

Conclusions

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Talk of a “Russian return” to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) amidst perceptions of American “withdrawal” from the region has held the attention of policymakers and scholars alike. For this reason, this volume has brought together some of the foremost experts on MENA issues to produce analyses on the likelihood and potential consequences of American disengagement from the region, the growing role of Russia and other regional actors, and how shifting power dynamics play out in the countries experiencing major crises.

As the chapters of this volume have indicated, Russia’s involvement in the region is neither a new nor a homogenous phenomenon. Russia has enduring strategic interests in the region that have been served through a range of foreign policies. And while one of those interests does indeed appear to be challenging US dominance, it does not appear that Moscow stands ready to take on the burden of hegemony in the region, or that it even wants to. Russia has a strong interest in maintaining diversified foreign policies that provide flexibility and additional bargaining power with their adversaries, as well as various platforms for both hard and soft power projection in the region and beyond.

The United States is not a declining power by any metric, nor have enduring US interests in the MENA region – ensuring the free flow of energy resources and preventing the growth of state or non-state actors antagonistic to the United States – diminished. The United States’ military, intelligence, and diplomatic

presence in the region remains unmatched by any other external power. And yet, perceptions of American abandonment of the region run high, spurred by surprise announcements from the US President of troop withdrawals in Syria and Afghanistan.

Thus, perceptions of the United States' impending exit from the Middle East are not driven by uncertainty over US capabilities or capacities, but rather by doubts about US commitment. Political will to engage in the region is waning, and the region's leaders have begun to confront what their future might look like without clear American leadership and prepare accordingly.

Though there is not yet a "vacuum" to fill in the Middle East as the United States has not actually scaled back its presence, anticipation of a US withdrawal has seen several actors begin to hedge their bets and seek rapprochement with Russia. This turn has been helped along by President Vladimir Putin, who has skillfully inserted Moscow into the affairs of almost every country in the region. Putin's approach differs greatly from that of the United States: he prefers to maintain balanced relations among all the regional actors, no matter the hostility toward each other, rather than take sides. This incentivizes each country to pursue relations with Russia regardless of Russia's ties to their rivals – no actor wants to be the only one out of Moscow's circle.

Russia's current approach in the Middle East is one of cooperation with existing – largely authoritarian – governments, and mediation between them in their many disputes. Moscow has friendly relations with the United Arab Emirates on the one hand and Qatar on the other, with Iran and Saudi Arabia and Israel. This policy of cooperation and mediation is applied in the region's countries in the throes of civil conflict as well. Syria is an excellent example: Moscow cooperates militarily with Assad and his Iranian allies, but also cooperates diplomatically and deconflicts with external powers opposing them in the war, including Turkey, Israel, and the Kurds. Moscow has succeeded in making it impossible to hold negotiations or take any steps to end the conflict without its participation, or more often, leadership.

Bolstered by its success in achieving its objectives in Syria, Moscow has expanded its reach throughout the region, projecting itself as a power broker in most Middle Eastern crises. Russia routinely establishes contacts and channels of communication with all sides in a conflict and offers its services as a mediator. This has been seen in Yemen, where Sergey Lavrov has proposed to broker peace talks; in Libya, where Moscow maintains diplomatic relations with the Government of National Accord while allying with Khalifa Haftar's, ensuring a prominent role in conflict mediation for Russia; in Iraq, where Moscow works in close collaboration with both the central government in Baghdad and the Kurds in the energy and infrastructure sectors; and in Turkey, Iran, and Egypt, where Russia's expanding diplomatic, economic, and military relations provide further examples of Russia's expanding role.

Russia has tried to portray itself as a powerful mediator committed to preserving stability in the Middle East, and has succeeded in making it near impossible to resolve many crises without Moscow's involvement. However, it is unclear whether Russia can actually deliver on its promises to guarantee stability in the region. Russia seems to value projecting diplomatic power over actually resolving conflicts, and no matter its commitments to brokering peace, it may not have the capacity or capabilities to do so.

As some of the authors pointed out, Russia's approach to the region may not be sustainable. Escalations in the region's interstate conflicts (especially between Saudi Arabia or Israel and Iran) may force Russia to pick sides and risk its strategy of maintaining relations with all, and unending intrastate conflicts risk draining Russian resources. Russia's own domestic economic woes, exacerbated by US and Western sanctions; unrest among Russia's growing Muslim population; potential flareups in Ukraine; and larger geopolitical concerns may all turn Russia's attention away from the region, especially under a new president in the eventuality of Putin's demise.

Thus, Russia is perceived as a power broker committed to stability in the Middle East, while its economic, military, and diplomatic capacity may limit its capability to live up to this role; and the United States is perceived as scaling back its commitments in the region despite continued interests and investments and superior capacity to guarantee regional security. Russia does not stand poised to overtake the United States as the hegemon in the region, but its power-projection activities in the region repeatedly threaten US interests. The analysis in this collected volume can help readers understand both the potential and limitations of Russia's role in the region and the various ways it manifests in different MENA countries and help policymakers make informed choices, whether they be to confront or cooperate.