

Syria and the Regional Quagmire of the Middle East

The Russian Approach to Middle East Conflicts and the Arab World

Mark N. Katz

Professor of Government and Politics
School of Policy, Government and International Affairs,
George Mason University

On 30 September, 2015, Russia began its military intervention in Syria, which has been credited with enabling the Assad regime there not only to survive, but also to regain key territory previously lost to some of its opponents. Turkey's shooting down of a Russian warplane flying in the vicinity of the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015 elicited a negative response from Moscow, including the deployment of Russian air defence missile systems to Syria capable of attacking targets in Turkish airspace. These events led many to conclude that Moscow had embarked on a more assertive military policy in the Middle East. But on 14 March, 2016, confusion over Russia's intentions arose when it was announced that Putin had telephoned Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to inform him that Moscow was going to withdraw the "main part" of Russian forces in Syria, and that the withdrawal would begin the very next day. True to his word, Russian forces did start leaving Syria for Russia. Putin also made clear, however, that Moscow intended to maintain both its longstanding naval base on Syria's Mediterranean coast as well as the air base it established there more recently. While Moscow may still help the Assad regime retain the territory it now controls, Putin is clearly not going to expend Russian resources in helping Damascus achieve its more ambitious goal of regaining control over all of Syria.

As dramatic – and confusing – as Russia's intervention in and at least partial withdrawal from the conflict in Syria has been though, there are several other ongoing conflicts in the Middle East in which,

unlike in Syria, Moscow has largely avoided military (if not diplomatic) involvement. These conflicts include the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the multi-faceted conflict in Libya, the fight between the Egyptian government and jihadists in the Sinai Peninsula, the ethnic and sectarian conflicts in Iraq, sectarian conflict in Bahrain and the multi-faceted conflict in Yemen, in which (like in Syria) regional as well as local actors are involved. Comparing the lack of Russian military involvement in these conflicts with its involvement in Syria yields a more nuanced picture of Moscow's approach to the Arab World.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

During the Cold War, Moscow was a vocal supporter of the Palestinian cause, even if it did not give much practical support for it. Strong American support for Israel was seen by Moscow as giving the USSR an opportunity to ally with Arab states opposing Israel. This succeeded in some cases (Egypt under Nasser, along with Syria and Iraq under the Baath in particular), though not in others (including Egypt under Sadat and Mubarak and the Arab monarchies). From the June 1967 War until the end of the Cold War, Moscow did not even have diplomatic relations with Israel. Relations were restored in 1991, but remained relatively cool under Yeltsin. Since Putin has been in power, Moscow has worked to improve relations with Fatah, Hamas and Hezbollah – the latter two having engaged in serious clashes with Israel. Yet at the same time, Moscow's ties with Israel have blossomed. Security cooperation has grown between the two countries, and Israel has become a source of military technology for Russia. Rhetorical support for the Palestinian cause (intended, perhaps, to bolster Russia's

image in the Arab and Muslim worlds) is the most that Moscow has offered. Furthermore, Russia's close relationship with Israel has paid off for Putin regarding Syria. Unlike many Western and Arab governments, Israel has not been critical of Russia's intervention in Syria. And in contrast to Turkey, which shot down a Russian warplane in response for what it claimed to be repeated Russian violations of Turkish airspace, Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon's reaction to the overflight of Israeli airspace by Russian military aircraft was to note that, "Russian planes are not trying to attack us and therefore it is not necessary to automatically – even if there is a mistake – to shoot them down."¹ Whatever Putin's aims in Syria, the Israeli government itself does not seem to see the Russian military presence there as presaging Russian assistance to its Palestinians opponents. In fact, after the announcement that Moscow would begin withdrawing Russian forces from Syria, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin sought reassurances in Moscow that this would not embolden Iran and Hezbollah to act against Israel.² The Israelis, therefore, saw the Russian presence in Syria as a restraining influence on them.

Libya

Putin was reportedly livid that certain Western and Arab countries 'took advantage' of the 2011 UN Security Council Resolution allowing for a 'no-fly zone' over Libya to intervene in support of the opposition to Moscow's long-time ally Gaddafi, resulting not just in the downfall of his regime, but also his violent death at the hands of a mob. Putin has repeatedly observed that the downfall of Gaddafi did not lead to Western-style democracy in Libya, but instead to chaos. And Putin has frequently declared that he will not allow what happened in Libya to happen in Syria. Yet although what happened to Gaddafi in Libya lies at the heart of Putin's justification for intervening in defence of the Assad regime in Syria, Moscow's

policy toward post-Gaddafi Libya has been remarkably restrained. Moscow has not become militarily involved in the complicated civil war that has emerged in post-Gaddafi Libya. While it talks with its various factions, Moscow's main relationship appears to be with the internationally-recognized Libyan government. Moscow has talked about resuming arms sales to Libya, but has stated that this can only occur when allowed by the UN Security Council.³ Indeed, with Putin so determined to retain or restore Russian influence in some countries, his lack of interest in doing so in Libya seems remarkable.

Egypt (especially Sinai)

Russian-Egyptian relations have improved significantly since al-Sisi seized power from Morsi in 2013. Offended at the Obama administration's disapproval, al-Sisi was gratified by expressions of support offered by Putin, and the two leaders have ostentatiously expressed their admiration and support for each other. Economic and military ties between Cairo and Moscow have also increased. The Kremlin, though, does not seem particularly interested in helping Egypt deal with the jihadist opposition in the Sinai Peninsula. And when a Russian passenger aircraft was destroyed shortly after taking off from Sharm al-Sheikh as the result of a bomb, Moscow was initially reluctant to acknowledge that this was an act of terrorism – even though Islamic State declared itself responsible for the downing of the plane.⁴ Moscow eventually did so, after cancelling civilian flights between Russia and Egypt. Considering Russia's harsh reaction to Turkey's shooting down of a Russian military aircraft, a similar reaction toward ISIS for the terrorist bombing of a Russian civilian aircraft might have been expected. Whatever the reasoning behind it, Moscow's relatively passive response to this incident does not appear to be that of a state seeking to become more active militarily beyond Syria in the Middle East.

¹ "Ya'alon: Russian Jet Recently Breached Our Airspace, Wasn't Shot Down," *Times of Israel*, 29 November 2015, www.timesofisrael.com/yaalon-russian-jet-breached-israeli-air-space-not-shot-down/

² Eglash, Ruth, and Booth, William, "Israel Fears Russia's Pullout from Syria Will Leave Dangerous Void," *Washington Post*, 16 March 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/world/israel-fears-russias-pullout-from-syria-will-leave-a-dangerous-void/2016/03/16/8a64a21a-eb7c-11e5-a9ce-681055c7a05f_story.html

³ ODNOKOLENKO, Oleg, "The Kremlin Used 'Rifle Diplomacy,'" *Defense and Security* (Russia), 20 April 2015 (LexisNexis).

⁴ "Russia Confirms Bomb Downed Plane Over Egypt, Vows Retribution," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 17 November 2015, www.rferl.org/content/russia-confirms-bomb-downed-egypt-plane/27370701.html

Iraq

Despite Putin's strident opposition to the US-led intervention that overthrew Russia's ally, Saddam Hussein, Moscow has developed remarkably friendly relations with the government in Baghdad that the US left behind there. Not only have Russian petroleum firms been active in Iraq, but Moscow has also sold substantial quantities of weapons to Baghdad. Although American forces withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2011, the Obama administration sent some back in order to help Baghdad deal with the threat it is facing from Islamic State. Apparently frustrated with the slow progress being made with this American assistance, the Baghdad government publicly invited Russia to provide it with military assistance against IS after Moscow's intervention in Syria began. But while Moscow announced that Russia, Iran, Iraq and Syria had all agreed to share intelligence, Russia did not send any of its forces to join the fight against IS in Iraq. In addition to Washington making clear to Baghdad that the US "can't conduct operations if the Russians were operating in Iraq,"⁵ Moscow itself did not appear at all eager to join the fight against IS in Iraq. What is especially noteworthy about this case is that Putin seemed unwilling to undertake military action even on behalf of a government that was inviting Russia to do so.

Bahrain

Despite support from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council states for the Sunni Arab opponents of Moscow's ally (the predominantly Alawite minority regime) in Syria, Russia has punctiliously avoided supporting the Shia-majority opposition to the Sunni monarchy in Bahrain. It could be expected that the existence of a US naval facility in Bahrain, just as there is a Russian naval facility in Syria, would make for an especially tempting 'tit-for-tat' strategy for Moscow; something that the Shia government in Iran (and possibly Iraq) would also welcome. The Kremlin, though, has not only avoided any such temptations, but has gone out of its way to demonstrate

that it has good relations with Bahrain's Sunni monarchy.⁶ If anything, Moscow appears to be trying to set a good example in its policy toward Bahrain for America and its allies to emulate in Syria.

Yemen

Moscow was heavily involved in the various conflicts taking place within and between both North and South Yemen from the early 1960s until the end of the Cold War. The two Yemens unified in 1990, but there has been no shortage of conflict there since – especially since 2011. In 2015, Saudi Arabia (along with several of its regional allies) intervened militarily in Yemen to protect the very weak, Saudi-backed transitional President (who Riyadh helped bring into office in 2012) from what it saw as Iranian-backed opposition forces (both the Zaidi Shia Houthis and Yemeni army units loyal to the previous President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who left office but not the country in the face of widespread opposition – including from the Houthis – in 2012). While decrying Saudi intervention in Yemen, Moscow has stayed out of the conflict there, emphasising the need for a diplomatic solution.⁷ Moscow may not be displeased to see Saudi forces bogged down in Yemen, especially if this limits Riyadh's ability to follow through on its threats to send troops to support Syrian opposition forces. Putin, though, does not appear to see Yemen as a promising opportunity for the deployment of Russian military forces.

Syria

Russia has provided arms to the Assad regime since well before the Syrian uprising began in 2011. But when these (along with support from Iran and its Shia militia allies from Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan) appeared insufficient to prevent the Assad regime from further losing ground to its internal opponents, Moscow intervened with its own forces. This Russian intervention succeeded not only in helping the Assad regime retain control of key territory, but also ena-

⁵ "U.S. to Iraq: If Russia Helps You Fight ISIS, We Can't," CBS News, 21 October 2015, www.cbsnews.com/news/us-iraq-chose-between-american-and-russian-airstrikes-in-isis-fight/

⁶ "Russia, Bahrain Favor People's Right to Decide Their Own Fate—Lavrov," TASS, 8 February 2016, <http://tass.ru/en/politics/855257>

⁷ "Russian Diplomat Sees No Prospects for Swift Settlement of Yemeni Crisis," TASS, 8 February 2016, <http://tass.ru/en/politics/855213>

bling it to regain some. Still, the Russian intervention in Syria has been far more limited than the American-led interventions in Iraq (2003-2011) or Afghanistan (ongoing since 2001). But, as was noted earlier, Putin began withdrawing Russian forces from Syria in March 2016.

Moscow intervened not only in helping the Assad regime retain control of key territory, but also enabling it to regain some. Still, the Russian intervention in Syria has been far more limited than the American-led interventions in Iraq or Afghanistan

Russian military operations in Syria consisted mainly of an intense aerial bombardment campaign; Putin himself indicated from the onset of the Russian intervention that he did not intend to send Russian ground forces to Syria (although various Russian officials talked about the possibility of “volunteers” from Russia going to Syria). Furthermore, as many observers have noted, Russian military action in Syria has been focused on protecting the Assad regime in its stronghold in western Syria against its non-ISIS opponents there, and not on attacking ISIS (whose base of operations is in eastern Syria). Despite warnings from Putin himself about the danger to Russia posed by ISIS, Moscow does not seem eager to engage in direct confrontation. Some in the West suggested that Putin was aiming to defeat the non-ISIS opposition but not ISIS in order to confront the West with the choice of either the Assad regime or ISIS as the only possible alternatives for ruling Syria (and anticipating that the former would be more palatable than the latter).

Yet just as Washington has done, Moscow has given military assistance to Kurdish forces in north-eastern Syria, which are mainly fighting against ISIS and not the Assad regime.⁸ But while Washington regards the Syrian Kurds as allies against ISIS, Russia ap-

pears to value them more as allies against Turkey – with which Moscow’s relations show no signs of improving after their disastrous downturn in November 2015. It is not clear whether, or how, the withdrawal of Russian forces from the Assad regime’s stronghold in western Syria will impact Russian support for the Syrian Kurds along the border with Turkey.

The Bigger Picture

Moscow has sought to portray Russian intervention in Syria to defend the Assad regime – and the lack of Russian intervention elsewhere, especially in opposition to any existing government – as an example of how Russia respects the authoritarian governments of the Middle East and, unlike America and the West, is a reliable ally to them. America and the West, by contrast, have intervened in Iraq and Libya to overthrow authoritarian regimes and sought to establish democracy, but, instead, have only created chaos. Moscow’s support for the Assad regime, and intervention to protect it, has prevented America and the West from attempting their misguided democratization efforts in yet another Arab country. Thus, all the authoritarian governments in the Arab world (and almost all of them are authoritarian) should not regard Russia as an enemy, but as an ally in upholding the *status quo*. Far from regarding Russian intervention to protect Assad as a threat, other Arab governments should see Russian support for Assad as indicative of Moscow’s respect for ‘legitimate government’ in Syria as well as other Arab countries

This message has found resonance with some Arab governments. Egypt’s al-Sisi in particular has expressed appreciation for Russian support for the ‘forces of order’ combating Islamist terrorism in Egypt as well as Syria.⁹ In contrast, the Obama administration’s discomfort with al-Sisi’s 2013 overthrow of the elected Muslim Brotherhood leader and criticism of al-Sisi’s crackdown on opponents of his new regime afterward are a source of frustration to the Egyptian government. Moscow would like all Arab governments to share this view of how Russia supports order but America and the West do not.

⁸ DEMIDENKO, Sergei, “Why Does Moscow Need Syrian Kurdistan?” *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, 24 March 2016, https://rbth.com/opinion/2016/03/24/why-does-moscow-need-syrian-kurdistan_578705

⁹ HATEM, Abdullah, “Sisi’s Attempts to Rehabilitate Assad...A Different Tune to the Gulf,” *Middle East Monitor*, 28 August 2015, www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/20697-sisis-attempts-to-rehabilitate-assad-a-different-tune-to-the-gulf

There is, however, a counter-narrative to this view. Far from appreciating how supportive Moscow is of a fellow authoritarian Arab ruler, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states that regard Iran as their principal opponent view Russia as an ally not just of Iran, but of the Shia against the Sunnis. They see Russian actions in Syria not just as helping the Alawite minority regime there to suppress the Sunni Arab majority, but also aiding what they see as an expansionist Iran's efforts to dominate Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Combined with their belief that Iran is seeking to support the Shia opposition in both Bahrain and Yemen, the Gulf Arabs see Tehran's ultimate aim as being to dominate them as well. Nor do they see Moscow as doing anything to stop Iran from doing so.

Those Arabs who want to see their countries democratize do not appreciate Russia's support for Arab dictatorships. These people, of course, do not appreciate Western support for the Arab world's authoritarian order either

Contributing to this counter-narrative that Russia is an ally of Iran and the Shias, are statements made by Iranian leaders that this is indeed true. For example, after his visit to Moscow in February 2016, Ali Akbar Velayati (currently foreign policy adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader and previously Iran's Foreign Minister) declared that there are "prerequisites" for the creation of an alliance between Iran, Russia, Syria and Hezbollah.¹⁰

Moscow, for its part, has tried to reassure the Gulf Arabs on this score. A Russian Foreign Ministry official, for example, described Velayati's statement as "speculative," and declared that "there are no plans of creating such an alliance."¹¹ The problem for Moscow in discrediting this belief though, is not only

Moscow's obvious eagerness to sell Russian weapons to Tehran, now that UN sanctions against it have been lifted as a result of the Iranian nuclear accord coming into force, but also that the Gulf Arabs see Moscow as being not just unable, but unwilling to restrain what they see as Iranian expansionism.

Moscow may hope that the withdrawal of some Russian forces from Syria, beginning in March 2016, will demonstrate to the Gulf Arabs that Moscow is not as firmly allied with Iran as they think. Of course, if Iran and Hezbollah continue or increase their support for the Assad regime, the Gulf Arabs are not likely to see the drawdown of Russian forces in Syria as being particularly beneficial to them.

For the Gulf Arabs, then, Moscow's argument that it supports the authoritarian order everywhere in the Middle East is simply not good enough. They do not appreciate Russian support for the 'wrong sort' of Arab authoritarians – specifically those that are Shia (or belong to the Alawite offshoot of Shiism) and allied to Iran. But for Arab governments such as Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and even the post-Arab Spring government in Tunisia, which (like Russia itself) are more fearful of their internal Sunni opponents than of Iran and its Shia Arab allies, Moscow's portrayal of itself as the defender of the established authoritarian order in the Arab world is much more welcome.

Furthermore, having developed close ties to Israel, Moscow is not doing anything to aid the Palestinian cause that is so popular in the Arab world. But pre-occupied with their concerns about internal opponents and/or Iran and its allies, no Arab government is prioritising the Palestinian cause either.

Finally, it should be noted that, although some authoritarian governments in the Arab world appreciate Russia's support for the authoritarian order there, while others would prefer that Moscow only support the 'right sort' of authoritarians (i.e., those not allied to Iran), those Arabs who want to see their countries democratize do not appreciate Russia's support for Arab dictatorships. These people, of course, do not appreciate Western support for the Arab world's authoritarian order either.

¹⁰ "Iran-Russia-Syria-Hezbollah Alliance Possible, Claims Senior Iran Advisor," *Sputnik*, 3 February 2016, <http://sputniknews.com/world/20160203/1034143077/iran-russia-syria-hezbollah-alliance.html>

¹¹ "Russia Has No Plans to Create Alliance with Iran, Syria, Hezbollah," *Sputnik*, 15 February 2016, <http://sputniknews.com/politics/20160215/1034766434/russia-syria-iran-hezbollah.html>