

How some of Moscow's Middle East interests could create problems for Russia

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At the end of January 2013, the Russian Navy conducted exercises in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean with the official aim to improve its ability to conduct joint manoeuvres far away from Russia. In the Mediterranean Sea, the exercise seemed to be more about flag-waving than power projection far from own shores (for which Russian naval units currently lack adequate air cover). However, it is hard to disregard developments in Syria. If the Assad regime falls, there may be a need to evacuate thousands of Russians from Syria. It would also mean a loss of prestige and affect Russia's standing in the Middle East. At the same time, Moscow's approach to the Middle East is in transformation as a result of the Arab Spring.

Russia's Middle East policy has evolved distinctively since 1991. In contrast to the comparatively passive policy during President Yeltsin's administration, Putin's and Medvedev's Russia pragmatically built relations both with states in the region – in particular the Iraq of Saddam Hussein, Libya under Muammar Qaddafi, and the Assad regime in Syria – and with non-state actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. It was an important Russian achievement that both public opinion and Islamists in the Middle East paid relatively little attention to the fate of Muslims in the Russian North Caucasus.

The Arab Spring increased the political influence of radical Sunni movements. Why then, does Russia only seem to support increasingly isolated Shi'ite actors, for example by using its position in the UN Security Council to block attempts to legitimize armed intervention to stop the civil war in Syria and tougher measures against Iran's nuclear programme? In the case of Syria, three

interests may influence Russia's approach: the perception of Russia's as a Great power, Russia's credibility as an ally and the potential role of political Islam in Russia.

The first interest is the notion of Russia as a Great power. This is uncontroversial in Russian domestic politics and a tempting card to play for an increasingly controversial President Putin. Where Syria is concerned, military interests and arms exports are unlikely to be key drivers behind Russia's policy. The small Russian Navy Facility in Tartus is mainly of symbolic value (it is the only remaining Russian base outside the former Soviet Union) and of limited use to support more extensive operations, but it could be used in the event of an evacuation. Syria wishes to buy Russian arms such as fighter aircraft, air defence missiles, anti-tank missiles and a theatre ballistic missile system. But Syria has a 3.6 bn USD debt to Russia for previous arms deals, and it is not a pivotal customer (it accounted for just 5 per cent of Russian arms exports in 2011), especially given the increase in Russian spending on arms since 2011. Russia has not delivered weapons that could seriously affect Israel such as long-range air defence missiles and theatre ballistic missiles. Political relations with Israel and the West seem to prevail over business relations with Syria. But why, then, has Russia resisted an international armed intervention to stop the Syrian civil war?

The second long-term interest is Russia's credibility as an ally. Post-Soviet Russia has given priority to influencing the former Soviet republics politically, economically and in security matters. Moscow's standing in the eyes of its allies in the former Soviet Union is crucial in this pursuit. In Syria, Moscow must balance placating Israel and

the West by not delivering all the arms the Assad regime wants against the appearance of being a steadfast ally. If former Soviet republics allied to Russia start doubting Moscow's sincerity, this could seriously undermine the latter's position. Moscow's way ahead seems to be refusing arms deliveries to Syria while opposing international intervention. But this balancing act could affect Russia itself. More Sunni anger at Russia's seemingly one-sided support for the Shi'ite actors may increase the hitherto low involvement of Middle East radical Islamists in the situation of Muslims in Russia (some 10 per cent of Russia's population).

This potentially worrying development could affect the role of Islam in Russia, the third interest. In his first two presidential terms, Putin tried to improve Russia's image among Muslims. Russia became an observer in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. As the first Russian ruler ever, he reportedly said that Russia is "... also a Muslim country". There is now, however, a worry in Moscow that political Islam, perhaps inspired by the Arab spring, could influence Muslims in Russia, not only in the North Caucasus, but also in Central Russia. Much of Moscow's response to signs of that appears heavy-handed. Hence, there is apprehension in Tatarstan about Moscow's policies increasingly emphasizing nationalism and growing intolerance with non-Russian languages and culture. In neighbouring Bashkortostan, Russian Interior troops have clashed with alleged "nationalist band formations". Loss of control over Bashkortostan and Tatarstan – regions with natural resources, critical infrastructure and communications connecting Western Russia with Siberia and the Far East – could ultimately hinder Moscow's access to half of the country.

Russia, a permanent member of the UN Security Council and hence a part of any internationally negotiated solution, has no doubt used the Syrian crisis to reassert its role in the world. The approach has won Moscow few new friends and entrenched its critics. It may also affect Moscow's political influence not only in Syria, but

also in the Middle East, as well as in the former Soviet Union, and ultimately in Russia itself.

In the Middle East, Sunnis are likely to be increasingly wary about Russia's objections to an international armed intervention to stop Syria's civil war. Supporting mainly Shi'ite actors is unlikely to ensure Moscow's future political influence in the region. The fall of the Assad regime is increasingly expected. Sanctions and even armed intervention may further weaken Iran. Stronger Sunni influence and weaker Shi'ite influence could mean that Russia's only future partner in the region may be – Israel (which could also offer a possible route for evacuating Russians from Syria).

Any post-Assad Syrian leadership is unlikely to embrace Russia as a partner. The safety of thousands of Russians in Syria is likely to be an immediate priority for Moscow. Russia has repeatedly stated that it may intervene to protect its citizens abroad. If the naval exercises are preparations for evacuation, Moscow may be about to abandon the Assad regime. If it does, Russia's credibility among its post-Soviet allies will suffer. In Russia itself, the government – whose rhetoric increasingly combines nationalism and great power nostalgia – would lose the special relationship with Syria, a remaining great power symbol. However, Russian nationals suffering in Syria would affect the great power aspirations of Russia even more.

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