



# **RUSSIA'S MIDDLE EASTERN POLICY**

## REGIONAL AMBITIONS, GLOBAL OBJECTIVES

Witold Rodkiewicz

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**OSW** |

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES

OŚRODEK STUDIÓW WSCHODNICH im. **Marka Karpia**

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## SUMMARY

- 1. Russia's policy in the Middle East is part of a wider strategy aimed at creating an international order which would shield Russia against Western interference in its internal affairs and would guarantee it an equal footing with the United States. In practice, that means that Russia's Middle Eastern policy is subordinated to the Kremlin's global strategy towards Washington. In the Middle East, Moscow seeks to create a regional variant of what it believes to be the best model of the international order, i.e. a concert of powers that would include, apart from Russia, also the regional powers of Turkey and Iran, as well as the United States; provided the latter shows a willingness to co-operate with Russia on an equal footing and give up its 'hegemonic habits'. The Kremlin's striving to restore Russia's great power position in the Middle East has also served to legitimise Putin's regime in the eyes of both the Russian elite and Russian population at large.**
- 2. The long-term aim of Russia's policy towards Turkey has been to loosen the ties which bind Ankara to the United States, NATO and the West, and to incorporate Turkey as a 'junior partner' into the new regional order based on a concert of powers. As a part of that policy, Russia has attempted to build asymmetric economic ties with Turkey that could serve to exert pressure on Ankara. However, Turkey's vulnerability to Russian economic pressure turned out to be insufficient to make it give up its strategic priorities, which Russia has been forced to respect to a certain degree.**
- 3. Iran is emerging as the most important strategic partner of Russia in the Middle East. Even though the Iranian-Russian relations are burdened by a major historical record of mutual distrust and marked by rivalry, and despite the failure of attempts to develop larger-scale economic co-operation, it remains a shared priority for the two countries to undermine the US position in the region. For this reason, Moscow and Tehran view each other as strategically indispensable partners.**
- 4. From the Kremlin's point of view, the main aim of the Russian involvement in Syria was to stop the Western, and more specifically the American policy of so-called humanitarian interventions. The Kremlin saw this policy as geopolitically motivated and feared that Russia**

**itself might ultimately become a target. The Russian intervention was intended to demonstrate to Washington the limits of its ability to influence the situation in the Middle East and show that the US would have to take the opinions and interests of Russia into account as an indispensable player in the region.**

- 5. Russia's success in salvaging Bashar al-Assad's regime and swinging the relative balance of power in the Syrian civil war in his favour has clearly buoyed Moscow's ambitions in the Middle East. If Russia's policy in the region was reactive and defensive in the first years of its involvement in Syria (from 2011 to September 2015), the success, at least in the short term, of the use of force has encouraged Moscow to try and build a new regional order in which Russia would play a key role.**
- 6. The greatest risk to Russia's position comes from the Donald Trump administration's anti-Iranian course. Russia may be confronted with a choice between keeping its 'strategic partnership' with Iran or facing direct conflict with the United States.**

# INTRODUCTION

The Russian military intervention in Syria began in autumn 2015 and was met with a wave of comments claiming that Russia had regained its global power position in the Middle East. The purpose of the present paper is to identify the nature of Russia's position as a power in the Middle East and to trace the motives guiding the Kremlin's Middle Eastern policy. The first part attempts to identify the place Middle Eastern policy occupies in the Kremlin's overall foreign policy and Moscow's priorities in the region. The second part describes the evolution of post-Soviet Russia's Middle Eastern policy, pointing to its growing involvement in the region on the one hand, and the instrumental nature of that involvement on the other. Because the Russian military intervention in Syria has been the central element of Russia's Middle Eastern policy since the autumn of 2015, the third part is devoted to analysing the reasons for and objectives of that intervention. Parts four and five delve into Russia's policy towards the countries it considers its most important regional partners, i.e. Turkey and Iran. Part six attempts to analyse the instruments with which Russia has built its position in the region and to assess the outcomes of its Middle Eastern policy and the challenges ahead of that policy.



# I. RUSSIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST – THE GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

## 1. The global circumstances of Russia's Middle Eastern policy

The Middle Eastern policy forms an integral part of the Kremlin's global policy and is informed by the two fundamental notions underlying Russia's overall foreign policy. The **first one concerns 'US-centrism'**,<sup>1</sup> i.e. the approach whereby the Russian establishment sees the United States as the main point of reference in its thinking about international policy and Russia's place in the world. Since at least the mid-1990s, Moscow's main strategic objective internationally has been to undermine the United States' power and to challenge the US-centric post-Cold War global order, while championing a new 'multi-polar order' (even if those aspirations were limited to political declarations before Vladimir Putin came to power). As a consequence of that approach, Russia has been using relations with other countries instrumentally, with Moscow treating them as pawns or potential allies in its global game with Washington. The degree of that instrumentalisation would differ, but in nearly all cases Russia's policy towards third countries took the American context into account. In the case of countries in the Middle East, as we will see below, that context was decisive. In other words, Russia's policy in the Middle East has been and remains subordinated to Moscow's global strategy towards Washington.

A paradoxical aspect of the 'US-centrism' of the Kremlin's policy is that, while Moscow seeks to undermine the US dominance, it also aspires to achieve Washington's formal, or at least informal 'recognition' and acceptance as a global power standing on an equal footing.

**The second notion that informs Russia's foreign policy, including its Middle Eastern policy, concerns the belief that Russia is predestined to be global power,** irrespective of objective constraints, especially those of an economic nature.<sup>2</sup> That means Russia has a right to co-decide, on an equal footing with Washington, on any international issues that affect Russia's interests. The Russian

<sup>1</sup> Bobo Lo was the first to note this aspect of Russia's foreign policy. See: *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, New York, 2002, pp. 23, 173–174; *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, RIIA, London 2003, pp. 17, 25, 128. In his latest book, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, London, New York 2015, he even referred to it as an 'obsession', pp. 98, 226.

<sup>2</sup> As Bobo Lo accurately observes, "the Russian ruling elite has come to regard global power status as an inalienable historical right, irrespective of Russia's circumstances", *Russia and the New World Disorder*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

elite's ideas of Russia's great power status stem partly from the Soviet experience and reminiscences, and partly from a distorted perception of the United States' policy and position. In line with those ideas, global power status entails the right to set the rules of the game on the international arena, and the right to either follow or disregard those rules on a discretionary basis. It also entails having a sphere of influence and a number client-states beyond that sphere (with varying levels of dependence). Financial pragmatism is an important characteristic of the Russian concept of global power status, which sets it apart from the older Soviet concept: Russia avoids subsidising its clients and allies and seeks to convert its political influence into business gains. It combines efforts to maximise influence and control with a tendency to minimise responsibilities and costs.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, **foreign policy is an important way for the Kremlin to legitimise its rule vis-à-vis the Russian elites and public, and in the last two or three years it may have been the single most important means to that end.** Both the elites and the Russian public perceived Russia's loss of global power status and the degradation of its international position in the 1990s as a painful humiliation. This is why any international moves which can be represented as a success for Russia in regaining its rightful status as a global power are welcomed with satisfaction by the Russian public and regarded as steps towards regaining dignity and 'normality'.

## **2. 'Closer' and 'farther' Middle East**

**From Moscow's point of view, the Middle East is divided into two fundamentally different zones. The first one consists of Turkey and Iran, and the second one consists of the Arab states and Israel.** Turkey and Iran are adjacent to the post-Soviet area and are the Russian Federation's neighbours across the Black and Caspian Sea basins. The two countries have long traditions of imperial statehood, major economic and military potentials, and growing regional ambitions. Both also have sufficient resources to effectively compete with Moscow for influence in the post-Soviet states, and even use soft power measures to influence fellow Muslims and ethnic compatriots within the Russian Federation. The other zone does not directly neighbour the post-Soviet area and none of the countries that constitute it have sufficient potential to effectively aspire to regional power status.<sup>4</sup> However, it is in that zone that religious

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> Neither of the main pretenders to that role, i.e. Saudi Arabia and Egypt, have sufficient potential to fulfil their regional aspirations. Saudi Arabia is not sufficiently populous, and

and civilizational centres important to Russian Muslims are located (including Mecca, Cairo and Damascus).

Because of those differences, Russia's policy towards each of the zones is based on different assumptions. Turkey and Iran are seen in Moscow as serious geopolitical players and relations with them feature high on Russia's political agenda. Moscow treats the two states as regional powers and views them as its partners in building the 'multi-polar' international order (at least in the regional dimension) and in stabilising the post-Soviet area. The other zone is not a long-term priority for the Kremlin because of the greater distance separating it from the post-Soviet area, and the absence of serious partners. It is symptomatic that all the versions of the Russian Federation's official Foreign Policy Concept (released in 1993, 2000, 2008, 2013 and 2016) assign very low priority to the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> Compared to Iran and Turkey, Moscow treats the countries of this zone and relations with them more instrumentally and does not consider any of them as a potential long-term partner worth the investment of diplomatic efforts or economic measures.

This difference in Russia's approach first became visible in the late 1990s. In 1998 Moscow started two large energy projects that laid a lasting foundation for its relations with Turkey and Iran. In the case of Turkey, it was the Blue Stream gas pipeline on the Black Sea bed, due to which Russia became Turkey's main gas supplier and Turkey became the second largest importer of Russian gas after Germany. In the case of Iran, it was the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant which made Russia Iran's main partner in the pursuit of the most important objective from the point of view of Iran's national ambitions, i.e. the development of nuclear technologies due to which Iran could become a nuclear-armed state or at least acquire the capacity to build nuclear weapons ('threshold' status). It is symptomatic that no similar 'strategic' projects were implemented with the Arab states, which Moscow saw primarily as potential economic partners and arms importers.

Egypt is not sufficiently wealthy. Their other weaknesses include the fact that their economies are resource-oriented and do not produce any advanced technologies, and their political systems do not offer an attractive model for other states in the region to follow.

<sup>5</sup> As Dmitry Trenin observes, "In the hierarchy of Russian foreign policy objectives the Middle East is usually behind America, China and the main Asian states". Россия на Ближнем Востоке: задачи, приоритеты, политические стимулы, Carnegie.ru, 21.04.2016, <http://carnegie.ru/2016/04/21/ru-pub-63388>

## II. EVOLUTION OF RUSSIA'S POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

**Post-Soviet Russia's policy in the Middle East can be split into at least four phases: 1992–2002; 2003–2010; 2011–2015; and 2015 onwards.** In each of them the policy objectives were different, and so was the region's place on Russia's list of priorities. The changes in Russia's policy were dictated primarily by the changing wider context, and especially by developments in Moscow's relations with Washington.

### 1. The economy and focus on internal policy (1992–2002)

**During the first phase, Russia did not show much activity in the region.** Its policy was guided by purely mercantile motivations, treating the Middle East almost exclusively as a potentially promising market, especially for Russian arms, and as a potential source of investment capital.<sup>6</sup> Russia was experiencing a deep economic crisis at that time and was focused on restoring internal political stability, and was therefore simply unable to pursue an active policy in the region. That did not change even after Yevgeny Primakov, an orientalist who had served as the Middle East envoy of the Communist Party's Central Committee during Soviet times and had an extensive network of contacts there, was appointed Russia foreign minister in January 1996.

After the outbreak of the Second Chechen war in 1999 and Vladimir Putin's rise to power, **a new aspect was added to Russia's Middle Eastern policy that was strictly related to internal politics.** At that time, Moscow made efforts to persuade Middle Eastern countries to restrain the Chechen independence movement's capacity to raise funds and recruit militants, and to deprive the Chechen insurgency of religious legitimacy. The Kremlin seemed to understand that its policy aimed at strengthening the 'official' Islam loyal to the Russian state needed to be supported and legitimised by the religious centres of the Muslim world.

To this end, Moscow made efforts to revive relations with Saudi Arabia, traditionally regarded as the political patron of Islam. Contacts between the two states had been *de facto* frozen since the outbreak of the First Chechen War. Moscow's aim was to get Saudi Arabia to unequivocally back Russia's policy on Chechnya (or at least to stop openly criticising that policy) and to block the

<sup>6</sup> A. Choumiline, *La diplomatie russe au Moyen-Orient: retour à la géopolitique, Russie.Nei. Visions*, Issue 93, May 2016, p. 3.

material and ideological support flowing to charities and educational foundations promoting the fundamentalist Wahhabi Islam among Russian Muslims. The official visit of the Saudi crown prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz to Moscow in September 2003 was a signal of normalisation, or even rapprochement between the two countries. During the visit, the Saudi leader (Abdulaziz was *de facto* ruling Saudi Arabia at that time because of King Fahd's poor health) explicitly stated that the conflict in Chechnya was a Russian internal affair and should be regulated in line with Russian constitutional procedures.<sup>7</sup> In return, Moscow declared support for the newly adopted, Saudi-sponsored Arab Peace Initiative for the Middle East.

Moscow's political interest in normalising relations with Riyadh overlapped with economic interests, encompassing the co-ordination of policies to influence oil prices in global markets, the development of trade, and attracting Saudi investments in Russia.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. A return to the Middle East (2003-2011)

The improved economic and financial situation after 1999, marked symbolically by Russia's early repayment of its foreign debt in 2003, **enabled Moscow to pursue a more active policy in the Middle East**. An impulse for that stepped up activity came from the 2003 crisis in Russian-American relations, caused by the US intervention in Iraq and the Kremlin's belief that Washington was pursuing an active policy to crowd out Russian influence in the post-Soviet area.<sup>9</sup> After two years of pursuing a detente in relations with the US, the Kremlin

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Abdullah bin Abdulaziz on 4 September 2003, <http://izvestia.ru/news/280837>. In autumn the same year, official observers from the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (and the Arab league) legitimised the presidential election in Chechnya organised by the Kremlin with their presence. Without the friendly stance of Saudi Arabia, that would not have been possible. See: А. Малашенко, Фактор ислама в российской внешней политике, *Россия в глобальной политике*, 18.04.2007, [http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/n\\_8391](http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_8391)

<sup>8</sup> All those issues were present in the joint communique adopted on the occasion of the Saudi crown prince's visit to Moscow in September 2003; <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/1712>

<sup>9</sup> This was how the Kremlin interpreted Washington's objections against the Kozak Plan, i.e. the Russian initiative to resolve the frozen Transnistrian conflict in Moldova, which would give Russia decisive influence on Moldova's foreign policy and authorise the presence of a Russian military contingent in that country. Similarly, the Kremlin interpreted the so-called 'colour revolutions' i.e. the mass protests against rigged elections which brought to power pro-Western political forces in Georgia (November 2003) and Ukraine (November 2004-January 2005) as manifestations of Washington's anti-Russian policy.

reverted to the policy of ‘softly’ containing the American hegemony by building an anti-hegemonic coalition under the slogans of the ‘defence of multi-polarity’ (мультиполярность in Russian), formulated in the late 1990s by the then foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov.

**In the Middle East, this policy consisted in measures to actively exploit tensions emerging between Washington and its traditional allies in the region,** such as Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Russia offered those countries closer political contacts and economic and military-technological co-operation, representing itself as a global power with a different view of regional issues and international order issues (such as the role of the UN, the use of force, humanitarian interventions, etc.), alternative to the one presented by the USA. While relations with Moscow could not fully replace ties with the United States for Russia’s partners in the Middle East, they offered them more room for manoeuvre and an additional bargaining chip in relations with Washington.

**At the same time, Russia started to rebuild – on new terms – relations with countries which used to be the Soviet Union’s clients, such as Syria, Libya and Algeria.** As a prerequisite, a solution had to be found for settling their old, Soviet-era debts. Between 2005 and 2008 Russia cancelled 73% of Syria’s debt of US\$ 13.4 billion and the entire debt of Algeria and Libya of US\$ 4.74 billion and US\$ 4.5 billion, respectively. The debt forgiveness was linked to the beneficiaries signing new multi-billion contracts, especially for arms supplies. This was particularly true for Algeria, which became the largest importer of Russian arms in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>10</sup> **However, it was Syria, formerly the Soviet Union’s main ally, that had the closest relations with Moscow.** Mutual ties were particularly close in the military sphere. Syrian officers would receive training in Russian military academies, and the number of Russian military advisers in Syria was estimated at 2,000 in 2006. Russia also renovated its supply and maintenance base in the port of Tartus, where it installed a new

<sup>10</sup> The new Libya not interested in Russian weapons, keeps mum on old debt, 9.09.2011, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/20110909166590836/>, A. Kreutz, Syria: Russia’s Best Asset in the Middle East, *Russie.Nei.Visions*, Issue 55, November 2010, pp. 14, 18–19; Mark N. Katz, Russia and Algeria: Partners or Competitors, <http://digilib.gmu.edu/jspui/bitstream/handle/1920/3016/Russia%20and%20Algeria.pdf>

According to the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database (calculations are the author’s own), the value of Russian arms exports to Algeria, which used to be between US\$ 90 million and US\$ 380 million in the years 2000–2006, increased to between US\$ 0.5 and US\$ 1.5 billion a year in the years 2007–2011.

floating dock in 2009.<sup>11</sup> The move could have been related to the Russian Navy's plans, announced back in 2003, to re-establish a permanent Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean.<sup>12</sup>

**Meanwhile, the Kremlin was building an image of Russia as a global power civilisationally distinct from the West and predestined to play the special role of a bridge between the West and the Orient because of its special ties to the Islamic world.**

In a meeting with the mufti of Tajikistan in April 2003, Vladimir Putin said that Russia "could be regarded as part of the Islamic world in some sense".<sup>13</sup> In September the same year Putin declared that Russia wished to join the Organisation of the Islamic Conference as he delivered a guest address to the Organisation's summit in Kuala Lumpur. In May 2004, Russia filed a formal application to be admitted as an observer.<sup>14</sup>

The Kremlin also frequently emphasised that Russia was the successor of the Soviet tradition of supporting anti-colonial aspirations against Western hegemony. All those elements were present in Vladimir Putin's speeches addressed to Muslim/Arab audiences and in bilateral declarations signed with Muslim state leaders.<sup>15</sup>

### **3. The Middle East as an 'extended bulwark' to defend Putin's regime (2011–2015)**

Even though Russia's policy became more active and its presence in the Middle East expanded in the years 2003–2010, the region remained of peripheral interest to the Kremlin. **In 2011, however, Russia rapidly stepped up its involvement in the region and the Middle East quickly moved up the list of priorities.** The Kremlin weighed in in **Syria** to defend the regime of President Bashar al-Assad which was threatened by the mass protests which broke out in the

<sup>11</sup> A. Kreutz, *op. cit.*, pp. 18, 21.

<sup>12</sup> M. Menkiszak, Responsibility to Protect...Itself? Russia's Strategy towards the Crisis in Syria, *FIIA Briefing Paper* 131, May 2013, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> A. Малашенко, *op. cit.*; <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/28551>

<sup>14</sup> Выступление на X встрече глав государств и правительств Организации Исламская конференция, 16.10.2003, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22160>

<sup>15</sup> See Vladimir Putin's address at the summit of Islamic states in Kuala Lumpur (no. 14), as well as his interview for the Al-Jazeera television network, 16.10.2003, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22162>

spring of 2011 and subsequently morphed into an armed rebellion. **This country became the focus of Russian policy in the Middle East.** During the first four years of the conflict (2011–2015), the Kremlin supported Assad using political and diplomatic means, above all trying to prevent a Western intervention like the one in Libya, and assisted the regime in the civil war by providing military equipment and by keeping military advisers in Syria.

**This stepped-up involvement was defensive and reactive and was motivated by the Russian leadership's specific perception of the Arab Spring and the Western intervention in Libya as potential threats not only to Russian interests in the Middle East, but also, and more importantly, to Russia's internal political stability.** This perception was based on closely inter-linked ideological and geopolitical premises. The ideological premise concerned the Kremlin's hostile attitude towards the Arab Spring as a mass movement aiming to topple authoritarian regimes. From the point of view of the Kremlin, any authoritarian regime which was toppled, especially under anti-corruption slogans, constituted a dangerous precedent and a potential model for the Russian people to follow.<sup>16</sup> The Russian leadership also feared that a political mobilisation in defence of Islam and against a secular regime could become an attractive model for Muslim communities in Russia and in Central Asia. The geopolitical premise concerned the view that the Arab Spring was an American special operation designed to implement a policy of 'controlled chaos'<sup>17</sup> (the aim of this was thought to be to install pro-American regimes in the countries concerned, in an alliance with the conservative Sunni monarchies: Saudi Arabia, Qatar), and to undermine the influence of Iran. The Kremlin was particularly alarmed by the intervention in Libya, which ended with the toppling and death of the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi.<sup>18</sup> Moscow saw it as a precedent-set-

<sup>16</sup> D. Trenin suggested, in slightly veiled language, that these were indeed the Kremlin's concerns, in the text *Россия и кризис в Сирии*, <http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=50914>

<sup>17</sup> In the context of the Arab Spring, this term appears for instance in the collective report prepared by a group of experts of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies (RISI) which works for the Kremlin, *Арабская весна: последствия для российской и мировой политики, Проблемы национальной стратегии*, 2012, Issue 4, p. 8. The notion of the West using 'controlled chaos' in the Middle East is also present in the writings of the guru of Russian strategic thought, Marshall Makhmut Gareyev, *Вызов принят, Военно-промышленный курьер*, Issue 7, 24.02.2016.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10–19. It should be noted here that neither the efforts made by the Obama administration to minimise the US military involvement in the operation in Libya, nor the fact that the initiative had come from France and the UK, which also shouldered the main burden of the operation, changed the perceptions in Russia where Washington was universally regarded as the main perpetrator. This distortion of Russian perceptions is a consequence of the specific 'US-centrism' of the Russian elites.



ting, successful application of Washington's 'responsibility to protect' doctrine. **The Kremlin therefore feared that the next possible intervention, this time in Syria, could create a domino effect, paving the way to a similar operation against Iran and, ultimately, perhaps against Russia itself.**<sup>19</sup>

Another important motivation for the Kremlin's policy in Syria stemmed from the need to strengthen the Russian leadership's internal legitimacy by demonstrating to the Russian public that under Putin, Russia can regain international influence and compete on an equal footing with the United States in the Middle East. Moscow's aim, however, was not to build a sphere of influence or create a network of client states (which was beyond its economic and financial capacity), but to establish a position for itself in consequence of which all the other actors would always have to take Russia's interests into account, and the states in the region would see Moscow as a valuable partner. **The strategic objective of Russia's involvement in the Middle Eastern geopolitical game was to strengthen Moscow's position vis-à-vis the United States and to force Washington to take Russia's views into account when dealing with regional problems.** This is why on the one hand Russia sought to undermine American influence in the region by blocking the moves of Washington and its regional allies and, on the other, it offered countries in the region an alternative to Washington in the form of political and military support as well as supplies of weapons and nuclear technologies (nuclear power plants) with no strings attached as regards the beneficiaries' internal policies. In this, the Russian policy exploited the opaqueness and lack of consistency in the United States' policy as well as Washington's reluctance to become militarily involved in the region.

In this context, the principal objective of the Kremlin's policy in the Middle East was not only to provisionally prevent another American/Western military intervention, but also to create procedures and mechanisms that would

<sup>19</sup> Concerns about the Libyan scenario being replayed in Syria and Iran were voiced, among others, by the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov on 18 January 2012; [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/asset\\_publisher/70vQR5KJWVmR/content/id/174490](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/70vQR5KJWVmR/content/id/174490) and [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/asset\\_publisher/70vQR5KJWVmR/content/id/174730](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/70vQR5KJWVmR/content/id/174730)

The fact that the Russian leadership thought in terms of the 'domino effect' is also visible in a statement by the RISI director L. Reshetnikov who said: "If Russia had not taken a firm stance [on Syria - W.R.], today the Americans would be cleansing Tehran. Russia said 'Stop the machine!'", interview on 23.09.2013, [http://www.stoletie.ru/rossiya\\_i\\_mir/leonid\\_reshetnikov\\_my\\_dolzhny\\_vybratsa\\_na\\_svoj\\_tretij\\_put\\_rossii\\_348.htm](http://www.stoletie.ru/rossiya_i_mir/leonid_reshetnikov_my_dolzhny_vybratsa_na_svoj_tretij_put_rossii_348.htm); See also a similar statement by Alexei Pushkov, chair of the foreign affairs committee of the lower house of the Russian parliament, as quoted in Menkiszak, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

allow Russia to more systematically restrict Washington's room for manoeuvre on the international stage. As the foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov put it, the Americans "had to be taught that one can only do business on the basis of equality, balance of interests and mutual respect".<sup>20</sup> **Thus, Moscow's involvement in defending the Assad regime was primarily instrumental** and was subsidiary to a broader objective of Putin's team, namely to create an international order that would generate as comfortable external conditions as possible for the Russian structures of power, especially in the event of an internal crisis.<sup>21</sup>

The Russian propaganda message which said that the objective behind Moscow's involvement in Syria was not to save the Assad regime was therefore true to a certain extent. As Moscow supported Assad in his fight with the opposition and protected him against external pressure and the threat of a military intervention by the West, Turkey or the Arab states, the Kremlin effectively treated the Syrian regime as its own crucial outpost in defending the Russian regime.<sup>22</sup>

#### **4. Intervention in Syria: the Middle East as a 'geopolitical lever' (2015-2017)**

**The direct military intervention in Syria launched on 30 September 2015 marked the beginning of a new chapter in Russia's Middle Eastern policy. The use of military force meant a qualitative change of the nature of Russia's involvement in the region and was also a successful attempt at taking over the military and political initiative and shifting from**

<sup>20</sup> "Их надо приучать к тому, что дела можно вести только на основе равноправия, баланса интересов и взаимного уважения". Interview on the show Воскресный вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым, 10.02.2013, [http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/asset\\_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/123866](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/123866)

<sup>21</sup> D. Trenin phrased it accurately, even if somewhat abstractly, when he said: "In reality, the difference [between Russia and the West - W.R.] over Syria reflects the clash (*противоборство* in Russian) between distinct notions of the international order, problems of sovereignty and human rights, the use of force and the obligation to use force (instead of letting the conflict resolve itself)". *Россия и кризис в Сирии*, op. cit.; the notion of the conflict in Syria as a 'hybrid war' directed by Washington is mentioned by Valery Gerasimov (chief of General Staff of the Russian Federation) in the text *По опыту Сирии, Военно-промышленный курьер*, 7.03.2016, Issue 9; see also the statement by Leonid Reshetnikov, the RISI director, who said the following on the causes of the Arab Spring: "It is the result of external interference. Especially American interference (...). They thought: we will undermine one country, we will undermine another. We will rule.", interview for *Stoletije.ru*, 23.09.2013, [http://www.stoletie.ru/rossiya\\_i\\_mir/leonid\\_reshetnikov\\_my\\_dolzny\\_vybratsa\\_na\\_svoj\\_tretij\\_put\\_rossii\\_348.htm](http://www.stoletie.ru/rossiya_i_mir/leonid_reshetnikov_my_dolzny_vybratsa_na_svoj_tretij_put_rossii_348.htm)

<sup>22</sup> This is accurately reflected in the title of an analysis by M. Menkiszak "Responsibility to Protect...Itself? Russia's Strategy towards the Crisis in Syria", *FIIA Briefing Paper*, 131, May 2013.

**a defensive and reactive policy into an offensive mode.** Saving the Assad regime, whose forces had suffered a series of defeats in the first half of 2015 and had been pushed onto the defensive by the armed opposition, was an important, but nonetheless merely provisional objective of the intervention.<sup>23</sup> In a broader sense, the political objective was to use the 'window of opportunity' created by the weakening of the United States' position in the Middle East in order for Russia to re-establish itself as a major power in the region. A particularly important argument for doing so came from the Kremlin's conviction that the outgoing Obama administration would not respond with stepped up involvement, and certainly not military involvement, to a Russian intervention. This allowed Moscow to relatively safely use military power as the main instrument to rebuild its power position.

It seems that the Russian leadership did not treat regaining regional power status as an end in itself, but rather a means serving several other strategic objectives. First of all, the Kremlin intended to use its position in the Middle East to build up its legitimacy *vis-à-vis* the Russian public and elites who felt nostalgic about Russia's former global power status and for whom the sense of being a power constituted an important element of their identity. Secondly, Russia's stronger position and wider influence in the Middle East were intended to force the West to give up its policy of isolating Russia, and pave the way towards a kind of geopolitical deal. The core elements of that deal would concern the West's acceptance of the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the implementation of the Minsk accords in line with Russia's interpretation of them (i.e. the federalisation of Ukraine with veto rights for Russia's clients in Donbas). In return, Russia would co-operate with the West in the Middle East under the common banner of fighting Islamic terrorism.

This is why the military intervention in Syria was preceded by a propaganda campaign aimed at creating the false impression that Russia's main aim was to fight terrorism. Vladimir Putin himself was involved in the campaign as he accused the United States at the UN General Assembly of destabilising the Middle East and indirectly supporting terrorism, and put forward a proposal for an international anti-terror alliance involving Russia (a proposal that had been made before). As a first step towards creating such an alliance, Moscow tried to establish a joint Russian-Iranian-Iraqi intelligence and command centre in Baghdad.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> С. Минасян, Сирийский гамбит Москвы, *Россия в глобальной политике*, 23.11.2015, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/Siriiskii-gambit-Moskvy-17821>

<sup>24</sup> Under US pressure, Baghdad withdrew from those plans.

The military intervention in support of the Assad regime required military and political co-operation with Tehran (see Chapter V). When it embarked upon this, Russia simultaneously undertook diplomatic measures to avoid a situation in which it would be seen in the region and in Washington as Iran's ally. Nor did it want the intervention in Syria to be interpreted as taking sides in the Sunni-Shia conflict. Moscow therefore intensified diplomatic contacts with the Arab states, irrespective of their position on the Syrian conflict. On the one hand, it sought to build closer relations with Egypt, which had become its main partner in the Arab world after the military coup in July 2013 which brought the army commander-in-chief, marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to power. On the other, it maintained contacts and tried to develop economic co-operation with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, both of which were financially and logistically supporting the anti-Assad armed opposition. At the same time, it demonstrated it was prepared to accommodate the interests of Israel, which wanted to be able to prevent Tehran from strengthening pro-Iranian groups in Syria and stop them from entering territories adjacent to the occupied Golan Heights. To this end, the Russian and Israeli military developed a mechanism to prevent incidents between the two states' air forces in Syrian airspace, which allowed Israel to continue its air strikes in Syria without risking armed confrontation with Russia. Moscow also established military contacts with Jordan with the same purpose.

**Since the end of 2016, Russia's aim has clearly been to use its position in Syria to build a three-party format with the other regional powers, i.e. Iran and Turkey, that could provide a formal mechanism through which Russia could exert a decisive influence on the regulation of the Syrian conflict. It seems that Russia regards such a mechanism as the first step towards creating a new regional order in the Middle East,** which would function without the United States or which would include the US as one of several equal partners, rather than as a dominant power in the region. In this way, Moscow has been trying to create a regional-level precedent for an international order based on the principles of an 'oligarchic' concert of powers.

### III. THE INTERVENTION IN SYRIA – A CASE STUDY

#### 1. Origins and objectives of the Russian military intervention

The military intervention in Syria launched on 30 September 2015 marked the culmination of **Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war, in which the Kremlin had consistently backed the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The aim of the intervention was to swing the balance in the battlefield in Assad's favour**, to enable the expansion of government-controlled territory, especially in the strategically important coastal provinces in the north-west of the country around Damascus, and to recapture Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city. **The aim of the operation was not only military, but also political and psychological. It was intended at taking away the opposition's hopes of winning the military confrontation and to force it to enter direct talks with the Assad regime.** Blocking the possibility of a military resolution of the conflict was also, perhaps primarily, intended to **persuade Washington and its regional allies to agree to a negotiation process in a Russian-proposed formula.** The most important element in that formula concerned the absence of any preconditions, which meant that the opposition, the regional powers backing it and Washington would have to give up their calls for Assad to resign or at least for an agreed pathway towards his departure. Another element concerned the so-called inclusiveness of the process (which amounted to a watering down of the opposition's representation by including members of the 'internal opposition' loyal to Assad and politicians dependent on Moscow), and a simultaneous exclusion of 'terror' groups. An equally important objective was to limit the United States' and its allies' freedom to act militarily in Syria and, in the best case, to persuade Washington to co-ordinate its military activities with Russia through joint military structures that would be established for that purpose. That, in turn, would lead to Washington recognising the Syrian regime as an ally in the fight against Islamic State (and other radical groups such as the al-Nusra Front) and the move would ultimately shield Assad against the threat of a direct US military intervention in support of the opposition.

**The Russian military intervention has turned out to be successful, at least in the short and medium term.** It allowed Assad to gain a clear military advantage over the opposition and push the latter onto the defensive, but also generated a number of side benefits for Moscow. Firstly, it created an additional impulse stimulating migration to Western Europe, which exacerbated the crisis in the European Union and boosted the ranks of those calling for the normalisation of relations with Russia, or even an alliance with Russia to fight terrorism and

to try to end the civil war in Syria along the lines of the scenario proposed by Moscow. Secondly, Moscow's decisive use of military force, which stood in contrast to the inconsistency of Washington's policy and its reluctance to become militarily involved in the region, generated political dividends for Moscow in the form of growing distrust of Washington on the part of the United States' allies who realised that they would have to reach some agreement with Moscow.

## **2. Moscow's peace initiatives**

Russia's policy in Syria was characterised by the combined, co-ordinated and flexible use of military and of diplomatic and political tools, and by an ambition to cash in the military wins by them being recognised politically – ideally by the United States. This is why, once it successfully weakened the Syrian opposition in the autumn of 2015, Russia made a series of attempts at creating a political mechanism in which Moscow would play a lead role and which would pave the way to ending the war on Assad's terms. Already in December 2015, Moscow obtained Washington's approval for its formula of United Nations brokered negotiations between the Assad regime and the opposition. The formula did not rule out the possibility that Assad could remain in power and 'watered down' the opposition side by including the so-called Cairo-Moscow group consisting of the façade Syrian opposition loyal to the Assad regime and people from the Syrian diaspora in Moscow. The Kremlin also sought to gain legitimacy for the formula by obtaining a UN Security Council resolution (which was adopted on 18 December 2015) and a declaration of the International Syria Support Group (11 February 2016).

Moscow also tried to persuade Washington to co-initiate and co-guarantee a ceasefire between Assad's forces and the 'moderate opposition', and to establish a mechanism to co-ordinate the two countries' armed operations in Syria. In this way, it wanted to achieve additional protection against possible US armed operations against Assad's forces.<sup>25</sup> It also sought to involve the United States in a process of which the ultimate aim was for Washington to accept the political consequences of the Russian military intervention, i.e. to recognise Russia as the main political player in Syria and accept the Russian model of resolving the Syrian conflict.

<sup>25</sup> Moscow did not trust the declarations of the Barack Obama administration, nor similar declarations which came later from the Donald Trump administration, that the primary objective of US policy and the only reason for the US military presence in Syria is to destroy Islamic State.

That model consisted in forcing at least parts of the so-called moderate opposition – by threatening them with complete annihilation – to accept an agreement with the Assad regime that would provide for no more than a superficial restructuring of the regime. Opposition representatives would be formally allowed to participate in the structures of power and would retain, at least during the transition period, direct control of the territory not yet captured by government forces (areas near the borders with Turkey, Israel and Jordan, and enclaves in the provinces of Homs and Damascus). The agreement would be internationally guaranteed and compliance would be controlled by a multilateral body established for that purpose, in which Russia would hold veto rights. In Syria, its execution would be supervised by structures built on the basis of the ceasefire monitoring centre created by the Russian armed forces in February 2016. Such a solution would reflect the model which Russia developed for internal conflicts in the post-Soviet states, and which could be called the ‘**Tajik model**’.<sup>26</sup>

For the Russian side, the participation of Washington in such an agreement was also important for prestige reasons because it would put Russia in the position of being the United States’ formally equal partner, and one that actually had more influence in the Syrian context.<sup>27</sup> The agreement with the United States on Syria was also expected to be helpful in **ending the economic sanctions and the West’s attempts diplomatically and politically isolate Russia**.<sup>28</sup>

**However, the rapid collapse of both ceasefires announced jointly by Russia and the United States<sup>29</sup> exposed the fundamental differences between the Washington’s and Moscow’s objectives in Syria.** While fighting Islamic radicalism remained the main objective for the United States (and Washington’s

<sup>26</sup> It is not insignificant that Moscow also co-operated with Tehran to reach the agreement ending the Tajik civil war in 1997. The ‘Tajik model’ as a blueprint for Russia’s policy on Syria was mentioned by the leading Russian orientalist Irina Zvyagelskaya, Executive Summary. Conference on Russia, the West and the Future of the Middle East, (27.04.2012), p. 9, [http://www.ieis.lu/online/www/menu\\_vert/1152/220/221/content/2168/2351/463/ENG/Executive%20Summary%20Russia%202012%20final.pdf](http://www.ieis.lu/online/www/menu_vert/1152/220/221/content/2168/2351/463/ENG/Executive%20Summary%20Russia%202012%20final.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> The Russian elite would see that as a sort of settling of scores for the Dayton agreement which ended the civil war in Bosnia in 1995 – in that case, the roles were reversed: the Americans had set the agreement’s main parameters and then involved Russia in the formal negotiations process to stop Moscow from trying to obstruct the agreement.

<sup>28</sup> W. Rodkiewicz, The agreement between Russia and the United States on Syria: benefits for Moscow, *OSW Analyses*, 14.09.2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-09-16/agreement-between-russia-and-united-states-syria-benefits-moscow>

<sup>29</sup> The first one was announced on 22 February, and the second one on 9 September 2016.

approach to the civil war was entirely subordinated to that objective), for Russia the main aim was to strengthen its own position in Syria and undermine the position of the United States.

Even though the Obama administration ultimately refused to play the role which the Kremlin's diplomacy wanted, Moscow still gained a lot from the ceasefire initiative and the diplomatic game surrounding it. Firstly, the initiative created a propaganda 'smokescreen' for the Russian military intervention, and especially the Russian airstrikes on areas controlled by the moderate opposition; these claimed large numbers of civilian casualties. Secondly, it undermined Washington's credibility in the eyes of the anti-Assad opposition and the regional US allies backing it. Finally, it cast the Obama administration in a bad light, thus weakening the campaign position of Hillary Clinton who had been part of that administration and who was perceived in the Kremlin as an anti-Russian politician.<sup>30</sup>

### 3. Towards a regional concert of powers

When the September 2016 joint US-Russia ceasefire agreement collapsed, Moscow started talks with Turkey and Iran **to create a new international format to persuade at least parts of the armed opposition to make a ceasefire deal on terms favourable to the Assad regime**, all the while militarily supporting the operations of the Syrian government forces and the pro-Iranian Shia formations, including the Lebanese Hezbollah, against Aleppo (the last large city controlled by the opposition forces). On **20 December 2016**, the foreign ministers of Russia, Turkey and Iran issued a joint statement in which they endorsed the ceasefire idea, expressed support for negotiations aimed at working out an agreement between the opposition and the Syrian government, and pledged to jointly guarantee such an agreement.<sup>31</sup>

A breakthrough came with the ceasefire between the Syrian government and parts of the armed opposition, mainly those supported by Ankara (i.e. sections of the so-called Free Syrian Army), negotiated by Russia and Turkey. The ceasefire agreement formally entered into force on 30 December 2016 and provided

<sup>30</sup> W. Rodkiewicz, *Fiasko zawieszenia broni w Syrii: rosnące napięcie na linii Waszyngton-Moskwa*, *Analizy OSW*, 5.10.2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2016-10-05/fiasko-zawieszenia-broni-w-syrii-rosnace-napiecie-na-linii-waszyngton>

<sup>31</sup> [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2573489](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2573489)



that all armed opposition groups except Islamic State and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) were welcome to join it. However, it did not address the question of the Kurdish self-defence formations PYD, which was the condition on which Ankara agreed to participate in the agreement. It also envisaged the creation of a joint Russian-Turkish verification mechanism. Iran was not a party to the agreement but declared its support.<sup>32</sup>

Under the agreement, Russia and Turkey jointly initiated the so-called Astana process. The stated aim of this was to achieve a consolidation of the ceasefire and to start political negotiations between the Syrian regime and the so-called moderate opposition (i.e. groups other than Islamic State and the former Jabhat al-Nusra). The process also marked the formal inclusion of Iran as the third guarantor of the ceasefire alongside Russia and Turkey. Its inaugural meeting was held on 23-24 January 2017 in the Kazakh capital Astana and was attended by the three guarantor states (Russia, Turkey and Iran), the Syrian government, and sections of the armed opposition, including a part of the Free Syrian Army and the Saudi-backed High Negotiating Committee of the Syrian Revolution and the Opposition Forces (HNC). The participants confirmed their willingness to observe the ceasefire but did not make any further concrete arrangements.<sup>33</sup>

Six more meetings were organised between February and October 2017 within the framework of the Astana process, in which the participants tried to make the ceasefire mechanism more concrete and specific and to start negotiations on a political deal between the opposition and the regime. In particular, in the fourth meeting on 4 May the creation of four 'de-escalation zones' was announced – the zones were the Idlib province neighbouring Turkey, the Homs province, the Eastern Ghouta region (east of Damascus) and the areas near the borders with Jordan and Israel. The scarcity and general nature of official information about the arrangements made in the meetings indicate that the participants struggled to work out solutions and only reached very general, framework conclusions which even then were not always implemented. For instance, Iran's accession to the previously established Russian-Turkish commission

<sup>32</sup> Встреча с Министром обороны Сергеем Шойгу и Министром иностранных дел Сергеем Лавровым, 29.12.2016, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53627>; Е. Снопина, Сирийское перемирие: Россия, Турция и Иран сделали то, чего не смогли США, 29.12.2016, <https://ria.ru/world/20161229/1484924353.html>

<sup>33</sup> TASS, 19.01.2017. It seems that the creation of a joint mechanism for the guarantor states to supervise the ceasefire, as announced in Astana, never took place since there have been no public reports on its existence. Замглавы МИД Ирана рассказал о комитете по контролю за перемирием в Сирии, 25.01.2017, <https://ria.ru/syria/20170125/1486439319.html>

“for considering the violations of the ceasefire regime”, announced after the third meeting, was not implemented, and the Russian and Turkish parts of the commission work separately.<sup>34</sup> The announcement of the de-escalation zones on 4 May was also purely formal. In reality, ceasefire agreements for Eastern Ghouta and the Homs provinces could only be reached due to Egypt’s mediation – they were signed in Cairo on 20 July and 2 August 2017 respectively.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, the de-escalation zone near the border with Jordan and Israel could only be put in place after a ceasefire was negotiated with the involvement of the United States and Jordan and announced at a meeting between the presidents of Russia and the United States in Hamburg on 7 July 2017.<sup>36</sup>

Even though the Astana process made only limited progress towards its stated objective of brokering an agreement between the armed opposition and the regime, it offered many benefits to Russia. In particular, it institutionalised a consultation mechanism between Russia and the regional powers of Turkey and Iran. In this way, Moscow created a foundation for its projected regional concert of powers in which Russia itself would play a leading role and which would either exclude the United States or put it in the position of an observer.<sup>37</sup> Russia’s pivotal role in the concert would be a consequence of the fact that Moscow’s relations with each of the partners are closer than those partners’ mutual relations. Moreover, in addition to its military might demonstrated in Syria, Russia has ties to other major actors in the region (such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt) that are closer than its partners’ relations with those countries. Finally, it is the only member of the projected concert with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. This would enable it to legitimise the concert’s decisions from the point of view of international law. The Astana process has also allowed Russia to build an image for itself of an actor seeking an end to the bloodshed and to resolve the conflict, but it has not prevented Russia from extending military support to the Syrian government forces. As the opposition forces became enclosed in the de-escalation zones and bound by the ceasefire provisions, the

<sup>34</sup> As indicated by the contents of the daily newsletters published on the Russian Defence Ministry website, <http://syria.mil.ru/syria/bulletins/bulletin.htm>

<sup>35</sup> Египет объявило о совместном с РФ успехе в достижении перемирия в Сирии, 3.08.2017, <https://ria.ru/syria/20170803/1499685557.html>; see also: A. Eltohamy, The limits of Egypt’s role in the Syria crisis, 9.08.2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/egypt-sponsors-truce-deal-syria-homs-eastern-ghouta-role.html>

<sup>36</sup> G. Harris, U.S., Russia and Jordan Reach Deal for Cease-Fire in Part of Syria, 7.07.2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/07/us/politics/syria-ceasefire-agreement.html>

<sup>37</sup> The US formally had observer status in the Astana process (along with Jordan and the United Nations).

Assad regime, which did not have sufficient forces to actively conduct simultaneous operations in different parts of the country, could concentrate its offensive efforts on selected directions and further expand the territory under its control. The process also weakened the opposition, within which the question of involvement in the Astana process triggered or deepened divisions, in some cases even leading to armed clashes between the different opposition forces.

#### **4. The Trump factor and what happens next for the US presence in Syria**

When Donald Trump took office as the president of the United States in January 2017, Moscow hoped that it could reach an agreement on Syria with the new administration which could pave the way towards better bilateral relations on terms favourable to Moscow. Those hopes were based on Trump's campaign pledges to put an end to liberal interventionism and to seek better relations with Russia guided by the American national interest defined in realpolitik terms. Moscow hoped that the Trump administration would treat fighting Islamic terrorism as an absolute priority and therefore would accept the Moscow-proposed 'solution' to the conflict in Syria. That solution would consist in an agreement between the Assad regime and parts of the Sunni opposition, imposed by the regional concert of powers (Russia, Iran, Turkey), under which the opposition would surrender in return for a cosmetic reconstruction of the Assad regime (the Tajik model).

Nevertheless, Moscow was worried to see the United States step up military activity in Syria in the first months of the new administration – the strengthening of the US contingent and increased support to the armed formation operating under the banner of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), i.e. the Kurdish-Sunni coalition with the Kurdish YPG self-defence units at its core.

The US airstrikes of 7 April 2017, which targeted the Syrian air base in Shayrat that was also used by the Russian air force, gave rise to temporary fears that – despite Trump's campaign pledges – Washington could after all decide to go for a military intervention against Assad, seeing him as an ally of Iran and an obstacle in the fight against Islamic State.

Russia's response to the attack was nonetheless fairly moderate, despite the harsh rhetoric, and was limited to suspending, for a short period, the memorandum on the avoidance of air incidents between the air forces operating in Syria (this had been negotiated already under Barack Obama). Moscow quickly

came to the conclusion that the airstrike against Shayrat was merely a display of force and did foretell a change in US policy on the conflict in Syria in general or the Assad regime in particular. Based on this realisation, Moscow proceeded to make yet another attempt at finding a political formula around which an agreement with the Trump administration could be negotiated – on Russia’s terms, of course. In doing this, the Russian diplomacy tried to convince its American counterparts that Moscow’s main objective in Syria was to ‘untangle’ itself from the Syrian conflict.<sup>38</sup>

The negotiations in question resulted in a ceasefire agreement, with the opposition units backed by the US and Jordan in the Syrian parts of the Quneitra, Dara and As-Suwayda provinces bordering Jordan and Israel. The agreement was unveiled on 7 July 2017 during a meeting between the presidents of Russia and the United States at the G7 summit in Hamburg. The most important aspect of the agreement was that it did not prevent Iranian and pro-Iranian forces from accessing the Syrian provinces bordering Israel and Jordan.<sup>39</sup> The agreement did not take into account Israel’s postulates (Israel was not a party to the agreement but had been consulted) to create a sixty-kilometre buffer zone that would be off-limits to Iranian and pro-Iranian armed formations. Moscow went no further than to promise Tel Aviv that such armed groups would maintain a distance of five kilometres from the territory occupied by Israel.<sup>40</sup>

Another benefit of the agreement from the Kremlin’s point of view was that, shortly after the ceasefire deal was signed, the Trump administration decided to terminate the CIA programme launched in 2013 to train and arm some anti-Assad formations.<sup>41</sup> The withdrawal of the Americans and American-

<sup>38</sup> Talks to high-level members of the administration during an official OSW trip to Washington, late May 2017.

<sup>39</sup> The Russian press reported on the arrival of Iranian troops in the provinces of Quneitra and Dara, quoting sources in the Israeli intelligence services, Израиль нашел на карте Сирии иранскую угрозу, *Коммерсант*, 18.10.2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3441649>. Representatives of the Trump administration denied that the July Russian-American agreement provided for Iran’s involvement in supervising the ceasefire announced on its basis in south-western Syria. However, the agreement concerned an area which partly overlapped with the de-escalation zone announced on 4 May in Astana. As one of the guarantors of the Astana accords Iran was therefore ‘authorised’ to send its military observers to the borders of the zone.

<sup>40</sup> The assurances were almost certainly informal, A. Harel, Israel Demanded 60km Buffer but Russia Let Iranian Forces in Syria Approach the Border, 15.09.2017, <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/1.812328>

<sup>41</sup> Trump Ends Covert Plan to Arm Syrian Rebels, The Associated Press, 19.07.2017, <https://www.apnews.com/120e7113eafe4ceabd9b2cdd429f27a8>

backed units from the Zakf base in eastern Syria in September was also a good development for Russia.<sup>42</sup> Whether the move was a consequence of Russian-American negotiations on separating the zones where their local allies/clients were operating, or the Pentagon's own initiative, it must have been interpreted in Moscow as a signal that Washington's declared policy of containing Iran's expansion in the Middle East did not mean that Washington was prepared to step up its presence in Syria – that is because the evacuation of the Zakf base enabled the Syrian government forces and the pro-Iranian formations backing them to reach the Syrian-Iraqi border. In this way, a land corridor was created linking the pro-Iranian armed formations operating in Syria and in Iraq.

Even though the pro-Assad formations did not completely stop attacking opposition units in the de-escalation zones after the Astana and Hamburg ceasefire deals, their main effort, and also the main effort of the Russian air force and special services supporting them, was now focused on fighting Islamic State in the provinces of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa. In this way, those formations entered a kind of race with the American-supported SDF units which would determine who will 'liberate' a larger part of the territory controlled by Islamic State. On the one hand, the Kremlin evidently did not believe in the Trump administration's declarations that its sole objective in Syria was to fight Islamic State and that the United States would not become politically involved in Syria to create a lasting political foundation for its influence there. On the other hand, it clearly tried to avoid direct military conflict with the United States. To this end, it accepted the informal separation line between the pro-Assad forces and the SDF, which left the territories on the northern bank of the Euphrates under the control of the latter<sup>43</sup> (along with Syria's largest oil fields), but at the same time helped the pro-Assad formations establish a foothold on the northern bank of the river (where Russian engineering troops are now building three pontoon bridges for them), thus making a future offensive against the SDF technically possible.<sup>44</sup>

It seems that Russia's aim is to persuade the United States to withdraw from Syria using political instruments. It is for this purpose that Russia has repeatedly decried the US military presence in Syria as a violation of international law and has accused the Americans of assisting Islamic State terrorists in their fight

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Troops, Terrorists Leave Base in Syrian Desert, 19.09.2017, <http://kayhan.ir/en/news/44387>

<sup>43</sup> P. Felgengauer, Syrian War and the Return of Zero-Sum Thinking in Russian-US Relations, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, volume 14, Issue 120, 28.09.2017.

<sup>44</sup> Н. Пальчиков, Меядин освобождён, *Красная звезда*, 16.10.2017.

against government troops and of blocking humanitarian aid. Moscow's allegations that there is a humanitarian disaster in the Er-Rukban refugee camp<sup>45</sup> located in the American-controlled zone also serve the same purpose. Russia's most important bid, however, will be to try to replace the United States as the 'patron' of Syrian Kurds for whom Russia, due to its influence on the Assad regime, is the only country that can help them achieve their political objective, i.e. autonomy within the Syrian state. The official invitation for the Syrian Kurds to the Syrian National Dialogue Congress organised by Russia on 18 November 2017 in Sochi to discuss a draft future Syrian constitution, was an indication that this will indeed be Russia's game.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> TASS, 25.10.2017; Минобороны обвинило США в прямой поддержке боевиков в Сирии, 14.11.2017, <https://ria.ru/syria/20171114/1508772123.html>

<sup>46</sup> Более тридцати организаций были приглашены на конгресс в Сочи по Сирии, 31.10.2017, <https://ria.ru/syria/20171031/1507942036.html>

## IV. POLICY TOWARDS TURKEY: ECONOMIC INSTRUMENTS AND GEOPOLITICAL OBJECTIVES

**The policy launched by the Kremlin in 2003 to return to the Middle East** as a global power by exploiting the rifts emerging between Washington and its Middle Eastern allies over the intervention in Iraq **has been most effective in the case of Turkey.** The factors which contributed to its success, apart from Ankara's objections to the intervention, and the decision by Germany, France and Belgium to block the military support which Turkey requested from NATO in February 2003,<sup>47</sup> included the rise to power in Turkey of the pro-reform, moderately Islamist AKP party led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. What played into Moscow's hands was that the Erdoğan team was seeking more independence from the United States in its foreign policy, was interested in economic co-operation and – in Moscow's view – was less interested in questions of pan-Turkic solidarity than the secular nationalists.

### 1. Building a partnership

The new chapter in Turkish-Russian relations was opened by Vladimir Putin's visit to Ankara in December 2004. During the visit, **the Russian president encouraged his Turkish counterpart to give up his aspirations to integrate with the European Union.** Pointing to Turkey's sense of being shunned by the West as something the two countries had in common, Putin suggested that Ankara and Moscow should build closer mutual relations. The US diplomacy noted on that occasion that the visit coincided with a stepped up effort by Russia to develop wider contacts within the conservative and religious communities in Turkey and to promote the ideology of Eurasianism among the Turkish elites (it was for this purpose that Putin's official delegation included Alexander Dugin, the chief Eurasianism ideologue).<sup>48</sup>

Putin's visit opened a period of intensively developing mutual relations. It was characterised by regular meetings between the heads of state and a gradual institutionalisation of political dialogue. Since 2004, Putin (or Dmitry Medvedev

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/10/international/worldspecial/nato-rift-widens-over-defense-of-turkey-in-case.html>

<sup>48</sup> As per information obtained by the United States embassy in Ankara, see the report by ambassador Eric Edelman: Putin Visits Turkey: Russia Bids to Turn Turkey from West, 10.12.2004, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04ANKARA6887\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04ANKARA6887_a.html)

in the years 2008–2012) has met the Turkish leader at least once a year.<sup>49</sup> In 2010, the two countries established a so-called High Level Co-operation Council, which was expected to meet once a year under the joint leadership of the state leaders, and a Strategic Planning Group under the leadership of foreign ministers. Moreover, Ankara and Moscow started military dialogue, focusing on the co-operation between the two countries' navies with a view to building a joint security mechanism for the Black Sea basin. According to a Turkish expert quoted by a US diplomat, "the Russians have been exceptionally skilful in exploiting Turkey's recently troubled relations with the U.S. and the EU", in particular by emphasising their "willingness to be non-judgmental on issues such as human rights and civil-military relations". This made Turkey feel that Russia was treating it with respect.<sup>50</sup>

Meanwhile, within the four years from 2004 to 2008, **trade** between Russia and Turkey increased more than three-fold from around US\$ 11 billion in 2004 to around US\$ 37 billion in 2008. And even though the decrease in oil prices (and the related gas price) caused by the global economic crisis led to a temporary reduction in trade in 2009 (to US\$ 19.6 billion), by 2012 the figure had risen to US\$ 33 billion again. During the next two years the volume of trade remained at the level of US\$ 31–32 billion but decreased suddenly to US\$ 24 billion in 2015.<sup>51</sup> In 2016, total Russian investments in Turkey reached US\$ 9.3 billion, and total Turkish investments in Russia stood at US\$ 1 billion (compared to US\$ 4 billion in 2014).<sup>52</sup> The single largest Russian investment in Turkey consisted in Russia's state-owned Sberbank acquiring DenizBank (one of Turkey's largest banks) in 2013 for US\$ 2.6 billion.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> H. Özdal, H.S. Özertem, K. Has, M.T. Demirtepe, Turkey-Russia Relations in the Post-Cold War Era, International Strategic Research Organization. July 2013, Tab. 1, p. 23. The table is incomplete, though, because it only includes the meetings that took part within the framework of official bilateral visits. It does not include the meeting in Istanbul in June 2007 (on the occasion of the Black Sea summit) or Erdoğan's visit to Moscow in August 2008.

<sup>50</sup> Turkey-Russia Relations: Into the Bear's Den – diplomatic wire from the US embassy in Ankara of 21.05.2007, <http://wikileaks.redfoxcenter.org/cable/2007/05/07ANKARA1215.html>

<sup>51</sup> N. Ulchenko, What is so Special About Russian-Turkish Economic Relations, *Russian Analytical Digest*, Issue 125, 25.03.2013, Tab. 1, p. 9; Российско-турецкие экономические отношения на новом этапе, Российский совет по международным делам, Moscow 2016, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> 2016 figures by the Central Bank of Russia, [www.cbr.ru](http://www.cbr.ru) (accessed on 7.05.2017); Turkish figures for 2014 quoted after N. Ulchenko, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>53</sup> <http://news.kremlin.ru/transcripts/19677>



**The energy sector has played a central role in the development of economic relations between Russia and Turkey.** Gas accounts for nearly half of Turkey's imports from Russia (45.5% in 2012), while oil and petroleum products account for a further 20%.<sup>54</sup> Russian gas exports to Turkey grew nearly 150% (from 11.8 billion m<sup>3</sup> to 27.3 billion m<sup>3</sup>) in the years 2002–2014, and Turkey's share in Russia's total gas exports increased from 6.9% to 12.7% in the same period. The share of Russian gas in Turkey's total gas imports is around 50–60%.<sup>55</sup> In 2010, Russia agreed to build a nuclear power plant in Akkuyu, Turkey. Russia's state-owned Rosatom will fully finance and subsequently own and operate the plant. Turkey has committed to buying electricity at a fixed price for 15 years.<sup>56</sup>

From Turkey's point of view, the **export of services** has also been important because it allowed the country to at least partly offset its high trade deficit (in the years 2007–2015, Turkey's trade deficit with Russia ranged from US\$ 14 billion to US\$ 22 billion a year). The value of Turkey's services exports, in particular construction services, increased between the years 2005 and 2012 from US\$ 4 billion to US\$ 12 billion a year (reaching the highest positive balance of US\$ 8 billion in 2012).<sup>57</sup> The influx of Russian tourists to Turkey played a similar role, as their number reached 4.5 million in 2014 following the mutual abolition of visas in 2011.<sup>58</sup>

**It seems that the Kremlin, by fostering the development of economic ties with Turkey, sought to achieve several geopolitical objectives.** Firstly, it wanted to give Erdoğan support and encouragement in his aspiration to make Turkey's policy more independent from the United States. Secondly, it wanted to strengthen the tendencies within Turkey that were driving the country away from its aspirations to integrate with the European Union. Thirdly, it wanted to send a signal to Ankara to show that Moscow appreciated Erdoğan's policy

<sup>54</sup> N. Ulchenko, *op. cit.*, Tab. 2, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> Turkey-Russia Relations in the Post-Cold War Era, p. 48 and chart 9, p. 49; S. Kardaś, At crossroads. Current problems of Russia's gas sector, *OSW Studies*, March 2017, p. 68, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2017-03-27/crossroads-current-problems-russias-gas-sector>

<sup>56</sup> Turkey-Russia Relations in the Post-Cold War Era, p. 52. Moreover, the Russian side agreed to train the Turkish staff to operate the power plant. According to verbal reports by Turkish experts, the decisive factor for Ankara was that the Russian side was willing to give Turkey access to more advanced nuclear technologies than the Western companies.

<sup>57</sup> Figures on the website of the Russian trade representation in Turkey, <http://turkey.ved.gov.ru/ru/>

<sup>58</sup> T. Alaranta, Turkey's New Russian Policy, *FIIA Briefing Paper* 175, March 2015, p. 5.

in the post-Soviet area where Turkey avoided open rivalry with Russia and did not seek to undermine or weaken Russian influence. Finally, Moscow wanted to create an industrial lobby in Turkey that would be as wide and influential as possible and interested in preserving good relations with Russia. According to a Russian diplomat, the nature of Russian-Turkish relations in that period “was defined primarily by convergent approaches to bilateral relations and the fundamental parameters of the global order, based on a search for individual pathways in a rapidly changing multi-polar world”.<sup>59</sup>

## 2. Crisis in mutual relations

**The first serious test for the developing Russian-Turkish relations came with Russia’s war with Georgia in August 2008.** Despite its close relations with Tbilisi, Ankara responded cautiously, taking a neutral stance on the conflict. Its strict adherence to the provisions of the Montreux Convention governing the access to the Black Sea of military vessels of non-Black Sea countries, which restricted the United States’ ability to step up its naval presence on the Black Sea, was seen in Moscow as the most important signal of Turkey’s readiness to take Russia’s interests into account in the context of the conflict. Turkey’s reaction to the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 was also restrained; while Ankara refused to formally recognise the annexation, it did not join the Western sanctions and even consented to the opening of a direct ferry connection to the peninsula.

**Serious tensions emerged between Ankara and Moscow over their treatment of the conflict in Syria.** The Kremlin supported Assad from the outset, while Erdoğan sought to oust the Syrian president and supported the anti-Assad armed opposition. However, despite the various incidents (e.g. when in 2012 Turkey forced a Syrian passenger plane to land in order to confiscate the Russian military equipment it was carrying), both Moscow and Ankara tried to make sure that the differences over Syria did not adversely affect the general shape of their mutual relations.<sup>60</sup> It seems that in relations with Erdoğan, the Kremlin adopted a similar tactic as it did with the other countries supporting the Syrian

<sup>59</sup> П. В. Стегний, Вдвоем на «хартленде», 19.02.2015, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/Vdvoem-na-khartlende-17312>

<sup>60</sup> S. Ananicz, W. Rodkiewicz, Turkish-Russian tension over the Syrian crisis, *OSW Analyses*, 17.10.2012, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2012-10-17/turkish-russian-tension-over-syrian-crisis>

opposition, i.e. it tried to keep up the appearance that it would be prepared to consider a solution involving Assad's departure.

**The Russian military intervention in Syria exacerbated the tensions between Ankara and Moscow**, especially after the Russian air force targeted the Turkish-backed units of the anti-Assad opposition in northern and north-western Syria, including units of the Turkish-speaking minority (the Syrian Turkmens).

**In November 2015, those tensions morphed into open conflict.** The direct cause concerned the intensive airstrikes against the Turkmen units near the Turkish border carried out by the Russian air force, and the repeated violations of the Turkish border by Russian aircraft. On 24 November Turkey downed a Russian Su-24 bomber which had violated Turkish airspace. Moscow responded in very harsh terms, clearly seeking to escalate the conflict: it refused any contacts with the Turkish leadership, imposed economic and visa sanctions on Turkey (the cost of which to Turkey was estimated at around US\$ 4 billion a year) and made the normalisation of relations conditional on Turkey agreeing to certain humiliating demands that Ankara could not accept (a public apology, the payment of damages for the downed aircraft, and punishment for the persons responsible). At the same time, Moscow stepped up military operations against the Turkmens by supporting the Syrian government forces' offensive heading towards the Turkish border.

At the same time, Russia also staged a propaganda offensive against Turkey. The Russian president, prime minister and foreign minister accused the Turkish leadership of supporting Islamic State terrorists and, in particular, of acting as an intermediary in Islamic State's oil trade (the Russian media also implied that the Turkish president's son was involved in the trading operations).<sup>61</sup> To further pressure Turkey, Russia allowed the Kurdish PYD party to open its first foreign office in Moscow and started to militarily support the YPG self-defence units associated with the PYD, which were building a Kurdish para-state in northern Syria (Russia provided them with arms and air support).<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> W. Rodkiewicz, Russian-Turkish confrontation over Syria, *OSW Analyses*, 2.12.2015, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-12-02/russian-turkish-confrontation-over-syria>

<sup>62</sup> M. A. Reynolds, Vladimir Putin, Godfather of Kurdistan?, 1.03.2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-godfather-kurdistan-15358>

It seems that by escalating tensions and accusing Turkey of supporting Islamic State, Moscow sought to discredit Ankara in the eyes of its Western allies in order to isolate Turkey and prevent it from having any influence on the terms on which the Syrian crisis would be resolved. The risk of an open Turkish-Russian conflict was also expected to create additional pressure on the United States and the European Union to accept the Russian-proposed solution for Syria, in which President Assad would be allowed to remain in power.<sup>63</sup>

### 3. Compromise and pragmatic normalisation

**In late June 2016 Russia substantially revised its policy towards Turkey. Moscow agreed to proceed towards the normalisation of relations,** even though the Turkish side had not met its demands: Turkey had not paid damages for the downed plane, and Erdoğan only expressed regret instead of an apology. An additional impulse for normalisation came from the firm support extended by the Russian leadership and President Putin personally to President Erdoğan at the time of Turkey's internal crisis triggered by the attempted military coup in July 2016. The unequivocal nature of Russia's reaction stood in contrast to the more ambivalent reactions of Western states.

The fact that Moscow was ready to close the downed aircraft affair with a compromise and to back Erdoğan on a crucial internal policy issue indicates that **in mid-2016 Moscow concluded that it needed to gain Ankara's co-operation on Syria, at least in the short term.** That, in turn, required at least a tactical compromise involving mutual recognition of the two sides' priority interests.

**The formula of that compromise** was probably sealed during President Erdoğan's visit to St. Petersburg on 9 August 2016. On that occasion Russia gave the green light to the Turkish military operation in Syrian territory, which also involved units of the anti-Assad opposition. That effectively meant Russia's consent to Turkey taking over military control of a fragment of Syria's border territory separating the Kurdish cantons of Afrin and Kobane. Turkey, on the other hand, *de facto* gave up its previously stated objective of removing Assad from power and most likely made a commitment not to attack his armed formations. Finally, the Turkish and Russian militaries established communication channels to prevent incidents. As a consequence of the compromise, on 24 August

<sup>63</sup> W. Rodkiewicz, Rosja eskaluje napięcie z Turcją, *Analizy OSW*, 3.02.2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2016-02-03/rosja-eskaluje-napiecie-z-turcja>

2016 Turkey launched its operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria.<sup>64</sup> In the military dimension, the operation targeted Islamic State, but politically it was a move against the Kurds, the aim of which was to prevent the Kurdish YPG-controlled areas east of the Euphrates from being joined with the Afrin canton further west.

**President Putin's visit to Turkey on 10 October 2016 marked a partial return to the pragmatic partnership** that used to characterise Moscow's relations with Ankara before they were frozen in the autumn of 2015. The partnership involved the avoidance of open conflict, continuous discreet bargaining over contentious issues and a readiness to make partial, ad-hoc compromises. It also involved fostering the development of economic relations, although it did not rule out attempts – especially on the part of Russia – to instrumentally exploit those relations in order to put pressure on the other side. Hence, on the one hand, energy co-operation was reinstated during the visit as the two leaders signed an intergovernmental deal to build the Turkish Stream gas pipeline.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, however, Moscow lifted only some of the previously imposed economic sanctions (the blockade on tourism and, partly, the embargo on agricultural imports), while the visa restrictions for Turkish construction companies operating in the Russian market were kept in place, as was the embargo on the import of vegetables, which constituted the most valuable part of Turkey's agricultural exports to Russia.

From the Russian point of view, normalising relations and resuming co-operation with Turkey had both short-term and long-term objectives. **The immediate objective** was to gain Turkey's co-operation in driving the Syrian opposition forces away from Aleppo so that Assad's forces holding the city under siege could recapture Syria's second largest city without the need for continued Russian air strikes that were causing substantial damage to Russia's international reputation. **The long-term objective** was to involve Turkey in Russia's efforts to develop a political formula to persuade the less radical sections of the Syrian opposition to stop their armed operations against Assad. Co-operation with

<sup>64</sup> K. Strachota, Turkey and Russia: cooperation instead of conflict, *OSW Analyses*, 29.06.2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-06-29/turkey-and-russia-cooperation-instead-conflict>; K. Strachota, J. Lang, Turecka interwencja w Syrii pod parasolem rosyjskim, *Analizy OSW*, 24.08.2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2016-08-24/turecka-interwencja-w-syrii-pod-parasolem-rosyjskim>

<sup>65</sup> The agreement provides for the construction of the branches of the gas pipeline (with a capacity of 15.75 billion m<sup>3</sup> each), one to supply gas to the Turkish market, and the other to transit Russian gas to European markets via Turkey.

Turkey was also intended to neutralise the Arab world's perception of Russia as a patron of Shia Muslims and an ally of Iran, which was harmful for Moscow. Finally, in the context of Russia's strong conflict with the West (especially the United States and France), provisional co-operation with Ankara was intended to demonstrate that Russia was not isolated and was able to pursue its objectives in Syria, not only without the consent of Western states, but also in defiance of their objections.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup> M. Chudziak, S. Kardaś, W. Rodkiewicz, Turkey-Russia: partnership of convenience, *OSW Analyses*, 12.10.2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-10-12/turkey-russia-partnership-convenience>

## V. IRAN – A GAME WITHIN THE MOSCOW-TEHRAN-WASHINGTON TRIANGLE

Since the very beginning of Vladimir Putin's presidency, Russia's relations with Iran have been part of the game with the United States in which the main challenge has been to find an optimum balance between three contradictory objectives. The first one is to **keep, or ideally strengthen, the 'strategic partnership' with Iran**; the second is to **avoid a direct confrontation with the United States** and to minimise the negative impact of the Russian-Iranian co-operation on Moscow's relations with Washington; and the third, least important objective is to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons or at least slow that process down.

### 1. The development of the 'strategic partnership'

The 'strategic partnership' with Iran has been based on two pillars. The first one concerns Moscow's and Tehran's perceived shared interest in undermining the United States' power, even if Tehran is mainly interested in the regional dimension, and Moscow is interested in the global dimension. In the relations with Iran, Russia has profited from the fact that it has been Tehran's only provider of arms and nuclear technologies and that, due to its veto rights in the UN Security Council, it could shield Tehran from Washington's attempts to use the UN mechanisms to step up pressure on Iran. From Russia's point of view, a very important element of the 'strategic partnership' concerns Iran's behaviour in the post-Soviet area where Tehran has not only avoided rivalry with Moscow, but has also actively co-operated with Russia. The most important example of that policy concerns Iran's co-operation with Moscow in brokering the agreement which ended the civil war in Tajikistan in 1997. Tehran persuaded the Islamic armed opposition to accept the agreement with the Russian-backed president Emomali Rahmon on terms which put the latter in a dominant position in the state.<sup>67</sup> Iran also maintained economic relations with Armenia, Russia's ally in the South Caucasus, helping the country survive during the blockade imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan. Finally, Moscow also

<sup>67</sup> Putin spoke with appreciation about the special nature of Russia and Iran's co-operation in ending the war in Tajikistan in an interview for the media in Iran ahead of his visit to Tehran: "Iran greatly contributed to easing the situation in Tajikistan (...). It was indeed an exceptional situation in the post-Soviet space", 16.10.2007, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24603>

appreciates the fact that Tehran distanced itself from Chechen separatism and refrained from criticising Russia for its armed operations in Chechnya.

**Russia has used its co-operation with Iran to strengthen its bargaining position vis-à-vis the United States** by suggesting to Washington that it would be prepared to limit its contacts with Tehran in exchange for appropriate recompense.

Back in 1995, Moscow concluded a confidential intergovernmental agreement with the United States in which it agreed not to export any arms or military technology to Iran after 1999. In return, the United States exempted the Russian supplies under contracts already in place from US sanctions. However, Vladimir Putin withdrew from the agreement already in the autumn of 2000, taking advantage of the ‘deficit of attention’ in Washington caused by the change of the presidential administration, thus signalling to both Washington and Tehran that Moscow would not be willing to limit its relations with Iran. Despite US protests, Russia then resumed arms and military equipment supplies to Iran.<sup>68</sup>

## **2. Relations with Iran under pressure**

When in 2003 the Iranian opposition revealed information which clearly indicated that Iran was working to develop nuclear weapons, Russia found itself under mounting pressure from the United States and the international community to restrict its co-operation with Tehran with regard to nuclear and military technologies. **Thus, reconciling the contradictory objectives of Russia’s policy towards Teheran became extremely difficult.** Moscow responded by formulating, on its own, additional conditions for its nuclear co-operation with Tehran (which was now supposed to return the spent nuclear fuel and refrain from enriching uranium to grades fit for use in nuclear weapons), and voted for three UN Security Council resolutions<sup>69</sup> banning the export of nuclear technologies to Iran and imposing sanctions on a number of persons and actors associated with Iran’s nuclear programme. On the other hand, though, it used its position in the Security Council to mitigate the scope and severity of the

<sup>68</sup> For a list of weapons and equipment supplied in the years 2000–2009, see: H. Adomeit, *Russland und Iran*, (Wien, November 2009), Tab. 1, p. 17–18. According to SIPRI, the transactions were worth around US\$ 1.6 billion.

<sup>69</sup> Resolutions 1737 of 23 December 2006; 1747 of 24 March 2007 and 1803 of 3 March 2008.



sanctions, it continued to supply military equipment to Iran and carried on the delayed construction works on the Bushehr nuclear power plant.<sup>70</sup>

In the meantime, high-ranking Russian officials repeatedly stated that they did not have any information indicating that Iran was aiming to build nuclear weapons. Russian experts, on the other hand, would admit that Iran was developing nuclear weapons but argued that it needed them mostly for internal consolidation and that the weapons would pose a threat primarily to Israel and the United States, and not to Russia.<sup>71</sup>

**An important revision of Russia's policy on Iran's nuclear programme occurred in 2010.** At that time, Russia backed a new UN Security Council resolution imposing further sanctions on Tehran (resolution 1929 of 9 June 2010). It also agreed, for the first time, to expand the embargo on supplies to Iran to include not only the materials and technologies needed for the development of nuclear weapons, but also a number of categories of arms. Moreover, the then Russian president Dmitry Medvedev further expanded the ban to include the S-300 missile systems, which Russia had concluded a contract with Iran for in 2007. Russia's refusal to deliver the S-300 systems had real military consequences for Iran in a situation when the country was under threat from possible US or Israeli airstrikes. The revision of Russia's policy towards Tehran was probably a way for Moscow to **return the favour after the Obama administration took some concrete steps as part of its new 'reset' policy towards Russia**, in particular, after it scrapped the original plans to deploy elements of the US missile shield in Central Europe (10 interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic) and signed the new START treaty which was crucial for ensuring Russia's strategic parity with the United States.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>70</sup> The complicated mutual manoeuvring over the continuation of work on the Bushehr plant are discussed in detail in: H. Adomeit, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-26; see also: M. Kaczmarek, Russia plays the Iran card with the USA, *OSW Analyses*, 26.05.2010, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2010-05-26/russia-plays-iran-card-usa>

<sup>71</sup> See the opinions of Russian experts quoted in: Adomeit, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29, 31, 42.

<sup>72</sup> Kaczmarek, *op. cit.*; according to Fyodor Lukyanov, one of Russia's best known international affairs experts, the revision of the Kremlin's policy towards Iran was "primarily a matter of swapping the Iranian issue for the decision not to deploy elements of the missile shield in Eastern Europe", Ф. Лукьянов, Сделка, война или смирение, *Газета*, 29.07.2010, <https://www.gazeta.ru/column/lukyanov/3402349.shtml>

This display of Russia's **instrumental approach** to relations with Tehran led to a cooling of mutual relations. The most prominent manifestation of this came with the lawsuit filed by Iran against Russia for breaching the S-300 contract.

### 3. From 'distrustful' to 'strategic' partnership

**The first signs of a new rapprochement between Russia and Iran could be observed in 2011 in connection with the two countries' similar assessment of the Arab Spring.** Both Moscow and Tehran saw the upheavals as a potential threat to their internal orders and geopolitical positions in the Middle East. Both feared that the Arab Spring could lead to a strengthening of the United States in the region or an activation of radical Sunni movements. That would also entail a strengthening of Saudi Arabia, Tehran's main geopolitical rival in the region. **Based on this assessment, both Iran and Russia became involved in defending the Assad regime in Syria.** When Russia launched its military intervention in the autumn of 2015, Moscow and Tehran **became *de facto* allies in the war**, which was an internal conflict in Syria but also a regional and global conflict between foreign powers supporting the different sides in the Syrian civil war. The intervention was preceded by at least several months of military consultations as part of which General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the elite unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps who was in charge of co-ordinating Iran's military support for the Assad regime, visited Moscow in July 2015.<sup>73</sup>

**As a result, the intensity of political contacts between Russia and Iran reached an unprecedented level.**<sup>74</sup> In particular, jointly conducting military operations required contacts to be developed between the military and security services.<sup>75</sup> In January 2015, the defence ministers of Russia and Iran signed a co-operation agreement providing for joint drills, contacts between military

<sup>73</sup> L. Bassam, T. Perry, How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow, 6.10.2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUSKC-NOS02BV20151006>; Soleimani is on the UN sanctions list, which is probably the reason why the Russian authorities denied he was in Moscow.

<sup>74</sup> This is an assessment by Nikolai Kozhanov, the Russian political scientist specialising in Russia-Iran relations, in: Н. Кожанов, Оживление в российско-иранских отношениях, 15.06.2015, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/06/15/ru-60391/ial8>

<sup>75</sup> The repeated trips to Moscow made in the years 2015–2016 by such functionaries as the National Security Council secretary, Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani, and the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Major General Qasem Soleimani (who oversees the operations of Iranian military and para-military formations in Syria), are probably just the tip of the iceberg, L. Bassam, T. Perry, *op. cit.*

staffs and exchange of intelligence.<sup>76</sup> Two joint centres for military information exchange and the co-ordination of activities were also created, one in Baghdad and the other in Damascus.<sup>77</sup> The navies of both countries have held frequent joint exercises on the Caspian Sea for the last few years, and Iranian officers have often been invited to military drills in Russia. Co-operation on military technology has also been reinstated. In April 2015, President Putin repealed his predecessor's decree banning the export anti-aircraft missiles to Iran and in early 2016, Russia delivered the first batch of the S-300 systems to Iran (the contract provides that Russia will deliver four divisions in total).<sup>78</sup> Iran's consent for Russian bombers to use the Hamadan air base to carry out airstrikes in Syria in August 2016 was a telling example of the closeness of mutual military relations.<sup>79</sup>

However, the scope of economic co-operation between Russia and Iran has remained relatively modest, despite the two sides' stated intentions and repeated efforts made by the bloc of economic ministries within the Russian government. Moscow hoped that Russian companies could benefit from the absence of competition from Western businesses kept out by the Western sanctions (which Russia did not officially recognise) and build a strong position in the Iranian market, but this turned out to be a miscalculation. In reality, despite mutual efforts and declarations, Tehran and Moscow did not manage to shield their economic relations from the impact of the Western policy of sanctions. Neither the signature, in November 2014, of a new contract for the construction of two more units at the Bushehr nuclear power plant, worth an estimated US\$ 10 billion, nor the Russian pledge in November 2015 to grant Iran a loan of EUR

<sup>76</sup> В. Иваненко, Иранская ядерная программа и российско-иранские отношения, *Проблемы национальной стратегии*, 1, 2016, [https://riss.ru/images/pdf/journal/2016/1/08\\_.pdf](https://riss.ru/images/pdf/journal/2016/1/08_.pdf)

<sup>77</sup> According to Mehdi Sanai, the Iranian ambassador to Moscow, Iran and Russia "have organised co-operation in the areas of intelligence and joint operational and strategic actions in Syria", *Партнерство России и Ирана: текущее состояние и перспективы развития*, (ed.) I. Ivanov, Moscow, 2017, p. 8, <http://russiancouncil.ru/common/upload/RIAC-IRAS-Russia-Iran-Report29.pdf>

<sup>78</sup> Interfax, 5.02.2016.

<sup>79</sup> *Партнерство России и Ирана: текущее состояние и перспективы развития*, p. 32. While some in Iran protested against the move or criticised Russia for disclosing the fact, already in December the Iranian defence minister made clear that, in principle, there was no reason why Iran should not allow the Russians to use its bases again if the need arises. See the interview of 28 December 2016, [http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/104040/Ministr\\_oborony\\_Irana\\_o\\_Rossii\\_Sirii\\_Turcii\\_Azerbaydzhanе\\_i\\_Izraile](http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/104040/Ministr_oborony_Irana_o_Rossii_Sirii_Turcii_Azerbaydzhanе_i_Izraile). Given the post-colonial sensitivities of the Iranian public and the memory of the Russian and Soviet military interventions in Iran, that position shows just how important military co-operation in Syria with Russia is for Iran.

5 billion for the implementation of investments by Russian companies, have had much impact.<sup>80</sup> As a consequence, bilateral trade, which had been worth around US\$ 4 billion a year in the period between 2001–2010, shrank to a mere US\$ 1.2 billion in 2015.

It was only after the Western sanctions were lifted in the aftermath of the entry into force, in January 2016, of the international plan to freeze the Iranian nuclear programme that Russia and Iran were able to intensify mutual economic co-operation. Moscow and Tehran then signed a number of deals, including on the mutual protection of investments, the avoidance of double taxation and the facilitation of customs and visa procedures (visas were abolished for organised tourist groups). Work also commenced on the establishment of a free trade area between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>81</sup> In July 2016, Russia allocated EUR 2.2 billion out of the 5 billion promised in 2015 for the construction of a heat and power plant by an affiliate of the Russian state-owned Rostec and the electrification of Iran's railways by the Russian Railways.<sup>82</sup>

Those efforts bore fruit in 2016 in the form of a rapid increase in the volume of total trade, which grew by 85% in 2016 (it was particularly significant in the context of the general decrease in Russia's trade in that period). However, after the first two months of 2017, total trade, and especially Russian exports to Iran, plummeted again and the volume of trade between January and April 2017 decreased by one third compared to the same period in 2016.<sup>83</sup>

The fate of the idea to organise a barter agreement of Iran's oil for Russian industrial products testifies to the scale of difficulties hindering the development of economic co-operation between Russia and Iran. The two countries signed a memorandum for that purpose in August 2014, but it was only in May 2017 that Iran announced the conclusion of concrete transactions, the volume of which was nonetheless five times lower than had originally been envisaged (100,000 instead of 500,000 barrels of oil per month). Moreover, on 18 August 2017, the Russian energy minister Alexander Novak revealed that the final

<sup>80</sup> Иран нашел средства для работ по строительству второго блока АЭС "Бушер", 13.09.2016, <https://ria.ru/atomtec/20160913/1476796051.html>

<sup>81</sup> Партнерство России и Ирана: текущее состояние и перспективы развития, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 22, 25–26.

<sup>82</sup> ОАО «РЖД» и Железные дороги Ирана подписали Меморандум о стратегическом сотрудничестве, Gudok.ru, 28.03.2017, <https://www.gudok.ru/news/?ID=1368660>; TASS, 29.07.2016.

<sup>83</sup> Official statistics of the Russian Customs Service, <http://www.customs.ru>

signature of all the necessary documents would only take place a month later.<sup>84</sup> Even if the transactions ultimately come into effect, they will fall short of producing a qualitative change in the economic relations between the two states.<sup>85</sup> The failure of the negotiations concerning the creation of a free trade zone between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union also indirectly demonstrates the scale of difficulties in negotiating mutually beneficial economic deals between Russia and Iran. The parties have already announced that they would only sign a trade liberalisation agreement, and they have yet to agree on the customs rates.<sup>86</sup>

Even this short characterisation of Russian-Iranian economic relations shows that – unlike in the case of Turkey, where economic co-operation plays an important role – Russia’s relations with Iran are founded almost exclusively on geopolitical premises. In the words of Vladimir Sazhin, one of Russia’s leading Iran experts, “it is possible that Moscow’s priority interest concerns the fact that Tehran pursues a generally anti-Western policy in the global and regional dimension”.<sup>87</sup> Both states are interested in weakening the role played by the United States in the region and have a common enemy – Sunni extremism. Those strategic priorities, combined with the successful experience of co-operation in Syria, even if it was not completely free of rivalry, make Russia Iran’s most important and closest strategic ally at this juncture.

<sup>84</sup> RIA Novosti, 18.08.2017.

<sup>85</sup> M. Bodner, Russia’s Oil Bargain With Iran Has Political Overtones, *The Moscow Times*, 9.06.2017, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russias-oil-bargain-with-iran-is-probably-politically-motivated-58173>

<sup>86</sup> Делегация ЕАЭС провела переговоры по созданию ЗСТ с Ираном, 16.06.2017, <https://ria.ru/world/20170616/1496691104.html>

<sup>87</sup> See: Партнерство России и Ирана: текущее состояние и перспективы развития, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

## VI. CONCLUSION

### 1. The instruments of Russia's Middle Eastern policy

Russia's success in strengthening its position in the Middle East was unexpected, given its limited instruments. The Kremlin's unquestionable success in this regard runs counter to the widely held view that in the era of globalisation, it is economic potential and soft power that determine a state's chances in competition with other states. Russia has managed to regain its status as a major regional power despite the weakness of its economic tools.

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, on several occasions Russia tried to stimulate the development of **economic co-operation** with the Middle East using political contacts at the highest level but, with the exception of Turkey, those efforts did not succeed to any significant degree. The level of economic co-operation with the Middle East remains modest. In the early 2010s, the value of co-operation (trade, services) with the entire Arab world was around US\$ 10–12 billion a year (including US\$ 6.5–7 billion total trade).<sup>88</sup> Russian exports to countries of the 'broader' Middle East accounted for around 1.7% of total Russian exports in the years 2011–2013, rising to 2.1% and 2.5% in the years 2014 and 2015, respectively.<sup>89</sup> Trade with Israel (US\$ 2.5–3 billion a year) and Iran (around US\$ 4 billion a year) should be added to those figures. The only country which stands outside of this picture is Turkey, whose trade with Russia has reached US\$ 30 billion. Egypt is the only Arab state to report trade with Russia exceeding US\$ 1 billion a year (US\$ 2.2 billion in 2010, 2.8 billion in 2011, 5.5 billion in 2014).<sup>90</sup>

Russia has also been unable to attract major investment from the rich Arab states. Its co-operation with Qatar's sovereign investment fund (Qatar Investment Authority, QIA), which invested around US\$ 1 billion in shares of Russian

<sup>88</sup> В. Исаев, А. Филоник, Российско-арабские торгово-экономические отношения, Восточная аналитика 2011, p.158, [https://ivran.ru/f/Vostochnaya\\_analitika\\_2011.pdf](https://ivran.ru/f/Vostochnaya_analitika_2011.pdf)

<sup>89</sup> Based on the figures of: <http://www.intracen.org/itc/market-info-tools/statistics-import-country-product/>

<sup>90</sup> Russia's foreign trade exchange figures as per the statistics of the Federal Customs Service, [www.customs.ru](http://www.customs.ru). Figures on total Russian-Egyptian trade in 2014 are based on an interview with the Russian ambassador in Egypt, 29.06.2016, [http://www.mid.ru/sovesanie-poslov-i-postoannyh-predstavitelej-rossijskoj-federacii-30-iuna-1-iula-2016-g./-/asset\\_publisher/sznBmO7t6LBS/content/id/2338542](http://www.mid.ru/sovesanie-poslov-i-postoannyh-predstavitelej-rossijskoj-federacii-30-iuna-1-iula-2016-g./-/asset_publisher/sznBmO7t6LBS/content/id/2338542)

companies in the years 2013–2016, is an exception here.<sup>91</sup> In December 2016, the QIA also took part in the privatisation of the Russian oil giant Rosneft, buying a stake in the company for US\$ 2.5 billion. However, there are many indications that in reality, the QIA only acted as a ‘smokescreen’ to conceal the fact that the transaction was financed by Russian banks.<sup>92</sup>

In a situation where the significance of its economic co-operation with countries of the Middle East (except Turkey) has been marginal, Russia has managed to rebuild its position in the region primarily using **military and political-diplomatic means**. The intervention in Syria demonstrated the country’s ability to carry out an expeditionary military operation in the region. Its military potential has turned out to be sufficient to swing the balance in the Syrian civil war and force actors in the region and beyond – such as Israel, Turkey, Jordan and even the United States – to negotiate the parameters of their military activity in Syria with Moscow.<sup>93</sup> The **military personnel** inherited by Russia from the Soviet Union with its experience in working in the region and co-operating with local military forces, has been a valuable asset in Russia’s arsenal of instruments. Military units composed of Russian Muslims (Chechens, Ingush) have also been an asset for Russia in the Middle East (currently in Syria, previously in Lebanon).<sup>94</sup> Moreover, there is a significant amount of officers who have studied in Soviet and Russian military academies in the armies of a number of Middle Eastern states (Syria, Lebanon, Yemen), as well as in Algeria.

<sup>91</sup> In 2013, it invested US\$ 500 million in the shares of the VTB bank, Л. Исаев, А. Коротаев, *Забывать о Сирии: почему Катар заинтересовался «Роснефтью»*, 20.12.2016, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=66505>; in August 2016, it invested US\$ 400 million (in conjunction with the sovereign investment fund of the United Arab Emirates) in the shares of the diamond producer Alrosa, RIA Novosti, 5.08.2016, and in September 2016 – US\$ 269 million in the Pulkovo airport near St. Petersburg, TASS, 8.12.2016.

<sup>92</sup> S. Kardaś, *A murky deal: a 19.5% stake in Rosneft has been sold*, *OSW Analyses*, 14.12.2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-12-14/a-murky-deal-a-195-stake-rosneft-has-been-sold>

В приватизации «Роснефти» принял участие ВТБ, *rbc.ru*, 16.01.2017, <http://www.rbc.ru/economics/16/01/2017/587d01469a7947eff3e09eaa>

<sup>93</sup> Russia has turned out to be able to airlift, deploy and maintain a relatively strong and well-armed air formation in the Middle East, consisting of up to 40 aircraft and dozens of helicopters supported by a land force of around 3.000 troops armed with heavy equipment (including tanks, heavy artillery and air defence systems). Within ten months (between mid-September 2015 and end of July 2016) the formation carried out more than 11.000 sorties, see: М. Шеповаленко (red.), *Сирийский рубеж*, Центр анализа стратегий и технологий, Moscow, 2016, pp. 106–119.

<sup>94</sup> N. Hauer, *Putin Has a New Secret Weapon in Syria: Chechens*, 4.05.2017, <http://foreign-policy.com/2017/05/04/putin-has-a-new-secret-weapon-in-syria-chechens/>

**Arms exports** have been an important element of the Russian presence and influence in the region. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in the years 2000–2015, Russia sold US\$ 16-17 billion worth of arms to Middle Eastern and North African states, which accounted for around 17–18% of Russia’s total arms exports in that period. Still, just one state, Algeria, accounted for nearly half of that sum (US\$ 7.8 billion). Other major buyers, which spent between US\$ 1 billion and US\$ 1.6 billion on Russian arms, included: Egypt, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Sudan.<sup>95</sup>

It should be noted that Russia’s share in total arms supplies to the region has been rather modest, e.g. in the years 2012–2016 Russian exports accounted for less than 8% of the total. Moscow has been a major arms supplier to two states only: Algeria (60%) and Iraq (23%).<sup>96</sup>

However, from the point of view of the Kremlin’s ability to use arms supplies as a tool of political influence, it is not so much the total volume of supplies that matters, as Moscow’s readiness and willingness to deliver relatively advanced and relatively inexpensive weapons systems to states which are either in conflict with the West (Iran, Syria), or are looking for an alternative to Western suppliers for political reasons (Egypt, Iraq).

The crucial factor, though, concerns Russia’s readiness to continue military supplies to a government that is involved in a bloody and protracted civil war, as demonstrated during the campaign in Syria.<sup>97</sup> It is also important that as a potential ally, Russia has proven to be insensitive to criticism and pressure from international public opinion and the media, which decried the notorious attacks (and especially airstrikes) by the Syrian government forces on civilian targets, including using chemical weapons.

It should nonetheless be noted that Russia’s use of military instruments has been closely linked to diplomatic measures. This close link between diplomatic and military instruments has been a characteristic feature and strength of Russia’s policy in the region. **Russia’s veto rights in the UN Security Council have also**

<sup>95</sup> Author’s own calculations based on SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, 1.11.2016.

<sup>96</sup> A. Fleurant, P.D. Wezeman, S.T. Wezeman, Nan Tian, Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2016, SIPRI, February 2017), p. 6, Tab. 2, p. 10, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Trends-in-international-arms-transfers-2016.pdf>

<sup>97</sup> Russian military experts estimate that Russian warships delivered 150.000 tonnes of cargo to the port of Tartus in the second half of 2015 alone. Сирийский рубеж, *op. cit.* p. 130.



**been a crucial element in this regard** as they allow Moscow to block actions by other states even if Russia itself is isolated. The fact that Russia resorted to the veto on eight occasions during the six years of its involvement in the defence of the Assad regime (backed by China on six occasions) shows just how important this instrument is.

Another important asset of the Russian diplomacy in the Middle East concerns its ability to draw on the long record of the Russian presence in the region. Thanks to that record, Russia has diplomatic cadres which know the language and the local traditions, and which benefit from wide networks of contacts.<sup>98</sup> Russia can also draw on the knowledge of Russian oriental studies scholars.

Moreover, Russia's Middle Eastern diplomacy has benefited from the **confessional factor**. On the one hand, Moscow has encouraged the Russian Federation republics (subjects) inhabited by traditionally Muslim nations to develop economic relations and contacts with the Middle East.<sup>99</sup> On the other, it has closely monitored and 'co-ordinated' such contacts through special representations of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs established especially for that purpose in the different Federation subjects already in the 1990s.

Paradoxically, Moscow has also been using the **Russian Orthodox Church** in its Middle Eastern policy, especially for the purpose of building an image of itself among Christian communities in the West (the Roman Catholic Church in Europe, and the conservative protestants in the United States) as a country which defends Christians against Islamic extremism and thus legitimising its support for the Assad regime. Patriarch Kirill personally met the Syrian president in Damascus as late as autumn 2011, and officially expressed support for the Russian armed intervention in Syria (which he characterised as a fight against terrorism) and for Assad's regime.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Mikhail Bogdanov, deputy minister of foreign affairs and the Russian president's special envoy for the Middle East and North Africa, may serve as an example of such a diplomat. See the official biography at: [http://www.mid.ru/about/structure/deputy\\_ministers/-/asset\\_publisher/7AT17IymWZWQ/content/id/647875](http://www.mid.ru/about/structure/deputy_ministers/-/asset_publisher/7AT17IymWZWQ/content/id/647875)

<sup>99</sup> See e.g. the most recent visit to Iran by a Tatarstan delegation with president Rustam Minnikhanov, <http://www.tatar-inform.ru/news/2017/04/19/549386>

<sup>100</sup> See the reports on the patriarch's meeting with a Syrian governmental delegation on 7 March 2017, <https://mospat.ru/en/2017/03/07/news143343/>

## 2. Outcomes and outlook for the future

Whether or not the United States ultimately withdraws from Syria completely and accepts the Russian-proposed formula for ending the civil war, Russia's status as a global power in the Middle East, gained via its military intervention in Syria, will remain a fact. It could only be challenged by a fundamental change in US policy and a move towards stepping up US involvement in the Middle East and military pressure being brought to bear on the Assad regime. Under President Obama such a change was out of the question. Donald Trump has never shown any interest in removing Assad from power and has been even more determined than his predecessor to reduce the United States' role in Syria to fighting Islamic State. However, unlike President Obama, President Trump believes that the Sunni radicals from Islamic State are not America's only enemies in the Middle East; the other enemy is Iran. For now, Washington seems to believe that it can counter Iran's influence without the need for a direct confrontation with Russia. However, the anti-Iranian policy of the Trump administration may lead to a situation in which Russia will have to choose between keeping its 'strategic partnership' with Tehran and facing a direct confrontation with the United States in the Middle East. At the same time, it is clear that Russia will try to avoid having to make that choice as long as it can.

There is also the question of the tangible benefits, especially the economic benefits, that Russia can derive from its involvement in the Middle East. There is no clear way in which it could convert its successes in the Middle East into practical gains. The prospect of using its position in the Middle East to strike a geopolitical deal with Washington and Berlin, under which the West would recognise Eastern Europe as a Russian sphere of influence and Central Europe as a buffer zone, or at least make some concessions over Ukraine (lift sanctions, accept the Russian interpretation of the Minsk accords) has turned out to be illusory and there are no indications that the Western side could be willing to make such a bargain.

Stopping the 'domino of colour revolutions' has also been an illusory gain, as such a domino existed only in the political imagination of the Kremlin elite. Neither are there any signs that Russia's greater political role in the region could translate into economic gains. Even in terms of arms exports, Moscow's policy in Syria has barred Russia access to the most lucrative markets of the oil-rich states in the Arab Peninsula.

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