

Russia Rising: Putin's Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa

Edited by Dimitar Bechev, Nicu Popescu, and Stanislav Secrieru
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Russia's return to Middle East and North Africa has become more evident since it intervened in Syria in 2015 at the request of Bashar al-Assad. Debates regarding Moscow's attitude have become popular amongst academics and policy analysts. What is Russia trying to achieve in the Middle East? Is Russia's policy in the region sustainable or limited? What is the context of Russia's Middle East and North Africa policy? Consequently, the book *Russia Rising: Putin's Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Dimitar Bechev, Nicu Popescu, and Stanislav Secrieru, aims to contribute to and fill the gaps in the above-mentioned discussions regarding Russian policy in Middle East and North Africa.

The structure of the book is divided into three parts. The first section provides a general overview of Russia's policy towards the Middle East and North Africa region, including a comparison with the Soviet Union's (chapter 2) and Vladimir Putin's Russia (chapter 3) policies in the region and their general motives. Regarding their role in the region, both the Soviet Union and Russia focused more on relations based on realpolitik rather than values or ideology. This assumption is more applicable and conducive to more flexible action, especially in Russia today. A reader may recall the 19th-century quote by former German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck: "Politics is the art of the



possible." Indeed, the basis for the relationship has not been unilateral to Russia. Instead, mutual interests with regional actors have been crucial in creating the possibility that pragmatism and interest-based policies represent. On the other hand, those can only be achieved if the means fit the end. However, challenges such as inadequate economic sustainability also limit policy implementation in the Middle East and North Africa region, which can lead to an overstretch problem.

Having established a holistic picture, the deduction method was applied from the general framework of Russian policy in the region as a whole to the more specific details. With a state-centered unit of analysis, the book actually tests the main argument in thematic policies (part 2) and then in bilateral relations with specific regional actors (part 3). In the second part, the thematic areas of interest were the military (with a focus on the Russian military presence in Syria), the usage of specific propaganda in the region, arms exports, and energy diplomacy are explained.

In the third part, the bilateral relations between Moscow and the respective regional actors such as Iran, Türkiye, Egypt, Israel, and Gulf countries have been examined. In every bilateral relationship, the common direction shaping relations is based on shared interests. Nevertheless, the issues (discussed in part 2)

have also been tested in specific bilateral relations. Energy diplomacy (such as the nuclear energy deals), arms exports (which also allow some Middle East and North Africa states to diversify their strategic dependence), common security challenges such as the issue of radicalism, economic and geopolitical considerations (including Russia's foothold in Syria) have provided a basis for the realization of common but limited interests. For Russia, this active policy and its 'return' to the region is aimed at and means recognition as an indispensable world power. With bargaining chips in Middle East and North Africa, Russia can project its limited power more effectively in particular issues while advancing its economic and security interests in the region. This argument is also valid for the Middle East and North Africa states in diversified and multiple sectors.

The book focuses more on analysis and practice than on theory. Writers generally treat states as *black boxes* with regards to their analysis. On the other hand, many of the authors have backgrounds in research centers as well as think tanks, and some are academics specializing in the issues covered in the specific chapters. Generally, the data was collected from materials such as prestigious newspapers and magazines, reports, and official statements. As this was a new topic, scholarly articles and books have been less extensive. However, chapter 9, written by Julien Barnes-Dacey, may be of interest to the reader, as it is based on data collected from diplomats and officials of various states. Some analyses would be better if more care was taken in the choice of words. For example, in chapter 3 (on p. 21), written by Dmitri Trenin, the Middle East and North Africa region is defined as "an extremely volatile region." It is true that the region is not stable and faces many threats. However, characterizing the region

as "extremely" volatile is an exaggeration and may lead to a false consciousness of the unfair representation of the region.

On the other hand, Trenin's conceptualization of the "situational alliance" in defining relations and engagement between Russia and some states, including Türkiye, may attract the interest of some readers. The adjective "situational" is a good description of the pragmatic policymaking that is demonstrated by the non-institutionalized cooperation in various issues. In addition to this, if this non-institutionalized and pragmatic cooperation is better understood, the *axis shift* debates in Türkiye will also lose their impact, as it will be understood that Turkish institutionalization (in terms of security) is an integral part of NATO, whereas with Russia it is situational and not institutionalized. In fact, the book also makes it possible to understand some determinants of Turkish-Russian relations when a comprehensive analysis has been made together with Russia's bilateral relations with other states mentioned in the book.

Overall, the book under review provided fruitful discussions thanks to distinguished experts. It is helpful for policymakers and analysts to understand Russian policy in the Middle East and North Africa region and provides a basic background for academics on the given topic. In addition, mentioning the Soviet Union's Middle East and North Africa policy has also given the reader a general insight into whether there is continuity or change in the Russian Federation's policies in Middle East and North Africa apart from the Soviet Union. On the other hand, it would have been nice to devote a subchapter to the relations with Libya in the chapter "The "Comrades" in the Maghreb" by Dalia Ghanem, since Libya is discussed in the context of energy relations, arm exports and re-

lations with various countries (e.g., Türkiye and Egypt), but not so much separately. It would have been a much better contribution to the literature on this subject. It would also be interesting in the second part to include the Sputnik vaccine diplomacy against novel coronavirus disease in Middle East and

North Africa. However, it is not included in the book, which has been heavily promoted by the Russian government to attempt for gaining prestige in international politics. Indeed, it would have also been interesting to see whether Moscow's vaccine diplomacy was successful or not.

The Russian Military Intervention in Syria

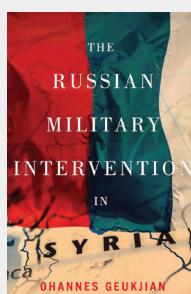
By Ohannes Geukjian

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The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, saw its complexities intensify as various states' interests converged, culminating in Russia's military intervention in 2015. The book intricately explores this event alongside other significant geopolitical shifts, suggesting that Russia's actions were a response to what it perceived as a series of Western oversights. Key incidents highlighted include interventions in Serbia and Kosovo without UN Security Council approval, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq without Putin's consultation, and the integration of Baltic countries into Western blocs, coupled with NATO's expansionist policies. These developments are depicted as being dismissive of Russia's security interests, thus prompting its military interventions in Crimea in 2014 and Syria in 2015. Geukjian's analysis in the book seeks to unravel the complex motivations behind Russia's assertive foreign policy maneuvers during these pivotal moments.

Many books try to explain the actions of Russia in Ukraine and Syria. As stated in



the introduction, what makes this book different is that it provides a detailed analysis of the causes and objectives of Russia's actions in the former Soviet Republics and the Middle East (p. 1). In his book, the author highlights the relationship between status inconsistency and conflict (p. 1). In addition, the book is particularly different in that it examines how Russia has used its membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to make status claims and lead international discussions in Syria and the Middle East. Furthermore, the book differs since it employs status theories taken from social psychology and social anthropology by International Relations "to explain and analyze Russia's seemingly irrational and unpredictable behavior" (p. 13). The book includes examples of how Russia used its veto power in the UNSC to avoid military intervention in Syria. In this direction, between 2011 and 2015, Russia sought peaceful resolutions to the conflicts in Syria. However, because the West and the U.S. do not consider Russia's interests, Russia launched a military intervention in Syria