



Imperial Strategies: Russia’s Exploitation of Ethnic Issues and Policy in the Middle East

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Summary

Russia has been an empire throughout its history. Accordingly, the mechanisms and practices of imperial management, particularly Russia’s ability to coopt potential elites from minorities with whom it is interacting, have remained central to its political behavior at home and abroad. And it has expanded to create linkages—or what Celeste Wallander has called “trans-imperialism”—between members of Russia’s Islamic population and Middle Eastern elites, e.g. the use of Ramzan Kadyrov as an agent of Moscow in the Middle East. At the same time Russia has also sought expanded investment by Middle Eastern governments in projects aimed at benefitting Russia’s Muslims.

But beyond attempting to create these kinds of trans-imperial linkages and coopt Muslims at home and abroad, Russia has actively exploited both domestic and foreign ethno-religious cleavages throughout its history to expand its power, territory, wealth and influence. Vladimir Putin’s regime is no exception, especially in Syria and the wider Middle East. The Kurds furnish a particularly revealing example of how Moscow has exploited these cleavages in Syria, Turkey and Iraq to gain energy rents, strategic access, wealth, and political influence over those governments to enhance its strategic position in Syria. Finally, as long as such opportunities present themselves to Moscow, it is unlikely that it will desist from exploiting this time-honored tactic of imperial aggrandizement and management, even if empire and imperial strategies invariably entail war and risk the security of Putin’s state.

Introduction

Since its inception as a state, Russia has been and remains an empire. In 2000, Alexei Malashenko observed that Russia's war in Chechnya is logical only if Russia continues to regard itself as an empire.¹ Similarly Alexander Etkind remarked in 2011 that Russian history remains one of internal colonialism.² Meanwhile in the course of building and then losing at least two empires and striving again to recover its lost legacy, Russia has acquired an immense amount of experience in so-called wars of imperial management, counterinsurgency, and power projection beyond Russia's borders. One hallmark of this historical experience is a repeated pattern of cooptation of domestic and foreign and ethnic minority elites. A second element is an accompanying unending tactical flexibility that exploits ethno-religious (or other) divisions among Russia's neighbors, or attempts to break up hostile or targeted states—or at least neutralize their ability to resist Russia's strategies for advancing its national interest.³ This is certainly the historical and present case as regards both Russian and foreign Muslims. Putin's policies have shown his awareness that, "for the contemporary Russian government, managing Islam and Muslim religious authorities is central to the functioning of Putin's state."⁴ In this context, Afghanistan in 1978–89 stands as an exception that proves the rule: in that instance, Moscow coopted an elite (the Afghan Communist Party and its various factions) that could not remain cohesive or deliver the population. And militarily, Moscow could not isolate the theater as it has successfully done in all its successful wars of counterinsurgency. Therefore, the Soviet Union lost the war and had to retire from that scene.

Examination of Tsarist, Soviet, and current Russian foreign policy reveals a pattern: that despite its own autocratic proclivities, Russia has generally advocated for a democratic solution in disrupted states in order to preserve a pro-Russian party either in power or at least in a position of influence in those areas. It then could use that faction to advance its own interests or even assimilate the entire country into Russia's empire. This is now happening in Syria if not Iraq, too, as seen in Moscow's stance on those countries' Kurdish issues. This exploitation and cooptation of ethnic minorities to promote a larger strategy of imperial assertion continues today in Russia's efforts to regain at least some of the perquisites of empire and great power standing across the Middle East that it lost in 1991. But today's strategic environment requires that Moscow adapt to the possibility of its own Muslim population playing a larger role in its Middle Eastern policy, and to the realities of influence travelling back and forth between Russia's own Muslims and Middle Eastern Muslim populations. Even before the Syrian insurgency began Moscow had seized every opportunity to ingratiate itself with Arab and other Muslim countries as a fellow Muslim country based on its sizable minority of co-religionists. For example, it became a member of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) in 2005. Subsequently, in 2014, Russia signed a framework agreement for cooperation with it.⁵ Already in 2003, Putin told the OIC that Muslims were "an inseparable part" of the "multiethnic Russian nation."⁶

The Cooptation Tactic

As Alfred Rieber has written, “For Russia there was no hard and fast distinction between colonial questions and the process of state building. This was not true of any other European state.”⁷ Today, given the permeable boundaries of Islamic societies, cooptation of tractable domestic and foreign elites who are ethnically or religiously connected can be used abroad both to resolve domestic issues and at home to resolve foreign issues. Today Moscow utilizes domestic Islamic elites, for example Chechens, for resolving Middle Eastern issues to Russia’s benefit. In Soviet times Moscow showcased Central Asia as a potential model for modernization of Arabic societies.⁸ But Moscow also uses its relations with Middle East countries to prevent them from supporting domestic Islamic terrorism.⁹ Meanwhile Middle Eastern governments now also seek to influence Central Asian states; for example, Saudi Arabia’s investments and mosque building in Tajikistan have allegedly led Dushanbe to veto Iran’s membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.¹⁰ Meanwhile Tajikistan openly solicits such Arab investments.¹¹

Celeste Wallander called this process of coopting foreign elites “trans-imperialism” although the label is less important than the imperialistic reality.

Trans-imperialism is the extension of Russian patrimonial authoritarianism into a globalized world. Russia can trade and invest without being open and permeable by selectively integrating transnational elite networks in the globalized international economic system and replicating the patron-client relations of power, dependency, and rent seeking and distribution at the transnational level. Russian foreign policy is increasingly founded on creating transnational elite networks for access to rent-creating opportunities in the globalized international economy. Moscow functions as the arbiter and control point for Russia’s interaction with the outside economy to ensure that Russia is not exposed to the liberalizing effects of marketization, competition, and diversification of interests and local power. If that were to happen, the political system that keeps the present leadership in power would be at risk of failing. In this sense, globalization is a threat not to Russian national interests but to the interests of Russia’s political leadership.¹²

Accordingly exploitation of ethno-religious and other fissures in targeted societies has become a staple of Russian foreign policy and simultaneously a means for insulating its own society from such influences by eliciting Arab support for Russia’s domestic and foreign policies. A recent Chatham House study by Keir Giles emphasized Russia’s ability to purchase or co-opt business and political elites to create compliant networks,” that is, generate “agents of influence” or “Trojan horses” in foreign governments and institutions that offer Russia leverage over them.¹³ This is particularly notable where ethnic and/or religious cleavages furnish Russia with the means for exploiting those fissures, as is now happening with Muslim migration to Europe.¹⁴ For Russia, nationalism begs to be instrumentalized for the state’s benefit in the Balkans as in the Middle East. In the Balkans and Europe’s East, Moscow supports the Hungarian minority against Ukraine, and Serbs against Kosovo, Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia—even to the degree of launching a coup in 2016–17, in Montenegro, using Serbs.¹⁵

At the same time Putin has sought outside elites' support to quell domestic insurgency and Islamic uprisings in the North Caucasus. This was a major objective of Putin's early diplomacy in the Middle East.¹⁶ And it still figures in Russian policy. For instance, in 2016, Moscow openly solicited Iranian investment in the North Caucasus republic of Dagestan.¹⁷ Today, although the original policy clearly continues, Putin has also redirected it to use Russia's Muslims in Syria and Libya to legitimize Russia's military intervention there.¹⁸ Moscow also has justified its Syrian intervention by often invoking the alleged public opinion of its own Muslim population to support Bashar al-Assad's regime, though this allegation cannot be tested or verified. But Moscow has clearly obtained such domestic support, at least from Russia's official Islamic establishment.¹⁹ For example, Putin also has entertained the idea of using Chechen forces in Central Asia and also tried to arrange for Kazakh and Kyrgyz peacekeepers in Syria,²⁰ in addition to sending Chechens to serve Russian policy goals in Libya and Syria as described below. Indeed, it appears that the request for peacekeepers from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) may actually resonate within that organization.²¹ Moreover, now that foreigners are allowed to serve in the Russian military, Putin might send Sunni Central Asian *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) to Syria as part of the Russian Army.²² Andrej Kreutz observed in this context that, for Putin,

The sheer size and ferocity of the Islamic challenge had an impact on the new Russian leader and persuaded him that a new political approach was necessary in order to solve the conflicts with the Muslim population of the country and have a closer link with the Islamic nations.²³

Similarly Maxim Suchkov has noted,

As an external power, Russia needs regional partners to master its own Islamist challenges in the Caucasus, the Volga region, and the Urals, to name a few. Thus Moscow is in constant pursuit of a balance between a pragmatic foreign policy in the Middle East and its own domestic problems in this regard.²⁴

Historically, Russian leaders, including Putin, have been hypersensitive to the prospect of foreign ethnic or ideological influence upon the regime's security, given the shaky loyalties to Russia of its ethno-religious minorities. But now Russia cannot close off its own Islamic population or those of former Soviet republics to foreign influences, especially when they all, including Russia, enlist Arab investment and political support. Yet, simultaneously, Russian elites also remain attuned to the opportunities that cross-border ethnic fragmentation provides for expanding the empire or at least enhancing Russia's global standing. Thus Kreutz wrote in 2009,

Iran abuts directly to the South Caucasus and Moscow has always considered this region a strategic interest priority zone. Russian analysts perceive that, "whoever controls the Transcaucasus [South Caucasus] also controls the Caspian Sea and access to Central Asia and the Middle East. In addition, ensuring influence and stability in the Transcaucasus countries is seen as a necessary precondition for Russia's internal peace and for its territorial integrity. Russia itself is also a

Caucasus state. Seven regions of the Russian Federation (Adygea, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, North Ossetia, Chechnya) are located in the North Caucasus and four more are on the steppes adjacent to the Caucasus (Krasnodar and Stavropol territories, the Rostov region, and Kalmykia). With Muslims constituting more than 15 percent of the Russian population any potential American and allied invasion of Iran and the ensuing clash of civilizations would put pressure on Russia's domestic issues and might threaten its territorial integrity.²⁵

Moscow's stratagem of using its ethnic minorities as instruments of Russian influence abroad while coincidentally protecting itself from having those same minorities used against Russia is rooted deeply in Russian imperial history, and it forms at least part of the context of Russia's current involvement in the Middle East. For example, even before the Syrian insurgency began, Moscow had seized every opportunity to ingratiate itself with Arab and other Muslim countries as a fellow Muslim state based on its sizable minority of co-religionists. Moscow's pursuit of membership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) paid off.²⁶ In 2003 Putin told the OIC that Muslims were "an inseparable part" of the multiethnic Russian nation."²⁷ And in 2014, Russia hosted The 6th International Economic Summit of Russia and OIC countries in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan.²⁸ Having established connections with the OIC, Moscow then initiated "a tango with Islamists," "defining some as bad and others as good." It may be seeking to elicit Western or Muslim state concessions but it also is clearly attempting to coopt external Muslims in support of its domestic policies and foreign policies.²⁹

The Foreign Policy Dimension and Its Link to Domestic Policy

In the Middle East this cooptation tactic is part of a larger overall approach to the "national question" that prizes tactical flexibility in manipulating reality to serve Russian state objectives. Thus James Sherr of Chatham House writes that,

While Russia formally respects the sovereignty of its erstwhile republics; it also reserves the right to define the content of that sovereignty and their territorial integrity. Essentially Putin's Russia has revived the Tsarist and Soviet view that sovereignty is a contingent factor depending on power, culture, and historical norms, not an absolute and unconditional principle of world politics.³⁰

This is what is now happening *de facto* in Syria as Moscow tries to take a leading role in defining exactly what the contours of Syrian statehood will be. Sherr subsequently adds, "For 20 years the Russian Federation has officially—not privately, informally or covertly, but officially—equated its own security with the limited sovereignty of its neighbors."³¹ This certainly includes its Muslim neighbors, including Turkey.

Similarly the manufacture, incitement, and exploitation of ethnic or other conflicts is not confined to peoples inside the empire. It was and is a hallmark of Russian policy toward the Kurds and Armenians in the late Ottoman Empire as well as today. Recent studies of

Russian policy toward the Kurds and toward Iraq make clear Russia's attitude vis-à-vis the Kurds varies with the prospects for its ties to Turkey and Iraq.³² Moscow's ties to the Syrian Kurds (YPQ) who support al-Assad and also check Turkey's regional ambitions are not a new phenomenon as Russia's previous support for them going back to the 1890s shows.³³ Russia essentially exploits pre-existing tensions in targeted areas. Those groups that cooperated with Russia themselves represented the fragmentation processes occurring within them and sought to use their connection with Russian power to advance their own objectives.

The Middle East: Syria's Kurds

In Syria, Moscow began with several strategic advantages that it then converted into positive strategic outcomes. First, Russia benefits from supporting a government possessing the rudiments of an army and state, which has also attracted support from Iranian and Hezbollah elements. This constellation of forces has proven strong enough to regain the initiative from the insurgents and ensure Bashar al-Assad's victory.

Second, al-Assad's enemies are mostly Sunnis, while his regime is mostly Alawite, an untypical form of Sunni Islam that is close to Shi'ism. Consequently his regime has apparently gained the support of Syria's religious minorities, who have good reason to fear an assertive Sunni regime, especially one influenced if not led by the Islamic State (IS). Evidently religious minorities—e.g., Shiite Muslims, Christians, Alawites, Druze, Ismailis and Kurds—fear IS and Sunni extremists more than they dislike al-Assad.³⁴

These groups have formed their own militias to protect themselves from the Hobbesian state of nature that Syria has progressively become, but those militias fight mainly for ethnic or ethno-religious self-protection while cooperating with al-Assad, Russia and Hezbollah or Iranian forces.³⁵ Syria's Kurds have much to lose from any overthrow of al-Assad, as a Sunni Arab state would suppress their efforts to create or associate with some kind of independent Kurdistan. Seeing Assad's weakness and dependence upon their support and Turkey's opposition to him as both an opportunity and a threat, they are predisposed to cooperate with Moscow and anyone else that can promote their interests. Thus, they are perforce dependent on Moscow, and both sides are cognizant of this fact.³⁶ Therefore, there are ample areas of opportunity in Syria among its ethno-religious minorities with which Moscow can work.

Moscow has stated that it pays special attention to the Kurdish issue.³⁷ In early 2017, Russia called for "cultural autonomy" for ethnic Kurds in any postwar Syrian state, in the constitution it is sponsoring for that country.³⁸ Russian scholars are thinking about applying a Bosnian model based on the Dayton peace accords for the former Yugoslavia to Syria. This would permit integration of the various militias into a postwar Syrian army, but would also ensure a weak central state that tolerates diverse cultures and peoples, including the Syrian Kurds and their political arm, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPK). This formula would allow Moscow to interfere in Syria for years to come, as it does in Bosnia.³⁹ Yet, at the same time, Russia has been building a military facility in

YPG-controlled territory at Afrin, evidently to train Kurdish military units—against the Islamic State for now, but probably also to support Russia in the future.⁴⁰ Certainly such a force obstructs Turkish military designs in Syria, particularly Ankara’s determination to prevent any kind of cohesive Kurdish political community. Likewise, any future Syrian government must also pay heed to Moscow’s clients in any future state.⁴¹

Building on such actions, Moscow has allowed the YPG’s political arm (the PYD) to open an office in Moscow and is allowing the YPG to expand its territorial remit inside Syria. Since many observers believe the PYD and YPG to be subsidiaries of the PKK—the Kurdish movement inside Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s *bête noire*—this effectively raises the specter of Moscow supporting both Syrian and Turkish Kurds either against Ankara or, in the future, against Damascus. The point of all these moves is not that Moscow supports such open state-building efforts, but rather that it is consolidating leverage over any future Kurdish developments in Syria and Turkey. As a result, it can use the Kurds, as it has for over a century, to weaken Turkey as well as keep Syria in a state of dependence upon Moscow, and thereby gain leverage over both states—and over the Kurds, as their main foreign protector. Thus, Russia retains maximum flexibility and maneuverability in attempting to meet any and all future contingencies. In other words, Russia can preserve its leverage to protect all of its military-economic-political investments in Syria and Turkey by being able to threaten or support those states, as it deems necessary.⁴²

Moscow also plays the Kurdish card in Iraq and Turkey. It seems clear that from the outset Moscow sought to bring as many possible opposition groups, including the Kurds, into, the political process of peacemaking in Syria.⁴³ This conforms to the traditional practice of supporting weak, multi-ethnic or multi-confessional states in targeted areas to secure lasting Russian influence. Similarly Putin has said that since the Kurdish factor is a real one in Syria and Kurdish forces are among the most efficient opponents of the Islamic State, Russia must work with them if only to deconflict its forces (Russian and Kurdish forces), a clear sign that Moscow intends to constrain Turkey, whose opposition to any form of contiguous Syrian Kurdish territory or political assertion is obsessive (at least from the Western point of view).⁴⁴

Moscow has also supported YPG military actions in Syria to constrain Turkish military actions in Syria.⁴⁵ Earlier in 2017, it seemed that there was a real possibility the YPG and Turkish forces could come into a direct clash around Afrin canton. Since Putin’s and al-Assad’s forces needed to move into territory occupied by Turkish forces around Idlib, it appeared that Moscow was then inclining to meet Ankara’s needs at the expense of its Kurdish allies.⁴⁶ This episode demonstrated what Moscow gains by playing the Kurdish card. It keeps Turkey and the Syrian Kurds in a state of dependence upon Moscow and on Moscow’s terms. Russia can deploy either the Kurdish or Turkish card as needed to advance its aims—in this case the pacification of Syria and avoidance of a full-scale clash with Turkey. But those entities that depend on Russian support invariably pay a high price for the attainment of even part of their objectives. Thus, in this particular case, Syrian Kurdish leader Ilham Ahmed hoped that Moscow, when devising disengagement zones with Turkey and Iran, would obtain guarantees for Kurds in a postwar state.

Clearly Moscow is in a highly advantageous position vis-à-vis both Syria and Turkey thanks to its patronage of both the Syrian and Turkish Kurds.⁴⁷

Moreover, in Turkey proper, President Erdoğan has accused Russia in the past of arming PKK militants.⁴⁸ So Moscow possesses a weapon that it can use whenever it wants to turn up the heat on the government in Ankara. Indeed, Turkey, as it now proceeds in Syria, faces numerous potential challenges involving the Syrian Kurds, and one of them is the “potential implications of a military confrontation with Kurdish militias for relations with Russia, who is supposed to play a role in disengagement on the Turkey-Syria border in accordance with the trilateral talks held with both Turkey and Iran in Astana.”⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Russia—similar to the way it deals with Hamas and Hezbollah, groups it denies are terrorists—claims that neither the PKK nor the YPG are terrorist organizations.⁵⁰ Therefore, it has no reason to shun them. Moscow alone decides who the terrorists are.

Russia and the Iraqi Kurds

Russian involvement with Iraqi Kurds is, if anything even deeper than with Syria’s Kurds, longer lasting, and more far-reaching. In Iraq, Russia appeals to the Kurds’ hope for independence and statehood. It manipulates both Baghdad and the Kurds using leverage over energy and arms deals, ultimately in ways that support Russian strategic and economic interests. Russian interest in Kurdish energy started once the European Union expressed a similar interest in 2010.⁵¹ In 2012, Exxon-Mobil gave up its project in West Qurna because it could obtain better terms from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. This decision triggered great anger in Baghdad, which was and is determined to prevent Kurdistan from entering into foreign energy deals independently of its authority. Baghdad it depends on those energy revenues to finance its governmental operations. So to replace Exxon-Mobil, the central Iraqi government looked to Russian and/or Chinese firms.⁵² However, Moscow, true to its stated policies of having a card to play with everyone, and complete flexibility regarding issues of states’ territorial integrity and self-determination, has been active ever since in energy deals in Kurdistan. Illustratively, today, Lukoil plays a major role as an energy exporter in Kurdistan.⁵³

Additionally, in 2012, Russia’s Gazpromneft (a subsidiary of Gazprom) inked two deals with Kurdish authorities, becoming the fourth major oil company to enter Iraqi Kurdistan. Gazpromneft acquired a 60 percent share in the 1780KM2 Garmian Block and 80 percent of the 474KM2 Shakal Block.⁵⁴ This deal came about even as Russia was negotiating with Iraq over arms sales and access to the West Qurna field. Iraq then sought to force Gazprom to cancel its deals with Kurdistan in November 2012 or else lose access to the Badra oilfield near Iran that it had acquired in 2009 and that was supposed to begin production in August 2013. Iraq’s government termed any contract with Kurdistan illegal, as the Iraqi government did not approve it.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, Moscow decided to retain and even expand its dealings with Kurdistan, even though that antagonized Iraq. Russia hosted the president of the Kurdish region,

Massoud Barzani, in February 2013. At these meetings, both sides discussed key political questions and energy issues as well as possibilities for further Russian energy contracts with Kurdish authorities.⁵⁶ Also at those talks, and despite Baghdad's remonstrations with Moscow, Gazpromneft signed a deal to enter into a Kurdish oil project, the Halabja Block.⁵⁷ This deal duly marked the third Russian energy project in Kurdistan.

Despite the February 2013 and subsequent deals with Kurdistan, President Putin apparently kept the Iraqi government informed of what it is doing. He may have done so to distance Iraqi Kurdistan from a flirtation with Turkey—both Russia and Iraq oppose Turkey's claims to being an energy hub and have a shared interest in keeping Turkey from obtaining unmediated access to Kurdish energy holdings.⁵⁸ But this entire sequence illustrates that Moscow can exploit the tensions between the KRG and the Iraqi government. Such maneuvering allows the Russia to gain leverage over Baghdad's and the KRG's energy and foreign policies—and potentially over Turkey as well. Thus, Russia's ties to Iraqi Kurdistan enhance its capabilities to effectively influence Turkey. The ability to manipulate ethnic rivalries here adds to Russian wealth and influence. Indeed, were Turkey to become a major energy hub, it would be able to export that gas or oil to other European countries, thus undercutting Russian exports that enhance Moscow's influence throughout the Balkans and Eastern Europe. But there are larger dimensions to this Russia-Turkey-Iraq triangle beyond that fact.

Turkish freedom from more dependence on Russian energy not only limits Russia's influence, it also enhances Azerbaijan's smaller but competitive project of selling the Balkans and Central Europe gas from the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP), which will connect at the Turkish-Bulgarian border to the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). Russia needs to keep Turkey as dependent as possible on its gas in order to retain a means of pressure and influence on Turkey, but also to preserve its position in the Balkans and even to some degree in the Caucasus and the Middle East. And if it cannot prevent the Kurds from selling their gas to Turkey, its goal then becomes to have a foot in both the Iraqi and KRG camps, thus ensuring that Russia receives its cut or rents for the sale of Kurdish and Iraqi gas to Turkey. And of course, to the extent that it can use Kurds against Turkey, Russia also keeps Turkey from reducing its dependence upon Russian energy. In other words, Russian policy is completely opportunistic, obstructive of genuine stability in the Middle East, as well as intended to maximize Russian flexibility and freedom of maneuver without committing itself irrevocably to any one side—except insofar as they oppose the United States.

Simultaneously, Moscow's leverage upon the Iraqi Kurds also gives it enhanced leverage upon Baghdad, which has repeatedly been forced to hold its tongue and not protest about Russian coercive pressures or its engagement with the KRG and the deprivation of the Iraqi budget of revenues from those energy platforms in Kurdistan. Precisely because it fears what Moscow could do to embolden the Iraqi Kurds and promote their centrifugal tendencies regarding independence from Iraq, Baghdad has repeatedly had to give in to Russian terms or not protest Russian encroachments upon it.⁵⁹ Moreover, that Russian engagement with Iraq's Kurds is growing: Rosneft has signed a new agreement with the KRG. Apart from plans to explore for more oil and gas holdings in Kurdish territory,

“Rosneft will get access to the major regional transportation system with the throughput capacity of 700 thousand bbl. [barrels of oil] per day, which is planned to be expanded up to 1 [million] bbl. per day by the end of 2017.”⁶⁰ Beyond granting Rosneft access to the KRG pipeline and ability to expand its capacity, Rosneft will then refine this oil in Germany. Also, according to Jabbar Kadir, an advisor to former KRG prime minister Barham Salih, the Russian oil giant promised to invest \$3 billion in the KRG in exchange for access to 700,000–1,000,000 bbl. per day that it would ship abroad.⁶¹ Consequently, Turkey has now been displaced from managing the KRG’s energy affairs.⁶²

Even as the fallout of the September 25, 2017, Kurdish referendum on independence was occurring, Rosneft signed deals with the KRG for 80 percent equity in five oil blocks, conservatively estimated at a total recoverable 670 million barrels of oil.⁶³ That \$400 million deal came on top of earlier loans of \$1.2 billion to Kurdistan earlier this year. And it was soon followed by Rosneft’s agreement with the KRG to acquire majority interest and thus control of Kurdistan’s main oil pipeline for another \$3.5 billion.⁶⁴ This deal evidently aims to prevent Iraq and or Turkey from taking control of that pipeline and suffocating the KRG’s independence drive. Instead they will now have to deal with Russia and the fact that it has clear title to that pipeline. Even if Iraq recovers that pipeline, it will clearly have to pay off Russia as well. Thus, Moscow maintains its leverage over both Iraq and the KRG.

The Kurdish question in Iraq (and by implication in Syria and Turkey) assumed even greater importance in the wake of the independence referendum. Russia here too has danced with both sides. On the one hand, it supports the integrity of the Iraqi state; and when the Iraqi government with Iranian (and Turkish) backing subsequently seized Kirkuk and its oil field, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced that Moscow is committed to a unified Iraq.⁶⁵ Clearly, Moscow cannot afford simultaneously to alienate Turkey and Iran as well as sanction a new civil war in Iraq’s territory by supporting Kurdish independence in a Kurdish state carved out of their territories. Yet, on the other hand, Russia simultaneously was and remains (especially after these deals) Kurdistan’s largest foreign source of financial support; and this will not change. For what is critical is not whether or not the Kurds obtain a state but whether or not they remain usable for Russia to give it leverage over each of the four regional states where this minority is present—Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran.⁶⁶ Indeed, it appears that Moscow’s grand design is to retain its hold on the Kurds and their energy in order to keep Iraq in line and off balance as well as to gain further energy leverage over Turkey. According to Russian Minister of Energy Aleksandr Novak, Moscow intends to connect Kurdistan’s oil and gas pipelines, which it now controls, to the Black Sea and thus to its projected Turkstream pipeline, thus dominating Turkey’s imports.⁶⁷ This last point of Novak’s remains an aspiration but one with potentially far-reaching political consequences if it materializes.

Clearly, Russia utilizes the Kurdish card in Syria and Turkey not just to promote restive minorities to weaken targeted states but also to put diplomatic pressure on Ankara and Damascus on behalf of its own interests, obtain energy rents, and gain lasting leverage over the Iraqi, Kurdish, Syrian, and Turkish economies and political systems. As a recent paper observes, “You do not need ISIS to prevail for as long as Turkey has an ongoing

conflict with the Kurdish nation in the broader region.”⁶⁸ In Syria, Moscow’s Kurdish game also balances Syrian and Turkish considerations viewed from Moscow.

The Chechen Card in the Middle East

Moscow’s utilization in Libya and Syria of Chechen forces loyal to the pro-Kremlin local government in Grozny underscores the reciprocal interaction among the Russian government and its agents. In this case, those key agents for Moscow are Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, Russia’s Muslim population, and Middle Eastern and Central Asian governments. Putin’s use of Kadyrov and Chechens in this way evokes previous efforts cited above to use Muslims as bearers of Moscow’s message.⁶⁹ For instance, Moscow has raised the idea of sending Chechen policemen to patrol captured areas of Syria, and is now talking to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan about them sending troops as well.⁷⁰ But it also inverts the policies cited above by which Putin sought outside Muslim support against *jihadi* and Sunni terrorism in Chechnya during the war of 1999–2007.⁷¹

However one views the relationship between Putin and Kadyrov, it remains the case that the Chechen strongman, though he clearly possesses some discretion, acts primarily as Putin’s agent in the Middle East. As *The New York Times* observed, the “Grozny-Kremlin relationship is calculated, controlled, and mutually beneficial.”⁷² By showing himself as a prominent leader and conductor of Russian foreign policy abroad, Kadyrov enhances his own standing at home and abroad, reinforces his value in Putin’s eyes by signaling Muslim support for his policies, and undoubtedly profits personally as well. He also establishes linkages to foreign governments who might be potential benefactors for him and Chechnya in the future and will, he hopes, testify in Moscow to his utility and “indispensability.” Meanwhile, Moscow obtains tangible support of thousands of battle-hardened Muslim forces that it can send to Syria or elsewhere in order to soften the impact of its military presence while demonstrating Russian support for Muslim self-assertion. Troops like the Chechen forces loyal to Kadyrov that were sent to Syria also testify to the success of Putin’s policies in suppressing the earlier insurgency and then reconstructing Chechnya. Thus the approximately 1,000 Chechen troops in Syria carry a high propaganda value in and of themselves and establish a vital and potentially lasting connection to Chechen émigrés in Syria who have supported al-Assad.⁷³

Through this channel, Ramzan Kadyrov establishes his credentials as a Kremlin policymaker and representative who can negotiate on behalf of Moscow with Arab governments; can help them clarify their positions vis-à-vis Russia; and elicit from them investments in Chechnya and/or other Muslim regions. Kadyrov has also become involved in Kremlin diplomacy toward Afghanistan,⁷⁴ and he is now organizing an international center for the training of special forces, no doubt with Russian backing. Since Kadyrov currently participates in most if not all high-level meetings with Middle Eastern leaders, he can credibly present himself as a real Russian power broker.⁷⁵

Kadyrov’s standing as an important power broker in Russian Middle Eastern policy also emerges in Libya. By 2015, he was negotiating with Libyan authorities to free Russian

sailors who had been seized by Tripoli. Since then, he has taken part in high-level negotiations among the factions in Libya and Russian officials who monitor the Libyan situation daily. Kadyrov is pushing efforts to cement ties with Libya's business community, even as he conducts negotiations with representatives of Libya's opposing factions. Meanwhile Moscow provides decisive military support to the faction led by General Khalifa Haftar. Kadyrov's role here is obviously important, and we can expect that Moscow will turn more attention and political resources to this war-torn North African state. Russia may use Kadyrov to show outside audiences that it can work with all relevant factions in Libya, as in Syria. But Moscow's ultimate objective, as in Syria, is expanding Moscow's long-term role and presence in Libya's politics, economics and energy as well as, presumably, obtaining a base in Libya: one of Joseph Stalin's aims in 1945.⁷⁶

Conclusion

These examples show just how tactically flexible Moscow can be in its use of Muslims, at home and abroad. The continuation of these strategies and tactics in service of a broader strategy to advance Russian interests, even in a maelstrom like Syria, shows the continuity of the cooptation tactic when applied to Islamic peoples through Tsarist, Soviet and now Putinist Russia. Russia's actions reflect not just an essential tactical continuity and flexibility but also the enduring imperial mindset of divide and rule. Russia clearly still behaves as if the Middle East is, as it was in Soviet times, a region close to Soviet (Russian) borders—even though those borders are now 1,000 kilometers further away. And it employs tactics and conducts policies toward the Middle East that reflect the ongoing continuity between Tsarism, Soviet power and the current Russian Federation. Indeed many Russian analysts underscore that a major reason for Moscow's intervention in Syria has been to leverage Russia's seeming ability to fight Islamic terrorism in order to compel Washington to acquiesce to Russia's earlier invasion of Ukraine.⁷⁷

Moscow continues to seek to govern and be seen by others as not just a great power but as an empire. And empire, as revealed, *inter alia*, in the persistence of imperial tactics of elite cooptation, ultimately also means protracted wars. Already in 2004, Rieber wrote a fitting epitaph underscoring the essential link between empire and war:

If imperial boundaries have no intrinsic limitations and are solely established by force, then they are bound to be heavily and persistently contested. The universal claims of empires, whatever the practical constraints may be in carrying them out, cannot by their very nature be accepted as legitimate either by the people they conquer or their rivals for the contested space. There can be no community of empires as there is a community of nation states. All empires share a common problem of legitimizing boundaries. As perceived through the prism of the community of nations, imperial frontiers appear problematic because they are sustained by force, even though solemn treaties might have recognized them from time to time.⁷⁸

The Middle East, of course, was historically part of various, competing empires and the legacies of those empires are still not yet resolved. Thus, Rieber's admonitions apply to it. But they also apply to Russia, which remains an empire in outlook and state structure. Indeed, as we have seen, its external power projection is closely tied to the dilemmas of assuring Russia's own internal security. Moscow's ingrained resort to this cooptation tactic in all of its guises and its overall imperial strategy in Eurasia and the Middle East are therefore not harbingers of a newly stabilized and legitimate Russian empire based on elite integration as was true previously. Rather it is a call to arms at home and abroad. Indeed, it is a summons to permanent war, even if it may take a non-kinetic informational aspect rather than a purely military character. But in either case, this summons to perpetual war ultimately is also not just a landmine under the current international order. It also a landmine under the continuity of the very Russian state Putin seeks to preserve and extend.

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