

## THE SYRIA CRISIS AND RUSSIA'S ALIGNMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: AN INTRIGUING SCENARIO

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### Abstract

*Russian foreign policy aims to revive the country as a great international player. It has high stakes in the Middle East. During the cold war, it cultivated robust relations in all sectors with the then regimes in Iran, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Syria. However, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia gradually lost its influence in the region. This article analyzes Russia's relations with the Middle Eastern countries against the backdrop of the civil unrest in Syria. It holds that by actively aiding the beleaguered Assad regime, Russia aims to consolidate its position as a power in the Middle East that can influence regional squabbles. After the loss of a friendly Kiev and the controversial Crimean annexation, Moscow is set to test Western interests in the Middle East.*

**Key words:** Syria crisis, Russia, Middle East

### Russia and Middle East

Since 1993, Russian foreign policy has been an attempt to rehabilitate Russia as a strong force in the international arena. It aims to ensure that Russia must regain its lost status in world politics and that its presence in the international arena is acknowledged. Russian interventions in the Georgian, Bosnian and the Ukrainian civil wars were a clear manifestation of the said strategy.<sup>1</sup> However, after the breakup of the Soviet Union Russia did tacitly acknowledge the over-arching role of the United States and grudgingly accepted alignments in its backyard, the state of affairs gradually changed with the ascension of Vladimir Putin at the helm. Under President Putin, Russia seems to have gained the confidence it had lost during the reign of Boris Yeltsin.

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<sup>1</sup> Aron Leon & Kenneth M. Jensen (ed.), *The Emergence of Russian Foreign Policy* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1995), 1-7.

After the end of the Second World War, Soviet Russia prioritized Eastern Europe and the Far East over the Middle East as it needed to secure its physical and ideological boundaries against the capitalist West. However, Soviet attempts to compete with the USA in the diplomatic arena continued in other regions of the world. The early 1960's witnessed active Soviet support to the regimes in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Soviet material support to these countries expanded with the passage of time and it became clear that Soviet Union was determined to carve out a sphere of interest in the region and would like to maintain it at all cost. At the same time Soviet attempts to expand its ideological influence with the ruling elite and the local intelligentsia in the Middle Eastern countries also continued to swell.<sup>3</sup> Beside active Soviet support to the regimes in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Libya, Soviet encouragement of a Palestinian movement to curtail US and Israeli hegemony in the Middle East was also under taken to increase Soviet influence in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup>

The Arabic speaking countries of North Africa like Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco too attracted interest from Moscow. The Deterioration in the US – Arab relations in the wake of the US decision to supply sophisticated arms and Surface-to-Air missiles to Israel provided further opportunity to the USSR to come closer to all major Arab states in the Middle East. The 1967 Arab-Israel war enabled Soviet Union to be recognized by the West, including the US, as a great power having legitimate interest in the Middle East.

Due to geographical proximity, Middle East became an area of primary concern to the policy makers in Moscow. The sensitive lanes of maritime communication passing through the Mediterranean and leading to the Pacific and Indian Oceans further enhanced its strategic interests in the region. Middle East also provided the Soviet Union with a platform to project its naval power in time of crisis and to monitor the flow of Middle Eastern oil and gas to Europe and the Far East.

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<sup>2</sup> Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War II to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Korybko. "Russia's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Syria and Iran as Regional Springboards", *Oriental Review*, (March 31, 2014). See: [www.orientalreview.org/2014/03/31/russias-foreign-policy-in-the-mideast-syria-and-iran-as-regional-springboards](http://www.orientalreview.org/2014/03/31/russias-foreign-policy-in-the-mideast-syria-and-iran-as-regional-springboards) (Accessed on 23 October 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Yaacov Rai, *From Encroachment to Involvement: A Documentary Study of Soviet Policy in the Middle East, 1945-1973* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974).

The West also has vital interests in the Middle East because of the region's vast energy reserves. Therefore, the West are not willing to abandon or endanger their interests by letting the Russians to cultivate close and strong relations with regimes in the area.<sup>5</sup>

The West's undue patronage of Israel at the expense of the Palestinians only pushed the Arabs into the hands of the Soviet Union. The Arab states countered Israel by gravitating towards Moscow.<sup>6</sup> Around 1970, the Soviet Union had attained a decisive role in the region on par with the West. Its bargaining position vis a vis the West increased by virtue of its influence in the Arab capitals like Cairo, Tripoli, Damascus and Baghdad.

Though the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict triggered another round of Soviet intervention in the Middle East, the events after the cessation of hostilities comprehensively redefined its status on the regional chessboard. The American politico-military investments scuttled further Soviet penetration. Moreover, communist ideology failed to build a vibrant constituency within the Arab world.<sup>7</sup> The USSR-sponsored Middle East peace plan, which clearly favoured Palestinian cause, did succeed in winning the support of all the Arab States. However, the USA and Israel had serious reservation against the plan and did not want it to be successful. The Reagan administration proposed its own version that resulted in the recognition of Israel by Egypt and Jordan. The only entities that kept their ties intact with the Soviet Union were the PLO and the Syrian Arab Republic. They refused to abide by the Camp David Agreement and therefore, needed Soviet support to maintain relevance in the region.<sup>8</sup>

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the Russian Federation re-oriented its foreign policy. Moscow faced a host of problems at domestic level, that diverted its attention from the Middle East. Under Gorbachev, the USSR had already a lot in its plate to focus on the Middle East. His

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<sup>5</sup> Steven L. Spiegel, *The Other Arab - Israel Conflict; Making America's Middle East Policy, from Truman to Reagan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 3-5.

<sup>6</sup> Yaacov Ro'i, *From Encroachment to Involvement: A Documentary Study of Soviet Policy in the Middle East, 1945-1973*, (Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1974), XXXVIII.

<sup>7</sup> Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy since the Invasion of Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 190-193.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 197.

successor Boris Yeltsin pursued a more pragmatic approach of balancing relations with Europe and rest of the world. He also had a task of resetting strategic interests in newly independent states surrounding Russia.<sup>9</sup>

When Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency in 2000, Russian foreign policy received new impetus. The country began to assert itself in the international diplomatic arena. There has been a clear commitment on the part of Russian policy makers to lay greater emphasis on strengthening its relationship with old allies in the Middle East and win new friends to increase its stature in the region. It increased its regional outreach. Energy became an essential strategic component in Russian foreign policy circles.<sup>10</sup> It vehemently opposed the military intervention in Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein. The loss of Iraq as a partner hardened Moscow's stance against West's attempts at regime change in Iran. Besides, relations with Damascus not only fortified but also attained a completely new dimension.

### Syria

Syria-Russia relations go back to the 1950s when the Soviet Union began to make strategic inroads in the Middle East to counter American influence. Keeping Syria closer meant they could outmanoeuvre Iraq and Turkey (the members of a pro-West alliance back then).<sup>11</sup> The Russians secured a naval base at the Syrian port of Tartus, which aided them in their quest to project power in the region.<sup>12</sup>

Two months before its dissolution, the Soviet Union began a modification in its policy towards the Middle East. It resumed full diplomatic ties with Israel in October 1991,<sup>13</sup> thus, communicating a departure from the practices of the cold war. The initial years of the Russian Federation under

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<sup>9</sup> Robert O. Freedman, "Russian Policy towards the Middle East: The Yelstin Legacy and the Putin Challenge", *Middle East Journal* 55, No.1 (Winter 2001): 58-90, see [www.jstor.org/stable/4329582?seq](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4329582?seq) (accessed on October 15, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Orkhan Gafarli, "Russian Foreign Policy in Light of Changing Balances in the Middle East", *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 10, no. 4. (February 2012): 142. Available at [www.turkishpolicy.com/pdf/vol\\_10\\_no\\_4-gafarli.pdf](http://www.turkishpolicy.com/pdf/vol_10_no_4-gafarli.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), 13.

<sup>12</sup> Nikolas K. Gvosdev and Christopher Marsh, *Russian Foreign Policy: Interests, Vectors and Sectors* (Washington: CQ Press, 2014), 315.

<sup>13</sup> Clyde Haberman, "Israel and Soviets Restore Full Diplomatic Relations", *The New York Times*, 19 October 1991. See <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/19/world/israel-and-soviets-restore-full-relations.html>.

Boris Yeltsin saw ties with Syria becoming frosty.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the overall relationship outlived this period of reorientation. One major factor has been the near total dependence of Syrian defence infrastructure on Russia supplied armory.<sup>15</sup>

When the tremors of 'Arab Spring' made their way into Syria and parts of it began to experience popular mobilization, Moscow steadfastly stood behind the Assad regime. The blood-soaked denouement of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi must have hardened Russia stance against any attempt at regime change in Damascus. Russia lost Baghdad when a US-led coalition deposed Saddam Hussein. Further, it felt tricked after an endeavour in Libya to protect civilians against state brutality transformed into an effort to oust Gaddafi. Therefore, Moscow has brushed every proposal away that undermines Assad's control over the levers of power.<sup>16</sup>

### Iran

Moscow attaches greater importance to its relations with Tehran as they effectively share a common neighbourhood – the South Caucasus and the Central Asia. It is in their mutual interest to keep their backyard peaceful. Despite the strong allegations of supporting some militant groups in the Middle East, Iran enjoys an advantageous position. Tehran and Baghdad see eye to eye on sensitive regional issues. Iran sustains a strong relationship with Hezbollah. This extends Iranian influence to the Mediterranean. Likewise, Iran has invested heavily in the survival of the Assad regime.

The alignment of interests has brought Russia and Iran closer to upgrade their relationship to a strategic level. Moscow has been assisting Tehran in its energy and defence sectors. Furthermore, Iranian nuclear ambitions have invited greater Russian involvement, which has translated in Moscow providing protection in the shape of surface-to-air missiles to sensitive nuclear installations.<sup>17</sup> The recent Russian announcement to lift a five-year

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<sup>14</sup>Nikolas K. Gvosdev and Christopher Marsh, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 315.

<sup>15</sup>Spyridon N. Litsas and Aristotle Tziampiris, *The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition: Multipolarity, Politics and Power Multi-polarity, Politics and Power* (London: Routledge, 2016), 37.

<sup>16</sup>Mark N. Katz, "Russia and the Arab Spring", (3 April 2012). See <http://www.mei.edu/content/russia-and-arab-spring>.

<sup>17</sup>Michael Rubin, "What are Iran's Domestic Priorities?", *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 6, no. 2, (July 2002):28.

ban on the sale of S-300 Russian SAM system to Iran is a continuation of the same policy.<sup>18</sup>

Russia not only completed the construction of a nuclear reactor at Bushehr in 2013, which was halted during the Yelstin era, but it also vowed to provide Iran with assistance to construct eight more nuclear reactors, two at Bushehr and six at other sites.<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting that Russia, in an effort to solidify its strategic partnership with Iran, quietly withdrew from the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement of limited nuclear cooperation with Iran in November 2000 and resumed arms sales to Tehran.<sup>20</sup> Russian support to Iran prevented the West to take any punitive action against Iran until 2006, when economic sanctions were imposed by the UN on Iran for refusing to suspend its uranium enrichment programme. Ultimately after a decade of tough negotiations between P5, the EU and Iran, a deal to lift sanctions on Iran finalized in July 2015. This has strengthened Iranian position at the regional and international level. Russia quickly appreciated this development for it has many trade deals to revive with Tehran.

At the same time, the fundamentalist nature of the regime in Tehran invites suspicion in some Russian circles, as they fear the Caucasus and Central Asia could become a seedbed for Iranian power.<sup>21</sup> Some in the Iranian security establishment perceive the conflict in Syria as an existential struggle for the state of Iran. Syria remains a powerful bastion of Iranian influence in the region. Its loss would entail the destruction of Hezbollah in Lebanon leaving Israel free to adopt a more aggressive posture towards Iran.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Carol J. Williams and Paul Richter, "Putin Lifts Russia's Ban on Delivery of S-300 Missile System to Iran", *Los Angeles Times*, 13 April 2015. Available from [www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-russia-lifts-ban-missiles-iran-20150413](http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-russia-lifts-ban-missiles-iran-20150413).

<sup>19</sup> Jonathon Marcus, "Russia to Build Iran's Atomic Reactors at Bushehr", *BBC News*, 12 November 2014.

<sup>20</sup> "Russia Ending Deal on Arms Negotiated by Gore", *The New York Times*, 23 November 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Weitz, "Iran's Empowerment in Central Asia and the South Caucasus", *The CACI Analyst*, 19 October 2015, available at [www.cacianalyst.org](http://www.cacianalyst.org).

<sup>22</sup> Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci (eds.), *Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict* (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 2016).

## Turkey

Turkey has become a key player in the Middle Eastern politics. It enjoys good relations with the Russia Federation. The relationship between the two countries gained momentum after 2000. It has grown beyond commercial and political ties. Both recognise each other's spheres of political influence, which is crucial to regional stability.

Russia desires an active role in the Middle East. The relations between Moscow and Ankara allow Russia space to manoeuvre within the region and balance its relations with Iran. Russia expects Turkey to take a regional stance independent of its western allies. It wants Turkey to stop its opposition to the Assad regime. At the same time, it is cognisant of Turkish concerns about the large influx of Syrian refugees and the subsequent financial burden. Moreover, Moscow understands Turkish sensitivities with regards to the Kurdish separatists gaining strength as a result of turmoil in Syria.

The meltdown of state in Syria put Russia and Turkey on a collision course. The former's policy of strongly backing the Assad regime clashed with the latter's vociferous opposition to the ruling Alawite family.<sup>23</sup> Then, on 24 November 2015, Turkish air force shot down a Russian Su-24 over Syria-Turkey frontier region.<sup>24</sup> Moscow was incensed. Initially, Ankara remained adamant that the downed jet had violated its airspace, but later on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed remorse and extended the hand of reconciliation toward the Russian President Vladimir Putin<sup>25</sup>.

The relationship received a new stimulus after Erdogan survived a violent coup attempt by disgruntled elements within his military in July 2016. He accused Fethullah Gulen, a preacher who has been living in a self-imposed exile in the USA since 1999, of instigating the overthrow.<sup>26</sup> The episode

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<sup>23</sup> "Syria Crisis: Where Key Countries Stand", *BBC News*, 30 October 2015. Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23849587>.

<sup>24</sup> "Turkey's Downing of Russian Warplane-What We Know", *BBC News*, 1 December 2015. Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581>.

<sup>25</sup> "Kremlin Says Turkey Apologized for Shooting Down Russia Jet", *Reuters*, 27 June 2016. Visit at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-jet-idUSKCN0ZD1PR>.

<sup>26</sup> "Turkey's Failed Coup Attempt: All you Need to Know", *Al Jazeera*, 30 December 2016. Visit at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/12/turkey-failed-coup-attempt-161217032345594.html>.

created a wedge between Ankara and Washington, and the possibility of Russia and Turkey coming together.

Be that as it may, Russia abhors Turkish hegemony in the area and wants to contain its influence. Some analysts in Russia think that the current regime in Turkey is moving towards Ottomanization of some parts of Syria and Iraq in order to regain its lost glory. They also think that Turkey is actively aiding the Sunni majority in Syria to topple the Alawite dominated Ba'ath party.<sup>27</sup>

### **Jordan**

The Syrian tumult has brought Amman and Moscow together. Jordan straddles a perilous geography, which can potentially put the Hashemite monarchy at risk. It has absorbed a significant amount of Syrian refugees.<sup>28</sup> It has assiduously prevented any rebel activity from its territory. After Moscow's entry into the Syrian civil war to replenish Damascus' attempt at retaking its lost space, Jordan increased its interactions with the Russian security establishment.

King Abdullah has undertaken two visits to Moscow since the start of Russian military intervention in Syria, which signals the critical nature of this relationship.<sup>29</sup> The fact that Jordan admits Russian centrality to any solution in Syria speaks volumes about the diplomatic evolution that has taken place between Moscow and Amman. While keeping its closeness with the West, Jordan has joined the Astana peace process led by Russia in January 2017. The Jordanian policy of neutrality with regards to the regime in Damascus has been a major development.<sup>30</sup>

Another point that is worth mentioning is King Abdullah's exhortation to the West concerning the situation in Ukraine. In order to bring harmony in

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<sup>27</sup> "Turkey, Russia in War of Words over Syria", *Fox News*, 4 February 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Muhammad Ghazal, "Jordan Hosts 657,000 Registered Syrian Refugees", *The Jordan Times*, 21 March, 2017. See <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/jordan-hosts-657000-registered-syrian-refugees>.

<sup>29</sup> Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Jordan's King Abdullah to Discuss War on Syria Militants with Putin", 22 November 2015. Available from <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-jordan-putin-idUSKBN0TB0S420151122>. See also <https://kingabdullah.jo/en/news/king-holds-talks-russian-president-2>.

<sup>30</sup> "Why Jordan Shifting its Syria Strategy?", (25 January 2017), available at [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/02/Jordan-positions-syria-government-peace-talks-russia.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/02/Jordan-positions-syria-government-peace-talks-russia.html).

the fight against extremist forces in the region, he called for a compromise on the issue of Crimea.<sup>31</sup>

### **Iraq**

The Islamic State (IS) obliterated the Iraqi-Syrian frontier and pushed Iraqi security forces as far back as Baghdad. Government troops just melted away in the face of fundamentalist blitzkrieg.

Russia has been steadily enhancing its ties with Iraq since the US-led 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' in 2003. Not only commercial but Baghdad has also pursued security collaboration with Moscow, which manifested itself in Iraqi willingness to allow Russian military activity on its soil against IS.<sup>32</sup> Just weeks after the commencement of Russian armed engagement in Syria, Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi unambiguously 'welcomed Russian airstrikes in his country' on IS formations.<sup>33</sup> Soon Baghdad was declared as 'the headquarter for the new intelligence sharing pact between Russia, Iran and Iraq to fight ISIS.'<sup>34</sup>

The autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan region has proved to be a formidable counter to the IS onslaught. Various Kurdish factions have been engaged on Syrian and Iraqi territories. Nevertheless, there is a perception that in its quest to gain Kurdish goodwill (ostensibly to outfox the US), Russia might complicate the fight against the Islamic State.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Lally Weymouth, "King Abdullah: Compromise with Russia on Crimea to Get its Help in Syria", *The Washington Post*, 6 April 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Ahmed Rasheed and Saif Hameed, "Iraq Leans toward Russia in War on Islamic State", *Reuters*, 7 October 2015. See <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-russia-idUSKCNOS112120151007>.

<sup>33</sup> Loveday Morris, "Iraqi Prime Minister Says he Would 'Welcome' Russian Airstrikes in Iraq", *The Washington Post*, 1 October 2015. See [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraqi-prime-minister-says-he-would-welcome-russian-airstrikes/2015/10/01/4177cf3c-684b-11e5-8325-a42b5a459b1e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.ee33beceb4fb](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraqi-prime-minister-says-he-would-welcome-russian-airstrikes/2015/10/01/4177cf3c-684b-11e5-8325-a42b5a459b1e_story.html?utm_term=.ee33beceb4fb).

<sup>34</sup> Madeleine Moreau, "Kurdish Groups are Divided over Russian Presence in Syria and Iraq", *Global Risks Insight*, 15 October 2015, available at <http://globalriskinsights.com/2015/10/kurdish-groups-are-divided-over-russian-presence-in-syria-and-iraq/>.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

### Israel

The resumption of diplomatic ties between Moscow and Tel Aviv in 1991<sup>36</sup> opened new avenues of cooperation between the two countries. The presence of a sizeable Russian-speaking Jewish community in Israel only supplemented the blossoming relationship.

Naturally, Israel became concerned when Islamist rebel groups began to capture territory in neighbouring Syria. While it has not undertaken an elaborate role in the civil war, the Iran-Assad-Hezbollah nexus demands continuous vigilance. In addition, at this point Russia-Israel relationship becomes complicated. Tel Aviv expects Russia to keep Hezbollah and Iranian proxies away from advance weaponry. To press the message home, Israel has conducted air raids on Hezbollah installations well inside Syrian territory.<sup>37</sup> Both have a mechanism for intelligence sharing and military coordination that lessens the prospect of any diplomatic crisis as a result of an armed operation.<sup>38</sup>

### Palestine

Palestine being the birthplace of Christianity holds a unique place in Russian foreign policy. During the days of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin regarded the Palestinian struggle as the 'vanguard of Arab liberation movement'.<sup>39</sup> The PLO opened its offices in Moscow in the summer of 1974.<sup>40</sup> The attitude remained such until the elevation of Mikhail Gorbachev whose principle interests reduced the issue to the periphery. His policy of domestic reforms and restructuring left little space for diplomatic intermediating. The passing of the Soviet Union further distanced Moscow from the Middle East. The newly emerged Russian Federation sought closer ties with the West, which naturally demanded a foreign policy less hostile and more in congruence with Western capitals. The easing of Jewish emigration from Russia and their consequent

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<sup>36</sup> Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), 17.

<sup>37</sup> Luke Baker and Laila Bassam, "Israel Strikes Raise Stakes in Face-Off with Hezbollah", 2 May 2017, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-israel-hezbollah-analy-idUSKBN17Y20Q>.

<sup>38</sup> "Russia summons Israeli Envoy over Syria Air Strike", *The Jerusalem Post*, 17 March 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), 50.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

settlement in the occupied territories indicated a major shift in Moscow's policy concerning Palestinian statehood.<sup>41</sup>

The relationship changed the course when Vladimir Putin rose to the presidency. His multipolar outlook retrieved the issue of Palestinian rights to the surface, which was signaled during his visit to Palestine in January 2000 on the invitation of Yasser Arafat.<sup>42</sup>

In March 2002 in an address to the Arab League, Putin said that peace in the Holy Land was possible only by ending the occupation of Arab territories. In the same year when the Israeli army moved into Jenin to clear out terrorists from the camps, the Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov bluntly questioned the viability of Israeli actions. Also, the State Duma condemned the said action.<sup>43</sup>

The Syrian crisis has put the issue of Palestine on the back burner. Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen have become battlegrounds. The rest of the states in the region do not have the stomach to undertake an elaborate diplomatic venture. Their own seats of power are wobbling. Secondly, transition within the PLO and Hamas augur uncertainty. Although Russia has been the part of the Middle East Quartet, the altering dynamics in the area demand a whole new set of priorities.

### **Conclusion**

After the Arab Spring, both Syria and Iran became the focal points of Russia's Middle East policy. Russia does not support an overthrow of the status-quo. Rather it supports gradual and popular regime change short of a chaos. Russia does not like any extremist or Jihadi elements coming in to power in any of the Middle Eastern countries as that may have damaging effects on its southern flank. It is very sensitive to any such possibility; it is averse to any military intervention in the name of regime change in the Middle East and wants the regional countries to resolve their mutual differences through peaceful means. Russia is at the same time not in favour of any militant group or non-state actors trying to topple existing legitimate governments.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 73.

Russia supports a strong central government and this has been a hallmark of its foreign policy. Political set up in most of the Middle Eastern countries resemble Russia's style of governance and it is possible that the regional countries find a post-communist Russia more convenient for the promotion of better political and economic relations. Russia's soft power in the region and its determined military engagements in Syria may diminish US influence in countries, which are at present US allies.

Russia seeks an enhanced presence in the Middle East to improve its status in the world. It is the biggest gas exporter to Europe. An influence on other exporters would only increase Russian leverage over the continent. Its efforts to portray itself as representative of the Muslim world in general and the Arab world in particular are designed to serve Russian strategic interest in this part of the world. Russian involvement in the Syrian crisis and its active support to the Palestinian cause is reflective of Russian efforts to keep radical Islam away from its neighbourhood, besides being acknowledged a world power by the international community.<sup>44</sup> Russia's own Muslim population is also exposed to the militant and jihadi Islam taking roots in its surroundings. It, therefore, does not want its Muslim population to get inspired by this popular upsurge of violence and militancy and would like the militancy curbed and not promoted. It has been strongly denouncing the US and the European policies to promote violence and create disturbance in the Middle East. It has made it very clear to the Middle Eastern countries that it is interested in their stability, territorial integrity and prosperity.

However, the Shia-Sunni strife being promoted by the vested interest groups in the region may tarnish Russia's image as an honest broker as its support to the Assad regime in Damascus and its close collaboration with Iran might be taken as supportive of Shia regional interests. This might antagonise the Sunni majority states in the region. Therefore, Russia will have to tread very carefully lest it throws itself into a quagmire.

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<sup>44</sup> Maria Dubovikova, "Russia, the Fly on the Wall of Israel-Palestinian Conflict." *Al- Arabia*, 13 July 2014. (accessed on 27 October 2015). [www.english.alarabia.net/en/views/news/world/2014/07/13](http://www.english.alarabia.net/en/views/news/world/2014/07/13)