



# Russia's Policy in Syria and the Middle East:

## Determination, Delight, and Disappointment

CAP paper no. 212, January 2019

"Islam in Russia, Russia in the Middle East" Initiative



**CENTRAL ASIA  
PROGRAM**

**Institute for  
European, Russian,  
and Eurasian Studies**

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*The Initiative "Islam in Russia, Russia in the Islamic World"  
is generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation*

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# Regionalization as the Key Trend of Russia's Policy on Syria and in the Middle East

Ekaterina Stepanova

*IMEMO, Moscow*

**Ekaterina Stepanova** heads the Peace and Conflict Studies Unit and is a lead researcher at the National Research Institute of the World Economy & International Relations (IMEMO), Moscow. She is also a Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) Professor. Her research and publications focus on insurgencies and terrorism, armed conflict and peace-building, extremist ideologies, radicalization, violent networks, human security, and the political economy of conflicts. Her books include *Terrorism in Asymmetrical Conflict: Ideological and Structural Aspects* (Oxford University Press, 2008). Her edited volumes include *Humanitarian Challenges, Humanitarian Support and Human Protection in Armed Conflicts* (IMEMO, 2018), *Addressing Terrorism, Violent Extremism and Radicalization: Perspectives from Russia and the United States* (IMEMO, 2017), and *Terrorism: Patterns of Internationalization* (Sage, 2009). She serves on the editorial boards of the journals *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Global Responsibility to Protect*, and *Global Governance*, and edits the journal *Pathways to Peace and Security*.

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The upgrade of Russia's role in Syria as a result of its military campaign since 2015 has helped bring Russia back to the Middle East. While few now doubt that Russia is in the region to stay, the main question is in what forms and to what extent. The military capacity Russia has demonstrated in Syria has not been matched either by its overall leverage and ambition in the Middle East or by its limited economic power. Thus, while military engagement in Syria catalyzed a relative increase in Russia's influence in the broader region, it is not alone sufficient to explain it. Rather, this qualitative upgrade resulted from Russia's evolving ability to grasp, accept, and adjust to the key process that had gained momentum by the late 2010s and is *endemic* to the region—the *regionalization* of politics and security in the Middle East. This trend manifests itself in the growing role of regional powers, factors, and dynamics. The focus of this paper is on the broader trend of regionalization of Russia's policy in the Middle East in the late 2010s; the benefits and constraints of this process, as illustrated by conflict management in Syria; and its implications for the West.

## **Regionalization**

The regionalization of Russia's Middle East policy has taken at least a decade and a half to evolve. For Russia, it has been an incremental, gradual process that has involved expanding its range of regional partners from just a few at first, to several, then to many, and later to almost all regional players, while also trying to maintain its distance from intra-regional strife (a so-called *multi-vector policy*). This required and depended on a high degree of pragmatism, rejection of any ideological schemes, cultural relativism, readiness to treat regional partners as equals, and selective opportunism. Since the mid- to late 2000s, these features have been reinforced by another qualitative shift in Russia's approach, which proceeded from the gradual stabilization of its domestic conflict in Chechnya (achieved mainly by reliance on local traditionalist ethno-

confessional Muslim actors, mostly former rebels, as an imperfect response that was nevertheless superior to transnational jihadists). This course at home stimulated a shift from a harsh anti-Islamist stance abroad to a more nuanced approach to reformist political Islam, both in and out of government, in the Middle East. Subsequently, it further evolved into a readiness to selectively reach out to Islamist armed opposition actors other than transnational jihadists, if this was in the interests of conflict resolution.

Against this background, Russia's side-picking and firm support for the Assad regime throughout the civil war (which culminated in Moscow's direct military engagement from 2015) initially appeared to cut against and potentially undermine Russia's otherwise multi-vector course in the Middle East. However, Russian policy on Syria evolved in such a way as to stimulate, rather than impede, Moscow's strategy of "playing on all fields." In fact, the main difference between Russia's pre-Syria and post-Syria balancing act with regional actors is that now it could do this with more partners and as a more influential player in the Middle East.

Back in 2015, the main drivers of Russia's military engagement in Syria had little to do with the region itself. Syria was largely instrumentalized to serve broader Russian foreign policy goals—as a trump card in its troubled relations with the West post-2014 and as a showcase of prevention of regime change by force, especially through potential Western intervention (in the post-Libya context), coupled with some degree of concern about global anti-terrorism. Increasing Russia's regional influence in the Middle East was not a primary driver at that time, but rather more of a bonus if everything else worked out. In practice, however, Russia's engagement in Syria, by putting an end to further "somalization" of the country and shifting the balance in favor of the central government, did catalyze an upgrade of Russia's standing across the broader region. This in turn stimulated Moscow's growing interest in the Middle East per se.

The regionalization of Russia's Middle East policy continues to evolve in three main directions:

- (1) New types and areas of Russia's regional influence, especially in the economic sphere and in conflict management beyond Syria;
- (2) A qualitative shift from a primarily Western-centric to a more region-centric approach to the Middle East—a recent tendency distinct from (and more strategically significant than) the mere diversification of Russia's regional contacts that has been going on for many years;
- (3) Identification and more active pursuit of Russia's own interests in regional partnerships in the Middle East—something that requires an actor to have a certain weight in the region, which Russia has now acquired.

## **Benefits**

The regionalization of Russia's approach to the Middle East has both benefits and inherent limitations, both of which are well illustrated by the latest stage of Russia's engagement in and beyond Syria in 2018–early 2019.

In the Syrian context, the most direct product of regionalization has been the Astana ceasefire/de-escalation process co-brokered by Russia, Turkey, and Iran since 2017 and which involves both the government and various opposition actors, including non-jihadist armed groups. Intransigent as Moscow may be seen in the West in the context of Russia–U.S./Russia–West relations, in the Middle Eastern context, Russia has quickly learned the art of compromise and flexibility with regional partners on Syria (especially with Turkey and Iran, but also with Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Iraq, etc.).

This approach has proven resilient to the periodic shocks that have tainted relations with key regional powers over Syria, such as Israel's role in a Russian military plane shoot-down during a Syrian response to an Israeli air raid on Latakia in September 2018 or an earlier shoot-down of a Russian bomber jet by Turkey in November 2015. The resulting temporary freeze in bilateral

relations did not, however, prevent Russia and Turkey from launching the Astana format slightly more than a year later. By late 2018, the two were working together on the situation in the largest remaining concentration of a mix of more moderate Islamist actors, mostly allied with Turkey, and jihadist forces in Syria's northwestern Idlib province. In another sign of flexibility, Russia made Damascus postpone a major military offensive in Idlib to accommodate Turkish interests. Turkish President Erdogan's remark at the November 2018 celebration of completion of the offshore part of the TurkStream gas pipeline from Russia to Turkey about bilateral relations "having already been through all kinds of tests" could equally apply to Russia's relations over Syria with *both* Tehran and Tel Aviv. It also applies, *ante factum*, to a new test of the Astana format's resilience posed by the regional implications of President Trump's announcement on December 19, 2018 of a U.S. withdrawal from Syria.

Even if slow or incomplete, the withdrawal brings an end to the U.S. buffer between Turkish and Kurdish forces in northern Syria. This has led Turkey to contemplate a major offensive against the Syrian Kurds' main military force (People's Protection Units) and even "taking over" from the US by laying claim to areas to the east of the Euphrates. However, this is also the case when the very complexity of the regional/local set-up itself balances and constrains any regional stakeholder, such as Turkey. The departure of the U.S. forces, who had been the Syrian Kurds' key ally on the ground, has actually pushed the latter closer to Damascus. Both Egypt and Russia stand ready to mediate their talks with the Syrian government and, if needed, serve as guarantors of the results (Russia can potentially even mediate between Damascus, the Syrian Kurds, and Turkey itself). This would imply progress toward intra-Syrian settlement.

In parallel, the advance of al-Qaeda-linked "Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham" in Idlib in early 2019, at the expense of the more moderate armed Islamists, has produced consolidation of jihadist targets in the province, providing Damascus with a perfect excuse to finally strike against internationally recognized terrorists. It also allows Moscow to use its support for such an offensive as timely leverage over Ankara, especially in view of the potential mass inflow of refugees from Idlib to Turkey, should the latter raise its ambitions too high in Kurdish-populated areas and to the east of the Euphrates upon the U.S. departure.

Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. special forces from Syria may have been surprising, but it encapsulated a longer, gradual decline of the U.S. role or interest in Syria. However, even prior to that, no state, including the United States, or group of states could "pull the plug on Astana" (using the words of the U.S. special envoy on Syria, Ambassador James F. Jeffrey). What distinguished the Astana format as a product of a thorough regionalization was that it was beyond U.S. or other external control from the start and that nothing serious, beyond or at the UN, has been able to be mounted on the Syrian issue without Russia, Turkey, and Iran ever since. Even if there is a lack of progress on the Syrian Constitutional committee or the broader UN track, Astana will persist for as long as needed, with an expanded range of regional observers, to help sort out emerging issues among the brokers and parties on the ground (a need reinforced by implications of the U.S. departure from Syria's northeast), ensure and improve coordination, complete the de-escalation zone experiment, etc.

The benefits of regionalization of Russia's policy in the broader Middle East context can be illustrated by the fact that of all the great powers, it is Russia that has the best relations with Turkey—despite supporting opposite sides in the Syrian civil war. Russia also steadily continues with mission impossible: maintaining good relations with both Iran and Israel as two constants of Russia's Middle East policy. It has upgraded its outreach to most Gulf states and has developed some of the best relationships ever with Egypt under President al-Sisi. Russia is not a lead mediator on Libya or Yemen, but it is in demand as a mediator by key local parties and has managed to carve a diplomatic niche for itself in both cases. It is also modestly active on the Israeli-Palestinian case and improves its working relations with Iraq and Lebanon. Last but not least, for

the first time in decades, Russia is set to capitalize on its new diplomatic and military influence to improve its economic prospects in the Middle East.

## **Limitations**

On the political and security side, regionalization can produce a more technical Astana ceasefire/de-escalation process, but it is not sufficient to produce Geneva, i.e. a substantive, long-term, and broadly internationally recognized UN-level solution to the Syria problem. While relatively effective, the Astana process has inherent limitations, as it was meant to help improve basic security conditions and prepare technical grounds for Geneva, not to address the key substantive issues of the Syrian political settlement. All other negotiating tracks and initiatives, such as the Moscow-sponsored Sochi Congress in January 2018 as an incomplete Track 2 or the Istanbul summit on Syria that brought together Russia, Turkey, Germany, and France in October 2018, have largely been activities undertaken to somewhat fill the void “in the meantime” as the Geneva process stumbles.

Cooperation with regional Astana partners has also cost Russia dearly on the way to Geneva. Obstacles to linking the Astana process to the UN talks came not only from the Syrian opposition or their regional or Western sponsors, but also from inside the Astana format. On the formation of the Constitutional committee, reluctance to accept the UN-composed part of the committee members’ list came from Damascus and Tehran. On the Kurdish issue, it is Turkey that remains fiercely opposed to having the largest Syrian Kurdish faction join the negotiations. Russia, for its part, has no intention of spoiling—and cannot afford to spoil—relations with its two main regional partners, Iran and Turkey, by radically intensifying political pressure on any of them regarding Syria.

Thus far, however, Russia has appeared to be able to live with these regional limitations, which it takes as “rules of the game,” as a natural progression of different and often conflicting regional powers’ interests and dynamics. This approach is also greatly facilitated by Russia’s lack of vital interests in this region (as well as in any other region outside post-Soviet Eastern Europe/Eurasia).

In the meantime, Moscow will continue to search for a political solution on Syria that is acceptable not only to Damascus, but also internationally, and recognized both at the UN level and across the broader Middle East. What often escapes international observers is that, in contrast to the region’s republican strongmen (al-Assad in Syria, al-Sisi in Egypt, or Haftar in Libya), Moscow is generally ready to accept and even back more representative, inclusive, and pluralistic systems in any of the region’s conflict zones. It keeps working on its own substantive input based on UNSC Resolution 2254, suggested its own draft of the new constitution (offering some major revisions rather than cosmetic amendments to the 2012 constitution), and is open to the idea of a “unitary decentralized” system (often raised by opposition members during their meetings with Russian diplomats).

Against this background, while the zigzags of the Trump administration’s erratic and inconsistent Syria policy (from annual demonstrative air strikes to an abrupt decision to withdraw U.S. forces) cannot critically alter the mainstream course of events on the ground, Washington’s lack of coherence and strategic vision on Syria *is* a major problem when it comes to the search for a UN-level political solution. In short, progress in Geneva still requires some form of active and constructive U.S. engagement.

On the economic reconstruction side, Russia itself can only contribute a very small share of the estimated US\$300–400 billion required for Syria’s reconstruction within the next 10–15 years (not to mention that post-conflict reconstruction and development beyond its own territory has generally not been Russia’s strong point). But as a lead military and diplomatic actor on Syria, Russia now co-owns the problem and cannot simply disengage from post-conflict reconstruction

without losing part of the reputational capital it gained through its engagement. While part of the required aid may come from the Gulf powers (with some, such as the UAE and Bahrain, slowly warming up to Damascus) and informal interest from private mid-size European companies is also on the rise, the scale of the problem requires broader internationalization of Syria's post-conflict reconstruction—another reason why Russia has a vested interest in putting the UN-level Geneva talks on track.

In sum, while Syria was a catalyst in bringing Russia “back” to the Middle East, Russia's atypically high-profile role on Syria has been more of an *outlier*, in terms of level, scale and side-picking, and is unlikely to be replicated elsewhere in the region. At the regional level, Russia will continue to pursue regionalization and develop and balance its plethora of regional partnerships with:

(1) Some upgrade of its role in conflict management elsewhere in the region (in Libya, Yemen, and, to some extent, the Israeli-Palestinian context);

(2) Modest, but growing economic role slowly approaching that of a mid-size actor;

(3) Security role limited to ensuring the minimal presence in the region that is required as a back-up to Russian diplomatic and economic activity, with the more specific function of a security guarantor in Syria.

### **Implications for the West**

What does a combination of visible but limited increase in Russia's influence in the Middle East with growing regionalization of its Middle East policy imply *for the West*?

On the one hand, the significant and relatively balanced regionalization of Russia's approach to the Middle East has become one of Moscow's few comparative advantages in the region and something in which it fares better than the West. The regionalization of Russia's policy has been a process profound and genuine enough to ensure that this policy is no longer mainly a “function” of its relations with the West. Regardless of what the United States and/or its European allies want or do, individually or collectively, Russia will keep trying to get the most out of its limited but upgraded influence, pragmatic approach, and diversified outreach to regional partners. The latest vivid illustration, in the Syrian context, has been the limited direct impact on Russia's mainstream course even of President Trump's December 2018 decision to withdraw militarily from Syria. Its significance for Russia has not been so much *per se* or in the bilateral US-Russia context as in its effect on the standing and policies of Moscow's main regional partners on Syria, especially Turkey (but also Iran and, to an extent, Iraq, Israel, Egypt, and the Gulf states).

On the other hand, the good news is that a combination of (a) profound regionalization and broad diversification of Russia's Middle East policy with (b) its relatively limited resources and pragmatic ambitions defies and excludes a return to any “grand” Cold War-style hegemonic or revisionist policies and approaches. It also does not leave much, if any, potential for direct confrontation between Russia and the collective West in the region. As the role of the United States and other Western powers in the Middle East has been gradually but steadily in decline, it is not with Russia that the West's real problem in the region lies. Instead, it is precisely with the difficulty of accepting and adapting to the growing regionalization of politics and security in the Middle East.