

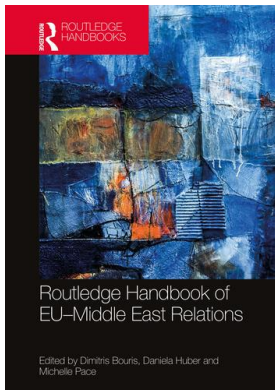
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RUSSIA AND THE EU IN THE MIDDLE EAST

From mutual distrust to forced cooperation?

Maxim A. Suchkov and Polina Vasilenko

Introduction

Over the last few years, Russia's image in the Middle East in the eyes of Western observers has ranged from a reincarnation of the Soviet Union to an "evil genius" to a self-proclaimed "unbiased mediator". On the one hand, this image has resulted from Moscow's own pursuit for restoration of its status as a global power and a kingmaker in the region – something Russia had lost following the break-up of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, these images are also a byproduct of Russia's own lack of transparency about its policy goals and the nature of its moves in the Middle East, both often criticised by Western, as well as Middle Eastern partners. Russia's Foreign Policy Concept issued in 2016 was supposed to provide clarity on these matters. Yet it centres around a rather vague concept of shaping "a fair and sustainable world order" by "promoting the rule of law, strengthening international security and cooperation at the different levels" (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2016).

What explains Russia's current policy of balancing between main regional actors is its new willingness to emphasise its position as a centre of influence in the world; a position which in essence is different from the Soviet approach. To explain Russian participation in Middle Eastern politics solely by the need to restore the lost sphere of influence, "replace the US" (Wasser, 2019) or fill in the power vacuum due to Europe's inaction means to lose sight of the important pragmatic component of Russia's foreign policy on one hand, and limited Russian resources on the other. When it comes to the Middle East, this is often a source of mutual misunderstanding between Russia and Europe.

The break-up of the Soviet Union saw Russia's virtual departure from a number of key regions. Once a turbulent venue for Soviet politics and policies, the Middle East turned out to be a liability for the new Russian leadership but at the same time Moscow's bargaining chip for improvement of relations with the West. Even with the departure of Andrey Kozirev, arguably Russia's foreign minister most loyal to the West, most pressing regional issues at the time – Iraq and Israeli-Arab relations – were meant to be handled in partnership with Western states, the US first and foremost, and less so with the Europeans. At the time, however, neither Russian ambitions, nor its resources made Moscow an appealing player for regional countries, nor a desired partner for the West.

Since the mid-2000s, EU–Russia relations went through various stages, from enmity to confrontation to mutual fatigue. The most poisonous crisis episodes included the Russian–Georgian

war in South Ossetia in 2008, NATO's intervention in Libya in 2011, the Arab uprisings and the subsequent use of chemical weapons in Syria in 2011–2012 and the conflict in Ukraine in 2014. After the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, interaction was also compounded by sanctions imposed on Russian companies and individuals. Next to Ukraine, the Middle East continues to be a major bone of contention between Moscow on the one hand and Brussels and individual EU Member States on the other. But it is also a host of missed opportunities which this chapter will particularly disentangle. To do so it will first look at recent milestone events that shaped mutual perceptions of Russian and European policies in the Middle East, in Brussels and Moscow respectively. This will set the overall framework for the chapter and organically flow towards the most acute issue in today's bilateral Russian–EU relationship which is the conflict in Syria where Russian and European disagreements are serious. The text will then analyse three major instances where cooperation between Russia and Europe seems plausible: these include Iran and the fate of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA); Persian Gulf Security; and the Middle East Peace process (MEPP). Finally, in the concluding part the authors will outline major takeaways from the study of Russian–EU relations in the Middle East and discuss prospects for their future evolution.

Mutual perceptions

The political uprisings across the Middle East that swept away decades-old authoritarian regimes during the so-called Arab Spring were tremendously significant for Europe, given the geographical proximity and the density of political, security and economic ties between Europe and the Middle East. For Russia, Libya and the fall of Gaddafi's regime was a catalyst for its perception of both Europe's inability to handle significant security crises in the neighbouring region and challenges for cooperation between Europe and Russia (Dessi, 2020).

The war against ISIS, first in Iraq and later in Syria, was another divisive issue for Russia and the EU. When the group was on the rise, policymakers in European capitals believed the best Europe could do was to help the Iraqi government in its war on terror (European Council, 2015). However, Moscow was – and remains – inclined to believe that the Europeans followed the Americans in prioritising the weakening of the Syrian regime rather than impeding ISIS territorial expansion in Syria. A cautious pan-European diplomatic approach was sidelined by more assertive national military policies, predominantly by France and Britain. Indeed, it is worth noting that, in the eyes of Moscow, Russia–EU relations are often under the shadow of the EU's transatlantic partnership. For instance, as some European governments joined forces with the US in tackling ISIS militarily, the role of the EU remained blurred. While regional and international actors in the coalition continued to see the US as the leader in this fight, it was pretty consensual among Russian policymaking circles that the “international coalition” was a mere euphemism for “US forces” that were established for the purpose of legitimising the American military presence in Syria.

Speaking about the desired positioning of Europe in the Middle East, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov formulated the following thesis at the Munich Security Conference in 2018: “We proceed from the assumption that the EU can play an active, responsible and, let me stress it, independent role in international affairs” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2018a). Such a “responsible and independent” EU role is not only “desirable” from Moscow's perspective, but there's an undeniable call for a constructive European presence in the Middle East. The EU's soft power in the Middle East is arguably more attractive than either Russia's soft power (Mohammadian, 2017) or the soft power of individual EU Member States, some of which are still perceived with suspicion, partly due to their colonial past (Rapnouil,

2018). A united and, as Moscow calls it, “sovereign” EU could indeed achieve a lot more in terms of engagement with societies and conflict mediation which, in theory, creates a basis for a Russian-European engagement.

European perspectives on Russia’s proactive presence in the Middle East are diverse across countries and some analysts believe that these differences played into Russian hands, when it was building bridges with some or putting pressure on other EU countries (Baev, 2018: 131). Indicative of what a constructive European perception could maybe look like is a report from a European Parliament research centre (Russel, 2018) in which Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015 was traditionally seen as a campaign to save the Assad regime and reclaim the status of a global power with huge humanitarian costs attached. The report admits that despite the fact that Moscow’s role was not always constructive from a European point of view, it nevertheless became a key player, and sometimes a mediator in regional conflicts from Libya to Yemen. In light of its analysis, the report comes to the conclusion that “Moscow’s growing influence in the region is as much the result of Western policy failures as its own strength” (ibid.), explaining the decline in its authority by the discontent of the local population with “Western intervention”. Such a combination of a critical assessment and a pragmatic view, as well as the identification of positive achievements, make it possible to outline a strategy for cooperation between the EU and Russia.

As this short overview has shown, the EU–Russia engagement in the Middle East faces diverging views and mutual distrust just as the future of the region remains precarious. However, there are possibilities for engagement: conflicts on which they will be forced to engage (such as the reconstruction and establishment of the political process in Syria), or where they can potentially develop much more if they manage to establish a strategic dialogue (the fate of the JCPOA, tensions in the Persian Gulf, stagnation of the Israeli-Palestinian settlement).

Forced cooperation

The war in Syria remains the most painful issue in this region. President Putin first announced that ISIS had been defeated on 7 December 2017 (Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, 2017) – the claim was reiterated by Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu just one year later on 20 October 2018 (TASS, 2018). The statements, albeit political, referred to the elimination of the territorial structure of the terrorist group rather than its operational ability to offer resistance. This development, however, has not resulted in a common agenda on Syria for Moscow and Brussels. The parties are yet to find common ground on a number of critical issues, including the return of refugees, economic reconstruction and the future of the Syrian political system that is closely associated with President Assad’s future, as well as the reform of Syria’s security apparatus.

Russia has played a key role in the Syrian conflict. Consequently, it managed to create an image for itself as a strong, competent and skillful player. Yet the limits of its constructive powers in the region are visible particularly under the current circumstances. The stabilisation of the Middle East, one of the proclaimed goals of Moscow’s politico-military campaign in Syria, is only possible in concert with other regional and external actors, including the EU. Judging by Moscow’s public messaging, Russia is interested in engaging with the EU on this pressing issue that is the Middle East. It is unable to pursue economic reconstruction in war-torn Syria without EU funding, and it also needs European assistance in obtaining resources from international organisations. The EU, in turn, is openly reluctant to finance a process it may not have control over. Nor is it willing to sponsor the regime it stands against, which is what would happen if Syrian institutions received either EU or international funding for economic reconstruction.

For similar reasons, the EU refuses to support Russian initiatives on the return of refugees and IDPs and will continue to do so until proper conditions for their safe return – including political and security measures – are put in place.

From the point of view of both Western and Russian experts (Hiltermann, 2019: 15), the Istanbul process (the quadrilateral summit in Istanbul which started at the end of October 2018) could be an effective mechanism for Europe and Russia to jointly explore common ground on reconstruction-related matters. Such a format became possible after one of the key contradictions gradually left the agenda. The West has ceased to demand the resignation of President Assad, tacitly agreeing with the Russian position that only the Syrian people should make such a decision. In 2018, the former French ambassador to Russia, Sylvie Bermann, told the Russian media “We will not decide for the Syrian people, but we are no longer talking about demanding unconditional withdrawal of Bashar Assad” (Kommersant, 2018). At the beginning of 2019, the United Kingdom took a similar position, recognising that the current crisis cannot be resolved without the participation of President Assad and his supporters (The Guardian, 2019). However, the positions of Russia and the EU on Syria still need to be carefully reconciled. Therefore, the Istanbul initiative will only work if the high-level negotiations are supplemented by specific projects and a substantive exchange of views on the expert Track II.

Potential cooperation

Iran

Having concluded a nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, the P5+1 (Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, the US and Germany) demonstrated a strong political will to overcome tensions in the region. However, after the US withdrew from the JCPOA on 8 May 2018 and launched a consistent “maximum pressure” campaign on Iran, European participants backtracked under the impact of US secondary sanctions. Their participation was limited to verbal statements of commitment to the letter of the agreement and promises to establish an economic mechanism that would allow Iran to recover losses. Although the financial mechanism for conducting transactions with Iran bypassing US sanctions, known as INSTEX, was created in January 2019 by the Europeans, the first batch of goods using the mechanism was delivered only on 31 March 2020 (Gov. UK, 2020). Many experts considered this European project unviable, but it was a joint E3 step forward to preserve the nuclear deal.

On the anniversary of the US withdrawal from the agreement on the Iranian nuclear program, for the first time, Tehran abandoned a number of nuclear restrictions, calling it “strategic patience” (Suchkov and Vasilenko, 2019: 68). Although the refusal to fulfil a number of clauses of the transaction in the first stage concerned the stockpiles of enriched uranium and heavy water, international observers and IAEA inspectors have repeatedly stated that Iran had not gone beyond the agreement and had not refused to cooperate with the Agency. Thus, trying to force Europeans to take responsibility, Iran not only gave time to the parties to the agreement to fulfil their obligations, but also emphasised the reversible nature of their scaling back (TASS, 2019).

Since 2018, Iran and the US have gone through a series of critical moments, including a downed American drone, a tanker war that also affected Europeans, and the assassination of Iranian top general Qasem Soleimani; any of these events could have developed into a full-scale military clash. All countries involved in the deal urged the parties to promote negotiations and reduce tension, but the common position of both European countries and Russia was to

persuade Iran to stand up to pressure without destroying the treaty and making the “mistake” that the US was waiting for. As President Putin aptly stated:

Russia is not a firefighting rescue crew. We cannot save things that are not fully under our control. We have played our part, and we are ready to continue to play the same positive role, but it does not depend solely on us. It depends on all our partners and all the parties, including the United States, the European countries and Iran.

(Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, 2019)

To anticipate the upcoming clashes between the United States and Iran on the expiring UN arms embargo, France, Germany and the United Kingdom could unite with Russia and China to formulate a new set of stringent conditions or codes of conduct, to be agreed to by the UN Security Council for future arms transfers to Iran (Geranmayeh, 2020).

Persian Gulf security

In the context of US maximum pressure, tensions also abounded in the Persian Gulf in May 2019 when four tankers, located near the territorial waters of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), were attacked by unidentified forces. On 13 June, two tankers belonging to Norway and Japan suffered serious damage as a result of the attack, which the United States blamed on Iran. Tensions continued to escalate when the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) detained the oil tanker *Stena Impero*, owned by the Swedish company Stena Bulk. The tanker, which was flying the British flag, was seized in the Gulf of Oman in response to the detention of the Iranian tanker *Grace 1* in Gibraltar on suspicion of supplying oil to Syria, bypassing EU sanctions. Two months later, the incident was peacefully resolved, but security remained at a critically low level.

Indeed, another sphere for interaction between Russia and the EU may be the promotion and implementation of the Persian Gulf security concept. In July 2019, Russia officially presented its own view on the organisation of collective security in this region at a time of spiraling escalation between Iran and the United States and its regional allies (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2018b). None of the ideas laid out in the Russian plan were new – they had all been voiced by Russian diplomats and other officials for years. But the document unified all ideas and came when the regional stakeholders involved appeared to be more focused on finding ways for effective mutual deterrence rather than ways to defuse tensions through diplomacy. The Russian proposal was unlikely aiming as high as to produce peace in the region, but it could give those seeking military solutions the possibility to understand that not all political options have been fully explored. At the same time, it was intended to provide those who fear war a chance to jump on the Russian bandwagon; and those who didn't necessarily want war but had gone too far to pull back (or find) a face-saving opportunity.

Strategically, the Russian move sought at least two objectives. First, the image of a new power broker in the Middle East that Russia has been constructing for itself at least since the start of its Syria campaign in 2015 is now being reinforced with the image of problem solver. Not only does Moscow seek to promote its own agenda in the region, it is also capable of presenting solutions. Second, the Russian proposal – in substance and form – runs in stark contrast to what the US has been offering, and this is likely intentional. While the Trump administration has been pushing for the establishment of an “Arab NATO” (Miller and Sokolsky, 2018), Russia promotes the idea of a Middle Eastern version of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (Suchkov, 2019). And while the US demands Iran change its behaviour or be isolated, Russia insists on neighbourliness and advocates no stakeholder being excluded when it

comes to regional issues. Furthermore, as Washington encourages military build-up in the Gulf, Russia has criticised the permanent deployment of outside troops in the sub-region.

While many of the Russia-proposed ideas may indeed interest regional players, others are likely to fall on deaf ears. The latter include Russia's call to set the region free of foreign (read: American) military presence which the security of the Gulf monarchies hinges on – as the core of the proposal to build a new security architecture around counter-terrorism efforts. Nevertheless, joining forces with European counterparts on regional security negotiations can become a conduit for a more independent European policy in the Gulf region and a way to restore the status of an active player after several years of inability to withstand US pressure on Iran. Involving the Gulf countries in the discussion could provide an opportunity to come up with a broad regional agenda, in order to avoid focusing solely on Iran's current destructive role in the structure of regional security (Adebahr, 2020).

In theory, Russia and the EU could also jointly promote the Iranian "Hormuz Peace Endeavour" initiative and mediate in negotiations between the Gulf countries regarding the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's proposal on signing a mutual non-aggression agreement by the regional parties (IRNA, 2020). By choosing key security problems for the region and leaving aside the irreconcilable interests of the Gulf states, Russia and the EU can make a contribution to promoting dialogue and stabilising the Persian Gulf region.

Middle East Peace Process (MEPP)

Russia has traditionally advocated the achievement of a comprehensive and fair settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ending the Israeli occupation of Arab lands that began in 1967. The Soviet intellectual and political tradition has deemed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the root cause of most socio-political problems in the contemporary Middle East (Primakov, 2009). Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia was virtually sidelined from the MEPP. Moscow's "institutional return" to the settlement of the issue came with the establishment of the Middle East Quartet in 2002. As a member of the Quartet – alongside the US, the EU and the UN – Russia had promoted the establishment of a functioning and viable Palestinian state (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2018c). At the same time, neither Russian resources nor its political influence allowed it to keep on par with the US on key decisions regarding the conflict. The Arab uprisings, the subsequent rise of ISIS, and the focus on Iran have seemingly shifted the conflict dynamics in the Middle East away from the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Yet, negative developments on the ground for the Palestinians in the last few years coupled with President Donald Trump's "deal of the century" revived international attention to the peace process.

On a number of occasions, Moscow has come forward with a proposal to act as an intermediary between Israel and Palestine and provide a platform for "negotiations without preconditions". Moscow was initially sceptical of Trump's peace plan and concerned over its possible implications for the future of Israeli-Palestinian talks and regional stability (TASS, 2020a). Russia's military campaign in Syria, its diplomatic efforts within the Astana group, and moves on other chessboards reasserted its standing in the region and boosted the confidence of the Russian leadership that this time Moscow could be more relevant to the peace process than in previous decades. Ever since, Russia has dedicated significant time and energy to getting itself back in the game.

On most aspects Russia has sought to demonstrate a more nuanced approach than the US. For instance, on 6 April 2017, eight months before Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement that Russia

recognised West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and named East Jerusalem “the capital of the future Palestinian state” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2017). Russia has not moved its embassy from Tel Aviv though, which formally allowed Moscow to stay within the “internationally recognised framework” regarding the “future Palestinian state”. At the same time, it made an important symbolic gesture to the Israelis – ahead of the Americans.

That said, Moscow understood the importance the peace plan had for President Trump and recognised the US was going to proceed with it regardless. Seeking ways to engage with the Trump administration, the Kremlin was thus cautious about throwing a wrench into the works – especially since it presumed the plan was anyway going to get stuck at some point all by itself. Therefore, while top Russian diplomats have occasionally voiced criticism of the Trump initiative, the Kremlin has instead elaborated concrete proposals on which to cooperate with the White House. It has suggested potential joint patrols of the Golan Heights and other measures to provide security for Israel – the proposals that Putin made to Trump during the Helsinki Summit in summer 2018 (Trofimov, 2018).

When it realised that none of these proposals were likely to materialise, Moscow moved to gradually reclaim its own status as an important middleman in the peace settlement. While relations with Israel revolved around de-escalation in Syria and Iran-related security matters, Russia’s Foreign Ministry has focused, at least since late 2018, on succeeding where Egypt had previously failed: reconciling Palestinian factions. The Palestinian side is indeed more interested in involving Moscow than Israel has been, since there are many points of disagreement such as Russia’s relations with Iran and Syria, as well as its non-recognition of Hamas as a terrorist organisation (Khlebnikova, 2019). In February 2019, Moscow hosted 12 Palestinian movements – including Fatah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad Movement – in an attempt to settle the divisions between them (Belenkaya, 2019). The efforts have borne little fruit so far but Moscow keeps plugging away. Moreover, it keeps seeking every opportunity to upgrade the relationship with the Palestinians and reinforce its potential intermediary role.

Thus, when Trump released the political portion of his plan in late January 2020, Moscow reacted calmly (TASS, 2020b). Well aware of the complexities of the plan – the divide it has created among Arab elites, and its general dismissal by the Arab street – Moscow has adopted a wait-and-see approach. At the time, the calculation was that if the plan was going to be rejected by the Arabs, Russia wouldn’t look like the one that torpedoed it. If the plan went through, which was deemed in the Kremlin as unlikely without some Russian and European engagement, Moscow would have a stake in the process. The former part of that calculation has proved right: The Palestinians rejected the deal and Russia has not been blamed for it. The latter, however, has not: The Russians were not engaged by the US.

Russia has responded to the move with a mix of old and new initiatives. First, it has reenergised its mediation between Palestinian factions. Second, it has proposed a return to the Middle East Quartet. Finally, it has offered to facilitate a meeting between the US and the Palestinian Authority. The last one is, perhaps, the most intriguing component of the Russian effort since the UN and the EU presumably support the initiative while the Palestinians “are not ruling it out”, even though they haven’t given a final answer just yet (Ravid, 2020).

In the midst of the re-election campaign and with “all things Russia” seen as toxic in Washington, Trump is unlikely to embrace either Moscow’s initiative to broker direct American-Palestinian talks or even to sit down with the rest of the Middle East Quartet for the planning of a peace settlement. Nevertheless, recent political changes, including the intention of the new Israeli government to unilaterally annex parts of the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Palestine withdrawing from all agreements with the US and Israel announced by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in May 2020, caused an unprecedented flash of Russian activity.

Russian diplomats, relying on the previous unsuccessful experience of solo mediation, proposed renewing the efforts of the Middle East Quartet and offered to facilitate a meeting between the United States and the Palestinian Authority (Suchkov, 2020). It is noteworthy that, according to some reports (Ravid, 2020), the UN and the EU seem to support this initiative, while the Palestinians “are not ruling it out”, although they haven’t given a definitive answer yet.

Advancing a peace plan could help the EU to take a more active role in the managing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict so far as the EU still has enough leverage to bring to the negotiating table: economic heft, large aid budgets, strong defence capabilities and an extensive and experienced diplomatic service. Its leverage would be significantly increased if it were supported in this by the other Quartet members: Russia and the UN.

Conclusion

As this overview has shown, on a number of crises in the Middle East, Russia and the EU ultimately share a common view for conflict resolution (the Persian Gulf, the MEPP), whilst on others (Syria) their cooperation is necessary. Furthermore, they could also jointly work on other shared interests, such as counter-terrorism, forced displacement and migration. This potentially opens the way to some sort of cooperation, if it were not for the lack of political will. While many threats and challenges from the Middle East objectively call for Russia and the EU to address them jointly, divergences in their respective views, interests and expectations will keep undermining cooperation for an indefinite period of time. Unless their disagreements and contrary understandings – of each other and the region – are put on the table and talked through, this partnership is unlikely to materialise.

It is, perhaps, Russia’s own geopolitical ambition to challenge the West in the Middle East that leaves little appetite in Brussels to cooperate with Moscow on regional matters. Arguably, this is not actually Russia’s ultimate objective. Rather, it is what Moscow does – and will continue to do – until it is engaged, or, in the Russian narrative, “recognised as an equal partner” by the West, including the EU. One of the important signs of a potential increase in cooperation is that EU states demonstrate their readiness for dialogue. Even though there is an opinion in the US that Russia should leave the Middle East because of its “destructive activities” (TASS, 2020c), the EU refrains from such a position. France and Germany advocate de-escalation as a key approach to the current situation in the Middle East. It is noteworthy that, unlike Great Britain which openly sided with the US after the assassination of Iran’s IRGC top Commander Qasem Soleimani, other European countries condemned this step and urged a defusing of tensions between the United States and Iran (Morris and Birnbaum, 2020). Perhaps after Brexit has been completed and Great Britain has left, the EU will consider Russia not as a “problem”, but as a necessary component in solving the most acute global problems.

Furthermore, as already mentioned, one of the constraints for fruitful networking is the historical distrust between Russia and the EU. Nevertheless, the “Crimea crisis”, being insoluble due to the differences in its perception, is gradually beginning to fade into the background. As a Russian analyst said after the Chancellor Angela Merkel’s working visit to Moscow on 11 January 2020, “Ukraine has stopped being so toxic for relations between Moscow and Berlin” (Sherwin, 2020).

However, both participants have to overcome not only the mutual perception distorted from the past, but also the clash of ambitions and interests in the region. Still, their policies in the Middle East should not necessarily be held hostage by these general patterns. Of all possible areas, the Middle East is probably one of the most conducive for meaningful dialogue between Moscow and Brussels because both parties are primarily committed to ensuring global and

regional security. Therefore, sooner or later Russia and the EU will have to begin thinking more intensely about how their relationship in the Middle East could look like.

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