

The Impact of the Syrian Conflict on Russian Relations with Other Middle Eastern Countries

By Mark N. Katz, Fairfax, VA

Abstract

Russia has taken a strong stand in supporting Syria's ruling regime in the on-going civil war. Surprisingly, this stand has not fundamentally altered Russia's relations with most other countries of the Middle East.

Moscow Backs Assad

Moscow's continued support for the Assad dictatorship's efforts to suppress its opponents has not only had a negative impact on Russian relations with the West, but with many Middle Eastern states that support the Syrian opposition. How negative this impact has been, though, has varied greatly.

This article will examine how the Syrian conflict has impacted on Russian relations with the Sunni-dominated governments of six key Middle Eastern states that oppose the Assad regime and Russian support for it: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and Libya (space does not allow a discussion of more). The conclusion will then examine the impact of the Syrian conflict on Moscow's overall relations with the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia

The Syrian conflict has had an especially negative impact on Moscow's relations with the Kingdom. Non-existent during the Cold War, Saudi-Russian relations were generally poor during the 1990s and early 2000s when Moscow accused Riyadh of supporting the Chechen rebels. Russian officials and commentators saw the Kingdom as supporting the rise of Sunni radicalism in the Muslim regions of Russia, in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and elsewhere. In 2003, though, a rapprochement occurred between the two countries. While some differences remained (most notably over Iran), the countries appeared to share a common interest in supporting the status quo in the region. Moscow, in particular, hoped that improved Saudi-Russian relations would lead to large-scale exports of arms and other goods to the Kingdom, as well as investment opportunities for Russian petroleum firms there.

Shortly after the start of the Arab Uprisings at the beginning of 2011, though, tensions emerged between Moscow and Riyadh. With Saudi Arabia supporting the opposition to Moscow-backed regimes in Libya and especially in Syria, the older Russian image has re-emerged of Saudi Arabia as the supporter of radical Sunni Islamist forces not just in the Middle East, but inside Russia itself. Many Russian observers portray Saudi Arabia as an even more sinister force than the U.S.

While the Obama Administration's support for the Arab uprisings is based on (what Moscow views as) the mistaken notion that democracy is possible in Arab countries, Saudi Arabia—which Moscow does not see as a champion of democracy—knowingly supports them in order to promote the rise of Sunni radicalism. Russian commentators also express disappointment that Moscow's earlier hopes for increased economic ties with the Kingdom have been largely disappointed. Without anything to mitigate them, Saudi-Russian relations appear likely to remain acrimonious as long as the Syrian conflict persists. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's calls for Saudi Arabia (along with Iran) to participate in a peace conference on Syria possibly indicate that Moscow hopes to mitigate the damage that differences over Syria have done to Saudi-Russian relations.

Qatar

While sometimes difficult even beforehand, Russia's relations with Qatar have also soured over the Syrian uprising. Just as it does with Saudi Arabia, Moscow sees Qatar's support for the Syrian opposition as reflecting a desire to promote Sunni radicalism both in that country and elsewhere (including Russia's North Caucasus). The fact that a country as small as Qatar has been acting in opposition to Russian interests is especially galling to Moscow. Russian-Qatari differences over Syria, though, have not prevented the giant Russian natural gas corporation, Gazprom, from signing an agreement in December 2012 to purchase "major volumes" of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) from Qatar or from opening a representative office there in February 2013.

Turkey

Moscow and Ankara have had serious differences with regard to Syria. Forced to care for a growing number of refugees fleeing Syria as well as Syrian government forces firing across the border into Turkey, Ankara has not been pleased that Moscow continues to aid the Assad regime. For its part, Moscow is not happy that Turkey has supported the Syrian opposition and has called for the departure of Assad as well as for (more worrisome to Russia) NATO to take action with regard to

Syria. Moscow was especially furious when in October 2012 Ankara forced an aircraft flying across Turkey en route from Russia to Syria to land due to a tip from the U.S. government that it was conveying Russian arms to Damascus (according to one Russian press account, it was “only” carrying radar equipment for anti-aircraft systems and elements of missile systems).

Yet despite their differences over Syria, Russia-Turkish relations have remained good. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan visited Moscow in July 2012, and several “important economic agreements” were signed then. Putin also visited Turkey in early December 2012. While Putin and Erdogan expressed differences over Syria, their main focus appeared to be their bilateral trade relationship. Having reached a massive \$32 billion in 2011, Putin and Erdogan expressed the hope that this would reach \$100 billion in a year. With large-scale energy and construction deals as well as tourism (3.5 million Russians visited Turkey in 2011) supporting them, Russian-Turkish bilateral economic interests are simply too important to both Moscow and Ankara for either to allow them to be disrupted by differences over Syria. In May 2013, the deputy director of the Russian Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation enthused about the prospect of Turkey buying a Russian long-range air defense missile system.

Jordan

Moscow and Amman have also differed over Syria. Like Turkey, Jordan has been forced to care for a large number of refugees fleeing from the conflict in Syria, and so is unhappy with continued Russian support to the Assad regime, which has allowed the conflict to continue. Moscow, for its part, is unhappy that the Syrian opposition has been receiving arms via Jordan. Here again, though, these two governments have decided not to let their differences over Syria hamper their improving bilateral relations. On February 19, 2013, Putin received Jordan’s King Abdullah II in Moscow. Although they discussed Syria and the Middle East peace process, they focused more on their growing trade ties (\$426.5 million in 2011), the possibility of Russian participation in the construction of Jordan’s first nuclear power plant, and even military-technical cooperation (which Putin described as “developing well”). Included in the latter was the startup of an RPG-32 hand-held anti-tank grenade launcher assembly and testing plant in Jordan by the Russian firm Rostekh in May 2013. Further, Moscow has also begun delivering humanitarian aid for the Syrian refugees in Jordan.

Egypt

Many Russian commentators have expressed apprehension about Egypt’s new Islamist president, Mohammad

Morsi, and his Muslim Brotherhood supporters. The Russian government, though, has taken a more pragmatic attitude toward him. Although the new Egyptian government has been critical of the Assad regime, Moscow very much appreciates that Morsi has expressed opposition to foreign (i.e., non-Arab) intervention in the Syrian conflict. Although Morsi upset Washington by working to improve Egypt’s relations with Iran, this initiative did not bother Moscow as Russia also has relatively good relations with Tehran. Russian tourists continue to visit Egypt in large numbers. One account noted that over a million Russians visited Egypt both in 2010 (the year before Mubarak fell) and in 2012 (the year afterward). In February 2013, the Russian Ambassador to Egypt, Sergei Kirpichenko advised that, “The scale of Egypt’s Islamization should not be exaggerated,” and even blamed what Islamization has occurred on the previous regime: “The country took the Islamization course back in the 1970s when Anwar El Sadat... started flirting with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic political forces, and the revolution of 2011 brought those forces to power.”

Further signs of improving Russian-Egyptian relations in 2013 include Morsi’s issuance of an invitation to Putin to visit Egypt, the discussion of Russia extending a loan to Egypt, and the growth in Russian-Egyptian agricultural trade. Perhaps especially since the Morsi government has differences with the U.S., as well as with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Moscow has chosen to focus on those areas where the Russian and Egyptian governments agree rather than upon their differences over Syria.

Libya

President Putin, Foreign Minister Lavrov, and other high level Russian officials have often cited how the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 imposing a no-fly zone over Libya were “overstepped” by the West and its Arab allies to bring about the downfall of the Qaddafi regime as the reason why Russia will not agree to even more limited Security Council sanctions against the Assad regime. Moscow is adamant that it will not allow what happened in Libya to happen again in Syria.

It is ironic, then, that—despite having difficulties at first—Russia has developed relatively good relations with the new government in Libya. In December 2012, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov announced that Moscow was in talks with Tripoli regarding Russia training Libyan military personnel. In January 2013, the Russian oil firm Tatneft held discussions with Libya’s National Oil Corporation about the former resuming operations in Libya; Tatneft employees returned to Libya three months later. In February 2013, the Russian Federal Service for Military-Technical

Cooperation announced that it was holding talks about resuming Russian arms sales to Libya. Also in February, Russian Foreign Minister met with Mahmoud Jibril, the leader of the Libyan National Forces Alliance, in Moscow where they discussed “ways to strengthen the traditionally friendly Russian–Libyan relationships in various fields.” Russian Railways has also expressed hope that it will soon resume the work in Libya that was interrupted by the 2011 conflict. The post-Qaddafi Russian–Libyan relationship, then, is yet another case of how differences over Syria have not been allowed to get in the way of improving bilateral ties.

Conclusion

Syria has been a divisive issue between Moscow, on the one hand, and the six Sunni-dominated governments discussed here, on the other. Moscow’s relations are truly bad, though, with only two of them: Saudi Arabia and Qatar. By contrast, Moscow has maintained or even improved its relations with the other four: Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and Libya.

Although Russian fears that Saudi Arabia and Qatar are actively supporting Sunni radicals not just in Syria but also in the post-Soviet space may go a long way

to explaining Moscow’s poor relations with these two monarchies, it is noteworthy that Moscow either has or hopes to have improved economic ties with the other four. What this suggests is that if Saudi Arabia and Qatar could bring themselves to increase their economic ties with Russia, the existing level of animosity in their relations with Moscow could diminish considerably. While the Qatari government has taken steps in this direction, it is not certain whether the Saudi or a future Sunni-dominated Syrian government would feel inclined to do so.

On the other hand, Moscow’s good relations with Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, and other Sunni governments may not prevent increased Muslim opposition activity in the North Caucasus or other parts of the post-Soviet space. Indeed, continued Russian support for the Assad regime in Syria may only encourage Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and non-state actors in the Sunni world to retaliate by supporting Sunni opposition movements inside Russia and the region.

About the Author:

Mark N. Katz is Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University (Fairfax, Virginia, USA). Links to many of his publications can be found on his website: www.marknkatz.com

ANALYSIS

Civil War, Revolution or Counter-Insurgency? The Syrian Conflict through Russian Eyes

By Philipp Casula, Zurich

Abstract

The Russian coverage of the ongoing conflict in Syria differs significantly from its depiction in most Western media outlets. Russian journalists report mostly from the perspective of the government and disregard the opposition’s standpoint. The opposition itself is mostly portrayed as radical and fundamentalist. There is a particular lack of political and background analysis. The conflict is usually presented as the regime’s struggle with terrorism, a view which not only legitimizes the Syrian regime, but which also appears to conform to Russian domestic and foreign policies.

Confusing Alliances

In his latest book, *State of Exception*, German novelist Navid Kermani highlights how the Syrian conflict blurs common interpretative patterns: On the one hand, there is an apparently secular Syrian regime, which, however,

is allied with the Iranian theocracy and the Lebanese Hezbollah. On the other hand, there is a partly religious Syrian opposition participating in demanding democracy and human rights. Also the Russian position in the conflict causes confusion and concern in the West: