

December 2016

Russia in the Middle East: EU & Israeli perspectives Herzliya, 26-27 September 2016

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The annual meeting of the Israeli-European Policy Network (IEPN) in Israel focused on the role and influence of Russia in the Middle East.

As mentioned by one of the participants, the current situation in the Middle East can be described as the “era of Putin”. Most of the Russian efforts now concentrate on Syria. There are virtually three different wars currently taking place in Syria: Internal – between the Assad regime and the rebels; Regional – the Saudis, the Turks and the Qataris are backing the opposition, while Russia and Iran are backing the regime and; A confrontation between great powers – Russia vs. the US. All three conflicts are connected and therefore a durable ceasefire would have to include all of them.

There was consensus among the participants that five factors explain Russia’s involvement in Syria. In decreasing order of importance, it allows Russia to: leverage its role in Syria to improve its geopolitical position vis-à-vis the West; distract attention away from Russia’s domestic economic weaknesses; protect Russia’s military interests in the region and ensure it has a veto over any outcome in Syria; demonstrate loyalty to its allies (as opposed to the US which angered Israel and Saudi Arabia with the conclusion of the Iran deal, and withdrew support from Hosni Mubarak during the Arab Spring) and prevent regime change (also in light of the colour revolutions) and; fight terrorists, many of which have a North Caucasian background. Russia’s support for Assad is also beneficial for Hizbullah and Iran. These actors will be strengthened in the region. Russia’s involvement also strengthens the myth used by jihadi groups; that all major powers

are fighting against the Sunnis. Shia-Sunni tensions are expected to increase and consequently, disorder will characterize post-conflict Syria. The inability of Assad to consolidate gains on the battlefield raises serious questions. Apparently Assad’s army is so weak that Russia has to rely on Shia militias from Iraq to occupy territory it has bombed. These militias listen to Tehran, if to anyone at all.

A good deal of the discussion focused on whether Vladimir Putin would ultimately abandon Assad. Though the Kremlin has regularly signalled its dislike of Assad, Russia now depends on Damascus to deliver results in Syria and so it cannot push too hard. Assad, Putin (and Khamenei) all have different ideas about the Syrian end-game. Besides, military overstretch could become an issue; Russia’s special forces are deployed in Syria, as are some of its most modern aircraft.

Looking ahead, one likely scenario is that Russia will advance Assad’s position until January 2017, when a new US president takes office; after that, Putin might want to strike a deal. But since Putin’s domestic popularity is based on foreign policy strength, he is unlikely to be all too conciliatory.

Moscow seems to have plans for the broader region as well. For instance, Russia is rebuilding its ties with Egypt. Though its involvement in the Syrian war may be more opportunistic, efforts to strengthen ties with Egypt appear more deliberate. Many discussions are taking place between Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and Putin. As part of his flirt with Cairo, Putin is discussing the sale of nuclear power stations. The Kremlin is conducting similar discussions in Riyadh, as well.

Minutes and Conclusions of the Seminar

The European Perspective:

Attitudes towards Russia are a sensitive issue within the framework of EU-Israel relations. The EU is trying



to influence its allies, including Israel, to put pressure on Russia so it amends its policies in Syria and in Ukraine.

The Russian intervention in the Middle East stands in stark contrast to the policy of the EU. The EU and Russia do not have the same view of Syria's destiny. Russia, first and foremost, supports the Assad regime in Syria militarily in order to preserve its interests in the region. The EU gives limited support to the rebels, denounces Assad and backs a political process that could lead to a political transition and a new regime. Europe must acknowledge the context of Russia's involvement in Syria. America's presence in the region has weakened, creating an opportunity for the Russian government to advance its position. There is no guarantee that once the administration of Donald Trump takes office in spring 2017, the situation will change. If the EU wants to avoid Russia from determining the fate of the region, it should increase its influence. For the moment, it is unclear how.

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, EU foreign ministers have endorsed the French peace initiative (which was rejected by Israel), including an international conference. Russia, instead, wants to host a bilateral meeting between Netanyahu and Abbas. Although the Israeli government seems to support Putin's initiative, the EU considers this as an action that undermines the Quartet and derides it as a photo opportunity for Putin rather than a viable effort.

The Israeli Perspective:

Israeli support for Russia was described as based on realpolitik pragmatism. Israel is building close ties to the Kremlin. Israel has not supported G7 sanctions against Russia; it keeps quiet over Crimea and the Donbas, and NATO's subsequent response (Israel abstained during a UN General Assembly vote on the Crimea annexation). The Israeli government is in discussions with Russia about a free trade agreement with the Eurasian economic union. Relations between Israel and Russia are an example that, when there is a common goal, it is possible to work together effectively, even if the parties do not agree on all issues.

Israel has two recognised goals in Syria: safe borders

and the ability to destroy weapons destined for Hezbollah and others. Currently, while Israel felt that the US was absent and irrelevant in the Middle East (let alone the EU), it believes Russia delivers on these points. Israeli-Russian relations in Syria focus on coordinating military activities and avoiding any incidents, such as Turkey's recent shooting down of a Russian airplane. But crucially, Russia allows Israeli jets to hit Hezbollah's weapons shipments destined for Lebanon. The personal relationship between Putin and Netanyahu appears to be much better than that between Netanyahu and Obama.

That being said, the existence of a Tehran-Damascus-Beirut axis is not of Israeli interest. If not for the support of various countries, primarily Russia, this peculiar partnership (between seculars and religious Shiites) would not hold up and the war in Syria would have likely gone in different directions, perhaps even an overthrow of the Assad regime and as a result, new game dynamics in the entire region.

Thus, despite previous delaying shipments of strategic weaponry to Iran (S300 air defence systems) and Syria (missiles), Russia has now completed the transfer of the S300 systems to Iran, and is currently in advanced negotiations on a \$10 billion deal, which, according to Russian media reports, include the sale of fighter jets, advanced Soviet T-90 tanks, helicopters and artillery systems.

The prevailing view among experts is that Israel has never been so secure. There is no existential threat; the IDF is stronger than any other (coalition of) adversaries; the peace deal with Jordan and Egypt has survived the Arab Spring; Al-Sisi and Netanyahu cooperate very closely; Iran and Assad are a greater threat to Saudi Arabia and ISIS, than they are to Israel. Syria's army is weak, Hezbollah is focused on helping Assad (rather than fighting Israel) and ISIS is focused on Assad as well. Overall, low oil prices mean less money for Israel's enemies.

So far, Israel has tried to avoid becoming actively involved in the Syrian conflict. After all, Israel's various enemies are fighting each other in Syria. One Israeli participant said Israel simply had to stay out of Syria and watch its security improve. He also said Russia was a stabilising influence in the region as it keeps

checks on Iran's and Hizbullah's influence. However, Israel is not completely uninvolved. It gives medical treatment to Free Syrian Army fighters in Southern Syria, and in any Syrian endgame the fate of the Syrian Druze, which have close ties to the Druze population living in Israel, might draw Israel in. The assumption that Russia will be able to manage Iran and Hizbullah for the longer term is very optimistic; Israel has no guarantees that Hizbullah will not focus its attention on Israel again. The current honeymoon between Israel and Russia may not last.

Conclusion:

Relations between Israel and Russia, as well as between Russia and the EU are not a matter of friendship, but of interests. Israel wants its northern border to be safe and its neighbours unable to access strategic weapons. Beyond that, Israel has no specific interest as to who will have power in Syria. The EU would prefer better relations with Russia, but it is unwilling to compromise its position regarding Syria, Ukraine and regional policy towards other former Soviet Union countries. Nor does it want to belittle the role of the Quartet.

There is a significant difference of opinion between Europeans and Israelis about how to interpret Russia's role in the Middle East. While, in general, Israel believes Russia has a stabilizing influence, the EU believes that Russia simply, opportunistically supports the status quo and does not have a real plan for the Middle East.

Increase in EU-Russia tension / Increase in Israel-Russia friendship – What does it mean?

Kati Piri

Member of the European Parliament, Socialists & Democrats

As a Member of the European Parliament, it is not my role to comment on the so-called 'increase in Israel-Russia friendship'. But I have my doubts about how sincere that friendship can be.

Russia's new ambitions for the Middle East region are of great concern to the EU. After vetoing for five years any meaningful action on Syria in the UN Security Council, Russia's military intervention last year established Putin as a key interlocutor in the Middle East. In the Middle East peace process, Moscow is looking for a separate role too, outside of the framework of the Quartet. And in addition to that, huge tensions with the EU already existed following aggression in Ukraine. What all these three cases illustrate is a clash of values and a profoundly different interpretation of the international order.

Neighbourhood

Let us start with the first case: Russia's role in the joint neighbourhood with the EU - as this has caused the biggest freeze in EU-Russia relations since the end of the Cold War. All six countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood contain either a so-called breakaway-region supported by Moscow or, in the case of Ukraine, face the annexation of part of the country. This gives Russia a strong leverage in all these countries. Military presence and force in combination with its propaganda machinery and financing of political parties are the tools used to chip away at the West's influence throughout Eastern Europe and to destabilize these countries.

The European Union has strongly condemned Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and does not recognize it. Furthermore, it remains extremely concerned about the continuing violence in the East of Ukraine where the rebels have the full support of the Russian



leadership.

In March 2014, the European Council agreed upon the first diplomatic measures in response to Russian actions in the country. And later that same year, in the absence of de-escalatory steps by the Russian Federation, the EU imposed travel bans and asset freezes against persons involved in actions against Ukraine's territorial integrity. European unity on sanctions was only found after the downing of flight MH17 whereby 298 innocent passengers lost their lives of which 196 of my country, the Netherlands.

The EU's sanctions do have an impact and have damaged the Russian economy that is also suffering heavily from low oil prices - which caused an economic recession for six consecutive quarters. The sanctions have been prolonged recently since there has been no progress in solving the outstanding issues on the basis of the Minsk agreement of the Normandy Four. Although the Minsk process has caused a de-escalation of the conflict, there are still problems with implementation of the agreement – by both sides. As of the end of August 2016, the ceasefire is violated frequently. OSCE recorded more violations in Donetsk, including 209 explosions on a single day. In addition, heavy weaponry has never been withdrawn.

The EU wants a stable neighbour that is independent and sovereign. Russia, however, wants to maintain a stake in Ukraine to be able to 'protect' the interests of the Russian speaking population there. These goals clash as the EU keeps condemning the obvious violation of international borders.

Syria

Then the second case: Syria. The Russian military intervention in Syria started in September 2015 after an official request by the Syrian government for military help against rebel and jihadist groups. Prior to these operations, Russian involvement had mainly consisted of supplying the Syrian Army to help the Syrian government retake territory from the opposition groups.

From Russia's point of view, it is understandable that it cannot ignore a region so close geographically and as unstable as the Middle East. The country, however, has no sustainable, democratic design for the region. It actually prefers a kind of status quo hesitant, as it is

to intervene in internal affairs of states or to support democratic movements. Russia's reappearance as a player in the Middle East under President Putin has as one of its main aims to restore the country's position as a great power outside the former USSR – an effort which is highly popular in Russia itself. In a way, Syria has become a key testing ground for Russia's attempt to return to the global stage.

In addition, there is an increased willingness of Russia to develop relations with Middle Eastern countries and Putin prefers ruling authoritarians to "revolutionary chaos", as he has labelled the Arab Spring. Russia has entered a new phase of military cooperation with, in particular, Iran and Syria. Those in Israel that want improved relations with Moscow should be aware of these facts. Russia has unquestionably become a dominant player in the Syrian crisis these days. With a relatively modest investment, it has certainly gained diplomatic leverage.

The Syria crisis has certainly made relations between the EU and Russia more complicated. Moreover, Russia's recent attacks on an aid convoy and the Aleppo onslaught will also have a – negative – effect on the West's cooperation with Russia. Based on shared interests, the US and the EU have been looking for ways to cooperate – for example, there is officially cooperation in the fight against ISIS, but in the end we support different groups in Syria and disagree on the future of the country.

Furthermore, the unconditional support for Assad regime's violence against its own population makes Moscow very unpopular among the region's Sunni majority.

Israel / Palestine

And then the third case: the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict. Russia can and should be a partner in attempts to bring about a peaceful settlement. The history of Israeli-Russian-EU relationship is complicated, but with the emergence of Putin, Israel found the closest thing to a friend it has ever had in Moscow. Together with the EU, Russia is involved in the Quartet for the Middle East, the four major nations trying to mediate between the opposing sides in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, although there are for the moment no concrete initiatives. But this seems to be



another example where Russia wants to conduct a so-called “Alleingang” (solo effort), exploiting its strong relationship with the current Israeli government.

Conclusion

Since Putin’s rise to power, Russia and the European Union have grown apart; representing different values and different models of government. It will not be easy to bridge these gaps and they pose as big a risk for the EU as to the Syrian crisis, the internal consequences of the refugee crisis and the consequences of Brexit. The problem is not only that it will be difficult to reconcile opposing fundamental views, but it also challenges unity within the EU. The Polish view of Putin, for example, differs considerably from the Italian one.

There are attempts to revive the so called Helsinki process that played an important role during the Cold War in stabilising the security situation in Europe and offering a platform for dialogue also on values issues. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) could be a forum for such efforts allowing an open debate about diverging views and conflicting security interests without preconditions and without reversing important international principles. The Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bert Koenders, always uses the metaphor of the fist and the extended hand combined, as a policy the EU should apply vis-à-vis Putin. Honestly speaking, we are still looking for ways to give meaning to the ‘extended hand’ part. But since there will not be an easy way out of the present predicament, the relation between Russia and the EU will remain tense. It will be hard to lift the sanctions as long as Moscow does not implement the Minsk agreement. Putin will not give in as long as his foreign policies remain the pillar of his popularity. The tension also finds an expression in the very violent anti NATO and anti EU rhetoric in Russia and the continuing military build-up which makes some neighbours very nervous and has already alerted NATO and its member states that are increasing their defence budgets.

So, I am not optimistic. On the other hand, we do not see a return to the dark days of the Cold War. The economies of the EU and Russia are and remain intertwined. Cooperation in many areas continues.

We still have certain interests in common and do not want a complete rupture. That may be enough to find a compromise on the most pressing issue of how to deal with the shared neighbourhood. But it will be a struggle to regain trust, although my colleagues from the right wing are no longer open for any dialogue with Moscow, accepting new dividing lines on the European continent.

I wish Israel better relations with everyone, including Russia. But let it not be to the detriment of its links with the West.



Russia's Comeback – Russia and the Syrian civil War

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Introduction

In September 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin surprised the entire world when he declared that his country would send troops to Syria to intervene in the fighting alongside the regime of Bashar al-Assad and against his opponents, mainly those who belong to radical Islamic organizations, such as ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sha'm [Syria]) and the "Nusra Front," ("Jabhat al-Nusra," "The Support Front for the People of al-Sha'm [Syria]"). Among their fighters were many Muslim volunteers from Russia. It is therefore no wonder that Russia presented its involvement as necessary in order to defend itself against the menace of radical Islam domestically. At the same time it was clear that Russia's involvement in Syria was also based upon considerations of honour and prestige. That is, Russia wanted to regain its position as a recognized world power. Moscow had other considerations as well, for example, its desire to use its involvement in Syria as a lever to gain an advantage over the United States, its main rival, in other arenas around the world, especially Eastern Europe. Russia's involvement in Syria was carried out in cooperation with Iran and, indirectly, with Hezbollah as well. This meant that an axis or alliance had emerged with implications for other parts of the Middle East beyond the territory of Syria.

Russia's intervention in Syria saved Bashar al-Assad's regime from almost certain collapse and even helped it stabilize, strengthen its position and take back control of some of the territories it had lost. The Russians failed, however, to win the war and bring it to an end. Nevertheless, beyond its immediate achievements on Syrian soil, Russia's involvement brought about a strengthening of its position in the Middle East and internationally as well. Russia became an important regional player whose opinion and interests, everyone – including Israel, and even Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – was careful to respect. It was now

clear that any settlement of the Syrian crisis would have to win Russia's approval. It also seems that thanks to its involvement in Syria, Russia acquired the ability to influence other regions of controversy and confrontation in the Middle East. One can even discern a desire, or at least willingness, on the part of the US and Europe to cooperate with Moscow on such issues as the fight against terrorism and the guaranteeing regional stability. Russia's intervention in Syria was thus a gamble that paid off well, perhaps even better than the Russians themselves expected and certainly better than the Americans expected. The Americans, for their part, preferred to disengage from the region and, in practice, leave it in the hands of the Russians. Be all this as it may, the Middle East never ceases to surprise. Thus, it could in the long run, as Afghanistan did in its time, sink Russia into a lengthy, expensive, and ultimately worthless adventure.

Russia from the Outbreak of the "Arab Spring" to Involvement in the War in Syria

The outbreak of the "Arab Spring" in mid-winter 2010 and the revolutions it led to in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and eventually Syria, found Russia in the midst of a long journey designed to restore its strength and the position it had lost when the Soviet Union collapsed nearly two decades earlier. During those two decades, Russia lost most of its positions of influence in the Middle East and ceased being a powerful player whose opinions had to be taken into consideration.

When the "Arab Spring" broke out in late 2010 it seemed as if the storm striking the Arab world would most likely destroy whatever influence Moscow still had in the region. Russia's remaining allies, or at least the secular regimes that were potential partners in Moscow's struggle against radical Islam, like Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, suddenly collapsed. It seemed that this was the way things would go in Syria as well. The fallen regimes gave way to Islamic movements from which the Russians could expect very little good. No one could have imagined at the time that the "Arab Spring" would open a path before Russia enabling it to return to the region in a big way, which it eventually did in Syria and to some extent in Egypt as well.



Russia's initial reaction to the outbreak of the "Arab Spring," still during the time of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, was one of surprise, perplexity, and helplessness. For example, Russia abstained when the United Nations Security Council voted to adopt Resolution 1973 in March 2011. The Resolution made it possible for the Western countries to launch an attack on the Libyan forces that were loyal to Libya's ruler Mu'ammār Qadhafi. The campaign led to the collapse of Qadhafi's regime and the dissolution of the Libyan state. Moscow's initial response to the crisis in Syria was also hesitant and faltering. In a series of statements issued at the time Russian President Dmitry Medvedev even expressed some disapproval of Russia's old ally when he criticized the way Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was responding to the crisis in his country.

However, to Russia, or to be more precise, to Vladimir Putin, who returned for the second time to the presidency of Russia at the beginning of 2012, it became clear that the process the Arab world was undergoing amounted to a clear and present danger to Russian interests in the region and beyond. Indeed, the "Arab Spring" soon became an "Islamic winter," with the rise to prominence of Islamic forces, whether moderate, like the "Muslim Brotherhood" in Egypt and Tunisia, or extreme, like ISIS and "The Support Front" ("Jabhat al-Nusra") in Iraq and Syria. Russia's traditional allies in the region were the secular regimes that ruled in many Arab states. The Islamic forces replaced some of those regimes (in Libya, for example) and threatened to replace Moscow's allies that had so far survived the wave of revolutions sweeping the Middle East (the regime of Bashar al-Assad, for example). Moreover, in Moscow's eyes the spread of Islamic extremism throughout the Middle East presented a clear and present danger to Russia's own national security, since it was afraid Islamic extremism would seep into the Muslim communities in Russia itself. Warning signs were already present, since Moscow could not ignore the growing number of volunteers streaming into the ranks of the Islamic organizations in Syria and Iraq from the Caucasus, a charged region prone to trouble in any case.

The Middle East was a traditional theatre of operations

for Russia due to its geographical proximity and the historical ties that bound Moscow to the Arab lands; at one time or another in the course of their development many of the Arab states were close allies of Russia. It was therefore clear to Putin that Russia's return to playing a major role in the international arena required it to go back and occupy influential positions in the Middle East. This meant that the region would be turned into an international arena of struggle in which Moscow sought to demonstrate its power and determination while exploiting the weakness shown by the United States under the leadership of President Barack Obama, who wanted to disengage from the region, or at least avoid sinking into renewed involvement there. What was perceived in the Middle East as America's weakness left behind not only a vacuum, but also many allies who were greatly disappointed and frustrated by the cold shoulder Washington had turned to them.

Russian involvement was expressed first of all in Moscow's coming down on the side of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. Beginning in 2012, with Putin's return to the presidency, and actually even earlier, Moscow increased the economic and military assistance it gave Syria. At the same time Russia worked to block any attempt in the UN Security Council to adopt resolutions that would provide an umbrella or international legitimacy for military action against Bashar al-Assad, or place responsibility or blame on him for the crisis taking place in his country. Thus, for example, Moscow together with China vetoed a number of UN Security Council resolutions: the 5 October 2011 call for condemnation of the Syrian regime on account of its responsibility for events in the country; the 4 February 2012 call to Bashar al-Assad to step down as Syrian president; and the 19 July 2012 call to the international community to step up the sanctions that had been placed on Damascus and expand them to the economy.

Later, in September 2013, Russia supported the agreement that provided for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons. This enabled US President Obama to come down from the limb he had climbed on following the Syrian president's use of chemical weapons in August 2013 east of Damascus. Assad's



use of chemical weapons in that instance had led to the US threatening a military response against the Syrian regime.

Syria was not the only arena in which the Russians demonstrated their power and their aspiration to come back and play a central role in the Middle East. Also in Egypt, Moscow backed General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi following the 30 June 2013 overthrow of the government of Muslim Brotherhood adherent Muhammad Mursi. This Russian backing came against the background of the cold shoulder the American government had turned to al-Sisi and his regime.

The Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia, also turned to Russia. In the case of the Saudis, Riyadh began talks to purchase Russian weapons for the first time in its history. In June 2015 the Saudi Minister of Defence, Prince Mohammad bin Salman, the King's son, made the first Saudi visit of its kind to Moscow. It is possible that the Gulf States hoped Russia could serve as a buttress for them against Iran, since they were now apprehensive that the US, unlike its conduct in the past, would be deterred from taking a clear and decisive stand alongside them in times of trial.

Even Israel sought to maintain and strengthen its relations with Russia, assisted by the fact that it counted among its population a large community of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. As Vladimir Putin liked to claim, Moscow remained committed to these people since they constituted the largest community of "Russians" outside his empire's borders. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's courting of Putin stood out in light of the coolness prevailing in Netanyahu's relations with US President Obama. Thus, at the beginning of 2014 Israel abstained from condemning Russia for its annexation of Crimea and refrained from joining the economic and diplomatic measures taken against Moscow by Europe and the United States.

However, it seemed that besides the desire to help Bashar al-Assad and embarrass the United States and, of course, strengthen Russia's position in the region, Russian involvement in Syria was also based on the desire to curb the Islamic forces, whether the extremists of ISIS and "The Support Front" ("Jabhat al-Nusra") or the more moderate Islamic forces, some

of which received support from Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Moscow viewed all of these forces as a threat to itself. The Russians realized that Washington and its allies were not having any success in dealing with ISIS, and they certainly showed no promise of destroying it. From this the Russians drew the conclusion that only "state power" could subdue ISIS and the other radical Islamic forces operating in the region, and since ISIS and its fellows had emerged as a result of the collapse of Iraq and Syria, then it was necessary to act to put these countries back on their feet so they could deal with the Islamic extremists. In the case of Syria Russia's work seemed easier for two reasons. For one thing, there was the tradition of a Russian presence in the country; for another, the Syrian state institutions continued to function, even if only partially, in those areas that remained under Assad's control, and they could serve as the nucleus for rebuilding the state and its institutions. A goal such as this – the restoration of the institutions of the Syrian state so that it could serve as a barrier to ISIS – was also acceptable to Washington, as was well known. The only point of disagreement between the two powers was whether Bashar al-Assad was part of the solution to the crisis in Syria and therefore his remaining in power would have to be tolerated, or was he the source of the problem and therefore he must leave power before it would be possible to bring the war in Syria to an end. On 2 September 2015, Russian warplanes arrived in Syria and a few days later Moscow admitted that Russian military experts were on Syrian soil helping Assad's army master the use of the weapons that Russia was sending in order to fight terrorism. The Russian force amounted to several dozen fighter planes and attack helicopters as well as surface-to-air missile batteries. Teamed with these were special forces and ground forces whose task apparently was to secure the air and missile forces that had been sent to Syria. Most of the Russian forces were stationed at the Humaymim airbase on the Syrian coast, which the Syrians gave over to the Russians for use as a base of operations in Syria. This was in addition to Tartus port, which had long become a home port for Russian vessels visiting Syria. Not long after the Russian fighter planes arrived, in late September 2015 reports began



to arrive from Syria that several thousand fighters of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards had also arrived in the country to fight alongside Assad's forces and the Russian fighters and helicopters.

The Russians wasted no time and on 30 September 2015 Russian planes began bombing rebel targets in the north and east of the country. On 7 October 2015, the Russians launched for the first time 26 cruise missiles from ships sailing in the Caspian Sea in southern Russia at targets in northern Syria. Some of the missiles, incidentally, fell on Iranian soil. On 29 October 2015, Russian aircraft launched attacks for the first time in southern Syria, in the area of the city of Dar'a, and later in the Syrian Golan Heights, near the border with Israel. The Russians claimed that the targets they hit belonged to ISIS and "The Support Front" ("Jabhat al-Nusra"). However, Syrian opposition and Western sources issued reports stating that the targets attacked by the Russians belonged for the most part to moderate rebel groups, like the "Jaysh al-Islam" and "Ahrar al-Sham," some of which were in contact with the West, and with Turkey and Saudi Arabia in particular. A year later, in mid-August 2016, it was reported in Moscow that Russia launched a fleet of bombers bound for Syria from an Iranian air base in Hamadan, becoming the first foreign military to operate from Iran's soil since at least World War II. Predictably, Moscow's involvement in Syria turned Russia into a prime enemy and target in the eyes of the radical Islamic organizations, inside Syria and abroad. Of course, they had tended to view Russia as an enemy even before this, due to Moscow's longstanding support for the Syrian regime and, of course, Moscow's struggle against the Chechens and other Muslim communities inside Russia. On 31 October 2015, a Russian passenger plane was blown up over the Sinai Peninsula, killing 224 passengers. A branch of ISIS in Sinai ("Wilayat Sinai," "The Sinai Province of the Islamic State") took responsibility for the explosion, which they said was in retaliation for Moscow's involvement in the war in Syria.

Russia's activities in Syria's skies resulted in an unprecedented Russian-Turkish confrontation. On 24 November 2015, a Russian Sukhoi SU-24 fighter plane was shot down by a Turkish aircraft as it was attacking

Turkmen militias with close ties to Turkey active in the Turkmen Mountain (Jabl al-Turkman) region on the northern coast of Syria. The incident caused a crisis in relations between Moscow and Ankara. President Putin described the downing of the plane as a "stab in the back by supporters of terrorism." Turkey, for its part, expressed regret for the incident but refused to apologize at first. Only about half a year later, in June 2016, did Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issue an apology for the incident in an effort to calm the tension between the two countries. The incident itself, as might have been expected, led to increased Russian involvement and presence in Syria, since President Putin felt he had to prop up his image in light of the blow Russia had received. He increased the number of Russian aircraft in Syria and ordered the stationing of advanced S-400 ground-to-air missiles at the Humaymim Base being used by Russia on the Syrian coast. The missiles, Moscow claimed, were intended to protect its aircrafts.

Israel also became concerned about Russia's increasing activities in the skies of Syria. In October 2015 Russian aircraft began operating in southern Syria near the border with Israel. Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon even revealed that a Russian plane had crossed the Israeli-Syrian border in at least one case during November 2015. In July 2016 there was a report about the intrusion of a Russian drone into the Golan Heights. Israel's attempts to down it using Patriot missiles and even fighter planes failed. Moscow later admitted that this was its drone and claimed that it had infiltrated into Israel accidentally. It seems that Israel was concerned about the arrival of the Russian fighter planes in Syria because they might limit Israel's own manoeuvrability and freedom of action in Syrian skies. To alleviate the situation Israel worked to achieve a degree of coordination with Moscow. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin met several times in the Russian capital for this purpose. Senior Israel Defence Forces (IDF) officers, including the Chief of Staff and the Commander of the Israel Air Force, joined some of these visits. The leaders of the two countries agreed to establish a communication hot line in order to prevent mishaps and misunderstandings. However,



it should be noted that this was not an intimate alliance such as Russia chose to establish with Iran in Syria, but at most a channel of communication to be used during or after a problematic incident.

Russia's involvement in Syria presented a challenge to the United States. On the one hand, Moscow's move was consistent with Washington's desire to lead an international campaign in the struggle against ISIS, but it was also clear that Russia aimed at gaining a firm foothold in Syria and that it was exploiting the struggle against ISIS to fight the moderate rebel groups in western Syria in order to guarantee the survival of Assad's regime in Damascus. Washington, however, avoided a confrontation with Moscow and settled for feeble statements condemning Russia's ever-deepening involvement in Syria. Representatives of the US administration, like Secretary of State John Kerry, defined Russia's intervention at most as "not useful" and as something that could exacerbate the crisis in Syria and intensify the fighting in the country instead of bringing it to an end. In the face of the Americans' foot-dragging, Moscow found itself alone and without competition on the Syrian playing ground, and consequently without any factor that could challenge or limit its moves. It goes without saying that the Russians exploited to the full the freedom of action granted them willy-nilly by the Western states, led by the US.

The strategy Moscow adopted in its fighting in Syria tended to copy the model Russia employed in its wars in Chechnya during the 1990s. The model proposed a military effort standing on two pillars. One involved the systematic and deliberate destruction of rural and urban areas by means of aerial bombing or shelling from the ground. This inevitably led to harming the civilian population that was suspected of supporting the rebels. The civilians, in turn, either fled or were chased away so that large areas of Syria were left without inhabitants. The second pillar of Russia's strategy involved Iranian-Syrian ground efforts led by the Syrian regime's forces, which included forces of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards or fighters from the Hezbollah organization as a prominent element. These ground efforts were intended to complement and bring to completion Russia's air operations.

The "Chechen Model" implemented by the Russians

throughout Syria with great determination and without any interference damaged the unity and morale of the rebels in large areas of the country. This enabled the regime and its allies – the Iranian forces, Shi'ite militias, and Hezbollah fighters – to take the initiative away from the rebels and gain control of a number of strategic outposts and important key positions in northern, central, and southern Syria.

However, at the same time the Russians lent a hand, together with Washington, in advancing a peace process designed to bring the war in Syria to an end. More than once the Russians even demonstrated a degree of flexibility in order to advance this process. Thus, in late February 2016 they cooperated with the United States in the declaration of a ceasefire, however fragile and temporary. They also discussed with the Americans ways to coordinate the fighting against the radical Islamic organizations and ways to bring about an agreed formula for settling the crisis in Syria. As a public relations step, in mid-March 2016 the Russians announced the withdrawal of their forces from Syria. However, this announcement turned out to have no substance, for Russian forces remained on Syrian soil and continued fighting the rebels opposing the Syrian regime.

It seems that the Russians came to the conclusion that the existence of a political process, and even more, the existence of a parallel movement on both the diplomatic and military tracks, did not represent any threat to their interests. In any case, Moscow's military involvement in Syria guaranteed that any final result would be to Moscow's liking. Moscow would have a decisive say in the result, no matter whether a political settlement was reached or the effort to get a settlement failed. It also seems that despite the mounting tension between Washington and Moscow, the two powers remained committed to finding a political settlement that would end the fighting in Syria. For it was clear to each of them that despite their differences of opinion regarding Syria, they would do well to serve their immediate interest. For the Americans this was the struggle against ISIS; for the Russians it was to secure Moscow's position in Syria. And for both, a political solution was preferable over the continuation of the war that was liable to sink them into an intervention involving the spilling of their own soldiers' blood.

Conclusion

Russia's direct military involvement in Syria since late 2015 was a demonstration of the fact that military force can "make a difference," and further proof of the understanding that strategic wisdom is expressed in the correct combination of military force and political processes. Russia's military moves in Syria in the fall of 2015 saved the Assad regime from imminent defeat, changed the balance of power in Syria, and produced levers for achieving a ceasefire and diplomatic dialogue. Putin could thus consider his move a success and enjoy the fruits of his achievements in Syria, which enabled him, among other things, to divert the attention of his public at home away from their economic problems. This was helped, of course, by the fact that the price Moscow had to pay in casualties up to that point was negligible.

Russia's involvement in Syria gave expression to the fact that Russia was returning not only to the Middle East, but to the global map as well, as an important player, active not only in nearby areas of interest, like Ukraine and Eastern Europe, but also far beyond. Indeed, Russia's involvement in Syria could serve as a means to pressure the West to remove the "Ukraine sanctions" imposed by the United States and Europe following Russia's operations in Ukraine, and to reach agreements on other disputed issues in other parts of the world as well.

It should be noted that Moscow's achievements in the renewed Cold War stemmed in no small measure from the fact that so far no real adversary had stood up against Russia. The US was missing due to its determination, after the failure it experienced in Iraq, not to return to the Middle East by employing military force. In addition, the US was inclined to disengage from the Middle East altogether, due the region's decline in importance in Washington's eyes.

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Russia's military intervention in Syria: interests, achievements and obstacles

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On 30 September 2015, Russia launched its military campaign in Syria. The intervention reflects broader changes in Moscow's policy towards the Middle East that encompasses ambitions, instruments and cost-benefit calculations. While in previous years, Russia's assertiveness was noticeable mostly with regard to the post-Soviet space and the Euro-Atlantic region, it now increasingly reaches out to the Middle East, too. A stronger position in this crucial region is perceived as an opportunity to re-establish Russia as a global great power which is the overall goal of Russia's foreign policy.

Since Putin's third term as president (2012), Moscow has pursued a more risk-prone approach in its foreign policy. This became obvious in the Ukraine crisis when Russia's leadership was ready to risk the most profound crisis with Western states since the end of the Cold War, including economic sanctions. Deploying troops to Syria and abandoning its hitherto cautious policy towards the Middle East is in line with this trend.

The risk-prone approach is the result of two developments. Firstly, we can observe a growing confidence in the extended toolbox of Russian foreign policy in general and in the strengthened capabilities of its armed forces in particular. In autumn 2008, Moscow started the most radical and comprehensive military reform in decades, aimed at transforming its outdated mass mobilization army into modern combat ready armed forces. The achievements in military reform now allow for underpinning (geo-) political interests with conventional hard power even beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Although on a limited scale, the intervention in Syria represents the first case of expeditionary warfare outside of the post-Soviet space since the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, by deploying troops to Syria, Russia abandoned its hitherto cautious policy towards the Middle East and switched to a more risk-prone approach.

Secondly, the risk-prone approach of Russia's foreign policy is linked to domestic considerations. While for a long time, the legitimacy of Putin's system rested on economic performance and the ability to enhance living standards for broader parts of the population, this model slipped into crisis when oil revenues declined and when the consequences of failed economic reforms coupled with the effects of US and European sanctions became obvious. In order to fill the legitimacy gap, the Kremlin turned to the field of foreign policy by strengthening the traditional narrative of Russia as a great power.

Official Justification

President Putin justified the military intervention by pointing to the necessity to combat international terrorism and to reduce the threat of terrorists returning to Russia from the Middle East. Indeed, Islamic terrorism is a real security concern to Russia. Several thousands of Russians – mostly from the North Caucasus region – and citizens from other post-Soviet states joined the ranks of the so-called Islamic State and other Islamist groups. Russia is one of the countries mostly affected by terrorist attacks – from Dubrovka (2002), Beslan (2004) to several attacks on Russian planes, Moscow's metro and airports. However, looking at the geographical distribution of Russian airstrikes in Syria reveals that combatting Islamist groups is only of secondary importance for Russia. To a large degree, Russian airstrikes against Islamist groups are selective and instrumental. They tend to target areas where Assad's troops are directly challenged by Islamist groups or are meant to increase Russia's image as an indispensable partner in the fight against a common threat.

Russian Interests

The immediate cause for Russian military intervention was not so much a growing terrorist threat but the prospect of Assad's regime losing power. Since the beginning of 2015, the Syrian government's forces were forced onto the defensive. Assad's fall would have greatly undermined Russia's position, both in Syria and in the entire region. However, the Kremlin's decision to intervene in Syria was not only an act under

pressure. The Russian leadership saw it as a window of opportunity to kill several birds with one stone and achieve aims in Syria, in the region and even beyond. By supporting Assad's forces to recapture part of the areas they had lost, Moscow wants to improve its bargaining position in the Syrian conflict. Russia demands to co-determine the setup of political negotiations and to ensure that its core interests will be protected. These core interests are the preservation of Russia's military infrastructure in Syria, a political transformation process that guarantees control of pro-Russian forces over key political, security and military institutions and that preserves the secular order in Syria. Although there are no hints that Putin and Assad are bound by personal loyalty, Russia strongly rejects the idea that Assad has to step down as a precondition for negotiations. Since the "colour revolutions" and the "Arab spring", the Russian leadership tries to avoid another example of a regime change driven by popular unrest or external interference. The fate of Libya's President Qadhafi turned that issue even more in a matter of principle for a leadership that faced mass protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg on 2011/12 and that is facing an economic crisis.

Russia's aims grasp beyond Syria. With a veto-position in the Syrian conflict Russia strives to realize its broader objective to become an important actor in the region, too. While after the Cold War, in general, and after the US intervention in Iraq 2003, in particular, Russia lost influence in the Middle East, it now sees a chance to regain regional importance. Moscow does not strive for a hegemonic position in Middle East but it wants to be part of the regional concert again.

Russia's motives for intervening in Syria reach beyond the region, too. By positioning itself as an indispensable actor in today's most pressing international conflict, the Kremlin intends to change the dynamics of Russian-Western relations to its advantage. Russia wants to use its key role in Syria to get concessions from the West. With regard to the EU that is struggling with the refugee crisis, Moscow hopes for positive spill over effects like gradually lifting sanctions or generally decreasing the importance of the Ukraine crisis for Russian-European relations. Even more important,

Russia saw a chance to force the US administration to abandon its isolation policy towards Russia and re-establish direct Russian-American cooperation. Being recognized as a global actor on equal footing with the US has been one of the key ambitions of Russian foreign policy since the end of the Cold War.

Achievements

The Syrian intervention to a great deal met the expectations of the Russian leadership. With still limited military means, it managed to achieve a considerable part of its objectives.

In the Syrian conflict, Russian military assistance did not only prevent a defeat of Assad's armed forces but was instrumental in switching from the defensive to the offensive and in securing territorial gains. By consequence, Moscow successfully curtailed the room of manoeuvre for other actors and limited the range of options that have been discussed and that have not been in line with the Russian position – like no-fly zones. Although Russia is not able to dominate the political negotiations, it had considerably enhanced its bargaining position and effectively became a veto power whose interests simply cannot be ignored anymore. As a result, the US administration, many European countries and even Turkey de facto changed their attitude with regard to the role of Assad in a transition period by stopping to demand his immediate resignation.

With a key role in the Syrian conflict, Moscow managed to underpin its ambitions to be recognized as an important regional actor in the Middle East. While at the beginning of the "Arab Spring" and the Syrian crisis, many experts expected Russia to lose influence and to become isolated in the region, Russia's position in general and military intervention in particular proved to be a game changer. Moscow was not only able to pursue a successful damage limitation policy – with regard to Jordan or Saudi Arabia – but even managed to expand its ties with important regional powers like Egypt.

By strengthening its military presence in Syria, Russia enhanced its regional power projection capabilities – although they are still on a limited scale in comparison to US deployments in the region. Besides the naval



facility in Tartus, by agreement with the Syrian leadership of August 2015 Russian armed forces use the airfield at Humaymim free of charge and for an unlimited time. While Tartus is crucial to secure Russian naval activities in the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Africa, Humaymim airbase offers a bridgehead for its air force.

Furthermore, the Syrian intervention contributed to creating the image of Russia as a reliable and effective protector for its (de facto) allies. Here, Moscow's leadership benefited from the indecisive attitude of the US administration and their failure to punish the crossing of red lines. These soft power resources give a competitive edge to Russia, not only in the Syrian conflict but also and even more with regard to the post-Soviet states. After Russia had annexed Crimea, had intervened in the Donbas and had instrumentalized ethnic Russians living abroad to destabilize the societies of the countries, some of the region's post-Soviet leaders became sceptical about Russian ambitions and intentions, for example in Belarus and Kazakhstan. However, these authoritarian regimes feel vulnerable to "colour revolutions", too, and in this matter tend to rally around Russia. Against the background of shared threat perceptions of domestic unrest and Western interference, Russia's assistance to Assad might enhance its prestige among allies from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – a collective defence alliance binding together Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Russia. Concerning Russian-Western relations, Russia did not manage to link the Ukrainian and Syrian issue and force the EU and US to change their sanction's policy. However, Moscow's new role in Syria partially changed the US attitude towards Russia. In the course of the Ukraine crisis, Washington froze military cooperation and reduced the level of diplomatic contacts with the Kremlin. The Syrian conflict forced Obama's administration to enhance the level, frequency and density of contacts with their Russian counterparts and even to acknowledge Russia as an actor of equal footing with the US. Moscow's special importance for Washington – above other external actors like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran – is embodied in the Russian-American agreements to end hostilities. Even though

the bilateral contacts are suspended, due to Russian bombing of Aleppo, Washington will probably have to further reach out to Moscow.

Risks and Obstacles

Despite numerous benefits, Russia's intervention in Syria contains serious risks and obstacles, too. By having taken sides with the Syrian leadership, the interdependency between Moscow and Assad grew to a level where Russia might find it hard to pursue an independent policy. The Kremlin made itself dependent on an actor it cannot really control. On the one hand, Russia has more leverage over Assad at its disposal than any other actor – even Iran. On the other hand, Russia can exert only modest pressure on him. It simply cannot let him fall without risking a disaster of its Syria policy. Although the interests of both sides overlap to a large degree, they differ at least in one crucial aspect. While Assad still upholds the idea of a military victory, the Kremlin never shared that illusion but strived for a strong position at the negotiation table. The Russian leadership seems to be concerned that Assad might impose a *fait accompli* on Russia and force it to support positions Moscow tried to avoid before. Besides, if Russia wants to be acknowledged as a reliable counterpart to the US in Syria, it needs to deliver Assad's compliance. Trying to keep Assad more under control explains why Russia declared a partial withdrawal from Syria in spring 2016 and why regularly reports appear in Russian newspapers that criticize the low performance of the Syrian armed forces and that advocate for a further withdrawal.

By intervening in Syria, Russia gave up its previous cautious approach to the Middle East. Since the new millennium, Russia strives to return to the region as an important actor. Up to autumn 2015, its strategy was to improve relations with all the regional actors while at the same time preventing to be dragged into the broader Shia-Sunni confrontation. This would not only limit Russia's regional room for manoeuvre but could have negative effects on Russia's mostly Sunni Muslim population. Therefore, Russia invested a lot of diplomatic capital to mitigate conflicts with Saudi Arabia, uphold contacts with Jordan and



even strengthen relations with Egypt. However, the partnership with Turkey soon became one of the victims of Russia's Syria campaign. Even if both sides succeeded in reducing tensions in August 2016, mistrust between both sides still is deep and will constrain political cooperation even when trade relations will improve. The greatest uncertainty, though, refers to the future of Russian-Iranian relations. Although both sides cooperate closely on the military field, they differ over Assad's fate, the future shape of Syria and Russia's ambitions in the Middle East. It became obvious how fragile the relations are when Iran allowed Russian air force to use the airport of Hamadan only to revoke the decision several days later. In the mid-term, the Syrian conflict might further deepen suspicion and rivalry between Moscow and Teheran.

From a military point of view, Russia's engagement in Syria contains risks, as well. The longer the operation lasts, the greater the risk is for overstressing the armed forces. Although Moscow's military operation is limited in scale, it involves a significant part of its special forces that are needed in Donbas and Crimea and to secure the Football World Championship in 2018. Furthermore, the longer the conflict takes, the greater the risk is for military escalation. Due to the Afghanistan and Chechnya syndrome, the Russian leadership will be reluctant to send ground troops in general and conscripts in particular. If the rebels gain in strength or get modern weapon systems and/or Assad's troops, Hezbollah or Iranian fighters get in the defensive again, Russia might face a serious dilemma.

Conclusion

By intervening militarily in Syria, Russia became a veto actor in the conflict whose interest cannot be ignored. In order to define its policy towards Russia, the EU should take a close look at the framework in which Moscow will take decisions in the upcoming months. Here, incentives for Russia to act as a spoiler or as a constructive partner for Western countries might change significantly due to domestic and foreign policy necessities.

Until spring 2017, we can expect Russia to push for

greater gains. First of all, this is due to the weakness and indecisiveness of the US leadership. The current Obama administration is reluctant to engage more militarily in Syria and even more so after the elections in November 2016. The new administration will need up to spring 2017 to define its foreign policy and to appoint key officials on crucial foreign policy posts. Against this framework, the Kremlin might seek to secure as much territorial gains in Syria as possible. The recent Russian airstrikes on Aleppo are in line with this calculation and remind of the Russian strategy in Ukraine when pro-Russian forces recaptured Debatsevo before the Minsk II agreement was signed. Furthermore, recapturing Aleppo would be another foreign policy success story that the Kremlin could sell to its domestic audience.

Against the background of presidential elections in Russia scheduled for spring 2018, bridging the domestic legitimacy gap will be the main priority of the Kremlin in the second half of 2017. Although the Russian leadership managed to secure a two thirds majority in the parliamentary elections in September 2016, the elections clearly demonstrated that the Kremlin faces problems in mobilizing its electorate. Voter turnout was low, in particular in the big cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg. Besides, presidential elections will take place against the background of further economic decline. This will force the Russian leadership to refocus on domestic issues. While mechanisms for controlling and repressing society and political opposition have already been enhanced, the Russian leadership needs economic success stories, too. This might serve as an incentive to push for a new rapprochement with the EU and the US. Switching its role of a spoiler to a constructive partner in Syria by engaging seriously in political negotiations and by using its influence on Assad to ensure his compliance with the results of possible negotiations could be one step in such an approach. Moreover, Russia will host the Football World Cup in 2018. To get prestige from this event, the Kremlin might find it beneficial to strengthen Russia's image in the West and to avoid further military escalation in Syria since this could extend the terrorist threat.

However, besides incentives for a more constructive

role, the Russian leadership might find it opportune to push for further escalation in Syria, too. When social protests occur in larger Russian cities and the leadership decides to turn them down by force and/or when intra-elite splits occur, Putin and his closest entourage could try to distract public attention to external dangers and try to produce a rally-around-the-flag effect.

Although it is difficult to grasp Russia's ambitions precisely, its contribution to the chemical weapons deal in Syria and the Iranian nuclear deal indicate that Russia is not only acting as a spoiler in the Middle East. It wants to be seen as a constructive actor who is able to co-determine the regional order. Western countries should make use of that. Besides, Russia is interested in keeping its military engagement limited and this interest will probably increase during the upcoming year when the Russian leadership will focus on domestic issues. Furthermore, Russia's strong position in Syria is a consequence of the current US administration's reluctance to engage more substantially, and the EU's absence as a significant actor in the conflict.

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ISBN 978-965-7523-40-7



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