



The Arab View of Russia's Role in the MENA: Changing Arab Perceptions of Russia, and the Implications for US Policy

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Executive Summary:

- In late September 2015, Russia made a great comeback to the Middle East scene when Russian Armed Forces, on President Vladimir Putin's order, intervened in the Syrian conflict, at the request of the sitting Syrian government.
- Putin's address at the 70th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2015 was a clear and unequivocal expression of Russian indignation at the dismal state of global affairs, in particular regarding the US-led military interventions in the Middle East.
- Russian military intervention in Syria—only two days after President Putin's UNGA speech in 2015—signaled to the West, the international community and the Arabs in particular, that the current regional trajectory of instability is no longer tolerable and that Russia will not stand by idly watching the Middle East collapse under the scourge of Islamist terrorism.
- The Russian resolve has taken the Western world, the US in particular, by surprise. Then-US President Barack Obama underplayed and underestimated the importance of the event that eventually turned the tide of the Syrian conflict by stating that Russia would face certain defeat in Syria.
- Whether Russia's return to the Middle East was aggressive or not, it has been a stunning, sudden success—and a setback to Western power and prestige.
- Obama's prediction of the outcome of the Russian intervention proved dismally wrong. Two years on, Russia is all but victorious, and the Syrian Army at the time of writing is rapidly recapturing the territory seized by the Islamic State (ISIS) and other terrorist factions fighting on the ground. Contrary to Obama's misplaced comments, Russia's intense diplomatic and military efforts have produced nearly unimaginable results,

including collaboration with the United States on the Syrian battlefield, where now Moscow, not Washington, is calling the shots.

- The key diplomatic successes of Russian peacemaking efforts include the agreement with Iran and Turkey on the establishment of several ceasefire zones in Syria. The culmination of Russian efforts in Syria, aided by Jordanian mediation and support, has been the Trump-Putin agreement on the establishment of de-escalation zones in southwestern Syria, signed on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Hamburg, on July 7, 2017.
- Most Arab states do not like to see the rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran. Others such as Doha prefer this, considering it a victory for Qatar and behind them their master, Russia, which planned for this new alliance that is against the interests of other MENA states. These developments pave the way for Moscow's greater presence in the Middle East.

Introduction

The Russian presence in the Middle East, in particular in the Levant and parts of North Africa, spans over two centuries, back to the time of the Russian Empire. And despite frequent interruptions and upheavals, it has lasted to this day. By the time the United States was first entering the region, following the end of World War II in 1945, during President Harry Truman's administration, Russian influence and presence in the Middle East had already been long established, although it had ebbed and flowed over time.

According to international law, the Russian intervention in Syria is legitimate, since it was launched at the request of the Syrian government. Yet, the Western powers have accused Russia of aggression and expansionism.¹ This rebuke likely stems from the fact that the United States and other Western powers feel that they are losing influence in the Middle East, while Russia is gaining strategic advantage in this crucial region, which Moscow considers its "near abroad." For Russia, the Middle East is instrumental to its national security, especially along Russia's mostly Muslim-populated southern border areas, whose citizens have in their scores joined various terrorist factions in both Syria and Iraq.

Meanwhile, the annual survey of Arab youth² ages 18–24 shows that young Middle Easterners' attitudes toward Russia and the West are in flux, whereby the two rivals seem to be reversing roles. In the same survey conducted last year, respondents from just four Arab countries—Iraq, Yemen, the Palestinian territories and Lebanon—considered the United States an enemy. This year, the number of countries to echo this negative opinion about the US has doubled to include Qatar, Libya, Algeria and Egypt. Coincidentally, all these are either countries in conflict with the US, due to its military interventions, and/or at the same time, more or less, traditional Russian allies from the Soviet era.

These trends simultaneously indicate an increasingly positive image of Russia in young Arab minds—a fact that can be attributed to Moscow's role as a protector of Syrian people against the menace of terrorism.³ The opinion of many Syrians, though some are against Bashar al-Assad and his policies. The US, on the other hand, is being regarded as unfriendly or even as the most dangerous nation in the world, in a growing number of countries globally. In Turkey, a

traditional American ally for the past half century, over 70 percent consider the US a top threat, superseding the Islamic State.⁴

Decades of US interventions in the Middle East, in particular the invasion and subsequent destruction of Iraq, and later Libya, have put the United States in a position of being blamed by both the terrorist factions and the ordinary Muslim public for the crisis embroiling the region. The changing attitudes of the new generations of Arabs, as well as non-Arab Middle Eastern nations, should be taken in consideration in shaping future US policy in the region. The new American Middle East policy should be built on a platform based on regional grassroots sentiments, national priorities and socio-economic and cultural aspirations—which are not necessarily in line with the existing American perceptions about the region and its needs.

Russia's cultural and religious ties to both the Muslim and the Christian populations in the Mediterranean part of the Middle East (present-day Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine) were particularly strong during the Russian imperial era. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire changed these dynamics. These broad shifts negatively affected Russia's presence and regional influence, while establishing the British and the French as the new regional overlords, from an Arab perspective.

While the Anglo-Russian and Franco-Russian rivalry in the region dates back to Tsarist Russia, especially the reign of the Romanov dynasty (1613–1917), the clash and rivalry with the United States in the region, is a much more recent phenomenon and is linked to the Cold War period. Soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and particularly the 1990s, the period was marked by Russian passivity and near-absence from the region. Changes in Moscow's policy orientation chiefly focused on solving internal socio-economic issues, thus pushing Russia to withdraw from the outer regions, including the Middle East, Africa and Central Asia, previously considered by the Soviets to be of strategic importance to the country's interests abroad.⁵

With the subsequent ascent of Vladimir Putin to the Russian presidency in 2000, Russia again started to play a more assertive role in these crucial regions, however. Notably, the Middle East again took on a key focus within Russian foreign policy. This shift in orientation toward the Middle East and Russia's "near abroad" (as Moscow refers to the other countries of the post-Soviet space) in the early 2000s, as Russia began to reemerge from the rubble of former Soviet collapse, was made manifest in the high-level visits organized in 2005 by Yevgeny Primakov to a number of Middle Eastern countries, including Iran, Syria, Lebanon and even Jordan. These visits were part of the new "Putin Doctrine," which emphasized repositioning Russia as a "great power" and developing a new geopolitical discourse placing Russia vis-à-vis the US.⁶

But after 2010 and the advent of the so-called "Arab Spring," the chain of events that ensued signified a systemic crisis across the region. At this point, Russia decisively stepped in, ostensibly to counter American hegemony, regime change and Washington's approach of "spreading democracy."⁷ For Russia, the so-called "Arab Spring" revolutions were reminiscent of the "Color Revolutions"—the various related movements that developed across a number of countries in the former Soviet Union and the Balkans in the early 2000s. Russia has strongly opposed such demonstrations, which the Kremlin considered a major threat to Russian national security and the stability it fought to regain in the decade following the collapse of the USSR.

Parallel with the “Arab Spring” events, changing European Union and US policies toward the region left room for Russia, the only country seeking a larger presence in the Middle East since it had lost many of its strategic bases in the MENA after the fall of some regimes in the region. These events have given the Russians an opportunity to “fill the vacuum left for an honest external broker in resolving regional problems”⁸ at the expense of the US and in a manner distinctively different from the Western one. In contrast, the US was distancing itself from MENA issues and trying not to become involved in the local conflicts, believing that the best policy was to remain neutral. Russia, on the other hand, thanks to efforts by Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, managed to set a course to return to the Middle East through rebuilding relations with various countries. Specifically, Bogdanov played a key role in winning friends and influencing people, from Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to Libya’s Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar. Russia’s updated approach to the Middle East offers an alternative diplomatic vision: an image of a steadfast ally respectful of national identities⁹ and the existing state order in the extremely volatile and unstable region. One should remember the last words Obama said on December 16, 2016, in his final press conference as president: the Russians cannot change the Americans or weaken them, because Russia is a weaker country and their economy does not produce anything that anybody wants to buy, except oil and gas and arms.

Moscow’s alternative vision appeals to many in the Arab world, much more than the Western approach that seeks to upend the status quo and impose, by the application of both soft and hard power, neoconservative, liberal democracy to the region. Due to the failures that US interventions of the past two decades have brought upon a range of Middle Eastern countries, from Afghanistan and Iraq, to Libya and Syria, to name but a few, the region seems to be more susceptible to fresh approaches; and Russia, with silent backing from China, seems to be offering that alternative.

Unlike Soviet foreign policy, which was strongly ideological¹⁰ in nature and sought to spread Communist ideas across countries of interest, post-Soviet Russian policy is markedly non-ideological and pragmatic in nature, apparently based on Vladimir Putin’s political philosophy of “pragmatic nationalism,”¹¹ with national security and sovereignty at its core. This approach focuses on economic and security integration and strengthening relations without imposing Russian values, either politico-ideological or cultural, on the partner-countries.¹² What is remarkable is that Arab governments are increasingly seeing Russia’s actions in a positive light.

Russo-Arab Ties: From the Soviet Union to Putin’s Russia and the ‘Arab Spring’

Russian policy toward the region has remained nearly constant since the era of the Russian Empire. And this fact is despite the fact that the state system in present-day Russia has changed drastically several times in the course of the last century and, consequently, so did Russian foreign policy priorities, including those regarding the Middle East and adjacent regions.

The Russian Empire regarded the Middle East to be important due to the Romanov dynasty’s approach to the Holy Land. Russian Tsar Peter the Great considered himself a protector of the

Middle Eastern Christians and the benefactor of the region's holy sites. Meanwhile, the Ottomans ruled the area and oppressed not only Christians but Muslims alike. The same Russian foreign policy orientation and regional significance remained a constant throughout Romanov rule, up until the Bolshevik Revolution and the formation of the Soviet Union in 1917.

Due to its large Muslim population, Russia has over the centuries, up until current times, sought to build bridges with the Islamic World, despite the two bitter wars with Chechnya in the early 2000s. Today, as seen on the Syrian battleground, the experience of fighting and overcoming terrorists in Chechnya has proven extremely valuable. In less than two years, Russian military advice as well as material and humanitarian support to the Syrian government have achieved more to suppress and eliminate terrorist groups and restore stability in many parts of the embattled Arab country, than have 16 years of American operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Cold War period in the Middle East, in contrast, was marked by a sharp rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. At the time, the region was essentially divided into two blocs, one supportive of and supported by the US, and the other by the Soviet Union which was a strong backer of the pan-Arab movement that rode the waves of nascent Arab socialism, which itself had appealed to the ideologically driven Soviet foreign policy. This period saw the Soviet Union support its allies in many ways, including though financial and military aid as well as training in Soviet institutions. Soviet allies during this time included: Egypt, Libya, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen.

Following the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, former Russian President Boris Yeltsin's Russia turned inward, nearly crumbling due to its political, economic and military weaknesses. Yeltsin's Russia focused on domestic issues and, in foreign policy matters, on relations with Europe and the United States. The Yeltsin era, 1991–1999, marks a Russian withdrawal to near-absence from the Middle East, with the exception of Turkey and Iran.¹³

On the eve of the new millennium, another change was on the horizon in Russia, and it came with Yeltsin's resignation and the nomination of Vladimir Putin as his successor. Putin's rise to power in 2000 marks a new era in Russian Middle East policy. Markedly different from the Soviet approach, Putin's Middle East policy is based on *Realpolitik* and is focused on strengthening ties with a range of Middle Eastern states. Those relationships are based on the arms and energy trades along with political and diplomatic support to regional allies in key matters where Russian and partner interests converge.

During a high-profile tour of the Middle East in 2005, Putin himself visited the region, accompanied by top executives from Russian military corporations (MiG and Rosoboronexport),¹⁴ in a quest to bolster economic ties and reestablish Russia's status as a major arms supplier—the role it lost during the Yeltsin's “low key” Middle East policy period. Besides renewing ties with traditional allies from Soviet times—Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria—Putin added to his Middle Eastern agenda relations with Jordan, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Israel and Turkey.

Since his early days as Russian head of state, Putin has consistently followed specific principles related to his multi-vector Middle East policy orientation: the protection of sovereignty,

economic gain (oil, gas and the arms trade), and the expansion of the Russian influence in the Western-dominated region.

Drastic transformational changes in the political life of several Arab republics, labeled as the “Arab Spring,” displeased Russia for their resemblance to the “Color Revolutions” that swept across several former Soviet republics, most notably Ukraine and Georgia, in the early 2000s. Bruised by its own bitter experiences with revolutions and anti-terrorist wars in Russia’s southern Muslim republics of Chechnya and Dagestan, Moscow strongly opposed these transformations—especially since it viewed them as outside-imposed rather than homegrown solution. In 2011, Russia abstained from United Nations Resolution 1973, yet it did not veto it,¹⁵ fearing that a repetition of NATO’s operations in Yugoslavia would be enacted in Libya after the imposition of a no-fly zone. The Russian approach to the Libyan crisis at the UN Security Council (UNSC) was manifest in the public exchange between then-President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, the latter calling the Resolution a “medieval call for crusades.” Russian fears turned into reality, and Libya has become an ongoing disaster and a de-facto failed state after the NATO intervention toppled long-standing Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, which pushed the country into a civil war.

In the Libyan case, Russia tried to stay neutral and exert its influence via the UNSC, rather than by acting more forcefully to assert a different position in the Libyan case. This hesitation on Russia’s part may be attributed to the fluctuating relationship the Kremlin had with the Libyan leader, as well as the attempt not to again sour relations with Washington, which had suffered in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian war in 2008. Following the NATO intervention in Libya, it was evident that Russia had chosen a wrong path, and this mistake was even publicly admitted: Russian officials stated their disappointment with the Western behavior in Libya. After realizing Russia’s mistake in Libya, the Kremlin then tried to contain its economic losses in the embattled country. But this became increasingly difficult as several competing parties took over and effectively split Libya into three different spheres of interest, none to Russia’s advantage.

In Syria, however, having learned from its mistakes in Libya, Russia took an unwavering stance from the outset of the upheaval by positioning itself as a protector intent on preventing the Libyan disaster from playing out in Syria. By choosing this strategy, Russia openly positioned itself in confrontation with the US and Europe. Russian interests and stakes in Syria were much higher than in Libya, which is part of the reason for a markedly different Russian approach. According to *The Moscow Times*, Russian investment in Syria in 2009 amounted to \$19.4 billion, while the 2005 canceling of 73 percent of Syria’s Soviet debt equaled \$13.4 billion.¹⁶ In addition to these two key economic factors, Damascus was a major buyer of Russian weapons, and Moscow could ill afford to lose such a long-time, trusted partner. Moreover, the dubious nature of the roots of the Syrian “rebellion” saw a revival of Russian fears of Islamist terrorism spilling over to its trouble-prone southern regions. Taken together, these were the major security factors driving Russian policy toward Syria.

The Key Countries in Russian Middle Eastern Focus

In light of the rapidly changing global geopolitical and economic order as well as the declining role of the West, especially the US, in the Middle East and Asia, Russia is seeking to reposition itself as a global power. In particular, Moscow is trying to raise its profile in the post-Soviet Central Asian space and in a number of Middle Eastern countries. The Russian focus for the coming decade is centered on reestablishing and strengthening cooperation with its traditional Middle Eastern strategic partners, such as Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, in addition to new countries, including Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Qatar. Moreover, Russia's partnerships with two non-Arab Middle Eastern countries, Turkey and Iran, despite some hiccups and occasional disagreements on several regional issues, seem to be rapidly strengthening in recent years.

As a member of the BRICS—a political-economic bloc of major developing economies Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa—Russia is not alone in its pursuit of influence in the region. China is silently backing most Russian moves. And despite assessments to the contrary by some Western policy analysts and think tanks, there is little room for speculation about a Sino-Russian rivalry in this region or elsewhere. What China lacks, Russia has and vice versa. Thus, each member of this duo perfectly complements the other, together building a strong foundation for long-term partnership across the board.

Chinese financial might and the size of its economy, in addition to its energy dependence on both Russia and Iran, among others, make the duo perfect partners for creating a new world order in this crucial region. This point has been made clear by Chinese announcements of investments in Syrian post-war reconstruction.¹⁷

Washington's moves to impose fresh sanctions on Russia, as well US efforts to put pressure on Iran and Turkey, are achieving results that may run contrary to established American policy. Specifically, those actions may draw Russia, China, Iran and Turkey closer together into an unbreakable Eurasian alliance that has the potential to change the political discourse for decades to come. The case in point is the admission of India and Pakistan as full members of the Russian- and Chinese-led Shanghai Security Cooperation Organization (SCO)¹⁸; while Iran is poised to join soon, likely followed by Iraq, and Turkey in the near future.

Devoid of ideological undertones, including “exporting democracy” and military interventionism, which underpin Western attitudes toward the region, the Russia-China duo's regional approach is markedly pragmatic and focuses on four key pillars of cooperation:

- Military,
- Security,
- Economic, and
- Political/diplomatic cooperation on regional and global issues.

While Russia is rising politically and militarily as a key global player, China is expanding economically, ascending at the expense of other economic giants such as Japan and Germany. Both countries are seeking strategic partnerships in crucial regions and developing markets, including the Middle East—for its energy resources—as well as developmental and

infrastructural investments, the latter being particularly attractive to China in pursuit of its larger global agenda.

Security is of vital interest to the Middle East, which has been embroiled in conflict for over half a century now. And in particular, following the disastrous consequences of the American invasion of Iraq, NATO's interventions in Libya, and the West's covert and overt support for Syrian "rebels," the solutions for regional security presented by organizations like the SCO, seem increasingly attractive to a number of Middle Eastern powers.

Russian modernized weaponry and military capabilities have been tried and tested effectively in the Syrian conflict—putting Russia back at the forefront as the guarantor of stability as well as the protector of state sovereignty and the principles of the existing international order. One of the tangible results from the Syrian intervention has been the numerous orders Russia received for its state-of-the-art S-300 and S-400 air and missile defense systems. Besides Syria and Iran, Turkey has signed purchase agreements with Russia,¹⁹ while Qatar has expressed strong interest²⁰ in becoming a buyer, too.

In addition to the military, economic and social security as well as investment that the BRICS offer as a group, Middle Eastern states also value certain contributions that China and Russia may proffer individually. In particular, the Chinese multi-billion, mega-development project "One Belt One Road" (OBOR)—which encompasses a number of regional countries, including Syria, Jordan and Turkey—is extremely attractive to key regional states.

China and Russia have principally devised their economic and political ties based on a sprouting cluster of strategic partnerships that involve economic and military cooperation at all levels.²¹ The strong ties between China and Russia are temporary, but they share their expansionist tactics together on various continents including Asia, Africa and South America, where China is cultivating a strong presence that can serve as a springboard for its future economic leap at the expense of the US. China, of course, cannot proceed or vie for the international market without fully being supported by Russian, which itself seeks to control many continents regardless of American interests.

In the political and diplomatic arena, the Arab World has now, for half a century or so, suffered dire consequences, not least due to the seemingly intractable Israeli-Palestinian issue. This conflict, which the Arab World has for several decades tried to resolve with American and European assistance, has to date resulted in little to no positive outcomes. The issue of "historic injustice"—as the Palestine problem is deemed by many Arabs and other Muslims—has been at the forefront of Russia's Middle Eastern agenda, including during the Cold War. While the US has traditionally sided with the Israelis, Russia has for a while stood as the advocate for the Palestinian cause, and has earned the respect of the Arab street for its support.

As terrorism started spreading across the Middle East and beyond, various militant factions based their rhetoric and ideology around the Palestinian issue, often citing the Western occupation of the Arab and the Muslim world as the key grievance that leads many of the militants to "jihad" in the belief that they are fighting for the liberation of their Muslim brethren. Russia has been advocating renewed efforts for finding a lasting solution to the Israeli-

Palestinian standoff. Russian President Putin's approach is based on the belief that the solution lies in returning to political negotiations based on the existing international agreements and laws,²² while Palestine should be granted its own long-overdue statehood. Moreover, Palestine has been included among the users of the common preference system of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), signaling future trajectories in regards to Russian Palestine policy.

Russia and the Wider Middle East: Forging New Alliances

The great transformation in the Middle East, including the collapse of state structures as well as the breakout of revolutions and wars, is ongoing. These transformations also include a growing rift between Iran and the US, a rift between Egypt and Iran because of the spat between Qatar and other GCC states, and a rift between a number of key world powers over Syrian crisis. All these have been forcing diverse actors into new alliances in the military, energy and food security spheres, among others.

Among regional actors, Egypt, for example, has approached Iraq to purchase oil, following a stalemate in its relationship with Saudi Arabia. The Egyptian request was soon followed by daily pumping of Iraqi oil to Egypt, to compensate for a one million barrel shortage on the Egyptian market. The Cairo-Riyadh conflict stems from an ongoing dispute over two Red Sea Islands and Egyptian President Abdul Fattah Sisi's stance on several regional issues, including his rejection of the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whom Sisi considers the legitimate leader of the country.

Furthermore, both Egypt and Iran are major markets for Russian weapons. The fact that Russia has entered agreements with both states on sales of its sophisticated weaponry indicates that they are deemed solid allies.

In addition to Egypt and Iran, Russian ties with Turkey have significantly improved in the past year and are poised for further growth. Particular success was reached by the Russian, Turkish and Iranian negotiators in Astana, Kazakhstan, on the settlement of the Syrian crisis, through the implementation of several ceasefire zones across the Arab country. Moreover, Turkey has ceased its support for the militants in northern Syria, paving the way for a cessation of hostilities. In turn, the Russian Federation has removed restrictions on trade and tourism, which were imposed on Turkey in December 2015, following the Turkish downing of a Russian Su-24 tactical bomber.

As the trilateral Russia-Turkey-Iran alliance gains traction, Russia, due to its advantage as a major world power, is securing access to the whole of Africa, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and major parts of Europe. By locking Iran within the alliance, together with China, Russia is gaining access to strategic sea-lanes and maritime choke points, therefore developing an upper hand in countering possible Western-led disruptions in energy supplies. Adding to the Russian Arab alliance is Qatar, which of late has been courting both Russia and Iran in light of the GCC diplomatic crisis. By coming together, Russia, Iran and Qatar—the three top world producers of liquefied natural gas (LNG)—can effectively control global gas supplies, and by extension gain a significant say over much of the global geopolitical discourse.

In addition to the Gulf Arab states and key countries in the southeastern Mediterranean and the Levant, Russia has been building bridges and relationship with a whole host of North African countries (Arab Maghreb), that include traditional Soviet allies Algeria and Libya, but also Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania.²³

During the Soviet era, relations with the Maghreb states were based on ideological affiliations, hence the strongest were with Algeria and Libya by virtue of the nature of their regimes. However, Vladimir Putin's presidency changed Russian foreign policy toward North African Arab states, and the relations are no longer limited to Algeria and Libya, but are increasingly moving towards closer cooperation with other countries, especially Morocco, despite competition there with the United States and France.²⁴

As in the rest of the Middle East, Russia's policy is focused on investment opportunities, trade exchanges, coordination in the areas of gas production and trade, and nuclear technology for peaceful, industrial purposes, as well as the strengthening of security cooperation in the fight against terrorism, against the backdrop of the Libyan crisis.²⁵

Middle East Between East and West: In Search of Identity, Security and Independence

Following the demise of the Ottoman Empire that ruled most of the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula for over four centuries, Arab peoples in the region have failed to gain real independence, despite the creation of the modern nation-states under Anglo-French control. Not all, but many of the problems that beset the region in the past century can be attributed to a large extent to the imperial designs and arbitrary drawing of the Middle Eastern map. Other factors contributing to the lack of stability in the region can be attributed to the forceful expulsion of Palestinians and the creation of the state of Israel. Sectarian issues, which the West mistakenly puts at the core of the Middle Eastern strife, are perhaps the last of the destabilizing factors in the region.

Over the past century in the Middle East, the unchanging constant remains a lack of stability and frequent armed conflicts. Thus, the powers that want to have a lasting positive impact on the region are the countries that put national, energy and food security at the forefront of their Middle East policy approach. It is more than evident at this juncture that the Western countries, led by the US, have failed in this task. Rather than bringing stability to the already inflamed region, the United States is creating more chaos that nobody seems to be able to control.

For a long time, the Middle East was not a self-sufficient region in terms of guaranteeing its own security. Security (and the majority of security threats) tended to be a kind of regional import provided by external forces. The Middle East was and has until recently remained one of the “major components of the bipolar world, an arena of competition and limited cooperation between the two global powers. Starting from the end of Desert Storm in 1991 up to the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2010–2011, the region was characterized by US hegemony and its attempts to preserve and even strengthen this hegemony.”²⁶

The Arab Spring changed this trajectory, principally due to Russian active involvement in the Syrian conflict. Russian involvement in Syria has in the beginning split the Arab world in two camps: pro- and anti-Russian or pro- and anti-United States. Today, a majority of the Arab states, voluntarily or involuntarily have to admit that US foreign policy in Iraq, Libya, Syria and elsewhere, has failed to bring stability. On the contrary, it has unleashed waves of instability and facilitated growth of a plethora of terrorist and extremist groupings across the Muslim world—a problem that will likely take another decade or two to eradicate.

The Appeal of Russian Policy Approaches to Middle Eastern Issues

What Russia seems to have understood about Arab needs, and Western powers have missed, is this vital need for security and partnership reliability. According to some Arab sources,²⁷ Arab views on Russia and its role in the region are not all in agreement. However, there are significant points worth mentioning, where views of a number of Arab actors converge.

It is noteworthy to compare these key points with the official Russian foreign policy concept,²⁸ as

they are centered on same crucial points:

1. Support for the nation state and state sovereignty.
2. Fill the strategic security vacuum caused by the decline of American power.
3. Partner in Syrian settlement.
4. Partner in war on terrorism.
5. Be a reliable alternative provider of weaponry and armaments.
6. Partner in economic development.

1. Russia's support for state sovereignty:

Russia's Foreign Policy Concept still places importance on the idea of the state and traditional sovereignty in international relations, and pursues policy of not intervening in the affairs of other countries, except at the request of the legitimate authorities, as was the case with Syria. This aspect of the Russian foreign policy is appreciated by a number of Arab states, together with the Russian stance against exposing societies to internal disintegration in pursuit of democratic demands. For some Arab governments and societies, Russia represents a safe superpower in contrast to the United States.²⁹

2. Filling the strategic vacuum:

Amid the decline of US power in the Middle East, Arab thinking about Russia, as an alternative power capable of filling the strategic vacuum left by American disengagement from the region, is starting to emerge. There are signs of an emergence of a comprehensive Russo-Arab relationship, and one not solely confined to military and security cooperation. Along with military agreements, many Arab countries have concluded economic, educational, technological and cultural agreements with Russia. However, there is fear in the Gulf, in particular, that Russian traditional partners, Iran and Syria, are reaping the most benefits at their expense.

To improve its standing in the eyes of the skeptical Gulf countries, Russia needs to address this fear by reassuring them about the Russian orientation that favors strengthening international peace and global security and stability, establishing a fair and democratic international system that addresses international issues on the basis of collective decision-making and the rule of international law, as well as creating equal partnership relations among states on bilateral and multilateral bases.

3. Partner in crises settlement:

As a key player in the Syrian settlement process, following the success of its anti-terrorism strategy, Russia is now expected to facilitate political settlements in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Libya, execute the settlement agreements and post-settlement processes of state reconstruction, as well as consolidate internal peace and national security. At the moment, there is a lack of confidence in Washington's ability to settle these matters in the Gulf; yet, there is no general Arab consensus on the Russian role. However, as the ceasefire agreements in Syria—initially reached through Russian efforts with Turkey and Iran, and later with the US and Jordan—seem

to be bearing fruit, the key countries that initially supported the overthrow of the Syrian government have changed their rhetoric and have ceased supporting the “rebel” groups.

4. Partner in the war on terrorism:

Russia is the one of the foremost opponents of the jihadist groups. One of the major motives for Russian military intervention in Syria was fear of the impact that the armed terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq would have on Russian Muslim republics, and the destabilizing effect that the returning jihadist elements could cause in Russia. Therefore, Moscow’s strategic interest in the war on terrorism lies at the center of policy. Hence, extending north-south intelligence and security cooperation between Russia and the Arab World is a lasting prospect for years to come. However, diversity in Arab states’ assessments of terrorist organizations and groups is a hindrance to this cooperation. The current situation in Syria indicates a difficulty in reaching a common Arab point of view on what constitutes terrorism, so work on helping Arabs find common language is a task that Russia and other Arab states intend to work upon.

5. The armaments provider:

The volume of Arab military spending and arms purchase deals over the past two years indicate that a significant share of arms bought by some Gulf States and Egypt originate from Russia. There is a clear tendency in the Arab countries to entice Russian interest toward more comprehensive partnerships with the Arab world in this sphere. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have funded an initial agreement between Russia and Egypt to purchase military equipment, including 24 MiG-29s, Buk-M2s and Tor-M2s. According to some reports, the deal ranges between \$2 billion and \$4 billion. Saudi Arabia also donated \$1 billion to support the Lebanese army in August 2014, some of which went to buy helicopters and Russian air defenses. Russia supplied Bahrain with Kornet-EM anti-tank missiles. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have also concluded independent arms deals for their own military purposes.

6. The economic partner:

Beyond military areas, Arabs consider Russia an important economic partner and a promising market for investment, as shown by the quality of the agreements concluded between Russia and the Gulf Arab states in 2014 and 2015. Russian-GCC governmental committees for commercial, economic, technical and scientific cooperation, as well as joint business councils and investment forums have been formed for some time. For example, an agreement to establish an investment fund worth up to \$4 billion, to finance joint projects and contribute to the development of trade and economic relations between Saudi Arabia and Russia, was signed during the meetings of the Russian-Saudi Joint Committee for Economic and Commercial Cooperation between the two countries in November 2015. Another investment fund, worth \$10 billion, had been agreed upon in July 2015. At the fifth meeting of the joint UAE-Russia committee in November 2015, an agreement on enhancing cooperation in the field of tourism, transport and investment was signed. Two additional memorandums of understanding were also signed, in the fields of sports cooperation and intellectual property. The Abu Dhabi Crown Prince’s visit to Russia in September 2013 saw the UAE and Russia signing a memorandum of intent to establish a joint investment partnership between the Department of Finance in Abu Dhabi and the Russian Direct

Investment Fund, to invest up to \$5 billion in Russian infrastructure projects.

All of the above are positive indicators of the areas for future collaboration between Russia and the Gulf Arab states in particular. Similar areas of common interest can be found in other Arab and non-Arab states in the Middle East. Beyond pursuit of economic and military cooperation, and in accordance with the official Russian foreign policy concept, development of bilateral and multilateral cultural relationships with the Arab world should be an area of focus in the post-conflict Middle East era.

Conclusion: Russia's Role in Middle East in the Coming Decade

Following the breakout of armed conflicts in Syria and other Middle East countries, Russia is increasing its involvement in the region in order to protect its own national security interests. Increased Russian engagement is noticeable through its calibrated military intervention in Syria and the formation of alliances with a number of Middle Eastern states, even at the expense of the United States due to Washington's withdrawal from the region under Obama's presidency.

When the Arab Spring turned into civil wars in Syria and Libya, Russia returned to the Middle East on a self-defense policy platform, seeking to counter Western ambitions in the region. This grand strategy required an application of diverse tactics in order to achieve its goals, all while benefitting from the weakness of the European Union and the distancing of the US from the Middle East in favor of the Pacific region.

Russia's return to the region on the counterterrorism platform was justified by the Middle East's close proximity to Russia's southern borders. This geographic closeness and the gravity of the terrorist threat gave Russia the right to intervene to safeguard its own national security, while simultaneously cooperating with key regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, Egypt and Algeria, in an attempt to reestablish the equilibrium of power in the conflict-ridden region.

Despite official narratives echoed by the media in parts of the Middle East and the West in particular, many Middle Easterners do not view Russian intervention in the region as something negative, nor do they see Russian presence in the region as colonialist or intruding. On the contrary, they view the Russian role in the region as *a fait accompli*, a situation that cannot be easily challenged or transformed. At the same time, Arabs understand that each of the major world powers pursues its own objectives in this strategically located region, which controls most of the global energy resources.

Overall, based on this understanding of the regional problems and needs, the coming decade will not see a decrease in Russian regional influence. Rather, Moscow can be expected to place more efforts on enhancing Russia's media presence and strengthen its influence through culture, art and education, in order to familiarize Middle Easterners with Russian civilization and values. Traditionally more conservative than the liberal and secular West, Russia has many more things in common with the Middle Eastern ways of life. And both Russia and the Middle East could reap great benefits from enhancing their cultural ties in the coming years, even while challenging American interests.

It is expected that Russia will be interfering in many countries' politics, especially those which were part of the former Soviet Union in a bid to annex them. It will also start exploration in the North Pole for oil and gas in order to use energy as a weapon against other countries. After the Syrian civil war ends, Russia, along with Iran, Qatar and Syria, will be exporting more than 70 percent of the world's gas. This factor is a serious threat to many countries, including the US, because gas will be used to twist the arms of many countries. The next decade will prove to be confrontational, with Moscow and Arabs agreeing on many issues that will challenge America.

ENDNOTES

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