

Chapter 7

Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East: New Challenge for Western Interests?

Nikolay Kozhanov

The current Russian presence in the Middle East is unprecedented for the region since the fall of the Soviet Union. Records of diplomatic and political contacts show increased exchanges of multilevel delegations between Russia and the main regional countries. Since 2012, Moscow has attempted to cultivate deeper involvement in regional issues and to establish contacts with forces in the Middle East, which it considers as legitimate. Moreover, on September 30, 2015, Russia launched air strikes against Syrian groupings fighting against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Before that time, Russia had tried to avoid any fully-fledged involvement in the military conflicts in the region. It was also the first time when it adopted an American military strategy by emphasizing the use of air power instead of ground forces.

Under these circumstances, the turmoil in the Middle East, which poses a political and security challenge to the EU and United States, makes it crucial to know whether Russia could be a reliable partner in helping the West to stabilize the region or whether, on the contrary, Moscow will play the role of a troublemaker. In this context, this paper addresses the following questions:

- How did the changes in Russian–Western relations affect the evolution of the Kremlin’s Middle Eastern strategy?
- What influence did Russian domestic political dynamics have on Russian foreign policy in the Middle East?
- What are Russia’s main interests in the Middle East?

The answers to these questions will help to understand whether regional dialogue between Moscow and the West is, at least theoretically, possible.

The Soviet Heritage and Russia's Approaches to the Middle East 1991–2011

By the fall of the USSR in 1991, Soviet authorities had created a solid foundation for the development of fruitful cooperation with the Arab world and Iran. The Soviet Union had relatively good relations with Algeria, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, and the Palestinian Authority. Moscow's dialogue with Iran and Kuwait had substantial and positive potential. From the political point of view, the USSR was quite appealing for Middle Eastern countries as a certain ideological alternative to the capitalist West and as a counterbalance to the American presence.

From the economic point of view, the Soviet presence in the region was also visible. Since the 1950s, Moscow had been involved in the construction of huge and ambitious industrial projects such as the Aswan High Dam and the metallurgy complex in Isfahan. During the 1950s–1980s, the USSR constructed about 20 hydro and thermal power plants in the region. By 1991, the track record of Soviet accomplishments in the region included 350 industrial projects. All in all, the Arab states received about 20% of the technical assistance allocated by Moscow to countries of the developing world. In addition to this, by the fall of the USSR, the annual volume of Soviet trade with the Arab countries reached \$7–12 billion. This figure comprised about 30% of USSR trade with developing countries and made economic relations with the Middle East an important source of income for the Soviets. The military cooperation between the USSR and the Arab countries was also impressive. The largest part of this sum was related to the Soviet–Iraqi (\$24 billion) and Soviet–Syrian (\$11 billion) deals. However, Egypt, Yemen, Algeria and Libya could also be named among the clients of the military-industrial complex of the USSR.¹

Apart from that, Moscow was an important creditor of the Arab regimes. The real volume of the debts of Middle Eastern countries to the Soviet government is still unknown. According to the most moderate estimates, by 1991 the USSR had \$35 billion of unreturned credits out of which the large part belonged to Iraq, Syria, Algeria, and Egypt.²

¹ Mediasil, *Ekonomicheskiye Otnosheniya mezhdu Rossiei i Arabskimi Stranami v Proshlom, Nastoyaschem i Budushchem*, www.mediasil.ru/upload/docs/5_analytic_reference.doc, accessed on October 4, 2013; Vladimir Isaev and Aleksandr Filionnik, "Rossiya—Arabskiye Strany: Politicheskiye Imperativy i Ekonomicheskoye Sotrudnichestvo," *Novoye Vostochnoye Obozreniye*, October 9, 2012. <http://journal-neo-ru.livejournal.com/47496.html>, accessed October 4, 2013.

² Ibid.

Yet, after 1991, Moscow largely neglected the potential for development of its ties with the region that had been created during Soviet times. In other words, from the fall of the Soviet Union until our current decade, Russian cooperation with Middle Eastern countries has had a relatively low profile. This can be explained by domestic political and economic turmoil in Russia during the 1990s and by the Western orientation of Russian diplomacy under President Boris Yeltsin (1991–1999).

Both political and economic contacts were mostly curtailed, if not cut. This situation was determined by a mixture of objective and ideological reasons. On one hand, the economic crises which periodically hit Russia during the first decade of its existence, political turmoil, the short-sighted privatization policy of the Yeltsin government, and the grip of criminal groups over the country's economy seriously limited the export capacities of Moscow and diverted the attention of the Russian authorities from foreign to domestic policy issues. The ports of Odessa and Ilyichevsk on the Black Sea, which were the main trade gates of the USSR to the Mediterranean, became part of independent Ukraine, which also negatively influenced Russian business contacts with the Middle East. According to various estimates, by the mid-1990s, the share of Arab countries in Russia's volume of trade was less than 1 percent.³ On the other hand, political and economic cooperation with the Middle East contradicted the new ideology of the post-Soviet elite of the Russian Federation, who saw their country as part of the Western world and refused to develop those vectors of diplomacy that they viewed as non-Western. As a result, the Middle East was considered a region of secondary importance for the new Russia. The only exception was Israel, whose relations with Moscow improved considerably during the 1990s (mainly due to the strengthening of the political and business positions of the Jewish community in Russia and the fact that this country was considered a Western splinter in the Middle East).

During the 1990s and 2000s, the development of constructive dialogue with Washington was still unofficially considered a top priority of Russian diplomacy. This intention was supported by the gradual strengthening of semi-official and unofficial ties with the West by the Russian economic, political, and cultural elite. Such an approach, in turn, determined Moscow's perception of the Middle East as a leverage and trade item in Russian relations with the United States and Europe. In fact, Russian authorities have played this card during periods of both U.S.–Russian rap-

³ Ibid.

prochement and severe tensions between the two countries, by either freezing their cooperation with the opponents of America in the Middle East or boosting it, respectively.

Russian–Iranian relations serve as the most notable example of this approach. Thus, in 1995, Russia and the United States signed the so-called Gore–Chernomyrdin agreement. According to this confidential document signed in the wake of reconciliation between Moscow and Washington, the Russian government agreed to stop the implementation of existing military-supply contracts with Iran by 1999 and not to conclude new deals with Tehran in this field. U.S. authorities, in turn, were expected to develop cooperation with Russia’s military-industrial complex while halting unauthorized provision of American military equipment to both the Middle East and the countries bordering Russia. In addition to this treaty, Moscow decided in 1998 not to implement its contract for the supply of a research reactor to Tehran. The reason for this decision was the same as in the 1995 agreement: the need to bridge relations with Washington. The subsequent tensions between Washington and Moscow during the first years of the new millennium were accompanied by the improvement of Russo–Iranian dialogue. In 2000, Putin and the then-president of Iran, Mohammad Khatami, met in New York, which led to the Iranian president making an official visit to Moscow in March 2001.

In 2001, both Khatami and Putin positioned their negotiations as the beginning of a new chapter in Russian–Iranian relations. It is necessary to admit that the rapprochement between the two countries was determined not only by their difficult relations with Washington. The substantial role in bridging relations between the two countries was played by Khatami’s firm intention to implement his doctrine of “the dialogue of civilizations,” Khatami’s cultural and diplomatic strategy that implied the development of contacts between Shia Iran and other countries of different religion and traditions. On the Russian side, Putin’s plan to develop Russian ties with non-Western countries as a part of his doctrine of the multi-polar world also pushed the two countries towards each other. In the early 2000s, the Russian president for the first time formulated his idea that Moscow should not be solely focused on its dialogue with the United States and Europe but try to have equally intense relations with the countries of the Middle East, Asia and South America. And Iran was one of those non-Western countries that seemed to be appealing for Russia as a potential partner within the framework of the multi-polar world doctrine.

Yet, the tense relations with the United States still remained the main factor determining the dynamics of the Russian–Iranian rapprochement of the early-2000s. Thus, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and subsequent improvement of both U.S.–Russian and U.S.–Iranian relations slowed down the tempo of the interaction between Moscow and Tehran. It again intensified after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, when both Russia and Iran were dissatisfied with the U.S. decision to occupy this country. Nevertheless, the U.S.–Russian reset of 2009 once again offset the Russian–Iranian dialogue, compelling Moscow to adopt a harsher stance on Tehran and its nuclear program. The Russian vision of the Middle East as the region of the secondary importance has changed after 2012.

Putin's Third Presidential Term and Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East

After 2012, Russia has substantially increased its presence in the region of the Middle East. Its foreign policy also became more consistent. Moscow not only improved its relations with traditional Soviet/Russian partners in the region (such as Iran and Syria), but also reestablished ties with those countries where its leading positions were believed to be lost for good (Egypt, Libya, Iraq). The Russian authorities made several attempts to increase their presence in those sub-regions that were believed to be the zone of exclusively Western (primarily U.S.) influence (for instance, the GCC countries). Moscow also intensified its interaction with regional organizations, paying special attention to the development of ties with the Middle Eastern members of the OPEC (an organization from which Russia deliberately distanced itself prior to 2012). Finally, for the first time since the fall of the USSR, Moscow deployed its military forces in the Middle East when it started a military operation in Syria in 2015.

It is possible to say that, after 2012, the Russian leadership adopted a more strategic approach to the Middle East by seeing it as a region of growing importance for achieving Russian political, economic, and security goals. This period of Russian diplomacy in the Middle East could be titled as the period of Moscow's return, main goal of which was to re-establish Russia as an important player in the region—a status that was lost by Moscow after the fall of the USSR. Yet, the main difference between current times and Soviet times was that now the Kremlin was more pragmatic, less ideology-driven, but also less economically capable than the Soviet Union. The intensification of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East

was determined by a number of factors. The key role in shaping Moscow's approaches was played by the growing confrontation with the West outside of the Middle East that naturally reoriented Moscow's diplomacy towards the non-Western countries. Yet, it was also the domestic situation in Russia and regional events that determined Moscow's new stance on the region. First of all, 2012 was the year of Putin's return to the presidency. The Putin of 2012 was different from the Putin of 2000 and 2004; more authoritarian, more decisive, more anti-Western, and extremely disappointed by the failure of the reset in Russia-U.S. relations. This could not but affect Russia's stance on the Middle East. At least initially, the support provided to the Assad regime was, in fact, revenge for what Russia saw as political and economic losses from the fall of dictatorial, but pro-Russian regimes in Libya and Iraq after the Western military intervention.

Public discontent with Medvedev's government and the controversy over Putin's re-election in 2012 compelled the leadership to shore up its support. From 2012, official propaganda started to appeal to the nationalistic sentiments of the population. These appeals received a positive response. A large portion of the Russian population wished to see Medvedev's successor more actively protect their perceived national interests and cement relations with non-Western powers. Under these circumstances, Russian support for Damascus, closer relations with Tehran, and rapprochement with Egypt were supposed to symbolize a return to the old traditions of the Soviet Empire for those missing the superpower glory of the USSR. Prior to its fall in 1991, the USSR had good political and economic relations with these countries. The image of the Soviet Union as an active player in the Middle East contrasted vividly with the behavior of post-Soviet Russia that did not see the development of its strong presence in the region as a top priority. Prior to 2012, a serious attempt to return to the Middle East was undertaken by the Kremlin just once. This sluggish effort took place in 2003-2008, when Putin decided to test the ground for the development of future relations with the Middle East and made a number of visits to the regional capitals. Yet, relatively modest gains of his trips stalled during Medvedev's presidency (2008-2012); like Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, Putin's successor was not interested in building ties with the region.

Under these circumstances, the image of Russia in the Middle East itself was changing. While still considered as a political alternative to the West Moscow was seen as a weak and not always reliable player. Its inability to prevent the United States from invading Iraq in 2003 vividly demon-

strated the limits of Russian capabilities; that year Middle Eastern newspapers were often repeating the claim that under the USSR the military occupation of Iraq would have been impossible.⁴ This image of a weak but still internationally active country stuck to Russia until 2012. Putin also wanted to change this narrative.

Putin's return to power coincided with the end of the Arab Spring of 2011–2012. Moscow explained the social uprisings within its traditional narrative of accusing the West of attempting to destabilize the international system with color revolutions and to impose its improper democratic values on other nations. Considering the Arab Spring as, at least partially, a U.S. and EU plot, the Russian government felt it had no choice but to become more deeply involved in the situation on the ground in order to balance the destabilization of the political situation in the Middle East by Western powers and to prevent repercussions in Eurasia. The experience of Iraq and Libya, where the fall of the dictatorial regimes of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qaddafi launched the chain of bloody events that completely destabilized these countries and turned them into sources of regional instability only fortified Russian concerns (especially when some Libyan anti-regime fighters suddenly moved to Syria—a fact that was seen in the Kremlin as a proof the conflict is overspilling country's borders).

By intensifying its current activities in the region, the Kremlin is pursuing the following three groups of goals:

- Economic: compensating for the negative effects of sanctions on the Russian economy; securing existing sources of income; protecting the interests of Russian energy companies and their share in the international oil and gas market.
- Political: avoiding complete international isolation; creating leverage which can be used to affect U.S. and EU behavior outside of the region; propagandizing Moscow's conception of the "right world order"; shaping Russian popular opinion.
- Security: reducing potential security threats for Russia and the post-Soviet space posed by the situation in the Middle East.

Russian strategy in the Middle East comprises several elements. First, Moscow is persistent in defending what it sees as its red lines in the region. It does not welcome forced regime change if it leads to the destruction of

⁴ Irina Mokhova, "Obraz Rossii v Arabskom Mire: Ot Sovetsko-Arabskoy Druzhby do Problemy Poiska Novogo Obraza," <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=16683>, accessed October 4, 2013.

existing state mechanisms. The Kremlin is also concerned about any change of borders in the Middle East. Moscow's flexibility has enabled it to talk to different forces in the region and, if necessary, play the mediator's role.

Second, Russia seems to be trying to reclaim its Cold War role as a counterbalance to the United States in the region. The Kremlin does not directly oppose Washington, but rather exploits the region's pre-existing disappointment with the United States through practical moves, which contrast with Western behavior. Thus, Moscow's stubbornness in protecting the Assad regime, and its readiness to help the police and authoritarian governments of the Middle Eastern countries with weapons supplies, allowed Russia to garner additional respect and popularity among the local elites when compared to Obama's attempts to promote democracy in the region and his intention to disengage from regional affairs. In 2013, the White House's failure to play an active role in overthrowing Bashar al Assad only strengthened the perception among U.S. allies in the GCC that American leaders wanted their country to leave the region and abandon its old partners. Meanwhile, the old perception of Russia as a weak and incapable country was replaced with the understanding that Moscow had become a force to reckon with.

Third, Moscow avoids using ideological rhetoric in its official dialogue with the countries of the region. It remains extremely pragmatic. Russia does not raise the question of political freedom in Iran, and tries not to be vocally critical of Israel's policies in Palestine and Gaza, in spite of its support for a two-state solution. Finally, in its economic efforts, the Kremlin focuses on those areas where it has market advantages: nuclear energy, oil and gas, petro-chemicals, space, weapons, and grain. Although the Middle Eastern share of overall Russian trade and investment remains small, the region still holds great interest and, in some cases, even key importance for selected Russian industries, including the agricultural and military-industrial complexes, and the petrochemical, space, and oil and gas industries. Israel and the UAE buy up to 16% of the precious stones and metals exported by Russia. The Middle East is the main destination for exports of Russian grain; by 2016, the largest buyers of Russian wheat, rye, and barley were Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, respectively.⁵ The Middle East is also an important market for some small and medium enterprises. For them, trade with the region often represents the main (and, in some

⁵ See <http://stat.customs.ru/>, accessed July 13, 2015.

cases, only) export market for their products.⁶ At the same time, Russian business in the Middle East builds its market strategy in the Middle East on the principle of a “Chinese price for European quality” by offering its products and services at a lower price than its Western rivals.

Nevertheless, Moscow is not omnipotent. Its success is more often than not determined by the policy mistakes made by the EU and United States. This suggests that corrections in Western approaches to regional issues would limit Russia’s capacity to maneuver. The Kremlin’s financial and economic capabilities will never match those of the West, so Russia has a market advantage in only a few areas—and these are gradually decreasing with the failure of economic diversification and the growing technological gap with the West. Moscow’s strategy of balancing between different powers in the region in order to maintain good relations with them all is also fragile and can be upset in the future by the necessity to take sides. Thus, the intensification of dialogue with Tehran raises Iranian expectations of closer cooperation. Yet, the formation of any alliance with Tehran could harm Russian dialogue with other states, including Israel and the GCC countries. Russia’s partners in the region are not reliable. Egypt, Turkey, and Israel are using Russian interest in closer contact as leverage to shape their own relations with the West; they intensify dialogue with Russia in order to make Washington more flexible on sensitive bilateral issues, but this instrumentalization does not make for good relations.

Vectors of Russian Diplomacy in the Middle East

Currently, there are several key vectors of the Russian diplomacy in the Middle East.

Iran

Moscow is extremely interested in keeping Iran in its sphere of its influence. First, Iran’s geostrategic position allows it to influence the situation in the Caspian Sea region, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East. This, in turn, compels Moscow to discuss a wide range of foreign policy issues with Tehran. Given the shared visions on how to handle most of these problems, Iran’s support is believed to be important to the success of Moscow’s activities to restore and strengthen Russia’s regional position

⁶ Igor Naumov, “Rossiyskiye Ubytki ot Arabskoy Vesny,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 29, 2012 http://www.ng.ru/economics/2012-02-29/1_arab_vesna.html, accessed October 4, 2013.

after the fall of the Soviet Union. Second, Moscow perceives Tehran as one of its last reliable partners in the Middle East, and tries to secure Russian positions in Iran. Finally, Russia and Iran are deeply involved in Syria, where they are trying to save the remnants of the Assad regime.

In 2013–2015, the Russian authorities also intensified their efforts to settle the Iranian nuclear issue. Moscow helped to facilitate Iran's negotiations with the international group of negotiators, whereas Lavrov's 2012 proposals on the settlement of the nuclear issue laid the necessary groundwork for the resumption of talks. In this case, Russian motives were determined by a number of factors. First of all, Iran armed with a nuclear bomb was not desirable for Moscow, as this would change the balance of power in the region and encourage other, even less stable, Middle Eastern regimes to join the nuclear club. Secondly, Russia believed that an unsettled nuclear issue could hypothetically lead to the destabilization of Iran as it created pretexts for potential military conflict between Washington and Tehran. Under these circumstances the Kremlin did not want Iran to become another failed state near the border of the post-Soviet space in addition to Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Third, Russia's role in the multilateral negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue helped to promote Moscow's importance as a constructive international player. The latter was also important given the negative reaction on the international community to the annexation of Crimea and Russian support to the separatist forces in eastern Ukraine. Thus, Moscow's involvement in the negotiation process on Iran was considered by some U.S. analysts as one of the main factors that guaranteed the success of the negotiation process.⁷ In July 2015, U.S. President Barack Obama even telephoned Putin to thank him for Russia's role in reaching the P5+1 agreement with Iran.⁸ Finally, by helping Tehran to settle the nuclear issue and lift international sanctions, Moscow was creating the positive image of Russia as a reliable partner. The latter brought obvious results by helping to revitalize Russian–Iranian relations.

Both Moscow and Tehran are interested in saving the remaining government institutions in Syria. This common goal favors Russian–Iranian

⁷ Suzanne Maloney, "Three Reasons Why Russia Won't Wreck the Iran Nuclear Negotiations," March 25, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2014/03/22-russia-us-tension-sabotage-iran-nuclear-deal>, accessed June 18, 2016; Multiple interviews with U.S. and UK diplomats and experts on Iran. London, June–August 2015; Washington DC, January 2016.

⁸ "Obama Thanks Putin for Russia's Role in Iran Nuclear Deal," *NBCNews*, July 16, 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/iran-nuclear-talks/obama-thanks-putin-russias-role-iran-nuclear-deal-n392976>, accessed June 18, 2016.

cooperation, although each country certainly has its own reasons for saving the remnants of the regime. Russia is largely driven by its security concerns and strong beliefs that the building of a new post-conflict Syria is possible only through the evolution of the old regime, not through its destruction. By supporting the Assad government in Syria, Iran fights for its place in the system of the regional affairs. Under these circumstances, Moscow and Tehran formed a marriage of convenience where each partner tries to reach its own goals through joining efforts. Such an approach implies that the partners not only coordinate their activities, but also try to avoid unnecessary confrontation over issues of secondary importance.

Another reason for the intensification of Russian–Iranian cooperation is the economy. Since the late 1990s, Iranian authorities have been promising to help European countries decrease their dependence on gas supplies from Russia. In most cases, the statements by Iranian officials on Tehran’s intentions to enter the European gas market still remain the part of the political game played by the Islamic republic’s authorities to make the West more inclined to lift sanctions and restore its economic ties with Iran. Yet, Russian authorities do not consider the challenge of Iran’s natural gas to their interests in the European market as negligible. Indeed, within the next decade Tehran will hardly be able to represent a threat to the Russian presence there. However, Moscow tries to see the situation in a long-term perspective. Under these circumstances, the Kremlin does not exclude the long-term scenario that Tehran will finally implement its promises to reach the European market.

Nevertheless, even seeing Iran as a potential rival in this field, Russia still prefers cooperation to confrontation. Moscow follows the principle of judo, which implies staying in full contact with your opponent and keeping him close. Consequently, wherever possible, Moscow tries to ensure the flow of hydrocarbons in the direction necessary for itself, or at least to make sure that it has a stake in the energy projects of Iran. As a result, Gazprom and other Russian energy corporations demonstrate open interest in the development of Iran’s gas production and gas infrastructure. This strategy of involvement in Iran’s gas sector is supported and promoted at the top level of the Russian political elite. However, by March 2017, Moscow did not progress beyond the mere discussion of potential investments projects in the gas sphere with Tehran.⁹

⁹ <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2017/03/13/10574165.shtml>.

During the Baku summit of the Azerbaijani, Russian, and Iranian presidents in August 2016, Putin called for the necessity of closer cooperation and coordination in the oil and gas sphere, particularly over the shared use of existing pipeline infrastructure and joint development of Caspian hydrocarbon resources.¹⁰ He formulated a plan to supply the northern provinces of Iran with natural gas via Azerbaijan in exchange for Iranian liquefied natural gas that Russian companies will receive in the Persian Gulf. The implementation of this project would allow Iran to decrease its dependency on Turkmenistan as its sole supplier of natural gas to the northern districts, while the Russian authorities would be able to ensure that at least some Iranian gas will not reach Europe but, instead, it will be channeled by Russian companies to other regions.

Syria

Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war was determined by a number of factors. At the initial stage, growing confrontation with the West and Putin's plans to reestablish Russia as an influential world power were the key factors determining Moscow's decision to support the Assad regime in its struggle. Moscow wanted to demonstrate to the United States that it could stir up trouble if its opinion were not taken into account. Thus, in early 2013, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that in Syria the Russian government was eager to make the Americans "learn the lesson" that they should deal with Moscow only "on the basis of equality, balance of interests, and mutual respect." In order to protect its interests, Russia used its veto several times (on October 4, 2011, February 4, 2012, July 19, 2012, May 22, 2014) to prevent the adoption of UN Security Council resolutions that, in Moscow's view, could have led to a further aggravation of the situation in and around Syria. Finally, in 2013 the Russians managed to do what was previously believed to be impossible: they stopped what had appeared to be an inevitable military operation by the West against the Syrian regime. On August 21, 2013, international media sources reported the usage of a chemical weapon in one of Damascus's neighborhoods. Neither side in the conflict took responsibility for it. The Western powers and their Middle Eastern partners accused the Assad regime of this. Subsequently, they tried to use their suspicions as a pretext for military intervention in the conflict. However, the reluctance of the Obama administration and the failure of the

¹⁰ <https://www.pravda.ru/economics/materials/gas/09-08-2016/1309352-iran-0/>.

British government to get the approval of the UK Parliament gave Moscow the necessary time to offer its own solution.

This was the first time during the Syrian conflict when Russia demonstrated that it had a number of opportunities for leverage at its disposal to shape the development of the situation in the way that would most benefit the Kremlin. Moscow's tough stance on Syria also had a positive influence on Russian relations in the Middle Eastern region. Thus, in the eyes of those regional states with a positive or neutral attitude to Moscow, the Russian authorities managed to rehabilitate themselves from their failure to protect the Qaddafi regime. Moscow proved that it was capable of protecting its partners and, thus, made the Arab countries once again interested in Russia as a political counterbalance to the United States. Regional rivals of Russia such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia were, in turn, compelled to recognize the Kremlin as an important player in the Middle East whose opinion needed to be taken into account. Thus, such influential newspapers as *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and *al-Hayat* considered the failure of Obama to persuade Putin to change the Russian stance on Syria as a pure victory for Russia whereas the U.S. administration was accused of "opportunism and weakness."¹¹

At the same time, Syria as a country paid a high price for Moscow's ambitions. Russian stubbornness in protecting the Assad regime for the sake of the Kremlin's success in its confrontation with the West gave Damascus much-needed protection and made it more confident in its actions against the opposition. As a result, during the first year of the conflict, when most existing problems had the chance to be settled through negotiation and reforms, the Syrian regime responded to the peaceful appeals of its opponents with brute force. By doing this, it hardened and brutalized further confrontation. It is true that Moscow made some reluctant attempts to persuade Assad to make concessions to the opposition. Thus, on February 7, 2012, Lavrov and the director of the Russian Intelligence Service (SVR), Mikhail Fradkov, visited Damascus to discuss the situation in the country with the regime. Yet, while seeing its confrontation with the West as the top priority Moscow did not demonstrate sufficient persistence in persuading Assad. However, with the further development of the conflict the Kremlin started to reassess its priorities. Consequently, in 2015, Russia's decision to send troops to Syria was determined not only by Moscow's

¹¹ Grigoriy Kosach, "Pozitsiya Rossii po Siriiskomu Krizisu v Arabskoy Presse posle Vstrechi G8," <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=17779>, accessed October 5, 2013.

intentions to confront Western intentions to displace Assad but by a reason not related to the Russian–U.S. standoff.

Multiple interviews with Russian officials and decision-makers showed that, by 2015, one of Russia's main concerns was that the fall of Assad's regime could lead to the spread of instability and radical Islamism to the post-Soviet space. By September 2015, Moscow's assessment was that the military, technological, and financial assistance by Russia to the Syrian regime would extend its existence but not save it. Intervention was the result of a choice between a bad and a very bad scenario; between a costly military operation to support Assad or doing nothing as his power—and Russian influence—crumbled. The Russian leadership was motivated by its perception of what had happened in Libya and Iraq, where—in its view—nothing good came of the complete destruction of the old regimes. In this case, the dynamics of Russia's relations with the West was of secondary importance in the decision-making process.

The idea that saving the regime from complete collapse was the only way to prevent Syria from going the way of Libya and Iraq determined Russia's military tactics. Its air force never took IS as the major target. Instead, it concentrated its firepower against the opposition groups that represented the greatest threat for the Assad regime. Russia's military intervention was largely about keeping the regime in power.¹² Nor is Moscow concerned about the collateral damage of its bombings. Reports of civilian casualties clearly demonstrate that little has changed in Russian tactics since the second Chechen war of 1999–2000.¹³

Nevertheless, Russia does desire to bring an end to the Syrian war. Moscow understands that it simply does not have enough economic and military resources to bring Syria back under Assad control by force. For Moscow, a settlement is only viable through a national dialogue between the regime and opposition. However, Russia would like to launch this reconciliation process under its own conditions. These include the preservation of the territorial integrity of Syria, the immediate formation of a united anti-IS coalition, saving the remaining state structures and the

¹² Interviews with Russian military experts. San-Francisco, Moscow, St.Petersburg, January – February 2016; Krishnadev Calamur, "A Strengthened Assad's Welcome at the Kremlin," *The Atlantic*, October 21, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/syria-russia-assad-putin/411658/>, accessed March 27, 2016.

¹³ Natalie Nougayrede, "We Are Watching the Destruction of Aleppo," *The Guardian*, October 8, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/08/destruction-aleppo-russia-massacre-civilians-grozny>, accessed March 16, 2017.

transformation of the regime only within the framework of the existing government mechanisms. This is why Russia gives so much attention to the Astana negotiation process: it creates a necessary basis for launching the sluggish political process while allowing Moscow to keep the initiative of shaping the format of the Syrian reconciliation in its hands. It was not a coincidence that the beginning of Astana consultations coincided with the presentation of the Russian draft of the future Syrian constitution.

On the one hand, Moscow is relatively comfortable with the possibility of political reforms in Syria and the perspectives of a post-Assad situation, as this is inevitable to achieve national reconciliation in the country. Russia does not exclude the possibility that Assad could be replaced, but this will not happen before there is confidence that the new leaders are able to control the situation in Syria and guarantee Russia's interests. On the other hand, Russia's vision of the future of Syria is unstable. Moscow's views on the depth of Syrian regime transformation depend on the dynamics of the dialogue between Moscow and the international community and developments on the battleground in Syria. The more Assad is successful in gaining territories back, the less Moscow is inclined to support changes beyond the facelifting of the regime. From this point of view, the regime's victory in Aleppo played a dual role. On one hand, it made the Kremlin excessively self-confident in its capacities to influence the situation in Syria. On the other hand, the stubborn resistance of the anti-Assad forces also showed Moscow that it needs to communicate with a wider range of forces fighting against Damascus than just a systemic/official opposition. As a result, Moscow stopped labeling all fighting opposition forces as terrorists and recognized at least some as legitimate players.

By March 2017, Moscow felt quite comfortable in Syria. The Russian authorities managed to achieve their first goal—to save Assad regime and ensure its success in retaking certain parts of the Syrian territory. Yet, the end of the game was still far away for Russia. Moscow would like to put an end to the civil war in Syria, or at least ensure the sustainable ceasefire on a large part of the country's territory in order to be able to facilitate partial Russian military withdrawal (Moscow intends to keep its presence in the Tartus naval base and Khmeimim airbase after the end of the war in Syria). However, this is only possible through the revitalization of the political process, and that is where Moscow did not achieve much success. Negotiations in Astana that started in early 2017 and were initially welcomed by the international community as an attempt to launch a full-fledged peaceful settlement have come to a deadlock.

Another challenge that Russia will face in Syria soon is the issue of ISIS. As it was mentioned, so far Moscow has not been enthusiastic about fighting the Islamic State and saw the saving of the Assad regime as its top priority. According to the Kremlin's vision, it was not the radicals themselves but the fall of the old political regimes that led to the destabilization of the region. As a result, the Russian authorities preferred to address the source of the problem (regimes' volatility) and only then deal with the outcomes of the system crisis (the rise of jihadists). Yet, after the regime success in Aleppo and gradual defeat of the opposition forces, Russia will inevitably have to intensify its struggle against the radical Islamists. However, Moscow does not want to fight against ISIS on its own. Yet, forming any effective coalition with other international forces is hardly possible due to mutual mistrust existing between Russia and the U.S.-led coalition as well as due to differences existing between them in the vision of the Assad regime's future.

Libya

In 2017 Russian involvement in the Libyan civil war has grown substantially. Along with active political consultations with General Khalifa Haftar, a commander of one of main military groupings in the Libyan civil war, Russia is believed to be supplying him with weapons with the logistic help of Egypt (it is believed that Cairo persuaded Russia to support Haftar and Moscow agreed to do this to flatter its partner)¹⁴ and financial support of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). By doing so, Moscow obviously pursues a number of goals. First, by providing active political and material support to General Haftar in Libya, Russia also demonstrates its readiness to affect the domestic political dynamics in Middle Eastern countries beyond Syria and in those areas of the Middle East that are located close to the post-Soviet space. Moscow's recent involvement in the Libyan civil war could be considered as the final stage of the evolution of Russian foreign policy in the region that started in 2012. Russia tried to approach to the region from largely neutral positions avoiding direct involvement in the Middle Eastern affairs. Its active support for the Assad regime after 2012 demonstrated the Kremlin's readiness to respond more decisively to those regional events that are believed to threaten Russian interests. Meanwhile, Moscow's involvement in Libya showed Russian intentions not only to give a response to the emerging challenges, but to take pre-emptive

¹⁴ Interview with Russian experts on the Middle East. Berlin, February 2017, Rome, March 2017.

steps to determine the development of the situation on the ground. Second, the instability in the region caused by the Arab Spring has been a serious blow to Russia's economy. Moscow lost up to \$20 billion in planned investments in military infrastructure, road construction, energy, and other areas following the fall of the Qaddafi government. By supporting General Haftar, Moscow has sought to create an influential pro-Russian group in the future Libyan government that Russia might use to compensate for some of its losses.

Finally, by increasing its involvement in Libya, Moscow continues to leverage the West. It tries to make sure that Russia's active role in Libyan affairs will make the United States and the EU less determined to put pressure on Russia in other areas in order to prevent the Kremlin from becoming a serious troublemaker in the Middle East.

Israel and Palestine

In 2017 the Kremlin managed to deepen its dialogue with Tel Aviv to a previously unseen level, although Russia retains its close contacts with the Palestinian administration. The Russian and Israeli authorities have finally come to the understanding that there will always be certain restraints on the development of bilateral ties, and have focused on the exploitation of opportunities rather than discussing fundamental problems. Consequently, in 2015 Israel secured Moscow's guarantee that the issue of the Iranian nuclear program would be settled in such a way as to eliminate any security threats to Israel. In return, the Israelis took a neutral position in the Russian–Ukrainian confrontation, abstaining from the UN General Assembly vote on Resolution 68/262 against the Russian annexation of Crimea, and silently supported Russian military involvement in Syria. The Israeli authorities also refused to support the main sanctions imposed by the United States and the EU on Russia, although some restrictions on cooperation with Russia in the military and banking spheres were still supported.

The Russian–Israeli rapprochement creates certain concerns that Russia is not always interested in the implementation of the two-state solution if it goes against Israeli interests. For Moscow it is more important to create a buzz around its diplomacy in the case of Palestine and Gaza than to actually settle the issue. Russian influence and resources are insufficient to bring the sides to agreement, but the Kremlin sees itself as profiting simply from participation, which demonstrates its importance to the Arab world

and West as part of the negotiation process. A solution would mean that Russia is no longer needed.

In 2017, Russian-Israeli relations were on the rise. Moscow and Tel Aviv actively cooperated both economically and politically. Israel was the first to establish effective de-confliction mechanisms with Russian air forces in Syria. In exchange Russia *de facto* opened Syrian skies for Tel Aviv by closing its eyes to occasional airstrikes conducted by Israeli air forces to prevent the transfer of Iranian and Syrian arms to Hezbollah.¹⁵

Yet, Moscow and Tel Aviv prefer not to draw much attention to their cooperation, as this may harm Russian relations with some other Muslim countries of the region. Nevertheless, Russian relations with Israel may still become a restraining factor for the further developing of Russian–Iranian relations. By allying with Tehran, Moscow would most likely harm relations with its silent partner in the Middle East—Israel. In December 2015–January 2016, statements by Israeli officials demonstrated concerns about growing Russian–Iranian cooperation in Syria and beyond. Previously, Israel tolerated the rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran as long as it was not considered a threat to national security. Yet, by 2016, Israeli officials had started to openly worry that the Russian government was beginning to close its eyes to anti-Israeli moves by Tehran.¹⁶ Although these speculations seem to have little basis, active Russian support of Tehran in Syria would almost certainly be considered in Israel as further proof of the growing Russian–Iranian alliance.

Egypt

Russian military involvement in Syria produced a harsh anti-Russia backlash throughout the Middle East. This compelled Moscow to intensify its attempts to bring some of the Arab countries onto the Russian side, as a means of diluting anti-Russian sentiment in the region. Subsequently, the Kremlin tried to find support in Egypt. Russia's efforts brought the expected effect: Cairo supported Moscow's actions in Syria and facilitated Moscow's arms supplies to Libya by providing necessary logistic support. Egypt also became actively involved in the revitalization of the diplomatic

¹⁵ "Syria Predupredila Izrayel," *Interfax*, January 13, 2017, <http://www.interfax.ru/world/545163>, accessed March 16, 2017.

¹⁶ "Rossiya i Izrail Dogovorilis o Konsultatciyakh Zamnachalnikov Shtabov po Sirii," *Vzglyad*, 4 October 2015, <http://www.vz.ru/news/2015/10/4/770399.html>, accessed on October 29, 2015.

track of the Syrian crisis settlement by arranging dialogue between the different groupings of the Syrian opposition.

The substantial improvement in relations between the two countries within the last four years should not be considered as exceptional, unexpected, or based solely on their common interest in fighting against Islamic radicals. The intensification of the Russian–Egyptian dialogue was a result of a gradual strengthening of the bilateral ties during the last two decades. It is notable that Egypt’s interest in establishing closer relations with Moscow was demonstrated by Egyptian authorities both under Hosni Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi.¹⁷ It was they (not Abdel Fattah al-Sisi) who essentially prepared the groundwork for what some Russian and Egyptian experts consider “Russia’s return” to Egypt. Therefore the choice of Moscow as one of Cairo’s potential partners was determined not only by the current developments in the Middle East, but also by deep and strategic calculations of the Egyptian elite that tried to improve its relations with Moscow even when Russia was not that much interested in this during the first two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union. Egyptian memories of Soviet assistance provided to Cairo under Gamal abdel Nasser also played some role, as did the gradual understanding that it was too risky for the Egyptian elite solely rely on the United States as a key international partner. Obama administration attempts to put pressure on al-Sisi, limits on arms supplies to his country, and criticism of the Egyptian government for human rights and democracy issues only convinced Cairo that Egypt should diversify its foreign policy and find new allies.

The personality of Vladimir Putin has also played an important role in the spirit of Russian–Egyptian cooperation. Putin’s political agenda aimed at the creation of a multi-polar world and Russia’s increased interaction with non-Western players inevitably pulls Egypt (as one of the key players in the Middle East) into the zone of Moscow’s interests. However, Russian analysts and diplomats are also arguing about Putin’s personal positive attitude towards al-Sisi. Some members of Putin’s administration have even discussed that a certain chemistry exists between the two presidents, which helps them to find a common understanding.¹⁸

¹⁷ Evgeny Bezushenko, “K Vizitu Prezidenta Rossii V.V.Putina v Yegipet,” February 13, 2015, <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=23524>, accessed on March 16, 2017; Pervin Mamed-zadeh, “Rossiya-Yegipet: Dvizheniye v Storonu Sotrudnichestva,” January 14, 2005, <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=3428>, accessed March 16, 2017.

¹⁸ “Peregovory Vyzvanniye Simpatiyey,” *TASS*, February 9, 2015, <http://tass.ru/politika/1753188>, accessed March 16, 2017.

Russia also seems to be trying to reclaim the Soviet Union's role as a U.S. alternative in Egypt. From this perspective, the memory of a Soviet presence in the region serves as an additional benefit to the Russian government. However, Moscow plays this card very carefully. As opposed to the Soviet Union, modern Russia clearly understands that it cannot compete with the United States in the scale of possible economic and political influence. The Kremlin does not oppose Washington directly, but exploits existing Egyptian disappointment with the United States through practical moves that contrast with American and European behavior. Thus, the reluctance of Washington to protect Mubarak when compared to Russian support provided to Assad makes Cairo think about Moscow as a more reliable partner. The decision of the United States and the EU to limit weapons exports to Egypt in 2013 was one of the reasons for the intensification of the Russian–Egyptian discourse on military cooperation.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

In 2011–2012, the growing confrontation between Moscow and the Gulf monarchies caused by the Russian position on Syria tangibly limited Russian options for strengthening cooperation with the GCC. For instance, during 2010–2011, Russia offered to involve Qatar in a number of investment projects worth \$10–12 billion in different fields of the Russian economy (especially in the oil and gas, construction, and gold mining sectors).¹⁹ However, all these proposals were ignored by Doha. Political factors (such as Russian–Qatari differences over approaches to the Arab Spring and the Syrian conflict) were, according to some analysts, critical in determining the lack of a response.²⁰ Moscow's contacts with the other GCC countries also became problematic. Even the UAE, where the Russian presence was probably the strongest in the GCC, was considered as an unreliable partner from the beginning of the Arab Spring.

All in all, the events of the Arab Spring and their aftermath formed a serious stress test for Russian foreign policy towards the GCC. The initial results of this test, however, suggest that Russia has managed to transcend it. During 2013–2016, the growing energy independence of the United States, Washington's intention to bridge relations with Tehran, and the U.S. failure to use force against Bashar al-Assad created grounds for Wash-

¹⁹ Eldar Kasaev, "Rossiya i Katar: Prichiny Ekonomicheskoy Stagnatsii," <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=17847>, accessed October 4, 2013.

²⁰ Ibid.

ington to split with its traditional allies—the Arab monarchies of the Gulf. The potential division between the United States and the GCC created new opportunities for Russia, which had been trying unsuccessfully to increase its presence in the Arab part of the Gulf since 2003. The rumors about U.S. withdrawal from the region compelled Saudi Arabia and its Gulf partners to look for other non-regional countries capable of compensating for a future decrease in the U.S. presence. As a result, some attention was now paid to Moscow, and, in spite of all existing contradictions, the members of the GCC were compelled to continue the dialogue with Russia. By the beginning of 2017, it became obvious that in spite of existing contradictions over a variety of political issues, neither Moscow nor the GCC intend to cross the red lines that would deprive them of the option of rapprochement. The events of the Arab spring clearly demonstrated to Moscow that it should recognize Saudi Arabia and Qatar as regional leaders. At the same time, Moscow's determination in defending its interests in Syria, while at the same time being ready to continue the dialogue with the GCC, proved that Russia was an important player in the region that should not be either neglected or underestimated.

Although the economic relations between the countries of the Gulf and Russia remain underdeveloped, they have certain potential. Moscow is unable to challenge the West's economic presence in the region, nor the growing influence of China (and other Asian countries). Yet, Russia is probably capable of finding its own niche in the Gulf system of economic relations. In its economic efforts, the Kremlin currently focuses on those areas where it has market advantages: nuclear energy, oil and gas, petrochemicals, space, weapons, and grain. Price and reliability are among the main reasons for Middle Eastern countries to become interested in Russian technologies. The Russian government also needs to demonstrate considerable patience, vigilance, and courtesy in developing its relations with the Gulf. The established ties with GCC members are still young and fragile, and they are exposed to the negative influence of external factors such as the unstable situation in the Middle East.

Balancing on the Verge

The overview of the main directions of the Russian diplomacy in the Middle East allows making the following conclusion: Moscow's success in reclaiming its long lost role as an important player in the Middle East was largely determined by its pragmatism and intention to talk to every force in the region it sees as legitimate. Given the complexity of Middle Eastern

realities, this strategy of balancing between all major players was not supposed to work. And yet, it does.

First, Moscow managed to persuade its political interlocutors that it will be much more useful to concentrate on discussion of those areas where Russia and Middle Eastern countries can cooperate rather than spend all their time on trying to persuade Moscow to abandon some partners for the sake of strengthening cooperation with the others.

Second, the overall regional disappointment in the United States and the West compels Middle Eastern countries to accept Russia, due to their perceived need to diversify their foreign policy.

Third, Moscow's capacity to deal with all the major players is appealing in a certain way. Russia is among only a few countries that sustain positive relations with Tehran, Ankara, Damascus, Riyadh, Cairo, and Tel Aviv. This makes Moscow a perfect candidate for the role of a mediator.

Nonetheless, Moscow's strategy of balancing between different powers in the region in order to maintain good relations with them all is ultimately risky. The region still wants Moscow to take its side. Thus, the intensification of dialogue with Tehran raises Iranian expectations of closer cooperation. Yet the formation of any alliance with Tehran would harm Russian dialogue with other states, including Israel and the GCC countries. Under these circumstances, the decision by Moscow not to veto UN Resolution N2216 on Yemen, adopted in April 2015, was a stress test for Russian–Iranian relations; the document imposed a ban on the export of weapons to Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.²¹ Russia managed to avoid an overtly negative Iranian reaction in this instance, but it will not be able to pull off this trick every time.²²

Is Russia a Threat to Western Interests in the Middle East?

There is no one answer to this question. The active Russian presence in the Middle East should not automatically be considered a serious threat to U.S. and EU interests. To begin with, Russia's capacities in the region

²¹ "MID: SB OON Otvetstvenen za Mir v Yemene Posle Prinyatiya Rezolucii," *TVC*, 16 April 2015, <http://www.tvc.ru/news/show/id/66195>, accessed July 13, 2015.

²² "Moscow Backs Iran's Yemen Proposal," *Mehr News Agency*, April 19, 2015, <http://en.mehrnews.com/news/106722/Moscow-backs-Iran-s-Yemen-proposal>, accessed July 13, 2015.

are limited. This limits its ability to engage in direct confrontation with the West there. In most cases, Russia tries to safeguard its existing political and economic interests. Even in Syria, its goals are not completely contrary to Western interests: it accepts the idea of a post-Assad Syria but wants to guarantee Russian presence there.

Moreover, there are several issues where Russian interests fully converge with those of the West. These include protection of the non-proliferation regime in the Middle East, the stabilization of Iraq and Yemen, and counteracting the spread of jihadism. Success on these issues would create further grounds for cooperation. Thus, Russia has been working hard to secure an effective dialogue between Iran and the West on the settlement of the Iranian nuclear issue. The main reason for this is that Russia appeared to be actually interested in the outcome of its efforts and not only in what it could gain during the process. An Iran armed with a nuclear bomb is not desirable for Russia, as this would change the balance of power in the region and encourage other, even less stable, Middle Eastern regimes to join the nuclear club. This, in turn, would pose a genuine threat for Russian security. Under these circumstances, it would be logical for the West to choose issues for cooperation with Russia carefully, where the latter is genuinely interested in an actual solution. Such grounds for interaction can likely be found in issues related to IS, Iraq, Afghanistan, and even Syria and Libya.

Nevertheless, Russia also believes in the success of its current Middle Eastern strategy based on the principle of balancing among different regional players. Success in Syria, rapprochement with Iran, the strengthening of ties with Egypt, and the development of dialogue with Israel and the GCC add to the Kremlin's confidence. As a result, Moscow demonstrates its readiness to defend its interests in the region with the use of not only diplomacy but by military force, if necessary. Consequently, any attempts to change Russia's approaches towards the Middle East will be challenged. While it will remain interested in dialogue with international players on key Middle Eastern issues, Russia will try to impose its own vision of the region's future with little inclination to make concessions.

Under these circumstances, dealing with Russia in the Middle East will be challenging but not impossible. Moscow is extremely suspicious about the West and believes that it has good reasons to blame the United States and EU for its previous misfortunes. The unprecedented (since, at least, the end of the Cold War) scale of the current tensions between Russia and the United States and the EU makes Moscow see its diplomacy in the

Middle East as another avenue that could be used in the confrontation with the West. Thus, the Russian authorities believe that they can exercise additional pressure on the United States and the EU via its contacts with the regional pariah states. Under these circumstances, Russian ties with Assad have special importance for the Kremlin. Even before the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, the issue of Russian–U.S. relations was one of the factors determining Moscow’s stance toward the situation in Syria. Russia was certainly taking what it saw as revenge on the United States for its previous losses in the region. Given the outcomes in Iraq and Libya, Russia learned that the fall of longtime partners inevitably leads to the loss of economic and political influence in those countries. Whether Russia stays out of the conflict (as in Iraq) or unobtrusively helps the West to overthrow its old allies (as in Libya, where Moscow was the first government to stop exports of military equipment to Qaddafi), the result is the same: Russia is compelled to leave countries liberated from dictators (after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Russian companies lost their stakes in the Iraqi energy sector, and it took more than six years for them to begin their sluggish return). Therefore, without solid guarantees regarding the security of its interests, Russia has been fighting hard for Syria, increasing its involvement in Libya and strengthening ties with Iran and Israel.

It is still unclear, however, how substantial Russia’s declared turn to non-Western countries really is. There is a suspicion in the region that Moscow may once again change its policy towards the Middle East as soon as its conflict with the West is over. Although challenges to Russian security that come directly from the region have also become some of the main drivers of Russian policy in the Middle East, so far Moscow’s activities there are still largely determined by factors not directly related to the Middle East—namely, relations with the West. A substantial change in Russian–American relations will inevitably affect Russia’s stance on Middle Eastern issues, although a complete revision of Russian approaches is unlikely. Even during the current fallout with the United States and the EU, Moscow is cautious about direct confrontation with the West over the Middle East unless it is determined to be in the interest of Russian security (as it happened in Syria). In April 2015, Putin decided to lift the ban on the export of S-300 missile complexes to Iran. However, even the sale of the S-300s should be considered as part of Russia’s message to the West rather than a real attempt to change it, given that the number of S-300s delivered to Iran is not enough to change the military balance.

Consequently, it is important to talk to Russia even if the outcome of this talk is not always substantial or immediate. The trust-building process will require time. Moscow also wants to be heard. It also has ambitions to secure the role of an international player whose opinion on key issues matters. As a result, asking Russia for assistance could have an unexpectedly positive role in allaying existing tensions between Moscow and the West. Otherwise, any attempts to isolate Russia can turn it in the serious and not always predictable troublemaker. Yet, while being ready to talk to Russia the West should also be prepared to defend its red lines in the Middle East. Putin and his team respect strong counterparts and neglect weak ones. Being unpunished for crossing red lines convinces the Kremlin of Western weakness and tempts it to be more brutal and decisive.

The set of topics that could be discussed with Moscow is limited, but still there are quite a number of issues to talk about. First, Russia is interested in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. From this point of view, Moscow could be an effective partner in ensuring Iran's adherence to the nuclear agreement reached in 2015. Moscow also understands that the settlement of the Syrian crisis is impossible without launching an international discussion on the future of the post-conflict Syria. In general Russia would like to minimize the number of sources of instability existing in the region. As a result, Moscow's involvement in the discussion of the futures of Libya, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan can be desirable. Finally, there are some opportunities for economic cooperation. For instance, Russian companies appear interested in forming joint energy consortia with foreign companies to develop Middle Eastern hydrocarbon resources. In 2016, one of the Russia's energy behemoths, Gazpromneft, acknowledged its experience of working in a consortium on the development of the Badra oilfield in Iraq as successful. This in turn creates opportunities for cooperation between Russian firms and those Western and local companies that eye Iran as a potential market. Russian energy companies have interests in other places. In fact, Moscow sees Egypt, Libya, Israel, the GCC countries, and even post-war Syria as potential markets.

