

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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What Is Vladimir Putin Doing in the Middle East [Part Two]?

The events unfolding in the Middle East are of immense significance, but, with presidential politics, same-sex marriage debates and the news-as-entertainment phenomenon, most Americans are ignorant of these developments. For that reason, I am adding a second part to the *Issues* of a few weeks ago, "What is Vladimir Putin doing in the Middle East?"

For decades, the United States has been the principal power providing guidance, protection, resources and influence in this critical region of the world. Since 2003, when the US overthrew Saddam Hussein, Iran has been inching its way into the larger Middle East, playing off the rivalry between Shiite and Sunni Islam. Since the US has traditionally supported the Sunnis (e.g., Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, etc.), that Shiite Iran is energizing with weapons and propaganda the Shiites of Iraq, and providing strategic support to the Assad regime of Syria and its lackey the Hezbollah terrorist network, is more than troublesome. Added to the encroachment of Iran is now Vladimir Putin's military buildup in Syria. Yaroslav Trofimov writes, "As seasoned politicians and diplomats survey the mayhem, they struggle to recall a moment when America counted for so little in the Middle East—and when it was held in such contempt, by friend and foe alike." Further, former diplomat Ryan Corker observes that "If you look at the heart of the Middle East, where the US once was, we are now gone—and in our place, we have Iran, Iran's Shiite proxies, the Islamic State and the Russians." Furthermore, President Obama made a very strong argument that the nuclear deal with Iran would cause it to be more flexible and work with us to deal with the challenges in Syria and other difficult areas in the region. But that has not happened. Instead, Iran is partnering closely with Russia to provide military and diplomat support to preserve the Assad regime. In this situation, the US is quite frankly irrelevant. Trofimov concludes that the mess in Syria and the strategic deployment by Russia "has given Mr. Putin the kind of Middle Eastern power projection that, in some ways, exceeds the influence that the Soviet Union enjoyed in the 1970s and 1980s . . . and has moved to position Russia as a viable alternative that can check US might in the region."

But, overall, what is Putin really up to? It is much grander than merely undergirding the regime of the butcher, Bashar al-Assad. For centuries, Russia has envisioned itself as the prime defender of Orthodox Christianity, which sees Moscow as the "Third Rome," and which sees Russia as the protector of all Orthodox Christians and places, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Indeed, as author Simon Sebag Montefiore points out, the current spokesman of the Russian Orthodox Church has declared, Putin's intervention in the Middle East is part "of the special role our country always played in the Middle East." Such a role motivated Catherine the Great and her activities in the late 1700s, which resulted in her

annexation of the Crimea in 1774 and the formation of the Black Sea fleet of Russia. Montefiore writes that “Catherine’s successors saw themselves as crusaders, with Russia destined to rule Constantinople and Jerusalem. Ultimately it was this aspiration—and a brawl over the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, between Russian-backed Orthodox and French-backed Catholic priests, that led to the Crimean War.” As President Obama has led an American retreat from the region, Putin, along with Iran, enthusiastically seeks to fill that vacuum, for Putin sees “himself in an unbroken tradition of Russian personal leadership and imperial-national power from the czars to today, the opportunity to diminish American prestige and project Russia as indispensable world arbiter.” It is also important to remember that Vladimir Putin is not an atheist. He has reinstated the importance of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia and forthrightly manifests a concern and allegiance to Russian Orthodoxy. Whatever his personal faith commitment, such an alliance with Russian Orthodoxy fits perfectly with his vision to restore the glory and majesty of the Russian autocracy in the Kremlin. Church and state mesh perfectly in the goals Putin has for the Middle East. The current US president cannot be lulled into complacency thinking that Putin is only interested in preserving the brutal regime of Assad in Syria or of fighting ISIS. He has much larger goals in mind.

In pursuing his ambitious, even delusionary goals in the Middle East, Putin is accomplishing something else. He wants the world, especially the US, to acknowledge him as a partner in power, one too important to be isolated by sanctions imposed by the West after the annexation of the Crimea. By the use of significant demonstrations of military power in Syria (e.g., the newest fighter jets, cruise missiles, supporting troops on the ground), Putin has closed off all the significant options left for the US and the West in Syria. The strategic alliance Putin is building with Iran and Hezbollah will be difficult to neutralize. Further, Putin’s overwhelming use of fighter jets all across Syria, even veering across the Turkish border, makes the establishment of a no-fly zone in Syria virtually impossible.

One final point: Every major analyst of Putin’s actions in Syria has consistently observed that President Obama and his administration “seemed to be caught flat-footed” (a *Washington Post* headline). Putin’s airstrikes, cruise missiles and the building of the airbase at Latakia have all threatened or weakened the two primary US operations in Syria: 1. The covert intelligence effort to aid Syrian rebels trying to oust Assad. 2. The overt military operation using US air power and aid to other rebel groups on the ground to decimate ISIS. Clearly, the Obama administration was slow to recognize and respond to what was happening. President Obama has had the lofty (and I believe utterly unrealistic) goal of creating a Middle East where [in his words] “Sunnis and Shias weren’t intent on killing each other.” Or creating a situation where Iran would “operate in a responsible fashion—not funding terrorist organizations, not trying to stir up sectarian discontent in other countries and not developing a nuclear weapon—you could see an equilibrium developing between predominately Sunni Gulf states and Iran.” He seeks to create “an international coalition and atmosphere in which people across sectarian lines are willing to compromise and are willing to work together in order to provide the next generation a fighting chance for a better future.” As he stated many times, the Iran nuclear deal was the key to the fulfillment of his vision. Where is that vision today? Iran is hardly joining with the US in bringing peace and stability to the Middle East. It has joined with Russia and Hezbollah to

secure the regime of one of the most brutal rulers of the 21st century—Bashar al Assad. While Obama was negotiating with Iran, Iran had Suleimani, commander of the Iranian Quds Force, making several trips to Moscow planning the current coalition between Russia, Iran and Hezbollah in Syria. As I am writing this, a coordinated strategy of these three is unfolding in Syria to preserve and extend Assad's regime in Syria. Where is the US in all of this? Marginalized. Obama says that what Russia is doing in the Middle East is a sign of weakness. But as Dennis Ross, special assistant to President Obama from 2009-2011, has written, "Neither the Russians nor the Iranians think they are losing in the region, and neither do the Israelis, Egyptians, Saudis, Turks, Qataris or Emiratis. They may not all like what the Russians are doing, but they see the need to deal with them. Is it possible that they are all wrong and Obama is right?" The answer to that rhetorical question is self-evident!

A new balance of power is indeed coming into being in the Middle East and, because of American disengagement under Obama, the US has lost its once significant leverage. What exactly that new balance will look like is still problematic, but, at this point in time, it does not look like the US will alone be providing guidance, protection, resources and influence to the region. Russia and Iran are now the major competitors with the US for that role. It is a new Middle East—and it seems to be a much more dangerous Middle East!

See *The Economist* (3 October 2015), pp. 17-18, 53-54; Dennis Ross in the *Washington Post* (9 October 2015); Niall Ferguson in the *Wall Street Journal* (10-11 October 2015); Greg Miller and Karen DeYoung in the *Washington Post* (9 October 2015); Simon Sebag Montefiore in the *New York Times* (9 October 2015); and Yaroslav Trofimov, "America's Fading Footprint" in the *Wall Street Journal* (10-11 October 2015).