

RUSSIA'S SHARP TURNS

To get involved in Syria, Russia had to turn to Iran as an unexpected ally, yet as the conflict develops, it is ready to accommodate any and all players to strengthen its foothold in the region

By Dmitry Shlapentokh

Although not always apparent to those closely watching the Middle East, Russia's recent foray into the region and in Syria came in response to domestic challenges at home, especially in the North Caucasus. As the insurgency in the Russian North Caucasus evolved from a nationalistic uprising to an Islamist movement—which became connected, at least indirectly, with the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS)—Moscow found a perfect excuse to become directly involved in the Syrian conflict in the fall of 2015.

To the world, Moscow presented its engagement in Syria as a way to deal with North Caucasian jihadists and halt the threat of them traveling back to Russia, but in reality, Russia had strategic hopes to return to the Middle East as a superpower and preserve its military bases in Syria. Ultimately, the Kremlin decided on a pragmatic approach: it took no one Arab state involved in the Syrian conflict as an ally and maintained a noncommittal stance with regards to making strategic alliances, ignoring the fragile geopolitical order that critically governs inter-state relations in the region.

For example, despite choosing to militarily collaborate with Iran in Syria, Russia never was committed to Iran as a full-fledged ally. Russia also had dealings with Israel and Turkey and engaged with them on several occasions during the conflict. As a matter of fact, it increasingly turned to Ankara, mostly because of Turkey's importance for Moscow's gas line projects, including the latest "TurkStream," the first direct gas pipeline to be built between Russia and Turkey. Perhaps, Moscow's success lay in its opportunism, flexibility in switching allies depending on the circumstances, and on the fact that no one power exercises complete dominance in the Middle East.

► Poster showing Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Aleppo, March 17, 2017. *Sebastian Liste/NOOR/Redux*

The North Caucasus–ISIS Connection

Russia's involvement with the Middle East cannot be separated from the country's internal problems, especially with regards to its considerable Muslim population. Since the early 1990s, the Kremlin has been



engaged in a protracted war in the North Caucasus against Chechnya. At first inspired by nationalism, Chechens sought to create an independent state. Islam was merely an ingredient that fueled their nationalistic ideology. Nonetheless, as the movement progressed over time, Chechen resistance increasingly took an internationalist jihadist turn and eventually demonstrated a peculiar pattern. Moscow took advantage of this evolution.

The First Chechen War (1994–96) was a disaster for Moscow: Russian troops were utterly defeated in Grozny, the Chechen capital, and Boris Yeltsin, the Russian president at that time, was compelled to sign the humiliating 1996 Khasavyurt agreement, which acknowledged Chechnya's independence. Still, the war resumed after Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 1999 prompted by the infamous apartment buildings' bombing during the same year that killed hundreds of Muscovites. There is evidence to suggest that this terrorist action was organized by the Kremlin to create an image of Putin as the country's only savior. The Kremlin attributed the terrorist actions to Chechens and launched the Second Chechen War.

Russian troops soon after that took Grozny, and the Chechen war settled into a protracted conflict against guerillas. It was during the fighting against Russian troops that the guerilla movement took hold within the Chechen resistance. More non-Chechens joined the fight, including Muslims from the North Caucasus and other Muslims from what Russians usually referred to as the "distant abroad." There were also a number of Russian Muslim converts. For all of them, the nationalistic animus of the early Chechen resistance was basically irrelevant. What united them was not nationalism but Islam which, in this jihadist form, played the same role of a unifying ideology as radical Marxism. Indeed, instead of the slogan "proletariats of the world, unite!" jihadists promulgated a similar slogan: "Muslims of all countries, unite!" There was also explicit emphasis on socioeconomic equality. As a result of these changes, the so-called Chechen state had been transformed into what would later turn out to be a phantom "Caucasian Emirate," led by Dokka Umarov in 2007. When the Arab Spring erupted in the Middle East, Umarov noted that Islam did not recognize "revolution" or "democracy," but claimed he would support the events of the Arab Spring should they lead to the spread of true Islam.

Yet one bleak outcome of the Arab Spring was the rise of Islamists, who eventually coalesced into ISIS. Umarov was heartened by these developments, and not just for ideological reasons; he assumed that fellow Islamists would provide him with financial assistance and would possibly send fighters. However, Umarov and the subsequent leaders of the emirate did not receive any tangible support from the leaders of ISIS. At the same time, those fighters who moved to the Middle East rarely came back, and those who did were easily apprehended by Russian authorities. Consequently, the Kremlin often did not bother to prevent

the jihadists' departure and, in some cases, even encouraged it. For example, it is alleged that Russian law enforcement contacted jihadists through intermediaries and promised them free passage to the Middle East.

ISIS, so to speak, split the emirate's fighters, even those who remained in Russia. Some swore allegiance to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the ISIS leader; others remained faithful to the emirate and became bogged down in bitter internal disputes with splinter groups. The split helped destroy the "emirate," which lost even the semblance of unity. Indeed, there was no "emir" for several years. But the major benefit that came out of the collapse of the emirate was that it enabled Moscow to understand its new role in the fight against global terrorism.

Moscow saw the emergence of ISIS as an opportunity to become involved in the Syrian war and to regain some of the influence that Russia had lost after the collapse of the USSR. Moscow saw the opportunity to emerge as a fighter of revolutionaries and terrorists, whereas the Russians viewed the United States in the post-Arab Spring Middle East as a force which helped revolutionaries/terrorists. The engagement in Syria was due to the fear that the collapse of Bashar Al-Assad's regime would lead to the loss of the Russian naval facility in Tartus and air base at Hmeimim. At the same time, the Kremlin assumed that Russia would be spared a North Caucasian-type or Afghan-type conflict. To achieve this endgame, Moscow had to re-engage with an old economic partner, Tehran. The importance of Moscow's engagement with Tehran dates back to the beginning of the post-Soviet era.

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Why Tehran?

After the collapse of the USSR, Moscow was left practically without allies, and hungered for foreign currencies. The economy was in a freefall. Iran was among the few states that were from the start interested in Russian hardware, especially weapons. Until 2015, however, Russia's own civilizational quagmire hindered it from developing a consistent and full partnership with Iran. The situation in Syria provided the perfect moment for Moscow to finally realize a long-drawn foreign policy plan based on the 1990s version of "Eurasianism" which favored building alliances between Russia and Asian countries.

In the 1920s, "Eurasianism"—a Russian ideology and intellectual movement—became popular among the country's émigrés. The proponents of the creed rejected two major ideological trends which dominated most of Russia's modern history: Slavophilism and Westernism. Slavophiles regarded Russia as a part of the Slavic world while Westernizers believed that Russia belonged to the West, at least since the time of Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century.

Eurasianists, however, rejected both prevalent visions. In their view, Russia was neither part of the Western nor the Slavic world. Russia was a civilization in its own right, based on the symbiotic relationship between Russians and other Slavs in the Russian empire, or the USSR—all of whom were historically Orthodox—and minorities, mostly Turkic by their ethnic origin.

Eurasianists, at least in their classical pre-revolutionary version, did not regard Russia as an Asian country. Still, pre-Second World War Eurasianists believed that Russia is closer to Asian countries than to European ones. Eurasianism re-emerged in the USSR during the late Soviet era and became especially popular in the 1990s. This version of Eurasianism was governed by contradictory views

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prevailing among the Russian populace: on the one hand, Russians viewed the republics of the former USSR as a burden which prevented Russia from thriving, and on the other hand, they increasingly felt nostalgic for the USSR and older times of comparative economic well-being and stability. Eurasianists insisted that parting with Eastern Europeans made sense—they were not “Slavic brothers” but rather

considered an alien geopolitical body. It was a different story for countries such as Iran and other Asian powers. An alliance with these countries seemed natural because of cultural and geopolitical similarities.

In the long run, however, the Eurasianists’ proposal for this model of foreign policy did not come to fruition. Yeltsin’s elite was slavishly acquiescent to the West, and the Russian state was weakened throughout the 1990s by privatization. In the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period, a series of reforms spearheaded by an emerging class of the super-rich drove the privatization of many Soviet industries and natural resources. Instead of allowing a centralized state to act as proprietor over land and country assets and resources, this class promoted a version of democracy which in its practical application translated into oligarchical rule, managed by a dysfunctional head of state. In addition, the emerging super-rich sent their money abroad, believing that it could only be safe in the West. They also assumed that the West was where they would escape to in case of a massive nationalization drive, which was not completely off the table throughout most of Yeltsin’s tenure. Moscow had no desire to agitate the West, viewed during the 1990s as a unified entity with the United States as its unquestioned leader.

Consequently, the pivot toward the West killed “Eurasianist” dreams of engaging with Asian powers, at least in dealing with Iran. Under pressure from Washington—which pushed the claim that Russian technology was advancing

Iran's ballistic missile programs—Moscow signed the Gore–Chernomyrdin agreement in 1995 to end Russian weapon sales to Tehran and sever any civil nuclear ties. Thus, Russia was acquiescent to the United States despite the popularity of Eurasianism.

By the end of Yeltsin's term, privatization had become too widespread and elites gradually stopped being opposed to increased state power, especially when Putin proclaimed that nationalization was out of the question. Putin capitalized on this proclamation and centralized the Russian state. Meanwhile, the United States continued to project its power in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of President George W. Bush's global war on terror. A more assertive Russia responded accordingly. In Putin's early years of rule, the Gore–Chernomyrdin agreement was scrapped and the construction of the Bushehr nuclear plant resumed. Moreover, Moscow signed an agreement with Tehran to sell the advanced S-300 air defense system, which would complicate considerably U.S./Israeli strikes. Still, even at that time of increasing tensions with the United States, Moscow hardly saw Iran in the context of "Eurasian" geopolitical "symbiosis" and tried to find a way to accommodate the West at Iran's expense.

Consequently, using the United Nations resolutions calling for Iran to curb its nuclear activities as an excuse, Moscow, formally under President Dmitry Medvedev, in 2010, scrapped the agreement with Iran to deliver the S-300s. Iran was outraged and filed a \$4 billion lawsuit against Russia's defense export agency. The construction of the Bushehr plant was also delayed under various pretexts, which further soured Russian–Iranian relations. Still, neither side severed the relationship, for a variety of reasons. Then the events of 2014 in Syria reignited the seemingly moribund marriage between Tehran and Moscow.

In Syria, Russia was expected to mostly contribute its air power while Iran provided the manpower. This division of labor seemed to work, and the Al-Assad regime—which had seemed to be in its death throes—began to move from one success to another with Tehran and Moscow's backing. Meanwhile, Washington was increasingly unable to prevent Al-Assad from standing his ground and from beginning to win the war.

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Still, bolstering and securing Al-Assad's victory and cooperating with Iran did not mean that the Tehran–Moscow relationship was built around the "Eurasian" model of mutual geopolitical loyalty or that the Russians and the Iranians have become complete allies. Both sides have kept wary eyes on each

other. Russia's relationship with Israel in particular was worrisome for Iran, which since the time of the 1979 Islamic Revolution had regarded Israel as its "mortal enemy."

A Thaw in Relations with Israel

The relationship that Russia presently has with Israel is a break from what it had been for the past sixty years—that is, from the beginning of the establishment of Israel. The USSR supported the founding of the Jewish state, and the Soviet-sponsored delivery of arms to Israel—for example, through proxies such as Czechoslovakia helped Israel survive the 1948 War with its Arab neighbors. Yet, soon enough, relations between the USSR and Israel took a negative turn. Israel, especially after the 1956 Suez Crisis, became allies with the United States. After the Six-Day War, Moscow broke off diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv.

The rise of officially sponsored anti-Semitism followed, which had centuries-long roots in Russia. Jews had lived in the territory of the Russian empire for centuries and were victims of discrimination and violent pogroms. Although during the early Soviet era, Jews—referred to here exclusively by their ethnicity—experienced a peculiar renaissance and occupied important positions in the Soviet state after the Second World War, anti-Semitism became increasingly prominent and was supported by the Soviet leadership.

During the Nixon–Brezhnev era, Russian Jews became a bargaining chip between the superpowers. The United States raised the issue of emigration for Russian Jews. Permissions were officially granted to some Jews to be "reunited" with their families in Israel. Millions left. Whereas many went to the West, mostly the United States, others went to Israel, where Russian-speaking Jews constituted a considerable part of the country's population.

Often well-educated and politically active, the Russian Jews who arrived in Israel in the 1960s and 1970s played a substantial role in Israel's society and politics. Some of them became cabinet ministers. Avigdor Liberman, a Soviet Jew

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from the former Soviet republic of Moldova, is currently the minister of defense in Israel, the position second to the prime minister. Many of these Jews had bitter memories about Soviet life and usually were anti-Soviet or anti-Russian and pro-American. These conditions only reinforced negative relations between Israel and the USSR.

However, after the collapse of the USSR and especially after Putin came to power, the situation changed dramatically. Not only did official anti-Semitism disappear, but a museum of tolerance dedicated to the history of Russian Jews

opened in Moscow as a testament to the state's changing relationship with Soviet Jews. All of this changed not just the attitudes of Jews in Russia to Putin, but those Russian or former Soviet Jews who lived in Israel. Anti-Russian feelings subsided and some Israelis developed pro-Putin sentiments. This changed the Israeli elite's views of Russia and led some Israelis to make attempts to coordinate their posture toward Syria and Iran.

Moscow eventually became attentive to Israelis' demand to eliminate or at least dramatically reduce the Iranian presence in Syria, which Tehran would use as a springboard for attacking Israel. Yet, it was not just the relationship with Israel which complicated Moscow's relationship with Tehran. Recently, Turkey–Russia relations also became a problem for both Moscow and Tehran.

Ankara Complicates Things

The tension between Ankara and Moscow could be traced to the distant past. As a matter of fact, Crimean Tatars were the vassals of the Ottoman Sultans for hundreds of years. They had been engaged in wars with Russia since the fifteenth century. Since World War II, the Republic of Turkey has continued the Ottomans' historically acrimonious relationship with Russia. As a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally, Turkey was viewed with suspicion and hostility in the USSR and in modern-day Russia.

The relationship between Ankara and Moscow reached a breaking point when a Turkish jet shot down a Russian military plane in November 24, 2015. Ankara claimed that the Russian jet had crossed Turkish airspace. Still, the problem was not the incident per se; Ankara was strongly opposed to Moscow's and Tehran's attempts to save Al-Assad. In the conflict with Turkey, Russia and Iran were on the same page since Iran vied with Turkey for geopolitical power in the region.

However, following the jet plane incident, Moscow buried the hatchet with the Turks and began to gravitate toward Turkey, even at the expense of Iran, supposedly Moscow's major ally in Syria and the Middle East. One reason that could explain Moscow's abrupt change in its approach to Ankara is Turkey's role in operating the pipeline, TurkStream. Launched in May 2017, TurkStream has been crucial for Russia primarily because it has bypassed Ukraine in sending natural gas to Europe.

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Moscow's goodwill toward Turkey was manifested in several ways: firstly, Moscow provided Turkey with *carte blanche* to attack Syrian Kurds, despite Russia's historical ties with the Kurds, and secondly, Moscow closed its eyes to Turkey's invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan. In both cases, Iran protested and

implicitly asked Russia to exert pressure on Turkey to compel it to withdraw troops. Moscow did nothing.

In addition, Ankara has made arrangements with Russia to acquire its advanced S-400 air defense missiles, which it signed a deal to purchase last September. One should remember that Tehran waited for the delivery of the less advanced S-300s for a decade.

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In the current situation, Moscow leans more toward Ankara than Tehran. First, Moscow wants both lines of TurkStream built. Second, Iran wants Russia to engage in a full-fledged war, and to make Iran a dominant force in Syria. Moscow does not want this, and is ready to accommodate other players, including Turkey, Israel, and even the United States in shaping Syria's future.

Moscow's Overall Engagement

The emergence of ISIS was a convenient excuse for Moscow to interfere in the region. Moscow claimed that ISIS fighters, many of whom from Russia, could return to the country. In reality, Moscow wanted to maintain its opportunistic footprint in the Middle East, which will help the Russians maintain their imperialist visions for the region, albeit in a limited and cautious manner. With that, Moscow tries to maintain a relationship with all players, including Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Moscow also tries to pivot to this or that player depending on its perceived interests, without compromising its relationship with the other players and notwithstanding the players' hostility to one another.

At the beginning of the Syrian conflict, Moscow decided to cooperate with Tehran to safeguard its bases in Syria and protect Al-Assad's regime. At the same time, it refused to do Iran's bidding, which wanted a resolute victory for the Syrian regime and to push aside other players, including the United States and Israel. In fact, Russia did not want to antagonize Israel, despite Moscow's recent accusation that it was responsible for shooting down a Russian plane by Syrian missiles. It also avoided a direct confrontation with Turkey, which competes with Iran and increasingly with the United States for the leading role in the region. Moscow's recent tilt to Ankara and readiness to accommodate its interests are due to the desire to lay down two gas lines through Turkey, which would make it possible to cut its dependence on Ukraine. To summarize: Russian engagement in the Middle East is convoluted and, in a way, limited, but Moscow is ready to accommodate the interests of other powers if its own interests are taken into account. 

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