The Kremlin's Middle East Gambit

by Anna Borshchevskaya **(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Anna Borshchevskaya (/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.

Articles & Testimony

An image of imperial greatness is a matter of political survival to Vladimir Putin, which helps explain his aggressive efforts to fill any vacuum America may leave in the region.

The following interview was conducted by Steven Keil of the German Marshall Fund, originally published ***on the GMF website (http://www.gmfus.org/blog/2018/04/10/kremlins-middle-east-gambit)*** *.*

Russia's actions in Syria and the broader Middle East have reinforced its influence and interest in the region. While there has been much debate about the ultimate aims and success of its efforts, it seems clear that the Kremlin has at least cemented its role as a de facto power broker in the region. And with President Trump pushing for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, the void for the Kremlin and other regional powers to fill is only likely to grow.

Given this, I recently sat down with Anna Borshchevskaya to ask her about Russia's foreign policy in the region and her assessment of the Kremlin's strategy. Anna is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute and a fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy.

Russia has had a long-standing presence and interest in the Middle East, but over recent years its engagement in the region has reached new heights. What have been the key factors influencing this uptick? Where will Russia have the most difficulty in continuing to expand its influence in the Middle East and why?

Anna Borshchevskaya: Putin has worked to return Russia to Middle East from the very beginning—since he came to power. One reason for this has been his desire to position Russia as a counterweight to the United States in the region through a zero-sum anti-Western approach. Perception of Russia's greatness was always important to Putin, and recall that this is the man to whom the fall of the Soviet Union was one of the greatest geopolitical catastrophes of the 20th century. This is not to say he wants the Soviet Union back—Putin's Russia is not guided by the same ideology, and indeed Putin tends to look further into Russia's authoritarian czarist past, though there are echoes of the Soviet Union as well. But an image of imperial greatness is a matter of regime survival to Putin, which to him is always a top

priority. We tend to separate domestic and foreign issues in the West far more than the Kremlin does.

Several key factors influence the new level of Russia's engagement in the region. First, for years Putin perceived the United States as weak, and weakness only encourages dictators. A strong U.S. presence is the one thing that would have deterred Putin. He also perceived correctly that the U.S. in recent years had little interest in remaining engaged in the Middle East. So it was easy for Putin to step into the vacuum. Domestically, Putin needed another distraction, another "short victorious war," and Syria provided the perfect opportunity for that.

In Syria in particular, so many interests came together. The country's geography makes it strategically vital in the region, providing access not only to the Eastern Mediterranean—Russia as a traditional land power is always looking for warm water ports, and Putin re-emphasized the navy in 2012—but also to the entire region. It was an opportunity to thumb their nose at the West, to marginalize the United States and create an image of Russia's greatness. For Putin, keeping Assad in power is really about keeping himself in power; when he saw protests in Syria in March 2011 and the possibility of Assad's fall he saw himself. Putin genuinely believes the West is behind all regime change, that the people are incapable of rising up on their own. It is doubtful Putin even respects Assad, he is simply useful to him. It was an opportunity to flood Europe with Syrian refugees and thereby weaken the West. It was an opportunity to provide live combat training for the Russian military, use Syria as an advertising campaign for its weaponry, and even cheaply dispose of old munitions. And it was about creating bargaining leverage, hoping that the West would remove sanctions in exchange for cooperation in Syria, though this was a more short-term goal than the others.

But Putin's goals have always gone beyond Syria, and he is looking at the entire region, not Syria alone. Russia will have most difficulty expanding in areas with strong U.S. presence. Yet the entire region feels a declining American interest, perceiving the United States as too risk averse and unwilling to use force when necessary as it should have against Assad in 2013, and as a fair weather friend—unlike Putin.

Which hotspot is the likely next target of increased Russian engagement in the Middle East? How can the United States and its partners best prepare for and counter such efforts?

Borshchevskaya: Syria remains a key area of engagement, which is important to watch. Tied to this is Russia's relationship with Iran. Another area is all of North Africa, especially Libya, where Putin has tried to position himself as a "peacemaker." Russian diplomats often signal that they would like to participate in a settlement there, whether alone or officially under UN auspices. Another area is the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Putin had long since inserted Russia into the Quartet, and loves to signal that they are a more neutral broker—I should say this is an overall Kremlin theme—portraying themselves as more neutral than the United States. Russia can talk to everyone in the region and thus they are more objective, so the story goes, and privately even Kremlin critics in the region acknowledge this perception.

Does Russia's engagement in the Middle East reflect broader geopolitical ambitions, or are they limited to Russia's more regional interests?

Borshchevskaya: It has become very common now to talk about a new Cold War, but the Cold War had a specific and different set of rules that the United States and the USSR had followed. Russia today is not the Soviet Union, but that does not make it any less dangerous. In the Middle East, the difference today is that there is no guiding ideology for the Kremlin, and thus it can shift loyalties and alliances as it sees fit—it has greater flexibility. But in terms of interests, survival remains a priority, and an aggressive anti-Western foreign policy goes hand in hand with this goal. Putin simply has little else to offer to the public other than the "besieged fortress" narrative. It is increasingly the source of domestic legitimacy for Putin's regime. In that sense, whether it is the Middle East or other parts of the world, what is important is the zero-sum anti-Western approach—to expose the West as weak, to show success where the United States had failed. In the Middle East, Russia together with Iran is in a better position to resist the West

than separately and thus this partnership is important to watch. It is also about creating instability in the region to justify the need for Russia's presence, not unlike frozen conflicts in the former Soviet Union.

Lastly but certainly not least it is about creating buffer zones. Historically, as you know, Russia always expanded, but this expansion was often out of weakness—the center felt insecure and felt it needed more buffer zones, creating a self-perpetuating cycle where the more the empire expanded, the more insecure it felt, and the more buffer zones it needed. In Syria, Russia's positioning of its military hardware was clearly meant more to deter the West than to fight the self-proclaimed Islamic State and other terrorists, and it appeared that Putin was trying to create A2AD (anti-access area denial) bubbles to limit the Wests' ability to maneuver. These are essentially virtual buffer zones—buffer zones adjusted for modern reality. ❖

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