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### The Middle East

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## THE MIDDLE EAST

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### Introduction

Moscow's military intervention in Syria, beginning in September 2015, marked a sharp break from the much more reluctant, hesitant role that Russia had played in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Not only was this Russia's first post-Soviet military intervention outside the former USSR, but its relative success in shoring up the Assad regime stood in stark contrast to the results that the United States and its allies achieved through military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. This chapter will review the backdrop against which Russia's political and military involvement in Syria took place and review its relations to the Greater Middle East. It will scrutinize in detail Moscow's relations with selected countries in the region, which the authors deem to be crucial for post-Soviet Russia, and conclude with an outlook on key challenges, questions, and themes Russia will face in this region.

### **Russia and the Middle East: realism, constructivism or both?**

As Western powers, especially the United States, are heavily engaged in the region, Russia cannot relate to the Middle East without relating to the West. In no other part of the world is Russia's foreign policy as "influenced by the development and behavior of Western nations" (Tsygankov, 2013: 1). This perspective implies a competition between Russia and the West *in* the Middle East as well as *for* the Middle East. The Middle East emerged as a place where the Soviet Union could and did act as a global power. For post-Soviet Russia, the region could play a similar role and, at least since Yevgenii Primakov's tenure as foreign minister, Russian foreign policy has become more "balanced" and "diverse" again (Tsygankov, 2013: 19), opening up to the Middle East as well. Hence, when coming to understand Russia's foreign policy in this region, questions of power and of power-balance vis-à-vis the West play a crucial role, and thus a "realist" approach seems very apt for analyzing these relations. Realism is the school of IR thought that is centered on nation-states, self-interest or "egoism" of states, "anarchy" in international relations, and "power politics" (Goodin, 2010: 133). Post-Soviet Russia seems to be engaging in such power politics again, to compete with the West for and in the Middle East.

Still, there is more to unravel: for Russia as for Western powers, the Middle East has been an area with a colonial legacy, of colonial exploitation or neocolonial ambitions. For the USSR,

it has been a region in which socialism could potentially come true – at least this is what ideologues in Moscow believed and what some of the Middle Eastern leaders have declared. Historically grown images of the Orient played a powerful role in Moscow, London, and Washington alike. Furthermore, “the East” has traditionally played a special role in Russian culture. Moscow and St. Petersburg intellectuals have claimed to possess special access to “Russia’s own Orient” in Central Asia (Tolz, 2011), deducing that this might also imply a special access to the “foreign East” (*zarubezhnii vostok*). How “Russia” sees itself in relation to the Middle East today cannot be disentangled from these legacies. Constructivism, addressing “the social and relational construction of what states are and what they want” (Goodin, 2010: 299), can take these issues into account.

We contend that together with power questions and balancing with the West, Russia’s approach to the Middle East is highly “identity driven.” In this sense, “history matters”: a long history of Russian and Soviet interaction with the countries of the Middle East has shaped mutual expectations and interpretations. Contemporary Russian policy toward the Middle East implicitly builds on this tradition. Constructivism and realism emphasize two sides of the Russian–Middle Eastern entanglement and are equally instructive. Both will inform the approach followed in this chapter, which will strike a balance between constructivism and realism.

### **State of the art: Western and Russian perspectives**

There is a very rich Russian literature on the Middle East, which experienced a marked spike after the events of the Arab Spring. However, there was no shortage of Russian accounts on this region beforehand. Especially after decolonization, many Middle Eastern states pivoted towards the Soviet Union. Conversely, “after a brief flirt with Israel, the Soviet leadership did many gestures of support for Arab countries . . . improving the image of the Soviet Union more and more” (Vasilev, 1993: 32, 65–67). From the 1950s to the 1970s, secular Arab regimes gained internal legitimacy and approval of the USSR by providing “mass education, health and other public services, industrialization and guarantees for employment, and social upward mobility, associated with independent initiatives and anti-imperialist postures” (Amin, 2016: 22). The ups and downs in Russian relations with the region also determined the quantity and quality of Russian literature produced on the region. Most recently, Soviet Oriental studies regained prominence and political relevance. The Middle East returned to university curricula with new textbooks such as Zviagelskaia’s *Blizhnevostochnyi Klinch* focusing on Russian–Israeli relations and the Palestinian conflict, while Streltsov’s *Rossia i strany Vostoka* takes a look at the “the East” and Russia at large. From specialists of Russian Oriental Studies, however, there has always been a constant flow of publications (Belokrenitskii, 2010; Mamedova and Dunaeva, 2011), including retrospective analyses such as Medvedko and Medvedko (2009) or Primakov (2009), who scrutinize Soviet engagement in the Middle East.

Soviet policy toward the Middle East was a matter of intense interest to Western scholars during the Cold War, but Western interest in Russia’s policy toward this region waned during the Yeltsin era, when Moscow was less active in the region. Russia’s increased activity in the Middle East under Putin has resulted in a corresponding rebound in Western scholarly interest in examining it. Many of these studies have focused on Putin’s policy toward individual countries or conflicts in the Middle East, or toward the region as a whole. Others have looked at Russian policy toward the Middle East in the broader context of Moscow’s overall foreign policy, U.S.–Russian relations, or even the broader great power competition. Angela Stent (2014) examines U.S.–Russian cooperation and conflict in the Middle East in terms of the rise and fall of efforts to improve overall Russian–U.S. relations during each U.S. presidential

administration since the end of the Cold War. Bobo Lo (2015) discusses Russia's policy toward the Middle East in terms of his overall argument that a "new world disorder" undermines all great power ambitions. Grygiel and Mitchell (2016) see Russia, China, and Iran as all working together to challenge the United States and its allies in various regions of the world, including the Middle East.

## **Role of the Middle East in Russian foreign policy**

### ***Cold War legacies in the Middle East***

During the Cold War, the USSR entertained tight relations with many Middle Eastern countries. While relations with single states experienced ups and downs, all in all, the Soviet Union enjoyed a continuous presence in the region.

Especially tight relations developed between Egypt and the USSR: Nasser's Egypt became the Soviet Union's closest regional ally. Moscow supported Cairo politically, militarily, and economically. However, the problem with Egypt as with almost every other Middle Eastern state on good terms with the USSR was that they often suppressed their communist movements. Still, there were Soviet party officials who believed that at least some Middle Eastern countries could embark on a path to socialism. Indeed, many of these states pursued agrarian reforms and strengthened the state sector. South Yemen pushed "socialist" reforms furthest, receiving assistance from the USSR, the GDR, and Cuba. The Soviet Union's messianic stance was, however, soon to be replaced by a more pragmatic approach, as Vasilev (1993) suggests. With Egypt switching sides in the mid-1970s, the Soviet Union's main regional partner became Syria, which positioned itself at the helm of the anti-Sadat camp.

The late 1970s marked the decline of Soviet influence in the Middle East, both for internal and external reasons. Internally, economic and political stagnation left little enthusiasm for the Arab cause. Externally, the rise of Iran after the Islamic revolution in early 1979 brought a new player into the region that appealed not only to Shia populations. Additionally, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 severely hurt Moscow's reputation in the Middle East. Vasilev (1993) shows how during the Cold War, relations with the Middle East were based – at least initially – on a presumed common identity: anti-imperialist and thus anti-Western, anti-Zionist and thus anti-Israel, and pro-socialist and thus anti-capitalist. All this resulted in the USSR not only having influence deriving from Soviet material assistance, but also originating in an identity-based alliance. However, this Soviet soft-power had its limits, as Mohamed Heikal already noted in the 1970s: "All the formative influences" of Arab leaders, that is:

[t]he books they had read, the history they had learned, the films they had seen – had come from the West. The languages they knew in addition to their own were English or French – Russian was, and remained, a mystery to them.

*(Heikal, 1978: 16)*

As for the Middle Eastern populations, Heikal complained that:

[t]he Soviets have proved particularly inept in cultural exchanges . . . The Arabs are eager to read the works of Tolstoy . . . but these are not what they are offered. They would find at the Soviet Publishing House in Cairo the collected works of Lenin for as little as 30 piasters, but this is not what they want to buy.

*(Heikal, 1978: 281)*

In another sense, the Soviet Union got it right. In contrast to Western interpretations at the time, Soviet officials soon understood that their Middle Eastern counterparts were *pragmatic* anti-imperialists. Unlike Western governments, the Soviet Union just delivered what their Middle Eastern counterparts demanded (Primakov, 2009: 18–21). Hence, pragmatism took increasing hold on both sides: Middle Eastern countries wanted to bolster their independence, and the Soviet Union wanted to keep their allies. Keeping them happy meant providing them with military support in their confrontation with Israel or in their struggle against “feudal” regimes, such as in Oman or Yemen. Primakov’s *Russia and the Arabs* (2009) underscores how heavily the conflict with Israel shaped relations with the Arab Middle East. Soviet influence on conflict resolution, however, remained limited, as the USSR had severed diplomatic relations with Israel in 1967, and many rounds of secret and unofficial meetings afterward remained inconclusive and pushed within the Soviet leadership to restore relations failed internally (Primakov, 2009: 273–296).

The immediate aftermath of the Cold War was problematic both for Russia and the Middle East. Relations hit a low. Two major shifts occurred in post-Soviet Russia’s relations with the Middle East. First, 9/11 heightened Russia’s attention to the links between domestic terrorism inside Russia and possible links to the Middle East. In the Kremlin’s eyes, the second war in Chechnya just confirmed what was already suspected: that Russian Muslim radicals were tied to Wahabism and that the Middle East played an ambiguous role in Chechnya. The Arab Spring marked the second major shift in Russia’s relations with the Middle East and brought to Moscow’s attention what it again perceived as the destructive role the West plays in the region. The Arab Spring and the West’s reaction confirmed deeply seated beliefs about the negative influence the West plays in the Middle East. The campaign that the West conducted in Iraq (2003–2011) found no support in Moscow, and the Western stance on the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria found equally little approval in the Kremlin. While Russia stood aside in Iraq, supported Western troops in Afghanistan, and abstained from interference in Libya, Russia assumed a much more active stance in Syria, trying to live up to its self-perception as a global power, prevent regime-change in Damascus, and push back both Western influence as well as the influence of terrorism, broadly understood. Finally, the resurgence of political Islam, especially in its militant version (which we will label here “jihadism”), was perceived by Russia as a threat to be countered. Russian politicians, journalists, and scientists alike particularly blame the West for its rise and – in reminiscence of the plot during the Soviet war in Afghanistan – portray many conflicts in the Middle East as an oversimplified binary opposition between secular regimes and “jihadist” movements, the latter often seen as being sponsored by the West and the Gulf states (Dolgov, 2015: 27–29, 32).

### ***Russia’s foreign policy after the Soviet collapse***

For Andrei Grachev (2008: 196), the events surrounding the first Gulf War symbolize the condition of Russian foreign policy shortly before and shortly after the collapse of the USSR. The rivalry between Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and Gorbachev’s top adviser Yevgenii Primakov underlined the “chaos,” “indiscipline,” and “demoralization” that reigned in the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Later, between 1992 and 1996, the Middle East was widely left out of the Russian foreign policy equation. During Andrey Kozyrev’s tenure as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Russia adopted a clear pro-Western stance, aimed at maximum integration within Western organizations and institutions. For Kozyrev, “Arab leaders were a group of political riffraffs . . . to be kept at bay” (Posuvalyuk, 2012: 51–53).

Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East in this period was also determined by the changes taking place in the region itself. Also triggered by the end of the Cold War, the Middle

East underwent a transformation characterized by coups d'état (Algeria, Sudan), unification (Yemen), or open war (Iraq). The loss of legitimacy of the old, authoritarian, and secular regimes, a new tide of political Islam, the loosening of the opposition to Israel as a unifying factor, and the rise of new values, new players, and new demands (Streltsov, 2014: 32–33) changed the region profoundly and challenged the foreign policy of a post-Soviet Russia which was in disarray itself and, still stuck in Soviet ways of thinking, found it hard to cope with the new realities in the Middle East.

Given its economic condition in the early 1990s, Russia was particularly interested in the economic dimension of relations with the Middle East. Being a conflict-ridden region, the Middle East was a key buyer of Russian weaponry. Russia furthered these conflicts with weapons supplies and had an interest in keeping these conflicts alive. After the Cold War, Iraq and Syria – which still had huge debts vis-à-vis Moscow – became of key interest for post-Soviet Russia in the region. For Iraq, this meant that Russia pushed to end the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council after the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Regarding Syria, which consolidated its international position after its support for the international coalition against Iraq in 1990, this meant a quick resumption of relations with Russia, not least in the military field.

Kozyrev's course had already started to lose momentum by 1993, with opposition to his pro-Western approach emerging within Yeltsin's team itself. The return of the Middle East in Russian foreign policy considerations, however, was instigated when Yevgenii Primakov took over the helm of the Foreign Ministry from Kozyrev. He questioned Russia's unconditional Western orientation and paid new attention to the Middle East.

### ***Enter Yevgenii Primakov***

Yevgenii Primakov became Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs in January 1996 and stayed in office until September 1998. His tenure had a double effect. First, Russia became more assertive in foreign policy, claiming back its status as a superpower and a global player; second, as a subplot to the aforementioned point, Russia became more involved in the Middle East, a region that Primakov had extensively travelled and studied as a scholar, journalist, and KGB operative since the 1960s (Andrew and Mitrokhin, 2005: 151).

With Primakov, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict received new attention. Primakov also tried to position Russia as a broker between Israel and Syria, especially in 1997 when Primakov toured the region. However, these efforts remained limited in their results. Primakov also brought a renewed pragmatism into relations with the Middle East, a pragmatism that Russia claims to represent nowadays too. It is a trend in Russian literature to speak of “pragmatism” (Vasilev, Primakov) or “de-ideologization” (Streltsov), and while it is true that there is no Soviet ideology anymore that influences the relationship with the Middle East, these terms themselves contain ideological axioms, such as economic efficiency or Russia being a great power.

### ***Russia turns against the West***

Relations between post-Soviet Russia and the West have never been easy. Under Primakov, Russia's stance had become more assertive. While relations briefly improved after 2001 in the context of the “war on terror,” their ties mainly followed a long downward trend, marked by NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia (1999), the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq (2003), the 2004 dual enlargement of the EU and NATO, the “color revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine (2003, 2004), the planning of a NATO missile defense system (2002/2007), and the intervention in Libya (2011). All these events caused relations with the West to sour, since in the Kremlin they



were all perceived as manifestations of the West creeping closer to Russia's borders or as meddling in the affairs of sovereign states irrespective of Moscow's explicit objection, thus denying Russia its global role and refusing to acknowledge Russia's voice as an equal. The anti-Western turn in the mid-2000s culminated in Putin's well-known speech at the Munich Security Conference (Putin, 2007). Since then, many of the issues mentioned in this address resurfaced time and again in several of Putin's other speeches, particularly his address of March 18, 2014, commenting on the Crimean crisis.

Apart from the conclusion of the new START agreement in 2010, the "reset" of U.S.-Russia relations under Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev soon stalled, and relations between Russia and the West in general have remained strained during Putin's third term. Disagreements range from the Syrian civil war to the Ukraine crisis. At the same time, and despite being Russia's biggest trading partner, relations with the EU have stagnated, and European sanctions against Russia as well as European far-right parties' flirt with Russia further burdened bilateral relations. Russia opening up to Asia and the Global South, including the Middle East, must be seen with these developments in mind.

### ***Global trends affecting Russian policy in the Middle East***

Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East is also affected by factors other than Moscow's bilateral relations with the governments of the region or growing tensions between Russia and the West. One important trend has been the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). While Brazil and South Africa may not have much impact in the Middle East, China and India do. Unlike Russia, which competes with several Middle Eastern countries in the oil export market, China and India both import large quantities of oil from the region. Like Russia, both China and India want stability in the region and have good relations with all states there. Unlike Russia, though, they prefer to see lower petroleum prices. If Sino-Indian competition grows, the Middle East may become an arena in which both compete for influence – something that Russia and the West will both have to navigate somehow.

Another factor that affects the policy of Russia toward the region has been the rise of secessionist nationalism in the Middle East and many other regions of the globe. The Middle East has already witnessed *de jure* secession from Sudan (South Sudan) and *de facto* secession from Iraq (Kurdistan). While their strength and activity levels vary dramatically, secessionist movements also exist in Turkey (the Kurds), Iran (esp. Kurds, Azeris, Baluchis), Syria (Kurds), Yemen (the South), Libya (Cyrenaica), and Algeria (the Berbers). Like most established governments, Moscow generally opposes secession – though Russia has supported it in former Soviet republics it is at odds with (Georgia and Ukraine). On the other hand, Russia has had to adjust to the reality of South Sudan becoming independent and the Kurdish Regional Government being effectively so. The problem, of course, is that making exceptions for secessionists in some countries only serves to encourage similar forces elsewhere while complicating relations with governments feeling threatened by them.

A trend indigenous to the Middle East affecting Russia and others is the fierce rivalry that has emerged between Iran on the one hand and certain Sunni Arab states – most notably Saudi Arabia – on the other, which is being played out in Saudi-Iranian rivalry occurring in divided Sunni-Shi'a (or Sunni-Alawi) states such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Yemen. Moscow has backed the side supported by Iran in most of these cases, but sides with the Sunni monarchy in Bahrain and has largely remained neutral in Yemen. Moscow wants to have good relations both with Iran and with Sunni Arab states, but its support for the former has led some in the latter to see Russia as supporting Shi'as against Sunnis.

When it broke out in 2011, Russian observers saw the “Arab Spring” as a continuation of the “color revolutions” that led to the downfall of governments friendly to Russia and replacement by ones friendlier to the West in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), and Ukraine (2004). Moscow believed the West was pursuing similar aims not just in Libya and Syria, but even in Russia itself when demonstrations against Putin’s plan to resume the presidency occurred in 2011–2012. Dolgov (2015: 33) claims, that “Islamist fighters” from Syria and Libya participated in the Euromaidan 2014 events, and that the EU and the United States aimed at repeating “the Syrian and Libyan scenario” in Ukraine in order to draw it into NATO. This Russian equation of the Arab Spring with the color revolutions underlies, among other factors, Putin’s determination to defend the Assad regime in Syria.

While Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and promotion of secessionist forces in eastern Ukraine beginning that same year has deeply affected Moscow’s relations with the West, it has had a remarkably limited impact on Russia’s relations with the Middle East. The Arab states, Iran, and Israel have not expressed opposition to Russian policy toward Ukraine; they do not see it as affecting them. Turkey has been more concerned, but has not allowed this to get in the way of its recent restoration of good relations with Moscow that began in mid-2016.

### ***Russia’s return to the Middle East***

Having largely retreated from the Middle East under Yeltsin in the 1990s, Putin set about restoring Russian influence in the region (Nizameddin, 2013). While Moscow made considerable efforts in this regard during the first decade of the 21st century, Russia still appeared to be a less important player there compared to the United States during the Bush Administration with its large-scale interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and active pursuit of the “War on Terror” throughout the region. The relative U.S. disengagement from the region as well as fraying relations with several long time U.S. allies – including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, and even Israel – during the Obama Administration combined with Putin’s seemingly successful intervention in support of the Assad regime in Syria beginning in 2015, has led many to see Russian influence as being on the rise in the Middle East.

U.S. influence in the region, though, still remains strong. And even if it does further decline, this will not automatically result in its being replaced by Russia. The complexities of the Middle East that have stymied the United States affect Russia too. The opportunities and obstacles of Putin’s efforts at increasing Russian influence in the Middle East from its Yeltsin-era low point can best be seen through an examination of Moscow’s complex ties with the major states and actors in the region since the end of the Cold War.

## **Record of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East**

### ***Syria***

Relations with Syria have always been important to the USSR and Russia. Soviet economic, military, and political support to Syria became a showcase for what the USSR could do for an Arab country. Also, the CPSU and the Baath-party had close contacts. These ties between Syria and the USSR became even more important after Egypt signed the U.S.-brokered Camp David Accords in 1978. Arm deliveries rose to new heights, and a Treaty of Friendship was signed in 1980, making Syria probably the closest of all Soviet allies in the Middle East.

Also, after the collapse of the USSR, Syria remained an important regional partner for Russia. First, Syria still owed a considerable debt to Russia. Russia wrote off roughly 70 percent of Syria’s



13.4 billion USD debt in 2005 (El Din, 2013), but since then Russia has resupplied the regime with weaponry and most likely Syrian debts have risen again. Second, the Syrian army remained highly dependent on Russian weaponry and spare-parts. Finally, Syria continued to be an important country in the region, key to affecting the Palestinian conflict, and with stakes in Turkey and Iraq. In the 1990s, Syria briefly improved its international standing through participating in the 1991 Gulf War with the United States against Iraq. Russia renewed its economic (1993) and military cooperation (1994) shortly thereafter, and new arms' deliveries took place in 1998. The Syrian leadership sought a more strategic partnership with Russia under Bashar al-Assad; however, Moscow refrained from this due to Damascus' tense relations with Israel. In 2005, both countries settled their dispute regarding Syrian debts, and Syria allowed Russia to implement a variety of projects in the country. Russia and Syria also agreed on a long-term military partnership between 2005–2010 (Vasilev, 1993: 146; Streltsov, 2014: 35–36; Zviagelskaia, 2014: 21–24).

Under Bashar al-Assad, Syria underwent far-reaching neoliberal economic reforms, favoring the urban middle-classes and neglecting rural areas (Matar and Kadri, 2016), while political reforms remained cosmetic. When the Arab Spring engulfed the country, quickly spiraling down into civil war, Russia sided with the regime. From the beginning, Moscow opposed regime-change in Damascus. A narrative of foreign-sponsored “jihadists” and of a “media war” against Syria came to dominate Russian public discourse (Dolgov, 2015: 28–29). Yet while Russia kept a protecting hand over Assad's regime, it also sought to maintain contacts with what it called “moderate opposition.” Moscow succeeded in averting Western air strikes against Damascus after the regime had used chemical weapons against the opposition in mid-2013, in exchange for reassurances that Damascus would surrender its chemical arsenal. Especially before Fall 2015, Russia intensified its diplomatic efforts to bring conflicting parties together, both internally and externally. But Moscow's attempts to convince foreign sponsors of the opposition to ease their support failed. This failure was also a result of Moscow's strained relations with many Gulf States and ultimately contributed to Russia's decision to step in militarily, triggering the largest and most protracted Russian post-Soviet military intervention outside of the former USSR. The intervention stabilized Damascus's position in the civil war, and led to the recapture of previously lost territory. It also allowed Russia to get a permanent foothold in Syria and dramatically increased its leverage on the Syrian regime. On the downside, Russia's military intervention damaged its already shaky standing as a broker in the conflict and further damaged its international reputation.

The new U.S. president, Donald Trump, called for Moscow and Washington to cooperate against the common enemy, ISIS, in Syria. Trump even seemed to accept Putin's logic that Assad was less worse than what would probably be a jihadist alternative to him. But when Trump launched an attack on a Syrian airbase in response to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons against its opponents, Trump “completely changed” his position on Assad within days, and U.S.-Russian relations soured over Syria. It is still not clear whether Syria will prove to be a source of U.S.-Russian tension, an opportunity for U.S.-Russian cooperation, or both in the Trump era. Much will depend on whether the U.S. administration will come up with a strategy for the region, which Russia has but the United States still lacks.

### *Egypt*

For the Soviet Union, relations with Egypt were of utmost importance. There were few international leaders who had more respect and more support from Moscow than Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser: “Nasser with his personal charisma, tact and caliber as a statesman” deeply impressed Soviet leaders (Vasilev, 1993: 67). Nasser received full support from Moscow despite his bad relationship

with the Egyptian communists. When Nasser died in 1970, Soviet diplomacy did everything it could to preserve the legacy of Nasserism (Primakov, 2009: 133). However, under Anwar al-Sadat, Egypt pivoted to the West. Signing the Camp David accords with Israel, it alienated not only other Arab states but the USSR as well. Internally, Sadat initiated the policies of economic opening or *Infitah*. Soviet-Egyptian diplomatic ties were severed in 1981. Mubarak's reign was seen much more positively, both regarding international relations (Cold Peace with Israel) and domestic policies. Diplomatic relations were reestablished in 1984, and under Gorbachev, ties were normalized. Despite political disagreements, economic relations persisted throughout the period. With Putin's visit to Cairo and Mubarak's to Moscow, in 2005 and 2006 respectively, the relationship was fully reestablished, though Russia's influence was a shadow compared to the one it had under Nasser, and their renewed ties lagged far behind U.S.-Egyptian cooperation.

Mubarak's fall in February 2011 was met with deep skepticism in Russia, as was Mohammed Morsi's ascent. The Muslim Brotherhood was, at that time, still on a Russian list of terrorist organizations, and Russian commentators suspected that Egypt would pursue an "Islamic project" in the Middle East (Dolgov, 2015: 17). Nevertheless, Morsi visited Russia in April 2013, only months before his ousting, and arrangements were made for Russian participation in Egypt's civilian nuclear program, modernization of Soviet-built infrastructure, and an increase in Russian tourism, as Egypt's seaside resorts of Hurghada or Sharm-el-Sheikh had become one of Russians' favorite holiday destinations. All in all, Russia adjusted well to the fall of Mubarak and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power.

The July 2013 Egyptian coup d'état, however, was hailed in Moscow. Despite the fact that Abdel Fatah al-Sisi belonged to a new generation of Egyptian officers with no ties to Russia whatsoever, as his military education had taken place in the West, he quickly found a connection to Russian President Putin and further boosted Russian-Egyptian ties. At the same time, relations between Egypt and the West cooled, given al-Sisi's increasingly authoritarian policies, leaving a void for Moscow to fill. For Russian observers, al-Sisi's power grab was a return to stability (Zviagelskaia, 2014: 73). Al-Sisi made Russia the first foreign country that he visited. He met with various Russian representatives and struck new arms deals, among them a US\$3.5 billion contract in April 2015. Included in these contracts was an order of 46 MiG combat jets, diversifying its arsenal and providing a lifeline for this famed but crisis-stricken Russian aircraft producer. Egypt under al-Sisi thus signaled an end to a one-sided reliance on the United States, much to Russian satisfaction.

### *Iraq*

Russian-Iraqi relations in the post-Soviet era have been largely dictated by Baghdad's strained relations with the international community between 1990 and 2003, and by the subsequent occupation by Western forces from 2003 to 2011, and the protracted internal strife which has continued. Formerly, in the 1970s, Iraq was an uneasy partner for the Soviet Union. Iraq signed an aid pact with the USSR in 1972, and this was, according to insiders, the culminating point of friendship. Afterwards, relations became more and more problem ridden. The "later Saddam" unleashed a campaign against the Iraqi communists in 1978, resumed the conflict with the Kurds, and then started leaning toward the United States (Primakov, 2009: 304–309). Also, his wars against Iran and Kuwait caused much displeasure in Moscow, as top diplomats bitterly recall. Former ambassador Viktor Posuvalyuk (2012: 110) even states that Iraq and the USSR had *never* been allies, as Saddam Hussein only wanted Soviet help to transform Iraq into the most powerful state in the Middle East.

The 1991 Gulf War has a special place in Russian-Middle Eastern relations for several reasons. To start, it marked the first time that Moscow and Washington were on the same side of

a Middle Eastern conflict. Second, the Kremlin could test its clout in the region and act outside the Cold War logic. However, there was no unified approach in Moscow as to which position to assume in relation to Iraq, and a strong disagreement ensued between presidential representative Primakov and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze as well as between the higher echelons of the Foreign Ministry appointed by Gorbachev and the people running the day-to-day diplomacy (Grachev, 2008: 195–196), with one side unconditionally supporting Western military intervention and the other calling for restraint.

Between 1993 and 2003, relations evolved in the wake of the embargo imposed by the UN Security Council. Russia was skeptical about the usefulness of the embargo early on. Russia again tried to mediate between the United States and Iraq. Viktor Posuvalyuk, by then special presidential representative to the Middle East, argued that Russia did not only have economic interests in mind when it assumed a moderating role in 1998. For Posuvalyuk (2012: 191), Iraq was a matter of the principles of international relations, about the risk of setting an example according to which the United States would bypass the Security Council at will.

Thus, the 2003 invasion of Iraq represented for Russia the realization of all its nightmares, provoked harsh reactions, and had lasting repercussions for Russia's view of U.S. foreign policy. Beforehand, Russian companies had made small inroads into the Iraqi economy and were awarded a contract to restore Iraq's electric grid (Streltsov, 2014: 41; Zviagelskaia, 2014: 57). In 2008, Russia started cooperating more intensely with the new Iraqi government, debts of more than US\$11 billion were cancelled, and Russian oil companies won tenders to extract oil in Iraq. Also, arms sales resumed. Additionally, a more strategic relationship between Iraq and Russia developed during the Syrian civil war, in which both countries sided with the Assad government. Intelligence is shared between Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Russia in joint information centers in Damascus and Baghdad.

### *Iran*

Relations between Russia and Iran were difficult both in the Tsarist and the Soviet eras. Tensions date back to the early 19th century when Iran lost territory to the Russian Empire. Russia intervened militarily against Iran's 1905–1911 Constitutional Revolution. The Soviet Union supported the secession of the "Gilan Soviet" in northwestern Iran at the end of World War I, and of Iranian Azerbaijan and Kurdistan at the end of World War II. The Soviet Union and Britain occupied Iran during World War II; Joseph Stalin's initial refusal to withdraw Soviet troops led to one of the first crises of the Cold War. Soviet support for the Tudeh, Iran's Communist Party, angered both the monarchy and theocracy. Moscow completely miscalculated the character of the Iranian Revolution and had to rebuild ties from scratch (Shebarshin, 2012). The Soviet Union also armed and aided Iraq during its 1980–1988 war with Iran. Even nowadays, the Iranian press routinely refers to these events as reasons why Tehran should not trust Moscow.

Since 1989, however, cooperation has increased between Moscow and Tehran. Russia agreed to complete the nuclear reactor at Bushehr, which the German firm Siemens started working on during the monarchy, but stopped after the 1979 revolution. Russia also began selling weapons, including missiles, to Iran. Both countries supported the opposition Northern Alliance against the Taliban in Afghanistan during the 1990s. And along with China, Russia tried to weaken and delay U.S. and European efforts to impose UN sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program. All in all, Russian observers speak at times of a strategic partnership that is grounded in shared geopolitical interests and even in common cultural and "civilizational values" (Dunaev, 2015).

Yet, several issues continue to trouble relations. Russia's completion of the Bushehr reactor lagged years behind schedule. Moscow agreed to sell the S-300 air defense system to Iran, but

then froze the deal in 2010, though Moscow reversed this decision in 2015. In addition, the two countries have been unable to resolve their differences over how to delineate the Caspian Sea, underneath which there are substantial quantities of petroleum. Iran has also been wary of Moscow's strong ties with Israel and its continued efforts to court anti-Iranian Arab states. And while it has acted to weaken them, Russia has frequently gone along with the West in imposing some UN sanctions on Iran.

Moscow and Tehran have both supported the Assad regime in Syria since opposition to it arose in 2011. Iranian forces were much more heavily involved in this effort until September 2015 when Russia deployed its air force to protect the Assad regime and attack its opponents. Yet even here, their cooperation is often fraught as was shown in August 2016 when Moscow's announcement that its bombers were flying missions over Syria from an Iranian air base led to anti-Russian criticism in Iran and the temporary cancellation of this program.

### ***Israel***

Although the USSR was one of the first countries to recognize Israel after it declared independence in 1948, in the mid-1950s Moscow aligned itself with the rising forces of Arab Nationalism, which were both anti-Western and anti-Zionist. Moscow broke diplomatic ties with Israel in the wake of the June 1967 war, in which Israel captured territory from and humiliated Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. Moscow sought to improve its ties to Arab countries generally through capitalizing on the unpopularity in the Arab world of U.S. support for Israel. But because the United States had ties to both Israel and most Arab states while the USSR did not have ties to Israel, it would be the United States which the belligerent parties in the Middle East would turn to in seeking peace efforts that largely sidelined Moscow.

Amidst improving Soviet-Western ties during the latter part of the Gorbachev era, Soviet diplomatic relations with Israel were restored in October 1991 – shortly before the dissolution of the USSR. Russian-Israeli ties improved during the Yeltsin era in the 1990s, when trade between the two countries grew and large numbers of Russian Jews immigrated to Israel. The relationship, though, was not especially cordial – particularly under the influence of the long-time advocate of close ties between Moscow and Arab Nationalist regimes, Yevgenii Primakov, when he was Yeltsin's Foreign Minister and then Prime Minister.

Since the rise of Vladimir Putin, Russian-Israeli relations have grown remarkably warm (Zviagelskaia, 2014: 117–135; Borshchevskaya, 2016). Several factors have contributed to this, including Putin's own personal regard for Jews, the close ties that Russian Jews in Israel have maintained with their motherland, Israel being a popular destination for Russian tourists, and growing bilateral ties not just in trade, but also in the military and security fields. Other contributing factors to better Russian-Israeli ties have been Israel's "understanding" for Putin's intervention in Chechnya at the beginning of his reign, Israel ending its arms sales to Georgia at the outset of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, and Israel's refusal to go along with the United States and Europe in criticizing Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its policy toward Ukraine in general. Despite Israeli unhappiness about Moscow's close relations with its arch rival, Iran, the Netanyahu government has been remarkably uncritical of the Russian military intervention in support of Iran's ally, the Assad regime, in Syria (Barmin, 2016).

### ***Saudi Arabia***

The USSR was the first state to recognize the Saudi conquest in 1926 of Hejaz, the western part of which became Saudi Arabia, where the holy cities of Mecca and Medina are located.

In mid-1932, Prince Faisal visited Moscow. In mid-1938, though, the Soviets withdrew their diplomatic missions without explanation from Saudi Arabia and four other Middle Eastern countries. Unlike these others, however, Saudi Arabia refused to exchange embassies with the Soviet Union again until the very end of the Cold War in 1990.

During the Cold War, Saudi-Soviet relations were tense. Moscow did not appreciate how Saudi Arabia became so closely allied to the United States and was unwilling to have even normal diplomatic ties with the USSR. The Saudi government, for its part, felt threatened by Soviet support for its regional rivals – including Arab Nationalist regimes in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, and Marxist-Leninist regimes in South Yemen, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan. During the 1980s, Moscow came to resent large-scale Saudi support for mujahideen groups fighting against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan – a quagmire for Soviet forces, which Gorbachev ended up withdrawing them from in 1988–1989.

Despite the normalization of relations between Moscow and Riyadh in 1990, Saudi-Russian relations were relatively unfriendly during the 1990s and early 2000s. Russian officials and commentators regularly blamed Saudi Arabia for supporting Islamists in Chechnya and other Muslim regions of the former USSR (Melkumian, 2010: 149). Riyadh was unhappy that Russia would not cooperate with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting States (OPEC) in restraining oil production in order to lift prices in what was then a low oil price environment. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Vladimir Putin not only expressed his support for the United States, but frequently referred to the fact that 15 of the 19 bombers were Saudis in an effort to portray the United States and Russia as allies against a common Islamist threat which Moscow saw the Kingdom as supporting.

Saudi-Russian relations improved, though, in 2003 in the wake of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, which both Moscow and Riyadh disapproved of. Putin himself visited Riyadh in 2007, and Moscow had high hopes for greatly increased trade ties, as well as investment from, the Kingdom. But their relations turned sour again after the outbreak of the Arab Spring revolts in 2011 when Saudi Arabia aided the opponents of Russian-backed regimes in Libya and Syria. Riyadh is especially unhappy that Russia has sided with the Kingdom's arch-rival, Iran, in supporting Syria's Assad regime. Riyadh and Moscow continue to express hopes for improved relations, but achieving this goal has proven to be elusive.

### *Turkey*

Russia and Turkey were regional rivals during the Tsarist and Ottoman eras. Relations between them improved after the early 20th-century revolutions in both countries. After the end of World War II, however, relations deteriorated when Turkey felt threatened by the Soviet Union and so turned to the United States for support and later joined NATO. During the Cold War, Turkey feared that Moscow was supporting the PKK – the Kurdish separatist movement that seeks to establish an independent Kurdish state in southeastern Turkey. Beginning in 1988, when conflict arose between Armenia and Azerbaijan even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian support for Armenia and Turkish sympathy for Azerbaijan became an irritant to Russian-Turkish relations. Nevertheless, Russian-Turkish trade expanded dramatically beginning in the 1990s, and the countries started to cooperate in the energy sector (Ul'chenko, 2010: 24).

Russian-Turkish relations grew closer still in the early part of the 21st century. One factor leading to this was the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq beginning in 2003, which neither Moscow nor Ankara supported. Turkey feared that U.S. support for Iraqi Kurds would serve to strengthen Kurdish nationalists inside Turkey. Another factor was that Turkey's relations with the EU declined as it became increasingly clear that while Brussels was willing to accept

Eastern European and Baltic states that were formerly under Soviet domination as members, Turkey was not welcome. Yet another factor was that, like Putin, Turkey's leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became increasingly impatient with Western criticism over the state of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in his country.

After the outbreak of the Arab Spring uprising in Syria in 2011, Russia and Turkey disagreed sharply over the fate of Syria's embattled ruler, Bashar al-Assad. Erdoğan called for him to go, while Putin insisted that he be allowed to remain in power. Still, Moscow and Ankara seemed to "agree to disagree" about Syria in the midst of an otherwise improving relationship. This changed, however, after Russia intervened militarily in Syria to defend Assad beginning in September 2015. In November 2015, Turkish forces shot down a Russian military aircraft in the Turkey-Syria border area. Putin reacted by imposing economic sanctions on Turkey. Furthermore, Moscow expressed support for Syrian Kurds, whom Ankara feared were allied with the PKK, fighting against Islamic State, which Moscow claimed Turkey was allowing to make use of Turkish territory.

Russian-Turkish relations dramatically improved, though, when in mid-2016 Erdoğan apologized for the shoot down incident and Putin agreed to lift sanctions. Their ties improved even more in the wake of the failed July 2016 coup attempt against Erdoğan, which Putin condemned more quickly than did Western governments – thus provoking not only Turkish resentment, but a Turkish belief that the West actually supported the coup. Yet despite the rebound in Russian-Turkish ties, Moscow and Ankara remain at odds over the fate of Assad in Syria (MacFarquhar, 2016). Their differences over the Azeri-Armenian dispute have not ended either.

## **Conclusions: future questions and themes**

### ***Russia in the Middle East today***

Post-Soviet Russia in the Middle East today is in a much better diplomatic, economic, and military position than it has ever been. It has good relations with almost every regime and movement, even opposing ones. For example, it has good ties to Israel and to Iran, to Tel-Aviv and Ramallah; it has good relations with Turkey and with most Kurdish factions, even allowing a "representation" of the Northern Kurdish state, Rojava, to open in Moscow. Saudi Arabia is at odds with Russia on many issues, but Moscow has relatively good relations with other Arab Gulf states, including Oman, the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait. Hence, on the one hand, Moscow has the potential to be a major intermediary in the region. On the other, especially after its intervention in Syria, Russia's standing in the Middle East also appears damaged.

In its return to the Middle East, Russia has benefited from a long tradition of intense relations built during Soviet times. Albeit a vanishing generation, some senior Arab military personnel remain who have been trained in the Soviet Union and speak Russian, and who act not only as military but also as cultural intermediaries. In the case of Israel and due to emigration, the Russian language is one of the most widely spoken languages in the country, and key politicians have a Russian background. Still, Soviet and Russian soft power in the region is weak, mostly for the same reasons as in Soviet times: Russia does not offer a model to emulate. As Mohammed Heikal noted in the 1970s, good relations with Moscow are more pragmatic than heartfelt.

The Middle East turned out again to be a place where East-West rivalries are played out. However, the Cold War is hardly a good reference to understand Russia in the Middle East now. The picture has grown increasingly complex, with many new players determining the course of events in the region, not least Iran and Saudi Arabia, whose rivalry is increasingly



influential in many conflicts (Syria, Yemen, Bahrain). Still, the Middle East is a place where Putin's Russia seems to be realizing its great power ambitions.

### ***The West: Russia's friend or foe in the Middle East?***

Relations between Russia and the West, especially the United States, have deteriorated in recent years over issues mainly unrelated to the Middle East, such as Georgia, Ukraine, the Baltics, NATO expansion, and EU enlargement, and EU regulations which Russian entities do not wish to comply with. In the Middle East, however, Russia and the West have shared some similar interests. Russia supported the U.S.-led campaign in Afghanistan against the Taliban and other jihadists. Russia also joined other major powers in negotiating a nuclear accord with Iran. While the Soviet Union supported or at least benefited from the overthrow of pro-Western governments in the Middle East during the Cold War, Putin's Russia has not sought their downfall. Indeed, the greatest differences between Putin and the West in the Middle East have been regarding Western efforts to further or support the downfall of authoritarian regimes Moscow has regarded as allies or partners in Iraq, Libya, and Syria.

Regarding Syria in particular, Moscow has sought to persuade Western governments that if the Assad regime falls, its most likely replacement will be a jihadist regime that is hostile to the West as well as toward Russia, and therefore it is in Western interests to join Russia in supporting Assad. Western governments, though, have not been persuaded by this argument, as they see the Assad regime's brutality as having given rise to the jihadist opposition instead. Yet despite their differences elsewhere as well as in the Middle East itself, Russia and the West do have a common interest in thwarting jihadists – something that Donald Trump seemed to recognize during his election campaign. But as serious U.S.-Russian differences over Syria and Iran in the short time since Trump became President have shown, having a common enemy does not guarantee that Moscow and Washington will be able to cooperate in the Middle East.

There could be serious consequences for Russia, though, if Russian ties to the West deteriorate further or just remain poor while Russian Muslim opposition to Moscow grows strong. Under these circumstances, it is not clear that the West would be willing, or even able, to help Russia against this "common threat," or that a proud but beleaguered Russian government would seek or welcome it.

### ***The Middle East: Putin success or failure?***

Whether Putin's policy toward the Middle East should be considered a success or a failure is not clear cut. Since he first came to power at the end of 1999, Putin has succeeded in re-establishing an important Russian presence in the region. Putin has also succeeded in establishing relatively good working relations with the governments of the region. There have been setbacks in some relationships – most notably between Russia and Turkey after the November 2015 Turkish shoot down of a Russian aircraft. But even this serious downturn was reversed in mid-2016. Further, the Russian military intervention in Syria that began in September 2015 has succeeded in propping up the Assad regime at relatively low cost to Moscow.

On the other hand, Putin has largely failed in building a coalition to join Moscow and Tehran in the fight against what Moscow sees as the common jihadist enemy; other states see the Assad regime, Iran, or even Syrian Kurds as too unreliable or as adversaries. This points to a larger problem for Moscow in the region: while Putin has succeeded in improving Russian ties with all the governments as well as some non-governmental actors in the region, he has not

resolved or overcome the many differences among them. Indeed, Russian diplomacy has not so much tried to resolve differences among regional actors as take advantage of them.

What this means is that while Middle Eastern governments and other actors have been willing to increase their cooperation with Moscow, Russia's close ties to their adversaries limit the extent to which each actor is willing to trust or rely on Russia. Further, while Moscow has succeeded in gaining some acceptance from many Middle Eastern governments for Russian intervention in Syria to protect the Assad regime, public opinion in many countries of the region disapproves of Moscow's actions there. Putin, of course, may not be particularly concerned about this, but negative opinion about Russian actions in Syria could serve to limit the degree to which Middle Eastern governments either cooperate with Russia, or could even motivate them to cooperate with the United States and the West against it.

Finally, one has to assess the domestic repercussion of these policies. In terms of identity construction, especially Russia's intervention in Syria, they have bolstered the image of Russia as a resurgent superpower. Formerly, the Middle East was of little concern to the domestic audience, and by and large still is; however, due to Russia's involvement in Syria, it came back to public consciousness. Due to the West's reluctance to act decisively in the region, Russia could indeed strengthen her position in the Middle East. However, the West's dominance in the region is still undisputed, especially due to U.S. close diplomatic ties and military muscle in the Gulf region.

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