

Russia and the Oriental Question revisited



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Unlike the comments made in autumn 2015, Russia did not enter the Middle East as a newcomer – it had been a geopolitical actor and a cultural power in the Eastern Mediterranean for centuries. The Russians had never actually left since trading with Byzantium.

Now, Moscow is present not only in its traditional Levant sphere, but also gains an increasing role as power broker in the Persian Gulf with old foes and friends across the region. This has implications for war and peace.

When the Russian government was requested by Damascus to provide military intervention on September 30, 2015, several voices predicted a clash with the many other armies already present in war-torn Syria. This was not the case. The Russian army just like Russian diplomacy knew how to find its way in the Syrian quagmire. And the communication with the US and other NATO-armies, like Turkey, functions rather well, apart from certain tragic incidents, most of which had been premeditated. No major war-by-accident was triggered – so far.

Before World War I, Russian schools and academies in the Eastern Mediterranean were just as important as the French and English, both competing for influence in the Ottoman Empire. The Russian bond with the region was and now again is the one of Orthodoxy. The majority of Oriental Christians are Orthodox. The Syrian city Aleppo had a Christian majority until the 1960s, being a traditional haven for the Armenian diaspora. The transregional importance of the Orthodox church has always secured a certain role and status for Russia, the protective power of the Orthodox Christian world.

The role of Constantinople

Moscow is historically referred to as the “Third Rome” with Constantinople as centre of the Eastern Roman Empire of Byzantium being the second one, conquered by the Ottomans in 1453. Both Russian language and culture were deeply marked by that heritage. The Sykes-Picot agreement, a Franco-British correspondence of 1915/16 on how to divide up the Ottoman Empire, was actually a trilateral arrangement, including Tsarist Russia and her claims on Constantinople. Foreign Minister Sergey Sazonov had obtained in March 1915 the guarantee that in case of an Allied victory, Constantinople would be under Russian control. But two years later, the world

was a different one. Lenin had been brought by the Germans from his Geneva exile in a sealed train to St. Petersburg, where he took control over the protests and turned the marginal Bolshevik movement into the revolutionary force.

The Cold War in the Middle East

The Soviet Union quickly grasped its role as a new attractive model for the discontent intellectual circles in the Arab world. One of the first states to recognise the Saudi entity, which turned into an independent state in 1932, was the USSR. The Cold War not only divided the European continent, but it provoked divisions on a global level. The Middle East with its oil rich Gulf states and many layers of conflict turned into one of the many stages for proxy wars. While the USA initially refrained from a fully-fledged support of the Jewish state created by the UN-General Assembly resolution 181 (II) in 1947, the USSR was one of the early arms’ suppliers. The entire concept of Zionism with its collective farms, the kibbutzim, and strong Eastern European heritage seemed too communist for Washington. Subsequent to the Six-Days-War in 1967 and October War in 1973, the USA turned into a solid ally of Israel, while Moscow shaped the many revolutionary leftist movements, stretching from Algeria to the Palestinians. President Gamal Abdel Nasser turned to the Soviets, though he would have initially preferred the Americans. The two states of Yemen, one under Soviet, the other under British control, was an omitted epicentre of that Cold War era in the Arab world. Only Ayatollah Khomeini decided to take a “third way” with the Islamic Revolution in 1979 in Iran – he despised both the Marxist East and the Capitalist West.

The entire Comecon cultivated Orientalist studies on very high levels. In today’s world of international relations, the better linguistic skills in Arabic, Farsi, Pashtu etc. are still to be learnt at Russian universities, also formerly in Prague, rather than in western academies, where those studies are often considered superfluous “orchid departments”. The network of alumni who graduated from Soviet universities still

play an important part for old and new ties from diplomacy to business.

Russia, Turkey, the Arab Gulf States and the Iran issue

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has been extensively travelling across the Middle East over the past few months. He has received guests from the region and demonstrated a rather high degree of continuity in Russian foreign policy: access to the sea and non-intervention in domestic affairs. The relationship with Turkey merits special scrutiny. Both are militarily confronting each other in Syria and Libya. But in parallel, they manage the art of sophisticated diplomacy by going along with each other on energy contracts such as TurkStream, which had replaced South Stream with the EU, and military cooperation, very much to the dismay of NATO. It is with Turkey and Iran that Russia has been pushing various agendas for Syria in the framework of the Astana format. With regard to the Arab Gulf States, Moscow is advancing the case of Syria, namely work with Assad. Fresh starts may yet be possible to untie the many fronts inside Syria where numerous Sunni monarchies have been in unconditional support of Islamist forces.

In late summer 2015, when the terrorist militias of the Islamic State (Daesh) had conquered huge parts of Syria and Iraq, it was feared that an advance by the terrorists to the Syrian coast city of Latakia, where millions of displaced persons had fled for shelter, could prompt massacres and exodus. Maybe the Rus-

sian military intervention prevented that additional cycle of violence in a once secular country that had turned into a stage for all sorts of proxy wars plus the influx of bored EU-citizens turning into terrorists.

In the case of Iran, the desire to preserve the multilateral disarmament agreement JCPOA of 2015, is a goal still shared by the EU and the Russian Federation. It will be especially pertinent how the USA will join again the agreement and how Russia will advance its respective influence. Iran and China have recently started a comprehensive strategic partnership, which has already changed the Middle Eastern chessboard. Russia is present on all levels in Iran, while the diplomatic relations with the US stopped in November 1979.

From the Oriental Question to the Middle East conflict

In early 20th century, relevant dossier in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was called the Oriental Question; its geography started in Bosnia and went all the way to Kabul. Ever since the end of World War II, we call the many layers of confrontation the “Middle East conflict”.

It is still the region where the largest reserves of easy to drill oil and gas of high quality are to be found. Even with the increase in non-fossil fuels and intended normative energy transition the region and its fossil resources will remain relevant. China has turned out to be the number one trading partner for many.

Political power: Vladimir Putin (fifth left), President of the Russian Federation, Recep Tayyip Erdogan (fifth right), President of the Republic of Turkey, Aleksandar Vučić (fourth right), President of the Republic of Serbia, Boyko Borissov (fourth left), Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria, Alexander Novak (very left), Minister of Energy of the Russian Federation, Fatih Donmez (third right), Minister of Energy and Natural Resources of Turkey, and Alexey Miller (third left), Chairman of the Gazprom Management Committee, were attending an event in January 2020, at the grand opening ceremony for TurkStream gas pipeline, which is laid in the Black Sea. It is a link between the gas transmission systems of Russia and Turkey.



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