

## *Chapter 8*

# **Russian and Western Engagement in the Broader Middle East**

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There are many problems in the greater Middle East that would be in the common interest of the United States, its EU/NATO partners, and Russia to work on together in order to resolve, or at least contain. These problems, many of which are overlapping, include: the challenge of Islamic State (IS), al-Qaeda, and other jihadist groups; the war in Syria; the multi-faceted problems posed by Turkey and by Iran; the conflicts in Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan; and, of course, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Whether America, Europe, and Russia can work together on these issues, however, is not at all clear given not just the quantity and severity of the problems facing the greater Middle East, but also the difficult state of Russian-Western relations, rising populism within the West, and the election of Donald Trump—a president whose foreign policy priorities appeared at first to be very different from those of previous U.S. presidents. On the other hand, the stated willingness of Trump and Putin to improve U.S.-Russian relations and work together on common problems raised the possibility that the Middle East is a realm where they could cooperate. Trump, as well as Putin, called for Moscow and Washington to work together against IS in Syria in particular. Further, if such Russian-American cooperation came about, it is difficult to imagine that America's EU/NATO partners would not support it. However, the hopes for improved Russian-American relations present at the beginning of the Trump administration seem to have already met the same negative fate as similar hopes at the beginning of the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations.

Yet even if Russian-Western relations remain poor and their interests largely diverge, there may be some instances in which they converge—including in the Middle East. In looking at Russian-Western engagement in the broader Middle East, then, both optimistic and pessimistic scenarios regarding how the United States, EU/NATO, and Russia might or might not cooperate on the many conflicts and problems of the region must be looked at since both are plausible. Something must first be said, though,

about what the spectrum of possibilities from optimistic to pessimistic might be.

The most optimistic scenario is one in which all three sides of the triangle—the United States, the EU/NATO partners, and Russia—work together towards common goals. There are also several combinations of two out of these three working together: America and its EU/NATO partners but not Russia; America and Russia but not the EU/NATO partners; and the EU/NATO partners and Russia but not America. The first of these three would probably be an adversarial scenario (West vs. Russia), whereas the other two might occur if either America or the EU/NATO partners chose not to be actively involved in dealing with one or more of the greater Middle East's problems, and let the other take the lead in working with Russia. There is also the possibility of little or no coordination among the U.S., EU/NATO partners, and Russia in the Middle East, thus maximizing the prospects that they would work at cross-purposes. The most pessimistic scenario, from a Western perspective, is one in which the U.S. and EU/NATO both prove unwilling or unable to be actively involved in much of the Middle East, and so leave Russia as the most assertive great power in the region. With this in mind, an assessment will now be made of the prospects for Western and Russian engagement on various issues affecting the greater Middle East.

### **Islamic State (IS), Al-Qaeda, and Other Jihadist Groups**

Since Sunni jihadists are a common threat to America, Europe, and Russia (as well as all the states of the region); joint cooperation against them is clearly a common interest. Putin has called for working with “Western partners” (among others) against this common threat in Syria in particular. Trump has called for working with Russia in Syria against IS as well. Indeed, considering that Sunni jihadists are such a common threat, it might not seem that the United States, EU/NATO partners, and Russia would actually need to cooperate on too much else in order to see the value in working together on this issue.

Yet even if, under the best of circumstances, all three recognized the benefit of working together against IS and al-Qaeda, this will be difficult. For if and when IS and al-Qaeda could be eliminated or seriously weakened in various places, the West and Russia (as well as their various Middle Eastern partners) will worry about who this will benefit. In Syria, for example, the West will not be happy if the elimination of IS and al-Qaeda

merely serves to strengthen the Assad regime. Reports abound that while Moscow calls for joint action against IS, it is mainly targeting other opposition groups opposed to Assad. This suggests that Russia views the latter as more threatening. Moscow may also want to eliminate Assad's non-IS opposition in order to force the West to choose between Assad and IS in anticipation that it would prefer the former. Similar concerns will arise elsewhere: if IS is defeated in Iraq, will this mainly benefit Iran through strengthening its Arab Shi'a allies in Baghdad, or will it enable Baghdad to be less dependent on Tehran? Or will the main beneficiary be Iraqi Kurds, who (if they are regarded as America's allies) will be seen by others as benefiting the United States?

Thus, even if the desire for joint cooperation between the West and Russia against IS (as well as al-Qaeda and other Sunni jihadist threats) is great, it may not be able to advance very far unless they can also agree on a common approach to the greater Middle East as a whole. For if they cannot do so, and especially if their actions against IS and similar groups are not coordinated, then each will fear that the other's actions against the jihadists are designed to harm its and its allies interests.

## **Syria**

Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring rebellion in Syria in 2011, Russia and the West have differed sharply on Syria. Moscow (along with Tehran) has firmly backed the Assad regime, while America and certain European states have called for Assad to step down. The Obama Administration provided some (largely ineffective) support to the "moderate" Syrian opposition, but some of its allies—Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—have provided a much greater degree of support to various Syrian rebel groups. As a result of the war in Syria, refugees have fled in massive numbers not just to neighboring states, but also to Europe where there has been an anti-immigrant political backlash against them.

The Obama Administration argument was that Assad should step down because his brutal rule contributed to the rise of jihadist opposition against it. Moscow's argument, by contrast, has been that while Assad may be bad, his most likely replacement, the jihadists, would be worse, and so the West should join Russia in supporting Assad. The Trump Administration seemed to be persuaded by this logic (and European governments do not now seem to oppose it even if they do not fully embrace it), but the U.S. military strike on a Syrian air base in response to Assad's use of chemical weapons

against his opponents and civilians in April 2017 showed that there are limits to how much Trump accepts Putin's logic about Assad.

Yet if all Trump's one bombing raid on Syria does is pressure Russia into halting Assad's use of chemical but not conventional weapons, and if the U.S. along with the EU/NATO partners effectively acquiesce to the Russian viewpoint that Assad is the least worst viable option in Syria, then the prospects for Russian-Western cooperation on Syria may still remain despite the rise in Russian-American tension as a result of this incident. The trouble, though, is that while Russia and Iran may have succeeded in preventing Assad from being overthrown and even clawing back important territory that he had lost, they do not seem capable of ending internal resistance—which may well continue to receive external support from some governments in the region. Even Moscow recognizes that the Assad regime needs to accommodate at least some part of the opposition, and so is sponsoring peace talks between the regime and some rebel groups in Astana. However, it is not clear whether Iran will go along with this process or whether it will help the Assad regime resist any Russian pressure to make concessions it does not want to make. In other words, even if they act in concert, Russia and the West may be unable to persuade or cajole either the internal parties to the Syrian conflict or their regional supporters to agree to a settlement. The lack of Russian-Western cooperation would only exacerbate this problem.

## Turkey

Turkey's relations with America began to deteriorate at the time of the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq in 2003. One of Ankara's concerns was that American actions enabling the Kurds of northern Iraq to govern themselves would fan Kurdish secessionism inside Turkey as well. While Ankara now has reasonably good working relations with the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq, the Turkish government has become angry with the United States over several issues, including American support for the anti-IS Syrian Kurdish forces (which Ankara views as linked to Kurdish separatists inside Turkey), Obama Administration criticism of Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian policies, and Obama's refusal to extradite Fethullah Gulen, the Turkish oppositionist residing in the United States whom Erdogan blames for the July 2016 coup attempt against him (it is not yet clear if Trump will reverse this policy). European relations with Turkey have also turned sour over the lack of progress in negotiations on Turkey's

accession to the EU, European criticism of Turkey's human rights record, and acrimony over the Syrian refugee issue. Even Turkey's continued willingness to remain part of the NATO alliance is uncertain.

Putin courted Erdogan for years, but this did not prevent their relations turning sour when Turkish forces shot down a Russian military aircraft in the vicinity of the Turkish-Syrian border. Since mid-2016, though, Russian-Turkish relations revived after Erdogan apologized for the incident and Putin was much quicker than Western leaders to express support for Erdogan at the time of the July 2016 coup attempt. Instead of being at loggerheads, Turkey and Russia are now coordinating some of their actions in Syria. But the potential for Turkish-Russian discord remains, especially since Moscow has also been supportive of Syria's Kurdish opposition (though it has downplayed this since the Moscow-Ankara rapprochement in mid-2016) and because they take different sides in the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which could well revive.

Russian-Western cooperation would reduce the opportunity for Turkey to play the two sides against each other, while the lack of such cooperation gives Ankara the opportunity to at least threaten to distance itself from the West and move closer toward Moscow. The Trump Administration placing less emphasis than the Obama Administration on democracy and human rights in other nations may not only serve to improve U.S. ties with Russia, but also with Turkey. While concerned about human rights in Turkey, European states may now be more concerned about preserving Turkey's cooperation in stemming the refugee flow from Syria to Europe. If Russian-Western relations deteriorate, the West may actually be better off if Russian-Turkish relations are good than if they become hostile again to the point of raising the question whether NATO might be called upon to defend Turkey against Russia.

## **Iran**

The Obama Administration's hopes that achieving a nuclear accord with Iran would lead to a broader Iranian-American rapprochement as well as more moderate Iranian behavior in general were not fulfilled. Iran is heavily engaged in supporting the Assad regime in Syria. America's allies in Israel and most of the Gulf Cooperation Council states continue to see Iran as an existential threat. During the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, candidate Donald Trump regularly denounced the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (or JCPOA, as the Iranian nuclear accord is usu-

ally referred to) as being a “bad deal” which he would “tear up.” But America’s EU/NATO partners, Russia, and many other governments all support the JCPOA. Any effort by the Trump Administration to dismantle the Iranian nuclear accord would put the U.S. at odds with its EU/NATO partners, Russia, and many other states on this issue. There have even been warnings from knowledgeable voices in Israel and the GCC states about how dismantling the JCPOA could well result in Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.

Yet after comparing the costs and benefits of retaining vs. abandoning the JCPOA, the Trump Administration now appears to agree with the EU/NATO allies, Russia, and others that retaining it is the better option for ensuring that Iran does not acquire nuclear weapons. One of the costs of not adopting this approach, the Trump Administration may understand, is that this would put increased strains on U.S. ties with its EU/NATO partners—and that this is something that Russia could be expected to exploit.

Yet even if America, Europe, and Russia all work together in upholding the JCPOA, this still leaves the question of whether a common approach can be achieved regarding Iran’s regional behavior, which includes involvement in conflict situations as well as hostile relations with Israel and most GCC states. America, Europe, and Russia acting in concert might be able to persuade Iran on the one hand and the GCC and Israel on the other to ratchet down their hostility, if not actually normalize relations. Even under the best of circumstances, however, this will not be easy. Still, it should be recognized that much of Israeli and GCC opposition to the Obama Administration’s efforts to achieve an Iranian nuclear accord were motivated by fears that this would (as Obama hoped) lead to improved Iranian-American ties, and that this would further lead to a reduced American commitment to Israel and the GCC. The Trump Administration appears to be in a better position to allay such fears while at the same time upholding the JCPOA.

On the other hand, a lack of cooperation among America, Europe, and Russia will contribute to continued Iranian-Israeli as well as Iranian-GCC hostility. The Trump Administration would definitely express strong support for Israel and the GCC. Russia would continue with its current policy of cooperating with Iran, but also pursuing good relations with Israel and the GCC. Some European states (notably Britain and France) would pursue security relations with the GCC, but most EU/NATO partners would probably focus on promoting their economic ties with all states of the

region. While none of these outside parties would encourage either Iranian-Israeli or Iranian-GCC hostility, their lack of effort to ameliorate these relationships increases the probability of a crisis occurring that negatively affects them all.

### **Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan**

The ongoing conflicts in these four countries are different from each other in many ways, but they have two common features: 1) governmental authority has not been, and does not seem likely to be, secured throughout each of them due to severe internal divisions; and 2) the U.S., EU/NATO partners, and Russia seek to avoid becoming heavily involved militarily in any of them even (indeed, especially) if they had been so in the past.

The West and Russia would prefer to see governmental authority re-established in each of them. At least in Iraq and Afghanistan there are governments that have authority in some parts of the country. In Libya and Yemen, however, the internationally recognized governments are extremely weak.

Cooperation among the United States, EU/NATO partners, and Russia on these regional conflicts could help focus efforts on containing and even reducing the jihadist elements operating in each of them as well as the search for federal political solutions that seek to accommodate ethnic, sectarian, or just tribal differences within them. In Iraq, this might mean seeking a solution that recognizes the Shi'a-dominated government, but also accommodates both the Kurdish Regional Government as well as a similar, non-jihadist, Sunni Arab regional government in the western part of the country. In Afghanistan, some sort of federal solution recognizing Pushtun control of the south and non-Pushtun control over other parts of the country could be explored. In Libya, this would mean building autonomous regional governments in the west (Tripolitania) and the east (Cyrenaica) under the umbrella of a unified whole. In Yemen, groups in various parts of the country would need to be accommodated, including the Houthis in the north, non-Houthi northerners, southerners in Aden and surrounding areas, and perhaps Hadhramis and others in the far eastern section of the country.

Because none of them wishes to become over-committed in any of these four countries, even a cooperative approach on the part of the United States, EU/NATO partners, and Russia may have difficulty in achieving

much where local and regional actors are determined to fight. Their working together, though, could help promote conflict resolution efforts if and when local and regional actors become more amenable to them (as can happen if a conflict goes on long enough to convince all participants that none can actually win militarily). If the West and Russia work at cross purposes, though, local and regional rivals will be encouraged to seek support from rival external powers.

### **The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

It is difficult to see how this conflict, which has defied all previous attempts to end it, can be resolved under current circumstances even if the West and Russia cooperate on this. American support for Israel, and the lack of any substantial external support for the Palestinians, means that Israel cannot be forced to make concessions to the Palestinians. And the Netanyahu government has demonstrated that it will not be persuaded to do so. Still, the problem will not go away either. And with the Palestinian population growing relatively faster than the Jewish population, the continued lack of an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement will mean continued Israeli suppression of Palestinian nationalism that will be costly for both the Israeli and the Palestinian communities.

Trump administration figures have expressed confidence that they can succeed where others have failed in bringing about a solution to this long-running conflict. But if Trump goes through with his campaign pledge to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem (which the U.S. as well as other countries have avoided doing up to now in order not to offend Arabs and Muslims generally), then the Palestinians are not going to see Washington as a reliable mediator. Interestingly, Russia seems to have suggested a compromise solution on this issue by recognizing West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Neither Russia nor the EU, though, appears willing to take up the thankless task of attempting to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. The continuation of the current state of relations between Israel and the Palestinians is the most likely scenario whether the U.S., its EU/NATO partners, and Russia cooperate with one another or not.



## **Concluding Thoughts**

The lack of cooperation between Russia and the West will only serve to exacerbate the ongoing problems of the Middle East. Yet even if the United States, its EU/NATO partners, and Russia can cooperate with one another, it will still be difficult for them to ameliorate any, much less most or all, of this fractious region's problems. And despite the common interests they may appear to have in cooperating in the Middle East, significant differences between them elsewhere (whether over Ukraine, the Baltics, or Russian interference in Western elections) may prevent the West and Russia from working together in the Middle East. The recent deterioration in the Trump-Putin relationship, though, does not bode well for this possibility. But even if there were good personal relations between Putin on the one hand and Trump as well as various European leaders on the other, this would not necessarily increase the prospects for conflict resolution in the Middle East. Indeed, the sheer difficulty of ameliorating any of the Middle East's many problems might only serve to undermine the initial hopes that Putin and Trump may initially have for cooperating with each other.

On the other hand, if Western policymakers can convey to Moscow that they are willing to work with Russia on common American/European/Western interests in the Middle East despite differences elsewhere, there may be some hope not only for achieving some of their common aims in the Middle East, but that working together to achieve them in this region could serve as an example for Russian-Western cooperation elsewhere.

