

NIKOLAY KOZHANOV

RUSSIA AND THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

MOSCOW'S DOMESTIC, REGIONAL
AND STRATEGIC INTERESTS



Russia and the Syrian Conflict
Moscow's Domestic, Regional
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Nikolay Kozhanov

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Introduction

Traditionally, Russian foreign policy towards Syria represents a certain enigma for researchers and political analysts. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow has never demonstrated such stubbornness in defending its partners in the Middle East as in the case of the Assad regime. During the last four years, international experts have offered a wide array of theories to explain Moscow's relations with Damascus. Thus, in most cases, analysts refer to the close political, military and economic ties existing between Moscow and Damascus. Some of them also point to Russian cultural connections with Syria and the substantial Russian-speaking community living across the country.¹ Most of these assumptions are not without foundation. However, these factors were probably important in 2011 – 2012 but, by 2015, had largely lost their relevance. Moreover, some of them even initially did not have much influence on the situation.

For instance, the factor of the Russian-speaking community has never played a decisive role in Moscow's stance on Syria. First of all, the bulk of the Russian-speaking community in this country was represented by Russian women who married locals, and their children, who could hardly be called a politically influential force. Some of these can hardly speak Russian or speak with a very strong accent. Those Syrians who studied in the USSR or Russia indeed have pro-Russian feelings and formed a certain segment of the Syrian intelligentsia. However, this part of the population was also limited in influence: Hafez Assad was very cautious about communists and leftists. Under these circumstances, the loyalty of the pro-Russian Syrians was periodically questioned by the regime. Bashar Assad also never trusted them and was more oriented to those people who received a Western-style education.²

As for the factors of bilateral military and economic ties, they had quite a limited time effect on the Russian position. If, by the beginning of the conflict in 2011, trade cooperation between the two countries was important, the four years of war have changed this by cutting almost all economic ties. Thus, by 2014 bilateral trade fell below \$0.4 billion and most investment projects were stopped. In other words, there was nothing left for Russia to

defend. The war completely devastated the country's economy. Consequently, Russian companies were to withdraw from Syria and compensate their losses by moving their business to other countries in the region. Luckily, in 2011 – 2014, the Middle East offered ample opportunities: Russian trade with Egypt, Turkey, Israel and the UAE enjoyed a positive trend and, in terms of value, were much bigger than that between Russia and Syria.³

Russian arms sales were also affected by the conflict. First of all, after the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Moscow limited its cooperation with Damascus through existing agreements on military cooperation. This put constraints on the further development of bilateral ties in this field. Secondly, the war was draining the Syrian budget and the government could no longer be considered a rich buyer of arms ready to pay for them in hard currency. Finally, in 2012 – 2015 Russian arms sales in the Middle East market considerably increased compensating stagnation in Russian-Syrian cooperation. Indeed, the initial impulse to the growth of Russian weapon purchases was provided by the Syrian conflict. "The events in Syria proved the reliability of Russian weapons. Currently, even traditional Russian opponents [among the GCC members] are looking into the possibilities to buy military equipment from Moscow" experts say.⁴ Yet, it was not Damascus, but other countries that became the main buyers of Russian weapons. For instance, in March 2014, Moscow and Algeria reached a \$2.7 billion agreement on the purchase of military equipment. In 2014, Moscow and Cairo also signed a \$3.5 billion package of agreements on the exports of Russian weapons to Egypt.⁵

The long-lasting conflict also degraded the importance of the Russian naval base in Tartus. Established in 1984, it used to serve the needs of the USSR's Fifth Mediterranean flotilla. However, after the flotilla's disbandment in 1991, this base has been used more as a symbol of Russia's presence in the Mediterranean than to serve the real needs of the Russian navy. Without adequate financial support and repair the base lost its strategic importance. As stated by some military experts, this naval station can hardly be called a base. Its personnel amount to less than 100 people. The infrastructure of the base consists of several pontoon piers and repair facilities which could not serve the needs of a modern fleet without a serious overhaul and upgrade. Since 2006, the Russian authorities have been thinking about the modernisation of the Tartus station and deployment of a full-scale military base there, but none of these plans has come to fruition.⁶ Although the recent joint Russian-Chinese and Russian-Egyptian naval manoeuvres in the Mediterranean Sea in May–June 2015 gave a new impulse for discussion among the Russians

on the necessity to have a proper military base in the region, the unstable situation in Syria makes the usage of Tartus hardly possible, at least, for now.

The time factor is extremely important for the understanding of Russian motifs in Syria. The inaccuracies of some analysts in their reading of Moscow's stance on the conflict are often explained by their misperception of Russia as a static system. Nevertheless, during the last four years, the situation in and around Russia has changed as well as the dynamics of the Syrian war itself. Under these circumstances, Moscow's stance on Syria evolved considerably.

An attempt to analyze Russian-Syrian relations as an isolated system without taking into account Moscow's diplomatic approaches towards the broader Middle Eastern region is another mistake often made by analysts. During the period 2011 – 2015, the Kremlin's vision of its Middle Eastern strategy underwent a serious change: if by the beginning of the Arab Spring, the importance of the Middle East was traditionally neglected by Russian strategists, the political consequences of the Arab uprisings and growing confrontation between Russia and the West returned the region to the centre of Moscow's attention. This transformation could only have a direct impact on Russian strategy in Syria.

This book will represent a new attempt to offer an insight into the motifs and drivers of Moscow's foreign policy towards Syria. As opposed to previous studies which deal only with certain aspects of the issue, this research will be based on a comprehensive approach. First of all, the study will consider the Kremlin's diplomacy on Syria within the broader system of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East. Secondly, special attention will be paid to the analysis of the influence of Russian domestic dimensions on Moscow's approaches to the issue. Thirdly, it will also adopt a historical approach by trying to analyze how Moscow's priorities in Syria evolved during the last five years and what factors influenced this evolution.

1

Russian Presence in the Middle East after the Fall of the Soviet Union

From the fall of the Soviet Union until the early 2000s Russian cooperation with Middle Eastern countries had a relatively low profile. This can be explained by domestic political and economic turmoil in the Russian Federation (RF) during the 1990s and by the Western orientation of Russian diplomacy under President Boris Yeltsin (1991 – 1999).

In actual fact, by the fall of the USSR in 1991, the Soviet authorities had created a solid background which could have been used by Yeltsin and his administration to further develop fruitful cooperation with the Arab world and Iran, if only Moscow chose to. By 1991, the Soviet Union had relatively good relations with Algeria, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and the Palestinian Authority. Moscow's dialogue with Iran and Kuwait had substantial and positive potential. From the political point of view, the USSR was quite appealing for Middle Eastern countries as a certain ideological alternative to the 'capitalist' West and as a counterbalance to the American presence. The latter allowed for keeping the status quo in the region which mitigated against the destructive power of political turbulence that periodically emerged.

From the economic point of view, the Soviet presence in the region was also visible. Since the 1950s, Moscow had been involved in the construction of huge and ambitious industrial projects such as the Aswan High Dam and the metallurgy complex in Isfahan. During the 1950s – 1980s, the USSR constructed about 20 hydro and thermal power plants in the region. By 1991, the track record of Soviet accomplishments in the region included 350 industrial projects. All in all, the Arab states received about 20 per cent of the technical assistance allocated by Moscow to countries of the developing world. In addition to this, by the fall of the USSR, the annual volume of Soviet trade with the Arab countries reached USD 7 – 12 billion.¹ This figure

comprised about 30 per cent of the USSR trade with developing countries and made economic relations with the Middle East an important source of income for the Soviets. The military cooperation between the USSR and the Arab countries was also impressive. For instance, during the period 1983 – 1990, the volume of Russian arms sales to the countries of the Middle East reached USD 55 billion. The largest part of this sum was related to the Soviet-Iraqi (USD 24 billion) and Soviet-Syrian (USD 11 billion) deals. However, Egypt, Yemen, Algeria and Libya could also be named among the clients of the military-industrial complex of the USSR.

Apart from that, Moscow was an important creditor of the Arab regimes. The real volume of the debts of Middle Eastern countries to the Soviet government is still unknown. According to the most moderate estimates, by 1991, the USSR had USD 35 billion of unreturned credits out of which the large part belonged to Iraq, Syria, Algeria and Egypt.² The past Soviet efforts not only created a positive image of the USSR as a reliable economic partner but practically hooked the Arabs and Iranians to the Soviet Union and, potentially, the RF: military equipment sold to these countries and industrial projects created by the Soviets required periodical technical service and upgrade which could be best provided only by the Russians. It should also be remembered that many Arab officers, engineers, doctors and intellectuals were educated at Soviet universities and, thus, formed pro-Russian groupings in Middle Eastern countries.

All these factors created the backbone of Soviet 'soft power' in the region. Although neglected by new Russian democrats, this power continued to play a positive role for Russian relations with the Arab world and Iran. Some analysts argue that, even two decades after the fall of the USSR, a certain part of Middle Eastern society still believes that the RF could one day play the role of the third (or alternative) power in their relations with other non-regional countries.

Yeltsin's Times: Forgotten Land

During the 1990s, the Middle East was almost forgotten by the authorities in modern Russia. Both political and economic contacts were mostly curtailed, if not cut. This situation was determined by a mixture of objective and ideological reasons. On one hand, the economic crises which periodically hit the RF during the first decade of its existence, political turmoil, the short-sighted privatization policy of the Yeltsin government and the dictate of criminal groupings over the country's economy seriously limited the export capacities of Moscow and diverted the attention of the Russian authorities

from foreign to domestic policy issues. The loss of the ports of Odessa and Ilyichevsk on the Black Sea, which were the main trade gates of the USSR to the Mediterranean³, also negatively influenced Russian business contacts with the Middle East.⁴ According to various estimates, by the mid-1990s, the share of Arab countries in Russia's volume of trade was less than 1 per cent.⁵ On the other hand, political and economic cooperation with the Middle East contradicted the new ideology of the post-Soviet elite of the RF who see their country as part of the Western world and refused to develop those vectors of diplomacy which it saw as non-Western. As a result, the Middle East was considered a region of secondary importance for the new Russia.⁶ The only exception was Israel, whose relations with Moscow improved considerably during the 1990s (mainly due to the strengthening of the political and business positions of the Jewish community in Russia and the fact that this country was considered a Western splinter in the Middle East).

Modern Russia's attempt to completely reorientate her foreign policy towards the West at the expense of other directions had far-reaching implications which, at the end of the day, did not turn out well for the Russians. In spite of the fact that after the rise of Vladimir Putin to power in 2000⁷ certain elements of confrontation returned in Russian relations with the United States and Europe, the continuation of dialogue with Washington was still unofficially considered a top priority of Russian diplomacy. This state of affairs continued until the very beginning of the Arab spring. Thus, according to the government's 2008 Foreign Policy Concept, Russia was 'interested in making effective use of the existing broad infrastructure for interaction [with the United States], including a continued dialogue on foreign policy, security, and strategic stability issues, which permits the finding of mutually acceptable solutions on the basis of coinciding interests.' Moreover, Moscow strived 'to transform Russian-US relations into strategic partnership... while working for the resolution of differences' between the two countries. Under these circumstances, Moscow's long-term priorities imply the construction of 'the relationship with the United States on a solid economic foundation, ensuring joint development of a culture for resolving differences on the basis of pragmatism and respect for the balance of interests, which will help ensure greater stability and predictability in Russian-US relations.'⁸ One could read the following between the lines: Russia acknowledged America's dominant role in international policy as well as the futility (or senselessness) of open confrontation with Washington. Instead, Moscow sought ways to establish partner contacts with Washington and was ready for discussion. To be sure, memories of Cold War rivalries – along with real or

imaginary threats to Russian national security posed by US policy in Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States – constituted a serious obstacle to beginning this process. Nevertheless, Russia was determined to look for ways to bridge relations with the United States mainly by means of bargain and compromise (though this did not mean that Moscow would avoid handling the issue in a harsh way if compromise was not achieved). This intention was supported by the gradual strengthening of semi-official and unofficial ties with the West by the Russian economic, political, and cultural elite.⁹ Such an approach, in turn, determined Moscow's perception of the Middle East as a leverage and trade item of Russian relations with the United States and Europe. In fact, Russian authorities have played this card during periods of both US-Russian rapprochement and severe tensions between the two countries, by either freezing their cooperation with the opponents of America in the Middle East or boosting it, respectively.

Russian-Iranian relations serve as the most notable example of this approach. Thus, in 1995, Russia and the US signed the so-called Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement. According to this confidential document signed in the wake of reconciliation between Moscow and Washington, the Russian government agreed to stop the implementation of existing military-supply contracts with Iran by 1999 and not to conclude new deals with Tehran in this field. US authorities, in their turn, were expected to develop cooperation with Russia's military-industrial complex while halting unauthorized provision of American military equipment to both the Middle East and the countries bordering Russia.¹⁰ In addition to this treaty, Moscow decided in 1998 not to implement its contract for the supply of a research reactor to Tehran. The reason for this decision was the same as in the 1995 agreement: the need to bridge relations with Washington.¹¹ The subsequent tensions between Washington and Moscow during the first years of the new millennium were accompanied by the improvement of Russo-Iranian dialogue. In 2000, Putin and the then-president of Iran, Mohammad Khatami, met in New York, which led to the Iranian president making an official visit to Moscow in 2001. The outcome of this trip can hardly be overestimated: the meeting concluded with the signing of the Treaty on the Basic Principles of Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran, now considered a cornerstone of their relations.

Subsequently, the secondary meaning of the Middle East for Russian diplomacy (as well as the perception of the region as a chessboard for Russia and the West) led to the emergence of a certain arrogance among Russian politicians and economists towards the Arab states and Iran. On the one hand, the Middle Eastern countries were considered to be difficult to deal with. On

the other hand, the unofficially declared secondary meaning of the region for Russian diplomacy led to a low level of responsibility on the part of Russian private and state corporations regarding the contracts signed with their Arab and Iranian counterparts. One of the most notorious examples of this approach occurred in 2007-2008, when the Algerian authorities suddenly realised that Russian MIG-29SMT and MIG-29UBT fighter jets bought from Moscow had serious technical problems. As it transpired, these issues were the result of machinations of high-ranking officials involved in the contract who deliberately installed previously used parts on new fighter jets. Even when the scam was revealed, people involved in it were not properly punished although this scandal resulted in the loss of part of the Algerian arms market for the RF.¹²

To a certain extent, this Russian behaviour formed a new image of Moscow which counterbalanced the positive perception of Soviet times. The Russians were seen as unreliable and weak partners, capable of betraying their Middle Eastern counterparts for the sake of better relations with the US and EU. Such a vision of modern Russia formed in the 1990s seriously backfired on the RF after the beginning of the Arab spring.¹³

Russia under Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev: Sluggish Return?

The Middle Eastern countries were literally reopened for Russia by the successor to Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin, who tried to implement the Russian doctrine of a multipolar world by establishing close and friendly ties with non-European and non-Western countries. Thus, in 2003, during his visit to Malaysia, Putin stated that Russia was going to closely cooperate with the Islamic world. Later, he declared the Arab countries one of the main vectors of Russian diplomacy. In 2003 – 2008, Putin supported this statement by official visits to Egypt, Algeria, Jordan and Iran. It was important that his administration concentrated not only on the re-establishment of contacts with the partners of the Soviet Union, but tried to broaden the ties of Moscow with the region by launching an active dialogue with the Middle East states which previously were not included in the sphere of Soviet influence. Thus, in 2007, Putin visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE.

These trips to the GCC countries were not the mere demonstration of Russian interest in dialogue with the countries of the Gulf. On the contrary, Moscow made an attempt to become deeply involved in the situation in the region. Thus, in 2007, the Russian government increased its focus on the region with a document entitled *The Concept for Ensuring Security in the Region of the Persian Gulf*. The main principles proposed in the document

implied the settlement of conflict situations by solely diplomatic means, the conduct of peacekeeping military operations only in accordance with UN resolutions, the participation of all sides involved in emerging issues in a decision-making process and the implementation of agreements achieved by the regional countries in strict compliance with international documents regulating relations in the region of the Gulf.¹⁴ This idealistic and probably naïve initiative arose some interest among the smaller GCC members, but mostly as an eloquent theoretical speculation. Its practical implementation was obviously hampered by mounting Arab concerns over the Iranian nuclear programme, the continuing instability in Iraq and the US hegemony over the Gulf. However, this concept has achieved one of its main goals: it has demonstrated the Russian intention to come to the region and to try to stay there for the long term.¹⁵ Moreover, in the 2000s, when characterising the foreign policy of Moscow on the Middle East, it became popular among Russian diplomats to argue that it is wrong to speak about ‘the return’ of the RF to the region. According to them, the Russians had never left this “strategically important region whose countries are connected with Russia by age-long friendly ties and cooperation”.¹⁶

An attempt to strengthen Russian soft power in the Middle East was another positive move of Putin’s administration. For instance, in 2007, Moscow launched the Arabic service of the state television channel ‘Russia Today’, whose broadcast currently covers not only the Middle East but Europe. From the outset, ‘Rusiya al-Yaum’ attracted a lot of attention in the Arab world. According to some experts, by 2013 its potential audience accounted for 350 million people in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe.¹⁷ On the ground, the efforts of the state TV channel were supported by a new governmental structure – Rossotrudnichestvo. This federal agency was designed in 2008 in order to develop Russian cultural and humanitarian presence abroad. Rumours that this structure was created according to the personal will of Putin only boosted the development of this organisation, which in no time created a net of representative missions in the capitals of a number of Middle Eastern countries including Syria, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt.

Prior to the Arab Spring, the main ideological idea promoted by Moscow in the region was related to cultural and historical unity of the RF with the peoples of the Middle East. The Russian authorities emphasized the multicultural nature of their country, heavily influenced by Islamic culture and traditions. The fact that about 20 per cent of the Russian population are Muslims was especially emphasized.¹⁸ From the political point of view, this allowed Moscow to sign a memorandum of understanding with the

League of Arab States (LAS) in 2003.¹⁹ Subsequently, in 2005, Russia received the status of an observer at the Organisation of Islamic Conference (Cooperation) (OIC).²⁰ This active dialogue with the LAS and OIC, in turn, substantially helped to allay the concerns of the Arab countries in relation to separatist movements in the southern regions of Russia predominantly inhabited by the Muslim population.

Although, by the beginning of the Arab Spring, the share of Middle Eastern countries (excluding Turkey and Israel) in Russian trade was relatively negligible (around 4 per cent), during the 2000s and early-2010s, the economic relations between the RF and the states of the region enjoyed a positive trend. By 2012, Russo-Arab trade relations achieved USD 14 billion per year whereas Russian trade with Iran accounted for USD 3,75 billion. The high potential of these ties could be illustrated by the rates of their growth: thus, in 2011, only in the case of the Arab countries Russian trade with them grew by 38 per cent as compared with 2010. This growth (although slowed down by the political turmoil in the region) continued in 2012. The fact that the trade balance was (and still is) in favour of Moscow (the share of Russian exports in the volume of trade is about 90 per cent) made the Middle East an appealing consumer market for Russian goods.²¹

As noted by a number of observers, by the beginning of the Arab Spring, Russian exports to the region had a certain country specialisation. For instance, Russian exports to Iran consisted of ferrous metals and metallurgical products, wood, pulp, and paper, fuel and energy resources, cereals, and fertilizers.²² In the case of the UAE, Moscow sold to the Emirates precious metals, metallurgical products, machinery and transport vehicles whereas in Morocco the main items of Russian trade were oil, petrochemical products, sulphur, coal and the products of the chemical industry. Such diversification, in turn, offered an opportunity to involve a wide range of Russian companies in trade with the region. Traditionally, Russia represented great interest for Middle Eastern countries as an arms exporter. Its weapons remained famous for relative reliability (as opposed to Chinese equivalents) and reasonable pricing (compared with the products of Western companies). By 2012, the share of Arab countries in Russian arms exports was more than 14 percent.²³

During the 2000s, Russian energy companies also returned to the Middle East. By 2011, they were involved in different projects or discussing possible ways of cooperation with such countries as Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Bahrain and Qatar. By the beginning of the Arab Spring, Russian economic ties with the Middle East were not limited by the efforts of oil and gas giants from the RF. Middle East customers generally demonstrated high interest in Russian experience and technologies

in such spheres as petrochemistry, space, nuclear physics, desalination, oil and gas production and processing. For example, in February 2007, Russia successfully launched the first Emirates' satellite for the Earth distance-sensing Dubaisat-1 from Baykonur. Since 2000, the Russian federal space agency Roscosmos has launched 14 telecommunication and distance-sensing satellites for Saudi Arabia. In 2008, Moscow and Riyadh started discussing further Russo-Saudi cooperation in the space field (including the usage of the Russian GLONASS satellite navigation system).²⁴ In 2012, the Russian company Technoprom export and Canadian Uranium One Inc. (which is believed to be controlled by the RF) undertook an obligation to supply four nuclear power plants which are supposed to be built in the UAE with low enriched fuel.²⁵

However, during the 2000s – early 2010s, the countries of the Middle East were seen not only as an investment market for Russian companies, but as a potential source of investments for the economy of the RF. Under these circumstances, special attention was paid by Moscow to the rich states of the Persian Gulf. Thus, in 2010, Russian government corporation Rostekhnologii signed a 0,5 billion dollars contract with Emirati GulfTainer Company Ltd on the joint implementation of infrastructural projects in the RF. In 2011, the above-mentioned Arab company became one of the owners of the Russian port of Ust-Luga on the Baltic Sea.²⁶ At about the same time the Iranian company Kaveh sought to invest money in the port of Olya on the Caspian Sea.²⁷ Russian experts did not conceal the fact that the Arab company Masdar could represent great interest as a potential participant of Russian projects related to the research of alternative sources of energy.²⁸

The Image of Russia in the Middle East Before the Arab Spring

It is difficult to say that, before the Arab Spring, the perception of Russia in the Arab world and Iran was negative. After the fall of the USSR, Russia 'inherited' the image of the Soviet Union as a country with a positive attitude to the Middle East. During the 1990s, the large part of the Middle Eastern community remembered that the Soviets politically, economically and, in certain cases, even military supported the Arabs in their quest for independence in the 1960s and 1970s. They also did not forget that Moscow was an effective counterbalance to US efforts in the region. As a result, some parts of Middle Eastern society believed that one day Russia would recover from the political and economic turmoil of the transitional period,

and Moscow would again become a reliable economic and political partner of the Arabs. The revival of Islam and Christianity as traditional religions of modern Russia and, thus, the elimination of the antireligious elements of Soviet ideology only strengthened these beliefs. The partial and sluggish revival of the RF in the 2000s gave certain hopes that the return of the Russians to the Middle East was near. Although Moscow continued to consider the Arab countries and Iran as a secondary direction of its foreign policy, even its limited efforts helped to preserve the positive image of Russia in the region.²⁹

Thus, the harsh reaction of the Russian authorities to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Moscow's persistent attempts to stop the Israeli military operation against Palestine and Lebanon in 2006 as well as Russian technical assistance in the restoration of war damaged regions after the end of this Arab-Israeli conflict found a very positive response in the Middle East. Under these circumstances, Arab and Iranian public opinion created the image of Russia as a political opponent of the US and the West. This, in turn, considerably improved the perception of Moscow in the eyes of the Middle Eastern street whose attitude to the Americans could not be described as very positive. It is not mere coincidence that some places in Palestine were named after Putin and Medvedev (streets in Bethlehem and Jericho, respectively). Moreover, the Arab world and Iran decided not to notice the Russian military operation in Chechnya in 1999 – 2000 (2009) or, at least, tried to soften their critics (with the exception of the GCC states).

Yet, as some analysts have observed, Russia never managed to reacquire the Soviet status of defender of Arab interests. Its inability to prevent the US from invading Iraq in 2003 vividly demonstrated the limits of Russian capacities: that year Middle Eastern newspapers were often repeating the thesis that under the USSR the military occupation of Iraq would have been impossible.³⁰ This image of a weak but still internationally active country stuck to Russia until 2013.

During this period, the Middle Eastern media were neutrally positive when covering Russia-related events. Reports on the RF periodically (although not very often) appeared in the newspapers of the region. Given not very active Russian foreign policy on the Middle East, these publications were mostly connected to the two following groups of topics: visits of Russian delegations to the MENA countries and the position of Moscow on the issues of Iranian nuclear programme, the Middle East settlement, Russian accession to the WTO, the creation of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GEFC) and others.³¹ The image of Russia

in the GCC countries was slightly different. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE periodically criticized the Russian position on Chechnya and the situation in the Northern Caucasus, attempting to present Moscow's behaviour in that region as anti-Islamic. In addition to that, during the period 2009 – 2012, Russian relations with the Arab monarchies of the Gulf were challenged by a number of confusing political incidents. For example, in 2009, the ex-commander of the Russian Military Special Battalion "Vostok", Sulim Yamadayev, was killed in Dubai. Although, this murder was probably a result of a personal blood feud between Yamadayev and the clan of the current president of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, it reminded the UAE authorities of the assassination of Chechen terrorist Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev which took place in Doha in 2004. He was allegedly killed by one of the Russian secret services. Under these circumstances, the probable political background of Yamadayev's killing caused serious concerns in the government of Dubai and the UAE. Another unfortunate incident took place in 2011 when the security forces of Doha airport attacked and seriously injured the Russian ambassador to Doha, Vladimir Titorenko, while he was accompanying diplomatic mail bags. This incident seriously aggravated Russian relations with Qatar: Moscow even threatened to downgrade relations.

Nevertheless, until the beginning of the Arab Spring, the push given by Putin to Russian dialogue with the Middle East and, in particular, the GCC mitigated the negative influence of such events on Russian-Arab contacts. Moreover, on 1 November 2011, the Russian minister of foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov, met for the first time in a summit with his counterparts from the Gulf Cooperative Council. This so-called GCC-Russia strategic dialogue meeting allowed Moscow to state and to discuss its strategic interests in the Gulf with the Arab monarchies, outlining the direction of future partnership. During this meeting, Moscow clearly demonstrated that Russian positions on the majority of regional and international issues were relatively close to those of the GCC members. Thus, Russia persistently insists on the necessity to create an independent Palestinian state and strives to support peace and stability in the region. The Russian authorities also emphasise that they stick to an 'open door' policy: the RF is ready to conduct a dialogue with any country of the region as long as this dialogue corresponds to Russian national interests.³²

However, the practical outcomes of the 2011 meeting appeared to be less impressive than initially expected. This was one of the first outcomes of the outbreak of the Arab Spring which was to challenge Russia's relations with the Middle East.

2

The Disaster Called the Arab Spring

Until the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Russian authorities had the false perception that the Middle East was a relatively stable political and economic system. They presumed that even periodically emerging conflicts were unable to change the existing balance of power (unless external powers were involved as in Iraq in 2003). Consequently, Moscow simply missed the beginning of the Arab Spring, considering it a minor event unable to bring any structural changes. Even the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt on 11 February 2011 did not make the authorities of the RF reconsider the situation. Russia literally ‘woke up’ only after the murder of Muammar Qaddafi on 20 October 2011, and this was indeed ‘the morning after the night before’. As noted by domestic analysts, during the Arab Spring Russian losses from the political turmoil in the Middle East were hardly comparable with the losses of any other non-regional player.¹

Initially, trying to keep aside from the intra-Arab conflict and limiting its reaction to the events in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen by statements on the necessity of the peaceful settlement of conflicts, the Russian government suddenly discovered that the new Middle East was not that friendly to Moscow any more. By 2012, the old regimes had already fallen, and the new authorities did not determine their attitude to Russia: Russia’s neutral position prevented them from attributing to Moscow either the status of a friend or an enemy. When the authorities of the RF changed their tactics and started clearly voicing their preferences, this new strategy also appeared to bring controversial results. The support of the regime of Bashar Assad shocked a large part of the Arab street: the understanding that Moscow supported the old dictatorial regime contradicted to a large extent the image of the Russians as supporters of liberation movements which emerged in the Middle East during the 1960s-1970s. Subsequently, this led to the cooling of Russian relations with a large part of the Arab world.²

Economic Losses

First of all, Moscow sustained heavy economic losses whose real volume is still to be determined. Thus, the fall of Qaddafi in Libya immediately led to the flight of Russian companies, whose consumer and investment markets were closed to them due to the controversial behaviour of the authorities of the RF during the civil conflict. Although the leaders of new Libya periodically declared their intention to retain a certain level of economic contacts with Moscow, experts in Russia are sure that the situation will repeat the experience of post-Saddam Iraq where it took Russian companies about six years to return.³ Meanwhile the main Russian arms exporter Rosoboron export alone estimates its financial losses in Libya at 2 – 6,5 billion dollars. For some companies of the Russian military-industrial complex these losses are non-recoverable: in certain cases, Tripoli was the main buyer of their products.⁴ The Russian railway corporation RZD is another victim of the Arab Spring in Libya: its current losses are estimated at 2,2 billion dollars. Taking into account the fact that the management of this company planned to work with Qaddafi's government for many decades to come the amount of lost profit could be even higher. Russian oil and gas companies should not also be forgotten. Before 2011, such giants as Gazprom, Lukoil Overseas and Tatneft either were involved or planned to invest in the energy sector in Libya. However, their cooperation with Tripoli was terminated.⁵

Finally, in April 2008, Moscow forgave about 4,5 billion dollars of Qaddafi's debts to the USSR in exchange for the involvement of Russian companies in new joint projects in Libya. Given the fall of Qaddafi and the freeze of economic relations between Tripoli and the RF, this sum may also could be considered an irrecoverable loss for Moscow. Under these conditions, Russian experts are not very optimistic about the future of the assets of the RF in Syria: Moscow's active support of Bashar Assad leaves no illusion about the presence of Russia in this country after his fall. Meanwhile, what exactly does Russia have to lose in Syria? Since the early 2000s, the volume of trade between the two countries has gradually been growing. By 2012, it almost reached 2 billion dollars. Traditionally, the trade balance was in favour of Russia and this, subsequently, made Syria an appealing market for Russian companies. In 2005, Moscow agreed to restructure the Syrian government's debt to the former Soviet Union, literally forgetting about three quarters (according to other sources – only half) of the sum, in exchange for new contracts for Russian businesses. This has led to a substantial increase in Russian investments in the economy of the country (mostly in energy and infrastructural projects) currently

estimated at USD 20 billion.⁶ Russian sales of military equipment to Syria are quite impressive: if, in 2006, Moscow and Damascus signed military contracts for USD 4 billion, by 2010, this sum had reportedly increased to nearly USD 20 billion.⁷

Although Libya and Syria represent the two most problematic cases for Moscow, Russian economic positions were generally undermined by the outbreak of the Arab Spring across the whole region. Thus, some experts speak about problems with Russian arms sales in the region. The continuing political turmoil in Egypt harmed the incomes of Russian grain exporters who considered this country as one of the main buyers of their product in the Middle East.⁸ The growing confrontation between Moscow and the Gulf Arabs caused by the Russian position on Syria tangibly limited Russian options to strengthen cooperation with the members of the GCC. For instance, during 2010 - 2011, the RF offered Qatar a number of investment projects at a cost USD 10-12 billion in various sectors of the Russian economy (first of all, oil and gas, construction as well as gold mining sectors). However, all these proposals were ignored by Doha. As argued by some analysts, the political factor was not the last to determine the Qatari approach.⁹ Even the UAE, where the Russian presence in the Arab part of the Persian Gulf is probably the strongest, are considered an unreliable partner since the beginning of the Arab Spring. As stated by one of the leading Russian experts on the economy of the Middle East, Eldar Kasaev, 'the UAE is a member of the GCC whose main ideologists are Saudi Arabia and Qatar which are famous for anti-Russian feelings. ... [As a result,] it should not be assumed that the Emirates will continue to develop relations with Moscow if the Qataris and Saudis start waging an [undeclared] war against Russia'.¹⁰

It should also be pointed out that Qatar is supposed to be one of the main Russian rivals in the gas market. After the beginning of the Arab spring, this unofficial confrontation received an ideological base. Additional troubles are created by the fact that both the RF and Qatar are members of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF). Subsequently, the political confrontation has tended to influence the behaviour of these players within the framework of this structure. Thus, in 2011, Russia deliberately sent to the summit of the leaders of the GECF countries in Qatar a delegation whose level was far lower than that required by protocol. In 2013, the Qataris responded in the same way when the meeting was held in Moscow.¹¹ Taking into account that the two other members of the Forum, Libya and Egypt, are preoccupied with their domestic situations, such behaviour does not make the GECF an effective organisation. This, in turn, harms the interests of all participants.

Losing Face

The troubles in Russian economic relations with members of the GCC are also caused by changes in the perception of the RF in the Middle East. Probably, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 were the most important tests for the image of Russia in the region. On the first occasion, Moscow managed to come out victorious: its negative diplomatic reaction on the war in Iraq and concerns which were voiced that Saddam's WMD threat was just a pretext for the Americans to implement regime change found positive feedback in the Middle East. However, the very modest reaction to the events of the Arab Spring bewildered the Arab street and even caused some disappointment in Moscow. The attempts of some Russian officials and analysts to present these events as another possibly outside-inspired movement which would not bring many changes in the political structure of the region only strengthened further criticism of the authorities of the RF.¹² Subsequently, the support of Assad by Moscow in the Syrian conflict was the straw that broke the camel's back. When, in 2012, Russian diplomats first vetoed the UN SC resolution on Syria, the RF became closely associated with all things the Arab Spring was supposed to fight against: violence, dictatorship and bloodshed. As noted by the expert on Russian-Arab relations, Irina Mokhova, 'almost all media resources from Morocco to Lebanon (with the exception of Algeria and Syria) became moderately critical of Russian efforts in the Middle East'.¹³

The crucial role in this process was played by the newspapers and TV channels of Qatar and Saudi Arabia whose public opinion on Russia was and still is far from being positive. Taking into account the influence which *Asharq Al-Awsat*, *Al-Hayat* and *Al-Jazeera* have on public opinion in the region and beyond it, Moscow was doomed to lose the information war for the Middle East. Thus, on 29 September 2012, *Asharq Al-Awsat* published an editorial article by Tariq Alhomayed which accused Lavrov of fabricating the facts about the situation in the region. Moreover, the stance of Moscow on Syria was just an invitation for a discussion on other topics sensitive for the RF such as the state of democracy and Muslim minorities in Russia. For instance, in July 2012, *Al-Jazeera* voiced concerns about the domestic policy of Putin and called him 'the dictator of the XXI century'. The active polemics on these issues in the Arab press led to the further demonizing of the image of Russia. Subsequently, on 12 October 2012, in his interview to state channel Qatar TV one of the leading religious figures of the Middle East, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, called Russia "enemy number one" of Islam and Muslims.¹⁴

Political Defeat

The negative changes in the perception of Russia in the Middle East are closely related with another challenge to Moscow's interests in the region posed by the Arab Spring: the shrinking of the number of countries ready for dialogue with the RF. First of all, the fall of the old partners of Moscow such as Qaddafi fundamentally questioned the future of Russian relations with the countries previously headed by these dictators. Russian analysts assume that the US, EU and even China have much better chances to become the partners or even allies of new regimes than Moscow. According to them, the approaches of these non-regional states to the Arab Spring appeared to be more intricate. Thus, the US and EU openly supported the revolutionary movements whereas the Chinese created a reliable safety net by establishing close economic contacts with local private business whose interests are independent from the nature of the political regime. Russia had none of these advantages.¹⁵

Secondly, as already mentioned, the Arab Spring hampered the development of Russian relations with those countries whose governments became interested in the establishment of closer political and economic ties with Moscow in the 2000s. The members of the GCC represent the most notorious example. The Russian support for Bashar Assad diverted them from Moscow. After 2011, it took about two years before the RF could finally resume the effective discussion of bilateral, regional and international issues with Saudi Arabia.

Thirdly, unexpectedly, the Arab Spring negatively affected Russian relations with Iran. When, by 2012, the authorities of the RF finally realized that they were losing existing and potential partners in the Middle East, Moscow became more concerned about the preservation of good relations with those states which were still oriented towards Russia. Under these circumstances, Iran represented the top priority for the RF. At first, Moscow initiatives brought some success. Russian medium and smaller companies became very active in Iran. The authorities of the RF closed their eyes to loopholes created by Russian business in the US and E.U. sanctions regime for their Iranian opposite numbers. This, in turn, found positive feedback in the cabinet of the then president of the IRI, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Shortly before the end of the latter's presidential term, the sides even started talking about the possibilities of resuming the exports of Russian S-300 missile complexes (or their close equivalents). Finally, on 1-2 July 2013, Ahmadinejad visited Moscow under the pretext of participation in the GECF summit. Analysts in Moscow believed that this positive background

created during the period 2012 - 2013 would allow the upward trend in Russo-Iranian relations to continue under the successor of Ahmadinejad, Hassan Rouhani.

Yet the outcomes of the Arab Spring brought certain corrections to these prognoses. Being scared by growing tensions in Iranian society and the possibility of a revolutionary 'spring' in Iran, the ruling regime of the Islamic Republic decided to loosen control over political life in the country by letting people choose among a certain set of candidates for the presidential seat. There was no surprise that the population, tired of radicals and neo-conservatives, chose probably the most moderate figure who promised a long-awaited domestic liberalization and normalization of relations with the West. To a certain extent, the new president of Iran could be called a product of the Arab Spring. The speech of Rouhani at the General Assembly of the UN on 24 September 2013 left no illusions that bridging relations with the US is his top priority. However, this strategy implies a distancing from Moscow. The authorities of the RF have already got signals from Tehran that the window of opportunities for Russo-Iranian relations is closed: first, it happened in mid-August when Putin's visit to the IRI was cancelled by the Iranian side and, after that, during the Shanghai Cooperation Council summit on 13 September 2013 when contrary to all expectations in Moscow the meeting of Rouhani with Putin brought no results.

Finally, the Arab Spring presented a serious threat to the dialogue between Russian authorities and the religious leaders of the Middle East. The positive development of these relations has traditionally been seen by Moscow as one of the factors directly influencing the political stability of the country: until the majority of Muslim religious leaders consider the situation with the rights of the Russian Muslim community normal, this, as believed by the authorities of the RF, seriously limits moral and financial assistance to radical Islamists acting in the South of Russia from abroad. Thus, in May 2012, the Russian authorities supported the organization of an international meeting of Islamic theologians from 23 countries in Moscow. The event was held under the slogan 'Islamic doctrine against radicalism'. The list of invited participants included such prominent figures as Secretary-General of the World Council of Muslim Scholars, Ali al-Qaradagi and vice-president of this organization Abdallah Bin Bayyah. The meeting ended with the adoption of a declaration condemning religious radicalism. It also called upon Muslim theologians to be very careful when using such terms as caliphate (*khilāfā*), jihad (*ḡihād*) and takfeer (*takfīr*) since they could justify the activities of religious extremists. This document was considered to be a major diplomatic success for Moscow. However, the impact of this

achievement was undermined when, a year after, a similar meeting was held in Cairo. That time, the gathering blessed the activities of the Syrian opposition and called the civil war in that country 'a jihad'. This statement indirectly affected Russia by logically presenting it as supporting the side against which the holy war was being waged. It could be hardly called a coincidence that the organizing committee of the Cairo meeting did its best to include as many participants of the Moscow meeting as possible in the list of invited delegates.¹⁶

The Reasons for Failure

There are several reasons explaining why the Arab Spring appeared extremely harmful for Moscow's ties with the region. First of all, this was determined by the general ill approach of the Russian authorities to the Middle East. Seeing the region as a playground for games with the West, they did not pay attention to what was happening in the Middle Eastern countries. Unlike the Soviet or Imperial times, Moscow's foreign policy towards the Middle East lacked direction and credibility. Policy priorities towards individual states and the region as a whole were contradictory and ill-defined. Russia refrained from diplomatic initiatives, while its links with regional governments were not used constructively. Thus, since 1991 and until recently, Russia neglected such factors as soft power. The creation of the Arabic service of the state Russia Today Channel in 2007 and the creation of Russian cultural centres in Middle Eastern countries during the 2000s were bold, but insufficient moves.

While the US and Europe were busy with the creation of pro-Western groupings within cultural, economic and political elites of the region through different humanitarian and educational programmes, Moscow minimized its cooperation with the Middle East in this field. Moreover, it literally cut relations with those pro-Russian groupings formed during the Soviet period. Subsequently, during the two decades after the fall of the USSR, these pro-Russian elements either perished or lost their influence without the support of the Kremlin. For instance, this was the case in Syria where as noted by some analysts the pro-Russian grouping was almost completely eliminated in the struggle for power after the rise of Bashar Assad in 2000. However, the Russian authorities realised this only in 2011 when it tried to re-establish connections with people previously loyal to Moscow. As a result, during the events of the Arab Spring there were few people both on the side of the regime and on the side of revolutionaries who could lobby the interests of the RF.¹⁷

Moreover, before the Arab Spring, the Russian authorities developed dialogue with the Middle Eastern countries primarily at governmental level, neglecting ties with non-state economic and political actors. Subsequently, after the fall of the ruling regimes in Egypt, Libya and other countries, Moscow was compelled to start its relations with new authorities of these Arab states from scratch.¹⁸ The existing close relations of the Kremlin to major Russian governmental and semi-governmental corporations also played a negative role. It is not pure coincidence that, before 2011, most success stories of Russian business in the Middle East were related to corporations affiliated with the government. The Russian government spared no effort to support its economic behemoths. On the contrary, medium and smaller businesses (as well as Russian industries which are considered to be of secondary importance for the economic elite) usually did not enjoy this level of support. As a result they were doomed to encounter numerous problems with Iranian realities on their own. With the beginning of the Arab Spring this situation had negative implications for Russian interests in the Middle East. The strong support of business interests at government level created an association of Russian business with the Russian state, and, thus, a dependence of Moscow's firms on the fluctuations of the political situation. Subsequently, the loss of political positions in Middle Eastern countries by the Kremlin led to the loss of economic position by its corporations. The ties of medium and smaller business with the private sector would have preserved Russian presence in the region. However, the creation of these ties was never encouraged by the authorities of the RF.

By 2011, Russian foreign policy-making on the Middle East was fragmented as it involved several decision-making actors with sometime conflicting agendas - the Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Trade and Economic Development, the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, NGOs, as well as governmental, semi-governmental and private commercial companies and even the Russian Orthodox Church. In the absence of long-term policy goals and priorities, Moscow took a case-by-case approach sticking to the principle of temporary profit and balancing between all regional forces.

The Russian attempts to follow the principle of open doors and be friends for all were relatively inefficient – even before the Arab Spring. Thus, during the 2000s the periodical efforts of the Russian authorities to maintain equally good relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel without acknowledging problems existing in the relations of Riyadh, Tehran and Tel-Aviv with each other only irritated Moscow's partners. For instance, the Kremlin's attempt to upgrade Russo-Israeli relations during Putin's visit to Tel-Aviv in 2012 without admitting the threat caused by Tehran's nuclear

program was, from the very beginning, condemned to failure. In addition to this, since the 1990s the people of the Middle East have tended to assume that post-Soviet Russia was more oriented to the West. This, in turn, did not increase trust in Russia.

The events of the Arab Spring only confirmed the old wisdom that it is hard to be a friend for all. This was proven by the civil conflict in Libya. In 2011, the attempts by Moscow to engage in shuttle diplomacy between the rebels and the government of Qaddafi raised a number of questions in both camps. On one hand, the leader of the Libyan Jamahiriya was confused by the fact that Russia which in 2008 - 2010 was actively developing relations with Tripoli suddenly started to persuade him to start negotiations with his enemies and possibly to leave the throne. This could not be considered other than treachery. On the other hand, the opposition felt the moral and military support of the West and wanted to take power. Under these conditions, any attempts to persuade them to start a dialogue with their opponent could only raise questions about whether the authorities of the RF wanted peace or were trying to postpone the final blow to Qaddafi.¹⁹

Last but not least, the intention of the then-president of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, to demonstrate his interest in developing good relations with the US and EU also played a negative role. In general, the factor of the personal influence of Russian leaders on the foreign policy of their country appeared to be crucial for dialogue between the RF and the Middle East. Putin's decision to establish close relations with Arab countries and to declare this vector of Russian diplomacy as important, remained only spoken and was not added as an amendment to any of the official concepts to determine the general long-term strategy of the foreign policy of the RF. Subsequently, when in 2008 Dmitry Medvedev who is known for his pro-Western orientation took the presidential office, he probably considered the development of a dialogue with Arab countries as the personal idea of Putin and never supported it. As a result, under Medvedev Russian activities in the region were less intensive.

As had happened previously in the history of Russian relations with the Middle East, in 2011 Moscow decided to use Libya as a trading item in order to bargain preferences in its relations with the West. On 17 March 2011, the Russian government did not veto UN SC resolution 1973 which paved the way for the US and E.U. intervention in the Libyan conflict. Subsequently, the RF imposed sanctions on Libya and this was the first effort to stop arms exports to the Qaddafi regime. In the eyes of the pro-Western grouping of the Russian ruling elite these steps were worth making: in 2011 Moscow still hoped to reset relations with Washington, and the military contracts with France also played their role. Nevertheless, this time the losses did not justify the gains.

The situation had changed: if, for instance, the above-mentioned Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement of 1995 had a significantly, but not crucially negative effect on Iran, Medvedev's decisions on Libya probably determined the destiny of Qaddafi. In other words, in 1995 Russia only cheated Iran whereas in 2011 it betrayed the regime of Qaddafi. Under these conditions the image of the RF in the Middle East suffered heavy losses: according to the traditions of the region, a treachery (no matter who is betrayed) is never forgotten.²⁰

Treachery is also considered a sign of weakness (as well as the strategy of balancing different forces: a strong player can afford to clearly demonstrate his preferences). In turn, this assured the opponents of Russia in the region that in other cases Moscow's opinion could be ignored. For instance, since the very beginning of the Arab Spring the Qataris have been periodically repeating the idea that the RF had long lost its status at the centre of power in international political arenas, but it still tries to regain it by playing the role of a minor troublemaker and supporting dictatorial regimes.²¹ The representatives of the Syrian opposition went even further: when persuading the American and European policy makers to intervene in the civil conflict in Syria, they argued that Moscow had no real leverages over the West. As an example they referred to the situation with Yugoslavia in 1999, Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011. According to them, in all cases the Russian government was compelled to accept that the US and NATO were calling the shots.

All in all, by 2013 Russia was very close to losing its political and economic presence in the Middle East forever. Yet, against all expectations 2013 was the first year of Moscow's return to the region.

Putin's Turn to the Middle East after 2012

2013 onwards has seen as a period of diplomatic activity by the Kremlin in the Middle East which is unprecedented since the fall of the USSR. Existing records of diplomatic and political contacts show an increased exchange of multilevel delegations between Russia and the Middle Eastern countries. Moscow was attempting to cultivate deeper involvement in regional issues and to establish contacts with those forces in the Middle East which the Kremlin considers as legitimate.

If before 2013 researchers argued that “Russia’s policies on the Middle East can be divided into two components: Iran and the rest of the region”, the mosaic of Moscow’s relations with the Middle East is now more complex.¹ For instance, in contrast to the substantial cool-down in bilateral dialogue during the last two years of Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency, Russian-Iranian relations are currently experiencing a renaissance. Between August 2013 and February 2015 Putin met his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani, on four occasions. At the ministerial level, bilateral meetings took place almost every one or two months. The two countries are discussing possibilities for the development of economic cooperation. On 11 November 2014, Russia and Iran signed a package of agreements on Moscow’s participation in the construction of up to eight new nuclear power units in the Islamic Republic. On 19–21 January 2015, Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu visited Tehran to sign an agreement on military cooperation. This, in turn, paved the way for Russia’s decision to lift the ban on the sale of S-300 missile systems to Tehran in April 2015. On 9 November 2015, Russian media reported that the deal on their export was signed.² Moscow’s relations with Egypt are also recovering. On 14 March 2015, Egyptian Prime Minister Ibrahim Mahlab even attributed Russia strategic status.³ Putin’s visit to Cairo on 9–10 February 2015 gave serious impetus to the development of Russian-Egyptian cooperation in the military, economic and political spheres. Special attention was given to the discussion of current regional

issues. This dialogue appeared extremely helpful for the promotion of Moscow's ideas and initiatives in the region. For instance, in his contact with the Syrian opposition in January 2015, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi promoted the Moscow-backed idea that Bashar Assad should not be excluded from political dialogue on the future of the Syrian Republic.⁴ Sisi also supported the beginning of the Russian military operation in Syria on 30 September 2015.⁵

Moscow is also successful in its attempts to support a certain level of dialogue with its main Middle Eastern rivals – Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Thus, on 22 November 2013, Moscow appointed a new ambassador to Doha, despite not having received an official explanation for the incident in which the previous ambassador Vladimir Titorenko was withdrawn following a row over a diplomatic bag at Doha airport on 29 November 2011. On 24 January 2015, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev headed the Russian delegation on a visit to Saudi Arabia to express official condolences following the death of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud. In spite of the tensions between Moscow and the Gulf monarchies over Syria, Russia and the GCC members have managed to hold three rounds of meetings between ministers of foreign affairs within the framework of the “Russia-GCC Strategic Dialogue” (the last was held in Kuwait on 19 February 2014). This is aimed at sustaining an all-encompassing dialogue between the Kremlin and the Gulf monarchies.⁶

By 2015, Moscow had been able to improve its relations not only with the Muslim countries of the Middle East. The visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman to Russia on 25–26 January 2015 illustrated that the Kremlin's relations with Israel are also enjoying a positive trend. It seems that both the Russian and the Israeli authorities have finally come to the understanding that there will always be certain restraints on the development of bilateral ties (such as Russia's interest in cooperation with Tehran). Under these circumstances, they are attempting to build dialogue within existing limits by focusing on the exploitation of opportunities rather than discussing cornerstone problems. Consequently, Israel secured Moscow's guarantee that the issue of the Iranian nuclear program would be settled in such a way as to eliminate any security threats to Israel.⁷ In return, the Israelis took a neutral position in the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation, abstaining from the UN General Assembly vote on Resolution 68/262 against the Russian annexation of Crimea. The Israeli authorities also refused to support the main sanctions imposed by the US and EU on Russia, although some restrictions on cooperation with Russia in the military and banking spheres were still supported.⁸

By 2015, the Russian authorities were trying to reach even the most distant corners of the Middle East. For instance, in late February 2015, representatives of Yemeni political parties, including members of the Ansar Allah movement (Huthis), visited Moscow to meet with members of the Russian State Duma.⁹

Finally, on 30 September 2015, Russia launched air strikes against radical Islamist groupings fighting against the Assad regime. This move was unprecedented for the history of Russian presence in the Middle East after the fall of the Soviet Union. Before that Moscow tried to avoid any full-fledged involvement in the military conflicts in the region. It was also for the first time in the history of modern Russia that Moscow adopted purely American military strategy by putting the main accent on the use of aviation instead of the army.

The increased complexity and intensity of Russian contacts with the Middle East since 2013 is directly connected to the overall changes in Moscow's diplomacy caused by the Kremlin's confrontation with the US and EU. Within the framework of these transformations Moscow's focus is shifting to the improvement of its contacts with non-European countries in Eurasia, including the states of the Middle East. When addressing the Federal Assembly on 4 December 2014, Putin stated that Russia's "goal is to have as many equal partners as possible, both in the West and in the East. ... We will continue our cooperation with Africa and the Middle East".¹⁰ In his speech at the Russian Diplomatic Academy in Moscow on 27 February 2015, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov went further and argued that the turn to Asia and the Pacific reflects Russian national interests in the 21st century. He also emphasised that these changes should not be considered "opportunistic" measures taken by Moscow in response to the current conflict with the West.¹¹

The transformation of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East was also determined by the domestic situation in Russia and the personality of the Russian leader. Putin aims to create a multi-polar world, and greater Russian interaction with non-Western players inevitably drags the Middle East into Moscow's sphere of interests. However, Putin's vision contrasts with Russian views on the Middle East under Yeltsin (1991 – 1999) and Medvedev (2008 – 2012), both of whom considered the region to be of secondary importance. This difference between Putin and Medvedev's perceptions of the Middle East was clearly demonstrated by the controversy over the Libyan crisis of 2011. While Putin labelled the US and EU as "new crusaders", Medvedev expressed his satisfaction over the news of the Libyan leader's capture.¹² These differing reactions nearly led to a split in the Putin-Medvedev tandem.

There was no surprise that immediately after his return to the presidential office in 2012 Putin began restoring relations with the Middle East, which had been seriously damaged under Medvedev. Thus, only two months after his election Putin met his Iranian counterpart Ahmadinejad. The meeting was held on 7 June 2012 on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Shanghai. Putin clearly stated his interest in the further development of relations with Tehran, calling Iran “an old traditional partner” of Russia.¹³

The Putin of 2012 was also different from the Putin of 2000 and 2004: more authoritarian, more decisive and more anti-Western. He was seriously disappointed by the failure of the reset in Russian-US relations and existing tensions with the West. This could not but affect Moscow’s stance on the Middle East. To a certain extent, the active support provided to the Assad regime was the Kremlin’s revenge for Moscow’s political and economic losses in Libya and Iraq. The Russian leadership was apparently offended that its silent support for the Western military operation did not receive any acknowledgement in the US and EU. This, in turn, impelled the Russian authorities to prove that they could cause serious trouble if their position on regional affairs was not taken into consideration by Western players.

Putin’s return to power also coincided with the end of the Arab Spring of 2011–2012. Initially, Moscow missed the beginning of the uprising, considering it a minor turmoil unlikely to bring any structural changes. In trying to explain the reasons for these losses, Moscow returned to its traditional narrative of “colour revolutions”, accusing the West of attempting to destabilise the current international system and impose its “improper” democratic values on other nations. Considering the events of the Arab Spring as, at least partially, the result of a US and EU plot, the Russian government had no choice but to become more deeply involved in the situation on the ground in order to balance the destabilisation of the political situation in the Middle East and, more globally, in Eurasia by Western powers.

By 2013, the general domestic situation in Russia also favoured changes in Moscow’s foreign policy in the Middle East. Public discontent with Medvedev’s cabinet and controversy over Putin’s re-election in 2012 compelled the country’s leadership to shore up the social base of its support. After 2012, official propaganda started more actively than ever to appeal to the nationalistic sentiments of the Russian population. Their appeals received a positive response. A large proportion of the mid- and lower layers of the Russian population wished to see Medvedev’s successor more actively protecting their national interests and cementing relations with the non-Western world. Putin gave them what they wanted. Russian support for Damascus, close relations with Tehran and rapprochement with Egypt were

supposed to symbolize a return to the old traditions of the Soviet Empire for those missing the “imperial” glory of the USSR. Prior to its fall in 1991, the USSR had good political and economic relations with these countries.

Repeating the Past in a New Way after Euromaidan

Of course, the current “pivot to Asia” is not the first attempt by Moscow to diversify its contacts with non-European countries since 1991. And in most cases, the development of relations with the West had a direct impact on Moscow’s rapprochements with the non-Western world, including the Middle East. Over the last 25 years, Moscow has made several attempts to establish closer relations with Middle Eastern countries. The most recent was during the mid-2000s. In 2003, during his visit to Malaysia, Putin stated that Russia intended to closely cooperate with the Islamic world. Later, he declared the Arab countries one of the main vectors of Russian diplomacy and supported his statement with official visits to Egypt (2005), Jordan (2007), Libya (2008), Morocco (2006), Saudi Arabia (2007), Qatar (2007) and the UAE (2007). He also made a trip to Israel (2005) and Iran (2007). However, these visits failed to sustain the initial momentum.

The failure of this and previous attempts to establish closer ties with the Arab countries, Iran and Israel can be explained by the fact that, between 1991 and 2012, Russian national interests in the region played a secondary role in determining the Kremlin’s approaches to the Middle East. In most cases the Kremlin’s diplomacy was shaped by the development of dialogue with the West (first and foremost the US). This focus on Washington led Moscow to view its stance on the Middle East as just another tool which could be used in its political games with the US, through the intensification or cooling of relations as required. The interdependence between the swings in Russian relations with the Middle East and the dynamics of the dialogue between Moscow and Washington is best illustrated by Russian relations with Iran during the 2000s.

For instance, the intensification of Russian contacts with Tehran during 2006 – 2008 coincided with increased tensions with Washington relating to the deployment of the US anti-missile defense in Eastern Europe and speculation about the possible integration of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO. Subsequently, the end to improved relations between Moscow and Tehran (as well as to Putin’s Middle Eastern endeavour in general) coincided with the beginning of the “reset” in Russo-American relations initiated by the Obama administration in 2009. Experts argue that this reset partly guaranteed Russian support for UN SC Resolution 1929 which paved the

way for the most severe US and EU economic sanctions ever imposed on Iran, the refusal of Moscow to export S-300s to Tehran in 2010 and the de-facto imposition of unilateral sanctions against Iran by then-President Dmitry Medvedev.¹⁴

The same attempt to improve relations with the US determined Moscow's stance on the Libyan crisis in 2011, when Russia decided to use Libya as a bargaining chip in its dealings with the West. On 17 March 2011, the Russian government did not veto UN SC Resolution 1973 which formed the basis for US and EU intervention in the Libyan conflict. Subsequently, Russia imposed its own sanctions on Libya, and it was the first to stop arms exports to Qaddafi.¹⁵ Russian diplomats currently deny Moscow's responsibility for the fall of the Libyan regime by arguing that it was the US, EU and their allies whose governments illegally used UN SC Resolution 1973 to topple Qaddafi.¹⁶ However, it is hardly possible that Moscow did not understand the scale of the potential implications of adopting this document.

The current rapprochement between Russia and the countries of the Middle East partly falls within the existing trend. Between 2012 and 2015, new tensions between Moscow and the West, firstly over Syria and then over Ukraine, impelled the Kremlin to intensify its contacts with the region. However, there is considerable difference between the current situation and previous periods of intense relations with the Middle East (for instance, during the period 2006 – 2009). This difference is largely determined by the scale and intensity of the Kremlin's conflict with the EU and US, which is unprecedented in Russian history since the fall of the USSR.

The negative implications of the current confrontation for the economy and international relations of the country have gone beyond the expectations of the Russian government. Accordingly, the Kremlin has had to react to challenges it did not predict.¹⁷ In order to cope with these problems the Kremlin was compelled to adopt a more complex approach to the Middle East than previously required. In the past, the ultimate goal of the upsurge in Russian relations with the Middle Eastern countries during periods of tension with the EU and US was the creation of leverage that could be used primarily to affect the behaviour of the US or to win additional concessions. Now, the complexity of tensions with Washington and Brussels compels Moscow to set multiple priorities for its diplomacy in the region. This requires the Kremlin to reject its previous vision of the region as a chessboard for its games with the West and to become more deeply involved in Middle Eastern affairs.

By intensifying its current activities in the region, the Kremlin is pursuing the following three goals:

1. Economic (compensating for the negative effects of sanctions on the Russian economy; securing existing sources of income; protecting the interests of Russian energy companies and their share in the international oil and gas market);
2. Political (avoiding complete international isolation; creating leverage which can be used to affect US and EU behavior; propagandizing Moscow's conception of the "right world order"; shaping Russian popular opinion);
3. Security (reducing potential security threats for Russia and the CIS posed by the situation in the Middle East).

As opposed to the period from 1991 to 2012, using the region to create leverage in its dialogue with the US and EU is now no longer the primary purpose of the Kremlin's efforts. Instead, existing tensions between Moscow and the Western powers over Ukraine played the role of a catalyst, launching the evolution of Russian priorities in the Middle East. Moscow is gradually beginning to understand the importance of its ties with the region itself and is assessing its capacity to build strong relations with Middle Eastern countries.

Russian Economic Interests

By the beginning of 2015, the Russian economy had sustained heavy losses from Western sanctions and the drop in oil prices. The high cost of the annexation of Crimea and general structural problems put additional pressure on the country's budget. Under these circumstances, every existing source of income became important for both the Russian authorities and business elites. This subsequently affected their perception of business opportunities existing in the Middle East. Whilst previously, Russian companies never hid the fact that the region held secondary importance for them, they now demonstrated much more interest in dealing with it.

Indeed, economic cooperation with the Middle East may have its advantages. Since the early 2000s trade relations between Russia and the Middle Eastern states have enjoyed an upturn. The fact that the trade balance was (and still is) in favour of Moscow (the share of Russian exports in trade with the majority of Middle Eastern countries is close to 90 percent) makes the Middle East an appealing consumer market for Russian goods. Items

exported by Russian corporations to the region have also diversified. This, in turn, offers an opportunity to involve a wide range of Russian producers in trade with the Middle East. For instance, Russian exports to Iran consist of ferrous metals and metallurgical products, wood, pulp, and paper, fuel and energy resources, cereals, and fertilizers.¹⁸ In the case of the UAE, Moscow sells precious metals, metallurgical products, machinery and transport vehicles, whereas in Morocco the main items are oil, petrochemical products, sulphur, coal and products of the chemical industry.¹⁹ Moreover, the share of oil and gas in Russian exports to the Middle East is not that great. From this point of view, trade with the region could be helpful for the implementation of Moscow's economic diversification strategy.

In spite of the fact that the Middle Eastern share of Russian international trade and investments overall remains small (see Annex 1, Table 1 and 2), the region still holds great interest and, in some cases, even key importance for selected Russian industries including the agricultural and military-industrial complexes, and the petrochemical, space, and oil and gas industries. Israel and the UAE buy up to 16 percent of the precious stones and metals exported by Russia. The Middle East is the main direction for exports of Russian grain: by 2014, the largest buyers of Russian wheat, rye and barley were Egypt, Israel and Saudi Arabia respectively.²⁰

The Middle East is also an extremely important market for some small and medium enterprises from various sectors of the Russian economy. For them, trade with the region often represents the main (and, in some cases, only) export market for their produce. Thus, small and medium Russian pharmaceutical, machinery and petrochemical firms have found their footing in the Iranian market. During the Qaddafi era, some Russian companies within the military-industrial complex were heavily dependent on Libya as the only market for their products.²¹

Traditionally, Middle Eastern countries retain an interest in Russia as an arms exporter. Its weapons have a reputation for relative reliability (compared to Chinese equivalents) and reasonable pricing (compared to Western companies). By 2012, the Arab countries accounted for more than 14 per cent of Russian arms exports.²² This arms trade is currently experiencing substantial growth. According to Russian experts, deals concluded in 2012–2015 with Egypt and Algeria alone outweighed the losses suffered by the Russian military-industrial complex from the loss of the whole Libyan market with the fall of Qaddafi.²³ The real volume of Russia's arms trade with the Middle East is unknown. Russian customs reports usually classify arms deals under the so-called Secret Code category, which includes all imports and exports which the authorities prefer not to

declare. The official data confirms experts' statements, at least, in terms of the growing number of Russian weapons consumers in the Middle East (see Annex 1, Table 3).

Moscow also supports the interests of the Russian space industry in the Middle East. Currently, the Kremlin promotes the Russian GLONASS satellite navigation system in the region. In 2015, the UAE expressed their interest in purchasing the sea-based spacecraft launch facility Space Launch, 95 per cent of whose shares are owned by the Russian company Energia Overseas Limited. Its purchase may strengthen the capacities of the Emirates Space Agency (established in 2013), which plans to send a spacecraft to Mars in 2021.²⁴

In 2013–2015, the Russian state-owned corporation Rosatom was successful in securing its share of the Middle Eastern market. On 11 November 2014, Russia and Iran signed a package of agreements on Moscow's participation in the construction of up to eight new nuclear power units in the Islamic Republic. The first two reactors are expected to be built at the Bushehr power plant, in addition to the power-generating block previously constructed by Russian engineers and handed over to the Iranians in 2013.

Russian cooperation with the countries of the region also aims to offset the negative effects of the Kremlin's sanctions war with the West. The Middle Eastern countries have acquired additional importance as agricultural exporters whose produce may help, at least in part, to replace some European products subject to Moscow's import ban. Egypt, Iran, Israel and Turkey have already expressed their intention to increase sales of food products (such as milk, dairy products, fish, fruits, vegetables and sea food) to Russia.²⁵ In September 2014, the then Israeli Minister of Agriculture, Yair Shamir, stated that Israel's farmers were capable of tripling food exports to Russia. He also indicated that Israel could provide Moscow with the investment and technological assistance necessary to increase its own food production.²⁶

Special importance was and continues to be attributed to contact with Israel aimed at providing Russia with technologies whose availability is limited by sanctions. In the future, contact with the countries of the Middle East may also help the Kremlin to create a system of measures to evade sanctions adopted by the US, EU and their partners. Under these conditions, the Russian authorities are trying to protect their trade and investment ties with the region from potential punitive measures. Thus, they offered Egypt and Iran the opportunity to use their national currencies as legal tender in bilateral trade instead of euros and US dollars, and invited

Cairo, Tehran and Jerusalem to create a free trade zone with the Eurasian Economic Union.

Russian Energy Interests

By 2015, falling oil prices and Russia's growing expenses (including those related to the annexation of Crimea) drew Moscow's attention to the situation in the Middle Eastern oil and gas sector. Regional reserves can create both challenges and opportunities for Moscow and its interests on the international energy markets.

On the one hand, if Russian companies were to obtain access to Middle Eastern oil and gas resources this could well increase their profits and strengthen Russian presence in the international hydrocarbon market (including its European segment), as the region would provide Russian energy behemoths with additional oil and gas resources for export. Thus, according to some sources, Lukoil intended to concentrate a quarter of its international projects on the Middle East by 2013.²⁷ The same interests determine the current activities of Russian Lukoil Overseas and Gazprom Neft in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan.²⁸ Since 2013, Russia has also attempted to become a dealer of Iranian oil by periodically discussing a deal with Tehran that would allow the Kremlin to receive oil (up to 0.5 million barrels per day) from the Islamic Republic in exchange for Russian goods and investments.²⁹ According to some sources, the two countries have already reached an agreement and begun its implementation.³⁰

On the other hand, exports of regional hydrocarbons (first of all, natural gas) without Moscow's control and participation could undermine Russian positions in the energy market. The biggest concerns relate to the challenge created by Middle Eastern resources for the Russian presence in the European gas market. A number of countries have never hidden their intention to replace Moscow as one of the gas suppliers to the EU.³¹

Under these circumstances, the strategy of the Russian government in the region aims at:

- Coordination of efforts with regional hydrocarbon (first of all, gas) producers;
- Active participation in regional oil and gas exploration and extraction projects;
- Counteraction of any deals and projects which may decrease Moscow's presence in the global energy markets.

While cooperation with regional powers on oil exports is less appealing to the Kremlin, Moscow is ultimately interested in close dialogue with Middle Eastern countries on gas resources. The idea of coordinating efforts with the main gas producers such as Algeria and Qatar, as well as Iran, has been considered by the Russian authorities for years. The Kremlin tried to approach the countries both at bilateral level and by offering to establish regional OPEC-like organisations. Thus, on various occasions, Moscow promoted the idea of creating the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) (initially proposed by Iran), the Gas Troyka (regular trilateral consultations between Russia, Iran and Qatar), and the International Organization of Non-commercial Oil and Gas Associations (MANGO). Yet, in all cases Moscow was not successful. MANGO has never been created. The Gas Troika was established in 2008 but did not last long due to growing sanctions pressure on Iran and political contradictions between Doha, Moscow and Tehran. In 2007–2008, the Russians managed to finalize the process of creating the GECF institutional base but lost their bid to establish St. Petersburg as the GECF's new headquarters, thereby failing to acquire their desired influence within the organisation.

At the bilateral level Russia was slightly more successful. It managed to cooperate with Iran in order to prevent the construction of trans-Caspian gas pipelines which would help Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to sell their hydrocarbons to Europe. Yet, as noted by observers, in 2006 – 2009 Moscow missed its opportunity to divide the sphere of influence in the international gas market with Iran when Tehran was offering to do this. However, in 2014, Moscow apparently decided to return to this question at the level of track-two diplomacy.³²

Russian contacts with Algeria were even more productive. As early as December 2011, the two countries agreed to exchange information on the gas market situation and to coordinate their efforts with the aim of counteracting any attempt by the EU to limit the rights of gas producers. On the sidelines of the 2012 World Gas Conference in Kuala Lumpur, Gazprom and the Algerian Sonatrach agreed to coordinate their pricing policy based on a long-term contract model bound to oil barrel prices. This unofficial alliance allowed the two countries to balance the influence of Qatar in the GECF. It lasted until mid-2014 when the future of Russian-Algerian cooperation was called into question by the intensification of Algerian dialogue with Qatar and Moscow's decision to suspend implementation of some of its obligations due to the aggravated domestic economic conditions.

Yet the Kremlin continues to attempt to salvage its cooperation with Algeria. In 2012, Gazprom and Sonatrach also agreed to swap LNG supplies: the former intended to use Algerian LNG to supply its European customers, while Sonatrach could guarantee access to the Asian market by trading Russian LNG produced at Sakhalin. On that occasion the deal was not finalised. However, both companies returned to this idea in February 2015. Periodic tensions with European consumers and the threat of further sanctions which could affect Gazprom's presence in the EU market compelled the energy company to widen its geographic focus. Algerian LNG would allow Gazprom to reach different destinations both within and outside Europe which could not be reached via pipelines. Thus, as of March 2015, Gazprom was negotiating a deal with Egypt on the export of approximately 439 million cubic feet per day.³³ Since 2006, Moscow has also been lobbying the idea of creating a mini-version of gas OPEC with the participation of Algeria, Nigeria and Russia. This initiative was directly connected to Gazprom's proposal to construct a gas pipeline that would bind Nigerian gas fields with Algerian LNG facilities, strengthening the presence of these three countries in the Mediterranean region. Yet the destabilisation of the security situation in North Africa called this project into question.

Russia's intention to participate in the above-mentioned trilateral project also reflects another aspect of Moscow's energy diplomacy in the Middle East. Wherever possible, the Kremlin tries to affect the export plans of regional producers in order to channel the flow of hydrocarbons in the direction necessary for Russia, or at least to make sure that Moscow has a stake in the exports. For instance, in 2013 Gazprom Marketing & Trading (GM&T) signed a memorandum with Levant LNG Marketing Corp which entitles it to buy within a 20 year period LNG produced on the Israeli Tamar gas field which might potentially find buyers in the EU.³⁴ Moscow also supports the construction of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. Russia believes that the successful implementation of this project would divert Tehran's attention from the European gas market and reorient it towards South Asia.³⁵

Russian Political Interests

Russian political dialogue with the Middle East pursues several goals. First of all, the Kremlin's contact with the countries of the region could be considered a part of Moscow's strategy to avoid complete international isolation. Russia welcomes any intentions demonstrated by regional players to talk to Moscow and, for its part, also tries to involve the Middle Eastern powers in active discussion on a wide range of issues. Thus, Cairo's 2014 attempt to diversify

its foreign policy vectors through the intensification of relations with Russia found a positive reaction in Moscow and resulted in Putin's trip to Egypt on 9-10 February 2015. Special attention is paid by the Russian authorities to the development of their contacts with regional organizations and to the creation of additional grounds for dialogue between Moscow and the region. Thus, apart from the "Russia-GCC Strategic Dialogue" initiative, the Kremlin has also launched the Arab-Russian Cooperation Forum, where Russian officials and high-ranking representatives (usually at the level of foreign ministers) of the Arab countries can discuss existing political and economic problems. So far, the Forum has held two meetings: in Moscow (February 2013) and in Khartoum (December 2014).³⁶

Moscow is also developing its contacts with the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) and the League of Arab States (LAS). The Russian authorities are seriously concerned by attempts by some forces in the Middle East to present Moscow as the main enemy of Islam and to provoke conservative political groupings within the OIC and LAS countries to support the activities of radical Islamists in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Currently, Moscow tries to use topics of common interest in order to demonstrate to the OIC and LAS members that Russia is not an enemy of the Muslim world. Thus, in February 2015, Moscow hosted the OIC delegation headed by Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Hassan Shukri to discuss the current situation in Palestine and East Jerusalem. On 29 March 2015, Putin sent a message to the LAS summit stating Moscow's intention to develop its relations with the Arab countries and to support the peaceful settlement of all existing regional conflicts. Among others, the Kremlin expressed its support for a two-state solution in Palestine.³⁷

Through its active Middle Eastern policy Russia also seeks to demonstrate to the US and EU that they should not pursue confrontation with the Kremlin, as Moscow's assistance may play a crucial role in the settlement of existing international issues. From this point of view, conflicts in the Middle East provide ample opportunities for the Russian authorities. On 30 December 2014, Moscow was among the eight UN SC members who supported the resolution that was supposed to set the time-frame for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Moscow provided important support to the negotiation process between P5+1 and Iran. In January 2015, it conducted what was positioned as a global meeting of Syrian opposition members with representatives of the Assad regime. Later on, the modest results of these negotiations were presented as substantial achievements by Russian mediators aimed at the stabilization of the situation in a war-torn country. The same trick was repeated by the Russians in April

2015 when they organized a second meeting of the Syrian opposition with representatives of official authorities (the so-called Moscow-2 meeting). Its results (modest, as in the case of the Moscow-1 meeting) were again portrayed by the moderator of the negotiations, Vitaly Naumkin, as another important achievement.³⁸

To a certain extent, Moscow managed to persuade the West of its importance. Thus, Russia's active role in the multilateral negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue is considered by US analysts as one of the main factors guaranteeing, so far, the success of the negotiation process. The March 2014 suggestion by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Ryabkov that, in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, the Kremlin could reconsider its participation in the P5+1 group on Iran was sufficient to keep Washington concerned about this possibility for the rest of 2014.³⁹ High-ranking EU officials also see the Kremlin as a significant player in the Middle Eastern Quartet on Palestine. On 5 March 2015, during his speech at Chatham House, the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, argued that Russia could play a helpful role in the negotiation process on Syria because only Moscow (and Tehran) can speak directly to Assad and his regime. He also gave positive feedback on Russian efforts to arrange a separate forum for dialogue between the Syrian opposition and Damascus in Moscow.⁴⁰ These statements were echoed in April 2015 by a high-ranking representative of a leading US think-tank directly involved in the track-two diplomacy in Syria: whilst recognizing the failure of the Moscow-1 and Moscow-2 meetings, he stressed that Russia was the only country successful in creating the ground for negotiations between the regime and the opposition.⁴¹ Finally, it could not be a coincidence that, after the success of the nuclear negotiations in Lausanne, US diplomats in Moscow started to test the ground regarding possibilities for cooperation with the Kremlin on other regional issues including the situation in Syria, Yemen and Libya.⁴² Even the beginning of the Russian military involvement in Syria did not change this paradigm. On the contrary, Russian troops on Syrian ground only strengthened Moscow's diplomatic position by proving that, now, any decision on Syria could not be taken without their participation.

Russian Security Interests

Russian involvement in the Middle Eastern region is also determined by the need to reduce potential security threats from non-European parts of Eurasia. The elimination of such challenges became crucial for Moscow at the beginning of its Ukraine-triggered confrontation with the West.

Tensions with the EU and US over Ukraine demand Russia's full attention and resources. As a result, it has become unaffordable for the Kremlin to be distracted by other external challenges. The Russian authorities are trying to diminish the number of problems they may encounter. With regard to the Middle East this meant the intensification of efforts to settle the Iranian nuclear issue which could hypothetically lead to the destabilization of Iran. The Russian authorities also demonstrated their interest in the stabilization of the situation in Syria in order to prevent the spread of instability to the Muslim parts of Russia and the post-Soviet space.

By 2015, the rise of jihadists in Syria and the threat they were deemed to pose to the security of the post-Soviet space made the Kremlin reconsider its priorities and take more interest in the settlement of the crisis. The need to allocate political and economic resources to the conflict with the West made this need more acute: from the very beginning of the Ukrainian opposition meetings in Independence Square in Kiev in late-2013, Moscow's officials have been concerned that they will not be able to cope efficiently with both the Ukrainian crisis and the challenge of Syrian jihadists.

The stated concerns of the Russian authorities are related to so-called Russian fighters taking part in the conflict on the side of the Syrian opposition and Islamist forces. The rise of jihadists in the Middle East as a result of the Arab Spring is in fact what worries Moscow. Thus, in September-October 2012, the head of the FSB (Russian security service), Alexander Bortnikov, officially expressed his concerns about the concentration of extremists in Syria. He argued that it was highly likely that these forces would soon start to infiltrate the Muslim regions of southern Russia in order to destabilise the situation in the traditionally 'problem' republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chechnya.⁴³

The Russian government sincerely believes that Assad's removal from power would trigger the expansion of jihadism and instability in the Caucasus and southern Russia. Moscow is deeply concerned about the efforts of Qatar and Saudi Arabia to support the most radical factions in Syria. Officials believe that the current situation in the region directly influences domestic stability by provoking Russian religious extremists to undertake more aggressive anti-government actions; in fact, Moscow's security services have noted increasing Qatari and Saudi financial help to Russian Islamists. Unsurprisingly, then, Moscow does not want the Islamist influence in the Middle East to grow.⁴⁴

And that's where Putin's experience may play crucial role. The rise of his career and popularity began with the Second Chechen war (1999 - 2001/2009). Putin probably remembers how hard it was to return the

rebel province to control and how expensive it is to keep Chechnya under it. Presumably, he does not want the story to be repeated. Nevertheless, the Syrian conflict has already demonstrated to the Russian authorities how fragile regional stability is. Thus, both the Russian expert community and security services are concerned with the participation of Chechens in the conflict on the side of the Syria rebels. For instance, prominent Russian expert on Syria Yuri Shcheglov in states that they form the second largest grouping of foreign nationals after Libyans fighting against official Damascus.⁴⁵ These Chechens are mostly represented by people closely connected with separatist movements in the Northern Caucasus. Thus, in early 2013, Russian media announced the death of Rustam Gelayev. He was the son of one of the most dangerous Chechen terrorists killed in 2004 in Russia. Gelayev was allegedly killed in Syria when fighting government troops as a member of a Chechen military grouping headed by Abu Omar Shishani⁴⁶ (although Gelayev's relatives state that his death was a result of a tragic accident).⁴⁷ Shcheglov also points out that the active participation of the Chechens in the conflict makes the Turkish, Qatari and Saudi sponsors of Chechen fighters increase funding of these radical grouping which was substantially limited after the Second Chechen war.⁴⁸ Under these conditions, the main issue for the Russians is whether the above-mentioned sponsors decide to stop their financial support after the fall of Assad or continue it in order to bring the jihad and jihadists to Russian soil.

These concerns were not baseless. By September 2013, Russian analysts were worried about several negative trends related to the participation of Russian Muslims and their co-nationals⁴⁹ from Middle Eastern countries in the Arab uprisings. First of all, they are concerned with the widening range of nationalities from the RF taking part in the Syrian jihad. Thus, apart from Chechen radicals, the so-called Russian grouping of jihadists (all in all, its size is estimated to be at least 250 people) includes representatives of different minorities of the Northern Caucasus and the Volga region. Some evidence refers to the participation of Tatars from extremist organization Jamaat Bulgar in the Syrian conflict. The latter, in turn, means the activation of Islamic radicals in regions which are far closer to Moscow than the Caucasus region is. Under these conditions, Syria becomes the ground for networking among various extremist groups. Previously separated and scattered, they gradually recognise themselves as a united front. Moreover, they are establishing ties with international terrorist organizations and, thus, they become part of the global extremist network. Both Russian experts and officials do not doubt that upon the return of these radicals to the RF, their

connections together with their battle experience will be used against the central authorities.⁵⁰

No one questions the fact that these extremists will sooner or later return to Russia. At the very beginning of the Arab Spring, the leaders of North Caucasian radical groupings such as the Emarat Kavkaz for bade their rank-and-file members to take part in the Libyan or Syrian civil wars. They were afraid that this could divert the attention of their followers from domestic issues. However, by 2013, the leadership of the Emarat Kavkaz changed their position and started to encourage people to fight against Assad, considering Syria as a training camp for members of the organisation.⁵¹ Under these circumstances, Russian military deployment in Syria should not be considered as the core goal of Moscow's diplomacy, but its instrument. It is also a mistake to present Russian actions in Syria as part of a stand-off between Moscow and the West. By September 2015, on the eve of Russia's dramatic military deployment, the Kremlin was afraid that Assad's regime was on the verge of collapse. The assessment was that the military, technological, and financial assistance provided by Russia to the Syrian regime would extend its existence but not save it. Intervention was a choice between a "bad" and a "very bad" scenario: a costly military operation to support Assad, or do nothing as his power – and Russian influence – crumbled. The Russian leadership was motivated by its perception of what had happened in Libya and Iraq, where – in its view – nothing good came of the complete destruction of the old regimes.

Yet the Kremlin does desire an end to the Syrian war but (as was re-confirmed by Putin in New York in September 2015), a settlement is only viable, for Moscow, through a national dialogue between the regime and the coalition. However, the Kremlin would like to launch this reconciliation process with its own conditions. These include the preservation of the territorial integrity of Syria, the immediate formation of a united anti-Islamic State coalition, saving the remaining state structures, and the transformation of the Syrian regime only within the framework of the existing government mechanisms. Putin continues to insist on a peace settlement in Syria based around existing Syrian state structures and institutions and some sort of power-sharing between the Damascus regime and the "healthy" elements in the opposition.

Moscow also insists that the removal of Assad from power should not be a precondition for the beginning of national dialogue. The Kremlin says that the fall of Assad's regime or his early removal will turn Syria into another Libya. According to Moscow's decision makers, this will mean the further radicalization of the Middle East and the export of Islamic radicalism to

Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. This vision of the situation drastically differs from that of the West and many Middle Eastern powers who consider Assad as the source of the Syrian problem rather than the solution. Yet, the Kremlin is determined to change international opinion. Russian authorities have adopted a twin-track approach. On the one hand, since spring 2015, the Russian authorities have intensified their dialogue with the international community (these efforts resulted in the Vienna meeting between opposition supporters, Russia and Iran in October 2015). However, on the other hand, the Russians have increased the volume and quality of military supplies and launched their military operation to guarantee that the Syrian regime survives until the Kremlin achieves a diplomatic breakthrough.

The Russian vision of the future of Syria is also changing. Recent statements made by Putin and Lavrov in September show that Moscow has finally stopped labeling all fighting opposition forces as “terrorist” and recognized at least some as legitimate players. Previously, Moscow agreed to deal only with the political wing of the Syrian (preferably, official/systemic) opposition. It definitely plans to build relations with the Syrian Kurds but also with those whom Putin has vaguely determined as “healthy” opposition, including representatives of the Syrian National Coordination Committee, the Muslim Brotherhood and some other movements.⁵² In October 2015, the Russian MFA declared Moscow’s readiness to negotiate with the Free Syrian Army.⁵³

Why is Syria so Important? Moscow's Vision of its Tasks in Syria Prior to the Beginning of Russian Military Deployment

In 2015, Syria once again became the top priority of Russian foreign policy after being temporarily overshadowed by the events of the Ukrainian crisis during 2014. Thus, in January and April 2015, Moscow hosted two meetings of the Syrian opposition with representatives of the Damascus regime (on January 26 – 29 and April 6 – 9). By arranging these meetings the Russian authorities were trying to promote their idea that the reconciliation should be achieved through dialogue among all non-extremist Syrian groupings and without outside involvement. In spite of the modest results of these negotiations, the Kremlin did not abandon its intention to launch a process of reconciliation between the opposing forces both by facilitating intra-Syrian dialogue and by discussing the issue of conflict settlement with the foreign sponsors of Damascus and the opposition.

Thus, Syria was one of the main topics discussed by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov with the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, during his visit to Sochi on May 12, 2015. Shortly after, Kerry's trip was followed by a visit from US special envoy for Syria, Daniel Rubinstein (May 18, 2015). On May 26, 2015, Putin made a phone call to UK Prime Minister David Cameron. The two leaders agreed to resume the multilevel dialogue on Syria and the issue of the Islamic State (IS). For the first time in several years, the Russian and British authorities even decided to organise a meeting of national security advisors to discuss the situation in Syria. In addition, Syria remains one of the main items on the agenda of Russian dialogue with Iran and the GCC members, whose high-ranking representatives have become frequent visitors to Moscow in recent months.

At the same time, Russian initiatives have been treated very cautiously by observers. They argued that by arranging these negotiations the Kremlin was acting out of self-interest and the aims had little or nothing to do with the settlement of the conflict. At the same time, there is little agreement on what Moscow's aims were. Some of them accused the Kremlin of another attempt to keep Assad in power by reinforcing the idea that the current regime should be the part of the solution.¹ Others said that by holding these meetings Moscow was simply trying to demonstrate to the US and EU the importance of Russia's role in the international arena and her value in the settlement of current international problems. The Syrian authorities and Iran were also very suspicious of the Russian moves. Although Damascus and Tehran officially welcomed the Moscow-1 and Moscow-2 meetings, they, as reported by some sources, did not exclude the variant that the Russians might try to use these events to come to terms with the Syrian opposition and its foreign supporters. Their concerns were not baseless. By January 2015, Moscow had already received several generous offers from the Gulf monarchies and Syrian opposition aimed at persuading the Kremlin to abandon Assad. Moreover, the question of what should be offered to Russia to achieve a change of position on Syria still remains one of the main items of inter-GCC discourse on Russian foreign policy in the Middle East.²

Yet, Russia did not look like a country whose position may be easily changed either by sticks or by carrots. In the case of Syria, Moscow explicitly demonstrated that it had its principles and it was ready to fight for them. The Kremlin's "red lines" on Syria could be formulated as follows:

- Moscow opposed any foreign military intervention in the Syrian conflict;
- The Russian authorities supported the idea of regime transformation through national dialogue but disapproved of a change of government by military means;
- The Kremlin supported the territorial integrity of Syria;
- Moscow was opposed to dialogue with radical Islamists and Jihadists.

Russian loyalty to these principles was once again outlined by Putin during his speech on June 19, 2015 at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum. Thus, the Russian president reconfirmed Moscow's support for Bashar Assad and declared that the Kremlin was interested in saving Syria as a state. Yet, he emphasized that Moscow was "ready to work with the president [Bashar Assad] to ensure political transformation, so that all Syrians have access

to instruments of power”.³ This approach created both opportunities and impediments for future conflict settlement in Syria.

On the one hand, the saving of government institutions in Syria and the transformation of Assad’s authoritarian regime to a more inclusive and democratic type of government generally corresponded to the interests of the large part of the international community that wanted to prevent the development of the Syrian conflict into another Libya. On that point, Moscow could agree with the West and the Syrian opposition on the need to save Syria from becoming another failed state. On the other hand, Moscow continued to support Assad as it declared and failed to see any alternatives to him. Consequently, this led only to the prolongation of the conflict. By July 2015, the success of opposition forces in Suwayda and Idlib as well as the capture of Palmyra clearly demonstrated that the regime’s military resources were extremely depleted and that Assad’s fall was only a matter of time. However, this duality of Moscow’s stance on the conflict can be explained by the evolution of Russian interests in Syria.

Game of Ambitions (2011 – 2013)

Moscow’s diplomacy in Syria and its evolution certainly fit the general picture of Russian approaches to the Middle East during the period 2011-2015. In 2011-2013, Russia’s initial impulse to support the Syrian regime was largely determined by the Arab Spring and Moscow’s ambitions. Putin’s return as president in 2012 played a role in this. The Russian president was seriously affected by the failure of the reset in Russian-US relations as well as existing tensions with the EU. In Syria he decided to take what he saw as revenge towards the US for previous Russian losses in the Middle East. Given the outcomes in Iraq and Libya, Putin had learned that the fall of long-time partners inevitably leads to the loss of economic and political influence in those countries. Therefore, without solid guarantees on the security of its interests, Russia was not prepared to abandon Assad. However, this fight was rather a question of principle: Moscow wanted to demonstrate to the US that it could stir up trouble if its opinion was not taken into account. Thus, in early 2013, Lavrov stated that in Syria the Russian government was eager to make the Americans “learn the lesson” that they should deal with Moscow only “on the basis of equality, balance of interests and mutual respect”.⁴

In order to protect her interests, Russia used her veto several times (on October 4, 2011, February 4, 2012, July 19, 2012, May 22, 2014) to prevent the adoption of UN SC Resolutions that, in Moscow’s view, could lead to a further aggravation of the situation in and around Syria. Finally, in 2013

the Russians managed to do what was previously believed to be impossible: they stopped what had appeared to be an inevitable military operation by the West against the Syrian regime. On August 21, 2013, international media sources reported the usage of a chemical weapon in one of Damascus's neighborhoods. Neither side in the conflict took responsibility for it. The Western powers and their Middle Eastern partners accused the Assad regime of this. Subsequently, they tried to use their suspicions as a pretext for military intervention in the conflict. However, the reluctance of the Barack Obama administration and the failure of the British government to get the approval of the UK Parliament gave Moscow the necessary time to offer its own solution.

This was the first time during the Syrian conflict when Russia demonstrated that it had a number of opportunities for leverage at its disposal to shape the development of the situation in the way that would most suit the Kremlin. On the one hand, being in constant contact with the Syrian authorities since the beginning of the Syrian war and providing them with diplomatic support, the Russians were able to influence Damascus behavior directly. They obviously sent Assad a signal that in order to avoid international intervention it was highly important for him to demonstrate the readiness for cooperation with the international community. On the other hand, the Russian authorities managed to mobilize its political partners to get the support for Moscow's steps among international organizations and to put additional pressure on Damascus. Thus, during the discussion of a new UN SC Resolution on Syria on August 29, 2013, Russia and China expressed the unacceptability of any military intervention in Syria. At the same time, Moscow asked Tehran to help the Russian authorities to persuade Assad to destroy all arsenals of chemical WMD under international control. Consequently, on September 10, 2013, Russian minister of foreign affairs Sergey Lavrov received the consent of the Syrian government to do this. Four days later, Lavrov met with the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, in Geneva to offer the Russian plan on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapon stockpiles outside Syria under international supervision. Subsequently, this initiative was used as grounds for the UN SC Resolution 2118 on the scheduled destruction of Syrian chemical weapons unanimously adopted on September 27, 2013.⁵

Moscow's participation in there solving of the Syrian chemical weapons issue⁶ also demonstrated that its stance on the conflict was determined not only by the Kremlin's confrontation with the US. First of all, the elimination of Assad's WMD stockpiles corresponded to Russian general interests in limiting the spread of weapons of mass destruction

in the Middle East. Moscow believes that regional instability cannot guarantee that chemical or any other type of the WMD will not fall in the wrong hands, leading to potential use not only somewhere in the Middle East but beyond regional borders (for instance in the post-Soviet space). On the other hand, the failure of the Western intervention in Syria and the fact that Moscow's initiatives created the necessary ground for the settlement of the Syrian chemical weapons issue without the use of military force were important for strengthening Moscow's position domestically as the results were presented as a straightforward diplomatic victory. What was even more important for Moscow, its tough stance on Syria had a positive influence on Russian relations in the Middle Eastern region. Thus, in the eyes of those regional states with a positive or neutral attitude to Moscow, the Russian authorities managed to rehabilitate themselves for the failure to protect the Qaddafi regime. Moscow proved that it was capable of protecting its partners and, thus, made the Arab countries once again interested in Russia as a political counterbalance to the US. The regional rivals of Russia such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia were, in turn, compelled to recognise the Kremlin as an important player in the Middle East whose opinion needed to be taken into account. Thus, such influential newspapers as *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and *al-Hayat* considered the failure of Obama to persuade Putin to change the Russian stance on Syria as a pure victory for Russia whereas the US administration was accused of 'opportunism and weakness'.⁷

At the same time, Syria as a country paid a high price for Moscow's ambitions. Russian stubbornness in protecting the Assad regime for the sake of the Kremlin's success in its confrontation with the West gave Damascus much-needed protection and made it more confident in its actions against the opposition. As a result, during the first year of the conflict when most existing problems had the chance to be settled through negotiation and reforms the Syrian regime responded to the peaceful appeals of its opponents with brute force. By doing this, it hardened and brutalized further confrontation. It is true that Moscow made some reluctant attempts to persuade Assad to make concessions to the opposition. Thus, on February 7, 2012, Lavrov and the director of the Russian Intelligence Service (SVR), Mikhail Fradkov, visited Damascus to discuss the situation in the country with the regime. Yet, while seeing its confrontation with the West as the top priority Moscow did not demonstrate sufficient persistence in persuading Assad. However, with the further development of the conflict the Kremlin started to reassess its priorities. And there were serious reasons for this.

Going Beyond Ambitions

Even when protesting against the attempts of the West and its partners (first of all, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey) to intervene in the situation in Syria the Kremlin never avoided supporting international efforts aimed at the launching of national dialogue in Syria. Thus, the Russian government welcomed the work of the first international conference on Syria in Geneva (so-called Geneva-1 held on June 30, 2012). The Kremlin even supported the conference call to form a transitional government in the country. Although the final document of Geneva-1 did not demand that Bashar Assad leave office, Moscow clearly demonstrated that it was ready to back changes in the Syrian regime if they took place through dialogue. Subsequently, the Russian authorities tried to make Damascus be more open for national dialogue. This, in turn, was not always welcomed by the Syrian regime which did not see why it should talk to the opposition.

Moscow's first cautious attempts to nudge Damascus towards transformation were determined by the fact that Russia was also concerned with the emergence of another zone of instability near to the borders of post-Soviet space which Moscow considers to be the zone of its national interests. During the first year of the Syrian conflict it had illusions that Damascus, with the necessary protection from external intervention, would be able to cope with the crisis. But these illusions were gradually fading with the radicalization of the conflict. As a result, the Kremlin had to take measures to move Damascus and the international community towards a compromise. Moscow also started to differentiate between Assad and the Syrian state. The protection of the state institutions gradually started to become the Russian top priority under the influence of the Libyan experience, where the country started to break up after the fall of Qaddafi. At the same time, Moscow clearly understood that it needed Assad as long as he was the only guarantor from turning Syria into a failed state. Yet, it did not mean eternal loyalty to him as a person. Moreover, such loyalty was barely possible.

The Kremlin has never completely trusted Assad. The Russian authorities cannot forget that after his election, in 2000, Assad initially tried to bridge relations with Europe; only when this attempt failed did he turn his attention to Russia. They also remember that, in the 1990s and 2000s, Damascus ignored all Moscow's requests to deal with Chechen rebels who, guilty of terrorist attacks on Russian military forces and citizens, subsequently fled to Syria.⁸ These facts make Moscow cautious about embracing Damascus as a strategic partner. In one speech, for example, Putin stated that he did not want to repeat the mistake the Soviet Union made with Egypt by trusting a

Syrian regime that could change its alliances as readily as Anwar Sadat did in the 1970s.⁹

With the further development of the conflict the Kremlin became more and more active in its efforts to launch the process of national reconciliation in Syria. Thus, on May 7, 2013, Lavrov and Kerry stated the necessity to organize anew international conference on Syria (so-called Geneva-2). After nine months of coordination meetings between the representatives of Russia, the US and UN such a conference was held in Montreux on January 22, 2014. The list of participants of the Geneva-2 meeting included the delegations of 39 countries as well as representatives of the UN, EU, League of the Arab States (LAS) and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Although Geneva-2 did not bring any substantial results (apart from the agreement on the supply of humanitarian aid to Homs and the evacuation of civilians from that city), there still were some achievements. Thus, for the first time the representatives of official Damascus met with people from the Syrian opposition (on January 25-31 and February 10-15, 2014).

Between Jihadists and Ukraine (2014 – 2015)

This intensification of Moscow's activities aimed at the launch of Syrian national dialogue was driven by the evolution of those factors that determined Moscow's approach to the Syrian crisis. By 2014, the Kremlin's ambitions as a key factor in determining Moscow's stance on Syria were largely overwhelmed by the growing security concerns connected to the radicalisation of the Syrian opposition. Even before 2014, the Kremlin was warning the international community that the leadership of the anti-government uprising in Syria could be hijacked by radical forces. To support this the Russian authorities usually referred to the experience of post-Qaddafi Libya. Yet, initially, these statements were part of a Russian propaganda campaign that tended to position the West as the force whose involvement in the Middle Eastern affairs never brings good results.

However, the jihadist threat became real by 2014. In June 2013, the head of the Russian Counter-Intelligence Service (FSB), Alexander Bortnikov, officially stated Moscow concerns that the Syrian conflict could negatively affect the security situation in Europe, the post-Soviet space and Russia. He argued that Syria was becoming a training camp for extremists and religious radicals from all over the world. According to Bortnikov, it was logical to expect that these people would not stay in Syria but would return to their home countries to begin the struggle against their own governments. Since then, the FSB has been periodically reporting the capturing and

neutralisation of jihadist emissaries from the Middle East recruiting volunteers for the struggle in Syria and Iraq. Moscow's security services are also closely monitoring those who decided to join the Islamists. If necessary, the Russian authorities can take measures to prosecute such people. Thus, in spring 2014, the Russian government amended its legislation by increasing the maximum possible period of imprisonment for participation in illegal military groupings up to 15 years. In September 2014, Rustam Kerimov became the first Russian citizen to be sentenced for fighting in Syria among jihadists.

Yet the numbers of foreign fighters from Europe, Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia who join the IS and other radical Islamists groupings in Syria and Iraq are growing. Thus, according to EU Justice Commissioner Vera Jouriva, by April 2015, up to 5000-6000 Europeans had left Europe for Syria.¹⁰ Estimates about Russian-speaking jihadists fighting in the conflict are different. On May 28, 2015, Russian Deputy-Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov argued that some 500 Russian citizens (mostly from the Northern Caucasus) were fighting for the IS.¹¹ On 27 May 2015, Russian society was shocked by news about the Russian teenage girl Varvara Karaulova from Moscow who had left her family to join the Islamic State in Syria. This was a case of a well-educated girl from a middle-class family who was also a student at a prestigious Russian university, who suddenly converted to Islam and fled to a war-torn country. Varvara's story had a happy end. She was stopped on the Turkish-Syrian border and returned home. However, her case is not unique.

All in all, Russian security services and independent analysts believe that, by 2015, there were about 1500-2000 Russian-speaking nationals from the Northern Caucasus, the Russian mainland and Chechen communities of Georgia, Turkey and the EU fighting on the side of different Islamic groupings (such as Jabhat an-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham) in Syria.¹² Apart from that, several hundred people from Azerbaijan and the ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia (such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) could be found among jihadists in Syria and Iraq.¹³ According to the director of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, Erlan Karin, by 2015 there were up to 500 Uzbeks, 360 Turkmens, 100 Kirgiz, and 190 Tajiks in Syria. He also talked of Kazakhs taking part in the Syrian war on the insurgents' side.¹⁴ The leading Russian expert on Syria at the Institute of the Middle East in Moscow, Yuri Shcheglov, says that by mid-2014 there were at least 1500 Chechens, 200 Dagestanis and about 100 people from other Russian regions fighting in Syria.¹⁵ Other sources are reporting the presence of Russian citizens from Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and even mainly Orthodox

Christian Northern Ossetia among Syrian and Iraqi Islamists.¹⁶ Finally, apart from Northern Caucasians, the so-called Russian grouping of jihadists includes people from the Volga region. For instance, some evidence refers to the participation of Tatars from the extremist organization Jamaat Bulgar in the Syrian conflict, and even ethnic Russians. In the latter case, media reports about Russians who converted to Islam and fled from their homes to join the Islamists in the Middle East have become relatively common.¹⁷

Such participants do not always see the IS or Jabhat an-Nusra's cause as their own. For some of them, this struggle is just a preparatory stage on their way back to their home countries where they can start their own battle. For instance, the ex-commander of Tajik OMON (police special operation force), Gulmurod Khalimov, who defected to join the IS (allegedly, with some other Tajik officers) in May 2015, officially declared his intention to bring the Islamic Caliphate to his home country and threatened both Russia and the US. In September 2014, Russian speaking fighters in the IS released a video on the Internet with promises to "liberate" the North Caucasus. The concerns of the Russian government were strengthened by the fact that, since 2013, the leaders of the North Caucasian radical grouping Emarat Kavkazhas started to encourage people to fight against Assad considering Syria and, later on, Iraq as a training camp for the members of the organisation.¹⁸ In 2013, one of the ideological leaders of the Emarat Kavkaz, Sheikh Abu Abdurrahman al-Maghribi, even issued a fatwa that blessed the Russian jihadists' aim to get battle experience in Syria, although it also reminded them that their main battle was to take place in the Caucasus against Russia.¹⁹

A Syrian connection was allegedly found by Russian authorities during their investigation of the terrorist attack on Grozny in December 2014. On the other hand, some of those extremists who stayed in Russia and Central Asia seem to try to find connections with the Jihadist movement in the Middle East.²⁰ Thus, in late 2014, several leaders of the separatist movement and religious preachers in Dagestan and the Northern Caucasus declared their loyalty to the IS. Roughly at the same time, the leadership of the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan also stated their intention of joining the global IS network.²¹ In June 2015, the leadership of the Emarat Kavkaz movement allegedly declared its alliance with the IS. Under these circumstances, the Russian authorities believe that the only way to stop the spread of instability in the post-Soviet space is to address the source of the issue and stabilize the situation in Syria via the launching of a national dialogue.

The further concerns of Moscow with regard to the jihadist presence in Syria were aggravated by the beginning of the Russian confrontation

with the West over Ukraine. By 2015, its negative implications for the economy and international relations of Russia obviously went beyond the expectations of the Kremlin. Under these circumstances, Moscow became increasingly interested in diminishing possible security threats. The confrontation with the West demanded the maximum concentration of Russian attention and resources. As a result, it has become an unaffordable luxury for the Kremlin to be distracted by other problems. From the very beginning of the Ukrainian opposition mass-meetings on Independence Square in Kiev in late 2013, Moscow's officials have been concerned that they will not be able to cope equally efficiently with both the Ukrainian crisis and the Syrian jihadist challenge.²² Under these circumstances, in 2014-2015 the Russian authorities demonstrated great interest in the stabilization of the situation in Syria in order to prevent the spread of Middle Eastern instability to the Muslim parts of Russia and the post-Soviet space.

Finally, by 2014, Russia indeed appeared to be keen to demonstrate to its Western opponents that they should not pursue further their confrontation with the Kremlin as Moscow's assistance might play a crucial role in the settlement of existing international issues. From this point of view, conflicts existing in the Middle East provided ample opportunities for the Russian authorities.

Lessons of the 2015 Meetings in Moscow

The above-mentioned factors resulted in the Kremlin's attempts to organize the aforementioned Moscow-1 and Moscow-2 meetings. At first glance, the main aim of these negotiations was positive. The meetings had the two goals. On the one hand, the Russian authorities wanted to make another attempt to launch a dialogue between Damascus and its opponents. This is especially important now when both the Syrian government and opposition forces are challenged by the IS threat, but instead of fighting against this archenemy they continue to weaken each other through continuous fighting. On the other hand, the Russians would like to overcome one of the main problems of the negotiation process between Damascus and the opposition: namely, the factionalism of the latter. It is not a coincidence that in both cases Moscow arranged two stage talks: the dialogue between the Syrian government and its opponents was to take place only during the last day of the meetings. The first day was completely devoted to consultations between the different opposition groupings in order to let them work out a joint position on the negotiations with Damascus.

The efforts the Russians made to arrange these two meetings were enormous for them. They got in contact with both the Assad regime and political opposition. They also made an attempt to reach people fighting on the ground and got the support of some external forces affecting the situation in the country. Thus, in December 2014, Russian deputy foreign minister Mikhail Bogdanov visited Beirut, Damascus and Istanbul. Among those he met was even the leader of Lebanese Hizbollah, Hassan Nasrallah.²³ Before the Moscow-2 meeting Russia was also quite active in persuading all those invited to attend. The Kremlin even tried to please the opposition and persuaded Assad to release up to 700 political prisoners (although the opposition initially asked the Assad regime to free 1400 people).²⁴

However, the outcomes of both meetings were extremely modest. During the January talks the sides were able to formulate so-called Moscow principles that stated the parameters of the future conflict settlement. They included the recognition of Syrian sovereignty, and observation of its territorial integrity and independence, as well as struggle against the terrorist threat.²⁵ These initiatives were finalized during the Moscow-2 meeting in the form of a document signed by all participants. However, the adopted paper could be hardly considered a real break-through. This is recognized by even those members of the Syrian opposition who still try to be optimistic about the Moscow meetings.²⁶ Apart from repeating common wisdoms, the document does not offer any practical road map on how to settle the Syrian conflict (see Annex 2). What's more important, during both the Moscow-1 and Moscow-2 meetings the government representatives and the opposition also failed to work out confidence-building measures that would allow them to implement adopted principles in practice. As a result, allegedly, some of the opposition delegates even declared this document void shortly after they signed it.

People invited to the Moscow-1 and Moscow-2 meetings also did not represent all groupings in the Syrian opposition. Even the reserved blessing of the meeting by the Americans and Saudis was unable to bring all desired participants to Moscow. Thus, while the representatives of the National Coordination Council and some other members of the moderate inner opposition were ready to be in Moscow the most important grouping of the external opposition – the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces – excluded the possibility of participating in the negotiations. Those who decided to ignore these meetings in the Russian capital were motivated by the following reasons. First of all, the contacts between the different groupings in the Syrian opposition had been already established and there was no need for a meeting in Moscow to do this.

Secondly, for the part of the opposition it is still hard to recognize Assad as a legitimate participant in any negotiations on Syria and its future. Thirdly, opposition members were confused by the fact that the Russian initiative seemed to be an attempt to reset the negotiations on Syria and start the discussion from scratch. One of the opposition members, Hadi al-Bahra, even stated that participation in the Moscow meeting would mean that all previous agreements should be put aside and any progress achieved forgotten (although it is hard to speak about any). However, during the Moscow-2 meeting, the Russians tried to bring some clarity to the issue and argued that their initiative went in line with the Geneva-1 agreements. Finally, the Russian government is also considered to be the part of the conflict. As a result, the members of the Syrian opposition raised a valid question as to what degree Moscow would be able to arrange a comfortable negotiation environment for all participants and not only to those representing Damascus. Moreover, some parts of the non-jihadist opposition still believe that a military solution in Syria is the only possible one.

Official Damascus appeared to be not that keen on these meetings in Moscow, either. The reaction of Assad to the Russian initiatives was relatively modest. Before the Moscow-1 meeting he emphasized that the Syrian authorities welcomed the Kremlin proposal and they would definitely send their representatives. However, Assad noted that Damascus would have to accept any outcomes of Moscow's meeting including the failure of negotiations. Moreover, he stated that the Syrian delegation would attend not to begin the dialogue but to understand whether its beginning was at all possible. During the preparation of the Moscow-1 and Moscow-2 meetings, Assad demonstrated a lack of flexibility and seriously irritated the Russians in their search for a compromise.²⁷

There were a number of reasons for Damascus to be reluctant about the outcomes of the talks. Mainly, it was bad timing. From January until early April 2015, Damascus felt confident about its military and political capacities. Even the loss of Idlib on 28 March 2015 was yet to be recognized as a serious defeat: at the beginning of April 2015, the Syrian army planned to retake it. The idea of external intervention was removed from the political agenda of the US and EU. Finally, the rise of the IS compelled some Western politicians to speak about Damascus as a possible partner in the anti-jihadist battle. Some Middle Eastern leaders (such as Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Sisi) also recognized Assad as a possible part of the future conflict settlement process. Subsequently, the question of whether the current Syrian president could stay in power, at least for the transition period, was actively

discussed among people in the region. And the answer was not always negative.²⁸

Moreover, even if Moscow was successful in bringing all groupings in the Syrian secular opposition to the negotiation table and at the same time managed to make Assad more ready to compromise, this would still not guarantee any practical outcomes. The Syrian secular opposition including the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces did not represent the majority of those people currently fighting on the ground against the regime. What was more important, the political opposition could not even influence the behavior of these people. This is especially true in regard to the Islamist groups. According to some Syrian experts, from the very beginning of the conflict the social base of the secular political opposition in the country was very narrow. It was formed by local intellectuals and parts of the middle class. All in all, these elements comprised about 20 per cent of the population. With the radicalization of the conflict, they opted either to flee from the country or to join the regime. The other 80 per cent mostly supported conservative views. This did not make them radicals or extremists but more inclined to support those groupings that chose Islam as the language of their propaganda. The Islamic grouping became even more appealing for the part of the population that did not support the regime when they proved to be better funded and more effective in the battle than the formally secular Free Syrian Army.

By September 2015, the fact that Moscow persistently adheres to its principle that no negotiations with Islamists are possible considerably limited Russian space for political maneuver. While it was unacceptable to deal with the radical jihadists that use Islam to justify their crimes against humanity it was (and still is) necessary to differentiate them from people using Islam as the ideology to organize their resistance. For some Syrians, joining one of the Islamist groups was the only viable way to struggle against the oppressive regime of Bashar Assad. By ignoring these people the Kremlin risks distancing itself from a large part of the Syrian population.

All in all, the Moscow-1 and Moscow-2 meetings clearly demonstrated Russian capacities and their limits. On the one hand, given its ability to speak directly with the Assad regime, Moscow could be effective as a mediator between Damascus and the international community. The Syrian regime's dependence on Russian arms supplies and diplomatic support gives the Kremlin additional leverage to influence Damascus. From this point of view, Tehran was the only viable alternative to the Russians. The Islamic Republic also had good contacts with Damascus. However, compared with Russia, Iran was more attached to the Assad regime. It also had its own ideas about

Syria's future which differ from either the American or European vision. Finally, existing mistrust between Iran and the US as well as between Iran and the Syrian opposition would not allow Tehran to be a good mediator. In the case of Moscow, the situation was different. Its pragmatism and flexibility as well as the existing critical approach to the personality of Bashar Assad allowed Russia to conduct dialogue on Syria with a wide range of forces. It is not a coincidence that, for the first time since Geneva-2, Russia was the only country that managed to bring Assad's people and opposition to the same negotiation table while other countries seemed to concentrate on the Ukrainian events only. On the other hand, Moscow was still considered a part of conflict. It also refused to talk to those opposition forces that chose Islam as their ideology, although not all of them (for instance Muslim Brotherhood, Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar ash-Sham) shared the radical views of Jabhat an-Nusra or the IS. Under these circumstances, Russia was unable to launch national dialogue on its own, but could be an effective player in an international team to address this problem.

Russia and the Perspectives of International Cooperation on Syria by September 2015

Kerry's visit to Sochi in May 2015 and its aftermath clearly demonstrated that the international community was getting largely interested in putting an end to the conflict in Syria via the process of the national dialogue and reconciliation. The Middle East was rapidly becoming extremely turbulent, meanwhile neither the West nor the regional powers (such as the GCC members, Turkey and Israel) were obviously capable to deal with the growing regional turmoil on their own. On the other hand, the Islamic State not only retained its control over the large part of the Iraqi and Syrian territories but managed to continue defeating its opponents in spite of the US air support provided to Bagdad. For instance, in May 2015, the IS forces won a decisive victory over the Iraqi and Syrian forces by capturing Ramadi and Palmyra. They not only seized strategically important points but made one step closer to the capitals of both countries.

The conflict in Syria was becoming bloodier, more radical and complex. By September 2015, it could be characterized simultaneously as a civil, sectarian and proxy war. The American-backed program of military training for the secular opposition forces (such as the Free Syrian Army, FSA) in camps deployed in Turkey and Jordan was inadequate to the needs of the resistance whereas the Saudis became gradually concerned about their

capacities to control those Islamists that they initially armed.²⁹ The Syrian secular opposition which the Americans and Europeans initially backed became more disillusioned about the US. Moreover, the Syrian moderates and secularists were disappearing as apolitical force on the country's political arena. Some of them preferred to leave the country. Others either joined the Assad regime as the only viable alternative to the Jihadists or tried to come to terms with the Islamists. Occasions when members of the FSA were joining the Islamist groupings or fighting together with them (as in the battle for Idlib in March 2015) became more frequent.

Finally, the sectarian conflict was spilling over the borders of the Middle Eastern region. Hundreds of foreigners from the West, Russia and Central Asia were joining the struggle in Syria on the side of the radicals. In June 2015, the IS was extremely close to the borders of Israel and Jordan, threatening the security of these countries.

Under these circumstances, refusing to engage in dialogue with Russia on the Middle East became increasingly costly for the West and the regional powers. The US recognised that it was extremely important to stabilize the situation in the region. In spite of existing disagreement on the future of Bashar Assad, Russia and the US were unanimous that the jihadist threat in the region had to be eliminated, government institutions in Syria saved intact, and that national dialogue might be the only solution. Thus, in the mid-March 2015, the CIA Director, John Brennan, said: "None of us, Russia, the United States, coalition, and regional states, wants to see a collapse of the government and political institutions in Damascus". According to Brennan their collapse would lead to the fall of the country under the influence of jihadists.³⁰ Well informed sources in the Middle Eastern region argued that the same view was being reached by the GCC countries and Iran.³¹ However, if acting separately neither the West nor the regional powers had any chance of success: each player had a unique means of influence on the situation on the ground but only when used together could these means bring the desired result. Hence, the last months have witnessed an increased exchange of delegations between the main sponsors of the Syrian opposition and Damascus. Russia was not an exception: in the mid-2015 it maintained a quite intensive level of opinion exchange with both the Western and Middle Eastern powers (including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and GCC).

Apart from the above-mentioned diplomatic support Russia had quite a number of things to offer. Thus, during his visit to the US in February 2015, the head of the FSB (Russian counter-intelligence service) Bortnikov gave an interview to the press about the readiness of Russian

security services to cooperate with their US colleagues on Syria and Iraq. He argued that in spite of existing sanctions, Moscow was ready not only to exchange information on the IS but to “conduct joint work” on the ground.

Yet Moscow’s decision to deploy military forces in Syria on 30 September 2015 changed the dynamics of Russian dialogue with the regional powers on Syria. Essentially, Moscow was compelled to engage its airforce in Syria as by September 2015 the collapse of the Damascus regime seemed to be inevitable.

Russian Military Involvement in the Syrian Conflict: What Happens Next?

Since May 2015, the West and its Middle Eastern partners have repeatedly failed to read Russian intentions on Syria. First, when they assumed that, after playing a positive role in the settlement of the Iranian nuclear issue in July 2015, Moscow would immediately help the US and EU to settle the Syrian conflict.¹ In early August 2015, Turkish President Recep Erdogan believed that his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin had already made a decision to shift support away from the Damascus regime.² During summer 2015, intensive meetings between Russian, American and Saudi officials only strengthened the confidence of those analysts and policy makers who expected changes in the Kremlin's stance on Syria. They argued that Russian withdrawal of support for Assad was a matter of time and Moscow was only trying to bargain a better deal.

At the same time, by September 2015, it was obvious that both Western and regional powers had obviously underestimated the seriousness of the warning signals about the growing Russian military presence in Syria they were receiving from the ground. Thus, Moscow's preparations for a military scenario were first known in mid-August 2015, when various media sources began reporting about the presence of Russian military delegations arriving in Syria to assess the capacity of local airfields to host Russian fighter jets. Subsequent information about the reconstruction of Latakia airport and two other airfields in the area controlled by the Assad regime were additional signs that Moscow was preparing for a military operation. Finally, in the second half of September, when the number of Russian fighter jets and military helicopters in Syria exceeded the number of actual Syrian pilots available to use them, the last doubts about Moscow's intentions should have disappeared. Apart from that, on 28 September 2015, during his speech at the UN General Assembly and meetings in New York, Putin clearly stated

that Russia would continue to talk to the international community on Syria but that would not mean that the military support of the Assad regime would be stopped.³ Nevertheless, the declaration made by the Russian authorities on 30 September 2015 to deploy air forces in Syria caught the international community completely unprepared.

This decision of the Russian authorities put an end to speculation about their readiness to abandon Assad.⁴ In spite of all expectations the Kremlin decided to raise its stakes in the Syrian campaign: Moscow not only increased the volume of its military supplies to Damascus and improved the quality of equipment provided but launched air strikes against radical Islamists and opposition groupings fighting against the Assad regime. As a result, by 1 October 2015, Moscow had clearly demonstrated that the Russians were not going to alter their position on Damascus. This was when the international community made a second error of judgment: instead of trying to understand the reasons for Russian behavior, Western media sources launched a hysterical campaign arguing that Moscow is about to send its ground forces to Syria.⁵ However, Moscow has neither abandoned Assad, nor planned to put its full-fledged army forces on the ground. This simply did not fit in with the Russian plans.

Speculation about Russian readiness to send significant numbers of ground troops to Syria for combat was largely baseless. By January 2016, the numbers of Russian advisors deployed in Syria had indeed increased, but this had a logical explanation as the volume and range of equipment supplied by Moscow to the Syrian regime had also been raised. Consequently, more personnel were needed to train the Syrians on how to use the new equipment. Apart from that, Moscow used its special operation forces and, allegedly, personnel from private military companies to assist the Syrian army in its offensive launched in October 2015.⁶ Nevertheless, that was the maximum of the Russian capacities that the Kremlin could use in Syria.

The deployment of full-fledged ground forces for a long period and far from Russian borders would require immense economic resources; this was what the Kremlin lacked. Moreover, Moscow probably remembered from the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979 – 1989) that this was one of the factors that exhausted and shattered the USSR economy; it did not want to repeat this experience. The war in Afghanistan also left a psychological scar in the Russian popular mind (often compared with the Vietnam syndrome in the US) that made it difficult for the Russian authorities to get popular approval for the massive use of armed forces abroad. Moscow's experience in Ukraine should not be compared with the Syrian case: Ukraine was and is still considered as a part of the Russian world/space.

Finally, the limited use of force completely satisfied the Kremlin's needs. Russian military deployment in Syria should not be considered as the core goal of Moscow's diplomacy but its instrument.⁷ In Syria Russia was and still is playing "geostrategic poker", where the Assad regime is logically considered Russia's main stake. This stake allows the Russians to influence the situation on the ground and demonstrate their importance in the international arena by positioning Moscow as one of those players without whom the Syrian question cannot be solved. By increasing military support to the Syrian government the Russian authorities simply strengthened their stake.

Moreover, by September 2015, on the eve of Russia's dramatic military moves, the Kremlin feared that Assad's regime was on the verge of collapse. The assessment was that the existing levels of military, technological, and financial assistance by Russia to the Syrian regime would only prolong its agony and not save it. Moscow could not afford losing its stake in the Middle East. Intervention was based on a choice between a "bad" and a "very bad" scenario: either a costly military operation to support Assad, or doing nothing as his power crumbled. The Russian leadership was also motivated in part by its perception of what had happened in Libya and Iraq, where—in its view—nothing good came of the complete destruction of the old regimes. It did not want to see the same happen to Syria as, from the Kremlin point of view, this would mean the turning of Syria into another regional source of instability and jihadist threat. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, Moscow was extremely concerned with the growing numbers of Russian-speaking extremists fighting in Syria.

How Serious is the Jihadist Threat for Russia?

Not all of the Russian-speaking fighters came directly from the Russian Federation. Thus, the majority of Chechens who joined the Syrian struggle arrived from other countries (including EU, Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan) where they or their parents previously found refuge from persecution by Russian authorities for participation in the first and second Chechen wars (1994 – 1996, 1999 – 2001) on the separatist side. Thus, quite a number of Chechen fighters came to Syria and Iraq from Georgian Pankisi Gorge (including one of their leaders, Tarkhan Batirashvili, aka Abu Omar al-Shishani). Some authorities argue that Chechen fighters in Syria began to represent a substantial force only after the arrival of a large group from Georgia in November 2013.⁸ Others, however, were already inside Syria by the beginning of the conflict as, over the previous 20 years, they had been accorded refugee status by the Assad regime itself.

In some cases, Russian-speaking fighters coming from abroad were also joined by the descendants of those Chechens and Circassians who fled from Russia in 19th and early 20th centuries and settled in various parts of the Ottoman Empire. According to a high-ranking member of the Chechnya government, Yusup Zubayrayev, by the beginning of the civil war in Syria in 2011, in that country alone there were about 6000 ethnic Chechens living in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Al-Hasakah, Qamishli and Ra's al-Ayn. Not all of them were eager to join the Syrian opposition: according to Zubayrayev, in 2012, 500 people even enquired with the Russian authorities about repatriation to their historical homeland.⁹ Yet, rumors have it that the memory of historical grievances (in most cases, the ancestors of these Chechens and Circassians were compelled to leave their homes in the Caucasus) was deep enough to make some of them join the Syrian insurgents to avenge Russia by fighting against Moscow-backed Assad.

There are several reasons that bring Russian-speaking fighters to Syria and Iraq. To a certain extent, the situation is similar to the experience of European countries where people try to join IS and other radical groupings to escape from socio-economic, political and personal problems in their home countries. Thus, the civil conflict in Syria creates multiple opportunities for social mobility that allows people to rise from “just another guy with poor expectations” in their home countries to a high-ranking member in the Islamist movement. For instance, this was the case of Batirashvili who managed to evolve from a retired Georgian officer to one of the leading members of IS. Some fighters also join the struggle out of their personal romantic belief in an attempt to “change the world”, “protect the oppressed” and create “a new and better society”.

On the other hand, it is necessary to remember that people joining some of the radical groupings (including IS) are getting paid for participation in the war against Bashar Assad and Baghdad. While the role of the financial factor should not be exaggerated, for those who came from extremely poor regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus, financial assistance together with some benefits in kind (first of all, free accommodation provided by the Islamists) can make the battle for Islamic ideas in Syria and Iraq very appealing. Finally, a religious component also plays an important role. Some of the Russian-speaking fighters are truly convinced Muslims. Moreover, Damascus is an important city in Muslim eschatology: it is believed that it will play the role of assembly point for pious Muslims before the final stand off against the great evil on the eve of the Day of Judgment. Consequently, some of jihadists are even trying to fit their current fight against the Assad regime into this narrative.

Post-Soviet realities also add some specifics. First of all, Russian security forces as well as the pro-Kremlin Chechen authorities headed by Ramzan Kadirov appeared to be effective in dealing with Islamic separatists in the Northern Caucasus. As opposed to the period of the 1990s to early 2000s, terrorist attacks in the Russian mainland are now rare, and the intensity of the insurgents' activities in the Caucasus itself is also decreasing. The FSB (Russian counter intelligence) periodically reports successful operations on the elimination of hidden terrorists cells. Under these circumstances, for Islamists it has become difficult to conduct their operations in Russia and some of them see Syria and Iraq as a ground where it is easier to fight for their ideals. Their participation in the fight against Damascus may also be indirectly considered as a struggle against Russia as it weakens the Kremlin-backed regime. In other words, Russian Islamists are literally squeezed from Russia to continue the struggle for their ideals outside it. The same could be applied to the Jihadists from Central Asia. The security regime in the countries of this region is extremely tough.

Struggle against Islamic terrorism in the post-Soviet space is also periodically accompanied by a crackdown on Islam as a religion, and anti-Islamic hysteria. From this point of view, the authorities of Russia, Azerbaijan and other post-Soviet countries periodically make things more difficult for themselves by not distinguishing between extremists and pious Muslims.¹⁰ As a result, they are alienating the latter and strengthening the position of the former. According to some experts on Azerbaijan, it was Baku's drawn-out attack on the Shia clergy prior to the events in Syria that led to the diminishing of their influence in the country and allowed Sunni radicals to recruit volunteers to join Islamists in Iraq and Syria. The ex-commander of the Tajik OMON (police special operation force), Gulmurod Khalimov who joined IS (allegedly with some other Tajik officers) in May 2015 stated that one of the reasons for his defection was the alleged attempt of Dushanbe to "organize provocation" against the Muslim religious community in the country.¹¹ Finally, the problem of illegal migrants and their social status in the post-Soviet space also plays a role. According to some sources, some elements of Central Asian jihadists were recruited not in their home countries, but in Russia where they worked as a low-skilled work force (often without an official permit to work in the country) or immediately after their return. Low wages, absence of social protection for illegal migrants, bad treatment by employers, life in ghetto-like dormitories and the absence of better opportunities in their home countries were creating conditions favorable for people to be recruited by Islamist organizations. Under these circumstances, various sources have reported that unknown recruiters (according to some witnesses, probably of

Chechen ethnic origin) visited workers in their dormitories and appeared on Fridays near mosques in Russia to promise people social and economic benefits in exchange for their service to the cause of the IS.¹² It is still unclear how many Central Asians were recruited in this way. Yet the international Islamist groupings were considering targeting illegal migrants in Russia as recruits against Moscow and its regional interests almost immediately after the beginning of the war in Syria.

Russian-speaking fighters are well represented in both the al-Qaeda related Jabhat an-Nusra grouping and its rival ISIS (the two most effective radical factions fighting against Assad's regime). They proved to be very effective on the battle ground and even formed their own units.¹³ However, Russian experts are unanimous in their belief that some of these fighters do not regard the IS or Jabhat an-Nusra cause in Syria and Iraq as their own. For them this struggle is just a preparatory stage on their way back to Russia where they can start their own battle. Signs in Russian saying "Death to Russia" and "Today – Syria, tomorrow – Russia" appeared on the walls of houses in the Syrian war zone as early as 2013.¹⁴ In 2014, Abu Omar al-Shishani already threatened to "liberate the Caucasus".

The concerns of the Russian government were strengthened by the fact that, since 2013, the leaders of the North Caucasian radical grouping Emarat Kavkaz started to encourage people to fight against Assad considering Syria and, later on, Iraq as a training camp for members of the organisation. In 2013, one of the ideological leaders of Emarat Kavkaz, Sheikh Abu Abdurrahman al-Maghribi, even issued a fatwa that blessed the Russian jihadists to gain battle experience in Syria, while reminding them that their main battle was in the Caucasus against Russia.

However, this support expressed by the political and religious leaders of Emarat Kavkaz was a compulsory measure rather than a voluntary step. According to some independent analysts, the cause of the Syrian and Iraqi jihadists appeared to be extremely appealing for their Caucasian brothers in arms. Consequently, by 2015, the outflow of Emarat Kavkaz's members to the Middle East severely weakened the capacity of this and other extremist organisations to conduct effective terrorist activities in Russia and the Northern Caucasus. Thus, in 2014, human rights observers registered a substantial decrease in the intensity of the insurgents' struggle against the Russian authorities. Under these conditions, Emarat Kavkaz was compelled to bless its members going to Syria and Iraq in order to retain their loyalty and persuade them to return. The leadership of this organisation presumably expects that after their return these fighters will not only have the necessary connections and experience, but they will also become the main symbols of

resistance attracting new members by their doubtful military “glory”. Under these circumstances, the 2014 decrease in terrorist activities in the Northern Caucasus should not mislead analysts and policy-makers: it is not the end of the Islamist resistance but the calm before the potential storm.

Allegedly, a Syrian trace was found by the Russian authorities during their investigation into the terrorist attack on Grozny in December 2014. In May 2015, Khalimov promised to bring the Islamic caliphate to Tajikistan and threatened the US and Russia. He separately addressed Tajik working migrants and called upon them to stop being “Russian servants” and to serve only Allah.

On the other hand, some of those extremists who stayed in Russia and Central Asia appear to try to find connections with the Jihadist movement in the Middle East.¹⁵ Thus, in late 2014, several leaders of the separatist movement and religious preachers in Dagestan and the Northern Caucasus declared their loyalty to the IS. Roughly at the same time, the leadership of the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan also stated its intention of joining the global IS network.¹⁶ In a sense, Syria and Iraq became the ground for networking between the different Russian-speaking extremist groupings. Previously separated and scattered, they gradually see themselves as a united front. Moreover, they are establishing ties with international terrorist organizations and, thus, are becoming part of the global extremist network. This process seems to be working in two directions. On the one hand, Russian-speaking jihadists creating (or, better to say in some cases, restoring) their connections with international Islamist movements and their sponsors (like Qatar). On the other hand, they are networking among themselves to establish a united front that consists of different nationalities from the former Soviet Union. The fact that, according to some human rights watchers, all Russian-speaking fighters are often referred to as “Chechens” regardless of their national origins (because of the dominance of the Chechens in their ranks) serves as a clear symbol of a newly emerging jihadist international.¹⁷

Everything Should Go According to Our Plan

At the same time, Russia never intended to take the burden of fighting against terrorism in Syria or saving the regime solely on its shoulders. Instead, the top priority was to re-establish the military and political capacities of the Assad regime. Consequently, any groupings (not necessary Islamist radicals and terrorists) that posed a serious threat for Damascus immediately became the target of Russian air strikes, although the Kremlin never acknowledged

this and kept insisting that its main goal in Syria was to bomb the Islamic State.

Russia's military presence in Syria clearly increased the regime's chances for long-term survival. Apart from that, the Russian military presence made any Western military intervention in Syria extremely unlikely. Previously, Moscow had suspicions that the US-led coalition conducting anti-ISIS operations could be used to overthrow the Assad regime. The deployment of the Russian air force in Syria allayed Moscow's concerns. At the same time, by exchanging information and trying to coordinate its military efforts with other countries Moscow continued promoting its idea of the anti-Islamic State coalition that would involve the Syrian regime, and, thus, bring Assad back from international isolation.¹⁸ By deploying its air forces at the Khmeimim airbase Russia also strengthened its own diplomatic position by proving that any decision on Syria could not be taken without Moscow's participation.

Russia's ultimate goal in Syria was much more ambitious than just strengthening the Assad regime. The Kremlin remained extremely interested in the end of the Syrian war and, in the mind of Russian strategists, this settlement was only possible through the beginning of a national dialogue between the regime and the anti-government forces (excluding radical Islamists and foreign fighter groupings).¹⁹ However, the Kremlin wanted to launch this reconciliation process on its own conditions. These conditions included the preservation of the territorial integrity of Syria, immediate formation of a united anti-Islamic State coalition, the saving of remaining state structures and the transformation of the Syrian regime only within the framework of the existing government mechanisms.

By 2016 Putin continued to insist on a peace settlement in Syria based around the existing Syrian state structures and institutions and with some sort of power-sharing between the Damascus regime and the "healthy" elements in the opposition. Moscow also insisted that the removal of Assad from power should not be a precondition for the beginning of national dialogue. The Kremlin did not believe that the fall of the Assad regime or his early removal would turn Syria into another Libya. According to Moscow decision makers, this would inevitably mean the further radicalization of the Middle East and the exporting of Islamic radicalism to Russia, the Caucasus region and Central Asia. The Russian authorities genuinely believed that by helping Assad they were protecting their national security interests. In August 2014, Lavrov called the radical Islamists "the primary threat" to Russia in the region. According to Russia, Assad was the only person able to guarantee the integrity of the Syrian state and the military institutions

needed to fight against ISIS and other radical Islamists. Although Moscow did not exclude the possibility that Assad could be replaced in the future, it could only happen when there was confidence in any new leaders who are able to control the situation in Syria.

This vision of the situation drastically differed from that of the West and many Middle Eastern powers that considered Assad as the source of the Syrian problem rather than its solution. Yet, the Kremlin was determined to change international opinion. Consequently, the Russian authorities adopted a two track approach. On the one hand, from spring 2015 onwards, the Russian authorities intensified their dialogue with the international community. This step made some policy-makers mistakenly think that Moscow was looking for ways to trade Assad for some economic and political concessions. Meanwhile, the main task of the Kremlin was to impose its views on the conflict settlement. On the other hand, the Russians increased the volume and quality of military supplies, as well as launching their military operation in the country to weaken the Syrian opposition and to guarantee that the Syrian regime would survive long enough to see the moment that the Kremlin achieved break-through on the diplomatic track.²⁰ In the end, the Russian plan worked. The Syrian regime stayed in power. Meanwhile, by March 2016, the Russian idea of establishing an anti-Islamic State coalition with the participation of the Syrian regime had been gradually finding support outside Russia. Even before the beginning of the Russian military deployment in Syria, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi openly expressed support for the Russian initiative. Some Western politicians also started to voice their opinion that the West probably should deal with Damascus in its anti-ISIS struggle.

However, the Russian vision of the future of Syria was also changing. By January 2016 Moscow finally stopped labeling all fighting opposition forces as “terrorist” and recognized at least some of them as legitimate players. Previously, Russia agreed to deal only with the political wing of the Syrian (preferably, official) opposition. However, after the beginning of its military operation in Syria, Moscow strengthened its relations with the Syrian Kurds. Earlier, on 9 and 13 September 2015, the Russian MFA stated Moscow’s readiness to include in the anti-IS coalition the Syrian moderate opposition and those Syrians who were not foreign fighters or international jihadists.²¹ This statement allowed the legitimisation in Moscow’s eyes of those moderate Islamists who had serious influence on the ground but with whom Russia had previously avoided dealing. Consequently, the Kremlin included some of them (first of all, the Muslim Brotherhood) in the list of groupings that could take part in the intra-Syrian negotiations. Finally, in early October

2015, the Russian MFA openly declared Moscow's readiness to negotiate with the Free Syrian Army.²² By January 2016, Russian officials also became more certain about the possibility of political reforms in the country and the emergence of a post-Assad Syria. While insisting on preserving Syria in its current borders, the Kremlin does not exclude the scenario of the country's federalization. The Russian authorities still consider Assad the only person capable of guaranteeing the integrity of the remnants of the state and military institutions which survived the previous years of conflict and are still capable of fighting against Daesh/ISIS. Yet, Moscow does not exclude the possibility that Assad could be replaced in the future. However, this should not happen before there is confidence that the new leaders are able to control the situation in Syria. Ultimately, Moscow sees the gradual transformation of the regime as inevitable and has raised the possibility of conducting early parliamentary elections.

Revitalizing the Diplomatic Track

Less than a month after the beginning of its military operation in Syria, Moscow started to flesh out ideas for the next phase of its involvement in the conflict. Harboring no illusions about the feasibility of a military victory in the country, it wanted to put itself at the center of a political process. The chief goal of the first phase of Russia's military intervention was largely achieved: by November 2015, the opposition groups in Syria representing the main threat for the regime started to lose their ground. At the same time, Assad's forces and his Iranian allies were able to stabilize their front lines and make a few territorial advances.²³ Yet, Moscow was unwilling to invest the sizeable military resources that would be required to tip the scales decisively in Damascus's favor. A protracted military operation could be very damaging for Russia. There were potential military losses and economic costs to be considered (by November 2015, the costs of the operation was estimated at upwards of 1 billion dollars per year).²⁴ There was also the threat that Russian public opinion on the intervention could cool, although, by November 2015, the Russian elite was still united in support of it. There were additional political risks for Russia's position in the Middle East. By November 2015 Moscow was severely criticized in the region itself. Although, for instance, the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council were more inclined to blame Washington for an ineffective policy that led to Moscow's intervention, than to criticize Russia itself, the Russian positions were very fragile. And that was proven on 24 November 2015 when a Russian bomber was shot down by a Turkish fighter jet.

Under these circumstances, Russia intensified its attempts to revitalize international negotiations on Syria and to launch the process of national reconciliation. This was seen as the only way for the Kremlin to pull back from the conflict it had become involved in. Subsequently, Moscow's diplomatic efforts led to the relatively productive multilateral talks in Vienna on 30 October 2015.²⁵ This meeting was held with the participation of China, the EU authorities, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, Britain, the UN and US. Moscow was pleased that the final communiqué in Vienna supported many long-standing Russian positions.²⁶ It restated international support for Syria's territorial integrity, a continuing secular government, the need to protect the country's remaining state institutions, and a refusal to negotiate with ISIS, as well as called for a continuing fight against any other groups in Syria listed by the UN as terrorist organizations. Two weeks after, the sides met again. On 14 November 2015, the participants of the second meeting stepped up with a peace plan for Syria. They agreed to ensure a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition based on the 2012 Geneva Communiqué; to implement a nationwide ceasefire in Syria; to convene Syrian government and opposition representatives in formal negotiations with a target date of 1 January 2016; to defeat the ISIS, Jabhat an-Nusra and other terrorist groupings; and to authorize the Jordan government to prepare a comprehensive list of terrorist organizations acting in Syria.

The results of the Vienna meetings were a notable achievement for Russia. First of all, the launching of the UN-sponsored talks in Vienna involved a wider-than-ever range of parties, including Iran, and they committed themselves to meeting more often. In spite of great tension between Russia and the West, US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov seemed to find a common language. At the same time, Moscow also demonstrated its readiness to talk to other regional countries. In spite of existing contradictions, Saudi Arabia and Qatar clearly expressed their intention to continue the dialogue with Moscow. Shortly before the Vienna meeting, Russia and Jordan agreed on the establishment of a coordination center that would allow the two countries to exchange information and coordinate their efforts in their struggle against ISIS. It was the second center of that kind created by Moscow in the region (the first one was established in September 2015 in Baghdad to facilitate the exchange of information between Russia, Iraq and Iran).

However, Moscow also had to pay a price for the organization of the Vienna meeting by reconsidering some of its approaches towards Assad's destiny. Thus, Russia's invitation to the Syrian president to visit Moscow

on 20 October 2015 had two goals.²⁷ While discussing the strategic parameters of military cooperation between Moscow and Damascus, Putin also wanted to check whether Assad would agree to stick to Moscow's plan for a political settlement. That would involve the gradual transformation of the Syrian regime by making it more inclusive. Moreover, on November 3, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova said that keeping Assad in power was not a matter of principle for Moscow, and that it was up to the Syrian people to decide whether he should leave. This, in turn, strengthened perennial mistrust between the Iranian and Russian leaders, as was illustrated by the rather remarkable comment on November 3 by Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, the head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, that Russia "may not care if Assad stays in power as we do."²⁸ Of course, the Vienna meeting did not eliminate all contradictions between the countries involved in the conflict, although it definitely led to a decrease in the degree of misunderstanding. Thus, the first and most contentious issue was the fate of Bashar al-Assad. Western countries wanted a timetable for him to leave and his regional adversaries wanted him to quit immediately, while Russia was reluctant to set a timeframe for his departure. Second, there was disagreement as to what constitutes a "terrorist organization" in Syria—and who therefore was a legitimate target for air strikes. Part of the problem was the near-complete lack of trust between Moscow and Western governments active in the anti-ISIS coalition. Russian officials from Putin on down stated that they would like help in compiling a precise list of groups that did not fall into this category.²⁹ For their part, members of the US-led coalition were adamantly opposed to information sharing for fear that it could be used to target Assad's many opponents.

Third, it remained unclear how negotiations between the Syrian regime and the opposition could be organized. On the one hand, Moscow and Tehran would have to work on Bashar al-Assad, who was well known for his obstinacy and political inflexibility. On the other hand, the standard Russian line was that it was not obvious whom Assad would need to negotiate with. The Syrian opposition was fragmented and it would take a lot of effort to form a group that could be a viable negotiating partner.

Finally, there was still great distrust between the different players at the table. The continuing deep hostility towards Iran by leading Gulf Cooperation Council members made it almost impossible for them to agree on Syria. The US and Russian military elites also saw each other in extremely hostile terms and there was no appetite for working jointly. Besides, Moscow was using the situation in Syria to wage a propaganda battle against US policy. This was not a conducive atmosphere for constructive dialogue over Syria.

Nevertheless, the Vienna meeting revitalized the process of international dialogue on the conflict settlement in Syria that brought substantial results. On 18 December 2015, the UN SC unilaterally adopted Resolution 2254 that reconfirmed the accords achieved during the Vienna meetings, entitled the UN to control the process of conflict settlement and declared the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) comprised of the participants of the Vienna meetings and headed by the US and Russia as the main ground for the conflict settlement process under UN control. Apart from that, the document laid down a time framework for new elections in Syria and the beginning of the constitutional reform in the country.³⁰ This, in turn, created the necessary legal base for the intensification of international efforts aimed at conflict settlement.

So far, the implementation of the UN SC Resolution and Vienna agreements has not gone smoothly. Assad's diplomatic inflexibility as well as the efforts of Saudi Arabia and Turkey to exclude from the negotiation process Kurds and political groupings not loyal to Ankara and Riyadh led to the failure of the first attempts to bring Damascus and the opposition to the negotiating table in January – February 2016. However, this did not prevent the international community from making further attempts to bring peace to Syria. Subsequently, on 21 February 2016, Russia and the US managed to agree on the principles of a cease-fire between Damascus and the non-radical opposition (i.e. excluding terrorists and Islamists) whose implementation started on 27 February 2016.

Pulling back?

The revitalization of the diplomatic track and the beginning of a limited cease-fire in Syria allowed Putin to make another bold move. On 14 March 2016, he declared a partial withdrawal of Russian military forces from the country.

However, the international community should not be deceived by the Russian statements on the beginning of military withdrawal from Syria. Moscow's current moves in the country are anything but areal military pull-back. The withdrawal of the Russian forces is only partial and limited to a certain portion of the aircraft deployed in the country since 30 September 2015. As confirmed by the Russians themselves, they plan to keep both Tartus and Khmeimim military bases fully operational and provide the Assad regime with the necessary equipment, training and military support. Moscow will still keep in Syria for an unspecified period a number of advanced fighter jets which have already continued making airstrikes since

the beginning of the official pull-back. Apart from this, the Kremlin also leaves in the Arab republic its striking helicopters and modern air-defense systems that are officially supposed to guard Russian military installations. Yet, in practice, there are some reports of the Russians using helicopters to support the advance of the Syrian army, while S-400 systems allow them to close Syrian airspace to unwelcome visitors.

The Russian withdrawal clearly demonstrates that Moscow's military intervention in Syria was largely about keeping the regime in power and making the West look flat-footed rather than fighting the so-called Islamic State, as has been continuously claimed. The military pull-back was declared by Putin while ISIS still controls a large part of Syrian territory. It is not a surprise that, in 2015, the territorial losses of ISIS in Syria were only between 14 – 20 per cent: Russian air-forces never considered the Islamic State as the major target. Instead, they concentrated their firepower against those opposition groupings that represented the greatest threat for the Assad regime itself.

Under these circumstances, the Russian statements on the beginning of the military retreat have to be considered as just another political maneuver made by the Kremlin aimed at saving the Damascus regime and retaining a high degree of Russian influence in the region. Since September 2015, Moscow has basically been trying to stay in control of the Syrian conflict settlement process by periodically putting the international community in the situation where it has to adjust to new Russian moves instead of working out its own solutions. Putin used this trick for the first time when he unexpectedly brought his army to Syria. While the West and regional powers were stunned by this bold move and were trying to understand, how to respond, Moscow managed to achieve a number of results on the Syrian front. Thus, Russia managed to prevent the Damascus regime from falling and insured its recognition as a legitimate participant in the conflict settlement process. The Russian involvement in Syria also minimized the chances of direct foreign military intervention with the goal of Assad's removal. Meanwhile, the process of conflict settlement was fully put within the framework of the UN mechanisms that Russia is very good at using in its own interests. Moscow also managed to launch the sluggish process of intra-Syrian negotiations and to establish a limited ceasefire regime in the country. Finally, by bringing military forces to Syria, the Kremlin made the West talk to Russia and take its opinion into account in spite of promises previously given by US and European politicians to keep Moscow in political isolation for what it had done in Ukraine.

Yet, by mid-March 2016, the shocking effect of the Russian military deployment started to wear off. The international community started to

accept Moscow's military presence in Syria as a new geopolitical reality and started to plan its responses accordingly. Russia had also exhausted most of the opportunities provided by the situation, and the negative effect from her military presence on the current scale started to overwhelm its positive side. First of all, Assad managed to stabilize control over the territories that were held by Damascus by September 2016, but even with Moscow's support the regime failed to achieve major military victories during its offensive operations launched after the Russian military deployment. The Russians obviously did not expect such weakness from its ally on the ground. In order to boost the further advances of the Syrian army, Moscow would need to bring additional forces and, thus, to risk sinking deeper into a protracted conflict with the risk of higher losses. However, the Kremlin had already been acting in Syria at maximum capacity whereas its Iranian partners started to be more reluctant about using their troops in Syria having seen Moscow's increased presence in the country. At the same time, Bashar Assad became more self-confident and less ready to look for a conflict settlement via negotiations and dialogue with the opposition that was seen by the Russians as the only way to resolve the conflict. Apart from that, further military action by Russia would inevitably create the greater danger of direct Turkish and Saudi involvement in the conflict, and could also motivate the US to apply sanctions against Moscow if Washington saw the Syrian ceasefire failing.

As a result, the Kremlin once again decided to change the rules by declaring its partial withdrawal. First and foremost, this move was expected to affect the process of the peace talks. Moscow has sent a clear signal to Assad that the Kremlin is not going to repeat the Soviet experience in Afghanistan and keep him in power in a way that the USSR kept the Kabul government going in 1979 – 1992. Consequently, in order to save his regime Assad will need to be more flexible during the negotiations and to look for compromise with the opposition and its sponsors. Secondly, the beginning of the Russian withdrawal is an appeasing message to the West and the Syrian opposition that Moscow is not going to deal with the situation in the country by military means only. Finally, the Russian decision to decrease the numbers of its forces in Syria presents Turkey and some of the GCC states that strive for greater military involvement in the conflict in an egative light, formally placing part of the responsibility on them for the possible failure of negotiations.

It is still not very clear whether Moscow consulted Assad on the decision to withdraw some of its forces from Syria. It may be assumed that while certain technical details were certainly discussed between Moscow and Damascus, the decision itself was taken by Putin's government alone. The

Kremlin possibly saw the current ceasefire in Syria as a convenient pretext to start a partial withdrawal in order to avoid becoming bogged down in a long drawn-out conflict and to present this withdrawal as a significant triumph to its Russian and foreign audience.

The larger part of Syrian territory remains in the hands of the radical Islamists. ISIS and, to a lesser degree, Jibhat an-Nusra and Ahrar as-Sham are still capable of conducting active military operations and on some occasions locally to defeat government forces. The decrease in the Russian military presence will definitely have a positive effect on the morale of the radicals and the part of the military opposition that decides to continue the struggle. However, statements by Russian officials that Moscow plans to keep part of its military forces in Syria and continue to supply Assad with modern military equipment suggest that, in practical terms, the situation at the front will not change much. The military bases in Tartus and Khmeimim will be still used by the Russians and, if necessary, the number of forces deployed there could be restored to the maximum once again. It is also important to remember that Russia has withdrawn part of those forces that it brought to Syria officially. Nevertheless, analysts point out that Moscow actively uses “volunteers with a military background” who help the Syrian troops on the ground.³¹ It is still not clear whether their presence will decrease as well.

The Marriage of Convenience: Russian-Iranian Cooperation in Syria

Russian military engagement in the Syrian conflict had a direct impact on Moscow's relations with Middle Eastern countries. However, it was only after the incident with the Russian Su-24 bomber that was shot down by the Turkish Air Force in November 2015 that the international community started to pay attention to the dynamics of Russian dialogue with the regional powers. The main interest among political analysts is the development of the interaction between Tehran and Moscow in Syria. Officially, the Iranian authorities supported Putin's decision to deploy Russian air forces at the Khmeimim airbase. The majority of Iranian politicians praised Moscow efforts aimed at supporting the Syrian regime whereas the main media outlets of the Islamic Republic such as IRNA, ILNA, ISNA and Mehr covered the activities of the Russian army in Syria completely in line with Russian propaganda. Moreover, when characterizing the development of the dialogue between Russia and Iran on Syria, some political analysts and policy makers started to use words such as "cooperation" and even "alliance".¹

Nevertheless, the international expert community was and still is far from being unanimous regarding the nature of the Russian-Iranian dialogue on Syria. While some researchers talk of the emergence of a strong regional alliance between Moscow and Tehran, others insist that the cooperation between the two countries remains extremely fragile and predict the imminent end of Russian-Iranian collaboration.² Those analysts who believe in the emergence of a regional partnership between Moscow and Tehran refer to the active multilevel interaction between Russia and Iran on Syria. They point out the increased intensity of the diplomatic contacts between Moscow and Tehran since the summer 2015 and emphasize that this recent intensification of bilateral dialogue could only be explained by the need to

coordinate the political and military efforts of the two countries in Syria. For instance, Syria was the main topic discussed by Putin and the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, during the visit of the Russian President to Tehran on 23 November 2015. Moreover, according to some sources, this meeting of the Russian and Iranian leaders differed from the standard form: traditionally, during the visits of foreign guests to Tehran, a meeting with Khamenei does not last long and plays a purely ceremonial role. By receiving a high visitor in his office the Supreme Leader gives a political blessing to the visit while the real issues are discussed by the Iranian president and his ministers. However, the meeting with Putin was an exception: the discussion was intense and lasted longer than usual. Khamenei, who personally controls the Syrian issue, wanted a detailed account of Russian intentions.³ Yet, some experts caution not to pay excessive attention to diplomatic contacts between the two countries when judging Russian-Iranian cooperation on Syria. From their point of view, a rift in the Russian-Iranian dialogue is inevitable: the goals pursued by Moscow and Tehran in this conflict are different and the leaders of the two countries have different ideas about the future of post-conflict Syria.⁴ In order to support this point of view, political analysts often refer to the absence of unanimity on the Russian military presence in Syria among the Iranian political elite.⁵ Who is right in the analysis of the nature of the Russian-Iranian dialogue on Syria? Both the opponents and supporters of the theory about the emergence of the Russo-Iranian alliance refer to the solid and real facts when proving their position. However, neither of the sides is correct in its conclusions. The devil, as always, is in the detail. No doubt, the Russian-Iranian interaction on Syria will have a long-lasting positive dynamic. However, there are factors that will not allow this dialogue to reach the level of a full-fledged military and political alliance.

Should We Form an Alliance?

A hidden discussion on the need to cooperate with Russia in Syria does indeed exist in Iran. Moreover, there are even some Iranian policy makers and analysts who cautiously question the rationale behind Tehran's military involvement in Syria itself. However, these questions are raised within a certain (rather small) group within the Iranian political elite without reaching the national level of discussion. Thus, some members of the Iranian middle class display some fatigue from Tehran's active and obtrusive involvement in regional affairs. They believe that it would be much more reasonable for their government to invest the money it spends in Iraq, Palestine and Syria on supporting of the pro-Iranian forces in the Iranian economy given that it is

experiencing difficult times. The message to the authorities of Iran is simple: “stop feeding the foreigners at our expense”.⁶ These views are also expressed by Iranian politicians, but rarely. Thus, in 2013, high-ranking Iranian diplomat Mohammad Sadr openly doubted the necessity of unconditional support of Bashar Assad.⁷ Under these circumstances, Russian military involvement in Syria also receives a very negative reception. For instance, in October 2015, prominent Iranian politician Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani clearly stated his critical attitude to any military attempts to solve the Syrian crisis. When commenting on the beginning of the Russian air raids in Syria Hashemi-Rafsanjani stated that he was against the bombing of Syria regardless of who conducts them because air strikes can hardly be an alternative to negotiations as a way to bring an end to the conflict.⁸ However, neither Sadr nor Hashemi-Rafsanjani’s views on Russian-Iranian involvement in Syria are openly supported by other Iranian policy makers. Moreover, by 2016, even those two politicians had become more cautious in their statements on Russia and Syria, having realized that their ideas failed to find large scale support.

Unexpectedly, Moscow is also criticized among the traditional supporters of Tehran’s active role in the Syrian crisis – Iranian radical conservatives and the IRGC members. These people believe that immense military efforts made by Tehran in support of the Assad regime bought the Iranian authorities the right to decide the destiny of Syria. Indeed, Iran deployed its military advisors and special forces in Syria long before Putin’s decision to send Russian troops to Syria. Tehran’s proxies (such as Lebanese Hizbollah and Shia militia) were the first to come to the aid of Assad, as well. Moreover, even after the beginning of the Russian air raids, Moscow still tried to play the role of the third side in the conflict by flirting with the legal opposition in Syria and occasionally distancing itself from Assad. At the same time, Iran has been clearly positioning itself as the loyal ally of the regime from the very beginning of the civil war in Syria. In addition to the military assistance provided, the Islamic authorities have been supporting the Assad’s regime materially and financially: during the most difficult periods for Damascus of 2013 – 2014, the salary of the Syrian army was paid directly from the budget of Iran while the Syrian economy was fueled by Iranian petrol and energy resources. Iranian military advisors trained the Syrian army for urban fighting while their civilian colleagues helped the Syrian administration to build an effective war-time economy.⁹ Under these circumstances, Russian direct military involvement in the conflict creates serious concerns among the Iranian military elite. They are afraid that Moscow might “steal” the Iranian victory in Syria. Shortly after the beginning of the Russian military

operation, the pro-IRGC media outlets of Iran started to argue that the Russian air raids and the huge psychological effect from them could make the Syrian regime forget about the Iranian input into the survival of Assad during the previous years. Consequently, Tehran might not play the role it really deserves in determining the future of post-conflict Syria. Apart from that, some Iranian media outlets called upon the Iranian authorities not to trust Russia and argued that Moscow might simply trade off its support of Damascus for increased investments from the Arab monarchies of the Gulf. The active contacts between Russia and the GCC only strengthened these concerns.¹⁰ Thus, in October 2015, the IRGC commander, Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari openly questioned the loyalty of Moscow to Damascus by saying that Iran was much more concerned with Assad's destiny than Russia.¹¹ Yet neither Hashemi-Rafsanjani nor the IRGC commanders backed by radical conservatives have the last word in determining Tehran's approaches to Syria and Russia. Unlike some authoritarian Arab regimes, the Iranian political system allows a certain degree of pluralism and debate in society about the foreign and domestic policies of the government. For instance, the political views of Sadr on the Syrian issue, though obviously different from the views of the majority, did not cost him his career: by 2016, he still was one of the advisers of the Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif. Moreover, he retained his good relations with the Supreme Leader of Iran.¹² However, this pluralism and relative freedom to express cautious disagreement with the actions of the Iranian authorities in the international arena should not deceive researchers: these intra-Iranian debates have little chance to bring changes in the diplomatic course of the country without the blessing of Khamenei, who takes the final decision on all sensitive political questions (and the Syrian issue is one of these). In other words Jafari, Zarif, Sadr and Hashemi-Rafsanjani have the right to openly express their opinions, but it is the Supreme Leader and his cabinet that make the final decision on every issue. And, during his meeting with Putin in November 2015, Khamenei gave the green light for Iranian cooperation with Russia on Syria.

The Supreme Leader's decision was largely supported by the moderate conservatives who by November 2015 dominated the political life of the country. Thus, immediately after Putin's trip to Tehran the advisor on international affairs to the Supreme Leader, Ali Akbar Velayati (who is deeply involved in Iranian diplomacy on Syria) formulated the official point of view on Russian-Iranian cooperation that became widely accepted in the Iranian political establishment. He argued that the Iranian authorities were determined to have "continuous and long-lasting cooperation with Russia" on Syria.¹³ According to Velayati, "Russian efforts aimed at the settlement of

the Syrian issue are completely coordinated with Iran. Occasionally [in the past] Russia and Iran had conflicting views on some aspects of the problem, but, finally, the two countries managed to agree on them as well.”¹⁴ In order to emphasize the depth of Russian-Iranian cooperation the politician also mentioned that, after Putin’s visit to Tehran, the commander of the Al-Quds Force (an IRGC division responsible for extraterritorial military operations including those in Syria) Qasem Soleimani could become a regular guest in Moscow facilitating the “exchange of information” between Russia and Iran on Syria.¹⁵ The evidence that a large part of the Iranian elite had reached a consensus on the necessity of working with Russia could be found even before Putin’s visit to Tehran and Velayati’s statements. For instance, in October 2015, the speaker of the Iranian parliament, Ali Larijani, visited Sochi to take part in a meeting of the Valday discussion club, an international intellectual forum annually organized in Russia. Unexpectedly Larijani, who traditionally had a very critical views on Russia and Russian foreign policy appeared to be very positive about the prospects of cooperation between Moscow and Tehran in Syria. He was unusually emotional when criticizing the US and EU policy in the Middle East and calling upon Russia to intensify its efforts aimed at strengthening regional security and stability.¹⁶ His positive statements about Russian-Iranian interaction in Syria chimed with Putin’s words. The Russian president praised Tehran for effective cooperation within the framework of the joint information center in Baghdad that was established to ease the exchange of information on ISIL activities between Russia, Iraq, Iran and Syria.¹⁷ Iranian politicians were more or less unanimous in their reaction to the tragedy with the Russian bomber shot down by the Turkish air force in November 2015. They recognized Ankara’s decision to attack the Su-24 plane as a serious mistake. Immediately after this event, Rouhani strongly advised his Turkish counterpart, Erdogan, to be more cautious with the use of force while another prominent Iranian politician, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, openly advised the Turkish president to “pay [more] attention to the settlement of domestic issues rather than to the creation of new problems on the international arena”.¹⁸ After November 2015, the majority of Iranian news agencies were also unanimous in their positive coverage of the Russian military involvement in Syria. Regardless of their political preferences, the main news outlets of the Islamic republic argued that the Russian military deployment was necessary to save the Assad regime. The difference was only in emphasis. Thus, while the official and conservative news agencies (such as FARS, IRNA and IRIB) were speaking about the Russian military involvement only in positive and extremely passionate tones the reformist newspapers such as *Mardom Salari*, *Arman*

and *Iran* were more balanced in their judgments periodically reminding their readers that Russian cooperation with Iran in Syria was driven exclusively by Moscow's pragmatism and not by partnership obligations.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Tehran's decision to work together with Russia was also the result of (this time – Iranian) pragmatism.

A Strategic Chess Game

The geostrategic factor strongly favored the strengthening of Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria. For Tehran, the beginning of Moscow's military involvement in Syrian affairs finally gave the Iranian authorities what they had been looking for for the last decade: a solid political and military base for the development of bilateral relations. Since the 2000s, Tehran had been looking for a leading world power that could be a counterweight to the US pressure on Iran. Traditionally, Russia was one of (if not the most) preferred candidate for this role. Yet, during the last two decades, any Iranian attempts to win Moscow's support ended in failure. The Kremlin cooperated with Tehran only on a case by case basis and took care to ensure that this cooperation never reached the level where it could negatively affect the development of Russian dialogue with the West or with other countries of the Middle East. Even when Moscow occasionally blocked some of the US moves against Iran or took measures to mitigate their negative effects, these Russian efforts were largely determined not by the partner obligations of Moscow to Tehran, but by the pragmatism of the Kremlin that used Iran to achieve its own goals. Moreover, until 2012, Moscow frequently sacrificed its good relations with Tehran in order to improve its ties with the US and EU. Thus, the so-called reset in Russian-US relations declared by Medvedev and Obama in 2009 was one of the reasons for the Russian authorities to postpone the delivery of S-300 missile complexes to Tehran and to impose unilateral sanctions against Iran in 2010.

However, even under these circumstances, Russia still remained the most appealing candidate for the Iranian authorities as a potential counterweight to US influence in the Middle Eastern region. Tehran's attempts to use China for this role in the late 2000s – early 2010s obviously failed. Initially, the Iranians expected that intensive economic and investment cooperation with Beijing would boost the building of an Iranian-Chinese political alliance. However, in spite of all Iranian efforts, China did not want to lose its neutral status in Middle Eastern affairs. Even more than Russia, Beijing tried to avoid forming any alliances that could spoil its good relations with any other countries of the region. Moreover, in the most difficult

situations in the Iranian context the Chinese authorities preferred to follow Russia.²⁰ By 2012, this naturally brought Iran back to the idea of building closer relations with Moscow.

Even the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Actions (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 group that substantially eased Iranian relations with the West did not change Tehran's plans to use Moscow. Statements made by Khamenei in September – December 2015 showed that the highest Iranian leadership still mistrusted the West and expected the continuation of confrontation with the US. This meant that Tehran remained interested in Russia as a counterbalance to American influence in the Middle East. However, in the case of Moscow, economic relations could not be a solid base for the formation of a political partnership with Iran. During the previous five years, bilateral trade was gradually decreasing whereas the volume of mutual investments remained negligible. All attempts to revitalize these ties in 2007 – 2009 and 2012 – 2015 ended in failure.

Consequently, Tehran made an attempt to build stronger cooperation with Russia in the political arena. The Iranian authorities tried to find such political issues of mutual interest whose discussion could lead to a long-term cooperation between the two countries. The unprecedented degradation of Russian relations with the US after Euromaidan in Ukraine and Moscow's involvement in Syria created long-awaited conditions for increasing the number of topics that could be discussed between Russia and Iran with a strong chance of establishing common approaches. Putin's decision to deploy Russian troops in Syria opened even more options for such cooperation. Shortly after the beginning of the Russian military operation, the Iranian authorities sent a clear message about their readiness to interact with Russia: during his Sochi trip, Larijani openly stated that in spite of the future lifting of international sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic and the gradual end of Iran's international isolation, the current leadership of the country saw Russia as its priority partner.²¹ The Russian leaders, on their side, also appeared to be extremely interested in strengthening relations with Tehran after the signing of the JCPOA. After 2012, when the international community resumed its attempts to settle the Iranian nuclear issue, Russia was concerned that the end of sanctions and a subsequent Iranian rapprochement with the West might diminish Moscow's influence in Tehran and distance the Islamic Republic from Russia. The previous failure to bind Iran to Russia through the intensification of bilateral economic contacts compelled Moscow to intensify the discussion on political issues of mutual interest. Subsequently, cooperation in Syria became one of the main reasons chosen by the Russian authorities as the basis for the development of bilateral dialogue.²²

Brothers in Arms

The need to develop active cooperation between the two countries in Syria was also determined by the situation on the battlefield. As mentioned earlier, Iran was the first to supply the Syrian regime with arms, financial means and “volunteers” while Russia initially tried to limit its involvement in the crisis to diplomatic support for Assad. Yet, by 2015, Iranian resources were substantially depleted. Moreover, it became obvious that these resources were not enough to save Assad. At that moment, Tehran was also deeply involved not only in the Syrian war but in the Iraqi and Yemeni conflicts. Consequently, the Iranian government was compelled to juggle its limited human and material resources between these three countries. Under these circumstances, the most difficult issue for Tehran was to determine which of its regional allies needed Iranian support most of all. As had happened on several occasions, the Iranians were not always able to make the right choice. Thus, the fall of Idlib to the Syrian rebels in the spring of 2015 was partly determined by miscalculations by the Iranian commandment who ordered the transfer of Shia militia forces from Syria to Iraq to help the Iraqi government in its struggle against ISIL. However, this left the Syrian forces without adequate backup, and, subsequently, they were defeated in Idlib.²³ The beginning of Russia’s direct military involvement in Syria considerably eased the burden on Iran by radically changing the balance of power in favor of Damascus. Moscow provided the Syrian regime and its Iranian allies with two things they seriously lacked: modern artillery systems and effective air support. As had been proven during the Libyan war of 2011 and the struggle of the Iraqi government against ISIL, without superiority in the air and effective artillery firepower the regimes were doomed to lose the battle against the rebels. It was not a coincidence that the Damascus regime started to lose ground in 2015 after the final exhaustion of its air forces. According to statements by eyewitnesses, in March – April 2015, the Syrian government tried to give the impression of using aviation to put psychological pressure on its opponents rather than carrying out real air raids.²⁴ Damascus was running out of spare parts to repair its old Soviet planes and munitions for them (the lack of munitions became one of the reasons for the Assad regime to start using self-made barrel bombs). The Iranians could not help its Syrian ally materially as Tehran lacked modern and effective air forces itself: the international sanctions imposed on Tehran hampered the development of military aviation. Most of the fighter jets used by the Iranian army are either obsolete Soviet and Western aircraft or locally produced copies.²⁵ The same applies to the artillery equipment.

As a result, the deployment of Russian aircraft at the Khmeimim base and the increase in supplies of modern military equipment (including allegedly Russian T-90 main battle tanks and advanced “Solntcepyok” artillery systems) were a game changer. The beginning of the Russian air strikes were also a key incentive for Iran to increase (at least temporarily) the numbers of its military forces and proxies in Syria in order to help the Syrian army to stabilize the situation on the front lines (especially, in the Aleppo area) in October – November 2015. However, later on Iran was compelled to withdraw parts of the IRGC personnel due to high losses sustained by them.²⁶ The important role of Russian aviation in saving the Syrian ally of Tehran was what determined Iran’s negative reaction to the Turkish decision to shoot down the Su-24 bomber: without Russian support, the chances of Assad’s army, Lebanese Hizbollah and Iranian “volunteers” to win the battle for Syria would be minimal. Under these circumstances, whoever was shooting at Russian military planes was indirectly weakening the Iranian army.

Differences that Bring Together

Those who point to the huge difference in the ultimate goals pursued by Russia and Iran in Syria are no doubt correct. Yet, instead of provoking a rift between the two countries these differences unexpectedly brought Moscow and Tehran together.

First of all, both Russia and Iran appeared to be extremely interested in saving the government institutions in Syria. For sure, each of the sides had its own motives for this. As already mentioned, Russia was largely driven by its security concerns and strong beliefs that the building of a new post-conflict Syria was possible only through the evolution of the old regime rather than through its complete dismantling. The confrontation with the West and Putin’s plans to re-establish Russia as an influential world power were the other factors that made Moscow support the Syrian authorities in their struggle. For Tehran, the need to save the government institutions was determined by a different motive. By supporting Assad, Iran was fighting for its place in the system of regional affairs.

Iranian approaches to the Syrian issue are mainly shaped by the views of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his conservative supporters who still see the Islamic Republic as a “besieged fortress”. For them, the current improvement in relations with the West that started after the signing of the JCPOA in mid-2015 is believed to be just a temporary break in the endless struggle for Iran’s national interests.²⁷ Within this approach Tehran’s struggle

for Syria is believed to be part of the greater strategy designed by the Supreme Leader and his team whose final goal is to secure the right of the Islamic Republic to regional supremacy. Iranian conservatives even formulated the concept of the “chain/line of defense” that comprises Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen.²⁸ According to the authors of this theory (such as the advisor to the Supreme Leader, Velayati), each of these countries represents a “front line” of Iranian defenses against international and regional opponents of the Islamic republic that strive to undermine its influence in the Middle East. Consequently the weakening of the Iranian presence in any of these four states can have global negative consequences for Tehran’s geostrategic plans. The list of enemies against whom Iran is struggling in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen may occasionally differ, but, as a rule, it includes the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. If necessary, Qatar and Turkey could be included in it, as well.

By 2015, the Iranian authorities had already formulated the principle that “the battle for Assad in Syria is a battle for Iran”, and it clearly planned to fight for its Syrian ally till the end. Moreover, according to Velayati, out of the four members of the “chain of defense” Syria has the greatest importance for Tehran.²⁹ The Supreme Leader’s advisor even called this country a “golden ring” in this chain.³⁰ The Iranian military involvement in Syria is also seen by the leadership of the Islamic republic as a part of its traditional stand off against Israel and the US. In December 2015, Velayati openly called Syria “the bridge” that connects Iran with Lebanon (i.e. Hizbollah) and Palestine which Tehran can only use if the Alawi regime stays in power.³¹ This approach to Syria inevitably puts Damascus in the centre of the Iranian-Israeli-American triangle. Thus, according to another advisor to Khamenei, Yahya Rahim-Safavi, the final goal of the US anti-Assad moves in Syria is to ensure the security of Israel.³² Such a vision of Syria inevitably makes the survival of the pro-Iranian Assad regime an existential issue for Tehran and, thus, puts the Islamic Republic together with Russia in the camp of international forces interested in the survival of the Syrian state. Yet, neither Moscow nor Tehran has illusions that they have sufficient military capacity to return Assad to full control over the country. As a result, both Iran and Russia support international efforts to settle the Syrian conflict through negotiations as long as this process guarantees the preservation of Russian and Iranian influence in post-conflict Syria. This necessity to secure their presence in this country after the end of the civil war, in turn, brings Russia and Iran closer diplomatically and allows them to cooperate in the context of the international platforms that discuss the future of Syria.

Finally, the similar perception of ISIL and Jabhat an-Nusra as a serious threat also naturally brings the two countries together. However, if for Russia these military groupings represent a security threat, Iran considers them also as an important ideological challenge. In spite of the fact that the Iranian leadership long ago unofficially rejected the idea of the export of the Islamic revolution (formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini), Tehran still painfully reacts to any attempts to challenge its sole right to use Islam as political leverage and state ideology. From this point of view, the ISIL that declared the building of the Islamic state as its goal is a serious ideological adversary for Tehran.

Both Russia and Iran are very pragmatic about their cooperation in Syria. This also helps their dialogue. Neither Moscow nor Tehran has any illusions about the ultimate goals of its partner and how different they are. This was openly stated by Velayati. When characterizing the level of cooperation between Russia and Iran in Syria he argued that “each country pursues its own benefits [by supporting Assad], [but] Russia cannot protect its interests in the Middle East and the region alone”.³³ From Velayati’s point of view, Russia did its best to involve Iran in international negotiations on the Syrian conflict as Moscow needed diplomatic support during its meetings with the sponsors of the Syrian opposition.³⁴ Iran, in its turn, agreed to help Moscow as the Iranian authorities believe that in Syria they are fighting a “small world war” and without Russian support it will be difficult to win in it.³⁵ As stated by Velayati, Russia, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Oman formed a “diplomatic block of resistance” within the framework of the international negotiations on Syria.³⁶ In other words, Russia and Iran came to an understanding that in order to secure their interests in Syria they need to cooperate. Consequently, Moscow and Tehran formed a marriage of convenience where each partner tries to reach its own goals with the help of the other. Such an approach implies that the partners not only coordinate their activities, but try to avoid unnecessary confrontation over issues of secondary importance by making concessions and temporary postponing the discussion of disputed questions that may prevent the sides from achieving their primary goals.

Thus, the principle of the marriage of convenience allowed Russia and Tehran to settle the dispute over the future of Assad and the Alawi regime. The Russian authorities have never been as loyal to Assad as Tehran. The survival of Syrian government institutions was and still is the top priority of the Kremlin. Nevertheless, the Russian leadership draws a difference between the Syrian state and Assad. From the long-term perspective, Moscow does not exclude the replacement of the current Syrian president through legal procedures if this does not harm the conflict settlement process. The Russian government also understands the necessity of transforming the Syrian

regime into a more democratic and inclusive entity.³⁷ The Iranian authorities, on the contrary, often do not distinguish between the Assad regime and the Syrian government institutions.³⁸ Initially, Tehran insisted that Assad's right to stay in power should not be questioned. Moreover, the Iranian authorities positioned this demand as one of their "red lines" in Syria.³⁹ This inflexible approach could seriously harm Russian attempts to revitalize the negotiation process between Assad and the opposition. However, by December 2015, Russia and Iran managed to overcome this difference in views on Assad's destiny by agreeing that the Syrian president will leave his post if such a demand is expressed by the majority of the Syrian people through the voting mechanisms which exist in the Syrian constitution. Yet, neither Russian nor Iranian officials made clear statements on when all Syrians are going to have a chance to express their will regarding the future of Assad and what should be done to avoid staged elections which are the norm for the Alawi regime.

The absence of clearly stated deadlines and mechanisms for a referendum on Assad's destiny or the election of a new Syrian president leads to the conclusion that Moscow and Tehran simply postponed the discussion on Assad's destiny until better times when nothing will threaten Syrian government institutions. The current formula ("Assad may go one day") temporarily satisfies both the Russian and Iranian authorities: it does not deny the possibility of political changes (important for Russia), but also does not argue that Assad's removal is inevitable (important for Iran).

It Is Not an Alliance

And, yet, it is too early to speak about the emergence of a fully fledged Russian-Iranian alliance in Syria. So far, military coordination between the two countries has been patchy. Neither is in a hurry to create joint command structures. Their coordination is occasional, and in most cases, the sides simply prefer to take parallel paths to the same destination. Thus, in 2014 – 2015, Tehran was independently contacting Syrian opposition factions with its own peace plan trying to organize the rebels' negotiations with Damascus. In September 2015, the Iranian authorities even managed to facilitate a fragile cease-fire between the Syrian regime and Jaish al-Fateh in several areas.⁴⁰ In each case Moscow was informed about Tehran's plans but it never participated in their implementation.

When interacting with the Syrian regime, Russia and Iran also used different tactics. Given all the financial, human and material resources invested by the Iranian authorities in the survival of the Assad government by 2015, Tehran saw Damascus as its minor partner to whom it could give

direct orders.⁴¹ As a result, by 2015, the behavior of the Iranian leadership towards its Syrian counterparts became extremely paternalistic: if necessary, the Iranian authorities were imposing their military-political decisions on Assad. Those officials who actively opposed the Iranian dictate had a tendency to die under very suspicious circumstances.⁴² In addition to that, since 2014, Iran was trying to create paramilitary structures in Syria that would be directly dependent on Tehran and only loosely connected to Damascus. The creation of the Syrian Hizbollah that would act independently from the Syrian government was supposed to give the Iranians additional leverage to affect the Assad's behavior. These paramilitary structures were also supposed to guarantee the Iranian influence in the country if Assad falls by acting as the local military groupings that would be supported directly from Iran.⁴³ Russia, on the contrary, has never put excessive pressure on the Syrian regime or tried to dictate what it had to do. Moscow also avoided any obvious actions behind Assad's back. According to some members of the Syrian opposition, the Kremlin made occasional attempts to find a successor for Assad who would be strong enough to control the situation in the country but more acceptable for the opposition as the head of the Syrian state during the beginning of the national reconciliation process. Nevertheless, this search for an Assad replacement (if it ever happened) was done very gently and cautiously in order not to irritate the current leader of the Syrian state.⁴⁴

Respect demonstrated by Moscow towards the Syrian regime created a positive image of Russia among those Syrians who were loyal to Damascus but extremely irritated by Iranian attempts to turn Assad into their puppet.⁴⁵ Consequently, part of the Syrian elite considered Moscow as a natural counterbalance to the obtrusive Iranians, whose military leaders are not always ready to share their influence in Syria with Russia.⁴⁶ Finally, the current format of Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria based on the principle of a marriage of convenience also prevents the dialogue between the two countries from evolving into the strategic alliance. In order to achieve the current primary goal – to save the Syrian government from falling – the countries agreed to temporarily ignore the differences in their approaches towards the settlement of those issues that, at present, are of secondary importance. However, this only means that the discussion of these questions (such as the future of Assad or Iran's plans to use the territory of Syria to continue supporting Hizbollah in Lebanon) is just temporarily postponed. Sooner or later Russia and Iran will need to return to their discussion, and there are no reasons to assume that the positions of the two countries regarding these postponed problems will become closer by then. For instance, leading Iranian politicians continue repeating their mantra that Assad should be kept in power at all cost.⁴⁷ At

the same time, Russian officials do not exclude the scenario of a post-Assad Syria. Moreover, in December 2015, Reuters even reported that Moscow has a ready list of Assad's successors.⁴⁸

This temporarily ignored divergence in Russian and Iranian approaches towards Syria is a very effective time bomb that will ruin any attempts to build a real alliance between Moscow and Tehran. This is obviously well understood in both countries. Thus, it is notable how the level of the bilateral cooperation in Syria between Russia and Iran was characterized by the Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. In his interview to the *New Yorker* on 6 October 2015 he avoided answering the question on whether Iran supported the Russian military operation in Syria. Instead, Zarif said that his country “supports anybody’s involvement against Daesh, provided that it’s serious”.⁴⁹ When answering the same question in his other interview, Zarif argued: “We try to coordinate regularly with Russia, as well as with others—except for the United States—on what is happening in the region. And we’re open to discussing with everybody the situation in Syria, because we believe it’s a common threat”.⁵⁰ In other words, although the Iranian minister of foreign affairs confirmed the fact of cooperation between Moscow and Tehran he tried not to exaggerate its importance.

Not the last role in limiting the capacities of Russian-Iranian dialogue on Syria is played by the factor of third countries. Both Russia and Iran (each in its own way) make sure that their cooperation on Syria does not harm the development of their relations with the West and with the regional powers.

Geopolitical Acrobatics

Russian diplomacy in the Middle East is based on the principle of balancing between different states as long as they are ready to deal with Moscow. In spite of the current political turmoil in the region, the Kremlin, so far, is very successful in maintaining relatively good relations with the key players of the Middle East (with the exception of Turkey). As explained in earlier chapters, this necessity to keep diplomatic channels open for dialogue with all countries of the region is determined by a number of factors. Under these circumstances, forming an alliance with Tehran is an unaffordable luxury for Moscow as this would ruin the Russian strategy of balancing between the main players of the Middle East.

Thus, if Moscow formed a full-fledged military alliance with Iran in Syria, this would affect Russian relations with the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council whose money is still considered by the Kremlin as a potential source of investment in the Russian economy. A Russo-Iranian

alliance would also undermine Moscow's diplomatic efforts to settle the Syrian crisis by making the Saudis less willing to talk to Russia and effectively dragging Moscow into the middle of the broader Sunni-Shia confrontation, allowing anti-Russian political forces in the Middle East to portray Kremlin as an enemy of the Sunni world. This would be a serious threat, not only to the Russian position in the region, but also, conceivably, for the domestic security of Russia, where the 15 million-strong Muslim community is predominantly Sunni. Salafi groupings in the Gulf have depicted the Russians as new crusaders at least since the beginning of the civil war in Syria.⁵¹ Moscow received a serious warning in October 2015 when approximately 50 Saudi clerics signed an open declaration calling for jihad against Moscow. This has created an ideological background for the unification of radical forces in Syria and provides motivation for supporters of radical Islam in the GCC to intensify their financial support for Islamists inside Russia.⁵² Russian cautiousness in developing cooperation with Tehran might also be an attempt to improve Moscow's image in the Sunni world. This image suffered severely after the beginning of the Russian bombings of the Syrian opposition which together with the radical Islamists became one of the main targets of the Russian air force in the autumn of 2015.

By allying with Tehran, Moscow would most likely harm relations with its 'silent partner' in the Middle East – Israel – whose position on the annexation of Crimea, on Western sanctions against Russia and on Russian air forces in Syria corresponds to Russian interests. In December 2015 – January 2016, statements by Israeli officials demonstrated concerns about growing Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria and beyond. Previously, Israel tolerated the rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran as long as it was not considered as a threat to the national security of the country. Yet, by 2016, Israeli officials had started to openly worry that the Russian government might begin to close its eyes to anti-Israeli moves by Tehran.⁵³ Although these speculations seem to have little basis, active Russian support of Tehran in Syria would almost certainly be considered in Israel as further proof of the growing Russian-Iranian alliance.

Under these circumstances, the Saudi-Iranian spat caused by the persecution of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr by the Saudi authorities on 2 January 2016 became a serious challenge for Moscow. On the one hand, keeping quiet would affect the dynamics of Russian-Iranian relations that had been on the rise. Moscow invested diplomatic and economic effort in improving dialogue with Tehran, including the opening of a credit line. It could not afford to lose these dividends in view of Russia's dire economic straits. The Russian authorities are desperate to retain Iran within its

sphere of influence and avoid any drift westwards. Without Iranian ground forces fighting the opponents of the Assad regime, it would be difficult for Moscow to attain its goals in Syria – Russia needed Iran’s military and political support to compel the Syrian opposition and its sponsors to negotiate with Bashar al-Assad. Moscow’s silence on the diplomatic quarrel between Tehran and Riyadh would also provide opponents of Russo-Iranian rapprochement among Iranian reformists and Russian pro-Western policy makers with further proof that the two countries are unable to forge any kind of effective partnership.

However, even in this situation the Russians decided not to sacrifice their strategy of balancing between the leading Middle Eastern powers. Consequently, they are trying to fudge it and avoid both complete neutrality and allying fully with Tehran. Shortly after the beginning of the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia in early January, Russia declared its readiness to play a mediating role between Riyadh and Tehran. There was also another dilemma related to Russia’s image on the international stage that determined the Russian intention to stay neutral. Putin tries hard to maintain an image of leader who does not leave his partners in trouble, but the Kremlin also traditionally positions itself as the main (sometimes only) protector of international law. Iran is a partner. Yet the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran after the death of Nimr was a clear violation of international norms. From this point of view, backing a country with a *laissez-faire* attitude towards the rights of foreign diplomats might not be in Moscow’s interests.⁵⁴ The Iranian authorities also take into account the regional situation when planning the development of their dialogue with Russia. Thus, while condemning the decision of the Turkish authorities to shoot down the Russian Su-24 bomber, they remain interested in maintaining the current good level of relations with Ankara. Tehran is obviously not ready to sacrifice its political and economic relations with its Turkish neighbor for the sake of its Russian partner.⁵⁵ Under these circumstances, the Iranian authorities have not once indicated their readiness to cooperate with Turkey and discuss regional issues including those related to Syria.

Syria, the Middle East and Russian Propaganda

The Russian presence in Syria and the Middle East also has its domestic dimension. In September 2016, Russia is expected to hold its Parliamentary elections. Under these circumstances, it has, at least, to give the impression of the troops' withdrawal from Syria. Otherwise the fact of Moscow's military presence in Syria might be used by the opposition to draw parallels between the Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war and the Soviet presence in Afghanistan that also started as a short-term operation aimed at the support of a regime loyal to Moscow. This, in turn, could have a negative effect on the level of public support for pro-Putin candidates. At the same time, the Russian authorities have never clearly stated their final goals in Syria. Consequently, this approach allows official propaganda to present any (even small) achievements as examples of the successful completion of military operations. This, in turn, would definitely have a positive effect on Russian public opinion.

It could be argued that if there was no Middle Eastern region with all its dramatic problems then Moscow would have to invent it. Currently, the Russian propaganda machine is actively exploiting regional issues to shape public opinion inside the country. Unexpectedly, the Middle East offered the Kremlin a very convenient prism through which to position itself in Russian public opinion on a number of vital issues such as the legitimacy of the regime, its confrontation with the West and the situation in Ukraine. As a result, for the last three years, the Middle Eastern problem has become one of the most popular topics discussed by Russian media sources and politicians.

First of all, the Russian authorities are focusing on Middle Eastern topics in order to shore up the popularity of the regime. In order to achieve this, official propaganda actively appeals to the more nationalistic sentiments of the Russian population. And these appeals find positive feedback. A large part of the mid- and low-layers of the Russian population would like to see Moscow more active in protecting its national interests and cementing

relations with the non-Western part of the world. The Kremlin, in turn, gives them what they want. Russian support for Damascus, close relations with Tehran and rapprochement with Egypt are positioned by Moscow officials and Russian media as the restoration of Moscow's influence in the world that was lost after 1991. For that part of the Russian population which misses the 'imperial glory' of the USSR, these moves are intended to symbolize the return to the old traditions of the Soviet Empire: prior to its fall in 1991, the Soviet Union enjoyed good political and economic relations with these countries.

The Show Must Go On

Under these circumstances, all that is necessary for the Russian authorities is to present the Middle Eastern situation through the prism of the Soviet past and old concepts that often have nothing to do with reality. As a result, ordinary Russians have quite a surreal picture of the Middle Eastern situation. Thus, Moscow's support for Bashar Assad's regime and rapprochement with Cairo are believed to be a symbol of Russian-Arab friendship and unity in the struggle against instability caused by the Americans and terrorism supported by the US regional partners - Qatar and Saudi Arabia.¹ The Russian media prefer not to mention that Assad's regime represents neither Arabs nor Syrians. They remain silent on Moscow's responsibility for the current bloodshed in the country. Kremlin propagandists also prefer not to mention that "evil" Saudi Arabia (together with the UAE) physically sponsored Russian-Egyptian friendship by allowing Cairo that is dependent on its financial support to let Russians in the country.

Unfortunately, anti-Americanism is also a part of these new old narratives based on the mythology of the Soviet past. While accusing the West in returning to the language of the Cold War, Moscow also de facto appeals to the stories of that time by resurrecting the image of the US as the "great evil".² The situation in the Middle East and a number of errors made by the Obama administration in the region make this task easy. In 2011, Putin personally labelled the US and EU "new crusaders" for their military operation in Libya.³ The current instability of the region is also portrayed by Moscow as a result of the US excessive involvement in the Middle East.⁴ In his interview with the Russian media on 22 April 2015, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov openly accused Washington of being responsible for the creation of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State by, first, supporting the mujahedd in Afghanistan in the 1980s and, then, invading Iraq in the 2000s.⁵ Some pro-government analysts and journalists go even further. They exploit

the traditional belief of the Russian population in conspiracy theories by spreading myths about the deliberate destabilization of the Middle East by the US after 9/11 and the absence of a real American interest in stopping the bloodshed in Syria and Iraq.⁶

Don't Rock the Boat: Stability vs. Democracy

The controversial public reaction to Putin's re-election for a third presidential term in 2012 and obvious problems with the development of civil society in Russia compel the Russian authorities and media to promote the idea of a special Russian model of governance.⁷ This implies a strong paternalistic central government that controls many aspects of socio-political life but also offers stability and security. This form of governance, according to Kremlin propagandists, perfectly suits the country's realities whereas values of the Western democracy do not. Moreover, any attempt to bring Western ideas to Russia might only lead to instability and political turmoil.⁸

In order to support this point of view, the Russian leadership periodically addresses the topic of the Arab Spring. The latter is explained to the public within the framework of the Kremlin's traditional "colour revolutions" narratives.⁹ Thus, Moscow's propagandists accuse the West of an attempt to impose their "improper" democratic values on the Middle Eastern nations that have their own non-democratic but authentic forms of governance. This, in turn, leads only to political chaos and bloodshed. As an example Moscow propagandists point to the situation in Libya where the population, "tempted" by "Western fairytales" about democracy, overthrew the government and received only a failed state in exchange. Although the Russian media have to acknowledge that Muammar Qaddafi was a bloodthirsty dictator, they also argue that instead of political freedoms he offered his people social security and stability.¹⁰ The latter argument creates parallels with those ideas that were actively promoted in Russia itself prior to the 2012 presidential elections that Putin's re-election meant stability, but changes in the leadership would bring only turmoil and havoc.¹¹

Finally, through its Middle Eastern narratives Moscow legitimizes its foreign policy towards Ukraine. It is notable that shortly after the beginning of the Saudi-led operation in Yemen against the Houthi rebels, the Russian government TV channel *Rossiya* presented a report in which the frontman of Russian propaganda, Dmitry Kiselyov, argued that there was no difference between Yemen and Ukraine. According to him, in both countries radical rebels overthrew legitimate presidents. Under these circumstances, he posed a question: if the Saudis can support overthrown president Abd Rabbuh

Mansur Hadi and even bomb Yemen, why should Russians be blamed for their support of Viktor Yanukovich?¹²

Russian propaganda compares Ukrainian nationalists fighting in Donbass with the members of ISIS struggling in the Middle East and often sees no difference between them. The presence of Crimean Tatars and Chechens (who largely support the radical religious ideology) among Ukrainian volunteers fighting against the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk Republics serves as additional proof that pro-Russian insurgents wage war against the global forces that represent the same challenge to international security and human values as the jihadists in Syria and Iraq.¹³ As a result, the civil conflict in Donbass also acquires a sacred status.¹⁴

We will Win

However, for Moscow it is also important to show that it not only fights for the right cause but that this struggle will end in Russian victory. First of all, Russian propaganda argues against the effectiveness of Western military assistance provided to Kiev. The Kremlin again addresses the experience of Iraq by pointing out that American arms and US instructors did not help the Iraqi army to stand up to ISIS. Consequently, Russian propagandists doubt that this outside assistance will help the Ukrainians.

To a certain extent, the Kremlin has already declared its victory in the confrontation with the West. Russian propaganda did its best to exploit to the maximum the visit of US Secretary of State John Kerry to Sochi in May 2015. This gesture of American good will was portrayed by the Russian media as American surrender. The main thesis promoted by the Moscow media was that the West needs Russian assistance on a number of issues including Iran's nuclear program and Syria's civil conflict. Under these circumstances, the West will forgive the Kremlin's misbehaviour in some other areas including Ukraine. Consequently, when commenting on Kerry's visit Lavrov officially referred to the failure to isolate Russia.¹⁵

When covering Middle Eastern issues for a domestic audience, Russian politicians and the media make bold and emotional statements with only rare attempts to restrain themselves. That is largely determined by a need to keep the public in a certain political frame of mind and constantly oriented to a set of basic ideas. Yet, so far, the Kremlin clearly differentiates between propaganda and diplomacy. Thus, while presenting Kerry's visit to Sochi as a diplomatic victory, the Russian government clearly understood that it needs Washington on Syria no less than the US authorities need to talk to Russia on the same matter. Consequently, in order to understand Russia's

true approaches to the Middle East and the West it is necessary to watch Moscow's moves rather than listen to its words.

However, it is still not a good idea to humiliate your opposite number, even if your words are only propaganda. On the other hand, a liar may eventually start to believe in his own lies. From this point of view, the official discourse of Middle Eastern events in Russia may have a negative outcome for Moscow. Officials have already started to believe in some propagandistic statements as the real truth. This over-simplifies the analysis and leads to a misperception of the situation. Thus, they label Saudi Arabia and Qatar only as terrorist sponsors. All Syrian rebels using Islam as an ideology to mobilize people for struggle were for a long time believed to be religious extremists (only by September 2015 did Moscow start to differentiate between moderate Islamists and the radicals), and the IS connection was suspected behind any terrorist activity in Russia or the post-Soviet space.

Finally, the Russian authorities may indeed start to believe in their victory over the West. Some Western analysts argue that Moscow's propaganda has already played a negative role in the Kremlin's decision making. They argue that, when presenting the failure of Obama to organise a military operation against Assad in 2013 as the result of Russian diplomatic efforts rather than the indecisiveness of Washington, Moscow did begin to imagine that it could challenge the West.¹⁶ This, in turn, could pave the way for a decision by Putin to challenge the international world order by the annexation of the Crimea.

Conclusion

2012 onwards has seen as a period of diplomatic activity by the Kremlin in the Middle East which is unprecedented since the fall of the USSR. Existing records of diplomatic and political contacts show an increased exchange of multilevel delegations between Russia and Middle Eastern countries. Moscow is attempting to cultivate deeper involvement in regional issues and to establish contacts with those forces in the region which the Kremlin considers as legitimate. If before 2012 the Kremlin's diplomacy in the Middle East could be characterized as inconsistent and shaped by the opportunism of the Russian authorities, growing confrontation with the West became the factor which impelled Moscow to intensify its activities in the Middle East. All in all, by intensifying its current activities in the region, the Kremlin is pursuing the following three goals:

1. Economic (compensating for the negative effects of sanctions on the Russian economy; securing existing sources of income; protecting the interests of Russian energy companies and their share in the international oil and gas market);
2. Political (avoiding complete international isolation; creating leverage which can be used to affect US and EU behavior; propagandizing Moscow's conception of the "right world order"; shaping Russian popular opinion);
3. Security (reducing potential security threats for Russia and the CIS posed by the situation in the Middle East).

Russian strategy in the Middle East comprises several elements. First, Moscow is persistent in defending what it sees as its red lines in the region. Thus, Russia is against any military intervention not approved by the UNSC or justified by the existing UN norms. It does not welcome forced regime change if it leads to the destruction of existing state mechanisms. The Kremlin is also concerned about any change of borders in the Middle East, and it is firmly against any dialogue with radical Islamists and jihadists. Moscow's flexibility

has enabled it to talk to different forces in the region and, if necessary, play the mediator's role. However, Russia is respected by Assad's regional opponents such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar for the stubbornness it demonstrates when defending its own red lines in the region. Accordingly, the Saudis and Qataris are compelled to take Russia's point of view into account and retain some dialogue with the Kremlin.

Second, Russia seems to be trying to reclaim its Cold War role as a counterweight to the US in the region. Yet the Kremlin does not directly oppose Washington, but rather exploits the region's pre-existing disappointment with the US through practical moves which contrast American and European behavior. Thus, the reluctance of Washington to protect Mubarak compared with the Russian support provided to Assad encourages regional powers to consider Moscow a more reliable partner.

Third, Moscow avoids using ideological rhetoric in its official dialogue with the countries of the region. Unlike in the former Soviet space, the Russian leadership does not impose its views either by force or by means of economic coercion. In dialogue with the countries and political groupings of the region Moscow tries to focus on existing commonalities rather than differences and contradictions. In all cases, the Kremlin also remains extremely pragmatic. Russia does not raise the question of political freedoms in Iran and tries not to be critical of Israel's policies in Palestine and Gaza in spite of its support for a two-state solution. Moscow tries to support a dialogue with all countries in the region without expressing obvious support for any particular state or coalition, and, so far, it has been partly successful in doing so.

Finally, in its economic efforts, the Kremlin focuses on those areas where it has market advantages: nuclear energy, oil and gas, petro-chemicals, space, weapons and grain. At the same time, Russian business in the Middle East is based on the adage of "Chinese price for European quality". Thus, price and reliability were the main reasons for interest from Middle Eastern countries in Russian nuclear technologies.

Nevertheless, Moscow is not omnipotent. Its success is more often than not determined by the policy mistakes made by the EU and US. This suggests that "corrections" in Western approaches to regional issues would limit Russia's capacity to manoeuvre. The Kremlin's financial and economic capabilities will never match those of the US and EU, so Russia has market advantage in only a few areas – and these are gradually decreasing with the failure of economic diversification and the growing technological gap with the West.

Moscow also pays attention to the formal side of diplomatic relations. Formalities matter in the Middle East but they need to be supported by deeds. This reality may finally upset Moscow's strategy of balancing between

different powers in the region in order to maintain good relations with them all – which is ultimately impossible. The intensification of dialogue with Tehran raises Iranian expectations of closer cooperation. Yet, the formation of any alliance with Tehran could harm Russian dialogue with other states, including Israel and the GCC countries.

Russian influence in the Middle East is also periodically challenged by the Middle Eastern countries themselves. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have tangible political and economic capacities to counterbalance Moscow's influence in the region. Russia's supposed partners in the region are also not reliable. Some, such as Egypt and Israel, are using the Kremlin's interest in closer contact as leverage to shape their own relations with the US: they intensify dialogue with Russia in order to make Washington more flexible on sensitive bilateral issues, but this instrumentalization does not make for good relations. Other 'friends' of Russia do not hide the possibility that, in future, they may be rivals with Moscow. For instance, Russian interests in the EU gas market are challenged by periodic statements from Iranian officials regarding Tehran's supposed willingness to join European-backed projects which would decrease EU dependence on Russian natural gas.

The active Russian presence in the Middle East should not be considered only as a threat to US and EU interests. The capacities of the Russian government in the Middle East are limited, and, in some cases, Russian and Western interests are overlapping. Even in Syria, the Kremlin's goals are by no means completely contrary to Western interests: currently, Moscow accepts the idea of a post-Assad Syria and simply wants to guarantee the Russian presence there. Moreover, there are a number of issues where Russian interests converge with those of the US and the EU. These include protection of the non-proliferation regime in the Middle East, stabilisation of the situation in Iraq and Syria, and counteracting the spread of jihadism. This should create grounds for cooperation between Russia and the West in the region.

Yet, at the same time, Moscow believes that it has chosen the right strategy in the Middle East. Success in Syria, rapprochement with Iran, the strengthening of ties with Egypt and the development of dialogue with Israel and the GCC add to the Kremlin's confidence. Consequently, any attempts to change Russian approaches towards the Middle East will be challenged. While the Russian government will remain interested in dialogue with international players on key Middle Eastern issues, it will try to impose its own vision of the region's future with little inclination to make concessions.

The question about reasons for the Russian support of the Syrian regime has quite a complicated answer. Moscow's stance is determined by the interplay of complex factors among which growing security concerns

are of prime importance. The Kremlin is worried that the fall of Assad will inevitably bring radical Islamists to power in Syria. This, in turn, will lead to the further destabilisation of the situation in the Middle East inevitably affecting the Muslim regions of Russia. At the same time, this does not mean that Moscow supports Bashar Assad as a person. On the contrary, his inflexibility as a leader irritates the Kremlin while recollections of his behaviour before the conflict created a considerable degree of mistrust of the current Syrian president in Moscow. Russian contacts with the Syrian opposition also demonstrate that the Kremlin is open to dialogue.

Russian confrontation with the West also played an important role in shaping Moscow's stance on the conflict. The unprecedented (since, at least, the end of the Cold War) scale of the current tensions between Russia and the US and EU makes Moscow see its diplomacy in the Middle East as another means that could be used in the confrontation with the West. Thus, the Russian authorities believe that they can exercise additional pressure on the US and EU via its contacts with regional pariah states. Under these circumstances, Russian ties with Assad have special importance for the Kremlin. Even before the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, the issue of Russian-US relations was one of the factors determining Moscow's stance toward the situation in Syria. Russia was certainly taking what it saw as revenge on the United States for its previous losses in the region. Given the outcomes in Iraq and Libya, Russia learned that the fall of long time partners inevitably leads to the loss of economic and political influence in those countries. Whether Russia stays out of the conflict (as in Iraq), or unobtrusively helps the West to overthrow its old allies (as in Libya, where Moscow was the first government to stop exports of military equipment to Qaddafi), the result is the same: Russia is compelled to leave countries liberated from dictators (after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Russian companies lost their stakes in the Iraqi energy sector, and it took more than six years for them to begin their sluggish return). Therefore, without solid guarantees regarding the security of its interests, Russia has been fighting hard for Syria.

So far, the success of Russian initiatives to establish an all-embracing Syrian dialogue has been limited. Yet, this does not mean that these attempts were futile. A bad peace is always better than a good quarrel, and in order to reach this peace the sides need to talk to each other. Moscow tries to create grounds to let the belligerents see whether the gap between them can be bridged. Moreover, at the time of writing, Russia was the only country (apart from Iran) capable of talking both with the opposition and with Damascus as well being able to offer a basis for dialogue. The opportunities provided by this Russian status should not be missed.

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in 2014, human rights observers registered the serious decrease in the intensity of insurgents' struggle against the Russian authorities. Under these conditions, Emarat Kavkaz was compelled to bless its members going to Syria and Iraq in order to retain their loyalty and persuade them to return. The leadership of this organisation probably expects that after their comeback these fighters will not only have necessary connections and experience, but they will also become the main symbols of resistance attracting new members by their doubtful military "glory". Under these circumstances, the 2014 decrease in terrorist activities in the Northern Caucasus should not deceive analysts and policy-makers: it is not the end of the Islamists resistance but the hush before the potential storm.

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Annex 1

Table 1. Russian Trade with Selected Countries of the Middle East in 2010–2013 (\$ million)

	2010	2011	2012	2013
Algeria	1337	2486	2785	1589.6
Bahrain	2.5	5	13.9	15.8
Egypt	2191	2820	3555	2946
Iran	3651	3755	2329	1602
Iraq	-	99.6	286	379
Israel	2588	2857	2917	3578
Jordan	148	350	426	181
Kuwait	132	357	83	34
Lebanon	239	406	202	530
Libya	171	124	260	386
Mauritania	37.8	54.4	33.1	31.7
Morocco	932	1810	1848	1426
Oman	13.3	39.3	42.1	59.4
Qatar	14.6	54.6	40	41.4
Saudi Arabia	366	852	1359	1078
Sudan	-	172	154	129
Syria	1158	1991	656	376
Tunisia	530	1155	594	361
United Arab Emirates	1019	1489	1487	2516
Yemen	168	163	234	218
Total	14698.2	21039.9	19304.1	17477.9

Source: Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, Russian Customs data.

Table 2. Russian Trade with Main Partners in the Middle East in 2014 (\$billion)

	Volume	Export	Import	Share in Russian trade (%)
Egypt	5.5	4.9	0.5	0.7
Israel	3.4	2.3	1.1	0.4
Iran	1.7	1.3	0.4	0.2
Turkey	31	24.4	6.7	4
GCC	3.3	2.7	0.6	0.4

Source: Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, Russian Customs data.

Table 3. Volume of Russian Trade with the Countries of the Gulf, 2006–2014 (\$ million)

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Saudi Arabia	273	427	466	265 (Jan.–Sept.)	366	852	1359	1078	1164
Kuwait	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	80	357	83	34	46
Bahrain	11	15	3.6	1.9	2.4	5	13.9	15.8	14.8
UAE	648	821	846	671	950	1489	1487	2516	1997
Oman	n/a	n/a	n/a	24	13	39.3	42.1	59.4	25
Qatar	n/a	n/a	n/a	8.7	14.6	54.6	40	41.4	51

Source: Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, Russian Customs data.

Table 4. Exports of Russian Products under the “Secret Code” Category (million USD) to the Middle East during 2010 – 2013

	2010	2011	2012	2013
Algeria	408	1581	1028	527
Bahrain	-	-	0.039	3.7
Egypt	189	130,5	145.65	221.6
Israel	73	47.3	2.2	0.985

	2010	2011	2012	2013
Jordan	8.7	96	56.7	25.3
Iraq	-	0.1	-	169
Iran	24	6	4.5	0.688
Kuwait	-	147	-	-
Lebanon	1.2	0.005	0.096	0.027
Libya	1	20	-	15.7
Oman	-	-	-	15
UAE	329	242.4	205	300
Saudi Arabia	-	12,8	0.018	0.041
Syria	525.9	712,6	391.4	231
Turkey	145.6	51	0.951	36
Tunisia	-	-	0.003	-
Yemen	-	-	1.5	0.264
Total	1705.4	3046.7	1836.1	1546.3

Source: <http://russian-trade.com/>

Annex 2

MOSCOW PLATFORM Provisions agreed upon during the second inter-Syrian consultative meeting. Moscow, April 9, 2015

1. The settlement of the Syrian crisis must be reached through political means on the basis of mutual agreement on the principles of “Geneva-1”, 30 June 2012.
2. The participants appeal to the members of the international community to use their influence on all Arab, regional and international parties involved in Syrian bloodshed, urging them to fulfill UN Security Council resolutions on counter-terrorism and cessation of all actions supporting terrorism, including the promotion of terrorists on Syrian territory, their education and training, providing them with shelter, financial aid and weapons.
3. The participants appeal to the members of the international community demanding immediate and complete lifting of the blockade and unilateral coercive economic measures introduced against the Syrian people and State institutions.
4. Content and results of any political process must be based on national sovereignty and the people’s will expressed through democratic mechanisms.
5. The political process is carried out through mutual agreement between the Syrians – Government, forces, parties and movements which are committed to a political solution.
6. The participants express support for a national reconciliation process and eagerness to strengthen it as well as to facilitate the achievement of a political settlement and support of the army and the armed forces in the fight against terrorism.
7. The participants appeal to the members of the international community for assistance in repatriation of Syrian refugees, and creation of favorable conditions for the return of IDPs.

8. The fundamental goals of a political process are as follows:
 - a - preservation of national sovereignty;
 - b - unity of Syrian territory and its people;
 - c - preservation of public institutions, improvement and enhancement of their functioning;
 - d - rejection of any political settlement built on ethnic, religious or communal quotas;
 - e - strict commitment to liberation of all the occupied Syrian territories;
 - f - the only way to achieve a political solution is an inter-Syrian national dialogue, led by the Syrians without any external intervention.
9. A political settlement will lead to consolidation and mobilization of the people in countering and defeating terrorism. Such a settlement should result in an exclusive monopoly by state institutions to possess weapons.
10. The participants appeal to the members of the international community to support mutual agreement on a comprehensive political solution to be reached during the Moscow meeting in preparation for its adoption during the Geneva-3 Conference.

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