

2. Same Ends but Different Means: Change, Continuity and Moscow's Middle East Policy

Mark N. Katz

Russian President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy toward the Middle East has broadly pursued aims similar to those of the Soviet Union (USSR) during the Cold War. These aims include 1) undermining Washington's role in the region in order to promote Moscow's; 2) preventing Islamist forces in the region from growing strong enough to support the rise of Muslim opposition in Russia, other former Soviet republics, or countries elsewhere closely aligned with Moscow; and 3) seeking economic cooperation with the Middle East despite often competing with it in the petroleum sphere. But despite the broad similarities in Moscow's overall objectives in the Middle East, Putin's approach to achieving them differs from that of the Soviets. While the Soviets usually worked towards their Middle Eastern aims in opposition to US allies in the region, Putin has pursued these goals largely in cooperation with them.

Soviet Aims

During the Cold War, Moscow strenuously sought to increase its own influence in the Middle East by undermining US influence there. There were even some instances of Moscow cooperating with conservative monarchies in the region such as those of the Imam of Yemen before his 1962 overthrow (after which

Moscow backed his opponents), the Emir of Kuwait, and even the Shah of Iran at times. However, the Soviets mainly sought to expand their influence at the United States' expense by allying with anti-American regimes and movements – especially the Arab Nationalist. Moscow gained influence in every country where an Arab Nationalist regime came to power: Egypt in 1952, Syria and Iraq in 1958, North Yemen and Algeria in 1962, and Libya and Sudan in 1969. Moscow also gained influence after the Middle East's sole Marxist-Leninist regime came to power in South Yemen in 1967. The Soviets also had warm relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), other Arab Nationalist and/or Marxist Palestinian movements, and similar opposition movements in Oman, Bahrain, Western Sahara, and elsewhere¹.

Especially from the mid-1950s through the 1970s (i.e., the eras of Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev), the Soviets (and many in the West and elsewhere) believed that the USSR was gaining and the West was losing influence in the Middle East due to powerful indigenous forces at work there. European colonies and pro-Western conservative governments were giving way to pro-Soviet Arab Nationalist, Marxist, or other anti-Western governments. The Soviets also benefited from being aligned with Arab and Muslim public opinion, as well as most Middle Eastern governments (including ones allied with the United States), in opposing both Israel and American support for it². Furthermore, successful efforts on the part of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to raise the price of oil beginning in 1973 resulted in an economic windfall for the USSR, which was also a major petroleum exporter³.

¹ A. Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin*, London, Routledge, 2018.

² R. Khalidi, "Arab Views of the Soviet Role in the Middle East", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1985, pp. 716-19.

³ Y. Gaidar, *The Soviet Collapse: Grain and Oil*, American Enterprise Institute, April 2007 (last retrieved on 1 July 2019).

But things did not always go Moscow's way in the Middle East during the Cold War. Moscow's support for both their regional adversaries and/or internal opponents resulted in some Middle Eastern governments (such as the Arab Gulf states) clinging tightly to the United States and the West despite their differences over Israel. Moreover, pro-Soviet governments in the Middle East often proved difficult partners for Moscow due to their rivalries with one another – as occurred among Egypt, Syria, and Iraq; between the Palestinians and various Arab Nationalist governments; and among the various Palestinian factions. In addition, the anti-Western governments and movements at first lionized Moscow for supporting their cause while Washington did not, yet over time some of these same governments and movements became critical of the USSR for “not supporting the Arabs as much as the United States supports Israel”. It was this sentiment, as well as the desire to reach a diplomatic settlement with Israel instead of trying to defeat it, that led to Egypt's conversion from a Soviet to an American ally under Gamal Abdel Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat⁴.

Furthermore, the “winds of change” did not always blow in Moscow's direction. The 1979 Iranian revolution that overthrew a pro-American government did not lead to the rise of a pro-Soviet one in its place (as had previously occurred after the downfall of other pro-American regimes in the Middle East), but rather to one that was hostile toward the USSR as well as to the West. Unlike Arab Nationalist governments and forces that mainly targeted pro-Western governments, the new regime in Iran supported Islamic revolutionaries who targeted Soviet along with Western allies in the region. In addition, the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89) led not only to widespread condemnation of the USSR within the Arab and Muslim worlds, but to the rise of virulently anti-Soviet Islamist rebel groups inside Afghanistan that Soviet forces could not defeat.

⁴ R. Khalidi (1985), p. 719.

Finally, just as Moscow benefited from Saudi/OPEC efforts to raise oil prices in the 1970s, Moscow suffered from Saudi endeavors to lower them in the mid-1980s. Saudi perceptions of Soviet hostility (including its invasion of Afghanistan and support for regimes antagonistic toward Saudi Arabia in Iraq, South Yemen, and Ethiopia) contributed to Riyadh's decision to forego profit maximization and pursue a "flood the market" oil production policy, which resulted in a prolonged period of low oil prices that gravely damaged the Soviet economy. Indeed, President Boris Yeltsin's first Prime Minister, Yegor Gaidar, saw this Saudi policy as the true cause of the collapse of the Soviet economy and the USSR itself⁵.

During the Cold War, therefore the USSR succeeded in taking advantage of several trends in the Middle East to extend its influence in this region from the 1950s through the 1970s. These included the rise of Arab Nationalism along with general anti-Western and anti-Israeli sentiment, and the increase in oil prices engineered by Middle Eastern oil producers beginning in 1973. But the Soviets also experienced several setbacks – some of their own making – during the 1970s and 1980s that not only hurt Moscow's influence in the region but also undermined the USSR itself. These included the willingness of conservative Arab states to rely on the United States for protection, despite their opposition to its support for Israel, due to their greater fear of the USSR and Moscow's regional allies; the defection of the most populous Arab state – Egypt – from the Soviet to the American camp in the 1970s; the rise of Islamist forces that were both anti-Soviet as well as anti-Western; and Saudi Arabia's ushering in a low oil price environment by "flooding the market" in the mid-1980s. Indeed, even after the breakup of the USSR and Russia's retreat from the Middle East, Russia was negatively affected both by various Middle Eastern sources supporting the Chechen opposition movement (which Russian officials and commentators often blamed on Saudi Arabia in particular) and

⁵ Y. Gaidar (2007).

by the continued low oil price environment (which led to acrimony between Russia and OPEC over Moscow's efforts to expand oil production)⁶. During this period between the decline of the USSR and the rise of Putin, Russia was less able to affect the Middle East than be affected by it.

Putin's Aims

The full extent of Putin's ambitions in the Middle East did not become evident until after the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011 and the Russian intervention in Syria that began in 2015. His actions there were far more cautious at first. But since he first came to power at the turn of the century up until the present, the hallmark of Putin's approach to the Middle East has not been to support the "forces of change" as the Soviets did, but to support *status quo* forces instead. Putin thus set out to establish and maintain good relations with all Middle Eastern governments despite their hostility toward one another.

At first, Putin focused on seeking to remove negative Middle Eastern influence from Russia both through his effort to defeat the Chechen rebels (whom Moscow insisted were being supported by Sunni jihadists from the Middle East) and by pursuing good relations with Middle Eastern governments that (despite their differences) shared Moscow's fear of Sunni jihadist forces. When Putin first came to power, Moscow saw Saudi Arabia in particular as supporting the Chechen rebels, and seized upon the September 11, 2001 attacks as an opportunity to try to ally with the United States and the West against what it portrayed as the common, Saudi-backed Sunni jihadist threat. But around the time of the US-led intervention in Iraq, which was opposed by both Russia and Saudi Arabia, and the Sunni jihadist terrorist attacks on Saudi Arabia itself in 2003, Moscow switched from portraying Saudi Arabia as a common threat to

⁶ M. Katz, "Saudi-Russian Relations in the Putin Era", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2001, pp. 608-17.

the United States and Russia to portraying the United States as a common threat to Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the Middle East *status quo* in general. Since then, Moscow has emphasized that while Russia supports all existing governments in the region, US support for democratization and human rights (whether through military intervention or otherwise) has not advanced either of these goals, but has instead needlessly undermined existing governments and allowed jihadists to become stronger. While most traditional US allies in the region have continued to cooperate with the United States (Turkey being the most notable exception), this Russian argument is something that has resonated with them all and has helped promote cooperation with Russia⁷.

Unlike during the Cold War, pro-Western governments have not fallen and been replaced by pro-Russian ones. But Putin has sought neither this nor the lesser goal of persuading existing US allies to switch to becoming Russian allies. Even Turkey, whose purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense missile system has called into question its future in the NATO alliance, does not seem likely to become militarily allied to Russia against the West (Ankara continues to differ with Moscow over several issues, including the future of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, what to do about Syrian Kurdish forces, and the ongoing dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan)⁸. Instead, Putin seems to prefer that existing US allies in the Middle East increase cooperation with Russia economically and militarily (especially by buying Russian weaponry) and that they resist Washington's pressure to cooperate with Western sanctions against Russia over Ukraine and Europe-related issues. And in these aims, Putin has succeeded.

Some US allies in the region have hoped that by improving their ties to Russia, Moscow could be persuaded to reduce or even stop supporting their adversaries. Riyadh in particular had

⁷ A. Vasiliev (2018), pp. 344-97.

⁸ G. Dalay, "Turkey and Russia are Bitter Frenemies", *Foreign Policy*, 28 May 2019 (last retrieved on 1 July 2019).

hoped that economic incentives from Riyadh would induce Moscow to distance itself from Tehran. Putin has made clear, though, that he will not distance himself from any one Middle Eastern state at the request of another. But to those uncomfortable with Moscow's close relations with their adversaries, Putin has indicated his willingness to compensate by increasing cooperation with them – even though this might discomfit a traditional Russian ally. In other words, while Putin has been unwilling to desist from cooperating with Iran at the behest of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), he has also been unwilling to refrain from cooperating with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE despite how this annoys Iran⁹.

Thus, unlike the United States and the USSR during the Cold War (and the United States ever since), which mainly allied with certain governments against their adversaries in the Middle East, Putin seeks to maintain “balanced” relations among them all despite whatever animosities they have toward each other. This gives opposing sides an incentive to court Russia despite each side's dislike of Moscow's support for the other. Moscow need not fear that this will harm relations with anti-American partners such as Iran, which are unlikely to turn toward Washington despite being displeased with Moscow – like Sadat did in the 1970s. Moscow's pro-American partners, of course, are hardly likely to give up their ties to Washington while Moscow continues to cooperate with their adversaries. But at a time when Middle Eastern states have, rightly or wrongly, come to doubt Washington's reliability as an ally (doubts that Moscow encourages), Moscow may calculate that they cannot afford to downgrade their ties to Moscow due to its support for their adversaries. Indeed, “the logic of the situation” may compel them to do more to court Moscow instead.

⁹ D. Trenin, *What Is Russia Up to in the Middle East?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018, pp. 111-12; M. Katz, *Support Opposing Sides Simultaneously: Russia's Approach to the Gulf and the Middle East*, Aljazeera Centre for Studies, 23 August 2018 (last retrieved on 1 July 2019).

Putin's approach to the Middle East therefore involves a combination of cooperating with all existing governments (i.e., supporting the largely authoritarian *status quo*) along with not taking sides in their various disputes (such as Israel vs. Iran; Saudi Arabia and the UAE vs. Iran; Saudi Arabia and the UAE vs. Qatar; etc.). In those Middle Eastern countries where there are ongoing internal conflicts and the central government is weak, Moscow also strives to maintain a balanced stance. While this is least true in Syria, where Moscow has firmly supported the Assad regime against its Arab opponents, Moscow has balanced itself between other antagonists in Syria's many ongoing conflicts, including between the Assad regime and Syrian Kurdish forces, between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds, and between Israel and Iran/Hezbollah. In Iraq, Moscow maintains good relations with both the Baghdad government and the Kurdish Regional Government. In Libya, Moscow recognizes the UN-sponsored government in Tripoli, but also supports its opponent, General Khalifa Haftar. In Yemen, Moscow has good relations with the Saudi-backed Hadi government but also with the Iranian-backed Houthis and the UAE-backed southern separatists¹⁰. As with inter-state tensions in the Middle East, opposing sides in these intra-state conflicts all have an incentive to court Moscow despite their aversion to its cooperation with their opponents.

But while this Russian practice of simultaneously supporting opposing sides may motivate them to court Moscow, it also inspires wariness of it. Putin has sought to overcome this problem by launching conflict resolution initiatives that capitalize on Russia's ability to talk with opposing sides, while the United States cannot or will not talk with some (such as Iran, the Assad regime, and Hezbollah). The most well-known of these is the "Astana process", which Moscow has been conducting with regard to Syria, but there are other conflicts that Moscow has also offered to mediate¹¹. While none of these initiatives have yet

¹⁰ D. Trenin (2018), pp. 86-111; M. Katz (2018).

¹¹ E. Stepanova, "Russia and Conflicts in the Middle East: Regionalism and

succeeded, Moscow's reputation in the region as a more capable mediator than the United States would be greatly enhanced if it could resolve even one of them. But even if none of Moscow's conflict resolution efforts actually comes to fruition (as is very possible), just their indefinite continuation allows Russia to play an important diplomatic role in the region that the United States cannot do as long as it is unwilling and/or unable to talk with certain parties (or possibly even if it is).

It is in the realm of petroleum that Putin has taken longest to fashion a policy distinct from that of the Soviets. While Putin has always sought investment opportunities in the Middle East for Russian petroleum firms and investments from the Middle East in the Russian petroleum sector, when Putin first came to power there were sharp differences between Russia on the one hand and Saudi Arabia and OPEC on the other over Russia's unwillingness to join OPEC in limiting production in order to bolster oil prices. However, the steady rise in oil prices in the early XXI century up until 2008 served to mitigate these differences, since the value of everyone's petroleum exports was increasing. Tensions arose again, though, when oil prices fell from these highs and Russia remained unwilling to join OPEC in limiting production to bolster prices. But after the growth in American shale oil production was increasingly seen as a common threat to both Russia and OPEC, Moscow changed its position in 2016 and began to cooperate on limiting oil production through the OPEC+ format. According to some observers, Saudi-Russian negotiations are now the most important factor in determining OPEC+ policy on oil production targets¹². Recent reports indicate, however, that despite this increased Saudi-Russian cooperation, the Saudis have sometimes been disappointed with Russia for not cutting back oil production as much as Riyadh has wanted or even as

Implications for the West", *International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2018, pp. 35-57.

¹² See, for example, J. Lee, "Russia Completes Its OPEC Takeover With Deal With Saudis", *Bloomberg*, 29 June 2019 (last retrieved on 1 July 2019).

Moscow has agreed to do¹³. Nevertheless, there has been an unprecedented degree of Saudi-Russian oil cooperation since 2016, which both parties feel strongly motivated to continue given the growing impact of American shale oil production on their petroleum export revenues.

During the Putin era, therefore, Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East has been successful in several ways. Unlike in the Soviet era, when Moscow had good relations with Soviet allies (though not always) and mainly poor relations with US allies, Moscow now has good relations with all governments in the Middle East. One benefit of this is that none of them supports Chechen or other Muslim oppositionists inside Russia. And instead of being at odds with Saudi Arabia and OPEC over oil production policy, Moscow is now cooperating with them on this issue. Like the Soviets, Putin certainly has not pushed the United States out of the Middle East. But while the Soviets may have hoped to do this, Putin has not made this a prime goal of Russian policy toward the Middle East. What he has done instead by having good relations with all governments in the region is to ensure that they are unlikely to cooperate with any US effort to push Russia out of the Middle East or out of the diplomacy related to the resolution of any dispute within it. So far, then, Putin's policy toward the Middle East has proven to be much more successful than Soviet policy toward the region during the Cold War.

The Future

Putin, and perhaps even his successor, may be able to maintain Russian influence in the Middle East indefinitely by maintaining good relations with opposing sides simultaneously. If the United States, for whatever reason, decides to play a less active role in the region, Russia may be able to increase its influence in the Middle East even further. But just as there were forces at

¹³ See, for example, T. Daiss, "[Cracks Begin To Form In Saudi-Russian Alliance](#)", *OilPrice.com*, 21 February 2019 (last retrieved on 1 July 2019).

work in the Middle East serving to limit Soviet influence there during the Cold War, there may now be some that could limit or even reduce Russian influence in the region over the course of the next decade or two.

While Putin's policy of supporting opposing sides simultaneously has been successful so far, no party is pleased that Moscow supports its adversary. In those cases where the United States and the West clearly support one side against another, pro-American governments have a strong incentive to continue cooperating closely with the United States even while they are increasing their cooperation with Russia. Putin's policy of supporting opposing sides simultaneously may then actually serve to bolster ties between the United States and those states that it strongly supports.

In addition, Putin (as was noted earlier) has been highly successful in keeping Chechnya and the status of Russia's Muslim population in general off the Middle East's agenda of concern. Middle Eastern governments and national movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah are not supporting Muslim opposition movements in Russia or elsewhere in the former USSR. Indeed, many have good relations with the Moscow-backed rulers of Chechnya, Tatarstan, and Russia's other Muslim autonomous republics¹⁴. But while Middle Eastern governments may feel no incentive to help Muslim opposition movements inside Russia, such movements may grow stronger as a result of conditions there – as press reports indicate may be occurring¹⁵. In other words: Moscow's good relations with Middle Eastern governments cannot prevent the rise of Muslim unrest inside Russia, and if it does, Middle Eastern governments may be unwilling or unable to help Moscow suppress such movements even if they do not support them.

¹⁴ M. Laruelle (ed.), *Russia's Islamic Diplomacy*, George Washington University Central Asia Program, 1 July 2019 (last retrieved on 1 July 2019).

¹⁵ I. Berman, "Demography's Pull on Russian Mideast Policy", in T. Karasik and S. Blank (eds.), *Russia in the Middle East*, Washington, DC, Jamestown Foundation, 2018, pp. 319-37.

Further, while Saudi-Russian cooperation on oil is now better than it has ever been, its importance may be reduced by increasing competition from US shale and/or decreasing worldwide demand for oil due to the rise of renewable energy sources. These trends will not only reduce the income of Russia and other oil exporters, but also diminish Moscow's ability to play an active role in the Middle East.

Finally, just as the Soviet withdrawal from the Middle East at the end of the Cold War resulted less from the failure of Soviet policy toward the region than the failure of the USSR itself, Moscow may once again be forced to reduce its activity in the region more as a result of events outside the region than of Moscow's fortunes inside it. If the post-Putin transition (which must eventually take place) goes badly and domestic political turmoil occurs inside Russia, Moscow may be unable to pay much attention to the Middle East. But even if a post-Putin transition goes smoothly, the new leader, even if chosen by Putin himself and ruling in a manner similar to him, may simply have different priorities than his predecessor. If, for example, he determines that China's growing economic and military strength is far more of a threat to Russia than Putin seems to think it is currently, the new leader may decide that 1) cooperation with the United States and the West against China is vital for Russia; and 2) Moscow needs to adjust its policy toward the Middle East by distancing Russia from Iran, the Assad regime, and Hezbollah in order to promote cooperation with the West against what he sees as the common Chinese threat. On the other hand, if Russia remains at odds with the West and grows increasingly dependent economically on an increasingly powerful China, Moscow may have no choice but to subordinate its interests to China's in the Middle East (and elsewhere).

Putin's policy of seeking good relations with all governments in the Middle East has arguably allowed Moscow to gain influence in more countries in the region than the Soviet policy of aligning with anti-Western governments and forces against pro-Western ones. But while Putin has managed to maintain

good relations with opposing sides simultaneously, an escalation of any of the region's many conflicts (particularly ones between Iran on the one hand and Israel and/or Saudi Arabia on the other) may make continuing to do so difficult. Further, even if conditions in the Middle East remain favorable for Moscow, larger problems elsewhere may constrain Moscow's ability to take advantage of these conditions. These possibilities include the whipsaw effect of greater supplies of oil from American shale and less demand for oil due to the greater availability of renewable alternatives; unrest among Russia's growing Muslim population; larger geopolitical concerns arising either from the need to accommodate the West *vis-à-vis* China or China *vis-à-vis* the West, or – most dramatically – a political crisis in Russia arising from the post-Putin transition. What is more, any of these problems could arise even if the US' role in the Middle East declines.