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Russian Policy in the Levant

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the policies of the Russian Federation in the Levant region against the backdrop of dramatic global, regional and domestic changes. Russia's strategy is analyzed through the prism of the Syrian and the Palestinian-Israeli conflicts. The Syrian conflict marks Moscow's new activist policy in the region. On the one hand, it has provided for the astonishing diversification of its relations with the various Middle East actors, Turkey, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Hamas, to name just a few. On the other hand, Moscow, striving for a new world order, has been faced with the fact that despite its cooperation with the US in Syria the two countries' approach to solving international problems are so distinct that even a fight against terrorism could not mend their relationship. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has always been perceived in Russia as the key factor in explaining the instability in the region. Russia's participation in the international structures dealing with the conflict resolution has been motivated primarily by a search for peace in the area. Instrumentally, Russia has always sought to keep open at least some channels of cooperation with the West, as these serve as a crucial means for decreasing international tensions.

Keywords: Russia, Terrorism, Regime Change, De-escalation Zones, De-confliction.

Rusya'nın Levant Politikası

ÖZET

Bu makale küresel, bölgesel ve ulusal değişimler bağlamında Rusya Federasyonu'nun Levant bölgesine yönelik politikalarını incelemektedir. Rusya'nın stratejisi Suriye ve Filistin-İsrail çatışmaları odaklı olarak analiz edilmektedir. Suriye çatışması Moskova'nın bölgede yeni ve eyleme dönük politikalarına işaret etmektedir. Bu durum, bir taraftan Rusya'nın Orta Doğu'da Türkiye, İran, İsrail, Suudi Arabistan ve Hamas benzeri farklı aktörlerle ilişkilerini çeşitlendirmesine neden oldu. Yeni bir dünya düzeni arayışındaki Moskova, diğer taraftan, Suriye'de ABD ile yürütülen işbirliğine rağmen, iki ülkenin uluslararası sorunlara çözüm bulma yaklaşımlarının birbirinden çok farklı olduğu ve terörizmle mücadele yaklaşımının dahi ilişkileri iyileştirmeye yetmediği gerçeğiyle yüzleşti. Filistin-İsrail çatışması Rusya tarafından her zaman bölgedeki istikrarsızlığı açıklayan ana faktör olarak algılandı. Rusya'nın çatışma çözümüyle ilgilenen uluslararası kuruluşlara katılımı, ağırlıklı olarak bölgede barış arayışı çerçevesinde gerçekleşti. Bu çerçevede Rusya Batı'yla ilişkilerinin devamlılığı adına, en azından araçsal olarak uluslararası gerilimin azaltılmasına katkı sağladığına inandığı bazı işbirliği kanallarının açık kalmasını sağlamaya çalışmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya, Terörizm, Rejim Değişikliği, Çatışmasızlık Bölgeleri, Çatışmayı Önleme.

Introduction

Russia's interests in the Levant cannot be separated from its global interests and calculations. The increasingly diverged interpretation of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the role of military interference as advanced by the main actors in the international arena, has posed a particular challenge to Russia, as well as to other nations.

The current processes underway in the Middle East and Levant result from the impact of a number of global trends, which include the crisis of the ruling elite and states, aggravation of socio-economic problems, increasing exclusivity within the ruling strata and lack of social mobility, and crisis of global secular ideologies. The situation in the region has had a direct bearing on the global balance of forces. The main divisive features of the modern international landscape are the uncertainty associated with the high level of conflict risk, involvement of external forces in conflicts with varying interests, and the growing activities of the local and transnational terrorist organizations. Historically, the Middle East has been exposed to the influences and/or control of external forces, a history which has left the region with a fairly loose structure of interstate relations devoid of powerful and trusted leaders,¹ forcing the countries of the region to continually search for legitimization.

The region is called the Near East in Russia and, because of its geographic proximity, its various military threats, conflicts, and terrorism are sources of particular concern in Russia. The Levant, as a part of the wider Middle East region and comprised of modern Asiatic Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and possibly Egypt (but not necessarily Cyprus),² can be seen through the same lenses.

Different roles have been assumed by the jihadist extremist groups such as *Jabhat al-Nusra*, ISIS and *al-Qaida*, under the conditions of civil war with the involvement of external countries in Syria, continuing tribal clashes in Libya and protracted internal confrontations in Iraq. Their activities have had an impact on Russia, as they are also a source of radicalization for some Russian citizens (around 14% of Russian citizens are Muslims). They also have affected the situation in Central Asia, where radicalization is on the rise.³ Several thousand Russian and Central Asian residents left their homes to join jihadists in Syria, Iraq, and more recently, in Afghanistan.⁴ A containment of these threats is obviously a priority for Moscow.

This said, Russian interests in the region cannot be narrowed to the regional agenda. Russia's global interests can better explain the country's new activist behavior in the region. The Middle East has become a testing ground for Moscow for a more prominent role in the international arena, presenting itself as a powerful global player, and an indispensable partner in the fight against international terrorism.

This article examines the policies of the Russian Federation in the Levant by examining the country's approach to two of the region's most intractable sources of instability: The Syrian Civil War

1 Ian Lustik, "The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: Political 'Backwardness' in Historical Perspective", *International Organization*, Vol.51, No.4, Autumn 1997, p.661-662.

2 *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archeology in the Near East*, current version 2011, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/search?q=levant&searchBtn=Search&isQuickSearch=true> (Accessed on 28 January 2018).

3 Erlan Karin, *Soldaty Khalifata: mify i real'nost'* [Soldiers of the Caliphate: Myths and Realities], Almaty, Vlast', 2014, p.173.

4 Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, New York, the Soufan Center, October 2017, p.11.

and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In the former, Russia has been an active player capable of making unexpected decisions. In the latter, Russia is a traditional participant in the international efforts to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict, exhibiting a more predictable behavior. These two conflicts are the focal points of Russian policies in the region. The conflicts provide opportunities for the author to present Russian policy towards the different countries of Levant, to accentuate its approaches, while at the same time allowing to avoid the description of the routines of bilateral relations.

Shaping Russian Approaches

Reviewing the policies of the Russian Federation in the Arab world in general, one cannot lose sight of the Soviet period, which, while substantially different from today, is still responsible for the formation of Russia's image in the region today.

The Soviet Union came to the Middle East in the second half of the 1950s and gained a strong foothold there during the following two decades as Arab national liberation movements were on the rise. At the time, Moscow was ready to sacrifice some of its most rigid ideological perceptions in favor of pragmatic considerations. Thus, Russian scholar and political figure Yevgeny Primakov explained the reasons underlying the decision of the Soviet leadership to ignore the blatant ideological and political flaws of the new regimes in the Arab states:

Life compelled us to ascribe the leading role in the national liberation movements to the petty-bourgeois revolutionaries, who denied the proletarian dictatorship, the class struggle, even the division of society into classes... The term 'revolutionary democrats' was coined to refer to those who had nothing to do with democracy, and in some cases were regenerating into Nazi style rulers... Over the period, when the Cold War was raging, the military and political dimension of the Soviet policies in the Middle East assumed primary importance. A decisive factor in the USSR approach to dealing with this or that Arab state was its foreign policy outlook, its attitude towards military alliances, especially the Baghdad Pact.⁵

For Russia, unlike for the Soviet Union, the ideological component has not had much relevance in the context of its Middle East policies. The differences between Soviet and Russian policies in the Middle East has not meant, however, a total lack of continuity and consistency. Developing relationships with Arab partners continued even after the Soviet Union's collapse, yet Russian policies became more diversified as the country began developing a relationship with Israel, establishing closer ties with Turkey and Iran, improving contacts with Saudi Arabia, and maintaining liaison relationships with a number of non-governmental actors.⁶

Russian leaders have thought to consolidate the nation's presence in the Levant, thus creating a more favorable environment for the country to act independently elsewhere in international

5 Yevgeny M. Primakov, "Blizhnnevostochnaya politika Rossii: istoricheskie etapy", [The Middle East Policy of Russia: Historic Milestones], Vitaly V. Naumkin, Veniamin V. Popov, Vasili A. Kuznetsov (Eds.), *Blizhnii Vostok, arabskoe probuzhdenie i Rossiya: chto dal'she?* [The Middle East, The Arab Awakening and Russia: What Comes Next?], Moscow, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, 2012, p.24-25.

6 Veniamin Popov, "My uspesшно vosstanavlivaem nashi pozitsii", [We've been Restoring Our Positions Successfully], *Rossiia v global'noi politike*, 22 September 2014, <http://globalaffairs.ru/diplomacy/Veniamin-Popov-my-uspeshno-vosstanavlivaem-svoi-pozitsii--16984> (Accessed on 14 February 2018).

arena. According to the authors of a monograph, entitled “Russia’s Foreign Policy”, Russia has been confronted by new challenges thanks to a more structurally complicated and competitive world order:

Russia was building up its policies under conditions of an increasingly complicated environment. Yet, as the manifestation of polycentric tendencies became more conspicuous, which was reflected in the more dynamic activities of other traditional and growing global players, as well as in the change of behavioral pattern of non-governmental actors, it was more difficult and more challenging to maintain the status of a great power, to facilitate and protect the national interests in all spheres, including economy and security.⁷

Within this context, a successful and confident regional policy was an indication of Russia’s place among the most powerful of international players. Nevertheless, it was believed in Russia, long before the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, that the West harbored a disparaging attitude towards the country and that its opinions on the key security issues were simply ignored. This belief was belied by a NATO expansion that would reach as far as the Russian frontier if the planned inclusion of Georgia and the Ukraine to the alliance ever materialized.⁸ Moreover, Russia itself was increasingly regarded as a simply a regional power. Barack Obama said this openly in a response to a reporter’s question at The Hague in March 2014: “Russia is a regional power that is threatening some of its immediate neighbors; not out of strength but out of weakness.”⁹ Thus, Vladimir Putin’s address delivered at the Valdai Forum in October 2017 was in no way an exaggeration, and reflected the basic Russian perception of the causes of a serious controversy between the Russian Federation and the West: “The biggest mistake that we made while dealing with the West was that we trusted you too much, and you made a mistake when you took that trust for a weakness and misused our trust.”¹⁰

As Russia did not possess as much power or as strong of a resource base as the former USSR, it sought to present its foreign policy as a symbol of success. The Middle East offered unique opportunity for this. Middle Eastern states, who felt nostalgia for a time when a nation played the part of a counterweight to the US, were also interested in Russia’s return not only as an ally, but as an honest broker. However, the Middle East was not a foreign policy priority for the Russian Federation, so the stakes for it were not as high as, for instance, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).¹¹

Apart from maintaining security and emphasizing its geopolitical status, Russia was also guided in its activist policies in the Levant by the desire to display itself as an indispensable partner in the struggle against the common enemy of international terrorism. By doing so, Russia hoped to achieve a certain degree of cooperation with the West and set up the conditions for an improvement of its relationship, which had been severely impaired since the Ukrainian crisis.

7 Tatyana A. Shakleina, Alexander N. Panov, Alexander S. Bulatov et al., *Vneshnyaya politika Rossii, 1991–2016* [Russia’s Foreign Policies, 1991–2016], Moscow, MGIMO University, 2017, p.20.

8 “Bush backs Ukraine and Georgia for NATO membership”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/01/nato.georgia> (Accessed on 25 January 2018).

9 “Obama dismisses Russia as ‘regional power’ acting out of weakness”, *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-dismisses-russia-as-regional-power-acting-out-of-weakness/2014/03/25/1e5a678e-b439-11e3-b899-20667de76985_story.html?utm_term=.eae11627f7d (Accessed on 14 February 2018).

10 “Putin nazval glavnyu oshibku RF v otnosheniyakh s Zapadom” [Putin named the main mistake of the RF in its relations with the West], https://news.rambler.ru/politics/38202038-putin-nazval-glavnyu-oshibku-rf-v-otnosheniyah-s-zapadom/?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fzen.yandex.com (Accessed on 28 February 2018).

11 *Kontseptsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi federatsii* [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation], 30 November 2016, part IV, pp. 22-34, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248 (Accessed on 12 February 2018).

Syria: Military and Political Aspects

Looking retrospectively at Russia's policies in Syria, which have impacted the overall situation in the region, it can be concluded that they were influenced by the failures of the Libyan intervention. The UN Security Council's resolution establishing a no-fly zone in Libya on 17 March 2011¹² and the severe NATO bombardment of the country were met with much criticism in Russia.¹³ Even the then-Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev did not see eye to eye on the issue. According to the BBC, the rare rebuke came after Putin pronounced the resolution resembled a "medieval calls for crusades" while Medvedev said such comments could "lead to a clash of civilizations".¹⁴

The Libyan precedent left an impression in Russia that it was cheated by the West with the help of obscure wording in the UN resolution.¹⁵ In the opinion of a powerful segment of the Russian elite, not only was the intervention costly, but a major threat was also perceived if a precedent was set that allowed Western interventionism to become a universal instrument for forced regime change.¹⁶ Thus, the Libyan experience largely determined the attitude of Russian leaders and society towards the civil war in Syria, where the protest movements acquired an increased momentum in the second half of March 2011 and escalated into armed clashes. Mistakes committed by the Syrian security services and army, motivated by a commitment to retain power at whatever cost, the erosion of ideological guidelines of the Arab Socialist Renaissance Party (the Ba'ath Party), the loss of its managerial functions, and finally, the support given to opposition forces by some regional and global powers gave rise to a fierce and uncompromising struggle.

The Russian Aerospace Force was deployed to Syria in September 2015 with the following task in mind: Russia sought to retain the Syrian state system in place, where the only functioning institutions were the President and the Army. Meanwhile, the Syrian Army was on its last legs and would soon have fully exhausted itself absent outside support. If the opposition, partly composed of radical groups, could manage to topple the regime, then there would be a destructive effect on the entire region. Such an outcome would likely lead to other developments that would undermine stability in the region: there was a high degree of probability that the Sunni-Shiite controversy would deepen further, anti-Christian sentiments would grow stronger, inter-ethnic tensions would be exacerbated and violence would spill over into neighboring states such as Lebanon and Jordan.

Also, Russia planned to strike a severe blow against international terrorist groups and put up barriers to prevent radical Islamists from spilling into other states in the Middle East and elsewhere. Developments on the ground showed later on that these concerns were not entirely groundless.¹⁷ The ability of radical groups to easily cross borders jeopardizes Russia's security, especially considering

12 *Resolution 1973 (2011)*, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/268/39/PDF/N1126839.pdf> (Accessed on 10 November 2017).

13 Michail Margelov, "Arabskii mir i predely avtoritarnoi modernizatsii" [The Arab World and the Limits of Authoritarian Modernization], *Rossiia v global'noi politike*, No.2, 2011, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/83> (Accessed on 3 March 2018).

14 "Medvedev rejects Putin 'crusade' remark over Libya", <http://www.bbc.co.uk> (Accessed on 22 March 2017).

15 Margelov, "Arabskii mir i predely avtoritarnoi modernizatsii".

16 Julie Wilhelmsen and Kristin Haugevik, "Strategic partners against terrorism 2.0? Russia's initial positions on Syria", *Policy Brief*, NUPI, No.37, 2016, p.1.

17 On the ISIS expansion see, *ISIS in Libya: a Major Regional and International Threat*, Ramat Ha-Sharon, The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, January 2016.

the fact that the border between the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan is about 7.5 thousand kilometers in length and is not reinforced properly as one would expect from a classic interstate frontier.¹⁸ As a result, only reinforced border that separates Russia from Afghanistan (a country that has been a hotbed of radical Islamism) is the former border of the USSR now controlled by the three Central Asian states.

In contrast to the Taliban, whose violence was locally focused and meant to control Afghan politics, the possible move of ISIS into Afghanistan could have altered the existing traditional balance of forces in that country. As was stated by Igor Sergun, the Chief of General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces, ISIS emissaries have been engaged in recruiting militants from the Eastern and Northern provinces of Afghanistan, including from territory located along the border with Turkmenistan.¹⁹ Regular reports on the extension of ISIS's international structure and the oaths of allegiance taken by the leaders of other extremist groups, as well as the creation of Wilayat Khorasan as an ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan in January 2015 can be explained by ISIS's desire to attract international attention,²⁰ and that the ISIS is a franchise scheme designed to swallow up isolated groups, tribes, organizations and to declare them as an inalienable part of its structure. At present all countries of Central Asia have been named by the jihadists as an area of responsibility of the IS branch – “The Islamic State of Khorasan”²¹

As ISIS continued to gain momentum, seizing vast swathes of territory in Syria, an international coalition headed by the US began operations against the group in September 2014. However, this did not stop the bloodshed. By late 2015, the number of victims in the conflict had exceeded 270,000 people, according to UN data.²² Under such circumstances, Russia began its military operation in Syria in September 2015.²³ Supported by the Russian Aerospace Forces, the Syrian government forces and its allies managed to reverse the opposition's momentum, turning to the offensive in key localities. By December 2016, with the Russian assistance, over 600 populated areas had been recaptured, including the ancient city of Aleppo.²⁴ The dilemma of “either Assad or ISIS” was no longer relevant. Within such context, the political settlement in Syria has increasingly become a matter of priority for the Russian Federation.

18 [Http://www.zakon.kz/159640-rossijsko-kazakhstanskuju-granicu.html](http://www.zakon.kz/159640-rossijsko-kazakhstanskuju-granicu.html) (Accessed on 9 March 2018).

19 For further details <http://www.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2015/10/15/1451559.html> (Accessed on 8 March 2018).

20 By way of example, according to the evaluation of the Iranian side, currently, the Afghan security officers also warn that in Northern Afghanistan on the border with Central Asia, the presence of groups associated with the ISIS is becoming more conspicuous. It is maintained that the extremists based in the Afghan province of Badakhshan have also taken an oath of allegiance to the “Islamic State” and replaced their former flags with the black ISIS banner. At present, over 5,000 ISIS militants are located on the Tajik border and about 2,000 on the Turkmen border. The Afghan provinces of Kunduz, Baghlan, Sari Pul, Faryab, and Jawzjan have accommodated terrorists who come from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, North Caucasus, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Translated from *Iranian Diplomacy*, 23 March 2015, http://inosmi.ru/irdiplomacy_ir/ (Accessed on 12 September 2017).

21 Andrei A Kazantsev and Leonid U. Gusev, *Ugroza religioznogo ekstremizma na postsovetskoj territorii* [A Threat of Religious Extremism for the Post-Soviet Territory], Moscow, Center for Integration Studies -MGIMO, 2017, p.51

22 [Http://tass.ru/info/4558821](http://tass.ru/info/4558821) (Accessed on 22 October 2017).

23 While the Russian Aerospace Forces were largely withdrawn from Syria in 2017, a limited contingent retains its presence in Latakia in the bases of Hmeymim and Tartus. One can add to it that the Russian police force was mostly staffed by the servicemen from the North Caucasus. The marines and paratroopers have been protecting the outer circle of defense facilities, and the police were inside the perimeter. See <https://topwar.ru/132395-v-edinoj-maskirovochnoy-rascvetke.html> (Accessed on 28 January 2017).

24 Ibid.

Efforts to Stabilize the Situation in Syria

An element of critical importance for Russia's efforts in Syria was the building up of a regional format for Astana with a view to supplement the faltering Geneva process. Russia, notwithstanding its fairly serious disagreement with Turkey and its existing divergence of interests with Iran concerning both the situation in Syria and the two countries' wider perspective on the Middle East, successfully contrived to adopt a rational working structure with these states, bringing stability to the situation. Turkey's and Iran's connections with local forces fighting one another gave these states powerful leverage and allowed them to play the role of guarantors in the event that a ceasefire was reached to stabilize parts of Syria.²⁵

A regional framework created for the Astana process essentially focused on the major changes underway in the Middle East, such as the dramatically increased role of regional powers (i.e. Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel) with separate interests and agendas, as well as a readiness to use not only political but also military instruments to implement them.²⁶ The rationale of negotiations in Astana would be the following: making it possible to reduce the intensity and extent of the fighting, relieve the humanitarian distress to the extent possible, enable refugees to start returning to Syria, and to open up a way for a peace process. With the assistance of Iran and Turkey, as well as UN Decisions, guidelines for enacting ceasefires were transformed and would allow for the creation of four de-escalation zones.

However, the establishment of de-escalation zones sparked apprehension among regional players, despite the fact that it would provide an opportunity to some of them to contribute to the process. According to a Russian expert Vitaly Naumkin, "Together with the United States and Jordan, we agreed to establish a de-escalation zone in the south-west of Syria, and it works even better than others, for example, in East Ghouta or Idlib".²⁷ The most serious concern was voiced by Israel, who disliked Iran's involvement and potential to reinforce its positions near the Israeli held Golan Heights and the possibility that Hizballah would be allowed to advance into the area.²⁸ More generally, Israel vigorously opposes the creation of an Iran-controlled land corridor stretching from Iraq to Lebanon via Syria.²⁹ According to Israeli analysts;

To avoid the negative developments and unilateral shaping of tomorrow's Syria by the Russian-Iranian axis, Israel should act on two parallel levels: one, display resolve toward Russia and continue to project strength and power to undermine Russian efforts in the region, in order to retain its bargaining chips; and two, encourage the United States, Jordan, and the Gulf states to be more involved in the strategic discussions on resolving the Syrian crisis.³⁰

25 "Russia, Iran and Turkey to act as ceasefire regime guarantors", 24 January 2017, http://www.inform.kz/en/russia-iran-and-turkey-to-act-as-ceasefire-regime-guarantors-un_a2992403 (Accessed on 11 February 2018).

26 Isabel Kershner, Anne Barnard and Eric Schmitt, "Israel Strikes Iran in Syria and Loses a Jet", *The New York Times*, 10 February 2018.

27 "Russia's 'high-precision policy' in the Middle East makes it increasingly important player in regional processes", http://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/russia-s-high-precision-policy-in-the-middle-east/?sphrase_id=256164 (Accessed on 14 February 2018).

28 Kershner, Barnard and Schmitt, "Israel Strikes Iran".

29 "Bennett: We Won't Allow Iran to Establish Land Corridor to Syria", <http://www.timesofisrael.com/bennett-we-wont-allow-iran-to-establish-land-corridor-to-syria> (Accessed on 1 February 2018).

30 Ofek Riemer and Garmit Valensi, "The Agreement on De-escalation Zones in Syria: Risks to Israel, with Opportunities for Influence", *INSS Insight*, No.928, 15 May 2017, <http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/No.-929.pdf> (Accessed on 24 May 2018).

Fortunately, such radical advice does not necessarily translate into Israel's policy, especially as far as the matter of disrupting Russian efforts in the region is concerned. Throughout the post-Soviet period, the Russian Federation has consistently pursued a strategy of promoting the development of relationships with Israel. This relation serves as an example of Russia's desire to maintain a high level of bilateral contacts despite that the countries may have differences and diametrically opposed interests.³¹ The Israeli approach to the situation in Syria, its occasional shootings and bombardments of positions held by Hizballah, Iran and the Syrian Army,³² and its demands to constrain Iran, do not compute well with Russian policies in the region. Nevertheless, sustained political dialogue and the ongoing interaction between the Russian and Israeli militaries on de-confliction zones have prevented possible frictions between them over Syria.

Another important element of the Syrian puzzle is the role played by Hizballah, which is not considered to be an ally of Russia, but a tactical and situational counterpart.³³ Notwithstanding, one can suspect that after enhancing its political influence in Lebanon over the years, following the election of President Michel Aoun, Hizballah would not resist the temptation of viewing its relations with Russia in Syria as a complementary to the group's power in Lebanon. Yet, such wishful thinking is not wholly justifiable, as the US-based policy analyst Mark Katz argued:

...while many in the West see Russia, Iran, and Hizballah as firmly allied in the Levant, they really are not. The Iranian regime and Hizballah are pursuing a sectarian Shi'a agenda that is not only anti-Israel, but anti-Sunni... What Putin appears to seek instead is to become the crucial party for each in keeping threats from its regional rivals in check. Each, then, would have an incentive to continue good relations with (or even make concessions to) Moscow for fear that the Kremlin will increase support for its rivals.³⁴

It seems quite likely that Russia's dealing with various players in the Middle East will effectively make some of them more flexible and cooperative. As a final analysis, the source of the Russian Federation's power in the region and its ability to be on friendly terms with all of the key players (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Egypt, Hizballah, Jordan, the Assad regime in Syria, HAMAS etc.,) is a byproduct of its military and political strategy in Syria. The desire of the leading states in the region (Saudi Arabia, other Gulf Countries, Turkey, Egypt and others) to acquire advanced Russian weapons³⁵ also

31 Irina Zvyagelskaya, "Russia and Israel: Trust despite Disagreements", <http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-and-israel-trust-disagreements/> (Accessed on 5 February 2018).

32 [Http://newsru.co.il/mideast/19oct2017/syria_009.html?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fzen.yandex.com](http://newsru.co.il/mideast/19oct2017/syria_009.html?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fzen.yandex.com) (Accessed on 19 October 2017).

33 Mark Katz, "Putin's power play Russia and Lebanon: A Geopolitical Juggling Act", *The American Interest*, 28 November 2016, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/10/28/Russia-and-Lebanon-a-geopolitical-juggling-act/> (Accessed on 10 September 2017).

34 Ibid.

35 The UAE and Russia signed a letter of intent on the purchase of Su-35 fighter jets in February 2017. The UAE has already purchased Russian ground weapons such as BMP-3 infantry combat vehicles and Pantsir S1 air-defense systems and entered into military contracts with Russia worth \$1.9 billion. The deal includes 5,000 anti-armor missiles in addition to training and logistic support. This year, Moscow started delivery of 50 MiG-29 fighter aircraft to Egypt. Cairo is also to start receiving 46 Ka-50 combat helicopters. It was reported in September 2017 that Algeria is going to buy over 300 Russian-made BMPT-72 Terminator-2 tank support combat vehicles (TSCV) in order to support T-90SA main battle tanks bought from Russia earlier. Now, the Algerian military uses technical vehicles equipped with Kornet ATGM launchers and ZSU Shilka self-propelled, radar guided anti-aircraft weapon systems. In early October 2017, Russia had signed a number of landmark arms contracts with Riyadh. The deal includes the S-400 anti-aircraft missile system as well as Kornet-EM anti-tank missile systems, TOS-1A "Buratino" heavy flame systems, AGS-30 grenade launchers and Kalashnikov AK-103 assault rifles. The already agreed on sales of S-400 air defense system to Saudi Arabia and

augment this power. Similarly, non-state players in Syria have also tried to take advantage of Russia's presence in order to secure additional leverage so that they are not left on the sidelines in the event of a future political settlement.

The Congress of Syrian National Dialogue held in Sochi on 29-30 January 2018 was an important step towards stabilization in Syria. A second track format was less binding than the official negotiations and it allowed different Syrian political forces, ethnic and confessional communities, groups, etc., to send their representatives to the Congress. While not all parties decided to attend, according to the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Michail Bogdanov, the results were;

Impressive... Our partners in the Astana process — Iran and Turkey — played an important role in ensuring the success of this event. At the same time, they worked with us to ensure maximum representation of Syrian political forces, civil society, ethnic and religious groups at the Congress, and contributed to the adoption of balanced decisions that could form the basis of the inter-Syrian negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations.³⁶

Moreover, the prospect of Syria's economic recovery can be a critical driver for the country's neighbors to solidify their own political and economic standing. In this connection, Lebanon, in all probability, could play a special role. It was not accidental that, after a meeting with the Russian President Vladimir Putin in September 2017, the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri spoke about Beirut's interest in getting life back to normal in Syria: "We have a seaport of Tripoli, a railway connection, airports. After a final political resolution is found for Syria, Lebanon can be a hub for the post-war reconstruction of Syria"³⁷ Such an approach could facilitate the participation of Russian companies in the reconstruction of Syria and invigorate Russian business endeavors in Lebanon.

The prospective military cooperation agreement with Lebanon is also on the list in Russia. According to Olga Olikier, director of the Russia and Eurasia program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the agreement provides "a broad framework... So it's not a landmark, it's a step. But it's certainly part of Russia's effort to expand its involvement and relationships in the Middle East, and Lebanon's desire to have more partners and options."³⁸

In short, the Syrian operation eventually allowed Russia to increase its presence in the Middle East overall and in the Levant in particular. However, it has not contributed much to a prospect of improving regional cooperation with the West; the common fight against terrorism does not appear to be a unifying factor any longer. Areas of divergence with the West are still wide. Generally speaking, they include reaction to Assad's role after a future political transition to the role of regional powers and, some armed groups, etc.

Turkey are groundbreaking deals. See Andrei Akulov, "Russia's Arms Sales to Middle East Countries Spike to Record-High Levels", <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2017/11/18/russia-arms-sales-middle-east-countries-spike-record-high-levels.html> (Accessed on 19 November 2018).

36 Michail Bogdanov, *Interview*, <https://ria.ru/interview/20180210/1514361847.html> (Accessed on 10 February 2018).

37 <https://russian.rt.com/document/59b952671835610b2d8b4567/amp/429798-livan-vosstanovlenie-sirii> (Accessed on 13 September 2017).

38 Michael Peck, "Lebanon: Russia's New Outpost in the Middle East?", *The National Interest*, 18 February 2018, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/lebanon-russias-new-outpost-the-middle-east-24538>, (Accessed on 20 February, 2018).

Russia and the Palestinian Problem

By 2018, the Palestinian problem had evolved from the failed attempts to resume the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations to a standoff. Russia has been ready to support political efforts to consolidate Palestinian gains, providing them a possibility to obtain a stronger position at the negotiating table.³⁹ From Moscow's standpoint, it was necessary to undertake a dynamic policy line with this end in view, considering the prospect of radical changes in the Palestinian community. There exists various distinct sources of tension within the Palestinian polity, with Palestinian leadership being perceived, more often than not, by the younger and impatient generation as politically obsolete and illegitimate.⁴⁰ Moreover, the efforts to find ways to resolve the conflict have been curtailed by the existing ideological and political rift between Hamas and Fatah.

Saudi Arabia and Egypt have made attempts in the past to reconcile the PNA and Hamas, but these attempts were failed as agreements were either never reached or failed to gain traction.⁴¹ It seems that Hamas's ideology required the group's leaders to take stringent stances that simply did not indicate a willingness to engage in a good faith effort to negotiate a peace with Israel. Russia, for its part, did its best to facilitate the process of national reconciliation. The Russian Federation, irrespective of the criticism leveled by Israel⁴² and some Western states, has continued to maintain ties with Hamas. Russian leaders, while condemning the terrorist tactics that have both discredited Hamas and impeded efforts to find a solution to the problem, have still found it necessary to retain contacts with the movement. The logic behind this is simple; Hamas has been an important player, and it cannot be simply ignored by mediators.

The first meeting between Hamas and Fatah representatives was organized in Moscow in 2011 to address the most acute problems in light of the reconciliation agenda and to formulate basic principles.⁴³ The leaders of the four Palestinian parties and movements, including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), arrived in Russia on 21 May following an invitation from the Institute of Oriental Studies, an auspice of the Russian Academy of Sciences.⁴⁴ When Hamas and Fatah finally signed an agreement for Gaza on 23 April 2014, establishing a national unity government, the Russian Foreign Ministry was quick to issue a statement saying that it would "continue to render assistance to the Palestinians within the framework of available opportunities seeking to ensure genuine national unity."⁴⁵ Though the agreement failed to have a lasting effect, Russia continued to be interested in the issue.

For Palestinians, to overcome a painful territorial (Gaza-West Bank), ideological and political rift would have been a major breakthrough. The resultant unified leadership would be able to pursue a more responsible foreign policy and to take decisions that could not be breached, as they would be

39 Andrei Fedorchenko, Alexander Krylov and Vladimir Morozov, *Palestinskoe gosudarstvo: pravo na budushchee* [Palestinian State: A Right for the Future], Moscow, MGIMO, 2018, p.227-240.

40 Mohammed Ayoob, "Palestine's Outdated Leadership Threatens Its Future", *The National Interest*, 20 January 2018, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/palestines-outdated-leadership-threatens-its-future-24153> (Accessed on 10 February 2018).

41 Elior Levy, "Fatah and Hamas: Another failed attempt at reconciliation?", <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5023631,00.html> (Accessed on 18 February 2018).

42 "Russia-Hamas talks anger Israel", <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4701312.stm> (Accessed on 11 February 2018).

43 <https://russian.rt.com/inotv/2011-05-25/Moskva-podderzhala-usiliya-HAMASa-i> (Accessed on 17 February 2018).

44 https://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2011/05/21/n_1849377.shtml (Accessed on 18 February 2018).

45 [Http://itar-tass.com/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1142117](http://itar-tass.com/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1142117) (Accessed on 14 April 2015).

supported by a consolidated platform. However, Israeli leaders were not ready at that time for any serious compromise and it was increasingly difficult for Palestinian leaders to content themselves with yet another interim measure, as there was a growing wave of criticism within the Palestinian community, especially among the young population dissatisfied with the lack of any positive prospective. As a result, on 29 November 2012, PNA leaders approached the UN with a request to recognize an independent Palestinian state within the 1967 boundaries.⁴⁶ While the process of integrating Palestine into international structures carried on, Russia had no problem with the recognition of the state of Palestine, as the USSR had earlier recognized the independence of the Palestinian state in 1988, after it was proclaimed by the Palestinian National Council (PNC).⁴⁷

Meanwhile Hamas failed to solve the burning problems facing Gaza residents and was unable to prevent the citizenry's aggravation as a result of the Israeli blockade. A UN report issued in 2017 addresses the problems with which Gaza Strip residents are confronted. The report cites a lack of employment opportunities, a lack of access to quality healthcare, as well as environmental concerns, adding that, if no measures are undertaken by 2020, the only source of fresh water in Gaza will be completely depleted.⁴⁸ At the same time, more radicalized jihadist groups, ideologically akin to Al-Qaida, have moved into Gaza and gained traction among the local Palestinians.

Having sensed a change in the political landscape, Hamas made a shift to appeal more towards Palestinian nationalism. Thus, in a new statement of principles issued in May 2017, Hamas demonstrated pragmatism,⁴⁹ rather than the desire to float in the waves of unadulterated Islamist utopia. The revised "principles" apparently reflected the road covered by Hamas as a quasi-government and the desire of its leadership to turn the "terrorist" organization into a legitimate partner for any potential negotiations focusing on the Palestinian problem.

In January 2017, Moscow was again the venue for negotiations between the representatives of Fatah, Hamas, and their affiliate organizations.⁵⁰ Then in October 2017, following negotiations in Egypt, Fatah and Hamas reached an agreement on all the issues concerning the establishment of a national unity government.⁵¹ From the Russian perspective, it was a significant achievement, although it is too early to speculate about the survivability and sustainability of the settlement.

In 2017-2018, the Palestinian problem (previously shadowed by other conflicts in the region) again found itself at the center of international attention. This time the cause was the US decision to officially move its Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem on 14 May 2018. With this decision, the Israeli right saw a golden opportunity for themselves. On 31 December 2017, soon after the US President's statement on the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the Central Committee

46 On 29 November 2012, the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution 67/191, under which Palestine was granted the observer status with the UN, as a state who "is not a UN member, without prejudice to the rights obtained, privilege and role of the Organization for the Liberation of Palestine at the UN as a representative of the Palestinian people". See <http://tass.ru/info/1543412> (Accessed on 20 April 2017).

47 [Http://tass.ru/info/1543412](http://tass.ru/info/1543412) (Accessed on 10 February 2018).

48 *UN Information Center in Moscow*, <http://www.unic.ru/event/2017-07-11/v-mire/tyazheleishee-sotsialno-ekonomicheskoe-polozhenie-v-gaze-posledstvie-10-letn> (Accessed on 15 July 2017).

49 Udi Dekel, "Hamas's New Statement of Principles: A Political Opportunity for Israel?", *INSS Insight*, No.928, 14 May 2017, p.1-3.

50 Konstantin Volkov, "Fatkh i Khamas v pyatyi raz dogovorilis' pomirit'sya" [FATAH and HAMAS have agreed to patch things up for the fifth time], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 12 October 2017.

51 [Https://ria.ru/world/20171019/1507181668.html](https://ria.ru/world/20171019/1507181668.html) (Accessed on 5 November 2017).

of Likud voted in support of the annexation of the West Bank and Jerusalem. According to Likud activist Nathan Engelsman, “this is a historic event that we have been waiting for a long time. If the US President believes Jerusalem is ours, there is no reason for the right party and coalition to think otherwise.”⁵² The deputies approved the Basic Law on the United Jerusalem at the plenary session of the Knesset on 2 January 2018, which stipulates that the transfer of any part of Jerusalem to foreign jurisdiction, even within the framework of a political settlement, will require a majority of 80 votes.⁵³ Hamas mobilized thousands of Palestinians on the border with Israel. They were met with fire. Israeli forces killed dozens of Palestinians in bloody clashes at the Gaza border.⁵⁴ The continuous exchange of fire has signaled a growing escalation between the Israeli army and Hamas.

Developments in the Middle East have made the issue of Palestinian-Israeli peace more urgent, providing an opportunity for Russia to become a more prominent power broker in the region. According to the Lebanese newspaper *Ad-Diyar*, Russia can replace the United States as a mediator in the settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Russia has traditionally supported the interests of Palestine, and Putin also has a close relationship with Netanyahu.⁵⁵ Obviously, Russia would not be able to, or interested in, replacing either the US or any other power], which has been engaged in the process for many years. From the Russian perspective, the Middle East settlement can only be a result of coordinated efforts.

Conclusion

By way of summarizing this review, several conclusions can be drawn. Russia’s policies in the Levant are a reflection of its new global role. It can be understood in the context of Moscow’s striving for a new world order that is less asymmetrical. Russia believes that in order for it to resume a constructive dialogue with the West it needs to demonstrate its goodwill while proving its ability to defend its legal interests and provide for its security.

On the whole, the Syrian case has demonstrated Russia’s readiness to use a wide range of means to advance its tactical and strategic objectives. Russia’s decision to deploy its Aerospace Forces to Syria in 2015 testified to Moscow’s commitment to defending its interests in the region and its readiness to prevent the terrorist organizations such as ISIS, *al-Nusra* and *al-Qaida*, as well as resisting the destruction of the Syrian state and the unpredictable consequence that would follow.

The proactive policy pursued by Russia led to the strengthening of its position in the Middle East and to the forging of new partnerships there. According to Russian analyst Nikolay Kozhanov:

It is also important for the West to keep in mind that, currently, Russia is confident in the success of its Middle Eastern strategy based on the principle of balancing between the different regional players. Success in Syria, rapprochement with Iran, the strengthening of ties with Egypt, and the development of dialogue with Israel and the GCC further cement its self-assurance.⁵⁶

52 <http://detaly.co.il/netaniyagu-3/> (Accessed on 10 March 2018).

53 http://newsru.co.il/israel/02jan2018/jer_605.html (Accessed on 6 March 2018).

54 <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/14/middleeast/gaza-protests-intl/index.html/edition.cnn.com> (Accessed on 27 May 2018)

55 <https://rueconomics.ru/306664-smi-livana-kontakty-putina-s-netanyakhu-i-abbasom-otkryvayut-novye-vozmozhnosti-dlya-izrailya-i-palestiny> (Accessed on 3 March 2018).

56 Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russian Policy across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods*, London, Chatham House, February 2018, p.29.

The military component of Russian policy sometimes causes some regional and global actors to suspect Russia of seeking to supplant other world powers in the Middle East. However, this opinion is misguided. It has become increasingly obvious in Moscow that stabilization and conflict resolution in the Middle East cannot be achieved by any country acting alone.⁵⁷ It is also true that Russia's policy in the Levant has not been marked only by success. The working relationships established by Russia with a number of regional powers, especially Turkey and Iran, are not cloudless. The interests of the countries three are not identical and it seems that more differences will rise to the surface in the foreseeable future. The situation on the ground has not been stabilized and a lot of effort is required to make it less explosive. With the military defeat of ISIS, relations between Russia and the Western coalition might become more complicated and their respective strategies in Syria rendered even less compatible.

With regard to the Palestinian problem, the approach adopted by the Russian Federation, both in form and in content, has been that of continuity. If we compare the impact of the Palestinian conflict with the impact of the Arab Spring on Russian security, the instability and strategic uncertainty that have been produced as a result of the developments in the Arab world since 2011 tend to pose a much more serious challenge than the unresolved Palestinian problem. However, this did not mean that the conflict was given a lower priority by Russian policy-makers. Russia's participation in the international structures dealing with conflict resolution has always been seen as a positive factor for the nation, as it opens up crucial channels of cooperation with various countries, which are kept available so they can be leveraged again to solve future international disputes.

⁵⁷ Vasily Kuznetsov, Vitaly Naumkin, and Irina Zvyagelskaya, *Russia in the Middle East: Playing on All Fields*, Material for Discussion at the Middle east Conference of the Valdai Discussion Club, Moscow, 19-20 February 2018, p.8.