



Russia in the Middle East: Implications and Policy Recommendations

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Introduction

The findings from the Russia in the Middle East Project demonstrate that the United States is being outplayed in this region. As Stephen Blank notes early on in the body of this research, Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East—as initially articulated by former Russian prime minister Yevgeny Primakov—has featured both continuity and innovation.¹ Primakov formulated the basic intellectual framework and threat assessment used by Russia to assess the Near East today. Primakov and his successors, namely Vladimir Putin, restored the anti-American and neo-Soviet outlook in Russia's overall national security policy by penetrating the Middle East by using an assortment of optics and tactics with such success that the model is being expanded outside of the Middle East region.² Tactics involving arms sales, finance, minorities and energy are all opening doors to Moscow that were previously closed. Russia's policy evolution in the Middle East clearly shows the enduring Soviet-like if not Tsarist worldview that drives Russian foreign policy.³ Vladimir Putin's double visit to the Gulf in 2007 guaranteed Moscow's position in the Middle East today and was a masterstroke as described by Theodore Karasik.⁴ And with Moscow's current control over the Syrian future, Russia's policy allows Moscow deeper access to the Middle East and ultimately Africa.⁵ The challenges to America are many.

Timeless Pursuit of Imperial Goals

As Blank points out, Moscow's ingrained resort to cooptation tactics in all of its guises is not new. Rather, the Kremlin's call to arms at home and abroad is part of the larger push by Moscow to expand Russian influence. Indeed, it is a summons to a permanent state of 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 by Moscow against Western interests in the Middle East is a landmine under the current international order. Furthermore, it is a landmine under the continuity of the very

Russian state Putin seeks to preserve and extend.⁶ As such, the key issue of sustainability of Moscow's push into the Middle East becomes paramount.

Europe's Division Is Moscow's Gain in the Middle East

The overarching security dimension of Russia's push into the Middle East has had a dramatic effect on Europe. Pavel Baev argues that disarray and discord are nothing new in European foreign policy, so the spectrum of different views on Russia's policy in the Middle East is presently perhaps only marginally wider than at the start of this decade, when, as he suggests, the arrival of a new cold war first appeared.⁷ The erosion or even complete disappearance of US global leadership is a major factor shaping European views and policies in the greater Middle East. European political and business elites, as well as fractured public opinions, are at a loss about the trajectory of interactions between Washington and Moscow in this volatile corner of the world, and so "Europe" is missing a key reference point for assessing the consequences and risks of Russian policies in the region. Middle Eastern leaders, meanwhile, may see moves by some European countries like Austria to become friends and partners of Russia in a positive light. Yet, there is still widespread mistrust of Putin's intentions—although the unique feature of the political landscape in Europe is that Trump is trusted even less.

Russia's push into the Middle East and the Syrian civil war has put pressure on the EU to advance the Kremlin's cause there by creating divisions inside Europe. The application of this instrument is set to intensify, and Moscow will try its best to advance the proposals in favor of cooperation on rebuilding Syria while at the same "protecting" Iran from crippling US sanctions by including the Islamic Republic in a new, emerging economic space.

Importantly, Europe sees Russian-Turkish relations as highly unstable. The EU, as an institution, is in an awkward and dubious position, having to sustain the process of Turkey's accession while at the same time making it clear to the member states that there is no prospect of actually admitting Ankara into Europe. While European opinion is focusing on Turkish human rights violations since the failed coup attempt in July 2016, Putin, to the contrary, has expressed full support to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and has proceeded with rehabilitating the partnership interrupted by the November 2015 air skirmish crisis. Concerns rightly abound that Erdoğan is pushing Turkey further into an alliance of sorts with Russia that has several geopolitical implications. Primarily, those geopolitical issues of concern include Russian military equipment being used in a NATO country, Russia's creation of a Sea of Azov protection zone that also impacts Turkey, as well as Moscow's ability to use Ankara's deeply established ties in Africa, developed by Erdoğan over the past decade.

Nevertheless, as Baev argues, many Europeans find Putin's ability and readiness to maintain dialogue with all important parties to regional conflicts, from Israel and Saudi Arabia to Hamas and Iran, highly commendable and in sync with their preferences for carefully negotiated political solutions. And many Arab states hold a similar view.⁸ This convergence of opinion is regularly missed by US policymakers and emboldens Russia to push further in the Middle East. A main point is that Russia can claim a role to play only as long as violent conflicts continue to rage in the region, and the Syrian civil war is notably now moving into a new phase requiring political work for post-conflict reconstruction. Baev states, "This propensity for conflict manipulation, combined

with the appraisal of military force as the most useful instrument of policy, and compounded with the need to ensure an increase in oil prices, makes Russia a very particular kind of stakeholder in the overlapping Middle Eastern areas of turbulence.”⁹ Or, in other words, there must be unresolved conflicts for Russia to play any kind of serious regional role. Therefore, Moscow will exploit any opportunity to exacerbate those conflicts so that it becomes a necessary actor in the Middle East. For Europe, Russia’s foray into the Middle East and the Gulf in particular is an immense security challenge. But so far, no good response to Moscow’s push has been registered due to internal European disagreement.

Turkey Is Moving Away From the West and Embracing the East

From a Turkish point of view, Syria is the top security priority for Ankara. Mitat Çelikpala asserts that Turkey faces a long list of Syria-related priorities, including the re-emergence of the Kurds (politically embodied by the PYD/YPG/PKK) as an international actor, the existence of al-Qaeda derivatives on Turkey’s borders, the future of Sunni regions after the defeat of the Islamic State, the increasing legitimacy of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria, the situation of the refugees, and the future of the pro-Turkish opposition in Syria.¹⁰ Among these priorities, the immediate concern for Turkey is the military, diplomatic, and political support that the United States and Russia had been providing to the PYD/YPG/PKK since the beginning of the Syrian crisis.¹¹ This struggle continues to bedevil the West on what exactly to do with Turkey and Russia.

Russia is playing a decisive balancer role in the realization of Turkey’s interests in Syria—despite Moscow’s deceptive role as a political partner. In fact, Turkish decision-makers feel that they need Russian support to force the US to change its attitude toward the YPG in Syria.

The triangulation between Ankara, Moscow and Tehran is also part of the equation. The flow of events and Ankara’s diplomatic initiatives indicate that Turkish officials are trying to keep Iran and Russia on Turkey’s side in Syria. This paradoxical attitude is the result of the three parties’ longtime geopolitical competition in the region, which drives their periodic conflicts as well as their cooperation. These current developments apparently have made Turkey an actor again on the Syrian battlefield; but in return, Russia is playing the Kurdish card with a much louder voice, thereby making Moscow a factor in Ankara’s relations with the West and enhancing Russia’s leverage in Iraq, Syria and Turkey. This complex web of relations results in an unbalanced, obscure and, at times, self-contradictory Turkish foreign policy.

From the Arab point of view, as noted by Shehab al-Makahleh, Russia is boosting its involvement in the region in order to protect its own national security interests.¹² 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 and the multiple twists and turns of the Trump administration.

Iran Is Subservient to Moscow in the New Middle East

From the Iranian point of view, as articulated by Alex Vatanka, Iran’s ideological commitment to compete with the United States in the Middle East and beyond has certainly been a major

geopolitical boon for Moscow since 1979.¹³ It is a reality that in effect weakens Iran’s hand—as Tehran’s stance on the US is a non-starter for a majority of the states in the region that enjoy close ties with Washington—and compels the Iranians to turn to Russia for a host of military, economic and diplomatic requirements. And yet, some quarter of a century after the fall of the Soviet Union, Iranian opinions on Russia vary greatly.

Vatanka argues that Russia and Iran primarily have a limited tactical military-security relationship out of necessity; but Moscow now holds the upper hand.¹⁴ When it comes to the generals from the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)—the political-military guardians of the Islamic Republic and Moscow’s principal Iranian collaborators in the Syrian war—one will mostly hear praise vis-à-vis Russia. These are the stakeholders in the Iranian state that speak of a “strategic overlap” of interests with Moscow in everything from combating Sunni terrorism to rolling back American power in the Middle East. Still, even among such pro-Russia voices in Tehran, the relationship is not always easy to justify, as was conveyed by Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan’s statement about Russian “betrayal.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, for the IRGC, it is the flow of Russian arms, intelligence cooperation and other practical benefits Moscow offers that make it a special partner. Russia has already been able to take advantage of this relationship, as demonstrated by the Caspian Sea Agreement of 2018 but also by the on-again-off-again use of Iranian territory for Russian aircraft landing and taking off from Shahrokhi Airbase. Meanwhile, Tehran undoubtedly quietly agrees that Russia has historically taken far more from Iran than it has ever contributed to its national interests.

Arabs Appreciate and Value Moscow More Than Washington

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 benefiting from the weakness of the European Union and the distancing of the US from the Middle East in favor of the Pacific region.

Moscow’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 justification to intervene to safeguard its own national security. Simultaneously, the fast-moving events compelled Russia to cooperate 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.

Shehab al-Makahleh pointed out that 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 as colonialist or intruding.¹⁶ 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.

Russia’s Gaining Superiority in the Information Sphere Is to the US’s Detriment

Donald Jensen argues that the projection of Russian power into the Middle East in recent years has been accompanied by an impressive Kremlin information warfare effort intended to advance Moscow's foreign policy objectives.¹⁷ The media tactic is an important tool in Russia's arsenal. This campaign has been somewhat successful across the region, especially in Syria. But the effectiveness of that effort is undermined by several factors.

First, government censorship in the Middle East is much more prevalent than in more open media areas such as Eastern Europe, where we have seen Kremlin disinformation campaigns be effective. This fact enables host governments to block Russian messaging they oppose. Second, Russia in general receives a mixed basket of popular praise and disapproval. Research by Pew finds that 35 percent of those polled in the Middle East see Russia as a threat; but 35 percent have a favorable view of Russia.¹⁸ These findings, moreover, have been consistent over the last few years. Third, there are few cultural, linguistic, historical or other ties between Russia and the peoples of the Arab world. In no country are there ethnic-Russian communities large enough to be mobilized by Kremlin information activities. Finally, Russia is geographically distant from MENA, making its messaging harder to sustain.

Conversely, 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 US interests. This process is now ongoing and could push American cultural icons out of the region over time.

For the United States, Russia uses its information warfare capability as a tactic, especially its *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik* news services, to advance its foreign policy goals in the Middle East. Those foreign policy goals include becoming a great power in the region, reducing the role of the United States, propping up allies such as Bashir al-Assad in Syria, and fighting terrorism. Evidence suggests that while Russian media narratives are disseminated broadly in the region by traditional means and online, outside of Syria their impact has been limited. The ability of regional authoritarian governments to control the information their societies receive, cross cutting political pressures, the lack of longstanding ethnic and cultural ties with Russia, and widespread doubts about Russian intentions will make it difficult for Moscow to use information operations as an effective tool should it decide to maintain an enhanced permanent presence in the region.

Financial Tactics Are Growing

Theodore Karasik pointed out that for Russia, the Kremlin sees its historical mission coming to fruition in the MENA region, where it is using financial tools that are helping to guide these states firmly within Moscow's orbit and influence. The Kremlin's move is smart and timely. The status and prospects for Arab-Russian bilateral relationships are growing, and both the Arab states and the Kremlin are expanding their financial connectivity. The United States needs to pay closer attention to Russia's financial tactics in the Middle East in order to gauge Moscow's successes and failures over the coming years.

The growing financial cooperation and interconnectivity between Russia and Arab Middle East states raises a number of troubling questions that Karasik¹⁹ points to as critical for understanding these monetary relationships: To what extent are Gulf states enabling Russian foreign objectives? What is the impact of Russia's financial tactics on the interests of US allies in the Middle East? How do these activities affect their relations with Washington? How do East Asian countries, and specifically their sovereign wealth funds (SWF), interact with Arab SWFs that conduct business with Moscow? Is there a triangulation effect ongoing that shifts the geo-economic center of global economics eastward?

Russia's ability to use finance as a tactic is new to the Kremlin's arsenal, with most of the financial activity seen in the Gulf states. The goal is to build greater ties between the two regions. Arab states that are open to and engaging with Russia's financial tactics are enabling Moscow to further cement itself in Middle Eastern affairs. Washington's Gulf allies are conducting business with Russia, a country that sees itself on a historical mission.

Overall, Russia's financial tactics in the Middle East undermine US foreign policy. Additionally, they contribute to an unhealthy financial environment for the United States by manipulating local economies in order to win the hearts and minds of civilians but also of the civil servants, soldiers and employees of the states supported by Moscow in the region. Russia's use of finance to build a presence in the MENA region and specifically the Gulf is a critical part of Putin's foreign policy. The US would be wise to track these developments and assess their implications for Washington's foreign security strategy.

Energy Tactics Are the Future for Russia in the Middle East and Africa

Shehab al-Makahleh argues that Russia can be expected to continue to interfere in many countries' politics, especially those that were part of the former Soviet Union, in a bid to annex them.²⁰ It will also start exploration in the North Pole for oil and gas in order to maintain its ability to use energy as a weapon against other countries. After the Syrian civil war ends, Russia, along with Iran, Qatar and Syria, will together export more than 70 percent of the world's gas. This factor is a serious threat to many countries, including the United States because gas will be used to twist the arms of multiple US allies and partners. The next decade will prove to be confrontational, with Russia and Arab states agreeing on many issues that will challenge the US.

Rauf Mammadov asserts that disagreements between traditional allies in the region have helped Russia become a player there.²¹ By building economic ties with its energy rivals in the area, and working with international organizations such as OPEC to pursue its goal, the Kremlin is doing what it has always excelled at: divide and conquer. Russia has tried to use its energy diplomacy in MENA both to bring the region under its influence and to drive a wedge between the United States and its traditional allies, especially in the Gulf.

In its more muscular role in the MENA, Russia has been putting pragmatic energy policies above political differences. A key question is whether it can continue cooperating with regional energy players while disregarding its geopolitical differences with them. In other words, how sustainable will Russia's energy diplomacy in the region be? And how will international oil prices affect Russia's relations with energy-exporting countries in the area over the long term?

The United States has become far less dependent on oil imports and even less dependent on Middle Eastern oil than just a decade ago. But the global nature of energy markets exposes the US economy to oil and gas price fluctuations. Both a recent explosion at a natural gas terminal in Baumgarten, Austria, and China's decision to slash coal production roiled global energy markets, underscoring how interdependent they are. Washington must ensure that Moscow does not outmaneuver it to increase its influence over global energy policy, and thus prices. This means the United States must keep a close eye on relations between its most important allies in the Gulf as well as its rival Russia. Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, will remain among the world's biggest energy exporters for many decades to come. And US oil companies are still major oil and gas producers in the region. The United States needs to keep open lines of communication with Middle Eastern oil producers given this region's indispensability to the global energy industry. Russia, meanwhile, is itself keen to further expand its energy cooperation in MENA to prevent volatility in energy commodity markets in order to maximize revenues gained from the exports of its own hydrocarbons.

Russia's Arms Sales Complicate the US's Relationships With Arab Armies

As Anna Borshchevskaya points out, there is also no denying that Putin is making great strides since May 2000 to use weapons sales as a tactic to garner closer relations with Arab states at the expense of the US and Europe.²² Moscow's military reform efforts since 2008 have clearly paid off, and arms sales have been an effective tool in Moscow's foreign policy arsenal, especially in the Middle East.

The advantages Russian arms offer to this region continue to outweigh the disadvantages, both practically and politically. While most US defense experts believe Russia will be unable to produce much next-generation weaponry, Moscow is making significant strides with its existing technology. Russian arms are sufficient for most of Moscow's clients—particularly those who cannot afford top-of-the-line Western technology. Borshchevskaya says that Russian weapons—generally speaking—are well made, sometimes on par with the US, well-suited for the region's operational and prestige needs,²³ and usually more affordable than Western offerings. Politically, Russian military products come with few strings attached and thus are a great choice when a country wants to diversify away from the West, or at least signal such an intent.

When it comes to arms deals, Moscow has made inroads with traditional clients such as Iran, Syria, and Egypt, but also diversified toward countries with closer links to the West, such as states in the Arab Gulf as well as India, Morocco and Turkey. Borshchevskaya notes that the Russian defense sector has problems, but it has also demonstrated improvements, learning and flexibility.²⁴ And in the context of US retreat from the region, Moscow has stepped into a vacuum where the Kremlin's efforts generate a multiplier effect of real power. As long as US leadership in the region is absent, Russia's arms sales to the Middle East and North Africa will remain a serious problem for American interests over the coming years.

Potentially hampering Russia are not only the above-mentioned problems with its domestic arms industry but also the fact that China wields a level of commercial influence Russia simply cannot compete with. Indeed, some countries, such as Algeria, are increasingly looking toward China, even as Algiers signed its blockbuster deal with Moscow. China is also starting to dominate in

high-growth areas such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), where Russia is no match. Another element is Western sanctions on Russian dual-use high-technology imports, especially effective toward Russia's defense industry. Commercially available technologies such as microelectronics and quantum computing have increasingly important modern military applications, but Russia cannot produce them independently. It has tried to resort to import substitution, but so far with poor results. Finally, Russian weapons on the whole met no real opposition in Syria. Therefore, despite Moscow's tests and displays, questions about the full extent of these weapons' capabilities remain.

Russian PMCs as the Deadliest Tactic

In the final analysis, by cultivating a growing number of private military companies (PMC) like the Wagner Group, Russia has created both a powerful and convenient weapon of non-linear warfare as well as a tool for the Russian elites to achieve their own geo-economic goals. Sergey Sukhankin argues that, from a military point of view, Wagner's operations in Donbas and Syria appear to have, in part, been designed to test its ability to "control the territory," a concept strongly emphasized by Valery Gerasimov and the Russian General Staff.²⁵ Importantly, PMCs offer Moscow deniability and conceal its responsibility for deaths of Russian soldiers in operations abroad. Additionally, Russian PMCs and especially Wagner allow for the potential integration of foreigners (from impoverished parts of the post-Soviet space), which provides the Kremlin with another powerful tool of influence to use overseas. Undoubtedly, the Wagner model is here to stay.

The Nexus of Demography and Ideology

Ilan Berman notes Russia's changing demography fundamentally alters its engagement with the Middle East and the Muslim World more broadly. As the country's demographic transition progresses, Russia's involvement in the politics of the region can be expected to increase, even as its potential to serve as a reliable partner for the United States there will continue to diminish. Fundamentally, Russian policy in the Middle East (and toward the Muslim World more broadly) is already competitive, seeking to assert Russia as a counterpoint to local US alliances and interests. The demographic pressures exerted by Russia's swelling Muslim minority are likely to reinforce these tendencies over the next several years. In the process, they will almost certainly exacerbate Moscow's already unconstructive, zero-sum approach to the Middle East.

2024: Putin and the Middle East

Gazing into the future, to 2024, is an important part of the Russia and Middle East project.²⁶ Specifically, Yuri Barmin argues that as Syria gradually falls from the top of Russia's political agenda in the Middle East over the coming years, Moscow will be looking for new ways to stay relevant in the region.²⁷ Russia's permanent military bases in Syria have the potential to change the power balance in the Mediterranean. Moscow has already created a heavily guarded perimeter in the Eastern Mediterranean by deploying air-defense capabilities to Syria, which complement its permanent naval force in these waters. Together, these deployments and growing capabilities will become a challenge for NATO as Moscow spreads its presence into the Alliance's naval underbelly in the Mediterranean Sea. Down the line, Russia is also managing to expand military cooperation

with Egypt and the future government in Libya, and is expanding its naval presence in the Red Sea.

Politically, however, hard power will over time produce fewer benefits for Moscow, and at higher costs, which is why the Russian government will need to discover new ways to remain relevant in the regional arena. Having used Syria to rebuild its image as a regional power, Russia is faced with the challenge of how to balance its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, neither of which is a true ally for Moscow. In order to forge stronger regional alliances, Vladimir Putin might revisit the idea of a global anti-terrorist coalition, which feeds into the concept of a regional system of collective security widely discussed by Russian policymakers.

Trying to insert itself in regional politics in the post-Syria era, Russia is likely to rebrand its image in the Middle East and position itself as a regional referee in an attempt to offset the negative impact of the Syrian conflict on its profile. Being a regional referee, however, does not necessarily translate into being a supporter of democracy. The legacy of the Arab Spring and Russia's own experience with democratic movements led Putin to believe that authoritarian stability may help the Middle East overcome its security problems. And Russia's military campaign in Syria has further crystallized this notion for the Kremlin that Russia has *carte blanche* in the region.

In addition, Russia's relentless drive in the Middle East is obviously tied to the future of energy markets through 2024. As both Barmin²⁸ and Mammadov²⁹ point out in their respective works:

- Russia's regional energy goals can be summarized as finding new markets for its oil and gas; attracting investment to replace Western capital blocked by sanctions; working with other energy exporters to stabilize international oil prices; undermining Europe's efforts to diversify its natural gas supplies; and helping Russia deliver more oil and gas to Asia.
- A favorable geopolitical environment coupled with higher oil prices has eased the Kremlin's efforts to build bilateral energy relations with the regional powers.
- Energy contracts give Russia presence, but actual control over regional infrastructure projects remains undetermined. This again raises questions about the sustainability of Moscow's energy push into the Middle East during Putin's fourth term.
- Resilience of the American fracking industry to the low oil price environment and the future of the Iran nuclear deal will be among the most significant elements influencing Russia's future in the region, and particularly the strength of its continued cooperation with Saudi Arabia.

And as Ilan Berman notes, Russia's policy on the Islamic world will form a unique nexus with Arab states through 2024 and beyond:

- Demography is among the most underappreciated drivers of contemporary Russian policy in the Middle East. Ongoing population decline—and the expansion of Russia's own Muslim minority—has exerted a significant influence over Moscow's attitudes and activities in the region over the past several years.
- The growth and radicalization of "Muslim Russia" has helped propel the Kremlin into assuming a leading role in the Syrian civil war, and will play an important role in shaping Russia's regional objectives for years to come.

- The nexus between Muslim Russia and the Islamic Middle East is an extraordinary driver in Moscow’s current and future relationship with MENA. Muslim Russia and the Islamic Middle East build on historical, governmental and business ties, and are now focusing on counter-terrorism and messages of peaceful co-existence and tolerance.
- Russia and the Gulf states are leading the moderation of Islam. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are articulating the same message now. The relative success of this trend will strongly reflect on Russia’s perceived policy accomplishments in the region.³⁰

Implications for the United States

Considering the circumscribed and frenzied role the United States currently plays in the Middle East, Russia is wide open to do as it sees fit there—and without too much push back from Arab powers.

Role of Optics

Much of Russia’s ability to project power and influence into the Middle East under Putin has to do with the role of optics in media reporting. Russia’s regional presence is subject to sustainability issues. A departure point is the sustainment level of a Syria-type action including force projection throughout the Middle East. Some analysts believe that Moscow’s posturing is merely for show and that, in reality, Moscow is likely “a one trick pony” and staging a “Kabuki Theater.”³¹ Protracted conflict in Syria keeps Russia financially strapped to the Levantine campaign. Thus, while Moscow is set to expand its presence, Russia’s footprint and optics must be taken into consideration by policymakers. Furthermore, Russian actions in the Middle East must be measured in terms of influence, credibility and authenticity. It is possible that Russia does not need to do much to generate the optics necessary for strategic and tactical success in the future because of media amplification.

Role of Sustainability

Undoubtedly, questions remain regarding the sustainability of Russia’s push into the Middle East through 2024. The key issues, as noted by both Barmin³² and Mammedov³³ are:

- Russia is operating with limited resources everywhere in the world. It is doubtful that it can sustain a large continued military presence in the MENA region.
- While Moscow tries to expand its presence, footprint and optics must be taken into consideration by policymakers. Russia’s actions in the Middle East must be measured in terms of influence, credibility and authenticity. It is possible that Russia does not need to do much to create the optics necessary for strategic and tactical success, because of media amplification.
- The US government needs a different set of metrics to measure Russia’s future influence in the Middle East, including discerning key differences in actual projection versus optics of influence.

Energy contracts give presence; but questions regarding actual control over infrastructure remain undetermined because of the multiple layers of opacity. How much of the energy push into the

Middle East is sustainable during Putin's fourth term is a key question that only market forces and geopolitics will answer. The strategy and cooperation between Russia and major OPEC producers exists now and will be coordinated more closely in the future. As Moscow expands its energy presence in the Middle East, it is important to watch for how Arab energy producers receive or reject Russian joint ventures, mediation, and controlling interests/ownership.

Moscow's ability to project its legacy navy relies on a hub-based strategy utilizing ports, airbases and berths. The question of cost impedes the arrival of new Russian naval craft until the late 2020s. It is possible that Russian maritime operations off the coast of Syria may not be easily duplicated off of other Mediterranean or Gulf of Aden/Gulf of Oman shores.

How Russia measures success will also be important in the timeframe out to 2025.³⁴ Public opinion is affected by body bags, and thus Moscow will continue to use proxies to influence conflict and terrorist zones. A favorable geopolitical environment coupled with plummeting oil prices has eased the Kremlin's efforts to build bilateral energy relations with the regional powers. Russia's presence in the region is nascent but growing quickly. Yet, will Russia be able to maintain its presence in the region? Will Russia or Saudi Arabia be interested in cooperation to extend the volume-cut deal now and in the future? This will depend on a number of factors. Resilience of the US fracking industry to the low oil price environment and the future of Iran nuclear deal will be among the most significant elements that influence Russia's future in the region.³⁵

Demography's Pull on Russian Mideast Policy Not Understood

Demography is among the most underappreciated drivers of contemporary Russian policy in the Middle East. Yet Russia's ongoing population decline—and the expansion of Russia's own Muslim minority—has exerted significant influence over Moscow's attitudes and activities in the region over the past several years. Thus, the growth and radicalization of "Muslim Russia" has helped propel the Kremlin into assuming a leading role in the Syrian civil war. This same constituency will play an important role in shaping Russia's objectives in the region in the years to come.³⁶

But there is a larger trend line that policymakers and stakeholders are missing: the nexus between Muslim Russia and the Islamic Middle East, which is an extraordinary driver in Moscow's current and future relationship with MENA.

Muslim Russia and the Islamic Middle East build on historical, governmental and business ties and are now focusing on counter-terrorism and messages of peaceful co-existence and tolerance. Russia and the Gulf States are leading the moderation of Islam. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are articulating the same message now. How that message continues as Saudi Arabia undergoes its transformation in the future is driven by metrics of success and failure in the MENA region for Russia's policy in the region. Coordination among Riyadh, Grozny and Moscow on the issue of the future of Islam is critical to track and understand. Thus, we confront a multi-pronged and multi-dimensional Russian strategy with initiatives in energy, diplomacy, projection of military power, and use of Muslim populations on the basis of a cultural and political affinity.

Miscalculating the North-South Corridor

As Karasik notes, the North-South corridor of energy and economic linkages between Russia and MENA remains poorly understood.³⁷ Nonetheless, it is clear that Moscow is achieving the ability to be the number one energy influencer in the Middle East.

Russia's moves to influence the energy market share and 91 percent of the entire future LNG industry in MENA—as calculated in 2016 by the Abu Dhabi Executive Council³⁸—are well underway, from Iran to Algeria. And the Qatar-Russia relationship will be key in this regard. Moreover, Moscow is using the Peninsula as a lily pad to Africa, following in Beijing's footsteps, to enter key African states in the Sahel, East Africa, and Africa's core—notably, Mozambique—to gain presence for exploration rights, weapons sales, and access and export of strategic minerals.

Such North-South energy strategies are going to dominate the international market, especially between Saudi Arabia and Russia. From the Arctic to the Gulf, there is a flurry of activity that includes strategic minerals. Indeed, Saudi money will soon be financing Russian energy projects in the Arctic.³⁹ Arab states are helping Russia build the necessary bridges by sea and air to the Middle East. These strategies are moving Russia and MENA eastward in terms of operating outside of SWIFT or currency swaps with the West, while gearing their deals toward the Yuan/Renminbi. The activity of SWFs between the Gulf and Russia is thus an area of finance that is falling outside of US surveillance and understanding. Moreover, Russia uses the GOZNAK Joint Stock Company to print currency for MENA warzones.⁴⁰ Taken together, this gray area economic investment in the North-South corridor is poorly understood, as are the flows of illicit monies that deserve anti-money laundering (AML) attention: including connections among Gulf–Russian Federation, Belarus–Gulf, Balkans–Gulf, and Central Asia–Gulf.⁴¹

US Policy Recommendations

Russian ambitions in the wider Middle East are inimical to US interests and support forces like Iran, which are also hostile to our interests and values. This will be the case for quite some time. Expanding the cadre of those with long-term experience in both Russia and the Middle East will thus be necessary to ensure that key policymakers and stakeholders fully grasp the key projections and metrics of the evolving Russian-Arab relationships.

Establishing the contours of a well thought out approach to pre-empt Russian moves will require further examining and addressing the long-term issues surrounding the emerging nexus of Muslim Russia and the Islamic Middle East—including as this nexus relates to the future of ties that bind North and South.

More importantly, the US government needs a different set of metrics to measure Russia's future influence in the Middle East. This includes a more effective means to discern the key differences in Moscow's actual power projection versus optics of influence. A key point is understanding how Russia and the Arab states see their interests merging in new and complex ways, including what challenges this may pose for the United States.

A New Scholarly Approach to Understanding the New Geopolitics of Russia's Activities in the Middle East

The woefully inadequate understanding of Russian objectives and tactics in the Middle East has been observed by the authors throughout the duration of the project. The rising foreign policy cadres currently serving in government or studying at educational institutions are receiving the wrong instruction when comes to understanding the complex issues of Russia's vision toward the Middle East. What is missing is extensive field work in both Russian and Middle Eastern area studies via educational and or academic exchange programs. What we are seeing, in other words, is the failure of the US educational system to keep up with the demands of the geopolitical environment. Area Studies is increasingly neglected by universities, while cut-backs in Russian programs are hurting the country's capabilities to understand and anticipate Russian activities. A serious initiative like or akin to a Blue Ribbon Panel may be necessary to combine not only the disciplines of Russia and Middle East Affairs, but also Russia and Africa, and Russia and Latin America. The necessity to mix area studies disciplines to create a new breed of analyst that is cross-cultural is of paramount importance in order to not only see what Russia is doing and going to do but also to simultaneously be able to understand and fully appreciate the Arab point of view.

US Government Needs an Immediate Joint Fusion Cell on Russia in the Middle East

The US needs rigorous, in-depth understanding of the actors in the drama; thus, the establishment of a fusion cell that mixes Russia and Middle East analysts is beyond critical at this juncture. However, this task is currently prevented by the stove-piping prevalent within most Washington, DC, government institutions. Confusion reigns supreme because of a lack of understanding of the intricacies of Russian strategy and actions, compounded by the broad lack of awareness of the Middle East's many nuances. Throughout this project, the level of questioning from US government analysts illustrated that the Russian analysts do not understand the Middle East and Middle East analysts do not understand Russia. Desk officers who are responsible for Middle East countries are unaware or too narrowly focused on their country; and consequently, they are missing the extra-regional activity conducted by the Kremlin.

Accountability of Arab Partners

The US needs to find a mechanism by which Arab allies are held accountable for their interactions with Russia. The optics are particularly poor when, for instance, Gulf military officers come to Moscow and Washington simultaneously for training. What Gulf military officers are learning from Moscow and what they are sharing with Moscow about the United States are key unknown questions. These relationships deserve closer examination to determine whether sanctions need to be applied to key Arab leaders or companies doing business with Russia.

Sanctions on Arab Partners Necessary to Halt Russian Enabling

The United States' ability to use sanctions as a weapon against Russia is highly likely to be eroded or nullified as Moscow seeks to bypass them by relying on outlets in the Gulf. That said, it is still an open question how sanctions on Rosoboroneksport will affect Russia's weapons sales to the MENA region. The North-South Corridor is essentially a "gray zone" when it comes to observing illicit financial activity; it appears to be either off-limits or not even on the US policymakers' radar. The US Treasury, FinCEN, etc. must more closely examine the financial relationships between

Russia and Middle Eastern states for irregularities. The toxic Russian state, where illicit behavior is a norm, cannot be allowed to negatively influence the reforms and transformations occurring across the Arab countries' energy and financial sectors.

The US needs to better understand the links between Russia and MENA. In contrast, Russians have a much clearer comprehension of MENA and its attributes than the US does. For Washington to address the threat posed by Russian activities in the region, this imbalance will need to be rectified immediately, for instance by introducing specialized training programs that bring cultural awareness to the analytical forefront. Presently, the US is missing the extremely important cultural drivers that are pushing Russia and MENA closer together. Understanding these attributes are key to generating an effective policy response.

Conclusion

Having returned to the Middle East, Russia is here to stay; forcing Moscow out of the region is highly unlikely. Although domestic problems in the Russian Federation may to some degree distract the Kremlin from its extra-regional goals, Russia's relentless drive south is now ever-present and amplified by the geopolitical and geo-economics transition occurring throughout the Middle East. As such, the US will only be able to contend with Russia's advances in this strategic region and beyond by understanding the key factors and drivers eluding Western scholars at the moment.

Notes

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²⁹ Rauf Mammadov, op cit.

³⁰ Ilan Berman, “Demography’s Pull on Russian Mideast Policy,” The Jamestown Foundation, March 8, 2018.

³¹ Russia in the Middle East Workshop 1, September 25, 2017, Washington D.C.

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³⁶ Ilan Berman, op cit.

³⁷ Theodore Karasik, op cit.

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