

Russia in the Middle East: Back to a "Grand Strategy" – or Enforcing Multilateralism?

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Russian military intervention in Syria was not an attempt to exert dominance as a hegemonic power in the Middle East. Far from promoting a unilateral approach, Moscow in fact supports multilateralism. Flexing its muscles in Syria was intended to make manifest to the United States and its allies that multilateral negotiations can not take place in the region – or elsewhere – with the exclusion of Russia.

politique étrangère

During the armed conflict in Syria, Russia has significantly upgraded its role and status both in the Middle East and beyond the region. The most radical upgrade has been Moscow's carefully calibrated military intervention on behalf of the Syrian government since late September 2015, as well as its role in the revived Geneva negotiation process since February 2016 and in the ensuing ceasefire co-brokered by Russia and the United States. This new role and level of engagement is at odds with the widespread stereotype about post-Soviet Russia's departure from the Middle East.

In contrast, in the mid-2010s there has been growing talk about Russia's return to the Middle East and, through its upgraded role in this region, to the central stage of global politics. This, in turn, has prompted the rise of expectations and speculation, both in and beyond the region, about Russia's new "grand strategy" in the Middle East. How justified are these expectations? Does the fact that Russia outplayed the United States on Syria suffice as evidence of Moscow's "grand strategy" for the broader region? Or should Russia's engagement be seen instead as merely a series of measured, *ad hoc* steps involving skillful improvisation, and mainly in the pursuit of instrumental tactical goals, in the absence of any more ambitious, long-term and comprehensive regional strategy? Or are we dealing

with something that does not fall neatly under either category, involving and displaying elements of broader strategic thinking – but not in the way of a “grand strategy” for the Middle East?

The international context and Russia’s global strategy

It took at least a decade for post-Soviet Russia to adapt itself to the new international realities, start rediscovering its identity as a nation, and (re) shaping, to the extent possible, its new role and place in the world. It is only in the 2010s, however, that several key strategic “directions” and cross-cutting lines took full shape and could be clearly traced in Russia’s foreign policy. These survived all the subsequent foreign policy crises and even the economic calamities that Russia became involved in. This points to the long-term and fundamental, rather than merely contextual or declaratory, nature of these guiding principles. Three guiding principles are most pertinent to the subject of this article.

- A gradual, but steady shift from the US global hegemony and “unipolar moment” of the 1990s and early 2000s, and, more broadly, from the undisputed centrality of the West, or the “Euro-Atlantic concert”, to an *emerging multipolar world*, with several rising centers of power and security. In this emerging world, the utmost limit of Russia’s long-term ambitions on a global stage – an aspiration that could take decades to come to reality – is to become one of its several poles.
- *The regionalization of world politics* that manifests itself in the rise of regional powers, institutions (including security alliances) and dynamics. Russia has already reclaimed its role and place as a leading power in its main and only vital region of interest and concern – post-Soviet Eurasia. In this macro-region, Russia has built up a regional security alliance (the Collective Security Treaty Organization), is pursuing a macro-regional economic integration project (the Eurasian Economic Union), and expects its interests and influence as a *primus inter pares* to be recognized by key actors both within and outside Eurasia, including the United States and the EU.
- *Russian aversion to regime change by force, especially from the outside*, which has become a cross-cutting line in its policies concerning the Middle East and beyond. This is despite the fact that, overall, Russia’s foreign policy and strategy (since it could be identified as a more or less coherent one, i.e. since the 2000s) has remained relatively *non-ideological, pragmatic* and marked by a high degree of *cultural relativism*, especially compared to the US-led and Western-backed “democracy promotion” in places ranging from Eastern Europe to Afghanistan and Iraq.

This aversion to forced regime change, especially with external support or through direct external intervention, was borne out of the Russian leadership's growing suspicions about the so-called "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet space through the 2000s. These refer to change of government, through means other than legal succession of power and with varying degrees of popular support, in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005 and 2010). While undertaken under the banner and in the name of democracy and moderate nationalism, these "revolutions" essentially were, or morphed into, a reshuffling of the balance of power among the ruling oligarchical clans and elites under the disguise of broader social protest, ultimately reproducing the "pre-revolutionary" conditions and sources of instability and often creating more problems than they were expected by some within these countries to solve. They were also increasingly seen by Moscow as being at least partly, if not mainly, promoted by external influences and powers from outside the region, and as threats to Moscow's influence. Russia's own wave of mass pro-democracy protests of the early 2010s was interpreted by the Kremlin as an attempt to move in the same direction of color revolutions.

As regime change proliferated across the Middle East, in the context of the Arab Spring, these pre-existing Russian perceptions, shaped by developments in its own regional environment, were reinforced by broader concerns about external interventions, especially by the United States and its allies, to overthrow regimes considered "improper" or "undemocratic", and, specifically, about the NATO states' readiness to abuse the UN Security Council mandate in the case of Libya. This was reinforced by the earlier trauma of the NATO intervention in Kosovo and by the still vivid images and consequences of the extremely controversial experience – or even, as seen by some in Russia and elsewhere, ultimate failures – of the US-led post-intervention state-building experiments in Afghanistan and Iraq. Thus, for Russia the Arab Spring uprisings, especially in Egypt, Libya and Syria, got lumped together with the "color revolutions" in post-Soviet Eurasia in a way that further "internationalized" and "generalized" its aversion to such developments anywhere.

Above all, these concerns were catalyzed for Russia by the new Ukraine crisis, starting in late 2013. The crisis was provoked by the fact that Ukraine's government was forced to choose (in strict terms of "either/or") between an association with the EU and closer relations with Russia and Eurasian structures. The Maidan revolution was driven by a mix of social protest, pro-democracy and pro-Western sentiments, nationalism,

extreme nationalism, and rifts between Ukraine's competing oligarchical groups. It led, with active political support from the US and with the EU states as positively disposed observers, to an overthrow of the inefficient and corrupt, but democratically elected president Yanukovich in February 2014 (to be replaced by a series of no less corrupt and inefficient, but now staunchly anti-Russian governments). Moscow interpreted this as the clearest sign ever of the West's determination to completely ignore Russia's interests even in its immediate neighborhood, including in countries with large Russian-speaking, culturally close and Russia-friendly/neutral populations. At the regional level, this certainly played a role in Moscow's decision to reunify the strongly pro-Russian Crimea that had for decades nurtured irredentist dreams and to later engage in overt political and covert security support to Russia-friendly rebels in Ukraine's southeast. At the global level, this led to the worst crisis in Russia's relations with the West over the entire post-Soviet period. In the Middle East, this combination of factors is central, although not exclusive, in explaining Russia's drive to radically upgrade its political and military support for the Syrian government. It was a way to both reassert its aversion to Western-backed regime change in principle, while also using its radically increased leverage on Syria as a badly needed trump card in its heavily damaged relations with the West.

What even this brief overview shows is that the recent rise of Russia's profile in the Middle East, due mainly to its untypically active engagement in and on Syria, has hardly been part of any "grand strategy" specifically focused on or primarily addressed to the Middle East. Rather, it has been a projection of (a) Russia's broader international interests and foreign policy directions, especially in view of its general rejection of unipolarity and its troubled relations with the West, and (b) Moscow's more narrow, but also more direct and vital concerns centered on its Eastern European/Eurasian regional environment. Whether this is good or bad news for the Middle East needs to be explored.

The systemic crisis in the Middle East

Parts of the Middle East have remained hotbeds of continuing and fresh armed conflicts and instability throughout the early 21st century (the US-led 2003 intervention and the world's worst armed conflict in Iraq since then; the on-off Israeli-Palestinian confrontation, the 2006 conflict between Israel and Lebanese Hezbollah, etc). However, in the 2010s the Middle East entered what could be called a full-scale *systemic crisis* across the region (that is, a crisis that affected both states and societies,

that permeated politics, and that affected all aspects of security and social economy).¹ Its manifestations included:

- major and nearly simultaneous social (socio-political) upheavals that became known collectively as the Arab Spring;
- fundamental crisis in many states, especially those with republican regimes;
- the ever-intensifying transnationalization of most social processes, including social protest, political/religious violence and extremism;
- growing tensions and increasing competition for influence among key regional powers, and the accelerating erosion of, and shift in, regional balances of power;
- the unprecedented rise of violent and non-violent non-state actors, including cross-border and more broadly transnationalized movements, etc.

Elements of these trends could be traced here and there, and had accumulated in the region over the previous decades. However, in the 2010s they burst out simultaneously and then merged so as to produce a new "quality", or stage. The overall crisis in regional security, the new wave of instability, internal upheavals and/or heavily transnationalized and internationalized civil wars, and seemingly intractable regional rivalries reached a scale and intensity that set the stage for region-wide destabilization and the disintegration of several states at once (Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen).

The role of external powers

In contrast to the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century, the regional crisis in the 2010s developed at a time when, overall, the role and leverage of major powers external to the Middle East, as either active meddlers or security guarantors in the region, or both, actually declined rather than increased. The United States serves as the most evident case in point: the "post-interventionist" US administration has clearly become "tired of the Middle East", struggling and often failing to keep pace with the dynamically changing situation and unable to alter or decisively affect the course of events. The same even more strongly applies to the European powers. In terms of activity and impact, regional actors (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE and Turkey) increasingly appeared to outplay external powers and influence.

1. For Russian perceptions of this shift, see *Russia and the Greater Middle East*, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), 29 May 2013; I. Ivanov, "Is a Collective Security System Possible in the Middle East?", RIAC, 9 February 2016.

For external powers, however, that did not remove a number of risks and threats connected to, or emanating from, the Middle East. The increase and diversification of global energy supply and the latest crisis in energy prices made the region less central to the global economy than it had been in the past. At the same time, the fundamental socio-political, statehood and security crisis in the Middle East brought with it new security concerns and implications. They mostly stemmed from reinforced perceptions about the long-term nature of regional instability, the continuing potential for further destabilization, and the related consequences and implications beyond the region, ranging from terrorist connections to migration flows. These challenges affect external powers unevenly. For instance, the role of the Iraq-Syria area as the main focal point for global terrorism activity and magnet for transnational flows of violent extremists in the mid-2010s poses a threat to everyone (but mostly to the countries of the region itself, as well as to those in Europe and Eurasia). In contrast, the avalanche of refugee and migrant flows from the Middle East primarily targets Europe (rather than North America, Eurasia, or other regions).

Until recently, the main type of response by key (Western) external powers to turbulent developments in the Middle East, while not amounting to a hands-off approach, boils down to *limited containment*. Examples range from limited air strikes against “Islamic State” positions in Iraq and Syria, carried out by the US-led coalition since 2014, to the 2013 deal on Syria’s chemical disarmament co-brokered by the United States and Russia. Not surprisingly, this limited-containment approach has had equally limited results for Syria, Iraq and the region – as well as for the West itself (as shown, e.g., by the persistent migrant flows and accelerating terrorist attacks in Europe). Despite the growing centrality of the Middle East to global politics and security, and its more direct impact on and ties to the West, this *damage limitation* course taken by key external actors has not been very different from, e.g., the approach taken by the United States and its Western allies (and also by Russia and China) to the Afghanistan problem in recent years.

The growing skepticism about limited containment pointed at its failure to prevent further escalation in the region’s main hot spots, threatening broader destabilization for years, if not decades, to come, with mounting negative implications beyond the Middle East. In the new – and dynamically evolving – regional conditions, two basic realities concerning the role of external powers become clear.

First, some dependence on external powers and their engagement in the Middle East, beyond economic (energy) issues, and a demand for such engagement beyond limited containment *persist*.

Second, the type of external engagement that is in demand has nothing to do with any old-style hegemonic, neo/post-colonial or bipolar schemes. Instead, the acute conflicts and instability in the midst of several simultaneous fundamental regional shifts combined with the lack of comprehensive regional security mechanisms actualize the need for *external arbiters, mediators, security guarantors, and balancers*. As things stand, this role can be best played by external powers that:

- have solid experience in the Middle East and in providing support to states and people of the region;
- are at the same time relatively less directly and massively affected by the immediate spill-over effects of regional instability (than, e.g., regional actors such as Turkey or Europe), and can thus ensure a degree of balance, pragmatism and the ability, if needed, to distance oneself from any (or all) regional actors;
- retain a significant degree of maneuver, are capable of autonomous action and not tied by alliances, domestic constituencies, resources or ideologies to the extent that this could paralyze any action.

Ironically, today *the only two external actors* that, for different reasons and despite their very different weight, capacity and outreach, meet all three conditions are the United States... and Russia. While both have long historical experience as key or leading external actors in the Middle East, both are now less connected to, dependent on and affected by the region than Europe is (on issues ranging from energy supplies to migration flows). However, to meet the demand for the kind of external engagement that could contribute to regional stabilization, these two actors need to have or to develop an interest of their own in such involvement. For Russia in particular, given its limited overall reach and general lack of really vital interests beyond its core Eurasian region, including in the Middle East, its “elevation” to the role of a major external security player and arbiter could only stem from a combination of a broad range of factors and drivers, many of which have no direct relation to the Middle East.

Russia’s Syria “game”: unilateral action to enforce multilateralism

Russia’s untypically proactive engagement in Syria signified, once and for all, the end of the post-Soviet period in its role in – and beyond – the Middle East. In the mid-2010s, Russia has become one of the two leading extraregional players in the Syrian crisis, along with the United States. The essence of Russia’s policy at this stage is, however, *profoundly different* from either “restoration” of its Soviet-time presence, or engagement in region-wide geopolitical rivalry with other external powers.

The failure of many governments and observers in and out of the region to keep pace with and understand the logic of Russia's policy on Syria partly stems from (a) attempts to explain this policy primarily within the framework of the Middle Eastern regional context and (b) the constant search for manifestations of some "grand strategy" on the Middle East in Russia's actions. Such a "grand strategy" is commonly interpreted as Russia's attempt to revive its Soviet role in the Middle East and establish "spheres of influence" with other major external players. If that is what "grand" implies, then such great-power-style "grand strategy" has not been in place. The main characteristics of Russia's policy in the Middle East, both before and after the outbreak of the Syria crisis, have remained pragmatism, a non-ideological approach, and readiness to engage in selective cooperation with most regional actors, despite tensions between and even with them. At present, this cooperation ranges from a new improvement in relations with Egypt under President Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi to readiness to coordinate with Saudi Arabia on the oil markets, and from maintaining good working relations with Iran to developing ties with Israel.

This does not mean, however, that Russia's untypically high-profile engagement in Syria has been solely a case of *ad hoc* adventurism and contained no elements of any broader strategy. The point is that these are elements of strategic thinking that goes well beyond the Syrian, or the broader Middle Eastern, context.

Furthermore, Russia's growing engagement in Syria, culminating in direct military involvement, has not simply been confined to pursuing several broader instrumental goals – all of which have been more or less achieved. At least one of these goals was dictated by domestic concerns about potential terrorist connections to the Middle East, but all the others were related to Russia's troubled relations with the West. They included pushing Russia back to the forefront of international politics, in spite of Western sanctions; actively using antiterrorism as a rare shared concern with the West (and the rest) at a time of rising terrorist activity by jihadists in Europe and the deepest crisis in Moscow's relations with the West since the end of the Cold War; compelling the United States in particular to talk to Russia more "as an equal", and moving the Ukraine/Crimea issues, relatively speaking, into the background.²

However, there has been more to these broader implications than just pragmatic instrumentalization and opportunism. In terms of its overall

2. For more detail, see E. Stepanova, "Les Russes et l'État islamique: politique étrangère et facteurs internes", *Outre-Terre*, No. 44 (3), 2015, p. 80-94.

foreign policy strategy, Moscow was faced with a critical *paradox*: to become more included and to closely (re)engage in multilateral international cooperation, especially in the political and security spheres, Russia first needed to demonstrate the ability to act alone. That ability had to be demonstrated (a) in an independent and sovereign manner; (b) in a resolute and decisive way; (c) in a difficult, intractable and escalating crisis setting, approaching catastrophe, and (d) in a region of high international security concern. In sum, if there was any real fundamental strategic driver behind Russia's upgraded role on Syria, it was *the use of unilateral action to enforce multilateralism*, in relation to both Syria and the region, and beyond.

Since Moscow's swift diplomatic intervention in 2013 to broker the chemical disarmament initiative (which offered Washington a better alternative to engaging in direct war against Damascus), the launch of Russia's military campaign in support of central government in Syria at the end of September 2015 became the next and bigger, but hardly the last, step ahead of the United States on Syria. In the course of its first several months, the air campaign achieved most of its original goals on the ground: correcting the military balance by helping the government to survive and expand the area under its control and preventing complete Somalization (long predicted by UN ex-envoy Lakhdar Brahimi as the worst-case scenario for Syria) and the ultimate take-over by jihadist forces.³ In doing so, Russia also displayed the range of its modern military capabilities and its new-generation weapons system and equipment by testing them, many for the first time, in battle conditions.

The biggest miscalculation on the part of most external and regional powers was to overestimate Russia's interest in achieving "strategic military victory" in Syria and the "grandness" of its overall ambitions in Syria and the Middle East. Multiple speculations about Russia's looming ground intervention indicated that this was perhaps what some in the US and elsewhere wanted Russia to do – only to miserably fail at it. However, this is not what Moscow had in mind. Its tactical successes in Syria were meant not to pave the way for escalating military engagement and the use of overwhelming force, but to provide the necessary switch to more efficient international cooperation on a more balanced eventual political settlement.

Any external military intervention in this region aggravates related risks in geometrical progression, and is bound to step upon multiple conflicting regional interests (as well illustrated by the Russia-Turkey rift over Syria).

3. E. Stepanova, "Russia's Policy on Syria after the Start of Military Engagement", Program on New Approaches to Research and Security in Eurasia (PONARS Eurasia) *Policy Memo* No. 421, February 2016.

This type of game can only work (a) if the dividends extend beyond the region and greatly outweigh the costs, and (b) for limited action with limited purpose(s) rather than for advancement of any grand, ideology-based designs. Russia's decision to withdraw most of its forces from Syria was, for many, as unexpected as Moscow's earlier decision to send these forces there in the first place. By announcing the drawdown, Russia signaled its priorities in and on Syria – to move ahead to a truly multilateral solution under UN auspices. It also perhaps somewhat frustrated Washington, Riyadh and Ankara alike by its unwillingness to get caught in the same trap as the one the United States had repeatedly got itself into. Russia's decision to scale down its military presence also sent a powerful message to President Bashar al-Assad and his circle. If Assad hoped to indefinitely hide behind Russia's military cover and manipulate Moscow to try to reverse the mainstream course and logic of the political/peace process, he was deeply mistaken.

As a result, Russia's military campaign in Syria only lasted full-strength from October 2015 to mid-March 2016, and was so swift that the West failed to mount any coherent response to it. Domestically, the operation has been portrayed in Russia as a surgical, effective campaign that accomplished its original mission, but stopped short of creeping involvement, did not cost much in personnel and financial terms, and tried to avoid civilian casualties on the ground. Internationally, this surgical use of military force to revive and advance the political solution, while stopping short of getting bogged down in a quagmire, posed a major contrast with massive and overly ambitious US-led interventions in the region and also with those by regional powers (e.g., Saudi Arabia in Yemen). While it was hardly meant as a lesson to teach to anyone, it showed that Russia has itself learnt certain lessons from failures by others.

In sum, Russia's unilateral action in Syria was neither a goal in itself, nor part of any region-wide "grand strategy" for the Middle East (such as a desire to become some alternative "regional hegemon"). Constraints to Russia's global role and unilateral involvement in regions beyond Eurasia have been and remain as profound and lasting as ever. Two of them suffice to be mentioned here.

First, Russia's fundamental financial/economic interests, especially in a situation of deep economic crisis and collapse of oil prices, partly aggravated by Western-imposed sanctions, severely or even decisively constrain any further or systematic expansion of its role and involvement beyond Eurasia, and generally dictate a preference for broad and increasingly diversified multilateralism. In Syria, Russia appeared more capable and skillful militarily than its overall economic capacity

suggests, but that has been a special, demonstrative case with intended implications well beyond Syria. Also, remarkably, in relation to the Middle East, the impact of the drastic decline in energy prices in 2014–2016 has been partly leveled off for Russia by the fact that it also affected all energy-producing states of the region. In this context, Russia’s reactivated economic dialogue with Saudi Arabia on the oil issue, including on freezing oil input (as opposed to Iran’s natural reluctance to restrain its oil exports in the wake of sanctions relief) runs in contrast to the opposite situation in the political realm (where Russia and Iran remain close partners). That, in turn, improves the regional balance in Russia’s policies in the Middle East and the prospects for some mediating role for it between the Gulf States and Iran.

The second major constraining factor for Russia’s global or major cross-regional involvement is, ironically, its own relative dominance in the region where it belongs, and which remains the primary focus of its security, political and geo-economic interests. If Russia does strive for regional hegemony, it is only in its own macro-region of vital interest and concern to itself. If its role is indispensable, it is in post-Soviet Eurasia only.

Prospects for engaging in multilateral cooperation in the Middle East

In Syria, Russia has effectively shown its capacity to opt for autonomous, unilateral action when the stakes are high for itself and in areas where it has some comparative strengths and competitive competence (e.g., in military and, partly, emergency humanitarian relief capacity, but not in terms of major reconstruction and development potential). However, interpreting this rare, selective engagement as a sign of Russia’s upgrade to a global heavyweight is misleading. *Sovereign – yes; global heavyweight and a military superpower with global reach – no.* For Russia, demonstrating and proving in Syria its ability to act autonomously, in a well-organized, swift and decisive manner has been more important than any specific regional gains and ambitions. This is already something that very few nations can afford these days.

It is not only that most major transnational problems and crises of concern to Russia require international cooperative or joint action with other key players, including, where appropriate, the United States. The point is that the kind of unilateralism that Russia exercised in the Middle East was largely intended as a means *to ultimately ensure more multilateralism.* This implied not only claiming and/or restoring Russia’s place at the

multilateral “table” and in multilateral formats in and beyond the Middle East, but also stimulating and encouraging a somewhat different kind and quality of multilateralism – *a more even, representative and realistic multilateralism* (than, e.g., the one displayed by the US-led Western-Arab military coalition) and a less ideological one (than, for instance, any Euro-Atlantic “out-of-area” adventures).

In the 21st century, any successful achievements in regional security in the Middle East, with implications beyond the region, have come about only through *active and sustained multilateral efforts* and involved major diplomatic input and engagement by external powers and international organizations. That is how the nuclear deal with Iran was negotiated by the P5+1 group (US, UK, France, Russia and China, plus Germany) and finally struck in July 2015 – despite multiple disagreements among the parties on other regional issues and on the Iran policy itself. This is how the US-Russia-brokered initiative on Syrian chemical disarmament was agreed in September 2013 (despite major discord between Moscow and Washington on most other Syria-related matters and deteriorating bilateral relations) and implemented by February 2015, under the auspices of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). While Russia’s unilateral stimulation of, or attempts to enforcet, more inclusive multilateral approaches and frameworks, with a role for Moscow itself, was meant to extend beyond the Middle East, it also reinforced or opened up prospects for its engagement in multilateral cooperation on several regional security matters. This is most likely to develop in three main directions:

Solidifying the Russia/US/UN-brokered ceasefire in *Syria* (in place since 27 February 2016) and strengthening multilateral cooperation on the Syrian peace process. While on military-political issues the United States will remain Russia’s main extraregional counterpart, humanitarian relief and post-war reconstruction and development in and around Syria are unthinkable without the Gulf States and Europe assuming a growing and leading role.

Russia’s modestly strengthening diplomatic role and coordination with partners in and out of the region, including the United States, over the conflicts in *Yemen and Iraq*. On Yemen, Moscow was the first to convene in April 2015 a special session of the UN Security Council on the evolving humanitarian catastrophe and to call for rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access and for humanitarian pauses in airstrikes, echoing an earlier call by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). On Iraq, Russia needs to find a balance and closely engage with both Iran and the United States,

while its diplomatic input will continue to be coupled with growing bilateral cooperation with and arms supply to the central government.

None of these regional conflicts (and Syria and Yemen in particular) can be effectively addressed and alleviated without lowering the new peak in tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran – two major powers that still compete for hegemony in a region that defies hegemony. Russia routinely postulates the need to use its presence in multilateral formats, such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the Non-Aligned Movement, to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, in view of its acquired key role in Syria, Moscow can certainly do more to help facilitate security dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia (and its Gulf Cooperation Council partners), but only in coordination with other actors, especially the United States. Any further substantive progress toward a Syrian settlement would boost Russia’s potential in this direction more than its traditional soft spot for well-intended, but overly ambitious diplomatic initiatives. One such initiative is to fill the void of regional security mechanisms and institutions with the idea of the International Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Middle East (a sort of an “OSCE for the Middle East”, intended to ensure comprehensive regional security, in contrast to the Saudi-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council).

Conclusions

The shift in Russia’s policy on the Middle East, underscored by its role in Syria, points to neither a 20th century-style “grand strategy”, nor pure opportunism or adventurism. In fact, elements of some strategic paradigm are evolving and taking shape – but as a set of cross-cutting guiding lines for Russia’s foreign policy as whole, especially at a global level, in relation to the world’s main current and emerging power centers and on global security issues. To claim that Russia has developed or is contemplating any “grand strategy” specifically addressed to and focused on the Middle East as such is not simply premature, but seems to lack grounds.

For Russia, the Middle East is a region undergoing a systemic crisis and one that is not only next to Eurasia, but is also at the center of world politics and (in)security, mostly due to high instability and multiple conflicts. As such, it serves both as a space on which Russia’s more general interests and concerns are projected, and as a proving ground for achieving broader foreign policy goals, mostly beyond the region. As illustrated by the Syria case, that does imply a degree of Russian return to the Middle East, but hardly in pursuit of a “grand” regional strategy. Rather, Moscow instrumentalized its involvement in Syria for solving foreign

policy tasks at the higher international level, such as Russia's return to the global stage in spite of Western sanctions.

There is, however, a broader strategic message in this seemingly pragmatic instrumentalization. Paradoxically, Russia's unilateral action in the region's worst conflict area also was meant to serve as a means to enforce more inclusive multilateralism and ensure a more adequate place for Moscow in multilateral frameworks and decision-making in and beyond the region. The good news for the Middle East is that this has already reactivated and stimulated the search for a multilateral solution on Syria. It may also help to foster international cooperation on Iraq, Yemen and even Libya, and to some extent contribute to efforts to ease tensions between the region's main rivals – Saudi Arabia and Iran.

