



Russia in the Middle East Until 2024: From Hard Power to Sustainable Influence

By Yuri Barmin

Summary

Russia's campaign in Syria has allowed Russia to re-emerge as a leading actor in the Middle East thanks, to a large extent, to the use of hard power and coercive diplomacy. As Vladimir Putin eyes reelection as president in 2018, he will rely on his victories on the Middle East front in his campaign rhetoric; but he will also need to plan his strategy toward the region for his next term in office. As Moscow looks to solidify its presence in the region, it will need to capitalize on the military foothold in Syria that it has established in order to project more political influence in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. As the Syrian war comes to an end, Russia will also need to look beyond weapons in order to be recognized as a trusted partner among Sunni Arab states and might see its positioning toward existing partners, particularly Iran, readjusted. In the post-Syrian war Middle East, Russia may choose to act in a way that would distance it from conflicting parties, as it does in Libya, in order to be recognized as a regional referee.

Introduction

Vladimir Putin's return to power in Russia in 2012 signified a dramatic change in the country's foreign policy and military strategy. Scrapping the achievements of the Dmitry Medvedev era in the Kremlin, which was characterized by a thaw in relations with the West, Vladimir Putin opted for a more aggressive approach toward positioning the country in the international arena. Experts still argue what prompted this review of the country's foreign policy strategy, but the developments that likely had a major impact on Vladimir Putin's policy planning in 2012 included the war with Georgia in 2008, the Arab Spring protests, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) infamous military campaign in Libya, which brought down Russia's long-time ally Muammar Qaddafi.

Contours of the new policy approach to the region started to emerge when Russia updated two of its key documents, the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation and the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, in 2013 and 2014, respectively.¹ The documents

pronounced strategies based on protecting Russian national interests abroad, including militarily if need be, and increasing Moscow's role in maintaining global security.

Quite notably, a more recent edition of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, signed by President Putin in November 2016, has a specific focus on the Middle East and names foreign meddling there as one of the causes of instability and extremism in the region that directly affect Russia.² The statement that serves as *de facto* justification for the Russian military campaign in Syria became the first official document to elucidate the country's ambition to play a bigger role in the Middle East and North Africa. In the three years that divide the two concepts, Vladimir Putin's approach to foreign policy experienced an evolution and increasing securitization (the word "terrorism" figures 15 times in the 2013 Concept and 35 in its 2016 edition). The Foreign Policy Concept also spells out the Russian president's growing ambition to deal with instability where it originates before it reaches Russian borders.

The rationale behind Russia's re-emergence as one of the leading powers in the Middle East was of a defensive nature and largely reactionary. The Arab Spring movement in the region was a painful reminder of the Color Revolutions that broke out across several post-Soviet states in the first half of the 2000s and, according to the Kremlin, led to the 2014 EuroMaidan revolution in Ukraine. Vladimir Putin himself is of the belief that that the Arab Spring is a continuation of those Color Revolutions and that both are foreign-instigated.³ Coupled with a forced revolution in Libya and the removal of Qaddafi in what Russia declared was a violation of international law, this episode is often cited as a watershed in Vladimir Putin's foreign policy thinking.⁴ A wave of revolutions across Eurasia convinced the Russian leadership that the apparent domino effect of regime change would eventually target Russia. It is not a coincidence that the Russian president likens Color Revolutions and the Arab Spring protests to each other and often makes no distinction between them. Commenting on anti-corruption protests in Russia in March 2017, he went as far as to call them "an instrument of the Arab Spring."⁵

Vladimir Putin sees Russia as a legitimate actor in designing a new power balance in the Middle East and as its integral part since security challenges originating in the region reverberate across the former Soviet space as well as in Russia. The United States, on the other hand, is an outsider in this region in the view of Russian officials. Criticism of the White House over its "destructive" role in the Middle East is a central theme of many of Vladimir Putin's speeches, including the one he delivered at the UN General Assembly prior to launching his military campaign in Syria in September 2015. In those remarks, the Russian president accused the United States of being the source of problems in the Middle East.⁶

A gradual withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East under Barack Obama among other things meant that the region's "policeman" was no longer interested in maintaining order there, which arguably presented Moscow with numerous security challenges. Russia's re-emergence in the Middle East to a large extent happened to fill some of the void left by the retreating Obama administration. In some cases it happened effortlessly, such as in Egypt, where the US decision to cut aid to Cairo in 2013 led to the emergence of a budding Russia-Egypt alliance. In other contexts, most prominently in Syria, Russia had to invest significant diplomatic and military resources to marginalize the US in the war and in the peace process. What started out as an attempt to replace the United States where it was no longer interested in playing a leading role later transformed into an ambition to challenge the US even where it had no intention of retreating, for instance in the Gulf region.

Russia's return to the Middle East differs from the Soviet experience: Today, Moscow is extending its reach without the baggage of Soviet ideology. The idea of using its arms exports to the Middle East in the ideological struggle against the West evaporated as soon as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) disintegrated and was replaced with the idea of making a profit for the cash-strapped budget. The Kremlin is looking to support its geopolitical claims with a strong pragmatic dimension.

In the Middle East, Moscow to reinforce its influence there as well as offset the burden upon the Russian federal budget associated with the expenses of the Syrian campaign. Following in the footsteps of the Soviet Union, Russia has used arms deals to reach out to Cold War-era allies in Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Syria to consolidate a new power balance. During the Cold War, Wynfred Joshua and Stephen P. Gilbert wrote that as more countries became recipients of Soviet military aid programs, there was a tendency for these countries to become greater political allies of the Soviet Union.⁷ And it seems that this argument is increasingly relevant today. According to SIPRI, in 2015 \$5.5 billion in Russian arms exports were destined for clients in the Middle East, which was ten times more than all Russian exports to the region for all of the 1990s.⁸

With Vladimir Putin declaring victory over the Islamic State during his December 2017 visit to Syria, Russia is faced with a number of opportunities as well as challenges. Its military operation in Syria may have put Russia back on the radar in the Middle East; but in all certainty, it essentially solidified its position in the region. As Vladimir Putin is eyeing re-election as president in March 2018, foreign policy achievements, chiefly in the Middle East and North Africa, figure prominently in his election campaign rhetoric.

One of the effects of Russia's assertive foreign policy has become an expectation from regional partners and opponents alike that Moscow will be active in the Middle East. However, the hard power that brought Russia to prominence in the region will not be a helpful tool to support long-term influence there and could, in fact, produce a negative impact for Russia's international standing. As a result, during his next term in office, Vladimir Putin will be faced with a challenge to depart from hard power, his preferred *modus operandi*, to embrace a spectrum of other tools in order to make Russia's presence in the region lasting and sustainable.

From Status Quo Disruptor to Status Quo Creator

New Military Positioning

In the next few years, due to Russia's gains in Syria, Moscow will be recalibrating its military position in the wider region. The most significant of its gains has to do with the establishment of permanent military bases in Syria. In December 2017, the Russian parliament approved the agreements with the Syrian government leasing the Tartus and Hmeimim bases to Russia for 49 years with an automatic 25-year prolongation.⁹ The Tartus naval base, which is about to be upgraded, will be able to host up to 15 warships as well as submarines.¹⁰

The establishment of a permanent military presence in Syria fits with the Russian strategy to acquire air and naval supremacy in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean and signals the restoration of the Soviet strategy toward the region. From 1967 up until the collapse of the USSR, the Soviet 5th Squadron operated in the Mediterranean despite Moscow having no permanent bases in the region. In 2013, the Russian President made a decision to revive a

perpetual naval presence there and ordered the establishment of the Mediterranean Task Force (MTF) within the Black Sea Fleet.¹¹ The establishment of permanent bases in Syria will allow Russia to overcome the shortcomings of the Soviet experience in the Mediterranean when warships had at times to use ad hoc supply lines to refuel and restock food and water. Remarkably, commenting on the setting up of the MTF, Vladimir Putin said in 2013 that Russia may use these warships for operations in the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, if such a need emerges.¹²

Russia has essentially developed what some analysts call an anti-access, area denial (A2/AD) strategy in the Mediterranean. Along with the deployment of the S-400 air-defense system to Syria, in November 2015 (and to Crimea, in August 2016), the Russian naval group in the Eastern Mediterranean is equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles and P-800 Onyx anti-ship missiles, which create an added advantage against a potential enemy.¹³ By returning to the Mediterranean, Russia challenges NATO's freedom of action there as well as parts of the Middle East. This was demonstrated by the de facto no-fly zone that Russian air-defense systems established over parts of Syria, Turkey as well as the Eastern Mediterranean.

Expanding its naval infrastructure will likely become a priority for Russia in the Mediterranean for years to come as it will be looking for ways to support the MTF, expand its operations and make them more autonomous. A temporary diplomatic conflict between Russia and Turkey in 2015–2016, following the shoot-down of a Russian Su-24, demonstrated that the position of the Russian naval group in the Mediterranean is quite vulnerable: the MTF is entirely dependent on Turkey since virtually all the supply lines pass through the Turkish-controlled Bosphorus.

Additionally, North Africa is increasingly playing a more prominent role in the Russian military expansion in the Mediterranean. Illustratively, speaking at the Valdai Club Conference in 2016, Vladimir Putin said that “Africa cannot be on the periphery of international relations”¹⁴ given its security problems, which affect all of the international community.

Russia is increasing its military cooperation with Cairo, a partner with which Moscow had a strong partnership under Gamal Abd'el Nasir and more recently with President Abdel Fatah El Sisi. Military-technical cooperation between the two countries is on the rise. But even more importantly, this cooperation now extends to annual joint naval drills¹⁵ and military exercises¹⁶ as Russia looks for additional access to Egypt's military infrastructure. Moreover, in order to simultaneously boost its Libya portfolio, Russia reportedly boosted the frequency of its use of Egyptian facilities at the border with Libya, including the port of Marsa Matrouh and the base at Sidi Barrani, once used by the Soviet Union.¹⁷

It is too early to conclude what Russia's endgame in Libya is. Yet, notably, apart from lucrative arms and energy deals that Moscow had with Muammar Qaddafi—but which were erased by the revolution in the country—the Russian military has long mulled using Libyan naval infrastructure for its operations in the Mediterranean. Indeed, during the early 2000s, Qaddafi even reportedly granted Russia access to the port of Benghazi for its fleet in an attempt to use the Russian military as a deterrent against Western incursion.¹⁸ Moscow may now wish to try to revive and perhaps further expand this type of relationship.

At the same time, Russia increasingly looking at warm-water ports in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco in the 2000s. Moscow has significantly stepped up diplomatic engagement with each of these actors over the past twenty years since the Soviet collapse.¹⁹ Algeria has been

Moscow's most committed partner since 1963 despite firmly remaining in the Western camp. In 2001, during the visit of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to Russia, the two countries signed a declaration of strategic partnership, which became a milestone in the expansion of bilateral relations. Moscow continues to export its weapons to the country: 91 percent of Algerian arms are purchased in Russia.²⁰ Moreover, in 2006, the two governments signed Algeria's largest post-Cold War arms deal, which amounted to \$7.5 billion.²¹ Despite having a more stable relationship than that with Egypt, Russia's ties with Algeria usually are opaque. However, Moscow's ambition to play a role in the resolution of the Libyan crisis, combined with threats emanating from terrorist groups that find refuge in Mali, Niger and Chad, have motivated Russia to expand its security cooperation with the country. As far back as 2010, Moscow has asked Algeria for access to the Mers el-Kebir naval base, near Oran with negotiations, at least publicly, still ongoing.²² Moreover, the two countries signed an agreement on counter-terrorist cooperation in 2016, and have already held two rounds of consultations on stepping up joint countering violent extremism in North Africa as well as set up regular exchanges of intelligence on extremist groups.²³

The October 2017 visit of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to Algeria is also remarkable in that it finally demonstrated that the Maghreb is again on Moscow's radar. Besides regular arms deals talks, the two sides reportedly discussed an agreement on a potential purchase of Russian S-400 missile systems, which Moscow only exports to select clients. If implemented, such an arms sale would symbolize a new strategic era in Russian-Algerian relations.

In Putin's calculus, Morocco also plays a crucial role, despite the fact that this country's military-technical cooperation with Russia is meager compared to Algeria's. Morocco's location, however, provides access both to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, something Russia has always sought to acquire in order to link the operations of its Black Sea and Northern Fleets. To that end, Moscow has taken steps to indicate interest in the resolution of the Western Sahara issue, a sensitive matter for Rabat. Russian officials hosted the Polisario Front, an independence movement from Western Sahara, in Moscow in 2017, which clearly unnerved Morocco.²⁴ The issue of Western Sahara is the kind of political leverage that Russia could use in order to position itself as a go-to mediator for Morocco.

Military presence in the Mediterranean may only be a first step in Moscow's ambitious naval expansion. With the MTF deployed to the Mediterranean in 2013, Russia also started demonstrating a keen interest in the Red Sea, sending its warships there for drills as well as to project power.²⁵ In 2017, Russian ambitions regarding the Red Sea took an entirely different form when Sudan's Omar al-Bashir expressed willingness to host a Russian naval base just across the sea from Saudi Arabia and next to Djibouti, which already hosts US and Chinese bases.²⁶ It is yet to be seen how Russia feels about setting up such a base so soon after acquiring a permanent military foothold in the Mediterranean. But proposals like this are already indicative of how local powers perceive Russia's growing role in the Middle East.

It is in Russia's long-term interest to continue building up its military capabilities in the Mediterranean to support existing bases in Syria, linking its Northern and Black Sea Fleets' operations in the Atlantic, as well as to obtain more leverage against NATO. Given failed Soviet attempts to set up a military presence in Egypt and Libya, Russia may finally revisit this idea.

Channeling Growing Military Clout Toward Political Sustainability

The key challenges facing Russia in the next few years concern how to convert gains made in Syria into sustainable political influence in the wider region. Military power projected by Moscow in the Syrian conflict and, by extension, its political clout have allowed it to be recognized as a leading external power in the Middle East. Once the fighting dies down, however, Moscow will have a hard time maintaining its relevance in the region at the same level.

Without ways to project political power in the Middle East, Russian military forces there will be irrelevant. The bottom line is that hard power is a crisis management tool but not an agenda setting one. Moscow's military clout in the region has reached the level at which it guarantees Russia presence in the Middle East, but what it does not guarantee is long-term political influence.

For Russia to replace the United States as the guarantor of security in the Middle East, it needs to show a long-term commitment to the region. But if Vladimir Putin looks to preserve his country's influence in the Middle East, he will need to come up with ways to engage partners that would convince them of Russia's resolve. With the Middle East not being the most strategically important region to Moscow, Putin will need to decide exactly how much influence he actually wants to project in the region. Maintaining the image of a great power in the Middle East will require Russia to invest diplomatically and financially in the resolution of other crises, such as the Libyan war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, these investments will chiefly concern maintaining stability in the region and will not yield fast returns.

Russia will finally need to set a long-term agenda for the Middle East. Short-termism has so far prevailed in Moscow's Middle Eastern strategy because its actions were largely reactionary and most decisions were ad hoc. This was evidenced by the fact that Russia's bid on Iran's ground forces as the main fighting force in Syria later led to multiple attempts by Tehran to hijack international agreements on the ground and undermine Moscow's mediation attempts.²⁷ While hard-power projection is unlikely to be at the center of Putin's regional agenda, certain contours of his post-Syria policy can already be named.

The Russian government as well as Russian intellectuals and Middle East experts have been flirting with the idea of a regional system of collective—an idea that has been pitched to governments in the region on many occasions in the past. Igor Ivanov, a former minister of foreign affairs of the Russian Federation and the president of the Russian International Affairs Council, notably laid out a vision for such a regional security system in a February 2016 article.²⁸ According to him, the mechanism should include the Arab countries as well as Turkey, Iran and Israel. The collective security system must consist of three tracks or “baskets”: security, economy and humanitarian cooperation. Disarmament in the Middle East should become a starting point for the discussion on the regional security system. The first steps in this direction could be the creation of demilitarized zones, the prohibition of destabilizing accumulations of conventional weapons (including anti-missile weapons), as well as a balanced reduction of armed forces by the main military powers in the region and neighboring countries.

Speaking before the United Nations General Assembly, on September 28, 2015, when he announced the beginning of the Russian military operation in Syria, Vladimir Putin proposed creating a global anti-Islamic State coalition “similar to the anti-Hitler” alliance.²⁹ He reiterated this idea at the G-20 meeting in Turkey, in November of that year.³⁰ This proposal,

which he has voiced several times in the course of the Russian operation in Syria, pointedly feeds into the idea of creating a regional security system. The viability of a regional anti-Islamic State alliance was demonstrated when Turkey, Iran and Russia partnered to implement de-escalation zones in Syria. Egypt and Jordan played a distinct role in the negotiation process on the creation of de-escalation zones and their implementation, and Vladimir Putin may try to institutionalize what already looks a lot like a regional anti-extremist alliance. An anti-terrorist alliance that could later transform into a collective security system seems to be one of the few areas in which Russia is willing to commit resources, based both on Russia's domestic security concerns as well as its foreign policy calculations.

Old and New Partners

With Russia's military position gradually readjusting as a result of the Syrian conflict, its partnerships might also eventually undergo a broader rethink. Russia will need to find a way to reach out to Sunni Arab powers and win their trust, which was undermined as a result of Russia's perceived alliance with the Shia in the Syrian conflict. According to Pew Research, as of mid-2017, only 28 percent of people in the Middle East expressed confidence in Russia and Vladimir Putin's foreign policy and only 35 percent had a favorable view of Russia.³¹

The Syria campaign has demonstrated that Russia's relations with regional powers are extremely fluid, as was demonstrated by a temporary break-up with Turkey, a surprising thaw with Saudi Arabia and a growing mistrust with Iran. Once the Syrian conflict is over, Russia will need to reassess its relations with partners and opponents, but nonetheless they might remain transactional and be based on short-term political, military and economic gains.

As the Syrian conflict gradually draws to an end, confrontational tendencies in relations with Iran might become more visible. Moscow and Tehran will likely come to realize that their relationship is much bigger than Syria. The number of outstanding problems plaguing the alliance is already multiplying (militarization of the Caspian Sea, competition for the European gas market, Iran's growing influence in Central Asia) while both make a bid on their partnership in Syria as a unifying element. Even in Syria, however, Russia and Iran increasingly find it difficult to sustain their alliance. Moscow finds it hard accepting Iran's view of the future of Syria that essentially solidifies the sectarian split in the country and often looks beyond its existing alliance to garner the support of the Sunni population.³² The process of reconstruction in Syria also means that Russia and Iran will have to shoulder a heavy financial burden if they want to continue to play a leading political role in the country; neither, however, is capable of doing that. Consequently, Russia has asked world powers,³³ as well as the Sunni monarchies of the Gulf,³⁴ to chip in, which will require a significant drawdown in Iran's political role in Syria.

While Russia's relationship with Iran is set to become rockier, there is no guarantee that Moscow's ties with Sunni powers, specifically with Saudi Arabia, will transform into a real partnership. The visit of the Saudi King to Moscow in October 2017 may have been indicative of a positive dynamic in bilateral relations, but it was largely prompted by the Saudi domestic dynamic rather than a genuine desire to reach out to Moscow. The biggest achievement that Moscow and Riyadh can boast about is that they managed to compartmentalize their relations, as was demonstrated by the oil deal reached by Russia and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), in November 2016, despite the ongoing Syria crisis.

Dichotomy Between Stability and Managed Democracy

Experts who had argued that authoritarianism in the Middle East would maintain stability and keep extremism at bay were proven wrong by the events of the Arab Spring.³⁵ The Russian leadership, however, still projects its vision of “autocratic stability” onto the region. And even though Moscow repeatedly insists that it is up to the Syrian people to decide through a presidential election who will lead the nation into the post-war period, the Russian government is unlikely to become a supporter of democracy movements in the Middle East. After all, elections have been a crucial legitimization tool of Russia’s own “managed democracy.”

The consolidation of power in the hands of the national leader as well as the securitization of the political agenda have characterized the Russian political system throughout the last 17 years Vladimir Putin has been in power. And they continue to guide him in how he sees regimes in the Middle East. Some of these authoritarian Arab regimes share a long history with Russia: during the Cold War, they proved their ability to maintain order for longer than any democratic regime could sustain it, not least due to Moscow’s financial and military support.

The fact that Bashar al-Assad survived throughout the bloody Syrian conflict, to a large extent due to Russia’s aid, solidifies the idea that authoritarianism in the Middle East guarantees stability and puts a cap on “toxic” democratic values imposed from the outside. In Moscow’s view, authoritarian tendencies are indigenous to the region, much like they are to Russia, which is why they need not be battled but rather be correctly managed.

Russia’s idea of “authoritarian stability” in the Middle East may find a potential supporter in Donald Trump, who notoriously dropped America’s agenda for promoting democracy in the Middle East. The distinct security focus of Donald Trump’s strategy toward the region has emboldened his allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel, and convinced them that the regional policeman will no longer restrain their geopolitical ambitions.

The position of both Russia and the United States is, thus, likely to resonate with many governments in the region that previously had to put on airs of civil society engagement and liberalization just to have international political and diplomatic backing. Egypt and Turkey are the two cases in point: the 2017 Human Rights Watch World Report specifically points to them to illustrate how the tide of new authoritarianism is sweeping through the Middle East.³⁶

In Turkey, the attempted coup in July 2016 was used by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) as an excuse to crack down not only on suspected plotters but also on wider circles critical of the government’s policies. Western powers sharply rebuked Erdoğan over his suspension of the rule of law in the country and mass detentions—but Russia pointedly did not. Putin was the one world leader who gave a call to Erdoğan to tell him Moscow supports his campaign to root out dissent, which the Turkish president described as “anti-constitutional.”³⁷ Furthermore Putin hosted his Turkish counterpart in St. Petersburg less than a month after the failed coup, during which Erdoğan explained that Vladimir Putin’s call to him was an important move, “a kind of moral support and display of Russia-Turkey solidarity,” as the Turkish president described the situation.³⁸ All this occurred just weeks after Erdoğan’s late June apology to Russia for the November 2015 downing of a Russian Su-24 jet over Syria; and it goes to show how masterfully Vladimir Putin uses authoritarian movements to his own political benefit.

Egypt is going through a similar wave of authoritarianism, with President Abdel Fattah El Sisi cracking down on dissent that is not necessarily associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. That government campaign is happening against the backdrop of economic instability, currency devaluation and increased poverty rates. However, the army's grip on power and full control over the public sphere give a semblance of stability in the country. Sisi's fight to eradicate extremism in the Sinai as well as his crackdown on dissent find support in Moscow, which is reflected in official statements coming from the Kremlin. Egypt reemerged as Russia's key partner in the Middle East, including in crucial spheres of military-technical cooperation. The two countries signed a protocol on military cooperation in March 2015, significantly ramped up joint military exercises, and are looking to green light an agreement that would allow Russian military aircraft to use Egyptian airspace and infrastructure.³⁹ With the turmoil and regular attacks in the Sinai Peninsula, counter-terrorism cooperation has become a distinct characteristic of the bilateral relationship. A security-heavy agenda acts as a glue between Moscow and Cairo, not least due to the military and security background of the political elites of the two countries.

Both Russians and Egyptians will head to the polls in March 2018 to elect their respective heads of state, while presidential elections in Turkey are to take place in November 2019. The outcome is already known in all three countries; Putin, Sisi and Erdoğan will almost certainly serve out their next terms into the first half of the 2020s, meaning that we are unlikely to witness a disruption in the security-comes-first policy employed by Moscow in its bilateral relations with both Cairo and Ankara.

The cases of Egypt and Turkey illustrate that Vladimir Putin is likely to encourage authoritarian "stability" across the region through skewed security-heavy policies. Putin's support for autocratic tendencies will hardly find any resistance among other powers in the region and will almost certainly be embraced. Syria's recovery from the seven-year war is unlikely to happen through the emergence of democratic institutions and freedom, but will probably lead to the creation of a strong regime with an inflated security apparatus to shield a fragile government and keep extremist tendencies at bay. Iraq's increasingly sectarian policies hint at a similar trend. And as Libya's internationally recognized government fails to establish control over much of the country's territory, Libyan National Army Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar represents the type of leader the Kremlin would presumably like to see for a post-civil war Libya.

If Russia's Syria policy is any indication, a highly centralized system will be Moscow's remedy for extremism throughout the wider region. The fear of a new wave of extremism will push many regimes to seek more control over the population, and a lack of incentives to democratize may bring about new repressive regimes. In other words Russia's leadership in the Middle East may significantly lengthen and reinforce the era of authoritarianism there.

New Positioning Vis-à-Vis Conflicts

The Syrian war became the first armed conflict in which Russia openly took part after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Its support for the al-Assad government and recorded Russian bombings of civilian infrastructure in Syria painted Moscow as a proponent of violence. Despite its undeniable contribution to devising de-escalation zones and its attempts to balance Iran's influence in Syria, Russia is seen as a power broker by key Arab states. But Vladimir Putin did not go to Syria to be equally distant from the government and the opposition playing

the role of a referee. He noted on many occasions that the Syrian President asked Russia for military aid and that was the grounds upon which Moscow made the decision to intervene.⁴⁰

A combination of factors bolstered Russia's commitment to intervention in Syria. First, geopolitically, the fall of Bashar al-Assad meant humiliation for Russia, his main global ally, and would deprive Moscow of a springboard to the rest of the Middle East. Second, from the pragmatic standpoint, Syria's proximity to Russia, coupled with the fact that it was becoming a training camp for jihadists from the former Soviet Union, meant that the civil war there was becoming a national security issue for Moscow. Hence, Vladimir Putin undertook this risky affair with no guaranteed outcome.

Syria, however, gives one a skewed idea as to how Russia's strategy toward the region may look in the future. The military campaign in Syria cost Russia \$484 million, according to the Russian president,⁴¹ or up to \$1 billion annually, according to independent estimates.⁴² These costs have been offset by returns on arms contracts and the existing budget for drills. This sum is manageable for the federal budget, even despite low oil prices. Russia's defense spending has been continuously growing from 2010, its share in the GDP increased from 3.2 percent to 4.4 percent in 2016⁴³. The recession, however, is taking a toll on the budget of the Russian Ministry of Defense resulting in its 6 percent contraction in 2017.⁴⁴ Syria was the reason why the Ministry of Defense managed to secure a larger budget until 2016, but it is also the reason why Moscow now looks for ways to cut the overinflated defense expenses. This only goes to show that the Syria operation is an exceptional affair that Russia is unlikely to repeat elsewhere in the Middle East due to geopolitical risks as well as financial costs that are already too high.

With the focus previously exclusively on Syria, the Russian foreign policy agenda toward the Middle East appears highly securitized to observers. Meanwhile the military and intelligence circles took charge over the policy making towards the region. Despite a wide range of goals that Moscow pursues in Syria, the distinct focus on security issues stoked fears over Russia seeking a military foothold in the Middle East by US officials.⁴⁵

While Syria is a special case, Libya might provide more insight into how Russia will position itself vis-à-vis conflicts in the Middle East for years to come. Following the fall of its partner Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, Moscow did not show much interest in the Libyan conflict, essentially leaving it to NATO to deal with the crisis. At the same time, Libya was a convenient case to go back to lambaste the West each time Russia felt its interests in the Middle East were ignored.

Russia re-emerged on the Libya scene, if not accidentally, pronouncing no specific agenda and making incoherent statements about the desired endgame there as the Libyan civil war erupted. Back in 2016, following the visit of General Khalifa Haftar to Moscow, the international community was convinced that the Kremlin was looking at Libya within the context of where it would continue to project military power once the conflict in Syria is over. The Russian ambassador to Libya, Ivan Molotkov, publicly spoke of a possible delivery of Russian weapons to the government in Tobruq.⁴⁶ Russia's informal backing of Haftar sent a clear signal to parties to the Libyan conflict as well as to the international community that Russia was following its traditional strategy of siding with the secular force with significant military power. These signals emboldened Haftar and prompted him to vow to gain full control over Libya and set up his capital in Tripoli, the formal seat of the UN-backed government.⁴⁷ Many experts predicted a Russian military operation in the country and looked for signs of a military build-up; but that were continuously off the mark.⁴⁸

Haftar took note of the Russian policy in Syria and capitalized on it. While the Kremlin was attempting to turn the army leader into a politician and looked to restart talks on the Libyan Political Agreement, Haftar was undermining these attempts by expanding his military operations. Russia's narrative on Libya changed significantly in 2017, as Moscow realized that its policy was undermining its goals for the country by actually enabling more violence; thus, it gradually distanced itself from Haftar. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Duma set up a special ad hoc body, "the Russian contact group on the intra-Libyan settlement," tasked with developing a network of contacts in Libya to help Moscow engage all relevant political forces in the country and offset the negative impact of being associated with Khalifa Haftar.⁴⁹

This approach did in fact work, and Russia became a go-to power for various parties to the Libyan conflict. Moscow hosted representatives of the Tripoli government as well as representatives from Misrata, the two major power centers in Libya. Even more importantly, Russia facilitated direct talks between Tripoli and the Touareg and Tobu tribes in November 2017, the first such talks between these parties given the fact that the tribes have not sided with any party to the Libyan conflict yet.⁵⁰

The head of the ad hoc contact group, Lev Dengov, describes Russia's position vis-à-vis the Libyan warring factions the following way: "Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has repeatedly explained that Russia is equidistant from all sides of the conflict and does not support either side to a greater or lesser degree than the other."⁵¹ This marks the emergence of a fundamentally new approach to conflict resolution in Russia. Hypothetically, Russian military aid and diplomatic support for Haftar could have resulted in the capture of Tripoli by the Libyan National Army, marking the end of the Libyan Political Agreement. Moscow, however, made a U-turn away from Haftar and opted for a more balanced position toward the settlement of the conflict, which helped it be recognized as a key power broker by all sides in this conflict.

The "strategic equidistance" approach that Russia has adopted in Libya is something Vladimir Putin might explore further in the future. And signs abound that Russia will attempt to become a referee and power broker in other contexts in the Middle East as well. One particular example is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Following the US decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Russia did not come out with harsh criticism of either the United States or Israel. The Russian Foreign Ministry limited its response to expressing "serious concern."⁵² Likewise, Vladimir Putin did not directly condemn Donald Trump's decision, only noting that it was "counterproductive."⁵³

Russia's relatively calm reaction to Trump's move and Israel's policies toward Palestine can be explained by Moscow's growing ambition to play a bigger role in the settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Russia intensified its diplomacy with Israel and Palestine in 2016, when Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev visited both in an attempt to bridge the differences between them. Later, in January 2017, Russia hosted all major Palestinian political organizations,⁵⁴ including Fatah, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, for direct talks among them in an attempt to facilitate the formation of a coherent position for talks with Israel. Russia recognized that the US-led process of reconciliation had not led to a breakthrough.

With the US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Washington's leadership role in the Israeli-Palestinian talks is no longer acceptable to Palestine, and it seems the Middle East

Quartet (the United Nations, United States, European Union and Russia) is no longer relevant. This presents a unique opportunity for Moscow to position itself as a new power broker in the conflict, one that does not favor one of the two sides. Russian diplomats have already participated in a flurry of meetings with Israeli and Palestinian officials following Trump's announcement, and each time they engage both parties.

Other contexts in the region seem to support the idea that Russia will be looking to remain equidistant from all conflicting sides in the Middle East, which does not necessarily mean remaining inactive. The GCC crisis that broke out in June 2017 is another example of how Russia creates a certain distance between itself and conflicting sides and tries to put itself above the dispute. Both sides made numerous attempts to win Putin's diplomatic support following the crisis. Doha is historically wary of Russia's role in the Middle East; yet, it engaged Russian diplomats at various levels and even canceled visas for Russian citizens⁵⁵. Saudi Arabia went on a similar charm offensive, which culminated in King Salman's visit to Russia.

Conclusion

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. Russia's permanent military bases in Syria have the potential to change the power balance in the Mediterranean. Moscow has created a heavily guarded perimeter in the Eastern Mediterranean by deploying air-defense capabilities to Syria, which complemented 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. Down the line, Russia is 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 produce fewer benefits for Moscow, 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.

Notes

¹ Voennaya Doctrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii (Military Strategy of the Russian Federation), Signed by the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on December 25, 2014, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf>; Konceptsiya Vneshney Politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation), Signed by the President of the

Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on February 12, 2013, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/122186.

² Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, Approved by the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016. http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248.

³ Alina Malik, Putin Recognized the Negative Impact of Trump, [gazeta.ru](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2017/04/12_a_10623461.shtml), April 14, 2017, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2017/04/12_a_10623461.shtml.

⁴ In his widely acclaimed book “All the Kremlin’s Men” insider into the workings of Vladimir Putin’s inner circle Mikhail Zygar argues that Putin absorbed the death of Qaddafi as a lesson: weakness and compromise were impermissible. “When he [Gaddafi] was a pariah, no one touched him,” Zygar wrote. “But as soon as he opened up he was not only overthrown but killed in the street like a mangy old cur.”

⁵ Some political goals use this for promotion in the political arena, [Znak](https://www.znak.com/2017-03-30/vladimir-putin-nazval-mitingi-protiv-korrupcii-instrumentom-arabskoy-vesny), March 30, 2017, <https://www.znak.com/2017-03-30/vladimir-putin-nazval-mitingi-protiv-korrupcii-instrumentom-arabskoy-vesny>.

⁶ Putin’s UN General Assembly Speech, Washington Post, September 28, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/28/read-putins-u-n-general-assembly-speech/?utm_term=.c9837439bf3d.

⁷ Wynfred Joshua and Stephen P. Gilbert, Arms for the Third World: Soviet Military Aid Diplomacy, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969, p. 147.

⁸ Nikolay Kozhanov, Arms Exports Add to Russia’s Tools of Influence in Middle East, Chatham House, July 20, 2016, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/arms-exports-add-russia-s-tools-influence-middle-east#sthash.JYHR0jTz.dpuf>.

⁹ Committee of the Federation Council on Defense approved the agreement on the Navy base in Tartus. RIA, December 25, 2017, <https://ria.ru/syria/20171225/1511640481.html>.

¹⁰ Veliky Novgorod and Kolpino Submarines Fired the Kalibr Cruise Missiles from Submerged Position Against ISIS Critical Objects in Syria, Russian Ministry of Defense, September 14, 2017, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12142271@egNews.

¹¹ Three years ago, the operational command of the permanent operational unit of the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean Sea was formed, Russian Ministry of Defense, September 22, 2017, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12096837@egNews#txt.

¹² Putin: Ships in the Mediterranean are not “saber-rattling”, RIA, June 6, 2013, https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20130606/941878268.html.

¹³ Andrea Beccaro, Anna Sophie Maass, The Russian Web in the Mediterranean Region, ISPI, Analysis No. 308, February 2017, P. 3.

¹⁴ “Putin said that Africa cannot be on the periphery of international relations,” RIA, October 27, 2016, <https://ria.ru/world/20161027/1480166410.html>.

¹⁵ Egypt and Russia plan to conduct joint exercises in the Mediterranean Sea annually, [Voenoye Obozreniye](https://topwar.ru/76978-egipet-i-rossiya-planiruyut-provodit-sovmestnye-ucheniya-v-sredizemnom-more-ezhegodno.html), June 15, 2015, <https://topwar.ru/76978-egipet-i-rossiya-planiruyut-provodit-sovmestnye-ucheniya-v-sredizemnom-more-ezhegodno.html>.

¹⁶ Russia and Egypt will hold joint military exercises “Defenders of Friendship”, [Kommersant](https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3514496), January 6, 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3514496>

¹⁷ Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, Lin Noueihed, Russia appears to deploy forces in Egypt, eyes on Libya role - sources, Reuters, March 14, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-libya-exclusive/exclusive-russia-appears-to-deploy-forces-in-egypt-eyes-on-libya-role-sources-idUSKBN16K2RY>.

-
- ¹⁸ Tom Parfitt, Gadafy offers Russia a naval base in Libya, *The Guardian*, November 1, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/nov/01/libya-russia-gadafy-united-states>.
- ¹⁹ Anna Borschevskaya, From Moscow to Marrakech: Russia is turning its eyes to Africa, *The Hill*, September 21, 2017, <http://thehill.com/opinion/international/351684-from-moscow-to-marrakech-russia-is-turning-to-africa>.
- ²⁰ Mansouria Mokhefi: "Algeria seeks to reaffirm the primacy of its relations with Russia", *Jeune Afrique*, April 27, 2016, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/321456/politique/mansouria-mokhefi-algerie-cherche-a-reaffirmer-primaute-de-relations-russie/>.
- ²¹ Algeria in Russian weapons deal, *BBC*, March 11, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4796382.stm>.
- ²² Malek Bachir, Russia's secret plan to back Haftar in Libya, *Middle East Eye*, January 30, 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-russias-secret-plan-libya-2129027228>.
- ²³ Algiers to host Algeria-Russia counter-terrorism consultations, *The North Africa Post*, April 18, 2017, <http://northafricapost.com/17412-algiers-host-algeria-russia-counter-terrorism-consultations.html>.
- ²⁴ Habibulah Mohamed Lamin, How Polisario Front hopes to partner with Russia in Western Sahara, *Al Monitor*, April 11, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/04/western-sahara-polisario-sell-russia-moscow-visit.html#ixzz55OoQalcn>.
- ²⁵ Russian large anti-submarine warfare ship calls at Egyptian port, *TASS*, October 19, 2017, <http://tass.com/defense/971516>.
- ²⁶ Bashir Discusses with Russia Setting up Military Base on Red Sea, *Asharq Al Awsat*, November 26, 2017, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1095236/bashir-discusses-russia-setting-military-base-red-sea>.
- ²⁷ Anton Mardasov, Russia re-examines relationship with Iran, *Al Monitor*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/russia-relationship-iran-syria-military-situation-moscow.html>.
- ²⁸ Igor Ivanov, Three Baskets for the Middle East, *Russian International Affairs Council*, February 1, 2016, http://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/tri-korziny-dlya-blizhnego-vostoka/?sphrase_id=4717562.
- ²⁹ Putin: Russia suggests creating a broad anti-terrorist coalition, *RIA*, September 28, 2015, <https://ria.ru/world/20150928/1288414410.html?injl=1>.
- ³⁰ Putin is Calling for the Creation of an Anti-ISIS Front, *Gazeta*, November 16, 2015, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/11/16_a_7895243.shtml.
- ³¹ Margaret Vice, Publics Worldwide Unfavorable Toward Putin, Russia, *Pew Research*, August 16, 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/08/16/publics-worldwide-unfavorable-toward-putin-russia/>.
- ³² Anton Mardasov, Russia re-examines relationship with Iran, *Al Monitor*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/russia-relationship-iran-syria-military-situation-moscow.html>.
- ³³ Kathrin Hille, Russia asks world powers to pay for Syria reconstruction, *FT*, February 23, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/47933554-f847-11e6-9516-2d969e0d3b65>.
- ³⁴ Saudi Arabia sets conditions to role in Syria reconstruction, *The Arab Weekly*, October 15, 2017, <http://www.thearabweekly.com/Gulf/9440/Saudi-Arabia-sets-conditions-to-role-in-Syria-reconstruction>.
- ³⁵ F. Gregory Gause III, Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 4 (JULY/AUGUST 2011), pp. 81–84, 85–90.
- ³⁶ World Report 2017, *Human Rights Watch*, P. 7, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/wr2017-web.pdf.

-
- ³⁷ Telephone conversation with President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan, July 17, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52529>.
- ³⁸ News conference following talks with President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan, August 9, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/countries/TR/events/52673>.
- ³⁹ Polina Khamshlashvili, A foothold in North Africa: Why does Russia need Egyptian military airfields, RBC, November 20, 2017, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/30/11/2017/5a2009699a794757097c2299>.
- ⁴⁰ Meeting with Syrian President Bashar Assad, October 21, 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/catalog/countries/SY/events/50533>.
- ⁴¹ Cost of Russia's Syrian Campaign Revealed as \$480 Million, The Moscow Times, March 17, 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/cost-of-russias-syrian-campaign-revealed-as-480-million-52199>.
- ⁴² Anton Bayev, A Year in Syria: How Much the Military Operation Cost Russia, RBC, September 30, 2016, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/30/09/2016/57ebb7199a7947db5bb2b309#xtor=AL-%5Binternal_traffic%5D--%5Brss.rbc.ru%5D-%5Btop_stories_brief_news%5D.
- ⁴³ Kudrin estimated the damage to Russia from the growth of defense spending, Lenta, October 5, 2017, <https://lenta.ru/news/2017/10/05/wane/>.
- ⁴⁴ Alexander Sharkovskiy, The Budget of the Defense Ministry Will be Cut by 100 billion, Nezavisimaya Gazeta, December 19, 2016.
- ⁴⁵ Eric Schmitt, Russian Moves in Syria Widen Role in Mideast, The New York Times, September 14, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/15/world/middleeast/russian-moves-in-syria-widen-role-in-mideast.html>.
- ⁴⁶ Russian Ambassador: Commander-in-Chief of the Libyan army discussed delivery of arms in Moscow, RIA, June 28, 2016, https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20160628/1453677993.html.
- ⁴⁷ West reaffirms support for Presidency Council "as the sole legitimate government of Libya", says military must be under civilian control, Libya Herald, December 24, 2016, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2016/12/24/west-reaffirms-support-for-presidency-council-as-the-sole-legitimate-government-of-libya-says-military-must-be-under-civilian-control/>.
- ⁴⁸ Alec Luhn, Russian special forces sent to back renegade Libyan general – reports, The Guardian, March 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/14/russian-special-forces-deployed-in-egypt-near-libyan-border-report>.
- ⁴⁹ Maxim Suchkov, Russia seeks well-rounded relations with Libyan factions, Al Monitor, December 15, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/russia-well-round-relations-libya-lev-dengov.html>.
- ⁵⁰ The head of the contact group of the Russian Federation: it's too early to talk about the specific date of the elections in Libya, TASS, December 3, 2017, <http://tass.ru/politika/4779828>.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Comment by the Information and Press Department on US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 7, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/diverse/-/asset_publisher/zwI2FuDbhJx9/content/kommentarij-departamenta-informacii-i-pecati-mid-rossii-v-svazi-s-priznaniem-ssa-ierusalima-stolicej-izraila?_101_INSTANCE_zwI2FuDbhJx9_redirect=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.mid.ru%2Fen%2Fdiverse%3Fp.
- ⁵³ Putin commented on Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, RIA, December 11, 2017, <https://ria.ru/world/20171211/1510673229.html>.
- ⁵⁴ Vasily Kuznetsov, Moscow offers stage for Palestinian talks, Al Monitor, January 31, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/moscow-russia-palestine-israel-peace-process-talks.html#ixzz54r06VJRU>.

⁵⁵ On a new procedure for obtaining short-term tourist visas to the State of Qatar for citizens of the Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 23, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/qa/-/asset_publisher/629HiryvPTwo/content/id/2796326.