

The Strategic Roots of Russian Expansionism in the Middle East

Reza Parchizadeh

Abstract

Russian expansionism in the Middle East follows a systematic approach to the region that is predicated on a profound understanding of the geopolitical, cultural, and religious landscape of the Middle East along the lines of the historical Russian strategic imperatives. For the time being, Russia's aim is to supplant the United States as the main political power in the Middle East. However, in the long run, the ultimate Russian goal is to dominate the world as the sole global superpower. My argument is that although Russia's fortunes have ebbed and flowed throughout modern history, what the Russian political establishment has demonstrated in regard to ideological/territorial expansionism, from the Tsarist Empire to the USSR to the Russian Federation, is strategic continuity. As such, in this article I am going to conduct a strategic survey of the Russian expansionism in the Middle East throughout modern history and then warn of the impending dangers of unchecked Russian expansionism for contemporary US and Middle East security and for the future of global democracy and liberal world order.

Keywords: Aleksandr Dugin, Eurasianism, geopolitics, Halford John Mackinder, Middle East, Russian expansionism, Vladimir Putin

Dr. Reza Parchizadeh – Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP);
r.parchizadeh@live.iup.edu

Introduction

Russia is no stranger to the Middle East, and Russian expansionism in that region of the world is by no means a new phenomenon. In fact, contrary to the popular belief in Western analyst circles, the recent trend of Russian interventionism in the Middle East is not just some sort of crude, random, opportunistic, brute-force, and “strategy-less” intervention. Rather, it follows a methodical and systematic approach to the region that is predicated on a profound understanding of the geopolitical, cultural, and religious landscape of the Middle East along the lines of the historical Russian strategic imperatives. Although Russians were mired in the complications of the collapse of the Communist Bloc during the 1990s, since the beginning of the new millennium they have demonstrated their resolve to resume the previous trend of expansionism, pursued first by the Tsarist Empire and then the Soviet Union. In hindsight, it can be seen that the Russian intervention in the Caucasus and the Black Sea basin – and assessing the West’s response – was only a warm-up exercise towards that goal; and now the Middle East is increasingly perceived by Russia as a permanent zone of influence. As such, although Russia’s fortunes have ebbed and flowed throughout modern history, what the Russian political establishment has demonstrated in regard to ideological/territorial expansionism, from the Tsarist Empire to the USSR to the Russian Federation, is strategic continuity.

In fact, the fundamental assumptions of the Russian state theorist¹ Aleksandr Dugin’s so-called “Fourth Political Theory,” where he treats geopolitical expansionism as a Russian “Manifest Destiny,”² and pseudo-mystically philosophizes about the “Sacred Space,” the “Spiritual Mission of the State,” and the inevitability of a unified “Eurasia” led by Russia,³ represent only a fashionable version of the centuries-old Tsarist and Communist imperialist discourse that has been cast in quasi-Mackinderian terminology. Sir Halford John Mackinder (1861–1947), an innovative British geopolitical thinker, in an

1 For Dugin’s relations with the Russian deep state, see: Charles Clover, “The Unlikely Origins of Russia’s Manifest Destiny,” *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/27/geopolitics-russia-mackinder-eurasia-heartland-dugin-ukraine-urasianism-manifest-destiny-putin/> (Accessed on October 30, 2020).

2 Ibid.

3 Aleksandr Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory* (Moscow: Eurasian Movement, 2012).

ever-evolving string of papers and books that he produced in the course of the first half of the 20th century, most notably “The Geographical Pivot of History” (1904),⁴ *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1919),⁵ and “The Round World and the Winning of the Peace” (1943),⁶ developed a groundbreaking theory that he would eventually call “geopolitics.” According to Mackinder’s theory, the world constitutes a closed political system in which geography plays an essential role in shaping the behavior of states. Simply put, geography determines politics. Mackinder specifically divides the globe between two major powerbases across two geopolitical fault-lines: the sea power (thalassocracy) whose locus is around the Atlantic basin; and the land power (tellurocracy) whose seat is in Eurasia. He regards the Atlantic powers as the periphery and the Eurasian powers as the “Heartland.” Historically, Russia in its different incarnations has embodied Eurasia – or at least most of it. According to Mackinder, throughout modern times the Atlanticists have had the upper hand globally. However, if the Eurasians manage to unite and utilize their resources in unison, they will eventually be able to supplant the Atlanticists as the greatest global power.

Mackinder’s main concern in the course of his half a century of theorizing is the rise of Russia as the global superpower. As Francis P. Sempa has put it, “His greatest geopolitical nightmare was that a hostile power or alliance of powers would gain effective political control of the Eurasian land mass and use its resources to out-build and overwhelm the insular powers.”⁷ Ironically, Dugin stands Mackinder on his head by advocating for the supremacy of Eurasia. Through a show of “multipolarity” that is invested in the historical religious and cultural affinities of the peoples of Europe and Asia with Russia, and by dwelling on their collective grievances against Western Civilization and especially the United States, Dugin, Putin, and all the contemporary “Eurasianists”⁸ strive to create a

4 Halford John Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1904), pp. 421–437.

5 Halford John Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962).

6 Halford John Mackinder, “The Round World and the Winning of the Peace,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (1943), pp. 595–605.

7 Francis P. Sempa, “The Roots of Mackinder’s Geopolitics,” *Orbis*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (2015), p. 619.

8 For a comprehensive treatment of Eurasianism among the contemporary Russian elite, see: Dmitry Shlapentokh, *Russian Elite Image of Iran: From the Late Soviet Era to the Present* (Carlisle: The Strategic Studies Institute, 2009).

hegemonic unipolar front led by Russia against the American-led liberal world order. As the Russia expert Mariya Y. Omelicheva has stated,

For the Kremlin, Syria represents a tactical theater in a broader strategy of anti-Westernism [...] In a nutshell, Moscow's main political "end" is a global Russia that holds a prominent place on a multi-polar international stage where the rules of the game are suited to the Kremlin. To accomplish this "end," Moscow has pursued a host of approaches to minimize the main threat thereto, namely the U.S. and the U.S.-led liberal international order.⁹

For the time being, Russia's aim is to supplant the United States – the current Atlanticist superpower – as the main political power in Europe and the Middle East; in the long run, however, the overarching Russian imperative is world domination. By utilizing the geopolitical advantages, alliances, and resources that global expansionism puts at its disposal, Russia is aiming for the status of the sole superpower, which will eventually bring it to blows with the West. As such, in this article I am going to conduct a strategic survey of the Russian expansionism in the Middle East throughout modern history, and then warn of the impending dangers of the hitherto unchecked Russian expansionism for contemporary US and Middle East security and for the future of global democracy and liberal world order.

Russia's Roots

The Russians were a race of Slavic people who settled in what is now western Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus during the Dark Ages. The Varangian chieftain Rurik settled Novgorod in 862. Two decades later, Rurik's successor, Oleg, founded Kievan Rus', the first major Russian polity. The Russians would go on to set up small and interdependent

9 Mariya Y. Omelicheva, "Russia in Syria: Reshaping the Global Order or Fighting Terrorism?" in Marlene Laruelle (ed.), *Russia's Policy in Syria and the Middle East: Determination, Delight, and Disappointment* (Washington, DC: Central Asia Program, 2019), p. 40.

fiefdoms around that area, gradually bringing those fiefdoms together to create a more expansive polity. For most of the Middle Ages, the descendants of Rurik would rule the Russians.

The Rus' were a pagan people. Due to their considerable distance from the major centers of Christendom, they were among the last European people to convert to Christianity. In 988 the Rus' eventually adopted Greek Orthodox Christianity from the Byzantine Empire. From then on, the fusion of Slavic paganism and Orthodox Christianity would define the contours of the Russian culture. During the Rurik era, the Russians were mostly engaged in civil wars and territorial conflicts among themselves; in addition, they occasionally battled the invading Mongol hordes from the east and the Teutonic Knights from the west. Those struggles eventually led to the creation of a unified Russian political entity with Slavo-Orthodox characteristics called the Tsardom of Russia.

But it was after the Romanovs' accession to the throne in the early 17th century that Russians developed major tendencies for expansionism towards the east and the south. To their east lay the powerful Tartar khanates whose lords were the descendants of the great medieval Mongol conqueror, Genghis Khan. Russian and later Soviet expansionism eastwards for approximately three centuries gradually subdued and assimilated those Tartars. That phase of Russian expansionism was memorably depicted by the French novelist Jules Verne in his *Michel Strogoff* (1876), the swashbuckling special courier of the Tsar caught up in the middle of a fictional Tartar rebellion in mid-19th-century Siberia.

Russian Expansionism at the Expense of the Persian Empire

On the course of its southward expansion, the Russian Empire set out to swallow large chunks of the Persian Empire. Contact had previously existed between the two empires during the age of the Ruriks, but it was Peter the Great, the archetypal Tsar, who in the early 18th century, in his desire to reach the "warm waters" of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, ventured as far south as the Caucasus to clash with the declining Safavid Empire.

In the Caucasus an uneasy peace had long been in place between the Georgian and Armenian Christians and the Persian and Azeri Muslims. Peter perceived that religious

rift as a valid pretext for intervention in the affairs of the Caucasus. This “religious rift strategy” would eventually develop into one of Russia’s foremost instruments of interventionism and expansionism in the Middle East. In 1722 Peter sent his armies to the region, supposedly to assist the Christians against Muslim raids, but in fact with the aim of securing the Persian Caspian Sea provinces for the Tsarist Empire. Unable to resist the Russian juggernaut on the one hand and grappling with internal strife on the other, the Safavid Empire was forced to leave the fate of the Caspian Sea region to the invading armies of the Tsar.

In 1723 the Shah of Persia negotiated a peace and surrendered certain Persian possessions in the Caucasus to the Tsar in return for his recognition of the Shah’s sovereignty in Persia and for assisting him in repelling the rebels should the need arise. However, this southward campaign, according to Kazemzadeh, proved too costly for the Tsar in the long run.¹⁰ The Caucasus lay too far from the Russian motherland, and its climate proved too harsh for the invading Russians. As a consequence, the Tsar’s troops fell ill and many of them died. Eventually Peter would have to let go of his dream of reaching the warm waters of the south, and withdraw his forces from the Caucasus. With Peter’s death in 1725, the first chapter of Russian expansionism in Persia came to an inconclusive close.

After Peter, the Russian Empire would for a while shift its attention from Persia to the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, for around half a century there were no major clashes between the Russians and the Persians. It was Catherine the Great’s rise to power in the second half of the 18th century that instigated the second phase of the Tsarist Empire’s expansionism in Persia. During her reign, Russia would once again attempt to reach the warm southern waters by pushing deep into Persian territories. Although Catherine herself died in 1796 without much gain in that direction, the southward momentum she started would continue well into the early 20th century.

With the French influence diminishing in the Middle East after the defeat of Napoleon in Europe, and with the British too concerned about India to invest in Persia, the Russians

10 Firuz Kazemzadeh, “Iranian Relations with Russia and the Soviet Union, to 1921,” in Peter Avery (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 321.

flooded the Caucasus. The result would be the first in a series of humiliating treaties imposed on Persia, namely the Treaty of Golestan (October 14, 1813). According to the terms of that treaty, the Russian Empire gained most of the Persian Empire's possessions in the Caucasus; acquired the right to be the sole power to keep a navy in the Caspian Sea; and extracted a number of one-sided commercial concessions. Worst of all, as a provision of that treaty, the Tsar was acknowledged as the protector of the Persian throne which in effect gave Russia a free hand in meddling with Persian succession affairs.

As if that humiliation were not enough, two decades later the Tsarist Empire, by concluding the Treaty of Turkmanchay (February 22, 1828), swallowed the rest of the Persian lands in the Caucasus, while forcing the Persian Empire to pay a large indemnity for presumably having started hostilities. Other political and commercial capitulations would include the exemption of Russian subjects from Persian jurisdiction as well as the exemption of Russian traders from Persian tariffs. So egregious proved the terms of the Treaty of Turkmanchay that since its conclusion it has turned into a proverb in Iran indicating international humiliation.

The Russo-Persian Wars of the 19th century established Russian military supremacy and, to a great extent, political and cultural hegemony over Persia; and the subsequent Treaty of Turkmanchay would set the tone for the Russo-Persian relationships for centuries to come. In the meantime, the Russian powerbase in Persia grew to such an extent that when in 1906 a liberal reform movement attempted to check the powers of the Tsar-backed Qajar monarchy, the Persian Cossack Brigade, trained and led by Russian officers, emerged as the major force opposing the constitutional movement. When the Cossacks shelled the Persian Parliament to expel the constitutionalists and then executed a number of those who were not fortunate enough to run away, Russian interference in Persia's internal affairs become blatantly open.¹¹

In the following year, the Russians and the British in a secret pact – that became known as the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 – would partition Persia in two spheres of influence, with the north belonging to the Russians and the south to the British. During

11 Reza Parchizadeh, "Iran Needs to Come Back to the West," *Harbinger Asylum* (Spring 2020), p. 73.

that time, Russian troops moved in to occupy much of their sphere of influence, as a result of which most of northern Persia came under de facto Russian control. The Russians would also jockey for more influence in the capital Tehran by forcing the hand of the beleaguered parliament to have Morgan Shuster, the competent American financial adviser, removed from office and expelled from the country, effectively curtailing the constitutional reforms in Persia.

After the Communist Revolution of 1917, Lenin and Trotsky, in a gesture of good faith towards an “oppressed nation,” released the documents of the formerly mentioned secret agreement between the Tsarist and British empires to partition Persia. They also declared null and void all the concessions owed by Persia to the defunct Tsarist Empire. However, they later deemed it more practical, under the guise of “Communist Internationalism,” to back Communist-leaning movements in north and northwestern Persia. The Jangali Uprising that for a time in the early 1920s even threatened to topple the central government in Tehran and establish a Communist regime in its place was one such movement.¹² Setting up their base in the Caspian Sea province of Gilan, the Jangalis (jungle-men), who abhorred the Qajar tyranny and ineptitude, wanted to revolutionize Persia as a whole. As time went by, Communists infiltrated the movement and turned it into a puppet Communist regime in northern Persia.¹³

This intervention proved to be short-lived. As the newly-created Soviet Union badly needed British commerce, and the British would not trade until the Russians withdrew from Persia, the Bolsheviks were forced to give up on their puppet regime, which was promptly crushed by the government forces. From then on, although Russians would continue to influence Persian politics, their southward expansion effectively halted for a long stretch of time. However, as Communism had taken root, a different kind of “expansionism” was in the works for Persia.

12 Peyman Jafari, “When the Red Flag Flew over Iran,” *Jacobin*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/11/soviet-socialist-republic-iran-gilan-history-imperialism> (Accessed on November 10, 2020).

13 Moisei Persits, *A Shamefaced Intervention: The Soviet Intervention in Iran, 1920–1921* (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1999).

Russian Expansionism at the Expense of the Ottoman Empire

Unlike Persia, the Russians clashed considerably with the Ottomans rather early in their history. The first friction between the two expanding empires occurred as early as the era of Ivan the Terrible in the mid-16th century. However, in contrast to the troubled Persian Empire that soon collapsed under the Russian pressure, the Ottoman Empire, which was the Tsars' larger, more powerful and more strategically important neighbor to the south, put up heavy resistance against the Russian encroachment for around four centuries; although along the way it would be forced to concede many commitments and cede vast tracts of land to the expanding Tsarist Empire. The Küçük Kaynarca Treaty (July 21, 1774) between the Tsarist and Ottoman empires proved to be a pivotal point for the project of Russian expansionism in the Middle East. According to Aksan,

The Küçük Kaynarca treaty, signed in haste after the complete collapse of the Ottomans at Şumnu in late spring 1774, was the single most humiliating treaty the Ottomans had yet signed. The Russians gained ports on the Black Sea [...] freedom of navigation in the Black Sea and Mediterranean, and could now claim the right to protect the interests of the Orthodox Christians of the empire. Much against their will the Crimean Tatars were declared independent, and the Ottomans had to pay a tremendous indemnity of 4,500,000 roubles.¹⁴

After decades of tension, struggle and war between the Russians and the Turks in the proximity of the Black Sea basin, that treaty ceded de facto control over the strategic lands around the Sea of Azov, including the Crimean Peninsula, to the Russians. As such, by establishing a route towards the "warm waters" of the south for the first time, that treaty became the fulfillment of Peter the Great's foremost desire.

More enduringly, according to that treaty the Tsarist Empire was acknowledged as the "protector" of the Christian sites of worship and the Christian pilgrims in the Holy

14 Virginia Aksan, "War and Peace," in Suraiya N. Faroqhi (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 103.

Land. After the dissolution of the Crusader States and then the fall of Constantinople in late medieval times, the office of protectorate of the Christian holy sites in Palestine had been undergoing a long interregnum. Additionally, since Peter the Great made the church a subsidiary branch of the state in Russia in the early 18th century, the Tsarist Empire had been struggling to parade and promote its Christian credentials at the expense of the Western Christians. As an Orthodox superpower, by securing the protectorate of the Christian holy sites at the expense of the “heathen” and the “infidels,” as well as by posing as the protector of Christian pilgrims in the Holy Land, Russia managed to extract the respect of the chronically inimical Catholic and Protestant powers in Western Europe. Later, the Tsarist Empire freely interpreted the provisions of the Küçük Kaynarca Treaty to extend its status of protectorate to all the Christians in the Ottoman territory. Thus, Russians did not only acquire political clout but also religious and cultural weight in the Middle East.

All the same, despite the ongoing struggle between Russians and Turks, the mere existence of the Ottoman Empire, which acted as a buffer zone between Tsarist Russia and the rest of the Middle East, for two centuries prevented the Russians from achieving their ultimate goal of full-throttle expansion southwards. At that time, the British Empire was also at the height of its power and would lend a strong hand to the declining Ottoman Empire against the Russians whenever necessary, as it did in the case of the mid-19th-century Crimean War. As a result, Russia would never achieve the degree of political control and cultural hegemony among the Turks that it had among the Persians.

Russian Interregnum in the Middle East

During the years between the two world wars, a number of hurdles, mostly consequent upon the problems of establishing a Communist polity which would become known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) or simply the Soviet Union, stymied the Russian efforts at southward expansion. The most important were the Russian Civil War that flared up following the Communist Revolution; and then the internal strife between the revolutionary leaders over the desirability of geopolitical expansionism or lack thereof for the nascent Communist cause.

As the October Revolution had been unable to completely rout the monarchist cause, a number of influential monarchist generals raised the Tsar's banner in the eastern and southern provinces of Russia and sounded the clarion call to all the monarchists and other anti-revolutionary forces to fight on their side. In response, the Bolsheviks unleashed their most lethal weapon, the Red Army, from Moscow and western Russia against the so-called "Whites" (monarchists). The ensuing battle, known as the Russian Civil War and regarded as one of the deadliest civil wars of the 20th century, raged from 1918 to 1922, from which the Bolsheviks eventually emerged victorious.¹⁵

In addition, doctrinal and strategic disputes among the Bolsheviks with respect to the desirability of either "Socialism in One Country" or "World Communism" halted any Russian plans for intervention in the Middle East. While the more idealistic Trotskyist faction advocated for Permanent Revolution and World Communism, the more realistic Stalinist faction stressed the importance of Socialism in One Country, so that the fledgling Soviet Union would not have to clash head on with World Capitalism.¹⁶ As Stalin would dominate the Communist party after Lenin's death, his non-interventionist attitude would define the foreign policy of the Soviet Union with regard to the Middle East for the duration of the interwar period.

To the south, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Kemalist Turkey emerged as a fiercely nationalist state with strong pro-Western tendencies, and as such continued the role of the then defunct Ottoman Empire as the buffer zone between the Russians and the Arab Middle East. The so-called father of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, known as "Atatürk" (Father of the Turks), was an Ottoman army commander who, by taking advantage of the disarray in the moribund empire, staged a coup against the last emperor, dissolved the monarchy, and established the Republic of Turkey with himself acting as its first president (1923–1938). Under Atatürk, Turkey would break with the Muslim tradition of the empire by adopting Western ways such as secularism, parliamentarianism, and a Latinized orthography.¹⁷ Turkey would also be almost immediately admitted to NATO in

15 David Bullock, *The Russian Civil War 1918–22* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2008).

16 Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p 78.

17 Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

the early 1950s, as such playing a pivotal role in the post-WWII American-led containment plan for the increasingly expansionist USSR. During the Cold War, Turkey housed one of the most important overseas American airbases at the southern city of Incirlik. Naturally, the Soviets could have no say in such a Westernized and Western-friendly state for a rather long time.

Last but not least, after the fall of the Ottomans, the territories of their vast empire in the Middle East came under the protection of the British Empire and the French Republic. Following the Sykes-Picot Agreement between Great Britain and France during World War I, the newly-formed League of Nations founded two major “mandates” that carved out two sets of territories from the former Arabic possessions of the Ottoman Empire. The British gained control of most of the Ottoman Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and the southern part of the Ottoman Syria (Palestine and Transjordan), and the French that of the rest of the Ottoman Syria (modern Syria and Lebanon). As a consequence of the new “world order” created by Western powers, during the interwar period the Russians would be effectively kept out of the Middle East.

Russian Resurgence in the Middle East

World War II changed everything. With the decline of Western colonial powers across the globe, a process that was hastened by the advent of various forms of independence movements and revolutions in the Middle East between the 1940s and 1960s, the Russians finally found their propitious moment for a new phase of southward expansion. By presenting themselves as the champions of the cause of “anti-colonialism” and “anti-imperialism,” the Soviets embarked upon their full-fledged project of expansionism in the Middle East. Buoyed by its victory in WWII, the Soviet Union resolved to challenge the United States, creating in the process a bipolar international system. In line with that goal, Moscow attempted to bring the Middle East under its ideological umbrella.

What precipitated the Russian intervention in the Middle East was the emergence of the Jewish State in the former British colony of Palestine. Contrary to popular belief, during the initial years of the life of modern Israel, the Soviet Union assumed a favorable

stance towards it. Though the Communists were suspicious of the Zionist movement lest it provoke the Jewish Russians and Ukrainians, the Soviet Union voted in favor of the UN partition plan for Palestine in 1947. In addition, when the first all-out war broke out between Jews and Arabs in 1948, the Soviet Union stepped in again to supply the Jewish State with much-needed arms. According to Grenville, Stalin instructed the Czechs to deliver Communist-produced weapons to the Jews.¹⁸

Whatever the reason for this initial assistance to Israel, the Soviet Union eventually found its main allies in the Middle East not in the Jews, but in the Arabs who, as it happened, were partly provoked into a high-pitched revolutionary nationalist mood as a consequence of the rise of a highly nationalist-conscious Jewish State in their neighborhood. Indeed, it can be assumed that Stalin's gambit with Israel paid off in the long run by pulling most of the important Arabs towards the Soviet pole. Israel, in the end, was a decidedly Westernized nation. The Arabs, on the other hand, remained substantially Third-Worldist.

Russophilia in the Arab World

During the Cold War, the Tsarist "civilizing mission,"¹⁹ couched in the pompous claim of "historical responsibility of liberating the oppressed nations," turned into a principal tenet of the Communist ideology in the Soviet Union.²⁰ This would appeal to many Arabs and appear as a constant feature of the Arab revolutions and the states that emerged from them. By then, different forms of "Arab Socialism," including most prominently Nasserism and Ba'athism, which mingled a highly distilled Arab Nationalism with a somewhat diluted Soviet Communism, became the most apparent manifestations of "Russophilia" in the Middle East.

18 J. A. S. Grenville, *A History of the World: From the 20th to the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 435.

19 Elena Andreeva, *Russia and Iran in the Great Game: Travelogues and Orientalism* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 5.

20 Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union*, p. 209.

The roots of Arab Socialism go back to the early 1940s when two Syrian Communist intellectuals, namely Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, in their desire to make an “Arab Renaissance” after the dismantling of the ancient colonial empires, started to draw the contours of an eclectic Arab revival.²¹ Ba’ath itself means “renaissance” in Arabic. Ba’athism promoted as its most basic principles Pan-Arabism,²² Arab Socialism, anti-Israelism, and anti-imperialism. In a traditional culture where old tribal ties played the most significant part in power politics, as a result of which the majority of the population would have to stay out of politics and only watch their betters act, the Ba’ath ideology promised a new hope for independence and social justice.

Syria and Egypt were the first Arab states to embrace modified forms of Arab Socialism/Ba’athism, and later Iraq, Yemen and Libya would follow suit. Riding the popular waves of revolutions and coups against obsolete and corrupt monarchies, the nationalist-socialist military rose to power in those Arab nations, turning militarism into the backbone of Arab Socialism. While the ancien régime would prop itself up on the support of the tribal chiefs and propertied merchants, Arab Socialism would find its most vocal advocates among the rank and file of society, including the working class and the emerging middle-class intellectuals.

However, despite its profession to socialism, in reality Arab Socialism would mostly depend on populism and charismatic rule. Already nurturing the seeds of despotism, starting in the early 1960s, all kinds of Arab Socialism, including Ba’athism, drifted towards ruthless dictatorships that made the ground more fertile for the Soviet intervention. The bloody 1958 coup in Iraq that brought to power General Abd al-Karim Qasim and then the 1963 coup in Syria that laid the foundations of the future Assad autocracy manifested such developments in the Arab Socialist ideology towards a more authoritarian form of government, which, as distinct from Ba’athism proper, is usually called “Neo-Ba’athism.”²³

21 Paul Berman, “Baathism: An Obituary,” *The New Republic*, September 14, 2012, <https://newrepublic.com/article/107238/baathism-obituary> (Accessed on October 10, 2018).

22 For a comprehensive explication of this important concept, see: Bernard Lewis, “Pan-Arabism,” in *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 156–180.

23 Reza Parchizadeh, “How the Ba’ath Ideology Drew the Contours of the Modern Middle East,” *Foreign Policy Association*, August 9, 2018, <https://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2018/08/09/how-the-baath-ideology-drew-the-contours-of-the-modern-middle-east> (Accessed on October 10, 2020).

The civil war in Yemen, sparked as a result of a Communist takeover, was another major event that played into the hands of the Russians. When the Communist army officers deposed Imam Muhammad al-Badr, the king of Yemen, and established a revolutionary government in the “Republic” of North Yemen, Badr sought the assistance of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the foremost Arab monarchies at the time, to make war on the revolutionaries. Naturally, Egypt militarily intervened on behalf of the revolutionary government while the Soviet Union provided strategic and technical assistance. The proxy war between the old-guard Arab Monarchists and the vanguard Arab Socialists continued up to the late 1960s, when the Arabs’ head-on confrontation with Israel would put the conflict between themselves on pause. All in all, the conditions proved propitious for the Soviet intervention and expansionism in the Middle East.

Throughout the Cold War, the most obvious manifestation of Russian expansionism in the Middle East turned out to be the Soviet intervention in Arab-Israeli affairs. There, the Soviet Union would act as the self-proclaimed godfather of the Arabs and keep them busy playing in its proxy wars against the United States in the wider context of the global war between the Communist and Capitalist camps. During that time, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and the Arab Palestinians all played, to different degrees, into the hands of the Russians.

In the course of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, the Soviet Union would provide Arabs with arms, jetfighters, and missiles as well as technical and strategic assistance. The Soviet officers would also train Arab armies. In addition to frequently manning Arab jetfighters with Russian pilots, the Soviet Union would occasionally fly its own jetfighters in support of the Arabs. In return, the Soviet Union would acquire strategic naval and air bases in Egypt, Syria, Libya, and the Republic of Yemen.

The most important Arab player of the Soviets in the Middle East was no doubt Egypt. In order to understand how after World War II Egypt became the epicenter of Soviet intervention in the Middle East, one must look into the West’s approach towards the revolutionary Egypt in the light of the Cold War era concerns. During that time, in a mood foreshadowing the Eisenhower Doctrine, the West’s primary concern was to keep the Soviet Union out of the Middle East, but more strategically important, out of the Suez Canal.

Excavated between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea by the French entrepreneur Ferdinand De Lesseps in the mid-19th century, the Suez Canal had come under British rule after the 1882 British invasion of Egypt. Later, the Convention of Constantinople (1888) declared the canal a neutral zone under British protection, which left Great Britain in de facto control of the canal. As the nationalist mood rose in Egypt after the Nasserist coup in 1952, the British and the French feared an Egyptian takeover of the canal. The fiercely Pan-Arabist and anti-imperialist rhetoric of Egypt's first president, colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, contributed to their fear. Additionally, Washington was concerned about a Soviet penetration of the Middle East should there be a Western vacuum of power in Egypt. As such, Washington attempted to make overtures to Egypt over Nasser's hugely publicized pet project of building the Aswan Dam on the Upper Nile.

However, when Washington hesitated to supply Egypt with much-demanded arms lest they be used against Israel, Nasser turned to the Soviet Union whose First Secretary, Nikita Khrushchev, proved more than happy to realize Nasser's almost every wish. Soviet-made planes, tanks, and light weaponry flooded Egypt as well as Soviet aid for building the Aswan Dam. When in 1956 the combined forces of Israel, Britain, and France invaded Egypt after the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Nasser, the Soviets issued an ultimatum to the invaders and would call for a ceasefire. The Egyptians would later succeed in navigating the canal with the technical assistance of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. Thus, when in the mid-1960s the Cold War had reached new heights in the Middle East, the Soviet Union was completely at home in Egypt.

Notwithstanding the long-term tensions between Arabs and Israel, it can be said that it was the Soviet Union that sparked the first major Arab-Israeli war after the events of the 1940s. Amid Nasser's acrimonious anti-Israeli rhetoric in 1967, the Soviet embassy in Cairo provoked the Arabs further by claiming that Israel was amassing troops on the Syrian border, most probably to mount an attack on Nasser's closest ally.²⁴ The truth or falsity of that claim remains hotly contested to this day, but it sparked a war between Arabs and Israel that would dramatically alter the balance of power in the Middle East.

24 Uri Bar-Noi, "The Soviet Union and the Six-Day War: Revelations from the Polish Archives," *Wilson Center*, 2003, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-soviet-union-and-the-six-day-war-revelations-the-polish-archives> (Accessed on October 25, 2020).

Pushed by his Arab allies to seize the moment to defend the Arab cause against Israel, Nasser moved the Egyptian army into the Sinai in mid-May 1967. Since the Suez Crisis of 1956, a contingent of UN peacekeeping forces called the “United Nations Emergency Force” had been guarding the border between Egypt and Israel to avoid direct contact and thus diminish the possibility of any conflict. Nasser’s next move was to immediately expel that contingent from Sharm al-Shaikh in the Egyptian territory and therefore stand eyeball to eyeball with Israel. What finally broke the camel’s back was Nasser’s blockading of the Straits of Tiran at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, effectively cutting off Israeli shipping towards the East.

Consequently, the three-pronged Six-Day War of 1967 started. In a “preemptive strike” that would thenceforward turn into the IDF signature style, the Israeli air force invaded and bombed Egyptian jetfighters on the ground. Deprived of air cover, the Egyptian army then fell prey to the lethal Israeli air force and hordes of tanks. To the north, in the Syrian theater of war, despite the Syrian army’s early advances, the Israelis were likewise able to turn the tide and advance into the Syrian territory as far as the Golan Heights. At the center, a Jordanian assault on Jerusalem was also rebuffed by the Jews. Even the Soviet Union’s intervention in the form of Russian jetfighters could not save the day for the Arabs. In the end, the result was a decisive defeat for the Arab cause and a resounding victory for Israel.

Not only were the Egyptian air force, the largest in the Arab world at the time, almost entirely obliterated and the Egyptian army crushingly beaten and dispirited, but also Egypt was divested of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula, at least for a rather long time. This was the war that also cost Syria the Golan Heights and Jordan the West Bank. Constantly perceiving the world affairs through a Soviet lens was already taking its toll on the Arab world. The Arabs had been incapacitated, not only militarily but also politically. Nasser paid dearly for his unwavering alliance with and his unremitting trust of the Soviet Union. When he died three years later, many said that he died of a broken heart.

But there was still one more step to be taken to change the course of Russian interventionism in the Middle East. The Next Egyptian president, Muhammad Anwar el-Sadat, was destined to take that step. In contrast to Nasser, Sadat was less “ideological” and more “pragmatic” and was wary of the power games the Russians had been playing

with the Arabs. As soon as he assumed office, Sadat started efforts to strike a balance between Egypt and the Soviet Union on the one hand and Egypt and the United States on the other. As al-Sayyid Marsot put it in a telling anecdote,

The Cairenes invented a story about Sadat that epitomized the difference between his form of government and that followed by Nasser. The story goes that on the first day Sadat got into the presidential limousine he waited until the car reached a crossroads and then asked the chauffeur, "Where did the rais [President, i.e. Nasser] turn here?" "He turned left," was the answer. "Signal left and turn right," said Sadat. Sadat believed the only way out of the morass of a foreign occupation of Sinai was to turn to the West, and especially to the United States, and get the American government to put pressure on the Israelis to evacuate Arab territories.²⁵

As a result, Sadat started to progressively sever Egypt's ties with the Soviet Union and instead make overtures to the Americans. As soon as he became president, Sadat approached the Nixon Administration so that they could mediate between Egypt and Israel for an Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai. As a sign of goodwill towards the West, in 1972 he also dismissed the Soviet personnel and dismantled their naval facilities in Egypt. However, when Israel proved adamant and the United States showed unwillingness to intervene on behalf of Egypt, Sadat for the last time would turn to the Soviets for arms. They provided him with a rich arsenal of Surface-to-Air-Missiles (SAM) and the Sagger anti-tank rocket launchers that came in very handy during the initial phase of the Yom Kippur War of 1973.²⁶

Sadat would once more change tactic after the half-won war by going over to the American camp. The fruit of the US mediation would be the Camp David Accords of 1978, whose provisions stipulated the Egyptian recognition of Israel as a sovereign state,

25 Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *A History of Egypt: From the Arab Conquest to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 156.

26 John W. Finney, "Soviet Could Spur Move to Aid Israel," *The New York Times*, October 11, 1973, <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/10/11/archives/soviet-could-spur-move-to-aid-israel-john-w-finney-js-officials.html> (Accessed on October 10, 2020).

the retrieval of the Sinai for Egypt, and a longstanding peace that has become the point of departure for other Arab states' normalization of relations with Israel in more recent times. Indeed, Egypt's change of policy towards the Soviet Union – and Israel – effectively terminated the project of Russian expansionism in the Middle East; for the Russians would cease to directly intervene in the region after 1973.

Thenceforward, with the gradual decline of all forms of Pan-Arabist and Arab Socialist ideology and the fall of Ba'athist despots and dictators such as Saddam Hussein, in addition to the final collapse of the Soviet Union itself, Russian hegemony would recede from the region. As a result, today the last bulwark of Arab Russophilia in the Middle East proves to be the Assad regime in Syria, where in recent years a resurgent Russia has boldly intervened.

Russophilia in Iran

Now let us return to Persia, which became internationally known as “Iran” in 1935. During the interwar period, that is, during the somewhat Atatürk-style pro-Western Reza Shah Pahlavi's era (1925–1941), although the Russo-Persian relations were far from smooth, and the Bolshevik regime would use all its power to influence politics in Iran, Russians and their allies were mostly sidelined as a result of Reza Shah's active anti-Communist policy. Consequently, between the wars, Communism in Iran either went underground or was only confined to places far from the capital, mostly to the regions in the north and northwest bordering the Soviet Union.

However, with the outbreak of World War II, Communism would once again emerge in Iran. When in 1941 the Allied forces invaded and occupied the neutral Iran and then sent Reza Shah into exile,²⁷ the Soviet Union, perceiving the situation to be ripe for resuming the Communist project in Iran from a position of power, took advantage of the turmoil

27 For a detailed account of how the Soviet Union and Western allies occupied Iran during WWII, see: Nikolay A. Kozhanov, “The USSR and Allied Occupation of Iran in August 1941: The Untold Story of a Difficult Decision,” in Rudi Matthee and Elena Andreeva (eds.), *Russians in Iran: Diplomacy and Power in the Qajar Era and Beyond* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), p. 297.

and started a huge propaganda campaign for the pro-Soviet Communist cause. In order to make their presence permanent in Iran, the Soviets propped up a strongly pro-Soviet Union “party” under the name of the Tudeh (masses), which for a time boasted being the largest Communist organization in the Middle East.

The Tudeh’s professed goal, according to Abrahamian, was to “adapt Marxism to the local environment”²⁸ to instigate a Communist revolution in Iran. In other words, as Iran was mostly composed of a Shiite Muslim population, the Tudeh would use Shiite religious jargon and lore to attract the masses. For instance, they would liken Marx’s concept of “revolution” to that of Hussein’s, the Shiite saint and Imam who had risen against the presumably illegitimate rule of Yazid around 1400 years before – and had fallen as a martyr in the process. During their heyday, the Tudeh would exploit many aspects of the Shiite religion through their many journals and periodicals to push their own agenda.

In late October 1944, in a blatantly pro-Soviet move, the Tudeh staged mass demonstrations against the Iranian government’s refusal to give the Soviet Union an oil concession in the north. A little later, when the Soviet Union refused to withdraw from its occupied zone in northwestern Iran, where it had set up two puppet regimes in Azarbaijan and Kurdistan, the Tudeh again backed the Soviet position.²⁹ Not surprisingly, the case of Iran vs. the Soviet Union was one of the first to be brought before the nascent United Nations for arbitration. When finally the world condemned the Soviet designs on Iran, Stalin had to withdraw his Red Army, upon which the government forces reclaimed northwestern Iran.

Immediately after World War II, as much as the new Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, disliked the Tudeh, he did not see it in himself to directly challenge the party due to his fear of Iran’s powerful northern neighbor. But when in 1949 there was an attempt on his life, and the would-be-assassin appeared to be somehow connected to the Tudeh, the Shah immediately issued a decree to dissolve the party. However, not long after that

28 Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 283.

29 Rowena Abdul Razak, “Convenient Comrades: Re-assessing the Relationship between the Soviet Union and the Tudeh Party during the British-Soviet Occupation of Iran, 1941–5,” in Matthee and Andreeva (eds.), *Russians in Iran*, p. 276.

incident the Tudeh would find an opportunity to reemerge when Mohammad Mossadegh of the National Front assumed office as prime minister. Pledging to rule as a democrat, Mossadegh, although not officially revoking the Shah's decree on the Tudeh's dissolution, in effect tolerated their activities.

In return, the Tudeh put Mossadegh's tolerance to good use. As soon as they were allowed public activity, they started a fierce smear campaign against Mossadegh, calling him an agent of imperialism due to his pro-American tendencies.³⁰ While portraying Mossadegh as a dictator, the Tudeh would eulogize Stalin as a truly popular and anti-imperialist leader, printing their pictures beside each other and drawing contrasts between them. Throughout Mossadegh's turbulent premiership, the Tudeh would continue to harass him and make attempts at destabilizing the country for the eventual purpose of creating a Soviet-style Communist state in Iran. Indeed, it can be assumed that the main reason Eisenhower later suspected a possible Communist takeover of Iran was the Tudeh's relentless anti-American activities during that period.³¹ As a result, while Truman had partly backed Mossadegh against Great Britain in the case of the Iranian oil's nationalization,³² Eisenhower found himself in a situation where he would endorse a joint British-American preemptive measure against the faltering prime minister.³³

After the fall of Mossadegh in 1953, the Shah harshly cracked down on the Tudeh, and in 1959 the last remnants of the party had either been wiped out or gone into exile in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe. The Tudeh, except for a very brief period during the revolution of 1979, never again played a significant role in Iranian politics. But the Tudeh's legacy endured. When in the mid-1960s and early 1970s Marxist armed cells emerged in Iran, many of them would draw on the Tudeh's experience and example. And

30 Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007), p. 76.

31 Mark J. Gasiorowski, "U.S. Perceptions of the Communist Threat in Iran during the Mossadegh Era," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2019), pp. 185–221.

32 Reza Parchizadeh, "The Legacy of the East India Company for the Anglo-Persian Oil Company," *Kayhan London*, March 20, 2018, <https://kayhan.london/fa/?p=109554> (Accessed on October 25, 2020).

33 Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2008).

around a decade later, during the revolution of 1979, those cells would play one of the most important parts in overthrowing the monarchy and expelling “imperialism.” Even the fact of the Islamic Republic’s bloody crackdown on all those cells, including the last vestiges of the Tudeh, would not change the attitude of a significant portion of the Iranian Left towards the West – which they still antagonistically regard as capitalist and imperialist.

Therefore, although Communists never took office in Iran, many tenets and tendencies of their Russophilia became instilled in the revolutionary Islamist regime and of course a wide variety of its Islamist and Leftist critics; tenets like anti-imperialism – which in effect solely constitutes Americophobia and Israelophobia – and a general ideological enmity towards the West. The truth that considerable factions of the Leftist opponents of the Islamic Republic, while ostensibly holding that regime in contempt, are still strategically in cahoots with it becomes apparent in their Americophobia and Russophilia – a fact that festeringly manifested itself in their open support for the Russian intervention in Syria.³⁴

The Path Forward

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rapid rate of Westernization and/or democratization across the former Communist republics during the 1990s sounded the alarm for the hardcore rump of the Russian elite that had managed to creep into the post-Soviet regime. They realized that should the process of liberalization be allowed to run its full course, they would certainly lose their long-enjoyed privileged position at the apex of the Russian political and economic hierarchy. In order to maintain their grip on power, and in line with centuries-old Russian strategic imperatives, the new ruling class revived the Tsarist and Soviet ambitions for global expansionism and conquest in the context of a perpetual conflict with the West. In a revanchist move, the Russian Federation intervened in Belarus, Chechnya, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

34 For example, note Fariborz Raisdana’s enthusiastic advocacy for the joint Russo-Iranian intervention in Syria, <https://youtu.be/jx62EsXP-FM> (Accessed on October 25, 2020).

between Armenia and Azerbaijan – all of whom could have gone Westward without the Russian authoritarian organizing principle – to bolster pro-Kremlin dictators, destabilize pro-Western governments, carve out territorial chunks, or create frozen conflicts and then gain influence by acting as arbitrator.³⁵

For a time, Moscow's objective seemed to be containing the Western and particularly American presence in its immediate periphery. That is why the US has yet to decisively respond to Russia's recent trend of aggressive and increasingly invasive foreign policy. With regard to the post-Soviet space, many in DC are still inclined to think that Moscow is only reclaiming what used to be Russia's "backyard," so to speak, and that it has little or no bearing at all on the security interests of the United States. However, next came the Middle East, which is a traditional American zone of influence. In 2015, some would say at the initiation of the Iranian regime's Quds Force commander Maj. General Soleimani,³⁶ Russia heavily intervened in the Syrian Civil War on behalf of the ruling dictator Bashar al-Assad. After wiping out almost all the legitimate opposition to the Assad regime, Putin now calls the shots in Syria, and Russia keeps expanding in the Middle East. As Assistant Secretary of State A. Wess Mitchell stated during his 2018 testimony before the US Congress,

Moscow wants to retain its presence in Syria as an entry point through which to influence future events in the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean. It also wants to inflict globally visible defeat on the United States: to create a negative

35 In this last regard, in the capacity of the arbiter between Armenia and Azerbaijan during their latest round of battles over Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia deployed over 2,000 troops along with tanks and other armor presumably to secure the truce in the Caucasus; see: "Corpses and Burnt-out Cars Line Karabakh Road as Russian Troops Deploy," *Reuters*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/armenia-azerbaijan/corpses-and-burnt-out-cars-line-karabakh-road-as-russian-troops-deploy-idUSKBN27T25M> (Accessed on November 13, 2020).

36 Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Iranian Commander Soleimani Meets Putin in Moscow," *Reuters*, December 16, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-iran-russia/iranian-commander-soleimani-meets-putin-in-moscow-idUKKBN0TZ1NY20151216> (Accessed on October 10, 2020); "Did Putin and Soleimani Meet in Moscow about Assad?" *Newsweek*, December 16, 2015, <https://www.newsweek.com/did-putin-and-soleimani-meet-moscow-about-assad-406210> (Accessed on October 10, 2020).

“demonstration effect” of thwarting our aims here to dishearten our friends abroad and to drive wedges between us and our allies.³⁷

Vladimir Putin, the erstwhile KGB officer and the perennial President of the Russian Federation, is undoubtedly the chief architect of the current phase of Russian expansionism. During the two decades that he has been at the helm of the Russian state ship, Putin has promoted authoritarianism and statism (putting the state above the individual), anti-secularism, religious orthodoxy, and an overwhelming antagonism to the liberal world order.³⁸ Across the post-Soviet space and farther in the West, Putin has promoted a rather fundamentalist version of Orthodox Christianity that appeals to the more illiberal elements of society. In fact, under Putin, the church and the state have once more become inseparable institutions as they were under the Tsar. As Andrew Higgins calls it, Putin’s promotion of Orthodoxy is “a drive to reach out to far right political forces in Europe seduced by the idea of Russia as a bastion of conservative social and cultural values.”³⁹ At the same time, by aggrandizing the image and role of Russia’s minority Muslim population, Putin banks on Islam to appeal to the majority-Muslim nations of the Middle East and North Africa.⁴⁰ He has particularly utilized the services of his puppet regime of the Kadyrovs in Chechnya as Russia’s goodwill ambassador to Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries.⁴¹ In fact, the Chechen President

37 “Hearing: U.S. Policy toward a Turbulent Middle East,” *House.gov*, April 18, 2018, <https://docs.house.gov/Committee/Calendar/ByEvent.aspx?EventID=108182> (Accessed on October 10, 2020).

38 For Putin’s professed anti-liberalism, see: Leonid Bershidsky, “Why Putin Sounds Alt-Right Though He Really Isn’t,” *The Moscow Times*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/06/28/why-putin-sounds-alt-right-though-he-really-isnt-a66212> (Accessed on November 3, 2020).

39 Andrew Higgins, “In Expanding Russian Influence, Faith Combines with Firepower,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/14/world/europe/russia-orthodox-church.html> (Accessed on November 2, 2020).

40 For Putin’s attempts to woo Muslims, see: Sophie Lambroschini, “Russia: Putin Tells OIC that Muslims are ‘Inseparable’ Part of a Multiethnic Nation,” *Radio Free Europe*, October 16, 2003, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1104687.html> (Accessed on November 4, 2020).

41 Murad. B. al-Shishani, “Ahmad Kadyrov’s Visit to Saudi Arabia,” *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, January 28, 2004, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/>

Ramzan Kadyrov is among Putin's praetorians and occasionally does Putin's dirty job of eliminating dissidents and opponents at home and abroad.⁴² Putin's systematic engagement with the Islamic World has paid off, as Russia has succeeded in grafting itself in the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) as an observer member and keeps expanding its influence in the important organization.⁴³ Given this two-pronged approach to two incongruous and at times antagonistic religious trends, it looks like utilitarianism is the main drive behind Putin's religious policy. For him, anything goes as long as it pushes forward his anti-Western agenda and attracts modernity's malcontents. Putin has been certainly following Dugin's advice that in the wake of the postmodern global apathy, Russia should turn to any aspect of tradition, including religion, and co-opt it for the cause of its Eurasian expansion.⁴⁴

Geopolitically, Putin has advocated for expansionism, imperialism, and an aggressive foreign policy. Since he first came to power two decades ago, Putin has vigorously pursued the policy of Eurasian reintegration. After years of hard work, political arm twisting, and military power projection, in 2015 he finally succeeded in establishing the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which brought back together most of the former members of the Soviet

[item/8705-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2004-1-28-art-8705.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/kadyrov-putin-superhero-29044327.html) (Accessed on November 4, 2020).

- 42 "Kadyrov Calls Putin a 'Superhero' Who Should Rule Russia for Life," *Radio Free Europe*, February 16, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kadyrov-putin-superhero/29044327.html> (Accessed on November 4, 2020); "Ramzan Kadyrov: Putin's Key Chechen Ally," *BBC News*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31794742> (Accessed on November 4, 2020); Mitch Prothero, "Inside the Special Relationship between Putin and the Man Responsible for a String of Assassinations in Europe," *Business Insider*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/putin-kadyrov-asassinations-2020-7> (Accessed on November 4, 2020).
- 43 For Putin's ongoing engagement with OIC, see: "OIC and Russia Sign Cooperation Agreement," *Middle East Monitor*, January 30, 2014, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140130-oic-and-russia-sign-cooperation-agreement> (Accessed on November 4, 2020); "Russia Interested in Organization of Islamic Cooperation Reforms, Says Envoy," *TASS Russian News Agency*, November 28, 2019, <https://tass.com/politics/1093871> (Accessed on November 4, 2020); Andrey Baklanov, "Russia Marks 15 Years of Its Membership in OIC," *Modern Diplomacy*, August 2, 2020, <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2020/08/02/russia-marks-15-years-of-its-membership-in-oic> (Accessed on November 4, 2020).
- 44 Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory*, pp. 18–19.

Union.⁴⁵ In the same vein, Putin was the orchestrator of the Caspian Sea Agreement of 2018, which effectively turned that strategically important body of water into a *mare clausum* (closed sea), or more specifically a “Russian Lake,” with the prime intention of keeping out the West.⁴⁶ However, Putin’s final aim does not seem to be merely creating a “cordon sanitaire” around the Russian homeland to counter Western encroachment. Beyond conventional agreements with its immediate neighbors to fend off the US, the EU, and Israel, Putin has mounted bold political and military offensives to expand the Russian reach and territory across the globe. In fact, under the new regime, the Russian Federation has globally expanded to such a degree that its Tsarist and Communist predecessors never even dreamed of.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, beyond its traditional pale in the Caucasus and the Black Sea basin, by directly intervening in Syria and Libya, turning Iran into a full proxy and base of operations,⁴⁷ and finally wooing Turkey to its side,⁴⁸ Russia has succeeded

-
- 45 Vladimir Putin, “A New Integration Project for Eurasia: The Future in the Making,” *Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union*, October 10, 2011 (originally published in *Izvestia*, October 3, 2011), <https://russiaeu.ru/en/news/article-prime-minister-vladimir-putin-new-integration-project-eurasia-future-making-izvestia-3-> (Accessed on November 3, 2020); Gleb Bryanski, “Russia’s Putin Says Wants to Build ‘Eurasian Union’,” *Reuters*, October 3, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-eurasian/russias-putin-says-wants-to-build-eurasian-union-idUSTRE7926ZD20111003> (Accessed on November 3, 2020); James Kilner, “Kazakhstan Welcomes Putin’s Eurasian Union Concept,” *The Telegraph*, October 6, 2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/kazakhstan/8808500/Kazakhstan-welcomes-Putins-Eurasian-Union-concept.html> (Accessed on November 3, 2020).
- 46 Phoebe Greenwood, “Landmark Caspian Sea Deal Signed by Five Coastal Nations,” *The Guardian*, August 12, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/12/landmark-caspian-sea-deal-signed-among-five-coastal-nations> (Accessed on November 4, 2020).
- 47 Andrew Osborn, “Russia Uses Iran as Base to Bomb Syrian Militants for First Time,” *Reuters*, August 16, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-iran/russia-uses-iran-as-base-to-bomb-syrian-militants-for-first-time-idUSKCN10ROPA> (Accessed on October 10, 2017); Arash Karami, “Iran Officials Defend Russian Use of Hamadan Air Base,” *Al-Monitor*, August 17, 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/iran-russia-syria-hamadan-airbase-fighter-jets.html> (Accessed on October 10, 2020).
- 48 “US Condemns Turkey for Testing Russian-Made S-400 Missile,” *Voice of America*, October 17, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/us-condemns-turkey-testing-russian-made-s-400-missile> (Accessed on October 10, 2020); Tim Ogden, “It’s Time to Expel Turkey from Nato,” *The Spectator*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/it-s-time-to-expel-turkey-from-nato> (Accessed on November 1, 2020); Jovan Kovacic, “The Lessons of Nagorno-Karabakh,” *New Europe*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/the-lessons-of-nagorno-karabakh> (Accessed on November 13, 2020).

in becoming the supreme powerbroker in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean.⁴⁹ Russia's recent trilateral accords with Iran and China will create even more wide-ranging and far-reaching opportunities for its expansion towards the Indian Ocean and beyond.⁵⁰ According to the leaks made by OilPrice.com, these agreements, which envision extensive military and security cooperation between Russia, China, and Iran, will change the entire balance of geopolitical power in the Middle East. According to the terms of the agreements, Russia's and China's warplanes will have unrestricted access to Iranian airbases, and their warships will be stationed at Iranian ports on the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman. Also,

-
- 49 H. I. Sutton, "Russian Navy Seen Escorting Iranian Tankers Bound for Syria," *USNI News*, October 21, 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2020/10/21/russian-navy-seen-escorting-iranian-tankers-bound-for-syria> (Accessed on October 21, 2020). Excerpt from the same article: "Russia now maintains a permanent squadron in the Mediterranean, based in Tartus, Syria. This includes submarines and large warships. If Moscow decides the Iran-Syria oil run is now a regular mission for the Russian Navy, it's set to complicate enforcement of international sanctions which could otherwise shut down one of the Syrian regime's vital lifelines."
- 50 Specifically speaking about Russo-Chinese relations in recent times, it should be noted that their relationship hasn't been as fraught as in the 20th century. Learning to pragmatically put aside their Cold-War-era ideological and strategic disagreements, since the start of the 21st century the Russians and the Chinese have been steadily increasing their cooperation in various sectors. In 2001, the two, along with the majority of the former Soviet republics, founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which has significantly promoted the security and economic vision of these Eurasian superpowers. Moscow has also signed multiple treaties of friendship with Beijing and tried to relieve its ongoing energy concerns by building the Trans-Siberian oil and gas pipelines that feed China's ever-hungry grids; see: Grace Shao, "Russia Opens Siberian Pipeline to China as Beijing Expands Its Influence in the Arctic," *CNBC*, December 3, 2019, <https://www.cbc.com/2019/12/04/siberian-pipeline-from-russia-to-china-polar-silk-road.html> (Accessed on November 5, 2020); Ariel Cohen, "The Strategic Upside behind Russia's \$55 Billion 'Power Of Siberia' Pipeline to China," *Forbes*, December 6, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2019/12/06/is-there-strength-behind-russia-and-chinas-new-power-of-siberia-pipeline/?sh=779eb36c1faf> (Accessed on November 5, 2020); Francesco Sassi, "What the 'Power of Siberia' Tells Us about China-Russia Relations," *The Diplomat*, December 7, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/12/what-the-power-of-siberia-tells-us-about-china-russia-relations> (Accessed on November 5, 2020). More recently, Russia and China, taking Iran under their wings, have been conducting more and more joint military and security exercises across Eurasia and the Middle East; see: "Russia, China, Iran Start Joint Naval Drills in Indian Ocean," *Reuters*, December 27, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-military-russia-china/russia-china-iran-start-joint-naval-drills-in-indian-ocean-idUSKBN1YV0IB> (Accessed on November 5, 2020); Ben Wolfgang, "Russia, China, Iran to Hold Massive Joint Military Exercise," *The Washington Times*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/sep/10/russia-china-iran-hold-massive-joint-military-exer> (Accessed on November 5, 2020).

Russian electronic warfare systems – to be used against aerial and similar attacks – will be installed across Iran, which can be tied to Russia’s Southern Joint Strategic Command, and through that to Chinese systems. In addition, senior IRGC officers will go to Beijing and Moscow, and Russian and Chinese officers to Tehran, for training on an annual basis.⁵¹ As a result of its active presence from the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, in a few years Russia will be in a comfortable position to project power in many different directions worldwide. Not to mention the disconcerting fact that Russia, by boldly violating the Monroe Doctrine, has managed to station nuclear-capable strategic bombers in Venezuela,⁵² literally America’s “backyard” – a move that would have certainly elicited an assertive response from the United States during the Cold War.⁵³

With an increasingly isolationist America and a Europe divided against itself, Putin is stamping his image on the face of the world. Apparently, contrary to the popular belief in Western analyst circles, Russia’s ultimate goal is not the restoration of its Cold War superpower status or to achieve political and strategic parity with the West,⁵⁴ but to surpass the West towards world domination. And this will set Russia on an inevitable collision course with the United States as the guardian of the liberal world order. That China is a military/economic giant and Iran is a destabilizing actor – and these days they collectively attract a major share of media attention in the West – should not detract from the fact that Russia is a superpower in its own right and with considerable designs on the world. As a matter of fact, the Eurasians’ combined might and effort pose the most severe existential threat to the liberal world order, as they constantly and systematically challenge and undermine democracies worldwide. Russia’s relentless resurgence in the

51 Simon Watkins, “China Inks Military Deal with Iran under Secretive 25-Year Plan,” *OilPrice.com*, July 6, 2020, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/China-Inks-Military-Deal-With-Iran-Under-Secretive-25-Year-Plan.html> (Accessed on October 10, 2020).

52 Vladimir Isachenkov, “Russia Sends 2 Nuclear-Capable Bombers to Venezuela,” *Military Times*, December 10, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2018/12/10/russia-sends-2-nuclear-capable-bombers-to-venezuela/> (Accessed on October 10, 2020).

53 “Monroe Doctrine (1823),” *ourdocuments.gov* (no date), <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=23> (Accessed on October 25, 2020).

54 For instance, see: Stephen Blank, “Introduction,” in Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank (eds.), *Russia in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2018), pp. 1–27.

Caucasus, Ukraine, and the Middle East; China's patent projection of power in Hong Kong and East and Southeast Asia; and Iran and Turkey's bloody jihad across the Islamic World and beyond can all be seen through that lens. Indeed, the comprehensive 2020 tripartite deal between Russia, China, and Iran can be utilized towards that very goal. In recent times, the three have even become more openly aggressive towards the United States itself, jointly challenging it or interfering in American affairs on different levels. For instance, at least during the past five years the triad has flagrantly interfered in the US presidential and congressional elections,⁵⁵ as well as in the racial conflicts that flared up over the death of the African-American George Floyd.⁵⁶ Furthermore, both Russia

-
- 55 Jeff Seldin, "Report Puts Russia, China and Iran in Line for Sanctions for Election Meddling," *Voice of America*, December 18, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/us-politics/report-puts-russia-china-and-iran-line-sanctions-election-meddling> (Accessed on November 7, 2020); Jordan Fabian, "US Warns of 'Ongoing' Election Interference by Russia, China, Iran," *The Hill*, December 19, 2018, <https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/412292-us-warns-of-ongoing-election-interference-by-russia-china-iran> (Accessed on November 7, 2020); Jonathan Landay and Mark Hosenball, "Russia, China, Iran Sought to Influence U.S. 2018 Elections: U.S. Spy Chief," *Reuters*, December 21, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-interference/russia-china-iran-sought-to-influence-u-s-2018-elections-u-s-spy-chief-idUSKCN1OK2FS> (Accessed on November 7, 2020); Jen Kirby, "Are China and Iran Meddling in US Elections? It's Complicated," *Vox*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/21418513/china-iran-us-election-meddling-russia> (Accessed on November 7, 2020); David Smith, "Russia, China and Iran Seeking to Influence US Ahead of Elections, Top Intelligence Official Says," *The Guardian*, August 7, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/07/us-election-interference-russia-china-iran-intelligence> (Accessed on November 4, 2020); Jeremy Herb, Zachary Cohen, Evan Perez and Paul P. Murphy, "Feds Say Russia and Iran Have Interfered with the Presidential Election," *CNN*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/21/politics/fbi-election-security/index.html> (Accessed on November 4, 2020); Brooke Crothers, "Election Meddling by Iran, Russia, China to Amp Up Prior to Presidential Election," *Fox News*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/tech/election-meddling-by-iran-russia-china-to-amp-up-prior-to-presidential-election> (Accessed on November 4, 2020).
- 56 Givi Gigitashvili, "Russia, China, Iran Exploit George Floyd Protests in U.S.," *Medium*, June 3, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/russia-china-iran-exploit-george-floyd-protests-in-u-s-6d2a5e56c7b9> (Accessed on November 7, 2020); Sergei Klebnikov, "China, Russia and Iran Mock U.S. Handling of Protests: 'I Have a Dream, but I Can't Breathe'," *Forbes*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sergeiklebnikov/2020/06/08/china-russia-and-iran-mock-us-handling-of-protests-i-have-a-dream-but-i-cant-breathe/?sh=75ac29253629> (Accessed on November 7, 2020); Josh Margolin and Lucien Bruggeman, "Intel Bulletin Warns of 'Malign Actors' Targeting US over George Floyd Fallout," *ABC News*, June 11, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/intel-bulletin-warns-malign-actors-targeting-us-george/story?id=71184163> (Accessed on November 7, 2020).

and China strongly opposed the US-proposed resolution at the United Nations Security Council to indefinitely extend the UN arms embargo on Iran to prevent Tehran's sale and export of conventional weapons, thereby defeating the resolution and allowing Tehran – at least in theory – to continue its procurement of game-changing military technology.⁵⁷ As Eurasianist theorists such as Dugin have envisioned, the “conflict of the Rest with the West”⁵⁸ is building up to a civilizational war.⁵⁹ As such, if Russia is allowed to achieve its Eurasian objectives, the combined forces and resources of authoritarian regimes can wipe out Western Civilization.⁶⁰

The West needs to wake up to the troubling fact that the world is going through the starting stages of a paradigm shift in global politics where powerful authoritarian regimes, pragmatically setting aside their multiple differences, are increasingly willing to work together to achieve one overarching goal: to undermine Western democracies and eventually eliminate the liberal world order.⁶¹ And as Russia, with its ongoing generation of ideology and strategy and projection of power, plays the pivotal role in binding those regimes together, the West needs to chart an articulated Russia policy, not only strategically but also ideologically. To fully appreciate the situation, cross-regional, multi-disciplinary

57 Edith M. Lederer, “UN Soundly Defeats US Demand to Extend Arms Embargo on Iran,” *Star Tribune*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.startribune.com/un-voting-on-indefinite-extension-of-arms-embargo-on-iran/572115052> (Accessed on November 1, 2020).

58 As Charles Clover has aptly summarized Dugin's position in this regard, “The key to creating ‘Eurasia’ is to reject a narrow nationalistic agenda, which could alienate potential allies. He quoted New Right theorist Jean-François Thiriart, who said ‘the main mistake of Hitler was that he tried to make Europe German. Instead, he should have tried to make it European.’ Russia, it followed, would not be making a Russian Empire, but a Eurasian one. ‘The Eurasian Empire will be constructed on the fundamental principle of the common enemy: the rejection of Atlanticism, the strategic control of the USA, and the refusal to allow liberal values to dominate us,’ wrote Dugin” (Clover, “The Unlikely Origins of Russia's Manifest Destiny”).

59 Aleksandr Dugin, *The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia* (Moscow: Arktogeja, 1997).

60 Tom O'Connor, “China Calls Russia's Talk of Possible Military Alliance ‘Positive,’ with ‘No Limit’ to Their Ties,” *Newsweek*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-calls-russia-talk-military-alliance-positive-1541817> (Accessed on October 25, 2020).

61 Reza Parchizadeh, “The Foreign Mess Awaiting the Next President,” *American Thinker*, October 11, 2016, https://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2016/10/the_foreign_mess_awaiting_the_next_president.html (Accessed on November 1, 2020).

programs of area studies such as Russia-MENA Studies, Russia-Europe Studies, and Russia-East Asia Studies, or even more broadly, Eurasian Studies, need to be developed by governments as well as by strategic and academic institutes in the West. Concurrently, the NATO needs to draw clear lines for Russian encroachment upon its vital interests in its own territory as well as intervention anywhere else around the world. So-called “red lines” need to be revived and strongly enforced. Furthermore, in view of the fact that in the global world of today all politics everywhere is inextricably intertwined, the West needs to develop a collective security doctrine that surpasses the conventional “domestic/foreign” division and encompasses all spheres of concern under one broad category such as Western Security. As a countermeasure to Eurasian authoritarianism and expansionism, Western values and democratic institutions must be developed in Eurasia, and traditional American allies strengthened in the Middle East. High on the agenda should be installing Western-friendly and democratic governments in Iran, Syria, and Turkey, as well as making the Arab-Israeli strategic alliance the centerpiece of the US Mid-East policy. The Abraham Accords, the recent American initiative to bring Israel and Arabs closer to each other after seventy years of conflict, was indeed a groundbreaking move in the right direction.⁶² The ties between the Jewish State and the moderate Muslims must be boosted and expanded so that together they can draw a tight perimeter along the southern and southwestern flanks of the Eurasian juggernaut.⁶³

If history has taught us one fundamental lesson, it is that civilizations fall as soon as they lose sight of their ideals and settle for the status quo. Great ancient civilizations such as Egypt, Persia, Greece, and Rome fell to the “barbarians” first and foremost because they had become complacent. As a result of excessive navel-gazing that divided them against themselves, those ancient greats over time turned into mere shadows of their former selves with little concern for the rise of their ambitious enemies. As such,

62 “The Abraham Accords Declaration,” *state.gov*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords> (Accessed on November 12, 2020).

63 Interestingly, this new line of defense will roughly correspond with the one composed of the so-called Southern Tier countries of the Cold-War-era Green Belt (to contain Communism), which ironically has lost Iran to the other side of the contemporary Iron Curtain and instead gained Israel.

they lost initiative, and when the critical moment came, could only fight a rearguard action that soon petered out. The account of their rise and fall – and their great deeds in between – is but a cautionary tale that keeps resounding across ages. Today, as the foundations of Western Civilization are under fire at home and around the world, Western democracies manifest many of those unfortunate failures. If we do not want Western Civilization to meet the fate of its star-crossed ancestors, we must actively strive to change the course of things.

Acknowledgements

I originally made this assessment in October 2015, when the Russian Federation had just intervened in Syria. Back then, a shorter version of the analysis was published by *American Thinker* and generated a significant amount of discussion.⁶⁴ The full research, however, was never published because it contained a sustained critique of what I perceived to be the then US President Obama's passive Middle East policy in the face of Russian aggression. Naturally, the American academic publications that generally favored the Obama administration's stance towards the Middle East would not show willingness to publish my analysis. In the meantime, the contents of that shorter version have been quoted extensively by various publications around the world, including two comprehensive anthologies, one published in Europe and the other in the United States, as well as an outstanding doctoral dissertation for University of Dublin's Trinity College. As is obvious, during the past decade the issue of Russian aggression and expansionism has become a hot topic in academic and analyst circles across the globe, and as such I believe it was already time for my time-tested assessment to be published in its entirety. Recently, my good friend Prof. Ronen A. Cohen, head of The Middle East and Central Asia Research Center at Ariel University of Israel, kindly asked me for a contribution to the university's

64 Reza Parchizadeh, "The Historic Roots of Russian Expansionism in the Middle East," *American Thinker*, October 18, 2015, https://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2015/10/the_historic_roots_of_russian_expansionism_in_the_middle_east.html (Accessed on October 20, 2020)

Journal for Interdisciplinary Middle Eastern Studies, and I offered the same paper with a theoretical overhaul as well as due factual updates. What you just studied proceeds from that history, those efforts, and that kind offer.

About the Author

Dr. Reza Parchizadeh is a political theorist, historian of ideas, and senior analyst. He holds a BA and an MA in English from University of Tehran and a PhD in English from Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), all with honors. He wrote his master's thesis on Middle Eastern and Orientalist philosophy and his doctoral dissertation on political thought and cultural studies in the West; and he defended both with distinction. His major areas of interest are medieval and early modern political thought, Renaissance literature, Protestant Reformation, British Imperialism, liberalism, Middle East studies, Iranian studies, Jewish studies, Islamic studies, security studies, and international relations. He is a member of the international committee of correspondents for World Shakespeare Bibliography, the prestigious joint project of Johns Hopkins University and Shakespeare Association of America, which constitutes the single-largest Shakespeare database in the world and is published by Oxford University Press.