

Could Russia Become a Serious Spoiler in the Middle East?

PONARS Eurasia Memo No. 359
February 2015

Pavel K. Baev
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

There were many new twists in the chain of Middle Eastern upheavals in 2014—from the escalation of civil war in Libya to the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria—but Russia was only marginally involved in any high-intensity political maneuvering in the region. This is hardly surprising given the preoccupation of the Russian leadership with the Ukraine conflict and its expanding confrontation with the West. At the same time, the Middle East has been the only region in the world where Russia has managed to continue playing a key role, validating its claim as a global power despite Western efforts to isolate it. Opportunities for re-asserting this role have been few and far between, and the attempt to stage talks between Bashar al-Assad’s government and some groups in the Syrian opposition in Moscow in February-March 2015 can hardly yield a breakthrough. The question is whether the impact of the Ukraine conflict on Russian policymaking in the Middle East (and, specifically, toward the Syrian civil war) will shift its emphasis from opportunity seeking to scoring cheap points as a spoiler.

Wandering in the Syrian Desolation

The deadlocked but mutating civil war in Syria remains the key focal point of Russia’s policy in the Middle East. For President Vladimir Putin, the stakes in this debacle are significantly higher than merely the survival of Russia’s last client-regime. In the Kremlin’s analysis, the tide of revolutions (allegedly sponsored and manipulated by the United States) constitutes a major threat to the world order, and Putin fancies himself a champion of the counter-revolutionary cause. Since the start of the Euromaidan in Kiev in November 2013, Ukraine has become the main theater of this epic struggle, but Syria, where authoritarian stability holds firm against the chaotic forces unleashed by the Arab Spring, continues to be a crucial battlefield.

The astounding success of Putin’s September 2013 initiative on eliminating Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles boosted his confidence in (mis)managing the Ukraine crisis that erupted a few months later. It appears likely that Putin took his smart tactical

maneuver, which prevented a limited U.S. missile strike on some of Assad's military assets, for a major strategic achievement that established Russia's role as an indispensable global power. Emboldened with this effective check on U.S. interventionism and encouraged by the lack of unity in NATO and the European Union regarding Syria's humanitarian catastrophe, the Russian leadership moved boldly ahead with derailing the EU Eastern Partnership project and the annexation of Crimea, a major breach of international law.

The assumption that the Assad regime will be able to withstand the pressure of rebel attacks is as reasonable now as it was in late 2011, when Moscow opted for the risky course of giving the regime its full support. However, the interplay of overlapping conflicts has reached a level of complexity far beyond the "black-and-white" simplification that remains prevalent in the Kremlin. The rise of ISIS and its swift advance from northern Syria to the suburbs of Baghdad took the Russian leadership by surprise, even more perhaps than it did U.S. strategic planners. In a sense, it confirmed the ideological thesis that revolutions generate chaos, in which violent extremism thrives, but it also confused patterns of political intrigue. Russia was quick to condemn ISIS atrocities (and provide military aid to Baghdad), but it had no intention of joining the U.S.-led coalition. Blaming Washington for fostering anti-Assad extremists, Moscow even tried to oppose U.S. air strikes against ISIS forces in northern Syria, which repeatedly put it in an awkward diplomatic position since even the Assad government found it opportune to welcome the strikes.

The Russian leadership has few doubts about the reality of the threat posed by Islamic extremism and has a real stake in the fight against ISIS. Hundreds of volunteers from the North Caucasus have joined its ranks. There is already a trickle of hardened fighters returning home, and a shocking rebel attack in Grozny last December proved that terrorist threats in Russia are far from contained. However, the Russian top brass assumes that no counter-terrorist cooperation with the West is necessary to deal with this threat, while the Kremlin's prime motivation is to prove Russia's ability to check U.S. interventionism and to derail Western efforts even where interests are broadly compatible. At the same time, the gravity of the ISIS threat (which remains undiminished despite sustained air strikes) gives Moscow greater freedom of movement to pursue its "hybrid war" in Ukraine.

Russia is interested in increasing its impact on developments in the Middle East. However, Putin cannot find a good way to score a low-cost, high-profile political coup in the Syrian war zone, especially with its increasingly limited material resources. The main asset for Kremlin intrigues, then, is its ability to engage in conversation with the three main external parties increasingly attached to the internationalized Syrian conflict.

Talking to Israel, Engaging Iran, Courting Turkey

Russian diplomacy has cultivated useful communication channels with Israel, Iran, and Turkey, three states with both great stakes in the Syrian war and the capacity to impact its course. The problem with building a substantial agenda for these communications is that their respective interests in the conflict are profoundly incompatible with one another and a poor fit with the Kremlin's counter-revolutionary and anti-American objectives.

Israel

In the first of these three channels, discussions on Syria are remarkably frank. From the very start of this debacle, Moscow has assumed that Jerusalem was not at all keen to see the downfall of the Assad regime. Unable to rely on ties with the large Russian community in Israel (which remains wary of Putin's authoritarian tendencies and is highly ambivalent about the Ukraine conflict), Putin has built up rapport with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who rejected joining the Western sanctions against Russia and even tried to take advantage of them to expand trade. For its part, Moscow expressed only pro forma disapproval of Israeli air strikes on Syria, including one last December that allegedly targeted Russian-delivered surface-to-air missiles and one in January that targeted Hezbollah commanders and killed an Iranian general. Russian attempts at expanding ties with Egypt, including a "working" visit by Putin to Cairo in February (where not much work was, in fact, done), are also fully in tune with Israel's preferences.

However, while Putin may be fully aware of Netanyahu's disappointment in Obama's policy-making in the Middle East, he ultimately cannot find a way to exploit it. The discord between leaders does not diminish Israel's fundamental interest in greater U.S. involvement in the region, which runs at cross-purposes to Russian intentions. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov is also not an ace in Middle Eastern affairs and often at a loss when trying to sort out the region's puzzle of interwoven quarrels. The Kremlin is also fully aware that closer ties with Israel increase suspicions in other quarters.

Iran

With Iran, exchanges on Syria are obscure and elliptic. The central issue in Moscow's ambivalent but prioritized relations with Tehran is the progress (or lack thereof) of the P5+1 talks in Geneva on Iran's nuclear program. Badly deforming the hidden Syrian agenda has been the sharp decline in oil prices, which has brought about such a contraction of petro-revenues in Russian and Iranian state budgets that neither state can provide support for the Assad regime at a level equivalent to that which sustained the latter's operations against rebels of various persuasions in 2011-2014.

The Russian leadership is worried that Tehran is losing interest in its traditional trans-Caspian connections with Russia, since advancement in the Geneva talks is essentially

based on bilateral and non-transparent U.S.-Iranian bargaining on which Moscow can exert little influence. Putin and Lavrov suspect that the future of Iraq and the Syrian warfighting constitute elements of this bargaining and resent being kept in the dark. Moscow's main hope is that Iran will overplay its hand by assuming that the Ukraine crisis works to its advantage and seek to break the sanctions regime against it with Russia's help and China's consent. This would leave Iran's nuclear program in limbo and signify a fiasco of U.S. maneuvering. Russia's new nuclear deal with Iran (announced just two weeks prior to the Geneva talks six-month deadline, which was duly broken) cannot alter the fact that bilateral economic ties are rather weak, while their political dialogue oscillates along a rather low degree of mutual trust.

Turkey

The only power in the Middle East with which Russia has developed trust-based relations is Turkey. The personal chemistry between Putin and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan constitutes the core of this special partnership. Putin was vague and defensive describing cooperation with Iran at a lengthy press conference in mid-December but unreservedly positive about Turkey, referring to Erdoğan as a "*krepky muzhik*." The term was officially translated as "strong character," which did not fully convey its inherent machismo.

Putin's state visit to Ankara in December was successful in expanding energy links, but his assertion at the later press conference that "Russia and Turkey have very many –I'd like to stress this–coinciding regional interests" was a statement too far. In Syria in particular, Russia's sustained support for the Assad regime clashes directly with Turkey's stance on the imperative of its removal (Turkey deems the Syrian government to be a sponsor of "state terror.") In most high-level talks, this sharp disagreement is diplomatically bracketed, which means that the potentially most significant channel of communications on managing the Syrian conflict remains a dysfunctional one. Moscow is keen to exploit the deepening conflict between Turkey and the United States, but Ankara's insistence on placing greater priority on "regime change" in Syria than on the struggle against ISIS narrows the space for such anti-American collaboration. Nonetheless, the Russian leadership recognizes that Turkey has suffered a number of setbacks in its effort to play a greater role in the Middle East and deems it the perfect partner for launching a joint initiative that would also serve Russia's ambitions.

To Spoil or Not to Spoil?

Russian diplomacy has been looking in vain for a low-cost opportunity to score another victory on par with its September 2013 initiative in the wider Middle East and, in particular, the interconnected conflicts of Lebanon-Syria-Iraq. In its opportunistic regional engagement, Moscow is inevitably exploring possibilities to act as a spoiler, in line with its consistent policy course on the Syrian civil war, which to all intents and purposes has succeeded in blocking the international effort to depose Assad. Beside a

pronounced desire to demonstrate the capacity to derail U.S. policy at the focal point of Middle Eastern geopolitics, Moscow has two more incentives for playing a cost-effective spoiler role.

The first is the dramatic (and, for Russia, devastating) decline in oil prices, which has been caused by profound shifts in global energy markets. This trend might only be reversed rapidly by a further spike of instability in the Middle East, which would disrupt supplies coming from the Persian Gulf. The 30-40 percent price drop that occurred in the second half of 2014 happened while three major suppliers—Iraq, Iran, and Libya—were already performing far below capacity. It is reasonable to assume that a normalization of production in any of them would push the benchmark price even lower. Russia may thus find it necessary to prevent progress in conflict resolution (and, hence, stabilization in one or more of these three major producers). It could mean the difference between severe economic crisis and implosion.

The second incentive comes from the highly uncertain transformation of the Ukraine crisis, where the January pause was highly unstable and generally unfavorable for Russia, which had to supply and protect the rebel-controlled territory around Donetsk and Luhansk while suffering from Western sanctions. Moscow opted to break the ceasefire but sought to combine limited escalation with new talks. The probable failure of these talks could prompt a decision to execute an offensive operation aimed at securing a land corridor to Crimea, and then the Kremlin may very well be interested to escalate one or several crises in the Middle East in order to divert U.S. attention. An analogous moment is the 1956 Suez crisis, which demanded so much U.S. involvement (not to mention interventions by France and Britain) that the Soviet military invasion that crushed the uprising in Hungary did not receive any meaningful response.

Despite Russian inclinations to experiment with its spoiler role, at least one restraining factor is China, which is increasingly dependent on oil supplies from the Persian Gulf (and greatly benefits from the fall in oil prices). The Ukraine crisis has effectively transformed the Russia-China strategic partnership into a patronage system, in which Moscow needs to prove its value as a junior partner not only by committing itself to supplying raw materials and hydrocarbons but also by performing certain functions on the global arena. Stirring up trouble in the Middle East would definitely meet with Beijing's disapproval.

That said, one area in which China might be interested to have Russia go rogue is the sanctions regime against Iran. Beijing is unhappy with its marginal role in the Geneva format and with the deadlock, which delays its plans for investing in Iran's oil industry. Neither Russia nor China is remotely interested in Iran becoming a nuclear-armed state, but they do not trust the United States to reach a satisfactory resolution on this issue through the current back-channel negotiations.

Another turn in Syrian/Iraqi conflict dynamics that could enable Russia to make a difference by upsetting U.S. policy designs is the possible breakup of Iraq, starting with the secession of Kurdistan. Agreement between Iran and Turkey would be crucial for such a development, but Moscow could grant the deal some international legitimacy, particularly if Washington were cut out of the bargaining. Russian companies (Lukoil and Gazprom-Neft) have major stakes in oil projects in southern and eastern Iraq, which provides Moscow useful entry points into local politics and gives it a slight political advantage over Beijing. While such proactive engagement would go beyond a mere spoiler role, Russia sees every setback for U.S. policy aimed at preserving stability in the region as its net win.

Within this stratagem might also be an option shaped by a possible Turkish decision to take on greater responsibility for containing the Syrian civil war, perhaps by establishing military control over Kurdish-populated areas in the northeast or by enforcing order around Aleppo. Russia could be a useful partner in such a risky endeavor, granting it a modicum of international legitimacy without U.S. participation. It could also make a direct contribution by deploying a couple of battalions, perhaps even using Chechen troops raised by Ramzan Kadyrov. At the same time, Russia could increase support for the Assad regime's offensive operations against the moderate Syrian opposition, so that ISIS remains the only (and entirely unacceptable) alternative.

The year 2015 is set to be hard and extremely uncertain for Russia's economic and political development. Putin's leadership could face unexpected challenges and cannot afford any decline in his unsustainably high public support. This vulnerability increases Russia's propensity for toying with power projection, with Syria being a key focus for Kremlin experiments in the Middle East.