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THE REVOLUTION IN RUSSIA'S MIDEAST STRATEGY

Andrew Korybko

News Agency "Sputnik", People's Friendship University of Russia, Moscow, Russia

Hamsa Haddad

MGIMO University, Moscow, Russia

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About the authors:

Andrew Korybko,
Political Analyst, News Agency "Sputnik",
Member of Expert Council,
Institute of Strategic Forecasts and Predictions, People's Friendship University of Russia

e-mail: korybko.e@my.mgimo.ru

Hamsa Haddad,
MA in Governance and Global Affairs (MGIMO University),
Independent Researcher

e-mail: haddad.h@my.mgimo.ru

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Abstract: The article analyzes the guiding imperatives behind Russia's grand strategy in the Mideast, including both its domestic decision-making institutional idiosyncrasies and the wider geopolitical considerations at play. It discusses the evolution of Russian strategy after the so-called "Arab Spring" events and into the present day, taking care to individually analyze Moscow's most important bilateral relationships. The review begins by addressing Russia's anti-terrorist intervention in Syria, before progressing to some words about the two competing foreign policy factions present in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. After outlining the key differences between the Liberal and Military-Security camps, the work then broadly explains how their rivalry figures into the formulation of Russia's overall grand strategy in the Mideast. Following that, it logically proceeds to examine the other bilateral relationships that are of significance to Moscow, beginning with Turkey, Iraq, and Israel, and ending with Saudi Arabia and Iran. The goal of the research is to establish a very general understanding of how Russia's foreign policy is presently practiced in the Mideast, how and why it got to where it is today, and forecast on the prospects for its further development. In doing this, the article relies on empirical observations and references several under-discussed news items that have evaded wider scrutiny. It also makes use of a few academic sources in proving that the geopolitical environment in which Russia conducts its present foreign policy was largely shaped by the US' legacy of Hybrid Wars on the region, which in hindsight created fertile ground for the revolution in Russia's Mideast strategy. In summary, Russia seeks to replace the US as the Mideast countries' most preferred and trusted partner, capitalizing off of Washington's decline in regional influence brought about by the disastrous rise of Daesh and the controversial perceptions over the Iranian nuclear deal in order to fill the strategic void that's been created in America's wake, and as of the end of 2016, Moscow has been wildly successful.

Russia's policy towards the Mideast has undergone a total revolution over the past year ever since the commencement of the anti-terrorist intervention in Syria. Prior to that, Moscow relied on its decades-long strategic partnership with Damascus to maintain a presence in the Mideast after the Soviet dissolution, and this policy progressively broadened into strategic cooperation with both Iraq and Iran. Russia's pre-"Arab Spring" Mideast policy hit a high point when all three countries became ostracized by the West to various degrees and thus turned to Russia as their preferred no-strings-attached 'balancer'.

About the "Arab Spring", this was a theater-wide Color Revolution that evolved into a series of Hybrid Wars across several states.[1] Russia's importance in Mideast affairs increased commensurate to the carnage that broke out all across the territory of its Syrian ally, most notably intensifying from 2012 onwards. Russia at that point depended on

[1] Cordesman, Anthony H. Russia and the "Color Revolution": A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the US and the West / Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2014. Mode of access: http://csis.org/files/publication/140529_Russia_Color_Revolution_Full.pdf

its interlocked strategic relationships with Syria and Iran to act as regional springboards for the promotion of Moscow's influence all throughout the Mideast, though it took the anti-terrorist operation in Syria to truly push Russia's presence to a qualitatively new level.

Ever since then, Russia has sought to focus on Syria as the magnetic center of geostrategic gravity in attracting varying degrees of partnership with the rest of the regional states, interestingly using Syria as a platform for strategic collaboration with the Great Powers of Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, and the medium power entity of Israel.

Syria

Before examining the nature of Russia's relations with each of these actors, it's necessary to elaborate a bit further at length on its anti-terrorist involvement in Syria, as the analytical revelations that this yields are immeasurably valuable in understanding the rest of Russia's Mideast policy and its most likely developments.

Russia's military behavior in the Syrian conflict has been distinctly characterized by a hypersensitivity at being sucked into an inescapable quagmire. Although Moscow handily maintains the military-strategic initiative to resolutely change the situation on the ground, it regularly holds back and fumbles its position due to what can only be ascribed to "Afghan-phobia", or the exaggerated fear of being drawn into a 21st-century repeat of the Afghan scenario.

Russia's reluctance to thoroughly commit the proper air and limited grounds forces necessary to protect and expand the war-dreary Syrian Arab Army's tactical gains has resulted in diplomatic embarrassments such as the first failed ceasefire from the springtime and the shady one which was conducted in secrecy in September. Russia has repeatedly reiterated that it has no desire to advance a military solution to the conflict, which is how its diplomats formally excuse the military's failure to decisively shift the political balance through armed means (e.g. holding back in the bombing campaign for Aleppo, et al.).

Elite Divisions

The schizophrenic policy of 'pulling the gun out of the holster and not firing', or to be more direct, intervening but not 'finishing the job' can only be attributed to the ongoing division among Russia's decision makers. Russian foreign policy matters are shadowy and it's near impossible for anyone without any inside knowledge or sources to truly understand who and what forces shape Moscow's decisions, yet it's still possible to proffer educated inferences gleaned from empirical evidence in suggesting relevant explanations. With that qualifying caveat in mind, it appears as though the Russian elite – particularly those responsible for foreign policy matters – is divided into Liberal and Military-Security camps.

The first of the two is overly worried about how Russia's reputation will be affected in the eyes of its 'Western partners' whenever it's criticized for its behavior or victimized by outright propaganda (such as false claims that it "kills civilians").[2] The Liberal group of foreign policy-influencing elites wants acceptance from the West and to enter into its good graces in order to self-interestedly feast from the carrot of 'sanctions relief', which would allow these individuals to restore their foreign currency revenue streams. Understanding just how much of a game-changer Russia's mission in Syria has been, they were privately hesitant to support it from the very beginning because they knew that it would result in a barrage of criticism that would make their dreams of sanctions relief and renewed partnership with the West ever less likely.

On the other hand, there are the Military-Security elite which – while also cautious about Russia's intervention, albeit for responsible and not self-interested reasons – appreciate the full geostrategic impact of Moscow's moves in Syria. This group of individuals is bolder than their Liberal peers and convinced President Putin of the need to initiate the anti-terrorist operation in the first place. It can be surmised that some of them understand the need for a

[2] Russia/Syria: War Crimes in Month of Bombing Aleppo / Human Rights Watch, 2016. Mode of access: https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/01/russia/syria-war-crimes-month-bombing-aleppo

more committed force and operational mandate in Syria, while their other in-clique compatriots have fallen for the Liberals' fearmongering that Russia could somehow get caught in a geostrategic trap if it upped the intensity of its airstrikes and deployed limited ground forces.

Because of the split within the Military-Strategic elite, the Liberal approach in advocating for a (premature) military drawdown and an acceleration of the political solution at all costs (including reputational damage brought about by the 'ceasefires') prevailed and appears to be guiding Russian foreign policy in this specific regard. To reemphasize, it's unclear what conversations are going on in the Kremlin and between which personalities and institutional forces, but it's a safe bet that this dynamic – for better or for worse – will continue to define Russia's foreign policy in Syria and the rest of the Mideast. This will continue until – if it ever happens – President Putin administratively 'purges'/neutralizes one or the other, though for the time being, it looks like the Russian leader values the see-saw approach towards Syria and is happy with receiving and responding to divergent views from the Liberal and Military-Security foreign policy camps.

Grand Strategy

Moving beyond Moscow's strategy in Syria and addressing its revitalized and dynamic interactions with the rest of the Mideast, Russia acts with confidence and quickness whenever a situation doesn't require military means to solve like in Syria. This was proudly on display when Russia immediately reached out to coup-besieged Erdogan and assisted in his vengeful anti-American 'multi-alignment balancing' towards Russia, Iran, and other multipolar countries.[3] This episode proved that a masterful interplay between the security /intelligence services and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is indeed possible and can be skillfully pulled off, which sets the precedent for a more robust and instantly adaptable Russian policy towards the rest of the region. If this trend stays the course, then Russia's grand strategy in the Mideast would be closer to being actualized.

In essence, Russia wants to replace the US as the Mideast countries' most valuable strategic partner, capitalizing off of the US' spree of clumsy reputational mishaps ever since it initiated its interlinked Hybrid War-'Lead From Behind'[4] rethink towards regional affairs. The US made a lot of enemies and produced a lot of bad blood during these processes, and no matter the comparative gains that some actors perceive to have made as a result, the inarguable outcome is that the US is no longer as trusted as it used to be by the regional governments and their populations. This in turn creates space for Russia to balance between each pair or group of rivals in a similar manner to how it already does with Armenia and Azerbaijan, India and China, China and Vietnam, and soon with India and Pakistan, too. The strategic challenge that Russia would have in maneuvering through the Mideast if the 'moderate'-led and Western-friendly political establishment remains in power in Iran could be mitigated through a similar balancing approach vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic and Saudi Arabia, which will be addressed at the end of the article.

Turkey

Evaluating all of the Mideast's major players one by one, it's appropriate to begin with Turkey, which has only recently undergone an impressive geopolitical reorientation towards the multipolar world. Long a bastion of the unipolar West due to its inclusion in NATO, Turkey under President Erdogan was inspired to 'diversify' its foreign policy partners after being doubly 'betrayed' – as Ankara sees it – by Washington.

Turkey is accustomed to being the US' junior partner and had no qualms about maximizing this in the direction of its subjectively defined supreme benefit by playing the role of Washington's 'Lead From

[3] Yildirim, Binali. Turkish PM Yildirim's exclusive op-ed for TASS on relations with Russia / TASS, 2016. Mode of access: http://tass.com/world/917205

[4] Korybko, Andrew. Hybrid Wars: The Indirect Adaptive Approach To Regime Change. The People's Friendship University of Russia, 2015. Mode of access: http://orientalreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/AK-Hybrid-Wars-updated.pdf

Behind' partner in the region, especially in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' Color Revolutions. However, the US' military and technical support to Kurdish fighters in northern Syria instantly provoked a security dilemma whereby Ankara began to see Washington as an unstated backer of de-facto Kurdish separatism (whether as an independent state or a quasi-independent 'federal' statelet), a scenario which existentially threatens the Turkish state. Motivated by this determinant as well as several others, Turkey rapidly began its rapprochement with Russia over the summer, which the US attempted to cut short by activating its covert Gulenist network in attempting a failed coup against Erdogan.[5]

The Turkish President doesn't forgive the US for this blatant backstabbing, nor for its backing of Kurdish separatism, and the diplomatic aftermath of American government-linked NGOs accusing Ankara of 'human rights' and 'democracy' violations[6] in the wake of Erdogan's 'purges'/'cleansing' sealed Turkey's multipolar reorientation towards Russia and Iran, though not without obvious situational limits.

Iraq

The Iraqis distrust the US for a similar reason as the Turks do, and it has a lot to do with the US' close relations with the Kurds. The US envisions that this demographic could one day become a 'second geopolitical Israel' in that they'd be a pro-Western 'Spartan' 'state' smack dab in the center of the Mideast and carved out of others' land with foreign (Western) support. Along with this, the US also shimmies between the Sunnis and Shias, with all Iraqis being cognizant by this point of the divisive sectarian power game that the US is playing. Nevertheless, Baghdad still cooperates with the US because Washington formally has the most potential to resolutely fight against the terrorists that it helped spawn, though only when the US thinks that the time is ripe.

Iran, while significantly contributing ground troops and coordinating powerful militias, lacks the capability to commit sustained air support to the anti-terrorist cause, and Russia – due to the elite split – doesn't want to do this either and is content with only sharing intelligence information with Iraq. In such a situation, the US is perceived as an invaluable 'ally', no matter if it can't be trusted now or in the long run. Russia, however, enjoys the trust of all three main actors in Iraq, as the Kurds, Sunnis, and Shias know that it has no ulterior motives, and Baghdad values Moscow's support of its territorial integrity. Therefore, the possibility presents itself for Russia to fundamentally change the geopolitical game in Iraq if it were to gather the political will to launch air strikes in the country after receiving the formal invitation to do so, though the paralyzing elite split between the Liberal and the Military-Security camps will probably preclude Moscow from carrying out this bold military move.

Israel

Israel is furious at the US for its unmistakable embrace of Iran over the past year, and this is chiefly due to Tel Aviv and Tehran being hated enemies and having absolutely zero trust. Israel knows that an observable improvement in ties with Russia would get under the US' skin and improve its negotiating position, which explains the very public diplomacy that's been going on between President Putin and Netanyahu and the rumored talk that Russia could possibly revive the failed Israel-Palestinian peace process.[7] It's also relevant that the Russian and Israel militaries created a mechanism for avoiding in-flight incidents over Syrian airspace, which must have irked the US to no end.

Other than Russia, though, Israel is also 'rebalancing' its relations with the US by moving closer to Saudi Arabia, which ironically plays to both Washington and Moscow's benefit. The

[5] Turkey Coup 2016 / *Tsargrad TV*, 2016. Mode of access: http://katehon.com/video/turkey-coup-july-2016

[6] Turkey / Human Rights Watch, 2016. Mode of access: https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/turkey

[7] Baker, Peter; Kershner, Isabel. Russia, Already Reinserting Itself in Middle East, Enters Israeli-Palestinian Fray // *The New York Times*, 2016. Mode of access: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/10/world/middleeast/russia-israel-palestinian-peace-talks.html

reactionary establishment of an Israeli-Saudi strategic axis under US 'supervision' (owing to the Pentagon's excellent relations with each of its counterparts) is a powerful 'Lead From Behind' balancing actor against US-supported post-sanctions Iran, which in both cases allows the US to simultaneously manage and divide two competing entities along the same lines as its British predecessor did during the zenith of its imperial era. Be that as it may, the Russian factor could severely complicate the US' plans, since Moscow could compete to replace Washington in this complex 'balancing' arrangement.

Saudi Arabia

The mentioning of Saudi Arabia brings the research along to addressing Russia's intentions towards the Kingdom. There was talk of possible weapons sales to the Saudis during the summer of 2015 at the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum,[8] though it eventually didn't pan out, especially after Russia's anti-terrorist intervention in Syria threatened to upset Saudi Arabia's regional plans. Nevertheless, the talk of an arms deal is apparently too important to both sides to go away for long, which is why it once again reappeared this May, albeit for a brief time and only known about due to Vladimir Kozhin's comments on the matter.[9] If anything ever comes out of this, it would likely be the export of Russian defensive systems and counter-terrorism equipment in order to avoid giving a negative impression to Iran, which would understandably see the sale of offensive weaponry as a potentially hostile act.

In this sense, Russia's possible rapprochement with Saudi Arabia would likely follow the model that's being applied towards Pakistan at the moment, in which 'military diplomacy' takes the lead, though manifested by non-intimidating weaponry, with India and Iran's concerns mirroring each other in this example. Therefore, Russia would have to tread delicately, but if it can successfully manage this high-risk diplomatic outreach, then the upshot would be tremendous and could help retain the all-around strategic balance amidst the ever-changing conditions of the 'New Middle East' that took root after Russia's military operation in Syria and the US' reliance on the Hybrid War-'Lead From Behind' policies.

As optimistic as some Russian strategists might be about this gambit, obvious problems remain in the Russian-Saudi relationship, chief among them both sides' divergence over Syria and Iran. However, Moscow and Riyadh are also pragmatically shrewd in the sense that there are self-interested reasons for each of them to put aside their differences and work with the other. Saudi Arabia, like Israel, is very upset at the US' pro-Iranian tilt as of late, and Russia is keen to attract more non-Western investments into its economy, especially those from the wealthy and cash-flush Kingdom. Moreover, these two countries importantly put aside their lose-lose energy competition with the other (provoked by the US and to Washington's ultimate shale gas benefit) in favor of taking piecemeal steps in the direction of sustainably practical cooperation in this sphere, as evidenced from the late-2016 OPEC deal. The paramount importance that this would have to both states if it ever occurred might incentivize them into cutting secret deals with the other, perhaps seeing Saudi Arabia withdraw its support to Syrian-based terrorist groups in exchange for Russia offering the Kingdom an irresistible arms package in 'balancing' against Iran.

Iran

Finally, the last major Mideast actor to be covered in this research is Iran, which figures prominently in Russia's regional policy and could be described as the trickiest of all of Moscow's partners. On the surface of things, bilateral relations are at their best point in history, which is technically true when one looks at the full-spectrum ties between both sides and the deep level of trust that their individual leaders and institutions proclaim for the one another. If one peels away the public layer and examines the deeper dynamics of this relationship, however, they'll see that bilateral

8 Saudi Arabia Mulls Russian Arms Deal / Sputnik News, 2015. Mode of access: https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201506201023619862/

9 Russia in Talks With Saudi Arabia on Weapon Deliveries/*SputnikNews*,2016.Modeofaccess:https://sputniknews.com/military/201605191039874611-russia-saudi-arabia-weapons/

ties are actually on somewhat flimsy footing, despite examples of substantial cooperation such as the nuclear energy partnership and joint anti-terrorist coordination in Syria (especially through the trans-Iranian overflight of Russian bombers and cruise missiles). After months of speculation that there might be some serious problems, or at the very least, misunderstandings, bubbling beneath the surface of the Russian-Iranian relationship, matters came to an ignominious head in late-August after Moscow briefly deployed anti-terrorist bombers to the Hamadan air base in western Iran.

This move was obviously sanctioned by the Ayatollah and his 'conservative' military-security institutional base of support, yet strictly opposed by the 'moderates' who have circled around Rouhani and his political allies. This latter category of elite were furious at what happened and openly made a scandal out of it because they were afraid that the US would reimpose sanctions against their country or delay the lifting of the existing ones. By coordinating with some of their 'conservative' sympathizers, they made such a fuss that Russia left after only a day or so of publicly being there, topped off by a humiliating quip by Defense Minister Deghan that Russians only wanted to "show they are a superpower" and therefore behaved with "a kind of show-off and ungentlemanly [attitude] in this field."[10] Deghan, a powerful representative of the 'conservatives', was called upon to issue such a strongly worded statement in order to present the illusion of elite unity over this decision, though it can be argued that it was the 'moderates' who were behind all of this and that the Ayatollah called upon Deghan to act as 'damage control' before the scandal immediately got too out of hand and was weaponized by the pro-Western global media in order to provoke even deeper divisions in Iran.

The 'moderate'-'conservative' split in Iran's elite interestingly mirrors Russia's own, and Tehran's waffling when it comes to Hamadan is eerily similar to Moscow's own indecisiveness when it comes to the 'ceasefire' and its overall military commitment to the anti-terrorist mission in Syria. Projecting ahead, it's uncertain what direction Russian-Iranian relations might take in the future, since while there are indeed many benefits that have been harvested from the 'conservatives'' military-strategic relations with Russia and the 'moderates'' complementary economic and energy partnerships, the observable lack of trust that uncomfortably spilled over during the Hamadan episode proves that serious challenges are taking shape which threaten to offset their future cooperation. The seeds of this unstated discord are likely due to the S-300 controversy (although resolved, the negative sentiments about it are still lingering in Iran), Russia's previous support of UNSC sanctions against Iran's nuclear program, Russia's lack of sustained military resolve in Syria, and perhaps most importantly, the rise of the 'moderates' in Iran and the related US-Iranian rapprochement which has the potential for further upending the geostrategic situation in the already unpredictable Middle East.

[10] Russia 'Showed-Off' over Use of Iran Airbase for Syria Strikes / *BBC,* 2016. Mode of access: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37154043

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РЕВОЛЮЦИОННЫЕ ПЕРЕМЕНЫ В РОССИЙСКОЙ СТРАТЕГИИ НА БЛИЖНЕМ ВОСТОКЕ

Эндрю Корыбко

Информационное агентство «Спутник», РУДН, Москва, Россия

Хамза Хаддад

МГИМО МИД России, Москва, Россия

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Об авторах:
Э. Корыбко,
политический обозреватель, информационное агентство «Спутник»; член экспертного совета, Институт стратегических исследований и прогнозов, РУДН

e-mail: korybko.e@my.mgimo.ru

Х. Хаддад,
магистр, МГИМО МИД России, независимый исследователь

e-mail: haddad.h@my.mgimo.ru

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Аннотация: В статье анализируются важнейшие установки, определяющие стратегию России на Ближнем Востоке, включая особенности принятия решений внутри страны на институциональном уровне и более широкие геополитические аспекты. Рассматривается развитие российской стратегии после событий так называемой «Арабской весны» до настоящего времени и отдельно разбираются важнейшие двусторонние связи Москвы. Обзор начинается с анализа проводимой Россией антитеррористической операции в Сирии, затем кратко упоминаются две соперничающие фракции дипломатов в российском Министерстве иностранных дел. Отмечая основные различия между лагерями либералов и силовиков, статья в общих чертах объясняет, как их соперничество вписывается в формирование общей большой стратегии внешнеполитической деятельности России на Ближнем Востоке. Далее последовательно рассматриваются важные для Москвы двусторонние отношения, начиная с Турции, Ирака и Израиля, и заканчивая отношениями с Саудовской Аравией и Ираном. Исследование ставит целью получить общее представление о том, как Россия проводит внешнюю политику на Ближнем Востоке, как и почему эта политика оказалась в своем нынешнем состоянии, и спрогнозировать перспективы ее дальнейшего развития. Статья опирается на эмпирические наблюдения и ссылки на сообщения СМИ, которые не получили достаточного обсуждения и широко не рассматривались. В ней также используются несколько научных источников, доказывающих, что геополитическая обстановка, в которой Россия проводит свою внешнюю политику, по большей части была сформирована наследием США, проводившими гибридные войны в регионе. В ретроспективе становится понятно, что тем самым была создана благодатная почва для революционных перемен в ближневосточной стратегии Москвы. Подводя итог вышесказанному, Россия стремится заменить США в качестве приоритетного и надежного партнера стран Ближнего Востока и заполнить образовавшийся стратегический вакуум, воспользовавшись ослаблением американского влияния в регионе, которые было вызвано подъемом Исламского государства с катастрофическими последствиями, а также спорами вокруг ядерной сделки с Ираном. К концу 2016 г. у России на этом направлении был бешеный успех.

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