In addition, the Russian Church pushes Christian interests in Syria both symbolically and financially. In 2013, the Patriarchate of Moscow sent 1.3 million dollars to Damascus as aid.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Russia would restore monasteries, monuments and churches in Syria, as well as Christian houses to help with the rehabilitation of Christian refugees after the end of the war, as the Church would prefer to secure the traditional Christian presence in the area and therefore its influence.<sup>8</sup> In the meantime, Kirill met King Abdullah II of Jordan and discussed the future rehabilitation of Christian refugees that fled to Jordan from Syria and Iraq "because those communities are ancient communities".<sup>9</sup>

Palestine is another region of great interest for the Church, primarily due to the long-standing rivalry for primacy among Orthodox followers between Moscow and Constantinople. Moreover, Kirill has been very active on the matters concerning the populations in the Middle East, and even dared to take a stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict and to call for peace in the area with the help of Russia.<sup>10</sup> At this point, Kirill sees an exceptional chance for prevalence in Palestine, because of the Greek Orthodox' church low popularity due



to its decision on selling land to Israeli business. In the meantime, the Russian Church stresses the importance of Russian presence in Holy Land based on the number of Russian pilgrims, citizens and businesses. The Church has also opened a number of institutes to promote its influence, such as the Russian Center of Science and Culture and has reconstituted the Orthodox Imperial Society of Palestine with the mission to reclaim the lands and places of worship that belong to the Russian Church.<sup>11</sup>

The Patriarch is focusing on protecting the lives and interests of all Christians –Orthodox or otherwise– in the Middle East, by joining with other Christian leaders globally, and all the while competing with them over influence in the Christian populations. Kirill and Pope Francis met in what was perceived as a historical encounter in Havana during 2016 and agreed upon working together for the safety of Christians in the Middle East. Nevertheless, it is evident at this point that the Russian church solidifies its presence in the area not only against his main Orthodox rival –i.e. the Ecumenical Patriarchate– but also against the Catholic Church as well. As the Vatican and other Catholic-majority countries have evidently pushed back in their help towards Christians spiritually and financially, the Russian Church presents itself as the savior of all Christian populations.

In conclusion, while being independent institutions with different interests in the Middle East, the Russian Church is working closely with the respective Russian government in order to expand their spheres of influence. Overall, this indicates the Russian strategic investment in the area as an influential soft power and a religious leader that would establish its leverage even after the war ends.

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