



Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

MES Insights • Volume 7, Issue 6

November 2016

Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East 2015–2016: Pushing on an Open Door

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There is no question that Russia has been very active in the Middle East over the last year, especially in Syria. There is a question, however, as to whether Moscow has been able to transform this activity into actual influence in the region. I would argue that the answer to this question is yes, but only because acts of omission and commission by the United States greatly facilitated Russian policy in the Middle East. This was particularly the case in countries as diverse as Egypt, Turkey, Israel, Iran and Syria.

Egypt

In the case of Egypt, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi took power in what might be called a popular coup in July 2013. The United States did not quite know how to handle the situation, and decided to partially interrupt its supply of weapons to Egypt, including helicopters, which Egypt needed to combat the growing insurgency in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula by an affiliate of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Russian President Vladimir Putin saw his opportunity and offered to sell arms to Egypt, and after Sisi's visit to Russia, Putin was warmly received in Egypt.¹ Among the weapons systems which Moscow has offered to Egypt are naval helicopters—ironically for the MISTRAL helicopter carriers which Egypt purchased from France after France refused to sell the MISTRAL to Russia because of its annexation of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine. Russia and Egypt also recently carried out joint naval and ground exercises, and, perhaps more important, in October 2016 Egypt voted for a Russian resolution on Syria at the United Nations—the only Arab and Muslim state to do so.² While the terrorist attack that brought down a Russian charter plane flying back from Egypt led to a sharp drop in the flow of Russian tourists to Egypt, the two nations are now very close, despite the resumption of US military supplies to Egypt.

Russia values its relationship with Egypt—as a Sunni Arab state with which it cooperates closely, as can be seen both by the joint military exercises and the Egyptian vote at the UN Security Council. Since Moscow is closely tied to the Shi'ite coalition fighting in Syria, consisting of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Asad, Iran, Hizbollah and other Shi'ite militias, with Russia providing the air power; it is not in the interest of Russian policy in the Middle East only to be identified with Shi'ite countries, given the rising Sunni-Shi'ite tensions in the region. Consequently, Egypt, as a major Sunni Arab state with close ties to Russia, demonstrates that Russia has an important Sunni friend in the Middle East. Indeed, by sending high-ranking representatives, including from Al-Azhar, to a Muslim conference in Grozny, Chechnya in September 2016, which castigated both Salafi and Wahhabi versions of Islam,³ Egypt has demonstrated its interest in a close relationship with Russia, although the United States, at least for the time being, remains Egypt's major arms supplier.

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Turkey

Turkey is another Sunni power in the Middle East, albeit not an Arab one, with whom relations have recently improved. While Russian-Turkish relations nosedived after a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian SU-24 bomber in November 2015, they began to recover after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan apologized for the incident. This was the case because Erdoğan came to the conclusion that he needed Russian support, or at least acquiescence, when Turkey intervened in Northern Syria to prevent the US-backed Syrian Kurdish forces—the Democratic Union Party (PYD), who were linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), against whom Turkey was fighting in Southeast Turkey—from creating a contiguous area of control along Syria's northern border, adjacent to the Turkish border. Turkish-Russian relations improved further in mid-July when Russia immediately backed Erdoğan during the 15 July 2016 coup attempt against him, while the US was slower to give the Turkish president its full support. Indeed, many in Turkey blamed the United States, if not for masterminding the coup attempt, then at least for giving asylum to the alleged coup leader Fethullah Gülen and resisting Turkish efforts to extradite him from the United States.

The end result of the Turkish-Russian rapprochement was that virtually all of the bilateral projects suspended when the Russian plane was shot down were reinstated, and Russia again permitted the importation of Turkish agricultural goods, such as fruit, and Russian tourists may soon be returning to Turkey in large numbers, thus helping the hard-hit Turkish tourist industry. The restored projects included the TurkStream natural gas pipelines, which, supplementing the already existing Blue Stream pipeline, will provide Turkey with 15.75 billion cubic meters of natural gas for its domestic use and another 15.75 bcms for transshipment to Europe, thus enabling Russia to bypass the pipeline through Ukraine and substituting for the South Stream pipeline blocked by Bulgaria.⁴ In addition, Russia and Turkey put the Akkuyu nuclear plant on a fast track for completion, a project for which the Russian firm Rosatom will supply four reactors. Finally, Turkey invited Russia to resubmit a tender for an anti-aircraft system turned down by Turkey three years before for being too expensive.⁵

The one remaining problem for Russian-Turkish relations, and it is a serious one, relates to Syria. The recent Turkish incursion into Syria, and its continued advocacy of a “no-fly” zone in Northern Syria pose a problem of choice for Moscow since the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Asad has denounced the Turkish intervention, and because Moscow is committed, at least in theory, in the words of Dmitry Peskov, Putin's spokesman, to help Asad regain “every inch” of Syria.⁶ Nonetheless, from Moscow's perspective the problem can hopefully be finessed given the fact that the dominant goal in Syria for Turkey today is control of Syria's Kurds, while for Moscow the goal is to weaken Turkey's alignment with the United States and NATO. However, given the mercurial nature of Turkish President Erdoğan it may be more difficult than Putin thinks to finesse the problem.

Israel

While Israel is neither Arab nor Sunni, it is an important country for Russia in the Middle East and relations have grown closer over the past year. One of the attractions of Israel to Moscow is the more than one million strong community of emigres from the former Soviet Union, who maintain close economic and cultural ties to Russia. It is one of the diasporas which Putin hopes to use to spread Russia's “soft power” around the world, and Putin may have welcomed the fact that one of the emigres, Avigdor Lieberman, is now Israel's defense minister, a man, who, when he served as Israel's foreign minister called Israel's relations with Russia “strategic”. Also attractive to Moscow is Israel's high tech industry, especially nanotechnology. Moscow also exploits the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to play a role in Middle East peacemaking—whether or not any peace results from its efforts—and this appears to be the aim of Russian Prime Minister Medvedev's visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories in November 2016. Russia and Israel also cooperate militarily, as the two countries have collaborated in producing an AWACS plane, and Israel sold Russia a drone system after Russian drones performed poorly in the 2008 Russian-Georgian war.⁷

In the last year Russian-Israeli relations drew closer primarily because of the Russian military involvement in Syria. The Israelis saw US inaction as Russia militarily entrenched itself in Syria as one more example of the Obama Administration's disengagement from the Middle East, and the US nuclear agreement with Iran, a country sworn to Israel's destruction, was seen by Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, as an example of the US undermining of Israel's interests. As the war in Syria intensified with Russian bombing of ISIL and non-ISIL targets, Netanyahu made a number of trips to Russia to underscore Israel's “red lines” in the conflict—preventing Iran and Hizbollah from setting up a new front against Israel near the Golan Heights and preventing the supply of sophisticated weapons to Hizbollah. Coordination with the Russians, whose S-400 anti-aircraft system's controlled much of Syrian airspace, was necessary for Israel to achieve its objectives as it periodically bombed Iranian and Hizbollah positions. So far, at least, Netanyahu's Russian policy seems to have worked, as the Russians have not engaged any of the Israeli aircraft flying on missions over Syria. For his part, Putin—who wine and dined Netanyahu during the Israeli leader's June 2016 visit to

Moscow, and even gave him a private tour of the Kremlin—seemed to relish demonstrating his close personal ties to the Israeli leader at a time when Netanyahu’s ties with US President Barack Obama were badly strained.⁸

Nonetheless, unlike the case of Turkey it is unlikely that Russia will be able to pry Israel away from its tight bond to the United States. The two countries have recently signed a ten year, 38 billion dollar military assistance agreement, Russia continues to provide military aid to Israel’s enemies, Syria and Iran, and Moscow also recently voted for the Arab-supported UNESCO resolution that denied any Jewish claim to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem.

Iran

Russian-Iranian relations also grew closer in the past year. In part, this was due to the final delivery of the long-promised S-300 anti-aircraft system to Iran, after friction caused by the suspension of the sale in 2010, and in part to the Russian-Iranian collaboration in propping up the Asad regime in Syria. Russia may have also been heartened by the fact that despite the Obama Administration’s perhaps naïve hopes for an improvement in US-Iranian relations after the signing of the nuclear agreement, the public pronouncements of Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and those of the leadership of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)—who are very powerful both politically and militarily in Iran—were as vitriolic against the United States as before the agreement was signed. It appeared the Iranian President Hasan Ruhani, who did want an improvement in US-Iranian relations, could do little in the face of opposition by Khamenei and the IRGC. In addition, incidents such as the mistreatment of US sailors who strayed into Iranian waters and the continued imprisonment of dual US-Iranian nationals further undermined US-Iranian relations. Indeed, throughout 2016 Russia and Iran reinforced each other’s anti-American positions.

To be sure there were frictions in the relationship, although they were minor. Thus Tehran complained about Russia’s publication of the fact that it had used an Iranian airfield to bomb anti-Asad rebels in Syria, and Moscow could not have been too happy about the return of Iranian oil to an already glutted market, although Russia publicly called for a higher quota for Iranian oil during negotiations with OPEC nations about stabilizing oil prices.⁹ Nonetheless, it will be many years before Iran can modernize its oil and natural gas production facilities to the point that it can be a real competitor to Russia in world oil and natural gas markets.

Syria

The Russian military intervention into Syria accomplished a number of goals for Moscow.¹⁰ First, it demonstrated that Russia stands by a Middle Eastern ally—in sharp contrast to the failure of the United States to stand by then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at a similar time of crisis. Second, it demonstrated that Russia has the power to prevent a regime change by force, orchestrated by the United States, as had happened in Libya. Third, it moved Russia from the position of relative diplomatic isolation, to which it had been cast after its annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine. Indeed, it had become abundantly clear by February 2016 that without Russia, there would be no solution to the Syrian crisis, as the US Secretary of State John Kerry has been scurrying after his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, in a so far futile effort to achieve a peace agreement in Syria. Fourth, as part of Putin’s efforts to demonstrate that Russia is again a great power, the military intervention in Syria gave Russia a chance to demonstrate its military power, not only bombing Asad’s opponents from its new airbase in Syria, but also firing cruise missiles at them from the Caspian Sea and from the Mediterranean as well. A related benefit to Moscow may be the opportunity to sell battle-proven weapons on world markets, although since the anti-Asad rebels have had no serious anti-aircraft weapons such as man pads—at least so far—and a Russian SU-24 was shot down by an American-made F-16, how successful Russian sales on world markets will be remains to be seen. Fifth, Russia has acquired a major airbase in Syria (Hmeimim), and using its S-400’s controls a considerable amount of airspace in the Middle East. It is now also in the process of expanding its naval facility in the Syrian port of Tartus from several floating docks and warehouses into a full-fledged naval base, one now protected by the S-300 anti-aircraft system.¹¹ A sixth gain, as noted above is the reinforcement of relations with Iran, the primary backer of the Asad regime.

To be sure much of the Russian success in Syria was made possible by the failure of the United States to take serious military action in that country to help the anti-Asad rebels, especially before the jihadists became influential in the movement in 2014. President Obama’s campaign mantra in 2012, “I got us out of Iraq, I’m getting us out of Afghanistan, I’m not getting us into Syria” persists as far as Syria goes, although US troops are back in Iraq to deal with the threat from ISIL, and the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, given the resurgence of the Taliban there, is likely to be delayed for a considerable amount of time. Essentially, President Obama has seen Syria as a quagmire with no military solution, and despite calling for the ouster of Asad, has concentrated US efforts in that country on combatting ISIL. However, the decisive Russian military intervention

in Syria has demonstrated, at least so far, that far from being a quagmire Russian military intervention in Syria has had a major effect, strengthening both the military and political positions of the Asad regime to the point that if serious peace negotiations ever begin, the Asad regime, backed by Russia, will be in a dominant position, or if military activity continues, Asad, with the help of Iran, Hizbollah and other Shi'ite militias, together with Russian air power, should be able to dominate Western Syria, where the bulk of the Syrian population and its major cities (Homs, Hama, Damascus and Aleppo) are located.

Conclusions

In sum, when one analyzes Russian policy in the Middle East over the past year, it is clear that the increased Russian influence in countries such as Egypt, Turkey, and Israel is due as much to acts of omission or commission by the United States, which Russia took advantage of, as to policy initiatives by Moscow. In the case of Syria it was Russian military action to which the US had no effective response, and in the case of Iran it was due to the belated supply of the S-300's, a common effort to support the Asad regime, and a common anti-American position that reinforced Russian-Iranian relations. There is no question that Russia plays a more influential role in the Middle East today than it did before its military intervention in Syria. Whether the incoming US administration can reverse the Russian momentum remains to be seen.

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Notes:

- ¹ For an overview of Russian-Egyptian relations after General Sisi seized power, see Robert O. Freedman, "Russia and the Arab Spring" in *The Arab Spring*, eds. Mark Haas and David Lesch (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2016) pp.254-255.
- ² "Russia Vetoes France's Draft UN Resolution on Syria; Russian Draft Rejected", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 8, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/a/russia-vetos-france-un-resolution-aleppo-syria/28040146.html>.
- ³ Cited in Yaroslav Trofimov, "Sunni Split Threatens Saudi Influence", *Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 2016, <http://www.commoditiescontrol.com/commodity-market/dowjonescommoditiesnews/sunni-split-threatens-saudi-influence-wsj-20160923DN001070.html>.
- ⁴ Nerdun Hacıoğlu, "Turkish Stream Deal May be Signed During Putin's Visit: Russian Minister", *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 9, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkish-stream-deal-may-be-signed-during-putins-istanbul-visit-russian-minister.aspx?pageID=238&nID=104756&NewsCatID=348>; and "Turkey, Russia Strike Strategic Turkish Stream Gas Pipeline Deal", *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 10, 2016, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkey-russia-strike-strategic-turkish-stream-gas-pipeline-deal.aspx?pageID=238&nID=104822&NewsCatID=348>.
- ⁵ Burak Ege Bekdil, "Turkey Invited Russian Bid for Air defense Contract", *Defense News*, October 10, 2016, <http://www.defensenews.com/articles/turkey-invites-russian-bid-for-air-defense-contract>.
- ⁶ Cited in Vladimir Isachenkov and Bassem Mroue, "Kremlin: Demands for Assad's Departure Thoughtless", *Associated Press*, October 22, 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/921f9f1fb42e4e05aef0e7958b439460/kremlin-demands-assads-departure-thoughtless>.
- ⁷ For a background on Russian-Israeli relations before 2015, see Robert O. Freedman, "Israel and Russia: Jerusalem and its Relations with Moscow Under Putin", in *Israel and the World Powers*, ed. Colin Shindler (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2014).
- ⁸ For a study of the deterioration of relations between Obama and Netanyahu, see Robert O. Freedman, "The Erosion of US-Israeli Relations in the Second Obama Administration", *Israel Affairs*, forthcoming, February 2017.
- ⁹ Cited in David Sheppard, "Iran offers Cautious Support to Oil Freeze", *Financial Times*, September 6, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/4c15a264-7413-11e6-bf48-b372cdb1043a>.
- ¹⁰ For a study of Russian involvement in Syria, see Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russia and the Syrian Conflict: Moscow's Domestic, Regional and Strategic Interests* (Berlin: Gehrlich Press, 2016).
- ¹¹ "Russians to Expand Military Presence in Syria with Permanent Naval Base", *Haaretz*, October 10, 2016, <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/1.746944>.