

RUSSIA'S PURSUIT OF POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST: CONTEXT, STRATEGY AND METHODS

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1. Introduction

The Russian Federation has managed to take the world by surprise: first, by conducting a successful rescue operation in support of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, and second, by having become an indispensable power broker in the wider Middle Eastern region.¹ As far as Syria is concerned, by the end of 2019, Assad's regime had effectively been saved by Russia's political and military support in the form of its direct intervention in the Syrian Civil War². Russia's decisive action in this situation enhanced its status throughout the Middle East region. This article aims to ascertain to what extent has Russia's conduct merely taken advantage of the vacuum left by the U.S. and the West, and to what extent can it be considered a pre-meditated and carefully considered plan that fits within Russia's wider strategic objectives.

First, the authors will take a closer look at the strategic assumptions that have enabled Russia to enhance its status in the region, focusing in particular on those underlying aspects that have led to the West's failure and comparing them to those that have helped pave the way for Russia to succeed. To that end, the authors analyse strategic assumptions held by Russia and the West by comparing their long-term behavioural patterns in the international arena.

¹ **Jones, S.** 2019. Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria: Will It Be a Pyrrhic Victory? – CTC Centinel, Vol. 12 (9), Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at U.S. Military Academy West Point.

<https://ctc.usma.edu/russias-battlefield-success-syria-will-pyrrhic-victory>. [Jones 2019]

² **Bashar al-Assad thanks Putin for 'saving our country' as Russian leader prepares for talks on ending Syrian war.** 2017. – The Telegraph, November 21.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/11/21/bashar-al-assad-says-ready-syria-peace-talks-rare-meeting-vladimir>;

Russia saved Assad but Syria peace settlement elusive. 2017. – Arab News, November 3. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1187796/middle-east>.

Subsequently, the article will focus on Russia's wider strategic objectives. It can be argued that in addition to its intervention in Syria, Russia seems to be also pursuing wider regional objectives in the Middle East. This article will examine the core elements of this strategy, in light of Russia's actual achievements in that regard, and the standards Russia relies on to measure its success. This section will focus on analysing the strategic concept of Eurasian power, as articulated by leading Russia experts and academics, as well as Russia's activities in the Middle East and the achieved results from that perspective.

In order to achieve its strategic objectives, Russia has developed and implemented a sophisticated foreign policy not only towards regional powers but also to address the question of Islamist tendencies and radical groups. Therefore, the third thread that this article pursues, attempts to understand the choice of methods that Russia has used to deal with Muslims in general and with Islamist radical groups in particular. The authors aim to gain a deeper understanding into what lessons Russia has learned from its policy towards Muslims and Islamism at home by outlining a long history of examples.

Finally, the article will offer insights into the implications for the West with regard to Russia's new status in the Middle East in order to understand the potential consequences of this new situation for Russia and the West. To answer that question, the authors outline some potential trajectories of the relationship between Russia and the West in the Middle East and beyond. Additionally, the role of ISIS³ will be analysed in the context of the Syrian Civil War as well as in the wider regional framework.

Against this backdrop, this article puts forward the following research questions:

- What strategic assumptions underlie Russia's recent success in the Middle East and how should it be understood in the wider context of historical Western efforts to stabilise the region?
- What considerations have informed Russia's strategy in the Middle East and how to measure its success?

³ **ISIS: Portrait of a Jihadi Terrorist Organization.** 2014. – The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israeli Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center, November 26.

<https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/20733/> (11.12.2019).

Mölder, H.; Sazonov, V. 2016. Sõjateologia ilmingud Lähis-Idas Da'ishi näitel: kas religioosne liikumine või poliitilis-sõjaline organisatsioon? – Sõjateadlane nr 3, lk 208–231. [Sazonov, Mölder 2016]

- How has Russia's past experience with Islam at home influenced its current conduct and its preferred methods in the Middle East?
- What implications does Russia's recent success in the Middle East have for the potential trajectories of Russian-Western relations in the region and elsewhere?

Taking guidance from the posited research questions, the next chapter will mostly concentrate on assessing the wider backdrop of Western and Russian ambitions in the Middle East, outlining the reasons behind Russia's success and the relative failure of the West in their respective pursuits. The third chapter delves deeper into Russia's strategy in the Middle East, whereas the fourth chapter outlines Russia's experience with Islam and fundamentalism at home, seeking to find similarities with Russia's behaviour in Syria. Finally, the fifth chapter will discuss the significance of Russia's actions and the success of its strategic ambitions in Syria, in the Middle East and beyond, primarily attempting to understand it from the Western perspective.

2. Contextualising Western and Russian Strategic Assumptions regarding the Middle East: Outlining the Influence of the Historical and Current Context

In order to compare Western and Russian strategic assumptions regarding the Middle East, it is necessary to outline the relevant historical context and the resulting implications. This section will mostly focus on some critical factors and trends shaping the situation in the Middle East starting around the time of the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War,⁴ while also covering the relevant historical background.

It is the controversial nature of the Arab Spring⁵ that carries in itself perhaps the best indication of the hopes and disappointments the West has entertained and suffered with regard to the Middle East in particular and the Islamic world in general. The Arab Spring encompasses two distinct pursuits – a quest for more democracy in the respective countries and a quest

⁴ Peterson, Ü. 2016. Süüria kodusõjani viinud sündmustest islamimaailmas ja eriti Süürias. – Akadeemia, nr 12, lk 2209–2233.

⁵ Brownlee, J. N.; Masoud, T.; Reynolds, A. 2013. *The Arab Spring: The Politics of Transformation in North Africa and the Middle East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Sazonov, V.; Mölder, H. 2014. Süüria – kas järjekordne ususõda Lähis-Idas? – *Idakiri: Eesti Akadeemilise Orientaalseltsi aastaraamat 2014*, lk 134–154.

for revitalising their religious and cultural legacy. This duality is also well reflected in the Western reception that hoped for the former but was often shaken, if not shocked, by the outcomes that favoured the latter. These hopes reflect the Western conviction of the inevitability of democratic developments throughout the world. However, this conviction has been repeatedly challenged and the history of the Middle East has proved that the democratic seed is fragile, needing welcoming soil and appropriate care in order to take root and flourish⁶; or a specific idiom with its own particular supportive arrangements (e.g. in Turkey).⁷

In any case, the outcomes of the Arab Spring have been controversial. On the one hand, it saw the fall of autocratic leaders (e.g. in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya), but the ensuing chaos often paved the way not merely for a return to traditional roots but also, for the rise of Islamists (even if moderate, like the Muslim Brotherhood).⁸ Thus, from the perspective of the West, the outcomes of the Arab Spring have been varied. Only the Tunisian example supports the argument of democracy being clearly on the winning side⁹, whereas some countries have witnessed the return of autocratic regimes (e.g. Egypt, where the army has once again assumed control),¹⁰ while many others (e.g. Libya, Yemen, Syria) have devolved into civil war.¹¹

Such developments carry an implicitly discouraging message for the West. The Western approach entails two different aspects of legitimisation that both seem to be working against its success in the Middle East. First of

⁶ **Shackle, S.** 2014. Is Democracy Possible in the Middle East? – Middle East Monitor, January 24.

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140124-is-democracy-possible-in-the-middle-east/>

⁷ See **Matos, A. P.** 2013. The Role of the Military in the Turkish Democracy: Are the Military the Guardians of or a Threat to the Turkish Democracy? – International Review of Turkish Studies, Vol. 3, Issue 1, pp. 8–27.

⁸ See **Rózsa, E. N. et al.** 2012. The Arab Spring – Its Impact on the Region and on the Middle East Conference. – Academic Peace Orchestra Middle East (APOME). Policy Brief for The Middle East Conference on a WMD/DVs Free Zone, No 9/10, August. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/09609.pdf>.

⁹ In Tunisia, liberals and the moderate Islamic party cooperated in an emerging multi-party system. For more, see **Natil, I.** 2016. Civil State in the Post-Arab Spring Countries: Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. – The Arab Spring, Civil Society and Innovative Activism. Ed. by Cakmak, C. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 5–6.

¹⁰ **Abdelsalam, E.** 2015. The Arab Spring: Its Origins, Evolution and Consequences... four years on. – Intellectual Discourse, Vol. 23(1), pp. 136–139.

¹¹ For more, see e.g. **Mushtaq, A. Q.; Afzal, M.** 2017. Arab Spring: Its Causes and Consequences. – Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society, Vol. 30(1), pp. 7–8. http://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/HistoryPStudies/PDF_Files/01_V-30-No1-Jun17.pdf.

all, in order to legitimise its activities in the Middle East, the West needs to justify these actions at home. With some notable exceptions¹², most of the Western measures have been geared towards supporting democratisation, from the direct export of democracy, to conditional aid, or to the general advocacy for human rights. Thus far, this has been the only argument for legitimating these policies in the West in order to secure public support as well as financial backing from the parliaments. However, as the above mentioned events have demonstrated, this particular goal may be both positively and negatively detrimental to Western aspirations in the Middle East: positively detrimental in the sense that the impulse to seek popular legitimacy in the region may lead to unexpected consequences as locals may opt for returning to their traditional values, and negatively detrimental, as democracy is perceived by the locals as part and parcel of the Western way of life imposed on the region.

Now, this latter aspect – the imposition of Western values and way of life – constitutes the second problematic aspect of legitimising the West's actions in the Middle East and has to do with the relatively long dominance of the Western civilisation over the Islamic World (i.e. the colonial past, effects of globalised capitalism, the legacies of the Cold War, etc.). The consequences of these historical and a myriad of internal developments paved the way for the ruling regimes and sometimes, in turn, for the counter-movements that emerged as a result (e.g. in post-revolutionary Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.).¹³

In this context, it is not surprising that the West has gradually grown tired of sustaining its active efforts in the Middle East, especially considering that its interventions have not managed to bring peace to the region. In some cases, the outcomes may even seem antithetical and counterproductive.

In recent years, the Western response, especially on the part of the U.S., not only with regard to the results of these interventions, but also in response to more urgent calls, has been to turn from active involvement to gradual

¹² For more, see **Cohen-Almagor, R.** 2018. US-Saudi Arabia Relations: Business as Usual? – Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Diplomatist, Vol. 6(10), October. <http://www.diplomatist.com/globalcenterstage/article20181029.html>.

¹³ **Stern, J.** 2003. Al-Qaeda: the Protean Enemy. – Foreign Affairs, Vol. 82(4), pp 27–40; cf. **Sazonov, V.** 2017. Afghanistan as an Example of the Kremlin's Hybrid Warfare – Why Russia is Arming the Taliban? – *Diplomaatia*, June. <https://icds.ee/afghanistan-as-an-example-of-the-kremlins-hybrid-warfare-why-russia-is-arming-the-taliban/> [**Sazonov 2017a**]

For a critique of the U.S. decision to launch 'The War on Terror', see also **Howard, M.** 2000. *The Invention of Peace: Reflections on War and International Order*. London: Profile Books.

withdrawal from the region.¹⁴ Although President Trump's policy choices may be seen as more ambivalent, his declared policy stance of 'Make America Great Again' carries strong isolationist connotations and seems to continue the trend ushered in by his predecessor, President Obama¹⁵, resulting in a power vacuum that Russia has been more than eager to occupy.

Strangely, the same conditions that have hampered Western ambitions have been conducive for Russia's ambitions. Furthermore, it can be argued that Russia has had the upper hand in both aspects of legitimisation, if not in moral, then at least in practical terms because the Kremlin does not have to justify its actions in the Middle East to the home audience by reverting to the narrative of contributing to the cause of democracy. On the contrary, Russia has itself put forward the notion of 'managed democracy'¹⁶, and due to its general opposition to Western values, Russia seems to be perceived as much less dangerous to the culture of the Middle East countries.

The second aspect, which is also closely related to the previous one, is the fact that as a result of adopting this approach, Russia does not have to deal with the problems related to the introduction of democratic reforms in the Middle East. Moreover, the Kremlin appears to be rather satisfied when Middle Eastern countries choose to return to traditional (or perhaps even to more or less moderate Islamist) ways of life. This gives Russia a clear advantage since its reception does not rely on the pursuit of democracy but can be satisfied with merely a measured dose of stability. Although the culpability for colonisation and for developments that unfolded during the Cold War could easily be attributed to Russia as well, somehow it seems that by distancing itself from the West by *de facto* not sharing the same democratic aspirations, Russia appears to have freed itself from any recriminations as well.

In addition to the vacuum created in the Middle East by the U.S. withdrawal, Russia has also benefitted from another particular advantage. In

¹⁴ **Unger, D.** 2016. The Foreign Policy Legacy of Obama. – The International Spectator, Vol. 51(4), pp. 1–16.
<http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/unger.pdf>.

¹⁵ **Wechsler, W. F.** 2019. US Withdrawal from the Middle East: Perceptions and Reality. – The MENA Region: a Great Power Competition. Ed. by Mezran, K.; Varvelli, A. Milano: Ledi Publishing, pp. 13–38.
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/MENA-Chapter-one.pdf>.

¹⁶ **Liik, K.** 2013. Regime Change in Russia. – European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), Policy Memo, Issue 81, May.
https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR81_PUTIN_MEMO_AW.pdf.

Syria, the West has mostly supported the small democratic factions among the larger anti-Assad opposition that also comprises radical groups.¹⁷ Thus, it is understandable that, at least for the U.S., such alliances have been questionable because some of those oppositional radical groups are also categorised as enemies just like Assad's regime¹⁸, further hampering U.S. efforts. Whereas Russia, in comparison, despite its officially stated priority of fighting ISIS, has aligned its operations to help Assad. According to Polyakova, the fact that Russia counts ISIS among its enemies has also worked as a facilitating factor, without distracting Russia from its main objectives.¹⁹ Altogether, this has made Russia's immediate strategic objectives much more straightforward and easier to pursue.

Moreover, there is another ISIS-related factor that may be working to Russia's benefit, and it is also one that has been hampering the West. By way of gross simplification, it could be argued that ISIS's emergence is itself partly a consequence of Western interventions in the Middle East and beyond. Furthermore, it is possible to draw a link between the 2003 Western intervention in Iraq, the consequent dismantling of Saddam Hussein's army and the rise of ISIS. While this does not mean that the West should assume responsibility for ISIS's actions, an indirect relationship can hardly be denied.²⁰ In comparison, for Russia, no such paradoxical relationships exist. Thus, without any moral burden or possible reservations, it is easier for Russia to fight ISIS, as compared to the West.

¹⁷ **Lang, H.; Awad, M.; Sofer, K.; Juul, P.; Katulis, B.** 2014. Supporting the Syrian Opposition: Lessons from the Field in the Fight against ISIS and Assad. – Center for American Progress, September.
<https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/IslamistsSyria-report.pdf>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁹ **Polyakova, A.** 2018. Putin's true victory in Syria isn't over ISIS. – The Brookings Institute, February 26.
<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/putins-true-victory-in-syria-isnt-over-isis/>.

²⁰ See e.g. **Jones, S. G.; Dobbins, J.; Byman, D.; Chivvis, C. S.; Connable, B.; Martini, J.; Robinson, E.; Chandler, N.** 2017. Rolling Back the Islamic State. – RAND report, pp. x–xi. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1912.html.

Even this, otherwise critical account, admits that 'ISIL did grow out of chaos that sprung from the US invasion of Iraq'. **Hundal, S.** 2015. ISIL's terrorism is not a reaction to Western foreign policy. – Quartz, November 18.

<https://qz.com/553733/isils-terrorism-is-not-a-reaction-to-western-foreign-policy/>.

See also **Milne, S.** 2015. Now the truth emerges: how the US fuelled the rise of Isis in Syria and Iraq. – The Guardian, June 3.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/03/us-isis-syria-iraq>.

Despite high hopes, the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime did not bring about peace. On the contrary – Iraq descended into civil war (incl. against the U.S. and its allies) that lasted for eight years. When the U.S. forces finally left Iraq in 2011, the situation in the country deteriorated, becoming even more unstable, eventually falling prey to another civil war. It was in this context that radical Islamists were successful in establishing a terrorist quasi-state – in the form of ‘the Caliphate’ under the name Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – in the territories seized from Syria and Iraq in 2014.²¹ However, as will be shown later, Russia's relations with ISIS have some additional facets due to some rather dubious connections. Specifically, many former officers of Saddam's regime, which was ruled by the Ba'ath party, have played a significant role in ISIS, if not directly controlling it,²² giving grounds to the argument that there is a Ba'athist-Salafist nexus²³ within ISIS. This nexus, in turn, is a critical indicator, revealing potential ties that may have been established with the KGB in the Soviet era given the fact that several former officers of Saddam's army and members of the Ba'ath party studied in Moscow during the Cold War.²⁴

Thus, provided that the alleged links with the KGB can be established, it is quite apparent that the same forces that have posed a challenge for the West, could ease the way for Russia to become the main power broker in the Middle East. Indeed, the ties with the KGB are not only difficult to sever,

²¹ **Bunzel, C.** 2015. From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State. – The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World. Analysis paper, No. 19, March. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf>.

²² **Sazonov, V.** 2017b. ISIS – kas Saddam Husseinini režiimi produkt? – Islam.ee, April 15. <https://www.islam.ee/arvamus/178-vladimir-sazonov-isis-kas-saddam-husseini-reziimi-produkt/>.

²³ **Natali, D.** 2015. The Islamic State's Baathist roots. – Al-Monitor, April 24. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fa/originals/2015/04/baathists-behind-the-islamic-state.html>.

²⁴ During the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), Saddam Hussein's security service, the Iraqi Directorate of General Military Intelligence (*al-Istikhbarat*), had ties with the Russian KGB. The KGB advised Saddam's security services in techniques of concealing covert weapons production facilities. See **Al-Marashi, I.** 2002. Saddam's Security and Intelligence Network and The Iraqi Security Apparatus. <https://www.nonproliferation.org/diagram-saddams-security-and-intelligence-network-the-iraqi-security-apparatus/>;

На стороне ИГИЛ воюют генералы с советской выучкой и образованием. Зачем России присутствие в Сирии. 2016. – New Day News, February 04. <https://newdaynews.ru/ekb/interview/556654.html>.

but they can, by the same token, come in rather handy by providing a line of communication for the Federal Security Service (FSB), Russia's principal security agency and the main successor to the USSR's KGB, and hence a convenient mechanism for deal-making.

3. Russia's Conduct in the Middle East in the Context of its Strategic Objectives

This chapter will look into the wider significance of Russia's pursuits in Syria and in the Middle East. The main elements and trends of Russia's conduct in the region will be briefly examined against some prominent interpretations of Russia's strategic concepts and goals, such as Russia positioning itself as the leading Eurasian power.

Looking at Russia's vicissitudes in Syria and in the wider Middle-East since 2015, one is faced with many paradoxes. Although Russia appears to have started out with a relatively modest aim of helping the Assad regime hold on to power in Syria, due to the success of that venture, Russia now enjoys the status of a major regional power broker in the Middle East. At first look, this status must seem somewhat surprising on at least two planes: regional and global. As to the regional plane, given the fact that Russia has thus far been considered primarily a supporter of Shia interests, this position should have posed insurmountable problems for establishing trust with the major Sunni countries in the region, begging the question: how did Russia manage to establish rapport with all major players in the Middle East?²⁵ As to the global plane, what could explain Russia's bold entrance into a second conflict (i.e. the Syrian Civil War) in addition to its on-going confrontation in neighbouring Ukraine?

As it will be argued, Russia has been pursuing this novel pragmatic policy for quite some time now, trying to gain the recognition of all major powers in the Middle East. In a way, Syria has become a welcome stepping stone on the road to achieving that goal. Russia's pursuits in the Middle East do not merely align with its regional goals, but also fit into the larger picture of its desired status as a global player. However, before going into the details of that policy, in order to gain an understanding of the complexity of Russia's past involvements and ties in the Middle East, it bears outlining some facts

²⁵ This applies, for example, to Israel in the context of Russia's close ties with al-Assad and Hezbollah and Iran.

about Russia's history with the region. As will be seen, it has not been only about siding with the Shia interests.

Throughout history, Russia's biggest rival in the Middle East has been the Ottoman Empire with whom Russia has been in fierce competition, particularly for the area surrounding the Black Sea and the Balkans, as well as with a view to securing access to the Mediterranean through the Turkish Straits.²⁶ In this context, it bears significance that despite numerous opportunities for Turkey and Russia to clash over their interests in Syria and in the wider region. Despite the freezing of relations between the two countries after Turkey downed a Russian aircraft in Northern Syria in 2015, their relationship was quickly mended, and in 2019, the world witnessed their close cooperation in managing the extremely complex situation in Northeast Syria, where one central question relates to the areas mainly populated by Kurds.

In the beginning of the 1950s, despite having first been a supporter of Israel, the Soviet Union established allied or equivalent relations with the enemies of Israel and its main supporter the U.S. Russia's new allies in the Middle East included Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, South Yemen and Syria²⁷, fitting nicely into the framework of the international communist revolution, one of the prevalent strands in international relations during the Cold War.

Despite the much heralded Russian support for the 'Shia axis', the relationship between Moscow and the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran has been and remains complex (e.g. clashing in the field of business interests as been the case in Syria).²⁸ Their relationship has also suffered due to the way Russia

²⁶ **Trenin, D.** 2016. Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers. – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Task Force on U.S. Policy toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia, p. 2.

https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16_Trenin_Middle_East_Moscow_clean.pdf. [Trenin 2016]

In addition to Turkey, Russia's other main competitor in the region, has been the Persian Empire or modern Iran.

²⁷ **Karmon, E.** 2018. Russia in the Middle East – The Sunni Connection. – Institute for Policy and Strategy (IPS) Publications.

<https://www.idc.ac.il/he/research/ips/Documents/publication/5/ElyKarmonRussiaMiddleEastJuly2018.pdf> [Karmon 2018]

²⁸ In this case, al-Assad can claim some sovereign decision-making authority while trying to balance the allocation of profitable deals between Russia and Iran. **Kotan, B. N.** 2019. How Assad balances competing interests of Russia and Iran in Syria. – TRTWorld, September 20. <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/how-assad-balances-competing-interests-of-russia-and-iran-in-syria-29976>.

publicised its use of an Iranian air base for its first air strikes in Syria.²⁹ As Borshchevskaya argues, historically Russian and Iranian interests have been more on a course of collision than in harmony. After the 1979 Iranian revolution, the famous slogan propagated by the newly anointed ruler Ayatollah Homeini was “*Neither East nor West but Islamic Republic*”, distancing Iran from both competing superpowers of the Cold War. Despite these complexities, Iran and Russia have managed to maintain a close relationship rooted mostly in their shared anti-Western political objectives, but also based on mutually beneficial economic relations and concerns over the rise of Sunni extremism in the region.³⁰

Perhaps most remarkable is the way Russia has managed to retain those Shia connections, while at the same time cultivating close relations with the Sunni powers. It is not only that the success in Syria has played into Russia's hands, but a long-term Kremlin strategy can be observed here as well. From 2005 to 2007, President Putin visited Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, securing an observer status for Russia in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.³¹ In this regard, Russia's close cooperation with Saudi Arabia is especially noteworthy because even if their interests should clash in Syria, according to Trenin, there are many more areas where their interests align quite well (e.g. support for Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt, manipulation of oil prices, etc.).³² In that respect, Russia's policy in the region diverges from that of the U.S. According to Trenin, Russia's strategy in the Middle East has been a careful tightrope act to avoid siding with any single party in a conflict, instead, constantly manoeuvring and engaging in trade-offs.³³

Nevertheless, Russia's connection with the Shia cannot be entirely overlooked.³⁴ In addition to its relations with the leading Shia nation, Iran,

²⁹ For more, see **Borshchevskaya, A.** 2016. Vladimir Putin and the Shiite Axis. – Foreign Policy, August 20.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/30/vladimir-putin-and-the-shiite-axis-russia-iran-syria/>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ **Karmon** 2018.

³² **Trenin** 2016, p. 3.

³³ “... *indeed to feel ‘confident that it can navigate between Tehran and Riyadh.’*” **Trenin** 2016, p. 4.

³⁴ For more, see e.g. **Baker, L.** 2016. Israeli Official: Russia has long-term ambitions in Middle East. – Reuters, November 15.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-russia-mideast/russia-has-long-term-ambitions-in-the-middle-east-israeli-official-idUSKBN13A2CN>.

Russia's cooperation with other regional Shia groups includes close partnerships with Syria's ruling Shia clan, the Alawites, supporters of Bashar al-Assad³⁵, as well as with Azerbaijan where the majority of Muslims are Shia. It is worth noting that Russia also has interests in Iraq where the Shia make up more than 60% of the population, with strong indications that Russia is pursuing economic interests there, if not more.³⁶

As to relations with Syria, it remains Russia's longest unbroken alliance dating back to the Cold War when close cooperation was established in 1950 under the leadership of Hafez al-Assad, the father of Bashar, and Syria became a staunch ally of the Soviet Union.³⁷ Although their relationship seemed to cool during the 1990s and 2000s, the 2011 crisis reawakened this relationship in full force. In order to secure Assad's regime, the Kremlin has sent him weapons³⁸, military advisers and equipment (incl. aircraft and armoured vehicles),³⁹ while also increasing its military presence in the region.⁴⁰ These weapon shipments have reached Assad's forces through the Syrian port in Tartus, currently under Russian control. From a strategic point of view, the Tartus naval base is of great importance to Moscow, securing Russia's only access to the Mediterranean Sea. Also, this is the only base

³⁵ **Peterson, Ü.** 2019. The Position of the Alawites in Islam. – Cultural Crossroads in the Middle East – Historical, Cultural and Political Legacy of Intercultural Dialogue and Conflict from Ancient Near East to Present Days. Ed. by Sazonov, V.; Mölder, H.; Espak, P. Tartu: University of Tartu Press, pp. 163–197.

³⁶ Russian oil companies such as Gazprom, Rosneft and Lukoil have been doing business in Iraq for many years; also, the first deliveries of Russian military exports to Iraq date back to the 1960s. **Ahmadbayl, A.** 2018. Russian presence in Iraq – a matter of time. – Trend News Agency, October 03. <https://en.trend.az/other/commentary/2960135.html>.

³⁷ **Trenin** 2016, p. 3.

³⁸ The majority of weapons used by Assad's forces in Syria originate from the former USSR or the Russian Federation. **Bennett, A. J.** 1985. Arms Transfer as an Instrument of Soviet Policy in the Middle East. – Middle East Journal, Vol. 39(4), pp. 745–774.

³⁹ The Syrian government has purchased weapons from the Russian Federation in the amount of several billion dollars. **Connolly, R.; Sendstad, C.** 2017. Russia's Role as an Arms Exporter. The Strategic and Economic Importance of Arms Exports for Russia. – The Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, pp. 8, 18, 27. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-03-20-russia-arms-exporter-connolly-sendstad.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Among other things, the Russian forces also use it as a testing-ground for their weapons. **Enders, D.** 2018. Russian weapons in Syria. – The National, November 13. <https://www.thenational.ae/world/europe/russian-weapons-in-syria-1.712798>.

outside the territory of the former USSR which has a favourable location and enables Russia to control the Eastern Mediterranean region.⁴¹

At this juncture it is appropriate to inquire how this policy approach can be understood in terms of Russia's wider strategic interests. For example, it is evident that acquiring a wider recognition in the region is in alignment with Russia's interests. First and foremost, Russia's widest strategic interests consider the Middle East region as vital to solidifying its strategic and political position in the world. According to Gvosdev, Russia does not pursue a Middle East policy specific to that region alone but coordinates its actions on a wider scale in accordance with its overall approach to international affairs. Gvosdev outlines what he calls the "twin challenges posed by Russia's geographic position: extensive and vulnerable land borders coupled with choke points." The significance of the latter lies in the fact that they could cut Russia off from the wider world. Traditionally, Russia's response to these problems has been to push the borders of its spheres of influence as far outward as possible and acquire control of the connecting nodes.⁴²

It is important to recognise that this interpretation of Russia's interests in the region relies on the good old logic of geopolitics and, in this context, it is relevant to highlight how Russia has harkened back to this notion while putting forward its new concept of 'Eurasian power'.⁴³ According to Karaganov, this term represents novel thinking that has emerged in the post-2000s Russia that is trying to distance itself from declining Europe while getting closer to rising China, India, Brazil etc. However, despite moving away from what it calls post-European values, Russia seems keen on re-establishing its relationship with the West as well. Karaganov argues that it is perhaps best explained by the fact that Russia's approach to security encompasses the whole Eurasian continent, and for the latter "the arc of

⁴¹ It is also notable for the fact that it reminds NATO of Russia's presence in the region as the Russian naval base in Tartus, Syria is located in close proximity to a NATO member state – Turkey is only ca. 150 km from Tartus. **Sazonov, V.** 2015. Putin's Game of Thrones in the Middle East. – *Diplomaatia*, December 18. <https://icds.ee/putins-game-of-thrones-in-the-middle-east/>.

⁴² **Gvosdev, N. K.** 2019. Russian Strategic Goals in the Middle East. – **Laruelle, M.** (ed.) 2019. Russia's Policy in the Middle East. Central Asia Program (CAP) Paper No 212, January, p. 7. <https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CAP-paper-212-Russia-in-the-Middle-East-Print.pdf>. [**Gvosdev** 2019]

⁴³ **Karaganov, S.** 2018. The new Cold War and the emerging Greater Eurasia. – *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 9(2), pp. 85–93.

territories and states from Afghanistan to North and Northeast Africa” is the key to the security of all, including Russia and Europe.⁴⁴

In that context, Russia’s intervention in Syria, and especially the wider stabilising role that Russia has tried to assume in the Middle East, acquires a more serious meaning. This is confirmed by Gvosdev, stressing that Russia aims to influence other key international stakeholders (e.g. the EU and China) by “showing that a central Eurasian ‘node’ within the international system under Russian management contributes to the peace and prosperity of other major powers.”⁴⁵

Gvosdev argues that in addition to this geographical reality, it is also important to realise that, as the successor to the great power status enjoyed by the Soviet Union, Russia wants to remain one of the “agenda-setting, rather than agenda-taking nations” of the world, not letting the U.S., the EU or China assume they could be in a position to dictate Russia’s internal and external affairs.⁴⁶ Thus, when Russia needs to prove its suitability to serve as a trustworthy custodian of the region, the Muslim countries, in conflict with former colonial powers or dealing with local radicals, offer suitable theatres for Russia to demonstrate its capabilities. These faraway nations can offer potentially high gains for Russia when battle-testing its ‘escalate to de-escalate’ doctrine, while the concomitant social and political risks remain low in case its venture should fail.⁴⁷ This indicates that for Russia the risks involved in opening a second front are lower compared to possible benefits.

⁴⁴ **Karaganov, S.** 2015. Eurasian Way Out of the European Crisis. – Russia in Global Affairs, June 08.

<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/Eurasian-Way-Out-of-the-European-Crisis-17505>.

⁴⁵ **Gvosdev** 2019, p. 8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7. The sanctions imposed on Russia by the West are just one example of such pressure. For some of their effects, see **Veebel, V.; Ploom, I.** 2020. Is Moscow in trouble because of targeted sanctions? A deeper glance at the progress of the Russian military sector over the past decade. – Journal of Slavic Military Studies [upcoming].

⁴⁷ **Adamsky, D.** 2018. From Moscow with coercion: Russian deterrence theory and strategic culture. – Journal of Strategic Studies, Vol. 41(1–2), pp. 33–60. In the case of neighbouring nations, the situation is different. See e.g. **Veebel, V.; Ploom, I.** 2019. Are the Baltic States and NATO on the right path in deterring Russia in the Baltic? – Defense and Security Analysis, Vol. 35(4), pp. 406–422. In the case of Russia, it is interesting to note the difference in thinking between the West and Russia. The Russian discourse often uses the term struggle (*borba*) to refer to various forms of strategic interactions. For example, their military dictionary includes terms like informational struggle, radio-electronic struggle, diplomatic struggle, ideological struggle, economic struggle, or armed struggle. Thus, it seems that for Russians a desirable positive situation is a dynamic and agile struggle rather than a static comfort zone relying on a peaceful world.

What is more, while Russia is striving to shore up its international status and recognition, its forces have often been warmly welcomed by national leaders because they can offer a viable counterbalance to the Americas, the British and the French, whose efforts are often perceived as imperial in nature.⁴⁸ What is more, in the eyes of locals, the Russians are also able to provide immediate help and working solutions.⁴⁹

From Russia's perspective, all of its more or less peaceful attempts to restore its former G8 status from 2015 to 2017, have been rejected referring its aggressive behavior in the past. Interestingly, in those cases where Russia has visibly used military force (e.g. in Syria), it seems to have been 'taken back into the club' again by the international community. This speaks in favor of relying on the 'escalate to de-escalate' doctrine and considering that Russia has not been admonished for using that tactic,⁵⁰ it will most likely continue using it.

Finally, it is time to take a look at how Russia has managed to achieve the status of a major power broker in the Middle East. First of all, it has made the most of the opportunities that have come its way, the most salient being the vacuum created by the West, and especially the U.S., who have almost deserted the region. However, these opportunities might have come to naught had Russia not played its cards as boldly as it did.

Leaving aside the moral responsibility for its more than brutal methods, especially towards civilians,⁵¹ Stepanova argues that Russia has achieved this status by using its military might clearly beyond its economic means or even overall ambition. However, in addition to decisive action that seems to be the key to Russia's success, Stepanova argues that, compared to the U.S., Russia has managed better in adjusting to new and changing realities. Instead

⁴⁸ **Karaganov, S.; Suslov, D.** 2018. A new world order: A view from Russia. – CIRSD. <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-winter-2019-issue-no-13/a-new-world-order-a-view-from-russia>.

⁴⁹ **Markedonov, S.** 2015. De facto statehood in Eurasia: a political and security phenomenon. – *Caucasus Survey*, Vol. 3(3), pp. 195–206.

⁵⁰ **Veebel, V.** 2019. Why it would be strategically rational for Russia to escalate in Kaliningrad and the Suwalki corridor. – *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 38(3), pp. 182–197.

⁵¹ It is important to also note that Russia has used asymmetric methods to achieve its goals. **Sazonov** 2017a; see also **Bērziņš, J.** 2015. Russian New Generation Warfare is not Hybrid Warfare. – *The War in Ukraine: Lessons for Europe*, Ed. by Pabriks, A.; Kudors, A. Rīga: The Centre for East European Policy Studies, University of Latvia Press, pp. 40–51. https://library.cimic-coe.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/20150101_UC_The-Ware-in-Ukraine-Lessons-for-Europe.pdf.

of restricting itself with conditionality, Russia has been relying on the trend of regionalisation of politics and security in the Middle East.⁵²

So what has Russia managed to achieve? First of all, it has secured Assad's hold on power in Syria, while also bolstering the stability of the whole Middle East region. This is a relatively uncontroversial statement in the Middle East, but it is also acknowledged by Western countries, although not directly. Thus, instead of staying within the confines of supporting only the Shia, Russia has managed to achieve the status of a power broker respected by all regional powers (incl. Saudi Arabia and Israel), enabling Russia to re-establish its status as a major power on the global scale.⁵³ And above all, it has unquestionably managed to successfully demonstrate its desired new identity as the Eurasian power.

4. Russia, Islam and Islamic Fundamentalism: Past Methods as Models for the Present

The previous chapter outlined some prominent Russian concepts for understanding its strategy in the Middle East from the geopolitical perspective, whereas this chapter will focus specifically on Russia's experience with Islam and Islamism⁵⁴ at home, while also looking for parallels between Russia's activities in the Middle East and its past experiences with Muslims in Russia and neighbouring countries. Thus, we will look into some major factors that have contributed to shaping Russia's experience with Islam to discern patterns for understanding Russia's conduct in Syria and beyond.

For many centuries, Russia has had a considerable Muslim population.⁵⁵ In addition, it has a long history with Muslims in Russia and Muslims living

⁵² According to Stepanova, this trend manifests itself in the growing role of regional powers, factors, and dynamics. **Stepanova, E.** 2019. Regionalization as the Key Trend of Russia's Policy on Syria and in the Middle East. – **Laruelle, M.** (ed.) 2019. Russia's Policy in the Middle East. Central Asia Program (CAP) Paper No 212, January, pp. 11–12. <https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CAP-paper-212-Russia-in-the-Middle-East-Print.pdf>.

⁵³ **Jones** 2019.

⁵⁴ **Yemelianova, G. M.** 2002. Russia and Islam: A Historical Survey. Palgrave MacMillan. [**Yemelianova** 2002]; **Bobrovnikov, V.** 1999. Muslim Nationalism in the post-Soviet Caucasus: the Dagestan Case. – *Caucasian Regional Studies*, Vol. 4(1), pp. 11–19.

⁵⁵ **Малашенко, А. В.** (Ред.) 2007. Ислам в России: Взгляд из регионов. Аспект Пресс; **Малашенко, А. В.** 2010. Ислам в России: религия и политика. – *Исламоведение*, № 3, ст. 69–85.

in neighbouring countries, as well as long-standing historical ties with Muslim communities and countries of the Middle East and Central Asia⁵⁶. As a result, Russia has had to develop a distinctive policy toward these different groups. Historically, Russia's first encounters with Islam date back to the 7th century, before the time of the founding of the Russian state itself,⁵⁷ and culminate with the Soviet era,⁵⁸ the reverberations of which are still present in the post-Soviet world.⁵⁹

If there is one facet that demonstrates the pertinence of the Muslim question for Russia, it has to do with the demographics of today's Russia. From the Russian nationalist perspective the outlook is quite daunting, because the birth rates of the ethnic Russian population are in decline, whereas the Muslim population, provided that the current trends continue, is expected to make up the majority of the Russian population by 2050.⁶⁰ Based on these demographic estimates, no religious group will gain as much prominence in Russia in the near future as the Muslims.⁶¹

The first and most general argument this chapter wants to put forward about Russia and Muslims is that, despite some noteworthy tendencies during the Soviet era,⁶² and the exception of Chechnya,⁶³ Russia's Muslim communities have never neither seriously radicalised (i.e. fallen prey to Wahhabism, radical Jihadi Salafism, etc.)⁶⁴ nor pursued political

⁵⁶ **Bacon, E. E.** 1980. *Central Asia under Russian Rule: a Study in Culture Change*. London: Cornell University Press.

⁵⁷ **Yemelianova** 2002, pp. 1–27.

⁵⁸ As Yemelianova has correctly highlighted “overall, 70 years of Soviet rule had a major impact on the various Muslim people of the USSR”. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 99–136.

⁶⁰ The statistics are revealing, i.e. annually, there are 1,7 births per 100 women among ethnic Russians, which is below the replacement rate, there are 4,5 births per 100 women among Muslims. **Akhmetova, E.** 2016. *Islam in Russia: Past, Present and Future*. – *Historiafactory*, July 02, p. 6 [Akhmetova 2016];

see also **Laruelle, M.** 2016. *How Islam Will Change Russia*. – The Jamestown Foundation, September 13.

<http://jamestown.org/program/marlene-laruelle-how-islam-will-change-russia/>.

⁶¹ **Di Puppo, L.; Schmoller, J.** 2018. Islam and Ethnicity in Russia: An Introduction. – *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, Vol. 27(1), pp. 84–87. [Di Puppo, Schmoller 2018]

⁶² **Benningson, A. A.; Broxup, M.** 1983. *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State*. London and Canberra: Croom Helm.

⁶³ **Yemelianova** 2002, pp. 166–193.

⁶⁴ **Malashko, A.** 2001. *Islamskie Orientirt Severnogo Kavkaza*. – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, pp. 137–164.

independence.⁶⁵ This may seem paradoxical, especially considering that Russia has been notoriously heavy-handed in its treatment of Muslim communities.⁶⁶

For example, during the Soviet era, Russia forced the hierarchy of its Orthodox Church upon the Muslim community.⁶⁷ The current circumstances seem to raise similar questions, especially since the revived Russian Orthodox Church has been playing one of the leading roles in the informal system of Russia's governance.⁶⁸ However, this new position assumed by the Orthodox Church is not so much religious as it is political, and Islam is also recognised as one of the official religions in Russia.⁶⁹ Hence, it could be tentatively argued that the Orthodox Church has not had much influence on the cultural identities of the Muslim community. Additionally, it seems that Russia's Soviet-era policy was not able to affect the widest section of popular Islam that comprised a syncretist mix of traditional customs and beliefs, where the Islamic element existed mostly in the form of rituals.⁷⁰ This offers one possible explanation why a relatively modest and traditional Muslim way of life has generally prevailed in Russia and the political aspect has not been able, or sometimes even willing, to seriously reshape the religious-cultural identities of these people.

This argument is also substantiated by Moscow's official policy of recognising Islam alongside other traditional religions.⁷¹ However, this should not be interpreted as a sincerely inclusive stance. According to Akhmetova, the Russian establishment has been rather reserved towards Islam: "The Kremlin wants a conformist Islam and reacts negatively to any deviations from conformism".⁷² Against this background, we can observe the emergence of the notion of a localised Islamic orthodoxy that represents,

⁶⁵ **Yemelianova** 2002, pp. 177–185.

⁶⁶ **Медведко, Л. И.** 2003. Россия, Запад, Ислам: «столкновение цивилизаций»? Жуковский-Москва: Кучково Поле.

⁶⁷ **Goble, P. A.** 2005. Demoniseerides Venemaa moslemeid: Moskva ohtlik gambiit ja Lääne nurjunud reaktsioon. (Demonizing Russia's Muslims: The Dangerous Gambit of Moscow and the Failed Reponse from the West) – KVÜÕA toimetised, nr 4 (ENDC Proceedings), p. 167. [**Goble** 2005]

⁶⁸ **Di Puppò, Schmöller** 2018, p. 85.

⁶⁹ It must be mentioned that Russia is a multi-religious society. In 1997, in addition to Orthodox Christianity, also Islam, Judaism and Buddhism were given the status of traditional religions in Russia.

⁷⁰ **Goble** 2005, p. 167.

⁷¹ For example, in a speech delivered by then-President Medvedev during his visit to Ufa in November 2011. See **Akhmetova** 2016, p. 6.

⁷² *Ibid.*

according to Di Puppò and Schmoller, an attempt to elevate the theological credentials of Islam in Russia.⁷³

The second argument that this paper puts forward concerns Russia's historical experience with subduing Muslim peoples, both at home and abroad. It has been posited that in its political efforts, Russia, as a rule, has constructively sought cooperation with the more moderate factions of Islam or generally moderate political factions. The history of Russian-Muslim relations is long and could hardly be discussed in this section in sufficient detail, let alone in its entirety. Therefore, it must suffice to outline some main elements from modern Russian history that can corroborate this hypothesis on the general level.

It could be argued that Russia's reliance on cooperation with moderate Muslims is a tradition that harks back to Tsarist Russia, and also the Soviet Union, in their pursuits to regain control over territories of the Crimean Tatars, the Emirate of Bukhara (Uzbek-Tajik state, 1785–1920), over Azerbaijan or northern Afghanistan. In more recent times, a similar approach can be observed in Russia's relations with Turkey, Syria and the Balkan states, especially in cases of mixed populations of Christians and Muslims. For example, it can be argued that although the Soviet Union helped establish the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) that later staged a coup d'état to overthrow the ruling monarchy, the Russians would have actually preferred Afghanistan to be ruled by more moderate forces.⁷⁴ Initially the Soviets supported King Mohammed Zahir Shah, but largely due to the inevitability of a regime change, they later switched their loyalties to his cousin Mohammed Daud Khan who, backed by the PDPA and the Soviets, declared himself the first President of the Republic of Afghanistan in 1973.⁷⁵ Thus the Soviet Union supported moderate factions against nationalist radicals (who would have liked to replace the King themselves), but most importantly, as long as possible, even against the PDPA. It could

⁷³ As they also point out, the Hanafi legal tradition figures prominently in this idea of 'orthodox traditional Islam'. **Di Puppò, Schmoller** 2018, p. 86.

⁷⁴ Khristoforov's research indicates that the 1978 coup d'état staged in Afghanistan by the Marxist PDPA was not actually in the direct interest of Moscow. Nevertheless, Communist party ideologists (S. A. Suslov, B.N. Ponomaryov) in Moscow deemed these events as positive developments, offering their support to the new government. For more, see **Христофоров, В. С.** 2019. Советские спецслужбы отрывают Восток. Москва: Российский государственный гуманитарный университет, ст. 188–189. [**Христофоров** 2019]

⁷⁵ See **Synovitz, R.** 2003. Afghanistan: History of 1973 Coup Sheds Light on Relations with Pakistan. – Radio Free Europe, July 20. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1103837.html>.

be argued that perhaps Moscow and the KGB saw that the Afghan society was not ready for such transformative change and that moderates would have offered greater stability also for the Soviet Union in the effort of controlling the country. Ultimately, it could be argued that the Soviets ended up using the PDPA mostly as an instrument for exerting influence.⁷⁶ But Afghanistan is just one example among many others. For example, in Azerbaijan the Kremlin put its support behind those moderate Muslim forces that opposed rapprochement to either Turkey or Iran.⁷⁷ Similarly, Russia has historically supported the Kurds whose version of Islam has been generally relatively moderate.⁷⁸ Moreover, in Egypt, the Soviet Union supported the moderate Nasser.⁷⁹ However, there are also exceptions, such as Saddam Hussein, one of the cruellest despots the world has ever known,⁸⁰ but that seems to have been a pragmatic choice on the part of Russia; first, to counter U.S.-supported Iran, and later, during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), against Iran’s religious extremism. However, it did not prevent Russia from approaching Iran later.⁸¹ Today, Russia’s pragmatic policy is prominently outlined in the so-called Primakov doctrine⁸², largely drawing on the assumption that ordinary Muslim people are not particularly concerned with the purities

⁷⁶ For characteristic patterns of the Soviet Union’s conduct in the Middle East, see **Христофоров** 2019. However, as regards the current situation, it should be acknowledged that Russia’s current support goes to the Taliban. **Sazonov** 2017a.

⁷⁷ **Shiriyev, Z.** 2019. Azerbaijan’s Relations with Russia: Closer by Default? – The Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, March. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-03-14-Azerbaijan2.pdf>.

⁷⁸ **Arraf, J.** 2019. Kurds In Syria Make A Deal With Russia. – NPR, December 02. <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/02/784225309/kurds-in-syria-make-a-deal-with-russia?t=1576234211037>.

Alid, G. 2015. Russian Consulate: Russia could support Kurdish Independence. – Kurdistan 24, December 15. <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/interview/91a42133-9158-42f7-a7ea-412d3d2d1fcb/russian-consulate--russia-could-support-kurdish-independence>.

⁷⁹ **Holbik, K.; Drachmann, E.** 1971. Egypt as Recipient of Soviet Aid, 1955–1970. – *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft / Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics*, Bd. 127, H. 1, pp. 137–165.

⁸⁰ See **de Vries, M. K.** 2003. Entering the Inner Theatre of a Despot: The Rise and Fall of Saddam Hussein. – INSEAD Working Paper. <https://sites.insead.edu/facultyresearch/research/doc.cfm?did=1281>.

⁸¹ However, this alliance has not improved much even today. See the discussion on Russia-Iran relations in Chapter 3 above.

⁸² **Tsygankov, A.** 2013. Russia’s Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., pp. 104–105. See also **Surovell, J.** 2005. Yevgenii Primakov: ‘Hard-Liner’ or Casualty of the Conventional Wisdom. – *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Vol. 21(2), pp. 223–247.

of Islam. Instead, as long as they feel that their traditional way of life is not in danger, they seem to welcome modernisation (e.g. infrastructure, hospitals etc.).

Drawing on the examples above, with a few caveats (e.g. Assad's use of chemical weapons and the despotic elements of his governance), Syria can also serve as an example of such a reliance on relatively moderate factions, be it the Alawites who support Assad or the Syrian Kurds. However, from a historical perspective, Russia has prioritised countries that are geographically closer, turning to Afghanistan, Turkey, the Balkans and Syria mostly when they can offer reputational gains for Russia in the eyes of the locals and other nations.⁸³ Still, we must be careful in relying on the argument that Russia, as a rule, tends to support moderate factions, because there are also several other aspects to Russia's policy that cannot be ignored (e.g. brutal military and other interventions).

This last intimation lays the foundation for the third argument that this paper wishes to put forward for evaluating Russia's campaign in Syria. Namely, Russia's military operations to subdue mostly Muslim-populated countries, dating back to the 17th century, have been extremely brutal. The prime example being the infamous Aleksey Ermolov, a Russian imperial general of the 19th century who commanded Tsarist troops in the Caucasian War and was directly responsible for subduing the local peoples under Russian rule.⁸⁴ The list of his gruesome methods included punitive raids, scorched earth policies, forced migration and exile, massacres of entire villages, etc.⁸⁵, taking their cue from methods employed by other European empires before.⁸⁶ It could be argued that his actions provided the model of operational and

⁸³ **Istomin, I. A.; Bolgova, I. V.; Sokolov, A. P.; Avatkov, V. A.** 2019. A 'Badge of Honour' or a 'Stamp of Infamy'? NATO as a Marker of Status in International Politics. – *MGIMO Review of International Relations*, Vol. 2(65), pp. 57–85 (in Russian). <https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2019-2-65-57-85>.

⁸⁴ It was Ermolov who built Grozny or Groznaia as his first fortress in the Caucasus, which literally means "terrible" or "menacing" in Russian, and was meant to inflict a feeling of terror among the locals. **King, C.** 2008. *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 47. King also notes the examples of targeted assassinations, kidnappings and the killing of entire families. *Ibid.*, p. 48. [**King** 2008]

⁸⁵ **Zürcher, C.** 2007. *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus*. New York: New York University Press, p. 72. [**Zürcher** 2007]

On Ermolov's role in Russia's relations with Iran and the Ottoman Empire, see **Keçeci, S.** 2016. *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire in the Caucasus against Its Southern Rivals (1821–1833)*. London: London School of Economics: an unpublished thesis. On his notorious cruelty with Caucasian peoples, see *ibid.*, pp. 188–189.

⁸⁶ **King** 2008, p. 47.

tactical methods that Russia has followed to this day. As recently, as during the Soviet period, Russia has employed mass terror, mass arrests, deportations (e.g. Chechens to Central Asia), religious persecution, sovietisation (e.g. forcing people to transfer from Arabic to Cyrillic alphabets), etc.⁸⁷

The Chechen wars of the 1990s, serve as one of the most recent examples of those methods being applied to subdue a defiant Muslim people. It has been estimated that in the course of its two military campaigns Russia managed to kill approximately 50,000 civilians of Chechnya's already relatively small population (ca. 1 million, with ca 700,000 of them ethnic Chechens).⁸⁸ In this context, it is important to highlight Zürcher's assertion that the image portrayed by Russians of Chechens as Islamist fundamentalists using guerrilla warfare and sporadic terrorism is not accurate because it originally started as a secular political nation-state project.⁸⁹ However, although the conflict in Chechnya might have begun with a clear political agenda and fairly little religious aspects, over time, it became a magnet attracting Jihadist fighters from all over the Arab world. While it cannot be said that the Chechen nation as a whole fell prey to them, they had a significant impact on the nature of this war. Zürcher argues that Islamism provided an overarching identity to a tribal society enabling the unification of otherwise quarrelling clans⁹⁰, with the victory bringing about a feeling of religious euphoria.⁹¹ Thus, while it is hard to judge if Islamism was the cause and ensuing terror the effect, or if the first war itself could be seen as a direct or indirect reason for radicalising the Chechen society, it is true that Russia had to deal with the consequences of radical Islamism in Chechnya, including the numerous terrorist acts committed by Chechen groups.⁹² It also provided

⁸⁷ Zürcher 2007, p. 73. As de Waal shows, under the pretext of not trusting the 'Turkish connected people' living near the border, many peoples were deported, including Chechens. de Waal, T. 2010. *The Caucasus: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 85. [de Waal 2010]

⁸⁸ Zürcher 2007, p. 70.

⁸⁹ As Zürcher claims, Chechnya was one of Soviet Union's poorest regions and later served as a pool for recruiting rebels. It became a part of the Tsarist Empire after half a century of fighting. Chechens consider the beginning of Russian rule as the first of a series of genocidal attacks on their people. See *ibid.*, p 71–72.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89.

⁹¹ See Gammer, M. 2006. 'The Lone Wolf and the Bear: Three Centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule'. London: C. Hurst & Co.

⁹² According to de Waal, one of the Jihadist centres connecting Chechnya to the outside world was Pankisi Gorge in Georgia where terrorist training camps were located. See de Waal 2010, p. 190.

Russia an opportunity to portray the whole Chechen cause as one of radical Islamist terrorism. What is more, in the context of infighting among different factions, Russia, once again, partnered with the clan representing a moderate strand, that of Chief Mufti Ahmat Kadyrov.

On the whole, drawing on the patterns emerging from Russia's relations with its Muslim people, it can be argued that it has largely followed the same model in Syria. The chaos of the civil war and the rise of radical Islamism gave Russia a licence to intervene, even at the price of bringing back the much discredited Assad. While it is yet to be seen if Assad will maintain his hold on power, or whether Russia and the West can deliver a peaceful solution, Russia's conduct in Syria provides grounds for positing that Russia's experience with Muslims at home has had a significant influence on its policy in the Middle East.

Finally, it must be mentioned that Russia seems to have sophisticated its policy towards both domestic and foreign Muslims to a considerable degree. At the same time, the Donbass War in Ukraine and tensions with the West after the imposition of sanctions, have pushed Russia to retreat from the West's 'war on terrorism'. According to Akhmetova, Russia's foreign policy has instead turned towards the Muslim East, particularly Turkey, becoming more cautious with regard to Islam and Muslims.⁹³ As she sees it, what contributed to this new position was the fact that for a long period "the Islamic factor was used in the country's foreign policy ... to corroborate the claim about Russia's special place in global politics, about its 'intermediary' situation as a Eurasian state which enables it to play the part of a bridge between the Muslim world and the West".⁹⁴ In this context, it is only understandable that in June 2005 Russia was granted an observer status in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

5. The Role of the Middle East, Syria, and ISIS in Russia's Strategy: A Discussion

This chapter will examine Russia's strategy in Syria and in the wider Middle East, while also looking into the role of ISIS and speculating about the possible future trajectories of Russian-Western relations.

Previous chapters have analysed the basic assumptions informing Russian and Western activities in the Middle East. The authors have highlighted that

⁹³ Akhmetova 2016, p 7.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

despite its relatively limited economic resources, Russia has nevertheless managed to achieve considerable military and political success. Could this be attributed merely to the effective management of its activities in the region? Although that aspect cannot be discounted, our analysis has indicated that there are several basic assumptions that work against the success of the West while simultaneously favouring Russia. The pragmatic objectives associated with Russia's so-called regionalist doctrine, in its neutrality, are more acceptable for the regional powers, as compared to the Western conditionality, legitimated by democratic requirements. However, even if locals see Russia as different from the traditional culprits (i.e. former colonial rulers and importers of foreign values), this position remains debatable. Thus, it could be argued that the newly emergent confrontation between Russia and the West seems to have served Russia well. This is perhaps best visible in the fact that all regional powers now recognise Russia as a major power broker in the Middle East. At the same time, it would be quite difficult to imagine that any Western power would be able to achieve that status as easily as Russia. What is more, we should not discount the important role Russian diplomacy has played in acquiring this status. Thus, it can be argued that professionalism coupled with a conducive environment has led Russia to enjoy its current success in the Middle East.

This chapter analyses what all this success means with regard to Russia's strategic goals. Drawing on the previous chapters, the authors distinguish between three major objectives within Russia's strategy in the Middle East that align perfectly with its Eurasian Power concept. First, Russia will strive to maintain control in Syria, if not securing Assad's rule, then at least retaining its king-maker powers, enabling it to build up and sustain its strategic foothold, both political and military, both in Syria and in the Middle East. Second, Russia wants to become and remain a major, if not the primary, power broker in the region, requiring it to develop strong relations with major regional powers. Third, through its newly acquired status in Syria and in the Middle East, Russia strives to assert its great power status globally. According to the concept of 'Eurasian Power', Russia sees itself as moving away from the (once potentially close) partnership with the West, instead seeing itself as pushed away by the West (especially by the U.S.). At the same time, Russia views itself as making a new strategic choice of contributing to the multipolar world instead of the old unipolar one. The Middle East has proven to be the best arena to demonstrate the implications of that choice. Maintaining regional stability is not simply vital to Russia's own geopolitical interests in terms of controlling potentially dangerous

choke points; it appears pre-eminently to align with the new idea of Eurasia as a single security area whose central relevance is understood by all major powers, from the U.S. and Europe to China. By being able to control one of the region's central nations (Syria), as well as being able to convene all major powers and balance their diverse interests, Russia has demonstrated both its military and diplomatic capabilities and by contributing to the stability of the region, it is entitled to claim respect and support.⁹⁵

This is where relations between Russia and the West come under the spotlight, and in that regard, also the special role of ISIS. Russia's role in maintaining (relative) peace and stability in the region makes it a valuable partner for the West, especially with regard to countering ISIS. While the U.S. may consider reducing its presence in the region and not feel the consequences anytime soon, it must be borne in mind that ISIS has global power projection ability, particularly towards Europe. If Russia has proved and will continue to prove to be able to keep ISIS under (at least territorial) control, it will have earned practical support from the U.S. and the EU, perhaps also from China.

It has become clear that for Russia, ISIS is the only discernible adversary in the region. Though Russia's Sunni connections may have intimidated otherwise, its clash with the interests of the more or less moderate Sunni opposition, have not been detrimental in the eyes of the major Sunni powers such as Saudi Arabia or Turkey. Instead, these nations have, even if indirectly, also approved Russia's goal of securing Assad's regime. For the Sunni powers in the Middle East, the most important aim appears to be enhanced regional stability. However, the West's recognition of Russia's role is also very significant. Even if the methods used by Russia, and especially by Assad, have been met with strong disapproval, Russia's own 'grand mission' has not fallen under much scrutiny.

Controlling ISIS may yet become an ambivalent motive inasmuch as it would give Russia the key to poke at one of the West's biggest vulnerabilities, both in terms of migration and terrorism. This ambivalent position towards ISIS will make for interesting speculations about the possible future trajectories of Russia's behaviour. However, it is not a one-way road, especially considering that ISIS's role appears to be even more pivotal, since Russia's justifications for remaining in the region will depend on ISIS's staying power; while there is also a risk that ISIS could take Russia hostage. This is

⁹⁵ **Разговор по прямому поводу. Россия и США стали больше обсуждать борьбу с терроризмом и будущее Сирии.** 2015. – Kommersant, September 21. kommersant.ru/doc/2814812.

not necessarily the case with regional powers, even if some of them may be using ISIS for waging their own proxy wars. For the regional powers, it is much more important that Russia has assumed the role of an arbiter between Shia and Sunni interests.

Finally, Russia's status in the Middle East may also impact its role in its immediate neighbourhood. Interestingly, it can be posited that while providing Russia with more confidence in pursuing its interests in the near abroad, its newly acquired power broker status in the Middle East will not allow for too much risk taking elsewhere. This assertion is reinforced by the fact that the regional power broker role assumed by Russia is beyond its economic means. This does not mean that Russia's political interests in the 'near abroad' will not remain the same, rather they may even increase. Russia will not back down from its interests in Ukraine, Belarus or Georgia, however, the way of handling those interests may be pushed from the recently preferred hybrid⁹⁶ and military grounds to the political plane.

Indeed, on that political plane, Russia's interests may find solid ground if the West chooses not to disturb Russia's position. What is more, it will probably push both parties towards negotiating compromises, meaning that the relations between Russia and the West (e.g. in Ukraine) may acquire a more diplomatic form and they may strike a *de facto* deal that recognises their interests in this 'near abroad'. Although the West may have little inclination to accept such eventuality, if it is interested in a relatively peaceful and stable Russia, it may be forced to come to terms with the fact that not all former republics of the Soviet Union will have the opportunity to integrate with the West. At the same time, this deal may still allow for strong economic relations between Ukraine and the West. While far from an ideal solution, it may offer Ukraine a chance to build up its economy and stabilise its society.

This last thread may be helpful in returning to the wider plane of strategic interests and political goals. Namely, in addition to the immediate gains that can be reaped from the Middle East, Russia may see its success in the region as a way to accomplish a long-term peace deal with the West. If Russia decides to become the watchdog of ISIS, it will also entail maintaining balance in the Middle East, which, in turn, may be a welcome development because that is exactly what the West is primarily interested in. If Russia manages to secure and maintain peace in the Middle East, the West may, in turn, close its eyes to certain methods Russia may use on the ground. Also,

⁹⁶ Śliwa, Z.; Veebel, V.; Lebrun, M. 2018. Russian Ambitions and Hybrid Modes of Warfare. – Sõjateadlane (Estonian Journal of Military Studies), Vol. 7, pp. 86–108.

tasking Russia with policing the region, may gradually relieve the West from that responsibility. Indeed, this may even lead the West to take interest in the stability of not only the Middle East but also of Russia itself.

6. Conclusion

This article analysed the general conditions that made it possible for Russia to reach the enhanced status it currently enjoys in the Middle East. The article highlighted some general underlying presuppositions that may be said to have led to the failure on the part of the West. Among them, democratic legitimation both at home and in the region were shown to play out negatively for those pursuits. Similarly, problems in defining an enemy straightforwardly and forming a clear front was discovered as having hampered the West in its pursuits in the Middle East. Finally, due to their colonial legacy and the imputation of the effects of globalised capitalism to the West, the overall context for any direct intervention by the West has generally been unwelcoming. In comparison, those very same circumstances have favoured Russia to a remarkable degree. First of all, Russia does not expect Middle Eastern nations to become democracies. What is more, there is also no need for Russia to legitimise such interventions at home. Secondly, Russia has found an ally in Syria's Bashar al-Assad, giving it liberty to execute a brutal campaign, which has given it a morally questionable but pragmatically beneficial handicap. Finally, regional powers are not intimidated by Russia's actions in the region as has been the case with the West.

As to Russia's strategy, it was established that since its 2015 intervention in Syria, Russia has gradually assumed the role of a regional power broker, which has been recognised by all major stakeholders in the region. For a time, it was a difficult position to achieve, since Russia was mainly associated with the Shia axis in the Middle East. However, this time it has managed to cast this image aside and become an acceptable partner also to the Sunni powers, not to mention Israel. Thus, in parallel to its activities in Syria, Russia has also been pursuing wider regional strategic goals in the Middle East. As a result, it can be argued that Russia has effectuated a carefully planned and comprehensive strategy for the region as part of its wider global strategy. By focusing on the Middle East, Russia has not only come to the rescue of an old ally, but succeeded in securing one of the possible choke points that could restrict its access to the world's seas and markets. It was also established that by Russia's own standards, the campaigns in Syria and the power broker position in the Middle East contribute to its notion of being an Eurasian power.

The third thread of interest that the article pursued attempted to understand the manner in which Russia has approached and dealt with Muslim nations and the radical groups among them. Russia can be said to have applied a sophisticated policy that, in addition to regional powers, is also able to address the Islamist tendencies and groups within. It was argued that Russia has most probably been applying the lessons it has learnt from its earlier policies towards Muslims and Islamism at home. While politically it seems to seek cooperation with moderate forces, then militarily it employs the kind of brutality that is characteristic of the heyday of the Tsarist Empire. In addition to its own long historical experience, of particular importance has been the conflict in Chechnya in the 1990s and 2000s. It could be argued that Russia allowed Chechens to develop internal divisions between radical and moderate Islamists in order to legitimise its brutal response and offer its own brand of stability. This pattern was found to be similar to the one Russia employed in Syria.

The fourth research question considered the potential future development of Russian-Western relations in the Middle East and beyond, focusing on the role of ISIS that has served as the primary justification for Russia's intervention in the eyes of the West. However, there is also the wider role of power broker and custodian that Russia has assumed in the region which the West has more or less explicitly acknowledged. Indeed, as was argued, this role makes the Russian Federation a rather useful, if still ambivalent, ally for the West in the regional and thereby also in global matters. Although the West does not always officially approve of Russia's conduct, it has nevertheless been tolerated. Considering that both parties share the aim of stabilising the Middle East, the West seems to be willing to turn a half-blind eye in some circumstances. In addition, it was speculated that it would be in the West's interest to forge a mutually acceptable peace agreement in Ukraine in order not to destabilise Russia.

In this context, Russia's regional, as well as global, position and prospects appear to present an interesting paradox. On the one hand, Russia has relied on brutal methods to achieve its goals in Syria, while at the same time, striving to become a power broker and guarantor of peace in the region. As such, Russia has been performing a precarious balancing act on the precipice of its economic means and stature. This role of a regional power broker, as much as it can be said to have obtained it, may also have a civilising effect on Russia. This enhanced status is not something that Russia would want to endanger carelessly, especially as it has finally brought it back to the league of major world powers. On the other hand, this new status is also something

that Russia is still in danger of losing due to its limited economic prowess. What is more, considering the vital importance of this newly acquired status to Russia, both regionally and globally, it will have to tone down its bravado to avoid losing it. Therefore, while Russia may still find it expedient to use the types of brutal methods it has demonstrated in Syria, the emphasis of its activities will presumably shift towards maintaining and bolstering the role of the custodian of peace in the Middle East. The significance of this position for Russia cannot be overestimated, especially considering how useful it makes Russia for the West. This, in turn, means that the West will become more interested and invested in maintaining a stable Russia. On the whole, since Russia cannot afford to continue with provocations as it has been accustomed to before, this new role may encourage Russia to become a more stabilising, and hence also more civilising force on the global arena as well.

Finally, in the context of Russian-Western relations it was speculated that Russia, as ISIS's watchdog, may be tempted to use ISIS to put pressure on the West (e.g. through migration, etc.). However, considering Russia's enhanced status in the eyes of the West for having achieved something that the West itself has not been able to, it will mean that while Russia's position will not be challenged, it will not be apt to use ISIS to threaten the West.

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