

## Russia's Middle East Policy: Regionalisation, Conflict Management and Implications for the West

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### Abstract:

While Russia's Syria campaign initially was meant largely as a trump card in its troubled relations with the West, it also upgraded Russia's standing in the region, which stimulated its growing interest in regional partnerships and in the Middle East *per se*. However, Russia's relative success in gaining influence in the Middle East is due not only to its involvement in Syria, but also to its ability to grasp and adjust to the growing role of regional processes and dynamics and its readiness to play with key regional powers as an equal. This ability developed gradually, reflecting and building upon Russia's practice of reaching out to multiple partners, as well as its non-ideological approach, pragmatism and cultural relativism. The West's real problem in the region is not with Russia, but with accepting and adapting to the main regional trend today – the regionalisation of politics and security in the Middle East.

**Keywords:** Russia, Middle East, Syria, regionalisation, conflict management

The analytical and political take of international media on Russia's Middle East policy, especially in the West, is full of perceptions of a radical, paramount shift in Moscow's approach in the mid-2010s, mostly in view of its military engagement in Syria since 2015. This shift is commonly seen as being one from relative negligence, inconsistency and an alleged lack of strategy to pro-active revisionism, aimed primarily at restoring its Soviet role in the region and challenging the West and the United States in particular.<sup>1</sup> This approach is based on a Western-centred perspective that still emphasizes the central role of the West in Russia's foreign policy course and mindset, with other drivers, interests and concerns playing a secondary, extra or

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<sup>1</sup> For typical accounts, see among others, Goldenberg and Smith, "U.S.-Russia competition in Middle East"; Cook, "Russia in Middle East to Stay"; Blank, *The Foundations of Russia's Policy*; Matthews *et al.*, "How Russia became"; Trenin, *What is Russia up to?*; Kozhanov, *Russian Policy across Middle East*; Inbar, "U.S. Mideast retreat a boon"; Borshchevskaya, "Russia's goals go beyond Damascus".

instrumental role. It suggests, *inter alia*, that Russia's rapprochement with several Middle Eastern powers is largely a function of its deteriorating relations with the West, especially since the mid-2010s. It also implies that Russia's Middle East policy is still excessively shaped by the Russia-West dynamics (competition, confrontation or select cooperation), in some reduced version of the bipolar/Cold War set-up.<sup>2</sup> In line with this logic, it is thought that Russia's policy could be significantly altered if the United States and its allies were to increase their engagement in the Middle East or that Moscow would readily trade its newly acquired influence in the Middle East for improved relations with the West and the removal of anti-Russia sanctions.

This article puts forward an alternative to such stereotypical and increasingly outdated views and offers a more complex set of explanations and a more nuanced and diverse picture. It is not only focused on the still important, but no longer overwhelming Russia-West context, but also explores Russia's ability to cope with and adjust to evolving regional realities. The upgrade of Russia's role in Syria as a result of its military campaign since 2015 has helped bring Russia back to the region. However, Russia's military capacity is not matched by, and does not correspond to its overall leverage, ambition and limited economic power in the region and cannot alone explain its increased influence in the Middle East. One of Russia's main comparative strategic advantages of the few that it has in the Middle East is its ability to accept and adjust to regional realities there, and especially to the regionalisation of politics and security in the Middle East and the growing role of regional actors, factors and dynamics. This ability did not develop overnight – it evolved gradually through the early 21<sup>st</sup> century to produce a more qualitative shift.

### **Structural developments at the international and regional levels**

In the early and mid-2010s, the systemic regional crisis in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region<sup>3</sup> developed during a period of decline – not increase – in the role and leverage of major external power brokers – the United States and its Western allies.

Under President Barack Obama, the United States had become somewhat “sick of the Middle East”, failed to keep pace of the turbulent events of the Arab Spring or evolving regional conflicts and could not alter or decisively affect the course of events. Under President Donald

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<sup>2</sup> For rare exceptions to this approach, see Sladden *et al.*, *Russian Strategy in Middle East* (the report also provides a good overview of Western discourse on the subject); Dannreuther, “Russia and the Middle East”.

<sup>3</sup> This involved the fundamental crises in regional security and of many ruling, especially republican, regimes, a wave of instability, internal upheavals (known as the ‘Arab Spring’) and internationalised civil wars, the rise of violent non-state actors, including heavily transnationalised movements, and escalating regional rivalries. For more detail, see Ivanov, *Russia and Greater Middle East*.

Trump, initial confusion morphed into broad adherence to the three traditional pillars of US Middle East policy in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, which were only somewhat shaken under Obama: (re)commitment to Israel's security (which also implied an ever more hostile and conservative approach to Iran), reaffirmed relations with the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, and (re)commitment to counter-terrorism (above all, in the form of continued US leadership of the Western-Arab anti-ISIS coalition). Beyond these pillars, there has been a growing lack of interest in any major stabilisation efforts. This has been coupled with occasional, almost erratic, demonstrative actions (ranging from limited annual air strikes against Syria in 2017–18 to recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December 2017) addressed more to US domestic audiences and, to some extent, the US' partners in and beyond the region than to anyone else. Sporadic outbreaks of Trump-style micro-militarism have increasingly resembled the aftershocks or convulsive disorder of a formerly omnipotent empire in a world which has been slowly but steadily getting out of control. However, they cannot replace the lack of a more comprehensive US strategy on conflicts in Syria, Libya, Yemen, etc., and can only somewhat slow down, and not fundamentally reverse the overall trend of a long-term decline of the US role in the region.

European powers have been caught in a paradox *vis-à-vis* the Middle East. The security of Europe is inseparable from that of the Middle East, and Europe is the region most heavily and directly affected by developments there – more than Russia/Eurasia and many times more than the United States. The effects range from the worst migration crisis in contemporary European history to extremist and terrorist connections. However, Europeans have still been largely waiting for US leadership. Only a few European powers have both the interest and capacity to act as security providers and guarantors in the Middle East but, judging by the consequences of the ill-conceived Libya intervention in 2011, even those powers lack comprehensive strategic thinking. While Europe is likely to confine itself largely to soft power and, if conditions permit, reconstruction and development aid in Syria, despite the UK and France's participation in air strikes in April 2018, this approach would clearly not work for Libya.

The relative decline of the West's role in the Middle East has come in contrast to two other trends. The main one is not the advance of any 'alternative' external actors but is, rather, endemic to the region: the growing regionalisation in all aspects of politics, economics and security and the greater role for regional actors (such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, etc.). Sometimes, and increasingly, these actors appear to outplay external powers in terms of influence, impact and strategic resolve. Regionalisation has several implications for all external stakeholders, Western and non-Western alike. To name just the two

most relevant to regional armed conflict management: 1) the time for ‘grand deals’ by external great powers has passed: for example, no US-Russia deal on Syria (such as the 2016 Kerry-Lavrov deals) would make any sense if not backed by and based upon some form of regional compact; 2) there is still some demand – even from newly empowered regional actors – for external engagement. But the type of engagement that is in demand today, in the midst of fundamental regional shifts and in a lack of comprehensive regional security mechanisms, has nothing to do with any hegemonic, neo/post-colonial or bipolar schemes. Instead, there is an actualized need for external arbiters, balancers, mediators, and, at times, security guarantors. This demand, coupled with the relative decline in the West’s role, has created opportunities and opened the space for previously relatively marginalised external actors (notably Russia) to become more active, including in direct conflict management; to upgrade and diversify cooperation with regional players; and to increase their role in the Middle East.

### **Patterns of continuity and incremental change**

Although the Russian military campaign in Syria since 2015 has captured much attention, little attention has been paid to the fact that this first military operation outside Eurasia remains quite untypical both for Russia’s foreign policy in general and for its behaviour in the MENA region. In substantive terms, Russia’s policies in the region from the post-Soviet to the post-Crimean period have been characterised as much (if not more) by patterns of continuity and incrementalism than by any major or radical shifts.

#### ***Patterns of continuity***

The first post-Soviet decade was a period of major decline in Russia’s role in the Middle East and the world at large. But after the turn of the century and throughout the early 2010s, as Russia started to formulate its own foreign priorities and concerns more clearly, its Middle East policy was a combination of some declining, residual role inherited from the Soviet past and a set of new factors, interests and expanded or newly established partnerships, with the proportion between the two gradually shifting from the former to the latter. This combination of ‘old’ and ‘new’ factors included:

- Post-Soviet disappointment with ideologically-loaded schemes and a lack of interest in promoting, let alone allocating resources to impose any new ones;
- Russia’s traditionally high degree of cultural relativism and absence of post/neo-

colonial attitudes;

- Some room for manoeuvre, even while lacking major economic leverage, as Russia was perhaps the only major power at the time not dependent on the Middle East for its energy supplies;
- Moscow's growing realization that it had no 'grand' or vital strategic interest in any particular region beyond post-Soviet Eurasia, including the Middle East.

From late Soviet times, Russia kept some ties to Iran, Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Syria (even modestly stepping up military-technical, oil and gas cooperation with the last two). It also started to develop interest in relations with both the Arab Gulf states (with which it had minimal contacts in Soviet times) and Israel (with which it had started to cooperate in information and communications technology, energy, diamonds, etc.) Russia did not support the US-led intervention in Iraq in 2003 and tried to mediate between Israel and Lebanon-based Hezbollah in the August 2006 conflict.

The emerging triad of a non-ideological approach, pragmatism and selective opportunism implied a readiness to engage in cooperation with most regional actors despite tensions between them, with them, or even within them. By the 2010s, Russia had managed to achieve a relatively balanced standing in the Middle East between Iran and the Arab Gulf states, the Sunni and the Shia, secular forces (the Fatah movement in the Occupied Palestinian Territories) and reformist Islamists ( Hamas in Gaza), and even, to an extent, between the Arab world and Israel. Also, in contrast to the behaviour of the United States and some of its European allies, Russia's relatively low profile and non-interventionism (at least until the Syria crisis), combined with its historical record of support for the Arab countries and remaining influence in the UN, affected its image in the region in a rather positive way.

Amidst a quickly escalating and increasingly transnationalised civil war in Syria, Russia's choice of sides in the form of growing support for the Bashar al-Assad regime, culminating in direct military engagement since 2015, could have been expected to bring Moscow only limited dividends in the region (such as strengthened relations with Syria's ally Iran or the ability to display Russia's military capacity). These limited dividends initially appeared to be outbalanced by major reputational costs and the alienation of Assad's many regional opponents, threatening to undermine Russia's evolving pragmatic, balanced and non-confrontational standing in the MENA and reduce its capacity to reach out to multiple actors and distance itself from intra-regional strife.

As of the late 2010s, however, that has generally not been the case (even despite continuing criticism in the West and in the region itself of Russia's staunch support for the

Syrian government). More active engagement in Syria has not diverted Russia from its mainstream multi-vector course. The growing realization that a solution to the conflict requires a regional compact, and the completion of the main combat part of its military campaign by the end of 2017 stimulated Moscow to reach out to all regional stakeholders, including those who supported the Syrian armed opposition in the civil war. Overall, Russia has managed to maintain good relations with both Iran and Israel (as the two constants of its policy), while hosting intra-Palestinian dialogue in Moscow. It has taken pains, not least as a country with a large native Sunni Muslim minority, to avoid being dragged into the region's Sunni-Shia sectarian divide. It has expanded cooperation with Saudi Arabia from coordination on energy prices to a dozen other projects and agreements and active interaction on the Syria settlement, despite disagreements, as marked by King Salman's visit to Moscow in October 2017<sup>4</sup> and his heir's visit to the FIFA World Football Cup opening celebration in June 2018. It has made some progress in relations with the UAE and Qatar, and even tried to mediate between Qatar and its Arab Gulf counterparts after they fell out with each other in mid-2017. It has seriously upgraded its relations with Egypt under post-Arab Spring President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and joined it in backing General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army, while retaining overall support for a UN-mediated solution and reaching out to other key players in the Libyan civil war. Russia has also built a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship with Turkey that has not only proved resilient to their differences on Syria, but has been catalysed by imperatives of conflict management – up to the point of Moscow and Ankara co-brokering the Astana ceasefire talks (alongside Tehran) and co-overseeing the Idlib de-escalation zone.

This incremental multi-vector approach has become a landmark of Russia's Middle East policy. As summed up by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, "We are working with all the political forces in each and every conflict..., and with all countries without exception, including those with opposing views."<sup>5</sup> The main difference between Russia's pre-Syria and post-Syria balancing act between regional actors – and its capacity to deal with them – is that it can now do this with more partners and from the standpoint of a more influential player in the Middle East.

Another long-standing feature of Russia's policy in (and beyond) the region has been its aversion to forced regime change through external and especially Western intervention. This stance started to gain ground well before the 2011 Libya intervention. It had built upon Moscow's growing opposition to the US' escalating pressure on Iraq which culminated in a regime changing intervention in 2003, and its mounting concerns about 'colour revolutions' in its own

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<sup>4</sup> That was the first ever visit to Russia by a Saudi monarch.

<sup>5</sup> Lavrov, "Remarks by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov".

Eurasian neighbourhood. This line of thinking only intensified in the aftermath of the Arab Spring events<sup>6</sup> (a term dubbed “a misnomer” by Lavrov,<sup>7</sup> due to their mixed and often dramatic outcomes) and was ‘sealed’ by the intervention in Libya. The latter, in Moscow’s view, abused the mandate of UNSC resolution 1973 which only permitted human protection measures.<sup>8</sup> The ‘Libya effect’ also played a direct role in shaping Russia’s policy in Syria and its inclination to stand by President al-Assad, at least until the conflict ends – as a way to prevent another Western-backed regime change in the region.

In the post-Arab Spring context, Moscow also started more systematically to make the link between uncontrolled state collapse (especially following regime change by force) and ensuing chaos, erosion of borders, spillover of violence and instability, and the creation of a vacuum quickly filled by violent extremists, including transnational terrorists, and militant power brokers.<sup>9</sup> This link shaped Moscow’s evolving approach to transitions from conflict to peace by making it more focused on the need to retain basic state functionality during transition. Nothing illustrates this overall pattern more vividly than the Syrian case, where Russia emphasized the need to preserve basic functionality of the key state institutions – and Syria’s statehood as such – throughout its engagement.<sup>10</sup> For Russia, however, stressing that need has not implied advancing any particular ideologically/culturally-loaded model or exact type of post-conflict governance. Russia’s approach does not specifically promote heavy-handed autocratic models, nor does it exclude support for more pluralistic power-sharing, it simply prioritizes retaining basic state functionality over other interests, such as human rights concerns. In short, it is not so much ‘autocracy first’, as it is ‘state functionality first’.

All these trends and patterns, of a long-term and sustained nature, evolved gradually and intensified as time passed. All emerged before the upgrade of Russia’s role on Syria, remained in place for the broader region during Russia’s military operation, and are likely to continue after the scale-back of its direct security engagement in Syria.

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<sup>6</sup> For more detail, see Malashenko, *Russia and the Arab Spring*; Naumkin et al., *Blizhnii Vostok, arabskoe probuzhdenie i Rossiia: Chto dal'she?* [Middle East, the Arab Awakening and Russia].

<sup>7</sup> Lavrov suggested that a reference to “a different season would perhaps have been more appropriate” (“Remarks by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov”).

<sup>8</sup> Russia supported limited international sanctions against Muammar Qadhafi’s Libya in the wake of a new round of Benghazi-based protests (Executive order on sanctions against Libya: Dmitry Medvedev signed Executive Order on Measures to Implement UN Security Council Resolution 1970 of 26 February 2011, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/10558>). But, in concert with China, Germany and Brazil, on 17 March 2011, Russia abstained on UNSC Resolution 1973 that paved the way for the Western-led military intervention in Libya. The intervention helped topple the Qadhafi regime and was followed by state collapse, chaos, fragmented violence and instability, with repercussions for the broader region.

<sup>9</sup> Russia attributed “the period of disturbances” in the Middle East to the “misguided practice of ‘geopolitical engineering’, including interference in internal affairs of sovereign states and regime change” and claimed that it has led to an “unprecedented upsurge in the level of the terrorist threat”. Lavrov, “Lavrov’s remarks at ministerial session”.

<sup>10</sup> For example, with the beginning of Russia’s operation in Syria, the focus started to shift back from increased fragmentation of the government security sector and the rise of local and foreign militias towards the central role of the national army (in contrast to Iran’s approach). Mamedov, *Non-Governmental and Irregular Armed Groups*.

### *Pre-Syria substantive policy shifts*

In addition to gradually evolving trends, there were some substantive shifts in Russia's policy that preceded its 'return' to the Middle East. These developments were less conspicuous, mostly due to Russia's lower profile before 2015, but no less significant. Two earlier shifts in particular affected Moscow's approach to conflict management in Syria and elsewhere in the region.

First, the move from a harsh, indiscriminate anti-Islamist stance to broad acceptance of reformist Islamism, both in and out of government, and even readiness to reach out to select armed Islamist actors, if merited by conflict resolution imperatives.

For a decade after the mid-1990s, Russia's policy in the Middle East was excessively affected and distorted<sup>11</sup> by its obsession with the rise of domestic Islamist militancy and terrorism in the North Caucasus and related transnational connections.<sup>12</sup> However, following a series of failures to enforce a purely military solution, in the 2000s, Russia gradually arrived at a more complex and effective anti-terrorism/stabilisation strategy in Chechnya. Moscow seized upon a split within the insurgency between more radical jihadists and traditionalist Islamic ethno-confessional forces, backed the latter via a policy of 'Chechenisation', and took them as a hedge against, and a more manageable alternative to Salafist jihadists. As a result, terrorism and militancy in the North Caucasus started to subside and the situation, particularly in Chechnya, entered a phase of gradual, albeit costly and incomplete, stabilisation.<sup>13</sup>

For Russia, this policy shift at home also dictated the need to reach out to 'traditional' and moderate Islamic forces abroad. This had implications for Russia's Middle East policies well before the Arab Spring follow-up electoral victories by moderate Islamist forces in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco. The need to improve relations with Saudi Arabia led Moscow to abandon anti-Wahhabist rhetoric and reject a federal legal ban on Wahhabism. In 2003, Russia became an observer at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation,<sup>14</sup> and in 2006, even chided the West for its handling of the Danish 'Prophet Muhammad cartoon' crisis. Russia also started to engage selectively with large, popular-based Islamist social/religious/political/militant movements in the Middle East and to differentiate between them and violent jihadists. Cases in point include periodic visits of Hamas delegations to Moscow and Russia's attempts to mediate intra-Palestinian dialogue. At the time of the August 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, Russia tried to make use of its relations with Hezbollah sponsors Syria and Iran to induce them

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<sup>11</sup> The main exceptions were Turkey and Shia-dominated Iran.

<sup>12</sup> See Moore and Tumelty, "Foreign fighters and Chechnya".

<sup>13</sup> Chechenisation was also backed by massive disbursement of funds by the federal government to Chechnya's new authorities composed of local anti-jihadist militias. See Stepanova, "Russia's response to terrorism".

<sup>14</sup> Native Muslims comprise at least 15% of Russia's population, 9 out of Russia's 21 ethnic republics are Muslim-dominated.



to moderate the latter's position.<sup>15</sup>

Moderation and 'normalisation' of Russia's academic discourse,<sup>16</sup> first and foremost, but also to some extent, its official rhetoric on – and a readiness to reach out to – Islamist forces may have been the single most important improvement in Russian Middle East policy and gained further ground during and after the Arab Spring. In post-2015 Syria, Moscow's relatively quick move beyond purely military priorities to ceasefire talks and the search for a political solution (which implies engaging some Islamist actors) would have been inconceivable had it not been mentally and diplomatically prepared by this earlier shift. When called for by the intensity of the emerging ISIS threat or by the imperative of peace consultations, Moscow even selectively got in contact with more radical Islamist groups opposed, for one reason or another, to transnational Salafist jihadism.

The second shift was Russia's move beyond the 'dictators fighting terrorists' paradigm towards a readiness to accept more pluralistic power-sharing solutions. During and in the wake of the Arab Spring, Moscow started to show more flexibility towards the inclusion of some Islamist forces (such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) into government and, later, towards more pluralistic post-crisis/conflict governance solutions more broadly. Not least, Russia saw them as a *sine qua non* condition for preserving the unity of war-torn countries, such as Syria or Libya. Moscow shared this goal with the UN, even if it questioned the widespread Western delusion that Arab states can embrace Western-style liberal democracy. In Russia's view, a more realistic and workable way to incorporate elements of political pluralism are to ensure better representation of key regions, players and communities through power-sharing and a reasonable, but not excessive, degree of decentralisation.<sup>17</sup> While this nuance often escapes international observers, what distinguishes Russia's approach to post-conflict transitions from that of the region's republican strongmen (Assad, al-Sisi, or Haftar) is Moscow's readiness to accept or back more representative, inclusive and pluralistic systems, be it in Syria, Libya, Yemen or elsewhere.

In sum, Moscow's policies and behaviour in the region were evolving gradually, demonstrating patterns of both continuity and some substantive change. Overall, however, Russia's political, security and economic involvement and influence in the Middle East remained limited. The main

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<sup>15</sup> Neither is listed as a terrorist organisation by Russia whose official list only includes terrorist groups that directly threaten its security (Federal list of organisations, both foreign and international, recognized as terrorist organisations by the Russian Federation, <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm>).

<sup>16</sup> Naumkin *et al.*, *Islam in Politics*.

<sup>17</sup> Such arrangements would fall somewhere between two extremes: unitary Baathist Assad-style or Hussein-style state models in Syria and Iraq or Qadhafi-centred jamahiriya in Libya, on the one hand, and Lebanon's compartmentalisation and confessional quota system, on the other.

factor that changed that pattern – not too radically, but in a visible way – was Russia’s direct engagement in military operations and conflict management in Syria, and its broader implications.

### **Russia’s role in conflict management in the Middle East: Syria and beyond**

Of the MENA region’s various contemporary conflicts, it is in Syria that Russian involvement has been untypically large, especially since 2015. What often gets lost in placing Russia’s engagement in Syria in the Middle Eastern context, is that it was exceptional in a broader sense, that is for Moscow’s foreign policy in general, especially beyond Eurasia, and culminated in Russia’s first military campaign outside the post-Soviet space in a quarter of a century.

An immediate question is whether this anomalous high-profile role in Syria, mostly due to Moscow’s readiness to back up diplomacy with military support, was primarily driven by its interests and factors in or beyond the region. The next question relates to some follow-on increase in Russia’s influence across the region, including in broader conflict management in Libya, Yemen, or the Israeli-Palestinian settlement, catalysed by Moscow’s role in Syria. Does this shift from low profile to a larger role in the region also imply a substantive departure from Moscow’s long-time preference for diversification, balancing, pragmatism, ideological/cultural relativism, and readiness to deal with regional powers as an equal? Or has the Syria operation, by the sheer effect of upgrading Russia from an extra to a real ‘player’ in the region, allowed it to build upon, enhance and bring its usual approaches to a new level? Will Russia’s Syria experiment remain an outlier of sorts or is it a sign of new things to come?

### **Syria**

Russia’s direct military engagement in Syria on behalf of the Assad government in the fall of 2015 looked like a certain deviation from its generally pragmatic, equidistant and relatively low-profile policies in the Middle East. To explain Moscow’s decision to upgrade its engagement into a military campaign, it is useful to establish the balance between foreign policy and domestic drivers; and considerations related to the Middle East – and broader foreign policy interests and goals.

In spite of some parallels in regime type between Putin’s Russia and Assad’s pre-war “smart authoritarianism”,<sup>18</sup> the Kremlin’s decision to raise the stakes on Syria did not result primarily from Russia’s domestic political dynamics, including Putin’s formal return to a new

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<sup>18</sup> Stepanova, *The Syria Crisis*, 3-4.

sequence of presidencies after 2012. Unlike conflicts in post-Soviet states, particularly at Russia's borders and affecting Russian-speaking/Russia-friendly populations, and in especially sharp contrast to the 2014/15 conflict in Donbass (Ukraine), none of the crises outside Russia's immediate vicinity in Eurasia have been 'internalised' by Russian society, or even had any domestic resonance to speak of. Russia's elite, state-centred foreign policy process is also largely independent of public moods, especially on matters that do not involve vital national interests and are of limited public concern. This allows Moscow wide room for foreign policy manoeuvre, regardless of the domestic politics of the day.

As for external drivers, two main foreign policy objectives of Russia's decision to engage in Syria militarily went beyond the Middle East: the first was to make Syria a showcase for prevention of regime change by force, especially by Western military intervention; and the second was to use the Syria card to force the United States to talk to Russia again on security matters of mutual concern (such as anti-terrorism), following the 2014 breakup with the West over the crisis in Ukraine. They were reinforced by a degree of genuine concern about ISIS as an increasingly transnationalised phenomenon. This combination of broader foreign policy drivers, with the main two unrelated or not specific to the Middle East as such, largely explains the exceptional nature of Moscow's decision to go military on Syria. Remarkably, at that time, the goal of increasing Russia's influence in the Middle East was important, but not a primary driver – more of a bonus if the rest worked out.

Three years after the start of Russia's military campaign in Syria, its two main initial goals had largely been met. This was done mainly through the change in the military balance on the ground in the government's favour (achieved with relatively limited forces and assets), but also by pushing for a regionally-brokered ceasefire and community negotiations at the local level. Despite certain drawbacks and complications, both Russia's new reliance on a combination of air power and special forces and its military police deployment, could be assessed overall as a "qualified success".<sup>19</sup> On 11 December 2017, President Vladimir Putin, speaking at the Hmeimim Air Base in Syria, ordered most of Russia's combat forces to return home (a process that continued through 2018) and declared their main mission accomplished. The imperative to interact on Syria played the key role in restarting political dialogue between Russia and the outgoing Obama administration in 2015–16, despite sharp disagreements on Ukraine. All further US-Russia controversies following Trump's election as the US president notwithstanding, Syria

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<sup>19</sup> For a review of Russia's military campaign, see Kofman and Rojansky, "What kind of victory?"

and antiterrorism were two of only three issues on which some practical progress was made at Putin and Trump's first summit in Helsinki on 16 July 2018.<sup>20</sup>

In 2017–18, there was still plenty of unfinished business for Russia on the military/counter-terrorism front, from providing air support to the Syrian army against remaining jihadist elements to serving as a safeguard for core government-controlled areas, including against any larger-scale Western intervention. However, the critical vector of Russia's Syria policy is shaped not so much by the military track per se as by two other dimensions: regionalisation, the shift from a Western-centred to an increasingly region-centred approach, best reflected by, but not confined to, the Astana ceasefire process; and the attempt to build on progress on both the military/counter-terrorist and ceasefire tracks to move Syria toward a political solution through a UN-led process. By exploring these approaches, Russia has sought to diminish its direct military engagement in and ownership of the Syria problem,<sup>21</sup> while keeping and expanding its regional partnerships in the broader Middle East.

As part of its regionalisation strategy, Russia has engaged with a variety of regional actors involved in the Syrian conflict, the main eight (!) counterparts being Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. These countries can be grouped into three tiers.

The first tier is the Russia-Turkey-Iran-brokered Astana ceasefire format. The Astana process was meant to solve three problems that had impeded progress during earlier rounds of the UN-managed political negotiations in Geneva. The Geneva talks had not involved key actors of the armed opposition on the ground, had not been based on a lasting ceasefire and had not accounted for major regional powers' interests. Before these tasks could be addressed, though, two military conditions had to be met: a correction of the military balance on the ground in favour of the government (achieved through Russia's military engagement in 2015–17) and intensified pressure on transnational jihadists (ISIS and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups) through uncoordinated, but parallel campaigns by Russia-led and US-led coalitions. Once these military requirements were met, the regionally brokered ceasefire process could start. Eight rounds of Astana discussions in 2017 directly addressed the three deficiencies mentioned above; the talks involved two critical regional power brokers, key non-jihadists, including Islamist opposition groups, and produced a relatively lasting ceasefire compared to previous ones.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Pompeo, "Secretary of State's answers to questions", 25 July 2018.

<sup>21</sup> See also Stepanova, *Russia's Syria Policy*.

<sup>22</sup> It also introduced four de-escalation zones (a unique form, distinct from the more traditional 'humanitarian safe haven' pattern in serving as a strictly temporary mechanism primarily oriented towards stimulating community deals and ceasefires with the government at the local level, with some subordinate humanitarian provisions as well). By the fall of 2018, three out of these four zones (Homs, East Ghouta and southwest border regions) had largely come under Syria's control, through a combination of

The second tier includes Egypt, which has provided a platform in Cairo for consultations on the Homs and Ghouta de-escalation zones. The realities on the ground in southwest Syria have called for a separate ‘Amman process’ that involves Jordan, Israel, Russia and the United States (with Washington’s mediating role described by Putin as a “significant contribution” and “influencing behind the scenes” overall “in a more positive than negative way”<sup>23</sup>). Jordan, the United States, and Egypt have also become observers to the Astana discussions. While Iraq has not played a major role in mediation efforts, it has become a reliable anti-terrorism partner against ISIS: since September 2015 it has hosted a four-party centre in Baghdad for information-sharing and coordination between Iraq, Iran, Russia, and Syria and has intensified efforts to establish control over the Syria-Iraq border by attacking the ISIS remnants in border areas.

Despite previous Russian rifts with Saudi Arabia and Qatar over Syria (and despite the rift between Riyadh and Doha since 2017), Russia has stepped up dialogue with both, forming a looser third tier. This happened as Saudi Arabia’s role, in particular, evolved from that of a lead financier of the fight against the Assad regime to that of a lead contributor to efforts to unite the fragmented Syrian opposition as a necessary precondition for the UN peace talks.

Throughout 2017-18, the truce consolidation process has been haunted by a tense interplay of force and talks (an unavoidable background for most conflict-to-peace transitions) and the difficulty in distinguishing between reconcilable and irreconcilable armed actors. It has also suffered from a good deal of spoiling on both sides: by domestic and foreign anti-government actors and by Assad’s forces and pro-government militias alike. With the exception of ISIS and other jihadist activity, much of this spoiling has been limited and materialistic, rather than total. While it altered the balance of forces somewhat on the ground in parts of the country, mostly in favour of the government, it has neither stopped the expanding ‘local ceasefire’ phenomenon at the inter-communal level, nor seriously damaged the Astana process.

Nevertheless, the Astana format was not meant or designed to address substantive incompatibilities between the parties or other disputed issues (such as the Kurdish or the foreign Shia militia problems); nor does it prioritise humanitarian issues. While Astana has helped improve basic security conditions and prepare technical grounds for the Geneva talks to restart in earnest, it cannot replace the UN in facilitating and seeking a negotiated political resolution to the conflict in Syria, in accordance with Resolution 2254. As Russia has no intention of maintaining a large-scale military role in Syria in the long term, it aims at gradually fading out of

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government military pressure and, often Russia-brokered, local ceasefire deals that allowed for the evacuation of light-armed militants from these areas, mainly to the remaining de-escalation zone in Idlib (under Turkey’s supervision).

<sup>23</sup> Putin, “Speech at 14<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Valdai Club”.

the Syria problem ‘on good terms’ – through a negotiated solution in the UN framework (which implies a more pluralistic system and genuine power-sharing, to be backed by UN peace-support and peace-building efforts). This would be not only an ‘honourable exit’ for Russia, but also an optimal or face-saving option for most regional stakeholders and the West. And it is undoubtedly the best option for Syria, especially in humanitarian, reconciliation, reconstruction and development terms.

To reactivate the stalled UN process by building upon the Astana ceasefire talks and stimulate dialogue on key disputed issues at the Track 2 level, Moscow initiated and hosted a Syrian Congress on National Dialogue in Sochi in January 2018. While this was an attempt worth making, it did not suffice to produce major progress in the UN-level talks. Among other things, progress in Geneva was complicated by the continued overestimation of the United States and its allies of the real weight of armed opposition groups, fuelling their hopes of dictating conditions to the government (including through the new round of US-led air strikes in April 2018). It was also complicated by the Assad government’s persistence and intransigence, as the situation on the ground became less and less favourable to the Syrian opposition, further weakening its negotiation positions (no external support can compensate for a lack of control on the ground). Russia, for its part, could only exercise a certain degree of pressure on Assad on political-military and humanitarian issues and has had no intention of spoiling relations with its two main regional partners, Iran and Turkey, by radically intensifying political pressure on either of them regarding Syria.

While Moscow supports the UN peace process on Syria to the best of its capacity, it has had to consider a broader range of exit options, should that process remain stalled for an indefinite time, or fail. Consolidation and further expansion of core areas and key population centres in western/central Syria under control of the central government, regardless of what happens on the political track, has long been the preferred option of Damascus<sup>24</sup> and Iran, but was not Russia’s *idée fixe*. However, the continuing impasse at the UN talks in Geneva has only reinforced and brought this scenario closer. In case of indefinite lack of progress on a UN-brokered solution, Moscow has little choice but to follow this option<sup>25</sup> – even if it is hardly the one it had originally envisaged.

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<sup>24</sup> Areas remaining outside government control, mainly in Syria’s north/north-east periphery, would be declared by Damascus “occupied Syrian territories” (i.e., by the U.S.-led coalition, Turkey, etc.).

<sup>25</sup> Despite potential reputational costs for Russia (especially on the human rights and humanitarian front), this option would still allow Moscow to retain some political-military dividends from its military engagement while gradually diminishing its direct role. It would also place a heavier humanitarian/reconstruction burden on Damascus and Tehran (which may ultimately find it too heavy, in absence of major foreign aid, largely conditioned on the UN-brokered political transition, and thus be pushed to

### *Other conflicts*

As Moscow started to play a greater role in **Libya** from the mid-2010s, the reflex among many observers was to try to find parallels with its engagement in Syria.<sup>26</sup> There were also speculations about a potential step-up of Russia's role in the region's other conflict spots, including Yemen, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

While perhaps unavoidable, any parallels with Syria grossly overestimate Moscow's interest and leverage in Libya and understate differences between the two conflicts. The Libyan conflict is more fragmented, chaotic and 'borderless' than the one in Syria, with major splits even between nascent parts and institutes of the state. But Libya also lacks some of the worst factors that complicate the Syrian settlement: the conflict is far less intense; the factor of Sunni-Shia tensions is missing; oil has a unifying role to play, as it requires national export infrastructure, and could contribute to post-conflict reconstruction. Libya's main problem lies more in the proliferation of uncontrolled militias, violent local power brokers, the *de facto* absence of borders, and the presence of some foreign jihadists, while tensions between competing governments based in Tripoli and Tobruk are more opportunistic than existential.

Since the 2011 foreign intervention and regime change, Russia has not shown particular interest in Libya, but has formally supported the UN-brokered 2015 Skhirat agreement. When that insufficiently inclusive process stumbled and chaos mounted, Egypt, the UAE and, more discreetly, France started to show signs of support for General Haftar – a renegade Qadhafi associate who defeated militias in Benghazi, consolidated remnants of Libyan armed forces into the Libyan National Army (LNA), and gained control over the main oil facilities and ports before handing them over to the National Oil Corporation. But when Russia, a secondary actor with no major stakes in Libya, also started to show signs of support, they were blown out of proportion, leading to speculations about Haftar as a "new Assad" and Moscow's "grand" Libya plans.<sup>27</sup>

Russia's diplomatic activity in Libya has been driven by a mix of genuine foreign policy concern and more opportunistic considerations.<sup>28</sup> As Libya descended into chaos, Russia gradually realized that its hands-off approach at the UN was no longer acceptable (and had

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become more cooperative), remove the Syria irritant from Russia's broader strategic relationship with Turkey, and leave the West with little that could qualify as a "success" in Syria.

<sup>26</sup> For typical examples, see Ibrahim, "After imposing his will"; Megerisi and Toaldo, "Russia in Libya"; Meyer *et al.*, "Putin promotes Libyan strongman".

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> See Stepanova, "Russia's approach to conflict".

already allowed for the abuse of the UNSC decision that paved the way for the Western-led intervention as the catalyst of regime change and transnationalised civil war). A degree of genuine anti-terrorist concern should not be discounted, in view of the surge in terrorism in, and terrorist threats emanating from Libya's failed state (including the presence of jihadists linked to ISIS and the problem of foreign fighters' return from Syria and Iraq) as well as Moscow's determination to position itself as a champion of global and regional anti-terrorism. However, this concern should not be overstated: Russian experts have pointed at "greater chances for a *Daesh* foreign fighter outflow to pop up in Yemen than in Libya",<sup>29</sup> while a direct threat to Russia from Libya-based jihadists or the presence of militants of Russian origin in North Africa is minimal.<sup>30</sup>

The activation of Russia's Libya diplomacy after 2015 was also driven by more opportunistic considerations at the regional level. Contacts with Haftar were a natural progression of Moscow's renewed partnership, especially regarding military-technical cooperation, with Egypt under President al-Sisi, and could reinforce Moscow's image as a supporter of strong leaders against terrorism in parts of the region. Russia's tactical diplomatic cooperation with the UAE (and, to an extent, Saudi Arabia) on Libya partly counterbalanced disagreements with them over Syria. Getting even minor extra leverage vis-à-vis Europe through some upgrade of Russia's Libya role, in a region of strategic importance to Europe, would not harm either. While Russia stuck to the UN arms embargo and its backing of Haftar remained limited, Moscow could not fully drop it. As Russia has no military role to play in Libya, it could get the necessary "hard element" to support its diplomacy through contacts with Haftar's LNA as the main military player on the ground, and periodic, but largely symbolic exercises of the Russian standing naval force in the Mediterranean, including off the Libyan coast.

Soon Russia went beyond Haftar to reach out to other 'veto players' in Libya, both leading Islamist forces: the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) and even the Misrata militias,<sup>31</sup> loosely affiliated with the GNA and opposed to the Tobruk-based House of Representatives and LNA. Moscow's next move was to attempt to mediate among key Libyan actors. "Essentially, engaging in peacemaking"<sup>32</sup> has become the main task for Russia's Contact Group on Libya established in 2015. Russia's efforts to facilitate the intra-Libyan dialogue have

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<sup>29</sup> Presentation by Vasily Kuznetsov.

<sup>30</sup> Lev Dengov, head of Russia's Contact Group on Libya, quoting a top Libyan security official on "the absence, at present, of any militants from Russia or other post-Soviet states" in Libya. Quoted in "V Livii my ne khotim assotsirovat'sa ni s odnoi iz storon konflikta" [In Libya, we don't want to be associated with any side of the conflict], *Kommersant*, 3 August 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Russia started to take the Misrata militias seriously after they liberated Sirte from ISIS in late 2016 and contacted them through Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov (who may be seen as Russia's own example of how to integrate a Misrata-style rebel).

<sup>32</sup> In a division of labour, Russia interacted with Haftar mainly through the Ministry of Defence, while the Contact Group is overseen by the Foreign Ministry and Parliament, with a heavy Chechen footprint (the group's head, Dengov, is assistant to Kadyrov, and the group is co-overseen by an MP from Chechnya, Adam Delimkhanov).



developed along two tracks: seeking dialogue between the Tripoli-based GNA and the House of Representatives in Tobruk backed by Haftar's LNA and keeping up contacts with the Misrata rebels, with the idea of getting them to talk to Haftar's people. While hardly a lead mediator such as France or the UAE, Russia will continue to explore this path, while supporting the UN framework for settlement in Libya.

Of all Middle Eastern crises, Russia's position on internal conflict in **Yemen**<sup>33</sup> since 2014 has been the closest to impartial. Russia did not support the external Saudi-led intervention into Yemen's civil war, and was the first to convene, in April 2015, a special session of the UN Security Council to call for humanitarian access and pauses in coalition air strikes and, in October 2016, to demand an end to air strikes to stop massive losses among civilians. Russia's emphasis on the humanitarian agenda in Yemen appeared stronger than anywhere else in the region, including Syria.<sup>34</sup> While it reflected the scale of the emergency (currently, the world's largest man-made one), it was also a mirror reaction to, and a way to highlight the double standards of the West and its Gulf allies who played up the humanitarian and human protection agenda in Syria against Assad, but understated or neglected it in Yemen. At the same time, Russia did not veto the April 2015 UNSC ban on arms export to the Houthi (Zaidi Shiite) rebels backed by Iran.

In 2017–18, as evidence of Russia's growing influence in the region, both Saudi-based and still internationally recognized President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and the Houthi rebels' political leader Saleh al-Sammad appealed to Putin to bring Russia in on their side. Yet Russia went on with its balancing act: it kept a diplomatic presence in the capital, Sana'a, for three years after it came under Houthi control in December 2017, evacuating the embassy to the Saudi capital, Riyadh, only following the death of Saleh. However, Moscow cannot withdraw formal recognition of Hadi (regardless of his questionable legitimacy), as that would contradict its line of supporting central governments across the region (above all, in Syria). At the same time, on 26 February 2018, Russia vetoed a Western-backed resolution to condemn Iran for allegedly fuelling the conflict in Yemen by violating the UN arms ban (seen as a US-driven attempt to isolate Tehran in the region), but offered to extend the embargo for another year.<sup>35</sup> Whether or not Russia will become more active in Yemen, it will in any case keep its contacts with all

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<sup>33</sup> For a Russian perspective on the roots of the latest conflict, see, e.g., Isayev and Korotayev, "Yemen: neizvestnaya revolyutsiya i mezhdunarodnyi konflikt" [Yemen: unknown revolution and international conflict].

<sup>34</sup> In Syria, Russia has not prioritised a humanitarian agenda, even though it has tried to push it with the Assad government, has expanded its own humanitarian aid to government-controlled areas, and never tires of accusing the Western allies of ignoring the humanitarian crises in areas liberated from ISIS, but outside government control, particularly Raqqa.

<sup>35</sup> Bhadrakumar, "What the Russian veto signifies".

conflict parties,<sup>36</sup> seek a power-sharing solution that involves the Houthis,<sup>37</sup> and will not allow Yemen to be used in anti-Iranian geopolitical games, nor to spoil its relations with Saudi Arabia.

The prospects for the **Israeli-Palestinian** settlement<sup>38</sup> remain stalled and have further deteriorated as a result of the Trump administration's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017 (catering mostly to his domestic constituencies and lobbyists against warnings from most regional actors and European allies). The combination of Moscow's renewed emphasis on conflict management and the self-confidence it has gained in the region with good working relations with both Palestinians and Israelis could suggest some upgrade of its profile in this case as well. While Russia's immediate concern has been damage limitation, "to prevent the negotiating process from collapsing in its entirety", it is promoting two parallel negotiating formats. In theory they are compatible but, in practice, they may be perceived as partly competing and are seen by other stakeholders, especially Moscow's Western partners in the 'Middle East Quartet', as being of "varying degrees of neutrality or negativity".<sup>39</sup> One format emphasizes direct talks between parties brokered by Moscow, ready to host them without preconditions. Another is the 'Quartet-plus' format to include regional representation (the Palestinian Authority wants to add several Arab states, but Russia prefers the Arab League representative). While the first format envisages a more central role for Russia and the second suggests a somewhat increased one, but still "one out of many", they both imply greater regionalisation of the process. In trying to retain its relative balance. Russia not only stresses that it wants "Israeli colleagues to feel completely safe" (conditioning this upon "mutual and region-wide security" that requires dialogue with the Palestinians), but also, in April 2017, it *de facto* became the first country to state officially that, while recognizing East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state (in line with the UNSC resolutions), "in this context we view West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel".<sup>40</sup>

In the mid-2010s, **Iraq** was a conflict area with a larger ISIS presence than Syria and with many of the same regional and external players formally or informally involved (the United States, Iran, Turkey). But, unlike Syria, it has become an area not only where the United States and Iran have found a tacit mode of co-existence in the fight against ISIS and other Sunni Islamist anti-

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<sup>36</sup> As noted by Lavrov, "We are working in Yemen with absolutely all parties without exception and we will continue to do so" ("Remarks at Valdai International Discussion Club").

<sup>37</sup> Russia's UN representative, Vasily Nebenzya, even suggested that "the settlement in Yemen could become a model for conflict resolution in the MENA region".

<sup>38</sup> For an example of Russia's mainstream approach, see Kuznetsov *et al.*, *Russia in the Middle East*, 24–7.

<sup>39</sup> Lavrov, "Remarks at Valdai International Discussion Club".

<sup>40</sup> Foreign Ministry statement regarding Palestinian-Israeli settlement, 6 April 2017, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2717182](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2717182); Ahren, "Russia recognizes West Jerusalem".

government forces, but also where the positions of the US and Russia have become the closest.<sup>41</sup> The rise of ISIS in Iraq turned Russia's previous scepticism about its 'post-occupation' government into quick support for Baghdad with arms deliveries. Combined with Russia's growing economic interests in Iraq (with most oil projects to be carried out in Iraqi Kurdistan), that predetermined Moscow's focus on backing the country's territorial integrity and, while supporting the Kurds' right to ethnic/cultural identity, on emphasizing the need for dialogue with Baghdad. On Iraq, Russia will keep balancing between the United States and Iran, with its own focus mostly confined to bilateral economic cooperation, arms supplies to Baghdad, and coordination with Iraq in the fight against the remaining jihadists in the Iraq-Syria cross-border context.

Summing up, Syria has played a central role in bringing Russia 'back' to the Middle East, but Russia's involvement there has been an 'outlier' (in terms of level, scale and choice of side) and is unlikely to be replicated elsewhere in the region. As the war in Syria slowly draws to an end – one way or the other – Russia will have more diplomatic resources at its disposal to play a modestly stepped up mediation role in the resolution of other regional conflicts. However, the type of conflict management will be more similar to that in Libya or Yemen where Moscow, while hardly a lead mediator, has managed to establish a diplomatic niche for itself. This role is unique in that Russia is neither a Western nor an Arab country (and as such can avoid respective biases), but itself a country with a large native Sunni Muslim minority, a reputation as a serious player in the Middle East and a past record of good relations with many Arab states. This role may serve as a multi-purpose instrument in Russia's relations with a range of regional and Western actors and secure some space for its own interests in and beyond post-conflict settings in the Middle East. Notably, an anti-Western impulse is hardly the main driver of Russia's policy in Libya, Yemen, the Israeli-Palestinian case, or Iraq. What applies to every context, however, is Moscow's acceptance of and adjustment to the reality of the regionalisation of policy and security in the Middle East, and its attempt to balance between the main conflict parties and regional actors in their respective contexts – a balance that is sought, but not easily achieved everywhere.

### **What next? Directions of change and Russia's interests in the Middle East**

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<sup>41</sup> In a way, Russia's behaviour in Iraq is close to what Moscow would ideally have wanted US behaviour in Syria to be.

Back in 2015, the main broader strategic reason behind Russia's military engagement in Syria was related to the dynamics of its troubled relations with the United States and the West. Three years later, building upon its role in Syria and its resulting new confidence in the region, Moscow could afford to start focusing on formulating and advancing its own interests in the Middle East, which now appear to lie more in the regional realm. The main directions of this shift may be summed up as three parallel, but interrelated trends.

Trend 1 is the increase in Russia's regional influence. This is due mostly to Russia's security role in Syria since 2015, despite controversies and mixed responses to it in and beyond the region. Russia's role has been decisive in that it has demonstrated an ability to act resolutely both on broader anti-terrorism grounds and in defence of a regional partner and Syrian statehood as such, and to prevent regime change by force, in combination with a readiness and capacity to act unilaterally as an external power, above all, independently of the United States, and to withstand strong Western pressure (something that very few powers can afford in principle). This capacity is qualitatively different from any Soviet- or empire-style 'grand strategy': Russia does not aim at hegemony, nor at full parity, strategic balance, or confrontation vis-à-vis key Western stakeholders in the Middle East.

Furthermore, Russia has been able to adjust to the region's inherent pluralism and multipolarity with support to emerging and still largely ad hoc regional multilateralism<sup>42</sup> (demonstrated by Russia's efforts on the ceasefire/political track in Syria, despite continuing disagreements on this and other issues with several regional powers).

Trend 2 is Russia's gradual, but qualitative shift from a primarily Western-centric to a more regionalised approach to the Middle East. This tendency is distinct from – and potentially of higher strategic significance than – the mere diversification of Russia's regional contacts, which has been going on for years. It is also substantively more important than a stereotypical 'turn' in Russia's policy from neutrality and/or select cooperation with the West on the Middle East to more adversarial dynamics (largely shaped in the post-Libya intervention context by disagreements with the United States/the West on Syria). Nor is it just a way to 'compensate' for the deterioration of Moscow's relations with the West, or avoid 'isolation' or reduce the effect of Western sanctions. This shift reflects actual realities and trends in the Middle East (regionalisation, the growing role of regional powers) and demonstrates Russia's readiness and ability to adjust to them. In short, the Middle East has started to matter for Russia per se, hardly in any vital sense, but increasingly on its own merit.

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<sup>42</sup> For more detail, see Stepanova, "Russia in Middle East".

Trend 3 refers to Russia's more active pursuit of its own economic, political and security interests in regional partnerships in the Middle East, not necessarily or not at all linked to relations with the West. Developing that kind of interest beyond either pure/ad hoc opportunism or dynamics of Russia-West relations required a position of a certain weight in the region. While remaining limited, Russia's newly acquired, post-Syria influence across the Middle East suffices for that purpose.

In Syria, Russia has appeared more capable militarily than suggested by its overall economic capacity. Russia's economic role, presence, trade and investment in the Middle East remains limited and lags behind the United States and its European allies (especially France, the UK and Italy), and even, on some counts, China, a relative latecomer. Russia's economic interests have mostly been confined to the region's significance for global energy markets and the role of its developing economies as markets for export of Russian products and technologies, especially arms, nuclear power plants, and wheat. Even in Syria, where Russia's overall role is the largest, the utmost it can hope for is to restore a pre-war USD2 bn annual trade volume by 2021.<sup>43</sup>

Russia, however, is set on capitalising on its new diplomatic and military influence in the Middle East to improve its economic prospects. Attempts to explain this as mainly a by-product of Western sanctions forcing Russia to diversify its economic ties are largely off the point.<sup>44</sup> The economic crisis of the late 2000s-early 2010s and the collapse of oil prices called for growing engagement with the lead economies of the Middle East, including Russia's major rivals on energy markets, well before any sanctions. The culmination of that engagement was the historic deal between OPEC and non-OPEC countries in December 2016, partly based on Saudi-Russian talks, and repeatedly extended. It triggered oil price recovery and spurred Russia's economic cooperation projects with the Arab Gulf states. To balance, Russia has also finalised oil contracts with Iran. Russia's gas policy in the region is increasingly driven by its genuine broader interest in diversifying gas exports.<sup>45</sup>

Russia has also started to use its few competitive advantages more actively to benefit its high-tech industries and agriculture. A breakthrough of sorts for Russian arms exports came with

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<sup>43</sup> According to the head of the *Delovaya Rossiya* (Business Russia) association, Andrey Nazarov. Quoted in "Laodikiiskoye poslaniye iz Kryma" [Laodicean message from the Crimea], *Kommersant*, 19 April 2018.

<sup>44</sup> The effect of Western sanctions is more in terms of posing certain financial and technological limits for Russia expansion of its projects (e.g., in Iraq).

<sup>45</sup> Contrary to a Western-centric view that emphasizes solely Russia's intent to divert export flows of Middle Eastern gas from the EU. See Kozhanov, *Russian Policy across the Middle East*, 18.

contracts with Iraq after 2012 and later with Egypt, spurred not least by the display of Russian weapons and military capability during its operations in Syria (with the Gulf states and Turkey as potential new clients).<sup>46</sup> While Russia has long exported wheat to the region (Egypt and Turkey are two of the top three importers of Russian food products), in 2017, Egypt for the first time surpassed China as the largest buyer of Russian goods.<sup>47</sup> While post-conflict reconstruction and development beyond its own territory has not been Russia's strong point, in 2016–17, it signed agreements in Syria to repair infrastructure and build electrical plants and grain silos, started to invest in mineral resources extraction, and declared its intention to become the main energy operator in the country.<sup>48</sup> Russia is also considering building housing complexes in Damascus and Aleppo and renting land in Syria for agricultural production.<sup>49</sup> There are some economic prospects in Libya, too, mostly in the energy sector<sup>50</sup> and in revising some of the pre-2011 projects, for instance, to resume work on railway construction to connect Sirte and Benghazi, electrification, etc. Also, Middle Eastern investments in Russia's own infrastructure, defence and oil industries, and commercial real estate have been growing.<sup>51</sup> In sum, the Middle East is acquiring greater economic importance for Russia.

A limited security presence (to stay in place even after the scale-down/completion of its campaign in Syria) and security cooperation with states of the region are also seen as a back-up to Russia's diplomatic/mediating role and economic interests.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, although Russia is less affected than Europe in terms of migration, radicalisation, extremism, and other direct spillovers from the Middle East, it is also affected in a different, less direct but fundamental way. The Middle East, and especially the Near East, as a region central to

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<sup>46</sup> According to the head of the national arms export agency Rosoboronexport, Alexander Mikheyev, as a result of the Russian campaign in Syria, demand for S-400 air defence systems, as well as Su-35 and Su-32 aircraft has increased the most (quoted by *TV-Zvezda*, 10 July 2017). Arms trade expert Ruslan Pukhov notes that the Syria campaign's major advertising effect has been for new types of fighter aircraft (Su-30SM, Su-35 and especially Su-34), Mi-38N and Ka-52 helicopters, and high-precision ballistic missiles and aircraft ammunition (quoted in *Novyie Izvestiya*, 18 April 2017). See also Khetagurov, *Voyenno-tekhnicheskoye sotrudnichestvo Rossii: gosudarstva Blizhnego Vostoka [Russia's military-technical cooperation: the Middle East states]*.

<sup>47</sup> According to the Russian Export Center, Egypt imported USD 1.8 bn in goods from Russia (up 44% from 2016), of which food imports, mostly wheat, accounted for USD 1.73 bn. "Egypt becomes biggest market for Russian goods", *RT*, 21 February 2018.

<sup>48</sup> A contract between Syrian General Establishment of Geology and Mineral Resources and Russian STNG Logistics to develop the largest phosphate mine in Syria, east of Palmyra, came into force in April 2018.

A. Nazarov, quoted in: "Laodikiiskoye poslaniye iz Kryma" [Laodicean message from the Crimea], *Kommersant*, 19 April 2018.

<sup>50</sup> E.g., Rosneft's arrangement to buy oil from Libya's National Oil Company, for resale.

<sup>51</sup> Russia's Direct Investment Fund signed strategic investment partnership agreements with several Gulf sovereign funds, including the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF), Kuwait Investment Authority, Qatar Investment Authority, and Mubadala and DP World (UAE). The USD 10 bn-worth agreement with PIF is one of the largest foreign investments in the Russian economy. "MidEast investors are interested in defense industry and real estate in Russia", *National Banking Journal*, 7 March 2017.

<sup>52</sup> This ranges from Russia's expanded military-technical cooperation with Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria, etc. to the 2017 agreements with Syria on upgrading the Tartus logistical/navy base, deployment of the Russian air force at the Khmeimim air base (for 49 years), and maintaining a small standing naval force in the Mediterranean.

both Islam as a religion and political Islam is of major significance for the broader Muslim world. Russia, with its Eurasian history and identity, and its large native, constituent Sunni Muslim minorities, is a peripheral but integral part of that world. Thus, Russia needs a voice in and vis-à-vis the region on matters that go beyond radicalisation and extremism and include religious and civilisational dialogue, Russia's role in and towards the Muslim world.

### **Conclusions and implications for Russia-West relations**

The upgrade of Russia's role in the Middle East, mostly due to its unusually high-profile diplomatic and military activity in Syria, did not lead to a radical departure from several longer-term, sustained features of Russia's policy in the region. They include reaching out to, and diversifying contacts with multiple regional partners, as well as a non-ideological approach, pragmatism, cultural relativism and selective opportunism. These patterns were coupled with Moscow's long-evolving aversion to regime change by force, especially through external, particularly Western, intervention(s), a policy direction increasingly interlinked with concerns about preserving state capacity during conflict and post-conflict transitions. In the Middle East, this combination was reinforced by the outcome of the 2011 Libya intervention and has been most vividly reflected in Moscow's Syria policy. Russia's approach to conflict management in Syria, Libya and elsewhere in the region has also been shaped by an earlier shift from a harsh anti-Islamist stance towards a more nuanced approach to reformist political Islam and even to non-jihadist Islamist armed opposition actors, if required by conflict resolution.

The main driver of change in Russia's policy since the mid-2010s has had little to do with geostrategic rivalries or geo-economics in the region itself. The upgrade of Russia's involvement in the transnationalised civil war in Syria was primarily dictated by the need to instrumentalise Syria for broader foreign policy purposes, unrelated to the Middle East as such, and a degree of genuine anti-terrorism concern. However, what was initially meant mainly as a trump card in Russia's troubled relations with the West, has helped upgrade Russia's overall standing in the region, and stimulated Moscow, by the late 2010s, to further regionalise its approach and develop growing interest in the Middle East per se.

Few observers now contest the fact that Russia is in the Middle East in earnest and to stay. However, for Russia this does not mean a return to Cold War-style grand hegemonic or revisionist plans. At the global level, Russia's maximum aspiration in what it sees as an

emerging multipolar world is, in the long run, to become one of its multiple centres. At the regional level, Russia is developing and balancing its plethora of regional partnerships with a focus on conflict management (as a mediator or, in the exceptional case of Syria, security guarantor) and a mid-size and growing economic role. While economic considerations should not be overstated, they have become as important as political and security ones. The latter are largely confined to anti-terrorism and ensuring a minimal security presence in the region as a back-up to Russia's diplomatic initiatives and its overall influence. Apparently, this type of role in the Middle East has major inherent limitations, given financial constraints (Russia is unlikely to become a lead actor in development assistance or post-conflict reconstruction), and Russia's lack of vital interests in the region.

Part of Moscow's relative success in gaining influence in the Middle East is due to the fact that it grasped and adjusted relatively well (better than the West) to the ongoing trend of regionalisation of Middle Eastern politics and security and is ready to play as an equal. This has become one of the most important of Russia's relatively few comparative strategic advantages in the region. As noted at the February 2018 Valdai conference on the Middle East, with a title ("Playing on All Fields") that speaks for itself: "We know the region better than the Americans do. All US might notwithstanding, we act more competently, and our steps are more carefully calculated."<sup>53</sup>

What does a combination of Russia's increased influence in the Middle East with growing regionalisation of its Middle East policy imply for the West and for Russia-West relations? First, Russia's policy in the region is no longer mainly a 'function' of its relations with the West: regardless of what the West wants or does, individually or collectively, Russia will keep trying to get the most out of its limited, but upgraded influence, pragmatic approach and diversified outreach to regional partners. Second, while in some cases the West and the United States have shown a readiness to accept a degree of multilateralism on Middle East-related security issues of particularly high strategic importance (such as Iran's nuclear program), the only role they are ready to 'grant' Russia is that of a junior partner, an instrument of Western interests and a go-between to deliver the West's message to particularly hard to convince regional actors. This role simply no longer suffices for Russia.

In fact, the West's real problem in the region is not with Russia. Rather, both the United States and the leading European actors, such as the UK and France, have a major problem with

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<sup>53</sup> A quote from Vitaly Naumkin, "'Jewelery policy' of Russia". See also a report based on that conference: Kuznetsov *et al.*, *Russia in the Middle East*.



understanding, accepting and adapting to the main regional trend discussed in this article – the increasing regionalisation of politics and security in the Middle East. Instead, they often choose to blame the lack of policy successes resulting from their own shortsightedness and inflexibility on a politically convenient external scapegoat (Russia) and on the familiar Russia-West binaries brought out of the mothballs of the Cold War.

The good news is that there is not much potential for direct confrontation between Russia and the collective West in the Middle East – nor in any other region beyond Eurasia. The not-so-good news is that the damaged state of overall Russia-West relations allows for very limited actual cooperation on the Middle East, even on such high-profile conflicts as Syria where all have some interests at stake.

The Trump administration may not be happy about the US setback on Syria (where it is the others this time, such as Russia and key regional powers, who are taking the critical decisions), but it is unwilling to become fundamentally engaged on a large scale, or to repeat large-scale problematic stabilisation and nation/state-building experiments of the previous decade, such as in Iraq. Given that, Washington's micro-militarism in Syria (such as the demonstrative air strikes in 2017 and 2018) was unable to affect the situation on the ground decisively and largely boiled down to ripples in the water. However, the Trump administration's lack of coherence and strategic vision regarding Syria has posed a larger impediment when it comes to the UN-level talks between the government and the opposition.

Both the need to move to the UN-level political solution on Syria and, more recently, the pending burden of post-conflict reconstruction, have pushed Russia towards dialogue and cooperation with the United States and its Western allies, but Moscow now sees them as only a part of the broader internationalisation of the Syria problem. Russia itself can only contribute a very small share of the estimated USD 300-400 bn required for Syria's reconstruction within the next 10-15 years.<sup>54</sup> However, as a power that has combined direct military engagement with a high-profile diplomatic role on Syria, Russia has, by default, a certain responsibility and cannot simply disengage from the issue of post-conflict reconstruction without losing part of the reputational capital it gained through its so far largely effective conflict management. The only way to address this issue is through broader internationalisation of Syria's post-conflict reconstruction.

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<sup>54</sup> The World Food Program's country director in Syria, Jacob Kern, assessed the cost of rebuilding Syria's infrastructure at USD 200-300 bn (UN Briefing, Geneva, 24 April 2018); "Syrian government estimated reconstruction to cost \$400 bln and take 10-15 years", *The Syrian Observer*, 17 April 2018.

To move towards that goal, Russia could and should stimulate regional cooperation and involvement in aid and reconstruction in Syria (while critical of the al-Assad regime, most regional powers, including the Arab Gulf monarchies appear to have reconciled themselves with the facts on the ground). Moscow should also systematically put humanitarian and reconstruction matters, including discussion of practical initiatives, on the agenda of its dialogue on Syria with the Western (and other) large donors. Humanitarian and refugee return issues in the Syria context already made it onto the agenda of the 16 June 2018 US-Russia summit in Helsinki, along with security issues across Israel's border with Syria;<sup>55</sup> the Putin-Macron talks in May 2018 led to the dispatch of over 40 tons of French humanitarian aid in Russian military cargo aircraft later in July, destined for UN-overseen distribution in Ghouta, in Russia's first joint operation on Syria with a Western country.<sup>56</sup> Finally, and above all, Moscow should continue to search for a political solution on Syria that is acceptable not only for Damascus, but also internationally, and recognised both at the UN level and across the broader Middle East region.

As the state of Russia's relations with the West is unlikely to improve significantly soon, this suggests a more incremental, step-by-step approach. It means reviving, continuing and, whenever possible, stepping up dialogue focused on concrete problem-solving in the region, both in conflict areas such as Syria and Libya and on security issues with global implications. In the past, any security achievements in the Middle East with implications beyond the region<sup>57</sup> were made only through active and sustained engagement by the West and Russia (joined by others), in the framework or with the support of leading international organisations. While the United States will remain Russia's main extra-regional counterpart on Syria, there is also a void in Russia-EU states dialogue and cooperation across the region. This applies not only to areas where the EU is traditionally strong (such as humanitarian aid and post-conflict reconstruction), but also considering Europe's leading mediation and potential security roles in cases such as Libya, and the imperative of selective anti-terrorism cooperation.<sup>58</sup>

For the time being, it also makes sense to think in terms not only of direct cooperation, but also parallel, informal, semi- or non-coordinated actions by Russia and its Western partners/counterparts to advance a few shared strategic goals. As the overall relationship slowly, but gradually improves, Russia and the West could then build upon limited dialogue and

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<sup>55</sup> Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's answers to questions.

<sup>56</sup> "France, Russia send humanitarian aid to Ghouta", *Arab News/AFP*, 22 July 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Cases in point are the 2013 US/Russia-brokered deal on Syrian chemical disarmament and the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.

<sup>58</sup> Such as intelligence-sharing on foreign fighter counter-mobilisation, with the EU and Russia/Eurasia as the two most heavily affected regions outside of the Middle East and with a limited direct overlap of foreign fighter threat between the two.

cooperation on select regional conflicts and Middle East-related issues of wide-ranging security concern to help put the broader relationship on track.

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