

Russian Views on the Middle East: A Trip Report

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June 3, 2016

Two Washington Institute experts share their findings from recent visits to Russia, where they discussed a wide range of regional issues with current and former officials, leading analysts, and other citizens.

In May, the authors conducted separate trips to Russia -- Ms. Borshchevskaya on an orientation visit and Ambassador Jeffrey as part of the Dartmouth-Kettering Track II Exchange Program. Held in Moscow and Zavidovo, the latest Dartmouth-Kettering dialogue focused on wide-ranging U.S.-Russian issues such as Ukraine, arms control, and cooperation in nondiplomatic fields. Russian interlocutors included various experts on the Middle East and bilateral relations; some were current government officials (e.g., the deputy foreign minister gave a briefing), while others were academics, former diplomats, or retired military officials. Below are the authors' impressions from various contacts.

Despite the perceived gridlock and conflicting worldviews on matters such as the Ukraine conflict, the main impression from the trip is that Russian officials and experts are generally optimistic about U.S.-Russian collaboration on Middle East issues. This attitude has been shaped by the nuclear agreement with Iran and, more recently, the focus on joint endeavors in Syria.

COMING TOGETHER ON SYRIA?

The optimism about the Syria situation was clearly influenced by the extensive discussions that Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov have held on the subject. For example, one of the chairs at the Kettering dialogue, Vitaly Naumkin, was recently selected as an advisor to the UN's Syria negotiation effort led by Staffan de Mistura.

Other players in the war were spoken of less favorably, however. Turkey and Saudi Arabia were often dismissed in disparaging terms, giving the explicit impression that Ankara will still be held accountable in some way for shooting down a Russian military jet last November (one Russian openly sympathized with Syria's claim to Turkey's Hatay province, where the aircraft was shot down). For its part, Riyadh was characterized as being too Islamic, with an oil-fueled economy that is heading for trouble.

Interestingly, official Russian discussion of Syria as presented in state-controlled media largely ignores the Sunni/Shiite dimension. According to this warped, simplistic view, the war is between the legitimate government of Bashar al-Assad and the terrorist opposition.

COUNTERTERRORISM AND STABILIZATION

Most interlocutors indicated that the United States and Russia share two common goals in the region: combating terrorism and fostering stability. The Russians are undoubtedly sincere on the former, despite the lackluster results of their efforts against the Islamic State, which stand in curious contrast to their devastating success against other forces fighting the Assad regime. Yet counterterrorism is hardly their top priority, and their definition of "stability" reveals significant divergence from most U.S. views of the region.

For one thing, Russian participants in the Kettering dialogue argued that Washington's supposed strategy of pursuing stability through democracy promotion was counterproductive. American participants made zero effort to advocate this alleged democracy-centered approach during hours of meetings, and they repeatedly pointed out that such promotion has not been U.S. policy for years. Yet these facts did little to dissuade the Russians from their theory.

Of more interest was the general Russian view that the right way to achieve stability is to promote secularism. Given Bashar al-Assad's record in Syria, they did not explicitly link him with either concept, but one can infer much from their repeated advocacy of this theme. They were less shy about branding the Islamic Republic of Iran as somehow secular at heart, with one participant describing a touching "secular" scene of a girl on the back of a motorbike embracing her male driver. They clearly saw President Hassan Rouhani's wing of the Iranian body politic as ascendant and had little to say about the Supreme Leader and his Revolutionary Guard.

What they seemingly failed to see was that they were advocating the imposition of a Western value -- secularism -- on the Middle East's complex social, religious, and cultural tapestry. This is arguably just as false a solution to the

stability dilemma as the purported American obsession with democracy. The emphasis on secularism is especially interesting in light of Russia's growing radicalization problem at home. Authorities are trying to resolve that problem through the suppression of religion, among other things, but Russian experts on the North Caucasus note that Islamic education has actually deterred individuals in that region from joining the Islamic State. In other words, ignorance about Islam is what opens the door for radicalization.

RUSSIAN VIEWS ON U.S. POLICY

Russian participants in the Kettering dialogue -- some of whom had held senior positions in the energy sector -- also emphasized that America's new energy production is a Middle East game-changer. One even congratulated his American colleagues for becoming the "New Saudi Arabia." This optimism was not tempered by efforts to explain the limited and temporary benefits of American tight oil and gas, or the reality of the Middle East's role in the global hydrocarbons market, which remains central today and will likely become even more crucial by the 2030s.

One problem with this Russian attitude is that it opens the door to a convenient "alternative universe" view of American motives. While the United States still seems to act as a traditional container of regional expansion in Moscow's backyard (e.g., by strengthening NATO and issuing Ukraine sanctions), Russians were somewhat puzzled by the Obama administration's reluctance to do the same in the Middle East, a region that has been part of America's extended backyard for four decades. Their apparent explanation for this disparity is that America has supposedly decreased its dependence on Middle East oil, refocused most of its regional attention onto terrorism, and accepted that stability is the main goal there, even if the alleged approach to that goal -- democracy promotion -- has failed. The danger is that this may suggest a greater commonality of interests with Russia than might be the case, especially in the next U.S. administration.

THE DOMESTIC SCENE

Outside official Moscow circles, many Russians complain about economic struggles and other issues that affect them personally, such as their inability to travel to Turkey and Egypt. The government suspended visa-free travel to Turkey following the November military shutdown incident; that same month, it suspended all flights to Egypt after an Islamic State affiliate took down a Russian passenger jet leaving the Sinai. To be sure, they have other travel opportunities in the region -- for example, one can now see ads for trips to Morocco on Moscow's streets, perhaps because King Mohammed visited the capital recently for the first time in years to improve bilateral relations. Yet this appears to provide little consolation given the growing restrictions elsewhere.

Regarding Syria, authorities talk as little as possible about casualties in an apparent effort to convince the public that Russia is not losing anything by intervening there. In fact, discussion of Syria, Ukraine, and similar foreign issues is now on the periphery. This is why an official can speak of Russia's Syria-related losses without mentioning the 224 citizens who died in the Sinai jet incident in October, shortly after Vladimir Putin launched the intervention to defend Assad. Authorities have even begun to deemphasize the recent death of Spetsnaz officer Alexander Prokhorenko; in March, he called airstrikes on his position in Palmyra after being surrounded by Islamic State forces, and state-controlled media trumpeted his heroism. Yet the Russian people would prefer not to have that kind of heroism, as sociologist Denis Volkov of the independent polling agency Levada-Center explained during the trip. Previously, in an October article for the Carnegie Endowment, he wrote: "With Syria, as with other domestic and foreign issues, the Russian government is taking public opinion into account not for the sake of the opinion itself, but in order to minimize the costs of implementing its policy."

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To the extent that the next U.S. administration looks at the Middle East in more traditional terms -- that is, like the current administration treats Ukraine, the Caucasus, the Black Sea, and the Baltics -- Russians could be surprised by the significant pushback against their agenda. As mentioned above, by identifying regional stability with the promotion of secularism, they are trying to sell an outside concept to a largely religious region. Worse, they are identifying themselves with two allegedly secular forces -- Assad and the Iranians -- that are profoundly destabilizing the region. This is a recipe for a clash potentially even more dangerous than in the Ukraine, where Russian military capabilities and political interests are predominant. Again, the danger of Russian miscalculation in the Middle East is high because Moscow seems to believe that most of America's geostrategic interests there are fading in parallel with its decreasing reliance on regional oil, and that the counterterrorism agenda is all that matters to Washington.

Meanwhile, the situation at home is growing worse. The Russian economy continues to decline. State-controlled television tries to distract the public with shows such as *Goodbye America*, which prophesies the fall of "the star-striped empire," but many Russians have stopped watching. Some are simply burying their head in the sand, focusing on other aspects of their lives. Putin will likely survive another election, but his government is less stable than it appears. Ironically, he seeks dialogue with the West because he has defined his rule in relation to the West, and therefore needs it.

In response, the West should push back on the Kremlin's Middle East agenda, but within the framework of extensive consultations at the official, think tank, academic, and Track II levels. In a volatile period and a volatile region, misunderstandings and failure to communicate will only heighten the inevitable dangers.

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