Russia is playing a much greater role now in the Middle East than it has for a long time and President Vladimir Putin appears to be doing very well, judged expert Mark Katz. However, Katz argued that even if the Trump administration’s priorities in the region are more closely aligned with Russia’s interests, Putin’s more assertive behavior will create a number of challenges going forward. Katz is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University, and spoke at a CSIS Middle East Program Gulf Roundtable titled “Russia’s Middle East Strategy and the Trump Administration” on January 6, 2017.

Russia’s greatest success in the Middle East in recent times has been its intervention in Syria, which not only prevented Bashar al-Assad from falling, but also allowed the Syrian regime to regain territory across the country. Katz observed that Russia has strengthened its ties with Syria and has simultaneously nurtured good relations with almost all of the other governments in the Middle East and with several key non-state actors in the region as well. The recent thaw in Russia’s relations with Turkey and its improving ties with many Gulf countries are key elements of this trend, he noted. In part, Russia has capitalized on the United States’ deteriorating ties with a number of governments in the region, Katz argued.

President Putin’s expressed support for the established order in the region contributed to his ability to improve these relations, Katz contended. In contrast to the Obama administration, Putin shows no interest in spreading values like democracy in the region, and Middle East governments appreciate this. In return, Putin welcomes the fact that Middle East governments do not challenge Russia on sensitive issues such as Chechnya or Ukraine. In this respect, Putin likely takes comfort from the fact that the Trump administration has not shown any desire to spread U.S. values in the region in a way that would challenge Russian interests.
Katz described the Trump administration’s expressions of appreciation for President Putin as remarkable, and there are various ways that Russia stands to benefit in the Middle East from a Trump presidency. Trump’s foreign policy appointees seem to regard the Islamic State group (ISG), other jihadist groups, and Iran as greater threats than Russia, and the president-elect has stated that he plans to work with Russia on the fight against the ISG. With a large Muslim population in Russia that is repressed both politically and socially, Katz argued that Putin will welcome this coordination, as the fight against the ISG is one of the pillars of his attempts to prevent Islamic radicalism from destabilizing Russia.

Trump’s hostility towards Iran is also privately welcomed in Moscow, Katz contended. Russia feared that U.S.-Iranian relations would improve after the signing of the Iran nuclear deal under President Obama, and would benefit from this thaw being reversed. Indeed, Katz added that if Trump were to rip up the deal, Russia would also gain from the deterioration in U.S.-European relations that would likely follow.

However, President Putin is likely wary about why President-elect Trump would praise him, Katz opined, and Putin also realizes that Trump will be difficult to work with. Indeed, rather than supporting Trump in the U.S. presidential election, Katz asserted that any Russian interventions in the campaign were more likely done to prevent Hillary Clinton from becoming president, whom Putin blames for inciting protests in Russia. Having proven himself to be a master tactician in the region, Putin will be ready to take advantage of any mistakes Trump makes in the Middle East, Katz argued.

However, Katz predicted that Russia will also make mistakes in the region. Although Putin may be skilled at tactical maneuvers, Katz argued that he lacks strategic vision in the Middle East and has no clear sense of who his real friends in the region are. In addition to the lack of strategy, Katz noted that Russia’s ability to act in the Middle East is also limited by financial constraints. Putin’s intervention in Syria has been done in a relatively inexpensive manner and Russia may not have the ability to replicate such interventions in other parts of the region. Indeed, an event could occur elsewhere in the world that would require Russia to pull back from the Middle East, reversing its recent gains.

Although Russia is now playing a more proactive diplomatic role to end the Syrian conflict, Katz observed that its diplomatic power is also limited. Russia has nurtured its ties with Israel over time and also enjoys relatively good relations with the Palestinian Authority, Fatah, Hamas, and Hezbollah, but it has seemed either unwilling or unable to promote a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nor is Russia leading any diplomatic efforts to reconcile Saudi Arabia and Iran. Instead, Putin is exploiting tensions in the Gulf in the short term by selling weapons to each, Katz remarked. Putin’s recent decision to welcome a delegation of Houthis to Moscow was intended to send a warning to Saudi Arabia about its involvement with the Syrian opposition, Katz contended, rather than constituting a serious attempt to resolve the conflict in Yemen.

Finally, public opinion in the Middle East may also limit Russia’s ability to act. In particular, Katz highlighted the risk of problems arising with Turkey, where anti-Russian sentiments are growing. Russia’s support for the Syrian regime’s campaign to retake Aleppo from opposition groups provoked public outrage in Turkey, even as relations between the two governments were improving. Therefore, even if the Trump administration’s priorities in the Middle East align more closely with Russia’s interests, financial, diplomatic, and strategic shortcomings will challenge Russia’s expanded role in the region. Katz compared Russia’s interventions in the Middle East with running through a minefield: Putin can’t keep running for ever – eventually, he will hit a mine.

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