

6. Russia and the United States in the Cases of Egypt and Libya

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The topic of love-hate relations between the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR)-turned-Russia in the Middle East has occupied a significant part of the discourse on international relations in the region since times long gone. Not only has this standoffish confrontation shaped the political backdrop of regional developments, more often than not it has also contributed to the domestic environments in both the United States and Russia, from the economical to the social to the political discourse. From this perspective, one should evaluate every endeavor undertaken by both actors with consideration to the resonance this or that statement or step was intended by leaders to create within their home constituencies.

The history of “mutually assured participation” by both the United States and Russia in the Middle East originated in the aftermath of World War II, when the USSR gained access to a seat in the “winner’s club” and transitioned from the status of the “Enfant Terrible” of the established world order to a fully-fledged superpower with nuclear capabilities and an appetite for adventurism. And the Middle East, with its vast reserves of hydrocarbons, strategic geographic position, and, importantly, its centrality in the Mediterranean Basin, see the natural place of interest for the leadership in Moscow. Also of importance was the Islamic factor, given the domestic policies toward the significant number of Muslims living under the umbrella of the USSR.

Just as Moscow began scrutinizing London's activities in the MENA region, Washington began monitoring Moscow's moves, trying to anticipate and/or stall the advancement of the USSR in the enigmatic world of *One Thousand and One Nights*, despite full knowledge of the odds being in favor of Russia due to proximity and the influence of the Eastern Orthodoxy.

The US-USSR rivalry over the region was shaped by several distinctive issues such as the influence on the emerging independent states, shaping daily political agendas, flimsy collaboration "in ways that would nudge the locals toward an armed peace"¹ and, of course, control over and use of the Arab-Israeli conflict through a number of agents in place.

It is not useful to resort to nostalgic reminiscences of the "bipolar" world, nor to indulge in blaming the monopolar construction of the international system, as much has already been written on this subject. The focus of this chapter is on the return of Russia to the South Mediterranean, namely Egypt and Libya, in the wake of what is commonly referred to as the Arab Spring.

Usually when discussing the recent reentry of Russia into Middle Eastern politics the narrative revolves around President Vladimir Putin's ambitions to become a key figure in international arena. Without diminishing the role of the longstanding Russian President, however, we posit that the new policies of Russia in the Middle East and thus the renewed sparring between Russia and the United States in and around Egypt and Libya actually started with the ascent of Yevgeny Primakov to the position of Russian Prime Minister. Primakov, with his unwavering position toward proactive policies in the Middle East, contributed significantly if not decisively to the assertive return of Russia in MENA politics². This began against the backdrop

¹ G.W. Breslauer, *Soviet Strategy in the Middle East*, New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 27.

² See, for example: E.M. Primakov, *Confidential: Middle East Frontstage and Backstage*, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 2006, p. 376. "The events of recent years require Moscow's focus on more proactive participation in resolving Middle Eastern problems.

of the NATO incursion in former Yugoslavia which was and still is felt as a great fiasco for Russia in the European continent.

And of course, just as Moscow's analysis is that Washington is "hiding" behind everything that damages Moscow's interests, the Kremlin's activities might be seen by Washington as an anti-American reaction everywhere it matters. Frankly speaking, there is no smoke without a fire, and there is a certain level of justification of Russia's suspicions toward United States, and the reciprocal feeling is not without its reasoning as well. The sequence of events in the Mediterranean in the twenty-first century may be considered as a good example of the return of both Moscow and Washington to the *modus operandi* of the infamous Cold War.

The transition started as a result of the war on terror waged by President George W. Bush in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. For a brief period of time, Moscow and Washington were united by the operation in Afghanistan; the best of counterterrorism partners they seemed to be. The counterterrorism discourse appeared to become a venue for constructing close cooperation, if not rapport, between the two major players wielding power in the greater Middle East, if not the whole of the Western Asia. The fissures appeared in 2003, when the United States invaded Iraq under what Russia saw as dubious pretexts. Even then, the rupture might have been avoided were it not for the fact that the US administration allowed Shia authorities to execute ousted Iraqi President Saddam Hussein (which rang extremely loud alarm bells in Moscow) and spectacularly failed to organize the civil life of Iraqi society in the aftermath of invasion, thus paving the way for the emergence of various violent extremist groups.

This served for Moscow as an example of "American ignorance" in Middle Eastern affairs, and the Russian powers that

There are good reasons for the success [of the Middle Eastern course]: Russia has unblemished traditional ties with Arab countries and Iran; relations with Israel have dramatically improved while maintaining fundamental policy toward resolving the Middle East conflict on a fair, accommodating basis".

be decided that the “bull in a china shop” tactics of the United States in the region not only threatened to ignite violence in the Middle East, but also aggravate the security situation along the borders of Russia. However, the afore-mentioned tactics of United States had a measured benefit for Russian policy by creating a semi-angelic image for Moscow, and still today Moscow “seeks to present itself to countries in the region as a pragmatic, nonideological, reliable, savvy, no-nonsense player with a capacity to weigh in on regional matters by both diplomatic and military means”³ as a total contrast to the US.

Now once again, the confrontation between the United States and Russia in the MENA region requires further study. Undoubtedly the main contested theaters are the two local actors traditionally on the forefront of regional politics: Egypt and Libya. Though the nature of US-Russian relations differs in each case, one thing remains constant, and that is the importance of each country in shaping policies in MENA post-World War II and beyond, with the special focus on the Mediterranean.

For the sake of practicality, each case will be examined separately.

Egypt

The US-USSR contest for primacy in Egypt started immediately after the withdrawal of Britain from Cairo. Egypt at that time was a prize worth taking risks for. As the Arab wisdom went, “what happened in Egypt, happened in the Middle East”. After the exit of Britain, a trove of opportunities opened in front of whoever was successful in replacing the “old colonial” as the source of influence on the Nile.

The historical contest carried on with the USSR gaining the upper hand in the 1950s and dramatically losing it in the

³ D. Trenin, *Russia in the Middle-East. Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, April 2016, p. 4.

1970s. The loss of Egypt in the beginning of the 1970s was effectively the beginning of the end for Soviet supremacy in the region, which up until that point had been reinforced by its status as the main military backer of Cairo.

Much has been published debating the reasons for Russia's loss and the United States' gain in momentum in the Middle East in the late 1970s through early 1980s, from failed military operations on the part of the USSR to the prowess of US diplomacy. In our understanding the truth was at once more mundane and unexpected.

The old USSR leadership constructed their presence in the Middle East around discourse on the historical fight against the enemy of the working class, thus relying on the two socialist pillars of the time, namely, the construction of heavy industries in the client countries to create an able-bodied working class, and the enhancement of their military to ward off imperialist aggression and put a lid on any possible dissent. This attitude was supposed to mobilize a united front of anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist forces. This could not have been farther from the reality. The so called "Arab socialist" elite was not interested in these globalist goals (with the exception of a few idealistic revolutionary figures of Michel Aflak's⁴ calibre). The threat of a Zionist foe was used as a pretext to periodically mobilize constituencies for a fight for the motherland, diverting the population's attention from the domestic agenda and introducing along the way martial law, which was of great help in curbing dissent. The modernized and beefed-up military was better at defending regimes from internal threats than external ones. Meanwhile, periodic wars with Israel became a sort of political ritualistic feeding of the egos on both sides of the Arab-Israeli divide, and served to bring in financial aid. Then all at

⁴ Michel Aflak was a Syrian philosopher, sociologist, and Arab nationalist. His ideas significantly influenced the development of Baathism and its political movement and he is considered by some to be the principal founder of Baathist thought.

once, “Egypt needed peace with Israel for the sake of Egypt”⁵, as the war became economically unfeasible. This fact was totally missed by Kremlin, as was the multiplying factor that follows.

The Kremlin failed to see that the same Arab elites were more interested in spending their ill-gotten wealth shopping in Europe and the United States, to the extent that names like Harrods, Galerie Lafayette, and Fifth Avenue became more influential than any other considerations in shaping the daily life and affinities of the powers that be in the Middle Eastern countries. Consumerist priorities became more powerful than ideological constructs. One has to acknowledge that US policymakers saw these inconsistencies early on and effectively exploited them in daily interactions with Middle Eastern counterparts. Thus, consumerism and not ideology won the day. Of course, there were other important reasons like problems inside the Warsaw Pact, the declining economy of the USSR, and the demise of the latter in 1991, but the initial failure of the USSR and prevalence of the United States in the autocratic secular elitist Middle East was hidden in European and American shopping malls.

Since the deconstruction of the USSR and Moscow’s retreat from all issues connected to the Middle East, Russian involvement in Egypt effectively shrank to meager “scientific and cultural” cooperation. However, during the same period a new phenomenon by the name of Russian tourism came into being. During the 1990s, thanks to newly obtained freedom of travel, Russian citizens quickly joined the vanguard of overseas vacationers. In the Middle Eastern countries Russia effectively snatched the leading position from the Germans and became the primary supplier of tourists to Egypt. This led to an interesting paradox in which Russia provided Egypt with financial influx, enabling the latter to pay for American goods and maintain its position in the Western marketplace. Of course, it was

⁵ T. Kuehner, *The U.S. and Egypt since the Suez Crisis*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 28 July 2009 (last retrieved on 14 June 2019).

by far not the only factor but nevertheless it played a significant role in keeping Egypt's economy afloat.

In the framework of a new Kremlin policy of making friends in the international system in the 1990s, Cairo was initially assigned a minor role as an unenthusiastic heir to the strategic partnership formed between Russia and Egypt's [President] Gamal Abdel Nasser. Moscow at that time controversially reached rapprochement with Israel and customarily assigned all its goodwill to the alliance with their former "Zionist" enemy, even though "the Israeli elite ha[d] perceived Russia as a country of alien values and alien political culture, while in Russia there are still vestiges of domestic anti-Semitism and suspicion toward Israel as an American satellite"⁶. It was difficult for the Kremlin to formulate any significant role for Egypt in their political agenda at that time, outside the Israeli narrative. Except, of course, as a favorite touristic destination.

The same was true for Cairo. Egyptian leadership until 2011 did not recognize Russia's role in the region except as a nominal counterbalance against US monopoly to be occasionally used as a negotiating chip. That meant that Moscow could have been replaced by any ambitious-enough party, which in its turn defined a complete prevalence of Washington as a leading international interlocutor in the MENA and Mediterranean political and economic discourse.

Thus, during the period from 1990 to 2011, an interesting triangle was formed, with Moscow providing Egypt with an instrument for political blackmail (the threat of a "return to Russia") in talks with Western counterparts, and cash from tourism which in turn Egypt used to purchase goods and commodities which were supplied by United States. Everything seemed to be going smoothly except for the 2011 uprisings later called the Arab Spring and the growing Russian ambitions based on Yevgeny Primakov revivalist approach to the role of Russia in the Middle East and North Africa.

⁶ T. Karasova, "Russian-Israeli Relations, Past, Present, and Future: A View from Moscow", in Z. Magen and V. Naumkin (eds.), *Russia and Israel in the Changing Middle East*, Tel Aviv, INSS, 2013. p. 53.

The “winds of change” were also fueled by several mistakes made by American policymakers during this period. First, there was a misinterpretation of the nature of the protests. It was assumed that Egyptian youth went to the street seeking democratic changes and protesting against political reprisals and the dictatorship of President Hosni Mubarak and his clan, while in fact the slogans were mainly economic with certain references to free democratic reforms, again inside economic context. Second, there was a misunderstanding of the role of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was perceived as a light of democracy in the dark tunnels of tyranny in Egypt – an approach that persists to this day and interferes with the process of US policy decision making. Third, the reach of the Egyptian armed forces was dramatically underestimated by the United States. And last, but not least, the inability of Western leadership to overcome the propaganda inertia in maintaining the *coup d'état* narrative and playing the hand of regional Islamist groups in attacking the government of al-Sisi⁷. One might take a note as well of the impact of the United States’ sudden abandonment of its long time “preferred dictator”, Mubarak, which left a lot of people in the region wondering.

At the same time, the consistent, if not overtly headstrong, character of the Russian attitude toward the Egyptian stage of the Arab Spring came to fruition in strengthening the political ties between the two countries. It did not hurt as well, that both leaders saw a lot of similarities in their beliefs and modus operandi. And let’s not forget the psychological factor: Russians are famously adept at not taking a patronizing stance *vis-à-vis* their counterparts, irrespective of their geographical origins; and Moscow consistently proselytizes belief in the sanctity of the existing regimes, a position which finds rapport with all Middle Eastern leaders, including those in Egypt.

⁷ M.W. Hanna, “Getting Over Egypt: Time to Rethink Relations”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2015, vol. 94, no. 6, pp. 67-73.

Libya

The case of Libya differs in so many ways from that of Egyptian that it needs to be examined from a different perspective.

If before the “Green Revolution” of President Muammar al-Qaddafi Libya was a prize contested between Italy and Britain, with the USSR and United States on the fringes, after Qaddafi’s ascent to power Libya started to become what might be called a one-man show, with practically all major powers keeping their distance. The main reason of course was the fact that due to his ambitions, populist approach, and theatrical disregard of the established rules of conduct in the international milieu, Qaddafi soon became what might have been called the “boogeyman of the century”. He was accused of everything from the aiding the terrorist organization Palestinian Jihad, to financing and arming the Irish Republican Army IRA, to the Lockerbie disaster⁸. Nobody wanted to be directly associated with him.

There were international contracts in Libya’s military and oil sectors which were somewhat significant, the main competition in the military sphere being between the USSR and France in mobile air defense, Italy and Czechoslovakia in armor, and Bulgaria in construction, etc. The USSR, though maintaining a careful non-partisan position, had for a period of time a number of advisers in-country, but without any significant success due to several factors, not the least of these being that Libyans did not like to be advised on anything. The United States at the time was more preoccupied with the Israeli-Palestinian

⁸ On 21 December 1988, aircraft N739PA was destroyed by a bomb while flying the transatlantic leg of the route of Pan Am Flight 103, killing all 243 passengers and 16 crew – a disaster known as the Lockerbie bombing. Libyan intelligence officer Abdel Basset al-Mighrani was sentenced to life in prison in connection to the attack. There are still contradicting views on Libyan involvement, though Qaddafi took responsibility in 2003. In addition to flaws in the prosecution’s evidence, there were strong suspicions that the General Command of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine was the actual perpetrator.

issue than the realities of the Maghreb, and was not too involved outside of its policy of sanctioning Libya under any pretext available which, to be frank, never had any real impact in Mediterranean affairs and never affected the USSR's position in North Africa. Even as "[...] tension mounted in late 1985 and early 1986 between the United States and Libya, the Soviets stressed Israel's synchronization of maneuvers to coincide with US threats against President Qaddafi"⁹, which demonstrates Moscow's priorities at the time.

Everything changed in 2011. Much analysis of Libya post-2011 has relied extensively on the dominant narrative of the Arab Spring, so much so that there is a dearth of out-of-the-box thinking on these issues. Thus, it became a given that the revolution in Libya was the direct extension of movements in Tunisia and Egypt. While not factually wrong, it is an oversimplification to describe the event in terms of a disenfranchised population revolting against a despot in the quest for a democratic future. From the beginning it was quite confusing to Russia to watch the population of the country with the highest standards of living on the continent protesting. Many in the Kremlin are still unsure of the origins of the uprising. This narrative is important to understand the policies of Russia in Libya and how and where they differ from the policies of the United States and its European allies. The understanding in the Kremlin is that it was a *coup d'état* that went wrong, and not a popular revolution. There were several factors influencing this assessment. They include the idea that Qaddafi was becoming too influential in Africa and Mediterranean in his newly acquired image of a "dove" in the region, propped up by unrivaled financial resources. There is also suspicion about a false-flag political operation in Egypt, which put Muslim Brotherhood to power and then crushed them under the heel of the military. Whatever the reason, the resulting civil war in Libya became the focus of the North African, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean politics,

⁹ G.W. Breslauer (1990), p. 231.

and as such a new stage for competition between Russia and the collective West, with the United States as the driving force.

Of course, one might point out the fact that leaders in Washington have been going out of their way to show that they are distancing themselves from Libya, while Russia at every opportunity sends strong messages that it talks with all parties involved in the Libyan conflict without preference for any particular one. But the fact that Libya is becoming the center-stage of the Mediterranean and, by extension, the Middle Eastern policies of the international community sow the seeds of educated doubt regarding the nature and extent of US and Russian involvement in the country's affairs.

Moscow in fact has been hosting different Libyan visitors from the cities of Tripoli, Misrata and Tobruk, sending overt signals that former Qaddafi general Khalifa Haftar and his self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) are priority number one. However, Washington has always been the destination preferred, if not always easily reached, by the same people – including Haftar, who, being an American citizen, holds hopes for the political and material support of his country of citizenship.

The internal political and military division in Libya into the two main camps – with Haftar and the LNA on one side, and the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) on the other – mirrors the political rift in the broader Middle East. Namely, Qatar and Turkey versus the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. This division is reminiscent of the power play between major international actors in and around Syria, Iraq, and Palestine, especially given the Israeli involvement in the North African country¹⁰. This distribution of players indicates beyond a doubt that contrary to their articulated neutrality, both Russia and United States are in fact active forces in the Libyan conundrum.

¹⁰ J. McQuaid et al., “The Same, Yet Different: United States and Gulf State Interests in the Post-Arab Spring Maghreb”, *CNA*, February 2017, pp. 26-27, 33-34.

Conclusion

To summarize, since 2013-2014, Russian policies in the region were revitalized, driven by two factors. First, after two decades of ignorance, Moscow desired to reassert its historical position (to receive its dues), and thereby persuade the West to be more compliant to the demands of the Kremlin. Second, the risks connected to the large Muslim population in Russia demanded the mitigation of tensions on one hand, and the curbing of anti-regime and anti-secular Islamist flare-ups in the far-flung southern borders of the country, where there is an understanding that “post-Soviet states regard Russia as at worst a hostile power and at best a pragmatic partner”¹¹, but not a reliable ally.

Russia missed a lot of the action in between 2001 and 2014, while the US, having been proactive during this period in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, committed along the way a number of diplomatic and military mistakes. These led to a number of problems, which Russia is now using to its advantage by pointing out the “inadequacy” of US policy in the MENA region. Furthermore, Moscow in fact became suspicious of Washington ability and desire to resolve what Moscow considered the top priority issues, like regime-toppling and Islamist proliferation.

Having said this, there is also a difference of principles in Russia’s approach to the Middle East which sets it apart from the United States. Russia is not trying to impose its worldview on its counterparts, which sets Moscow apart from the liberal proliferation doctrine of the Western alliance and gives it the status of preferred partner to the authoritarian regimes of the MENA region. On the other hand, Russia is able to provide only limited economic support, and not more than the occasional veto in the UN Security Council politically. This severely impedes Russia’s influence in the highly mercantile world of Middle East and North Africa.

¹¹ D. Trenin, *It’s Time to Rethink Russia’s Foreign Policy Strategy*, Carnegie Moscow Center, 25 April 2019.

The other side of the divide things looks exactly the opposite. While the US-led Western alliance is quite attractive in that it represents the great riches of the dreams of the dedicated consumer, the US commitment to discourse on “democratic liberation from oppressive rulers” seriously hampers the future of US relations with the regional elites.

Possibly this explains why both Russia and the United States are trying to take more or less equidistant positions from opposing parties in the regional political milieu. Both actors exploit to the maximum the counterterrorism agenda, more often than not throwing terrorist labels at questionable issues. Both parties are persistently trying to play the savior, while differing on what exactly they are saving the region’s peoples from. In the end, one cannot but help but wonder whether the United States and Russia are playing the Middle East, or being played by it.