Prospects for EU-Russia Cooperation in the Middle East: A view from Moscow

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Since 2014, EU-Russia relations went through various stages, from enmity to confrontation to mutual fatigue. Next to Ukraine, the Middle East is a major bone of contention between Moscow, Brussels and EU member states. It is also a host of missed opportunities.

The war in Syria remains the most painful issue in this region. President Putin first announced that ISIS had been defeated on December 7, 2017[1] – the claim was reiterated by Defense Minister Shoigu just one year later on October 20, 2018.[2] 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. Meanwhile, the situation in the region remains precarious with potential crises on the horizon in Iraq, Lebanon, and Libya, as well as tensions over Iran and dynamic uncertainty about the Israeli-Palestinian settlement.

Russia has played a key role in the Syrian conflict. Consequently, it managed to create an image for itself of a strong, competent, and skillful player. Yet the limits of its constructive powers in the region are visible even under the current circumstances. The sooner the Russian leadership recognizes this the better for the preservation of Russia's own achievements. The stabilization 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 the most acute issues of the Middle East.

However, when Russian officials express support for a "responsible and independent" EU role in the security of the Middle East – as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov put it in his speech[3] at the Munich Security Conference in 2018 – they imply a policy course that is "desirable" from Moscow's perspective rather than "doable" from an EU perspective.

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[1] Jeff Daniels, "Putin boasts about 'defeated ISIS' in Syria as he discloses 'significant' troop withdrawal", CNBC, // https://www.cnbc.com/2017/12/11/putin-boasts-about-defeated-isis-in-syria-discloses-troop-withdrawal.html, (December 11, 2017).

[2] Анатолий Макаров, Шойгу: при поддержке ВКС РФ за три года в Сирии полностью уничтожен ИГИЛ, Звезда [Anatoly Makarov, "Shoigu: with the support of the Russian Aerospace Forces, ISIS was completely destroyed in Syria in three years", Zvezda], // https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/201810200705-20k2.htm, (October 20, 2018).

[3] Выступление Сергея Лаврова на Мюнхенской Конференции по безопасности, [Sergei Lavrov's speech at the Munich Security Conference], // https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfuUENJOC7k, (February 17, 2018).

Appearance rather than substance: how Moscow sees the EU in the Middle East

The political uprisings across the Middle East that swept away decades-old authoritarian regimes were tremendously significant for Europe, given the geographical proximity, density of trade, political, security and economic ties between Europe and the MENA region.

The Russian leadership expressed skepticism that the Arab Spring would unleash the forces of democracy in the Middle East. Moreover, the Kremlin directly associated the Arab Spring with the so-called "color revolutions" and ascribed the uprisings to the "deeds of Western governments". Some Russian experts and academics, however, had a more nuanced interpretation of the events,[4] suggesting the protests were largely grassroots and triggered by local grievances and displeasure with national governments. Most Russian observers, however, shared a grim assessment of the long-term implications of the "Arab Awakening" for MENA, as well as for adjacent regions, including Russia and Europe.

Moscow operated on the assumption that, as repressive as the Arab regimes were, they still kept things under control. When they started crumbling, Russia braced itself for the worst-case scenario. After NATO 's intervention in Libya and the Fall of the Gadhafi regime, Russia's original die-hard skepticism about the direction of the developments had Moscow clinging to "the devils it knew" even tighter. The Russian position on President Assad is a case in point. Regardless of how brutal Assad's crackdown on the protesters turned out to be, he was still perceived to be the better of two (or any other number of) evils that Syria would have faced if he had fallen. Nonetheless, experts in Moscow still debate about what Russia's approach to Assad would have been had Gadhafi not died as a result of the Libyan crisis, and if Moscow could have been more flexible on Assad's "peaceful departure". In any case, President Assad's fate has been at the core of disagreements between Russia and the West ever since.

Libya was indeed a catalyst for Russia's perception of both Europe's ability to handle big security crises at its shores and the potential for cooperation between Europe and Moscow (see EUREN Brief no. 13 by Andrea Dessì). The Russian leadership saw that while the war in Syria was raging, a cautious pan-European approach was sidelined by more assertive national policies, predominantly by France and Britain.

From the Russian perspective, the lack of a sound diplomatic solution to the crisis in Syria threatened to turn the country into a Libya-styled disaster. In addition, Russia thought the EU didn't have the initiative on Syria and its own policy was – and to a degree remains – largely dependent on what Moscow and Washington were doing.

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, Brussels policy-makers believed the best Europe could do was to help the Iraqi government in its war on terror. Moscow was – and remains – inclined to believe that the Europeans followed the Americans in prioritizing the weakening of the Syrian regime rather than hurdling ISIS territorial expansion in Syria.

When some European governments joined forces with the United States 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, Moscow argued that the "international coalition" was a mere euphemism for "US forces" that were established for the purpose of the legitimization of the American military presence in Syria.

All of this is indicative of the first and, arguably, the biggest obstacle for genuine cooperation between Russia and the EU, at least as Moscow sees it: the issue of EU agency in international affairs, both in general and in the Middle East in particular. That is the ability of the EU to take independent or "sovereign", as Russia calls it, decisions on foreign policy matters of importance to Europe regardless of the will of the United States. Moreover, the issue relates not only to the EU as a whole but also to some key EU member states whom Moscow considers dependent on Washington to a point where it is detrimental to their interests.

A Macron moment?

For a brief moment, from May 2017 to January 2018, the election of President Emmanuel Macron seemed to change this perception. The young French leader sought to be the European voice in the Middle East. Moreover, Paris was among the few countries to have

[4] Maxim A. Suchkov, "Russia and the Arab Spring: Changing Narratives and Implications for Regional Policies", The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Research Paper, // https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/Russia_and_the_Arab_Spring_Changing_Narratives_and_Implications_for_Regional_Policies.pdf, (December 2018).

considerable experience in the Middle East, a clearly formulated position on Syria and the willingness to engage different parties on the Iranian dossier. In the following months, Macron achieved some progress on other policy tracks when Paris hosted the intra-Libyan talks in July 2017[5] and helped settle the unrest in Lebanon in November 2017.[6]

Moscow believed that Paris was acting upon the assumption that Russia was eager to end its isolation from the West. However, by the time Macron took office in May 2017, Moscow had invested material resources and political capital in the region and was unwilling to trade it all in for some symbolic "breakout from isolation". After all, the most influential Middle East leaders now preferred to travel to Moscow (and Sochi), not Paris or Brussels. Russian policy-makers had moved beyond the idea of "breaking isolation". Moreover, some of Macron's initiatives and positions on Syria, such as Assad's use of chemical weapons, contradicted the Russian position and were seen as potentially jeopardizing Russia's achievements.

This was particularly true for the French idea to create the "small group" in April 2018, which comprised Britain, Germany, Jordan, the United States and Saudi Arabia. Moscow's reaction was similar to European criticism of the Astana group. Russia considered the "small group" to be an initiative that sought to rival Astana and believed it would eventually undermine the legitimacy of the Geneva venue.

France's pursuit of engagement with the United States over the Syrian dossier reinforced Russia's view that neither the EU nor its individual member states were truly independent or powerful in their decision-making on the Middle East, which disincentivized Moscow from seeking genuine cooperation with Europe on regional issues. As one senior Russian diplomat put it in the fall of 2016: "Just look at how they are voting in the UN Security Council – this will give you a clear-eyed view on how different French policies really are from those of the Americans and the British". This statement reflected the general mood in Moscow towards the French initiatives at the time. Still, Moscow accepted invitations to discuss most of the French proposals. It also modestly expected that some of this would help to mend bilateral ties.

What Moscow overlooks about the EU in the Middle East

It is often argued in Moscow that the Europeans do not fully realize the scope and nature of the challenges that stem from the Middle East. Russia also believes that the lack of a positive European agenda in the Middle East is the reason why European nations struggle with the issue of "rising Islam", be it the increasing number of Muslim communities in Europe or home-grown radical Islamists. Finally, Moscow criticizes the EU for not having a common position, let alone a common understanding of Middle Eastern problems – as well as for not being prepared to commit resources adequate to the issues at stake. In fact, when it comes to military means, these resources are non-existent outside of NATO.

In reality, however, many European states do have a centuries-long record of engagement with different states in the MENA region, especially in North Africa and the Levante. Historical experience dating back to the colonial era, famous schools of oriental studies, NGOs and policy institutions active in the region provide considerable expertise to European policy makers.

Most importantly, there's an undeniable call for a constructive European presence in Middle Eastern societies. The EU's soft power for the Middle East is arguably more attractive than Russia's soft power or the soft power of individual member states that are still perceived with suspicion, partly due to their colonial past. A united and, as Moscow calls it, "sovereign" EU could indeed achieve a lot more in terms of engagement with societies and conflict mediation.

Cooperation or distrust?

Ideally, Russia and the EU could jointly work on at least three areas with regard to the Middle East: counter-terrorism, forced displacement and irregular migration, and stabilization. For the time being, however, the obstacles to any idea of cooperation seem to be insurmountable.

Syria arguably stands out as the main apple of discord. The future of President Assad remains the key disagreement between Moscow and Brussels. In fact, the more the parties involved discuss the country's political future, the more the figure of Bashar al-Assad seems to be

[5] Patrick Wintour and Chris Stephen, "Libyan rival leaders agree to ceasefire after Macron-hosted talks", The Guardian, // https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/25/france-raises-hopes-of-deal-between-libyan-rival-factions, (July 25, 2018).

[6] "Hariri In Paris As France Tries To Mediate Crisis", RFE/RL, // https://www.rferl.org/a/lebanon-hariri-paris-saudi-arabia/28861176.html, (November 18, 2017).

[7] "Western powers and allies start new Syrian initiative in Paris", Qantara.de, // https://en.qantara.de/content/western-powers-and-allies-start-new-syrian-initiative-in-paris, (April 24, 2018).

[8] Author's interview with a senior Russian diplomat, Moscow, (November 2018).

divisive, both inside and outside Syria. The two other points of divergence that are closely associated with this are economic reconstruction and the return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Russia is unable to pursue economic reconstruction in war-torn Syria without EU funding, or at least 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 virtually what would happen if Assad's government 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 ones, are put in place. From a European perspective, therefore, Russia is "putting the carriage before the horse".[9]

The reforms of Syria's constitution and security apparatus are even bigger challenges looming on the horizon for Russia and the EU. Iran's role is significant in this sector and Moscow is willing to engage with Tehran, while seeking to ease the Iranian grip on some areas of future Syrian security. It seems unlikely, however, that the Europeans, let alone the Americans, would easily allow the two countries to decide this pivotal issue between themselves.

Moreover, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear programme, which was once a promising platform for dialogue between the Russians and the Europeans, is now experiencing problems that threaten its future. After the US withdrawal from the agreement, the EU found itself (from Moscow's point of view) caught between the Scylla of the Trump administration's pressure over its support for the deal and the Charybdis of Iran's intention to resume its nuclear program following complaints about its failure to deliver on commitments to support the Iranian economy. Russia benefits from being perceived as a more reliable partner than the West in Teheran. However, there is little Moscow can – and, frankly, will – do to lift Iran out of its economic problems. As Tehran is likely to return to the pre-deal parameters of its nuclear program and political rhetoric, Russia and the EU will increasingly find themselves in opposing camps.

Following the American killing of General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRCG's Quds Force and one of the pillars of the Iranian regime, Tehran decided to roll back its commitments under the JCPOA. This doesn't meant Iran abandons the deal altogether or will immediately jump to the production of nuclear arms. On the contrary, Iran is evidently still open to the talks with Europeans and expects them to provide mechanisms for sanctions' relief. This means, however, that the ball is in the European court. The EU has to decide about how they react to the Iranian decision and possible US pressure over Washington's own confrontation with Iran. In the meantime, Russia will most likely sit back and wait to pick up potential low hanging political fruit.

One area for potential cooperation between Russia and the EU could be the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. As a member of the Middle Eastern Quartet on the settlement of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the EU has expressed interest in mediation between the Israelis and Palestinians. Given President Donald Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel, the demand for alternative negotiators is on the rise. This could, in theory, pave the way for more joint efforts by Russia and the EU. In reality, however, neither party shows any appetite to touch this "hot potato", nor do they want to burn political capital by failing in the Israeli-Palestinian mediation.

As a result, while many threats and challenges from the Middle East objectively call for Russia and the EU to address them jointly, divergencies 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 materialize.

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[9] Author's interview with a senior diplomat from an EU country, Moscow, (September 2019).