

# Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East under Putin: Can Bears Walk in the Desert?

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SPYRIDON N. LITSAS, NOV 23 2018

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In 1787, the Russian Empress Catherine II visited Crimea with several European ambassadors. The purpose of the trip was to impress and deceive the ambassadors regarding the true power capacity of Russia prior to a new war against the Sublime Porte. For that purpose, Grigory Potemkin, governor of Crimea, set up mobile villages full of soldiers that were dressed as peasants in order to present a fake picture of a fully developed countryside with thriving agricultural activity. Since then 'Potemkin villages' became synonymous with diplomatic deception and influenced deeply the Russian foreign policy culture. As Vladimir Lukin notes, Russian Foreign policy has a "passion for mere show, the Potemkin village syndrome" (Lo 2002, 67). Even during its imperial era, Russia showed an interest in the Middle East that had much to do with Moscow's soft-power expansionism in the region. This can be seen, for example, in the Kucuk Kaynarca Treaty in 1774 that not only tried to regulate the military tensions between the Ottoman and the Russian Empires but also granted the privilege to the latter to be acknowledged as the 'champion' of the Christian sites of worship in the Holy Land and beyond (Ismael, Ismael and Perry 2016, 33). Moscow, from the early days of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, fully acknowledged the geostrategic importance of the region and it also recognized its soft power leverage as a place where the three great monotheistic religions of the globe were in osmosis. Thus, it tried to take advantage of its Christian Orthodox doctrinal norm. However, imperial Russia developed a distinct hesitancy towards the prospect of antagonizing the European powers that had already placed the region under their own shadow. The main reason for this political indecisiveness was coming from the fact that for Russia the Balkans, the Caucasus region or Central Eastern Europe were much more important than the Middle East.

Characteristically, when in 1901 the Emir of Kuwait Mubarak al Sabah asked to be placed under Russian protection, the request was refused mainly because Russia did not want to antagonize Great Britain in the region (Kreutz 2007, 123). The same attitude, hesitance and self-restraint, was traceable during the Soviet era as well. The Middle East continued to appear in Soviet rhetoric as a region of primary geostrategic and geo-economic importance for Moscow. Additionally, the Kremlin tried to establish close ideological links with various Arab states by promoting and championing the Baathist ideology, accusing the Western world of neo-colonialism – while during the late stages of the British mandate in Palestine and the early period of the independent Israeli state it established close relations with the Haganah and later on with the Ben Gurion administration (Sicker 2000, 213–215). Again, these moves must be seen as indirect attempts to challenge the British and American presence in the region and not as efforts to revise, directly or indirectly, the regional status quo. This Soviet attitude can also be detected during the rise of the Baathist and Nasserist political movements in Iraq, Syria and Egypt (Dawisha 2016) which were blends of Arab nationalism with large doses of third world socialism.

The aforementioned regimes had developed close relations with the Soviet Union either as associates or as the Kremlin's puppets in the Middle East. Despite the fact that through this ideological and in some case economic and military patronage Moscow had an excellent opportunity to undermine the Western presence there, it did not want to elevate antagonism in the Middle East to a higher level. On the contrary, the Soviet approach was mainly focused on

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weakening the ties between the United States and the Arab states instead of establishing its own sphere of influence. For example, Soviet proposals for the political neutralization of the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf through a wide-scale demilitarization during the late 1970s and early 80s aimed to affect mainly US–Arab relations by presenting Moscow as the sole element who respects the Arab sovereignty and Washington as a firm aggressor (Allison 2009, 147–160). Moscow abandoned its traditional duplicitous Middle Eastern policy towards the Western world only during the last phase of the Soviet Union, when Michael Gorbachev understood that the USSR was economically and politically exhausted. Thus, the Soviet decision to condemn the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and authorize military action against the Baathist regime by the US and its allies can be seen within this aforementioned context of Soviet weakness (Allison 2012, 157–161; Fuller 1991).

## The Yeltsin Period: Playing Safe

As was expected, the collapse of the Soviet Union opened a wider discussion within the Russian political elite regarding the new Grand Strategy the state had to adopt in order to sail through the stormy waters of the post-Cold War international archipelago. A small part of the Russian political elite wanted to come closer to the US in order to achieve rapid economic recovery and domestic political stability. Another larger group wanted to adopt a balanced foreign policy, i.e. frequently siding with the US but also maintaining an independent approach where the Russian national interests were not in accordance with American ones. Last but not least, the most influential group was the nationalist side who wanted the adoption of a hardline policy against the US in general. The hardliners, a bizarre mixture of ultra-nationalists and ex-communist officials, demanded the return of Russia to the front row of international affairs (Freedman 2001). According to them, this could be attained only through a new round of direct antagonism with the US.

Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation (1991–1999), opted to not openly challenge the US. Nevertheless, he continued with the traditional Russian policy in the Middle East of not following an aggressive line towards regional developments. He was also concerned not to miss any opportunity to indirectly challenge the established American policy. Therefore, Yeltsin's Russia participated in the signing ceremonies of the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinian administration and in the signing of the 1994 Peace Treaty between Israel and Jordan – two pivotal diplomatic initiatives of the US State Department aimed at the establishment of a more stable balance of power in the Middle East. Yet, it was Yeltsin's Russia that called for the lifting of the international sanctions against Iraq and Libya in 1994, a diplomatic move that irritated the US and made Moscow popular again within the anti-Western Arab nucleus (Felkay 2002, 82). During the same period, Moscow tried to play a stabilizing role between Israel and the Palestinians. In November 1996 and in October 1997 Evgenii Primakov, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited both Israel and the Palestinian authority in an attempt to portray to the rest of the world that Moscow was ready to take every necessary step in order to contribute to a viable peace settlement. During his second visit in Israel, Primakov transmitted messages between the Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu and the Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad to show the Israeli side that Moscow was able to influence Syrian foreign policy in favor of a new status between the two sides (Feldman 1998). In addition, during the Lebanese crisis of 1997, Moscow approached Syria and Iran and asked both states to terminate their support for Hezbollah. Nevertheless, it was not long before Russia sealed a \$2 billion arms deal with Syria giving it the opportunity to carry on with its destabilizing policies towards Lebanon (Feldman 1998).

Yeltsin's era and its policy line towards the Middle East can be seen as a first step towards a Russian foreign policy of getting back to normality. In addition, it can be labeled as a mild-smart policy that tried on the one hand to minimize the cost for preserving a Russian political presence in the Middle East and extending on the other hand the attrition for Washington at every given opportunity. The Russian navy was not yet in the position to antagonize the Sixth Fleet of the US, while the Kremlin was also struggling hard to face the dire consequences of the Soviet economic and social failures and at the same time maintain influence over pivotal regions such as the Caucasus. Nevertheless, Yeltsin saw the Middle Eastern conundrum as the ideal venue in order to exercise a non-costly yet ambitious foreign policy. Thus, Russia tried to be present in each and every important development that occurred in the region during the first phase of the post-Cold War period to show to the rest of the world that despite the Soviet collapse, Russia was still a major international actor. Yet, in reality Russia did not have the capacity to follow such an ambitious foreign policy. So, Russia resorted once again to the Potemkin deception. By showing public disapproval at the UN

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Security Council towards certain US Foreign Policy moves in the Middle East – such as economic sanctions against Iraq or the close relations between Washington and the Gulf states on regulating oil prices – Russia was trying to distinguish itself within the international community. It was a good plan that yielded some successful results. However, it was widely known that Russia could not survive without US economic aid and thus few paid any close attention to the Russian Middle East Potemkin villages.

## The Putin Era: A New Offensive Stance

The arrival of Vladimir Putin, first as a Prime Minister and then as President came with a conservative stance, preserving the fundamental lines of Yeltsin's Russian Foreign Policy. In the Middle East, the main preoccupation of the new administration was to prevent the transmission of regional crises to the nucleus of the Russian Federation, e.g. the rise of jihadism. Since his early days in office Putin faced jihadism in Chechnya and in other neighboring territories. Simultaneously, the strengthening of the Taliban regime and al-Qaeda's influence in Afghanistan applied considerable pressure upon the Kremlin. As Oded Eran describes Putin's early days:

Relating specifically to the Middle East, what transpires is that Russia's top objective in that geographical space is political stabilization for the purpose of forestalling the spillover of political and military crises, endemic to the region into the volatile regions of central Asia and the Caucasus, inside Russia and out, in its 'near abroad' (Eran 2003, 159).

Putin, well experienced in security issues, was fully aware of the open links of communication between Arab jihadists and Salafist groups in the Caucasus region. For this reason, he approached the Middle East as the main corridor for terrorists wanting to penetrate the Russian domain. Additionally, political stability in the Caucasus was, and still is, vital for Moscow for the uninterrupted transport of Caspian oil and gas to the European and Asian markets. Nevertheless, regarding the so-called '*Big Game*' – US-Russian antagonism – he decided to continue Yeltsin's policy in an attempt to challenge US presence in the Middle East whenever that was feasible. These challenges adopted the form of either the reinforcement of diplomatic and military links between Moscow and various rogue Arab states with a profound anti-Western agenda such as Iraq, Libya and Syria, or they were expressed through Moscow's unwillingness to work with Western powers in order to achieve wider regional stability. For example, during the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel clashes Moscow drew a separate line from the Western world. Instead of offering its uncompromised support to Jerusalem, it maintained open channels of communications with Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah (Katz and Pollak 2015).

In general, during these early days in office Putin tried not to alarm the US too much in an attempt to win some time and heal as many wounds as he could of the almost incapacitated post-Yeltsin Russian bureaucratic apparatus. 9/11 and what followed gave Putin an unexpected opportunity to modify his primary foreign policy stance and move ahead in various regions of strategic importance, including the Middle East. The decision of the White House not only to conduct a full-scale war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan but to neutralize jihadism globally reveals the American spirits after 9/11. The Bush administration (2001–2009) decided that it was vital for the security of the US not only to end the tyrannical regimes of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and that of the Taliban in Afghanistan, but to generate a broader change of paradigm in the Middle East through the implementation of the so-called Democratic Peace Theory. The Bush administration chose to introduce this post-Kantian approach as the corner stone of its counterinsurgency strategy in the Middle East – an effort that cost trillions and almost impaired the American economy. The gigantic economic effort to withstand the maximalism of Bush's administration forced Barack Obama's administration (2009–2017) to change the US strategic commitments. The American electorate had grown weary with military involvement in the Middle East, thus Obama issued a new strategic goal for the nation; the pivot to the Asia-Pacific. The United States continued to be interested in the socio-political developments in the Middle East, mainly due to the vital importance of the sea routes of the Mediterranean. However, this time there was no US willingness to be directly involved in the numerous regional conundrums. Nevertheless, politics, as nature, abhors a vacuum and Putin's Russia took full advantage of the US reorientation.

In the early days following 9/11 Putin proved to be a skillful artisan, balancing between the need to persuade the international system that Russia was willing to align with the Western world against the jihadists and with the decision

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to pursue his long-established strategy to challenge the American presence in the Middle East. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks Russia publicly offered its support to the US for the military operations in Afghanistan, while it also gave the US access to military bases in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in order to conduct their aerial attacks against the Taliban (US Department of State Archive 2001–2003). However, in the summer and fall of 2002 Russia openly confronted the US over its Iraq policies. Russia not only opposed any discussion regarding the prospect of regime change in Iraq in various international venues, including inside the United Nations, but also provided political support to Saddam Hussein before and during the Iraq war of 2003 (Kramer 2006; Kanet 2010, 212). In the following years the distance between Washington and Moscow in the Middle East became more evident with Russia being less hesitant to reveal its true intentions against the US presence in the region. Nevertheless, it was not until the arrival of Obama's administration when Russia abandoned its conservative stance and adopted a more offensive approach that aimed not only to undermine US presence in the region but to expand its own.

Clearly, Russia was not willing to bandwagon with the US any more. The Russians, masters in the Potemkin diplomacy, knew very well that what matters most is what others think of your power capacity and not if you are truly willing to match your rhetoric with actions. Before the first US–Russian summit under the Obama administration in April 2009 Dmitry Medvedev, President of Russia during that time and one of the closest associates of Vladimir Putin, emphasized the need for equality and mutual benefits of the two great powers – since both Russia and the US had a special responsibility in world affairs concerning strategic stability and nuclear security (Oldberg 2010, 36–37). Moscow was sending the signal to the international system that it had not only returned back to the front row of the international arena but that it was also ready to match the United States in international affairs. The Middle East, together with Central Asia, were the ideal terrains for this.

The onset of the Arab Spring gave Russia the opportunity to put this new approach into action. In general terms, this new approach can be characterized as emphatically offensive and pragmatic in terms of comprehending the change in the regional balance of power – and moving accordingly. What Russia set out to do was to discover new territories in order to create a new sphere of influence. By doing that, the Kremlin aspired to expand its aura in the Eastern Mediterranean, on the one hand, while on the other hand it aimed to seize more opportunities in order to intervene – by proxy or directly – in various regional crises. As Ekaterina Stepanova notes:

The main characteristics of Russia's policy in the Middle East, both before and after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, have remained pragmatism, a non-ideological approach, and readiness to engage in selective cooperation with most regional actors, despite tensions between and even with them (Stepanova 2016).

At first, Russia approached the Arab Spring with a characteristic conspiratorial flair, seeing the various revolts in the Arab world as a violent process fabricated by the US in order to give the Kremlin the elbow from the region (Malashenko 2013, 9). Nevertheless, Moscow soon understood that the Arab Spring was an opportunity to implement its own pivot to the Middle East. Putin made an official opening to the Muslim Brotherhood by inviting Egypt's new President, Mohamed Morsi, to Moscow – despite of the fact that according to a 2003 Russian Supreme Court ruling Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood was on the official list of terrorist organizations (Malashenko 2013, 9). This non-ideological pragmatism was also seen in the Libyan case, where Moscow showed that it was prepared to assist its old allies – yet it was also prepared to accept the new realities that were emerging from the outcome of the Arab Spring revisionist process too.

During the early stages of the Libyan crisis, the Russian side tried hard through diplomacy to achieve the continuation of the Qaddafi regime. Qaddafi had been a valuable ally in the region since the Cold War era, while Benghazi and Tobruk – two strategically situated port cities in the Eastern Mediterranean – were useful to the expansion of Russian naval hard power and the transformation of the Black Sea Fleet into a blue water force. However, when it became clear that Qaddafi had no future in Libya, the Russian delegation abstained in a UN Security Council vote that imposed a no-fly zone over Libya, prohibiting Qaddafi from using his air force to strike the rebels. This move, abstaining instead of rejecting, shows that after 9/11 Russia is seeing the Arab world with pragmatic eyes, searching for long-term political investments with the post-Arab Spring status quo that will eventually emerge in the region (Donaldson & Noguee 2014, 324). This is not necessarily a matter of breaking free from old bonds but reassessing the new realities in the Middle East and moving accordingly – including making swift changes when applicable.

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However, the most characteristic case regarding the new Russian foreign policy in the Middle East can be found in Syria. Relations between Moscow and Damascus date back to the early post-1945 period and had been sealed with the granting of a small settlement in Tartus in 1971 that functioned as a Soviet naval military base with limited capacity. The beginning of the Syrian civil war offered Russia the opportunity to strengthen its ties with the Syrian regime and upgrade its military presence there. Besides the naval base in Tartus – that can today accommodate first and second rank ships from the Russia Mediterranean flotilla (Shlykov 2016, 35–38; Bodner 2015) – Russia de facto controls the strategic port of Latakia and the airbase at Hmeymin that has installed the notorious S-400 missile Triumf system. Meanwhile, Russian elite forces – the Spetsnaz – have taken part in various major operations against ISIS (Pleitgen 2016). The Syrian civil war presented an opportunity for Russia to lead a pro-Assad coalition, which involved building closer ties with Iran and Hezbollah. In sum, the Syrian civil war became a useful tool in the hands of Moscow in both short- and long-term ways.

Putin's Russia constantly tries to challenge the post-Cold War structural dimension of the international arena, that of systemic unipolarity and US power. According to Sergey Lavrov, the experienced Russian minister of foreign affairs and one of the closest Putin's associates, "*the international situation remains mosaic and controversial. Along with this, a common tendency could be observed...a polycentric international architecture*" (RT 2016). However, in order for Russia to support the existence of this new and dynamic polycentric international architecture it has to make known its own poles of influence. The Arab Spring's effect on the balance of power in the Middle East, and in particular the Syrian civil war that followed it, offered Russia the opportunity to not only to effectuate Putin's goal of constructing a distinct pole of influence – but also to publicize to the world that Russia had re-emerged as a powerful global actor.

During the Arab Spring many analysts criticized the stance of the Obama administration regarding its non-support of traditional Western allies. The most characteristic case was that of Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt. Despite the fact that Mubarak was a significant US strategic partner, Obama decided not to intervene as Egypt underwent a revolution. In the face of the advice of his most experienced associates in foreign affairs – such as Hillary Clinton, Robert Gates and Tom Donilon who were strongly in favor of aiding Mubarak – Obama instead sided with his younger advisors who saw revolt as an opportunity for Egypt to follow a democratic path (Traub 2015). On top of that, the collapse of Mubarak's regime had been used by various analysts to devalue Obama's foreign policy credibility and discredit the national prestige of the US. For example, Raghida Dergam (2011) wrote in *Al Arabiya* that "*the Obama administration had become a liability to its friends,*" the editor of the *American Interest* Adam Garfinkle (2016) characterized the attitude of Obama's administration towards the swift socio-political changes in the Middle East as 'Follyanna', while Zbigniew Brzezinski stated that "he doesn't strategize. He sermonizes" (Lizza 2011).

Putin found a window of opportunity in the Syrian crisis to boost Russian prestige by promoting the theory that Moscow never abandons its close allies and that states who get close to Russia can be protected by the Kremlin from domestic and international hazards. As the late Vitaly Churkin, the Russian representative in the United Nations for 11 years, stated during an interview with Colum Lynch (2015):

We are stronger on our allegiances than others, I think, and this is being recognized internationally...if you have good relations with a country, a government, for years, for decades, then it's not so easy to ditch those politicians and those governments because of political expediency.... Russia could be trusted more than the United States to back its friends.

It goes without saying that this strategy has already shown positive results. The current Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi maintains close relations with Moscow, Saudi Arabia has upgraded its diplomacy with Russia, while Israel worked to build stronger links with Moscow during a period of US–Israel disharmony between the Netanyahu and Obama administrations. It has to be noted here that Donald Trump's administration has responded to the perceived failures of Obama and set out to make up lost ground. Trump quickly set about establishing a different pattern of relations with the pivotal states in the Middle East – including Israel and Egypt. In addition, the US bombing of the Syrian air base in Shayrat in April 2017 in response to a chemical weapons attack must also be seen as a US venture to discredit the Russian narrative and as a test to gauge the level of the Russian commitment to its support of Assad's regime.

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## Beyond the Middle East

One of the most urgent foreign policy goals for Russia is to face the strategic challenge of the activation of a land-based NATO missile system in Deveselu, Romania. The Deveselu military base hosts an Aegis system – a missile shield to protect NATO's European states from short and medium range missiles. The base, together with an analogous base in Poland, is set to play a decisive role in the European defense structure for decades to come. Russia considers both these military bases as a major security threat and thus tries to find suitable strategic alternatives in order to balance these hard power establishments. One of these strategic developments is the strengthening of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, which has been qualitatively and quantitatively upgraded. Russia can now potentially isolate Romania from its NATO allies by closing the entrance of the Black Sea to Western naval powers and at the same time open a parallel front in the Eastern Mediterranean. According to Stephen Black:

These trends have allowed Russia to essentially make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for NATO to get into the Black Sea to defend NATO allies and partners without substantial losses of ships, planes, and men (Coalson 2016).

Russia is aware that in order to broaden this strategic advantage it has to preserve its presence in the Middle East – gradually transforming the region from a Western zone of influence to a ground of ideological and political antagonism between Washington and Moscow.

In addition, the strategic importance of the Middle East for Moscow adopted a parallel dimension that was seen during the Ukrainian crisis of 2013. Putin followed the traditional foreign line regarding the necessity of preserving Russian interests in its near abroad, which includes the Caucasus and Central and Eastern Europe. The main reason for this approach has to do with the fact that Russia has always felt vulnerable towards invasion due to the vast flat steppes that offer a strategic advantage to a foe who can enter the Russian heartland without having to face challenging terrain or high-rise mountains. Indeed, this has occurred twice; once during Napoleon's invasion in 1812 and again during the Nazi invasion in 1941. Naturally, this is just one dimension that draws on the psychology of the Russian consciousness as derived from the historical evolution of the Russian people and their land. The other dimension refers to the strategic fact that should Russia lose control (or influence) over the Caucasus and Central and Eastern Europe then access to the Mediterranean will be unattainable and eventually Russia will be isolated in Asia.

Russian fears have maximized after successive waves of EU and NATO enlargement, including the absorption of members of the ex-Warsaw Pact. This development has forced Russia to reconsider its attitude towards the Western world, while also offering an ideal opportunity to justify its propensity to violence every time it feels that vital Russian interests are in jeopardy. This posture manifested in 2008 during the Russian-Georgian war and then again when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014 – ultimately leading to the annexation of Crimea. Putin is using the increasing Russian involvement in the Middle East to focus the Western gaze away from the Caucasus region and Central and Eastern Europe. Meanwhile he continues to make moves in the Middle East such as with the signing of a \$2.5 billion deal with Turkey for the purchase of the Russian S-400 'Triumf' missile defense system (Daniels 2017) and two major nuclear energy deals with Turkey and Egypt. On top of that, Putin made good strategic use of the Syrian civil war in order to drive the US and NATO to commit forces and resources into the region. Consequently, as the Syrian civil war has deepened, the US and NATO have placed Ukraine and Georgia on a high dusty shelf as their attention is monopolized by defeating the jihadists on the one hand and on the other hand controlling Russian involvement in the Arab world. It is more than clear that Putin sees the Middle East as an ideal boost for the Kremlin's status and a decoy that keeps antagonists away from Russia's spheres of influence in its near abroad.

## Conclusion

The Middle East was never at the top of the Russian (or the Soviet) agenda until the arrival of Putin. However, following the 9/11 attacks – and in particular after the Arab Spring – Putin's Russia saw in the Middle East's volatile condition as an excellent opportunity to expand its influence. At the same time, it was an ideal opportunity to keep the gaze of the Western world away from regions with greater strategic importance for the Kremlin such as the Caucasus and Central-Eastern Europe. Various analysts today claim that the international system has already entered into a

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new 'cold war' between the US and Russia. I disagree with these views, mainly because neither Washington nor Moscow have the appetite or the capacity to enter in such a holistic and demanding state of affairs. Nevertheless, Russia now follows a more aggressive policy in the Middle East and this is likely to continue as the region falls deeper into crisis. There are no more Potemkin villages in the Middle East. Instead, there are raw ambitions together with a profound Russian propensity for escalating antagonism with the West.

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