

INSS Insight No. 1224, November 6, 2019

Russia in the Middle East and Africa: A Higher Gear or Media Buzz?

Zvi Magen, Vera Michlin-Shapir, Daniel Rakov, and Yoel Guzansky

Following President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw United States forces from the Kurdish zone in northern Syria, the international media and many political and military commentators hurried to crown Russia as the big winner in Syria and present it as the entity enjoying free rein there. The many summits President Putin has recently held with Middle East leaders (including a meeting with Turkish President Erdogan, a state visit to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and a summit in Russia hosted jointly with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi for all African Union leaders) were framed as evidence that the United States has given up in the region and Russia is working its way into every crack and crevice left behind. However, the regional actors are in fact in no hurry to cut their ties with Washington; they recognize the limits of Moscow's power and are leveraging their developing relations with Russia to improve their bargaining position vis-à-vis the United States. In practice, the Syrian Kurds, under US auspices, are maintaining their hold over most of their territory; Turkey and Iran still enjoy notable operational freedom of action in Syria; moving the Geneva process forward requires US cooperation; the Gulf states are limiting the extent of their relations with Moscow; and in Africa, Russia is the weakest of the big power players (after China, the United States, and the Europeans). Moreover, despite the recent developments, Russia is not the main actor to constrain Israeli military activity in Syria. It seems that the current strategic context (as long as Washington retains assets that are significant for Russia) provides Israel with an opportunity to promote its interests regarding the future of Syria. For the long term, Israel must prepare for Russia's expanded influence beyond the Syrian quagmire – which will be a graduated and reversible process.

Recent weeks have featured Russia's expanded diplomatic activity in the Middle East and Africa, following to its longstanding involvement in the Syrian civil war in cooperation with Iran and while in contact with all the region's players. In this context, President Vladimir Putin made highly publicized visits to the Gulf and hosted a high level Russian-African summit.

In the background to these events was the international crisis over the reduced United States military presence in northern Syria, paving the way for Turkey's Operation Peace

Spring, designed to seize control of the area held by the Syrian Kurds on the border between Syria and Turkey. The American move was interpreted as an abandonment of the Kurdish allies and a sign of a diminished US commitment to allies in the Middle East or anywhere else. Russia attempted to fill the vacuum left by the United States while reaching understandings with Turkey, the Syrian regime, and the Kurds. According to the international media, the image of Russia as the leading power in the region was strengthened. Many commentators crowned it “the big winner in Syria,” and described it as an entity capable of determining Syria’s fate with virtually no limits.

To what extent does the image of “the Russian victory” reflect reality, especially given President Trump’s decision to return some of the troops to guard eastern Syrian oil fields? Russia’s intensive diplomatic activity in the region reflects Moscow’s desire to fill the breach left by the United States, but it does not represent a change in the balance of power between the global powers in the region. The United States, should it choose to do so, still has the ability to challenge Moscow and upset Russia’s achievements to date in almost every part of the region.

Russia in Syria following the reduction of the US presence: The announced American withdrawal, entailing the abandonment of its Kurdish allies, followed by the Turkish operation in northern Syria, suggested a total clearing of the stage for Russia. This was followed by Russia’s diplomatic achievement in a meeting between Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Sochi on October 22, 2019, at which Erdogan agreed to limit the northern Syria operation. Later, Russia announced it was deploying its forces on the Syrian-Turkish border. The combined military-diplomatic move was indeed initially perceived in Moscow as an unprecedented success for Russia and for Putin himself, who called it (with Erdogan at his side) a “very important, possibly even fateful decision.” It seemed that Russia was left as the only global power in Syria, having restored a significant part of Syrian territory to the Assad regime without firing a single shot.

Nonetheless, the Russians quickly cooled their enthusiasm. The senior Russian analyst Fyodor Lukyanov, echoing the official position, stressed that Russia is interested in stabilizing Syria and does not view the situation as a zero sum game with the United States. On October 26, Russia’s Foreign and Defense Ministries began a strident media attack, accusing the United States of stealing Syria’s oil and being responsible for the humanitarian disaster in the al-Rukban refugee camp in Jordan. They also cast doubt on the American claim to have eliminated ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. A small Russian force was deployed along the Syrian-Turkish border, but it cannot control the situation. Turkey continues to bomb Kurdish and Syrian positions from time to time, while Russia proclaims the situation has stabilized. Russian and Syrian forces were involved in confrontations with Kurdish (YPG) troops and are denied freedom of

movement in Kurdish areas. In recent weeks, media outlets identified as Russian propaganda tools have relentlessly attacked Syrian Kurds and labeled them “terrorists.” This was highly unusual for Russia, which previously refrained from such rhetoric, resembling Turkish propaganda.

Furthermore, the political process to resolve the conflict in Syria, which was resumed on October 30 in Geneva (in the guise of convening the Syrian Constitutional Committee), is also not under Moscow’s control. The United States, the European states, the Gulf countries, Turkey, Iran, the Assad regime, and the Syrian opposition all have interests that are difficult to reconcile, which caused the process to lag in recent years. The Russian attempt (2017-2019) to promote a resolution to this impasse in cooperation with Turkey and Iran through the Astana Process did not succeed, and Moscow is now forced to return to the Geneva track, which is under UN control, and over which, therefore, the West has veto power. Still, the Syrian Constitutional Committee (an initiative Putin has personally promoted since 2017) reflects the West’s Syria-fatigue and willingness to undertake a serious reexamination of Russia’s intentions without an a priori commitment on the reconstruction of Syria.

Putin’s visit to the Gulf: Improving relations with the UAE is an important Russian objective. Moscow views Saudi Arabia and the UAE as key states in the Middle East that are crucial for the promotion of its political and economic interests. The Gulf states would like to see Moscow distance itself from Iran and cooperate with Russia in oil price stabilization, a critical component of their economic stability. They engage Russia despite past resentments and hidden competition with Russia over oil markets.

On October 14-15, Putin made a state visit to Saudi Arabia and UAE. It was his first visit there since 2007, and was described as “historic.” The visit took place following the Iranian attack in September on Saudi oil installations, which militarily has gone unanswered by the United States (in line with what has in recent months been seen in the region as American hesitation and withdrawal from political activity in the region). In turn, Moscow offered to mediate between Riyadh and Tehran, and even proposed an initiative for a security arrangement for the Gulf.

The Russians sought to ensure the visit would be significant, especially at the economic level. Yet at the end of the day, the primary results were ceremonial: the symbolism of the Russian President visiting the country that portrays itself as the leader of the Sunni world and the interpersonal connections between the leaders. Memoranda of understandings were signed, first and foremost an agreement on cooperation to stabilize oil prices, which assumes a permanent basis for an OPEC+ arrangement. But even this signature event wasn’t new, because the agreement in principle was made many months

ago. Russia also signed an agreement on cooperation on civilian nuclear matters with the UAE, but there were no reports about progress in the sales of Russian nuclear technologies and/or advanced weapons. Therefore, at this level too, it is unclear that Russia achieved much beyond the declarative.

The difficulty ascribing any practical significance to the visit is presumably related to US sensitivities, and Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are highly mindful of this. Still, in many areas, they are trying to improve relations with Russia as a complement to their relations with the United States, and perhaps even use them as leverage against Washington.

The Russian-African summit: In late October, Russia hosted a Russian-African summit with all 54 states of the continent (43 of which were represented by their leaders). President Putin jointly led and the conference with his Egyptian counterpart Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The impressive production, costing some \$70 million (one of the most expensive conferences ever held in Russia) and the marathon meetings between Putin and 16 African leaders were designed to stress Russia's rising star in the international arena and its intention to play a much more significant role in Africa. Russia's moves in Africa should be recognized as an attempt to expand its Middle East policy, partly in light of the growing coordination with Egypt and the UAE.

However, in practice, Russia's relations with the African continent remain limited. Its "pivot to Africa" is the result of heavy political and economic pressure by the West, forcing Moscow to look for new markets. Russia's balance of trade with Africa totals \$20 billion (of which 60 percent comes from Egypt and Algeria alone). To date, Russia has succeeded in playing a significant political or security role in only a few African states. It is therefore safe to assume that Russia will try to strengthen its ties and status through a gradual process so as to minimize friction with the other global powers having greater status on the continent – and deeper pockets (China, the United States, and France).

Conclusion

During his visit to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Putin presented his hosts with white hunting falcons (which nest in the distant frozen wasteland of Russia), symbolic of the last month of Russian moves in the region:

- a. On the one hand, the Russian falcon is familiarizing itself with the desert climate: Russia is consistent in its desire to expand relations with regional states and succeeds by identifying mutual interests and points of convergence. Trump's policy helps Russia build influence in the region.
- b. On the other hand, the bird chatter symbolizes that the buzz over Russia's achievements in Syria and the change in the regional balance of power between the United States and Russia is exaggerated. The United States still holds very

strong cards in Syria – territorial (most of the Kurdish zone and the al-Tanf region); political (veto rights over the Geneva process); military deterrence; and economic (sanctions and preventing aid for rebuilding Syria). Beyond Syria, Russia at this stage has limited influence on regional states. Despite the growing suspicion over Trump, US allies in the Middle East are not rushing to the Russian side. Rather, they want to use a Russian connection to build leverage for negotiating with Washington or to maximize relatively narrow mutual interests. Moreover, Russia with its limited economic resources, cannot and doesn't compete with the United States for policing the region, but is only seeking to play the role of mediator.

Currently, Israeli military activity in Syria does not present as an important challenge to Russian interests, as long as the United States, Turkey, and Iran continue significant operations in Syria. Therefore, Russia can continue to tolerate Israeli activity as long as Israel is careful not to harm any Russian personnel and as long as the ramifications do not disrupt Russia's broader plans for Syria.

At the same time, given the renewal of the Geneva track and Trump's desire to end America's military presence in Syria, a political opportunity may be presenting itself to Israel, as long as the United States still holds significant cards vis-à-vis Russia. Israel must work to couple its interest in limiting Iran's presence in Syria with potential US-Russian agreements.

In the long term, Israel must prepare for regional Russian influence extending beyond Syria's borders and take into account a Russian "pivot to Africa," which might challenge Israel's interests, especially if disagreements develop between Israel and Egypt and/or in the Red Sea basin.