

## RUSSIA'S TIGHTROPE DIPLOMACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST – FEET OF CLAY OR SOLID GROUNDS?

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### **Abstract**

Since its increased involvement in the Syrian civil war, Russia has managed to gain a major foothold in the Middle East. The Kremlin's intervention aims at restoring Russia's geopolitical greatness, especially in the wake of the international uproar caused by the annexation of Crimea, in 2014. Thanks to unrestricted access to the Syrian Khmeimim air base, in 2015, Russia has managed to get involved in military combat along the Syrian loyalist forces (e.g. the battle of Aleppo), providing it with unmatched clout in the region. This development has led President Putin to strike alliances with historically inimical powers, especially with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, thus no longer providing unfaltering support to Bashar al-Assad's regime and breeding more tensions in the Middle East. This article studies how Russia might actually benefit from this controlled form of chaos, as part of its strategy to put forward a new multipolar order in the region and the world.



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## **Introduction**

When a series of critical articles regarding Bashar al-Assad was published on the Russian website RIA FAN in mid-April, several observers construed it as an unofficial means of expressing Moscow's discontent towards Syria (Vitkine, 2020). RIA FAN is a website owned by a Russian businessman named Yevgeny Prigozhin, who has close ties with President Putin and is linked to the Wagner Group, a private military contractor often suspected of serving Russian interests in Crimea and Syria. It is indeed a classic Kremlin strategy to present a rather politically correct, official discourse, and spread its more contested views through state-influenced media. The publication of these articles is thus hardly anecdotal. Although Vladimir Putin has been providing unswerving support to Damascus since the very beginning of the crisis, in 2011, he would appear to be growingly impatient at his Syrian counterpart's handling of current affairs, especially regarding his eagerness to recapture the province of Idlib. The north-east part of the country is the last rebel stronghold in Syria, and has proven to be the main bone of contention in the resolution of the conflict, as well as one of the century's most horrendous humanitarian crises. A major reason why it is such a disputed area lies in the fact that Turkey (allied with Russia) ambiguously sponsors the remaining rebels (mostly Hayat Tahrir al-Sham jihadists) so as to prevent al-Assad from recovering this particular bit of Syrian territory. As a matter of fact, it is a highly strategic area for Ankara, which has been willing to create a buffer-zone by resorting to force in order to stem the flows of refugees reaching its border, and keep the Kurdish troops at bay.

Such a complicated and bloody situation sheds new light upon the ins and outs of Russian strategy in the Middle East. Moscow has long prided itself on being a key protagonist within the Syrian crisis, all the more as the United States has been scaling down its involvement in the region. Russia has progressively woven an intricate web of seemingly contradictory alliances, simultaneously rubbing friendly shoulders with Turkey and Syria, Israel and Iran... This policy has enabled the Kremlin to become an essential partner to all stakeholders, filling the void left by the United States' relative withdrawal. However, as evidenced by the plight of Idlib, this kind of tightrope diplomacy inevitably breeds clashes and tensions between Moscow and its allies, who often find themselves at odds regarding their geopolitical ambitions. Instead of implementing its own strategic agenda, Russia frequently has to try and reconcile such opposite interests, arbitrating the crisis rather than leading to its full resolution. We may thus wonder about the efficiency of Russia's plan of having a seat at every table, by reconsidering its impact on the conflict. This particular issue enables us to analyze how Russia tries to challenge the global order imposed by the West in order to restore its former geopolitical influence (especially in the Middle East), by exploiting a controlled form of chaos in the region.

## **The main reasons for Russia's involvement in Syria**

Fully-fledged military engagement began in September 2015, when the Kremlin decided to support the collapsing Alawi regime of Bashar al-Assad. Russia's much touted primary goal was supposedly the fight against terrorism. Indeed, by the end of 2015, up to 7,000 people from Russia and post-Soviet states had joined Daesh or Jabhat al-Nusra (Lavrov, 2018), creating links and channels between the Levant and the jihadi groups dwelling in the North Caucasus (Chechnya, Dagestan...). The rationale for this objective was twofold. Firstly, Putin wanted to curb the spread of Islamism in Russia and at its borders in order to forestall terrorist attacks on Russian soil. The territorial gains of ISIS increased its attractiveness for wannabe jihadists, which required uprooting so as to prevent them from receiving adequate training and military gear. Secondly, following the Crimean crisis, such involvement was yet another way of reminding the West that Russia was a major force to be reckoned with. Cut off from Western alliances (first and foremost NATO), Russia shows and advocates another diplomatic course within the Syrian conflict by weaving striking new alliances beyond traditional Western networks, so as to become an irreplaceable actor on the field. Hence its full support to the Assad

regime and its cooperation with Iran, two countries which the Western coalition, led by the United States, has hardly engaged with in order to solve the crisis.

However, Russia's anti-terrorist interventionism soon proved to be somewhat of a masquerade. According to researcher Florence Gaub, 90% of Moscow's airstrikes targeted non-jihadist rebels (Gaub, 2018), namely members of the Free Syrian Army, al-Assad's major national challenger. Russia deliberately refused to specify what its jihadist targets actually were, which enabled it to bracket together ISIS fighters and the Syrian opposition. To put it bluntly, Putin has used the fight against terrorism as a peg to help the Alawi regime crush militias that have been questioning its legitimacy since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, in March 2011. Moreover, the Russian president hedged his bets by devolving the most pivotal field operations to mercenary military companies such as the Wagner Group—thus repeating the very strategic scheme that was implemented in Crimea, in 2014. This particular gambit aims at calling the tune in Syria through diplomatic and military support to al-Assad, in order to preserve the status quo.

Russia's top priority is indeed the quest for stability. Its involvement in the Syrian conflict must be understood as a way to restore the Kremlin's geopolitical grandeur, by striving to become the one country that put an end to regional collapse. This strategy is directly aimed against the United States. Indeed, in his September 2015 speech at the United Nations General Assembly, Putin vehemently criticized American interventionism and regime-change ideology, especially in Iraq and Libya: "It is now obvious the power vacuum created in some countries of the Middle East and North Africa led to the creation of anarchic areas which immediately started to be filled with extremists and terrorists" (Sengupta, MacFarquar, 2015). According to foreign policy expert Angela Stent, Putin regards Western and American support to Arab springs (including against al-Assad) as a major source of unrest, which has undermined the regional stability that was guaranteed by authoritarian regimes (Stent, 2016). There lies the ambiguous dialectic of Russia's strategy. Putin requires a minimum state of chaos in order to stand out as a primary actor in this conflict, but still needs some stable bases such as the current Syrian regime in order to avoid full-blown havoc.



Such a strategy enables Russia to fill the void left by the progressive withdrawal of American troops so as to phase out the Pentagon's interventionism. It is part and parcel of one of Moscow's pieces of doctrine called "Eurasianism" (Najafi, 2012). This theory emphasizes the need for Russia to strengthen its ties with major powers ranging from the Middle East and the Caucasus to South Asia. The implementation of such a network aims at counterbalancing American influence in countries bordering Russia. Indeed, as theorized by Aleksandr Dugin, a Russian politician and leader of the "International Eurasia Movement", one of the primary goals of Russian eurasianism is to build a multipolar world in order to thwart American unilateralism. The promotion of relations with such countries as Turkey, China and India would enable Russia to take independent positions on international issues, as well as put forward a new world order model. This strategy somehow echoes Putin's particular defense of a unipolar, multilateral world, as evidenced by his speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference: "I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world" (Putin, 2007). In other words, Putin's multilateralism implicitly rejects American interventionism and, as already seen in the abovementioned 2015 speech, searches for relative stability at the expense of self-determination and democratic revolutions.

Engagement in Syria therefore gave Putin the perfect opportunity to reinforce close cooperation with some actors that are deemed necessary to check American power in the region (namely Iran and Turkey), and lay the ground for a seemingly multilateral intervention at the regional level. And it so happens that the timing was quite convenient. Russia's extremely mediatized involvement in Syria somehow managed to outshine the outcry caused by its annexation of Crimea, in 2014, and Russian military operations there. The Syrian crisis thus provided Russia with three valuable assets: the possibility of promoting another frame of diplomatic action in opposition with the United States; a potential diversion from Crimea; a human-scale playground for putting to the test its military tactics and weaponry (Lavrov, 2018).

### **An intricate web of contradictory partnerships**

Unwavering support to Bashar al-Assad's regime is the bedrock of Russia's involvement in the Middle East. Moscow started having the upper hand in September 2013, right after the Western coalition, in spite of President Obama's "red line", did not retaliate to the regime's Ghouta chemical attacks against rebels and civilians. Putin got the better of the coalition's tentative cohesion, which enabled him to quickly become a key actor. In September 2015, Damascus allowed Russian forces to settle in the Syrian Khmeimim air base, granting them full air control in the region. Such projection capabilities aim at making Russia the dominant military power within the conflict, in order to avert further collapse. Indeed, Moscow desperately wants to avoid another Iraq-like "failed state" in the Middle East, which might spur the United States to get involved once more. Helping al-Assad crush grassroots requests for democracy is thus seminal, inasmuch as popular protests undermine the regime's legitimacy and breed divisions, whereas the Kremlin strives for stability (at the expense of political consent). Although Moscow requires a bit of chaos as we have already mentioned before, it must avoid collapse to its detriment and unpredictable upheavals —hence the need for a stable Syrian regime amid regional instability, allowing Russia to pull the strings.

Cooperation with Iran therefore seemed inevitable. Indeed, both Syria and Iran belong to what Tehran calls the "Axis of Resistance", namely the alliance between Shia governments, Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi militias against NATO, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Russia needs additional ground support by Iranian Quds forces and Shia paramilitary groups, which struggle to preserve Iranian clout in Syria. However, as we shall see, this particular matter epitomizes the frailty of this alliance, insofar as Iranian revolutionary and expansionist strategy threatens the very stability that Moscow sought to foster in Syria by cooperating with Tehran.

Yet geopolitical changes have led Russia to strike more alliances, with contradictory partners —the first and foremost being Turkey. Until July 2016, Moscow and Ankara were at odds with each other. Turkey is a prominent member of NATO, and its Syrian policy went against the grain of Russia's plan, since Erdogan initially aimed to topple al-Assad by funding the Syrian opposition and several Sunni jihadist groups (such as Jabhat al-Nusra). Things changed, though, in July 2016, after a botched attempt at a military coup against Erdogan. The Turkish President got closer to Putin's line in order to strengthen his position in the region. Indeed, his NATO allies started calling into question his handling of refugee flows and began providing support to the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) in Syria. This alliance enabled Erdogan to take a leading part in overseeing the crisis (at the 2017 Astana talks for instance), as well as clamp down on the YPG's progression in Rojava (North-East Syria). The Turkish attacks in Northern Syria that occurred in October 2019 and February 2020 are part of this buffer-zone strategy, which is tacitly backed by Russia, in spite of its prior cooperation with the Kurds. Turkey's involvement helps Russia check Iran in Syria and fill the vacuum left by

American withdrawal, following Trump's announcement in October; and air coverage by the Russian army gives Turkey plenty of elbow room to stave off the establishment of a Kurdish state at its borders.

### **Handling tensions among inimical partners**

Such an elaborate network based on partnerships with historical foes has proven to be quite an ordeal for Russia to manage. Indeed, the Kremlin has to arbitrate between conflicting interests, insofar as each stakeholder is trying to reap the benefits of the evolution of the crisis. As already mentioned, Iran wants to increase its military presence in Syria in order to avoid any loss of influence in this pivotal part of the Shia crescent. Tehran has been pitting itself against Saudi Arabia for regional religious and political hegemony since 1979, and the American assassination of General Qasem Soleimani last January dealt Tehran a massive blow. Although Iran is a major partner for Moscow, Putin cannot let it feel emboldened by ground victories against ISIS. Indeed, Russia does not want to come across as a mere pro-Shia power by backing Iran and Syria. Economic and oil ties with Sunni Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia are far too important for the Kremlin to model itself on confessional strife and gaps in the region.

Moreover, Russia's close links with Israel (another "contradictory alliance" in the face of Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iran) forbids it to put up with growing Iranian clout in Syria, which would translate in Hezbollah prevailing on the very fringe of Israel. It is also quite likely that such a heavy threat to Tel Aviv would bring about sustained American support for Israel and thus weaken Russian position in the region (Katz, 2018).

However, the difficult handling of inimical partners does not necessarily mean the Kremlin has lost the upper hand. Indeed, bringing historical enemies together can be regarded as the implementation of the old Machiavellian precept "Divide et impera". By playing its different allies out against each other, Russia seems to tower above regional divisions and thus takes the lead, becoming both judge and jury in the Syrian conflict. The best example of this scheme is Putin's alliance with Erdogan. It shows that Moscow is willing to call the shots with an overt and staunch opponent of Bashar al-Assad, which blatantly tones down the Kremlin's unflinching support for Damascus, as evidenced by the abovementioned criticisms that were published on RIA FAN. Divide et impera by arbitrating between two actors with opposed interests, in order to become a key partner for all stakeholders while pursuing its own agenda.

However, Russia's rapprochement with Turkey might highlight the limits of this intricate strategy. Involvement in the Middle East was partly designed as a way to benefit from the power vacuum left by American withdrawal and to further weaken Washington's position. Yet it somehow backfired. The United States recalled the Kremlin its projection capabilities by easily striking Soleimani dead; and the oil price war that aimed at crushing American shale oil production roused tensions with Saudi Arabia and severely damaged Russia's economy in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. The United States thus proves harder to evict than Moscow was led to believe by its much-heralded withdrawal. Strengthening ties with Turkey can therefore be construed as a means for Russia to safeguard its interests in the region with a more reliable and "American-friendly" partner than Iran, at the expense of the stability of Moscow's previous partnerships.

### **Conclusion: A precarious regional structure**

French historian Georges Sokoloff famously dubbed Russia a "poor power" (Sokoloff, 1993); namely, a country that has always tried to mimic major powers in spite of its deep congenital flaws (such as the difficult mastery of its vast territory). Russian foreign policy is thus characterized by its cunning ways, seizing punctual opportunities to weigh more influence at a lower cost. The Syrian civil war and subsequent havoc in the Middle

East were such an opportunity. Yet a “poor power” always has to bear in mind that its action must remain limited and targeted. Increased vulnerability looms behind undue interference.

Russia seems to have overlooked this major implication. Putin might have envisioned a web of contradictory alliances as a means of consolidating his position in the region. Yet recent events, especially related to the pandemic, have shown Russia’s frailty and tentative handling of such a motley network. Moscow already has to face insistent pressures due to Turkey and Iran’s craving for influence in the region, while redefining its support for Bashar al-Assad. Russia wanted to bounce back on the international scene thanks to this tightrope diplomacy; but a growingly protracted Syrian conflict would be tantamount to an equally lasting quagmire. The Russian promotion of multilateralism (though obviously tipped in its favour) therefore creates an opportunity for Western powers to restore and pursue dialogue with Moscow, since it can only bring peace through a multilateral consensus, as evidenced by Putin’s speeches. Russia’s aggressive foray into the Middle East has enabled it to try and shape the new order it has been advocating for years; to keep forestalling demanding cooperation with the Kremlin cannot but delay the resolution of one of the 21st century’s most tragic crises.

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