

# Russia and the Middle East: The Quest for Recognition

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# Russia has had a long-term interest in the Middle East

1776 – 1774

- Russian intervenes into Syria in support of Arab rebels.
- Great Power tensions
- Annexation of Crimea

2014-16

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- Great Power tensions
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# Russia's historical interests

- Securing the borders of Russia
  - Continual conflict with Ottoman and Persian Empires
- Support of co-ethnic (Slav) and co-religious (Orthodox) communities.
- Recognition as a Great Power in the region (part of the Eastern Question)



# 2014 parallel with 1955

- Russia retreats from the Middle East in times of weakness
  - 1917-1955
  - 1991-2014
- 1955
  - Khrushchev's 'leapfrogging over the wall of containment'
  - Arms sales to Egypt and Syria
  - Quest for Recognition
- 2014 Similar logic for post-Soviet Russia



# Russian intervention into Syria

- Assertion of Great Power projection and status
- Ideological support for the Syrian regime
  - Background of the Arab Spring and the NATO intervention into Libya
  - Putin sets 'red line' in relation to Syria
  - Crisis in Syria occurs at same time as protests in Russia
  - Broader reaction against Western order.



# Impact of Russian Intervention into Syria

- Perceived success of the intervention resurrects Russia's status and prestige
- Contrast with the Soviet period – limits to ideology; much more pragmatic approach
- Utilizes the increased influence in Syria to strengthen its regional role
  - Astana Process.



# The Syrian intervention – exception to the rule

- Syrian-style intervention has not been reproduced elsewhere
- Russia offers its services as a mediator but does not get directly involved
  - Israel-Palestine
  - Yemen
  - Libya
- Reality of Russia's limited interests in the region

# Priority 1: Northern Tier – Turkey and Iran

- Main strategic and economic interest in the region
  - Geographical proximity
  - Large populations/economies
- Disintegration of the USSR has meant much less suspicion/distrust from Iran and Turkey
- Economic partner with Turkey
- Partner with Iran





# Priority 2 – Israel and the Gulf States

- Israel
  - Striking contrast with the the Soviet Union
  - Large Russian-speaking population
  - Strong Putin-Netanyahu relationship
  - Economic/technology links
  - Similar analysis of the Arab Spring and threat of Islamism



# Gulf States

- Similar To Israel, post-Soviet Russian relations breaks Soviet taboo.
- 2017 – King Salman in Moscow; Putin in Riyadh in 2019
- Puts behind tensions over Syria
- Significant Gulf investments in Russia.
- OPEC+



# Priority 3 – the Rest of the Arab world

- Egypt
- Iraq
- Lebanon
- Libya
- Algeria
  
- Syria as the exception?



# Russian achievements

- Quite remarkable 'return' of Russia to the Middle East after absence of over 20 years.
- Intervention into Syria as risky but has provided dividends
  - Recognition of Russia in the region as a Great Power.
- Russia's pragmatic approach has meant it has wide support in the region
  - A conservative force supporting the status quo; contrast with West which appears a more ideological and normative force, promoting democracy and human rights.
  - Russia benefiting from perceived withdrawal of US from the region

# Russian Challenges and Constraints

- It used to be said that the ‘Soviet Union could bring war but not peace to the Middle East’
- Syria as still unstable and deeply scarred by war
  - Limits of Russian power to promote reconstruction
  - Sanctions imposed by US and West further constrain this
- Russia as a weak economic actor in the region
  - Its economy competes rather than compliments that of the Middle East; economic interests mainly military arms; nuclear power
  - China as the real economic giant in the region – now exceeds the US as largest importer of oil; largest trading partner; largest investor
  - Russian and Chinese interests not necessarily aligned in the region.

# Conclusion

- The Middle East as a 'highly penetrated region'
  - Russia as one amongst other significant external actors
  - Constantly shifting balance of power
  - But quite expert in navigating this
- Recognition, Prestige, Status
  - Important driver of Russian behaviour
  - Has gained recognition from the regional Middle eastern states
  - Less successful in getting recognition from the West
    - Difficult to leverage its Middle eastern role globally
  - Reason for return to the Ukraine question.