Russia’s role in the Middle East: a stabilizing force?

Russia has successfully leveraged its influence in Syria to become an important, if not central, power broker in the Middle East. Nowhere was that more visible than in the meeting between the Israeli, US and Russian national security advisors in Jerusalem at the end of June 2019. While nothing concrete emerged from the talks, it was clear from the security chiefs’ statements that all three countries are setting the stage to stabilize the region, drawing a line under the tectonic shifts that have transformed the Middle East in the last decade.

Power shifts: US actions give Iran greater power in the region, upset status quo

Russia’s rapidly expanded influence in the Middle East comes on the back of a decade of seismic events which have not only disrupted power dynamics between regional actors in the Middle East, but also altered the status quo among world powers involved in the region.

The US’s invasion of Iraq dismantled the Saddam Hussain regime, the Iraqi state and the old regional order extant since the 1970s, and led to the emergence of a patchwork of Shi’a political parties which quickly came to dominate Iraq’s newly formed institutions with political support, in varying degrees, from Iran. That country’s influence became critical to the survival of the new Iraqi government after ISIS conquered large parts of the country. Iran’s assistance in creating the Public Mobilization Units to defeat ISIS embedded it even deeper within Iraqi politics, and it played a key role in forming a government following the 2018 elections.

Beyond Iraq, the intervention of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and militia in Syria on behalf of the Bashar al-Assad government and Iran’s longstanding support for Hezbollah in Lebanon expanded Iran’s regional power. Iran’s emergence on the regional stage undermined the traditional hegemony of powerful authoritarian states and increased the potential for popular uprisings from segments of the population which saw an opportunity to sweep away longstanding dictatorships impervious to the economic and social stagnation of their countries.

While the grand ambition of President George Bush’s administration to bring “regime change” to the Middle East was thwarted by the insurgency in Iraq this was cold comfort to the region’s traditional powers, which were shocked by US’s evolving role from protector of the status quo to a major destabilizer. Under President Barack Obama, the US-Iran negotiations and subsequent nuclear deal deepened the anger of the old order, which feared a potentially burgeoning friendship between the
two antagonists.

Meanwhile, another strategic decision by the US, namely, to scale back the military’s role in Iraq and shift its foreign policy away from the Middle East to other larger strategic arenas, such as Asia, created a space for a new power broker to step in: Russia.

**Syria intervention: Russia becomes key influence in regional politics, gains leverage over Europe**

When Russia moved into Syria to provide military aircover to the pro-Assad forces, observers in the region wondered what it could gain from the intervention.

It has since become clear that President Vladimir Putin and his foreign minister Sergey Lavrov saw a number of opportunities on a regional scale, and the position it has built for itself offers something to multiple actors: Russia is now the lead figure in the critical triumvirate (along with Turkey and Iran) that controls the political future of the Assad regime in Syria. By saving Assad, Russia has made Iran totally dependent on it for military assistance.

Saudi Arabia, which opposes Assad, has acquiesced to Moscow’s moves in the region. The last several OPEC meetings indicate that the oil cartel now relies on Russia to cobble together output restraint agreements. Even Israel, a potent military player and regional power, has come to see Russia’s role in Syria as a stabilizing force and, more importantly, as a restraint on Iran. Russia has also restrained Turkey from using unbridled force to destroy Kurdish forces in Syria.

Russia’s newfound political influence in the Middle East has also provided it with leverage in Europe: Moscow’s success in crafting a political settlement in Syria is critically important for Europe because it could lead to the repatriation of sizeable numbers of Syrian refugees, a contributing factor to the downfall of the EU’s most powerful leader, Angela Merkel, and key to the rise of anti-immigrant right wing parties across the continent. In return, Russia could seek an end to European diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions following its annexation of Crimea and attempts to dismember the Ukraine.

**The Jerusalem talks: Russia offers to restrain Iran in exchange for concessions from**
US on Syria

The deal that Russia appeared to be angling for in Jerusalem was the rehabilitation of the Assad regime in exchange for the US’s acquiescence to its survival and future support for the reconstruction of the country. In exchange, Russia is likely to contain Iran’s influence in Syria with the ultimate aim of removing all “foreign forces” from the country. This is a complicated move, as Iranian forces are seen by Russia as critical in the fight against “terrorists” and are there at invitation of Damascus. Nikolai Patrushev, the head of Moscow’s security council, reiterated in Jerusalem that Damascus, not Russia, must be the actor to negotiate with Iran.

Behind the scenes, Moscow has been pushing the Assad regime to curtail pro-Iranian militia and remove prominent Iranian supporters from the regime. An offer of substantial aid from the GCC countries to rebuild the country could be a substantial sweetener. Israel, which is the main beneficiary of a constrained Iran, will help Russia’s rehabilitation with the US Congress with the ultimate aim of revoking US sanctions put in place after Crimea. At the conference, Patrushev emphasized that Moscow understood Israel’s security concerns and was keen to ensure the elimination of the threats against it. [1]

Although a long shot, Russia could also offer Iran its help in brokering new negotiations with the US over the nuclear issue and sanctions on its oil exports in return for Tehran’s cooperation in Syria. Putin discussed a regional security and confidence building proposal with Trump at the recent G-20 summit in Osaka, and following that the UAE’s foreign minister flew to Moscow to discuss Gulf security. Brokering peace between Iran and its neighbors would be the ultimate prize for Russia and guarantee it a critical role in the security arena of the Gulf. As far-fetched as it seems given the depth of the disagreements in the region, the distance that Russia has travelled in the last two decades in terms of strategic positioning makes it the most likely player to help stabilize a very volatile situation.

Sources:
[1] Al Monitor June 25, 2019 “Moscow seeks Iran-Israel compromise at Jerusalem security chiefs meeting”