

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Russia, the United States, and the Middle East

by Jon B. Alterman

We don't know much about what was said when U.S. President Donald Trump sat across from Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the G20 summit on July 7, but we do know they talked a lot about the Middle East. By his own account, Trump told Putin, "There's so much killing in Syria. We got to solve Syria."

Russia has been playing a more active role in the Middle East in the last five years, and before committing to strategic cooperation with Russia, it is helpful to judge Russia's objectives and strategies in the region.

It is easier to grasp Russian strategy by contrasting it with Chinese strategy. China has a large stake in the region's trajectory, relying on the Middle East for more than 60 percent of its imported energy. China has an expanding economic footprint, as trade and investment increase and Chinese contractors grab a multi-billion dollar share of infrastructure projects. Despite its rising interests, China's quite evident ambition is to **expand its economic footprint without taking the expensive step of expanding its security footprint**. China seeks to complement the U.S. security presence with its own economic presence, not diminish it. Widespread interest in Chinese goods and Chinese know-how mean China is often welcomed warmly by host governments.

By contrast, Russia's footprint in the Middle East is mostly in the security field. Russia sells billions of dollars' worth of weapons systems, but it has little trade or investment in non-military areas. It has sought to become the arms supplier of second resort, selling to countries such as Egypt and Algeria when the United States has refused. In contrast to China, which seeks explicitly to work alongside the United States, Russia's efforts in the Middle East seem precisely designed to balance against U.S. security interests. Russia has bolstered the Syrian government after the Obama White House declared "**Assad must go**," delivered sophisticated S-300 missiles to Iran, and deployed even more advanced S-400 missiles in Syria.

This is not to say that Russia is acting in the Middle East merely to oppose the United States. Russia has its own judgments about the threats that come from terrorist groups and the wisdom of bolstering autocratic regimes. But there is another important dynamic at work. Russia seems to see international relations as a zero-sum game. Seen through this prism, the more benefit that accrues to the United States, the worse

(continued on page 2)

Turmoil in the GCC

The current rift in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is deeper than any in memory, CSIS Senior Vice Presidents Jon Alterman and Frank Verrastro assess in a new commentary. Entitled "Qatar Crisis: Turmoil in the GCC" and penned a few days after four Arab states broke diplomatic relations with Qatar, the commentary dissects the geopolitical context for the crisis and speculates its potential short- and long-term impacts on energy markets, regional politics, and U.S. strategy. The two experts argue that while war seems unlikely, the GCC that emerges could be a very different organization than that which existed at the start of the crisis. You can read the full commentary online [HERE](#). ■

Sana'a's Solar Revolution

Sana'a, Yemen may be famous for its traditional tower houses, but since a bloody civil war engulfed Yemen in 2015, a new sight has become increasingly common on its skyline—solar panels.

Electricity supplies are down 70 percent since fighting destroyed several key **power stations** in the impoverished country. Many households in the capital now have power less than six hours per day. With higher fuel prices as a result of the war, private generators are simply too expensive for most people to operate. But for many Yemenis, the answer lies in the sky.

Cheap Chinese solar panels can provide a household with enough energy to operate lights, a washer, and a television each day, and they go for as little as \$80 in local markets. Once they have been purchased, the electricity costs go to zero. In the two years since the conflict broke out, solar energy production in Yemen has quadrupled. Still, storm clouds are looming. In the chaos of a wartime economy, **low-quality and counterfeit** products have seeped into the market.

Some Yemenis have taken matters into their own hands. In 2016, a mix of public, NGO, and private actors joined together to launch the **Green Pages** initiative, Yemen's first solar energy platform. Although Green Pages is not a governmental body and can neither enforce quality control nor prosecute fraudsters, it sets its own standards for products and connects customers with trusted suppliers.

Where government cannot or will not act, others are stepping in. No one wants to emulate the tragedies of Yemen, but out of those tragedies is at least one example worth considering. ■ SA

it is for Russia, and the more hostility there is to the United States, the better it is for Russia.

Russia's bid for increased Middle Eastern influence comes after a period in which the United States had a remarkable run in the region. Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union had clients scattered here and there: Syria, Egypt for a time, South Yemen, and so on. But the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and Russia was scarcely able to gather up what it had lost. By 2010, every single country in the Middle East had a positive relationship with the United States, except for Iran and Syria, which were trying to improve relations. What Russia had to show in 2010 for decades of efforts to build ties was a forlorn little naval base in Syria. If someone told you in 1980 that would be the case, it would have seemed strange.

For decades, U.S. strategy in the Middle East has been intended to create more resilient societies—first to foster societies strong enough to reject communism, and more recently to foster societies strong enough to reject terrorism. Broad economic opportunities, open markets, and inclusive politics are all intended to feed into that goal. Russia, however, seems to see the economic focus as a way to exclude Russia, and the political focus as dangerous and naïve.

The Russian strategy, as best we can make out, has three components. The first is to challenge Middle Eastern governments' prevailing pro-Western instincts. This is done in part by undermining the image of the West and Western intentions, and in part by fomenting disorder among pro-Western coalitions (which, it must be admitted, were initially established to contain the Soviet Union).

The second component is ensuring that popular revolutions in the Middle East do not inspire copycat efforts by Russian citizens or the citizens of their allies. Successful popular movements are a threat to Russian stability.

The third component is working assiduously to define security narrowly, as a battle between governments and terrorists. The Russian effort seems directed at blunting broad Western efforts to coordinate assistance to promote economic, social, and political development. Russia has wedded itself tightly to the strategy of building strong bilateral ties to the security establishments of Middle Eastern governments, and it has shown its mettle by cleaving to the Syrian government through a series of atrocities. The Russian government's own record fighting terrorism in the Caucasus is indicative of its preferred strategy. It is one of scorched earth.

Seen broadly, the United States and its allies have been playing for "victory" in the Middle East, seeking to promote economic and political systems that further stability. Russia, by contrast, seems eager to play for a tie. Arguably, Russia cannot "win"—compared to the United States, it is "[outgunned](#), [outmanned](#), [outnumbered](#), and [out-planned](#)." But Russia can be a spoiler, carving out spheres of influence and using the limited strength it has to block others' plans. For the United States and its allies, which have devoted trillions of dollars and vast efforts to create resilient governments that participate in multilateral systems that foster wide interests, the Russian drive toward emphasizing narrow security measures not only impedes the Western construct, but it also affects the trajectory of the region.

On purely tactical objectives, there is a great deal of overlap between Russian and U.S. goals in the Middle East. For example, neither Russia nor the United States wants the Islamic State group (ISG) to take over Syria. But on a strategic level, there is more divergence. Russia appears reluctant to attack the ISG, believing that its existence legitimizes both the Syrian government and the Russian role supporting it. More broadly, Russia sees a multilateral effort to promote resilient societies not only as folly, but also as a threat to Russian stability. The differences between the United States and Russia in the Middle East are not merely matters of emphasis; they are fundamental. They show every sign of remaining so. ■ 7/18/17

In Case You Missed It

CSIS Middle East Program Adjunct Fellow Dina Esfandiary authored an [analysis](#) of Iran's presidential election.

The program hosted a [roundtable discussion](#) on the intersection of jihadi-salafism and local conflict in the Maghreb and Sahel.

In the Media

"It's a very dangerous position for a secretary of state...when you can't confidently speak in the name of the president." Jon Alterman to *BBC* on challenges Tillerson faces in handling the Gulf crisis, 6/30/17.

"I don't think there is a strategy, there is an instinct to be disruptive, to break from the previous administration." Jon Alterman in *The National* on President Trump's Middle East doctrine six months into his presidency, 7/5/17.

"Yemen is wickedly hard...People want obvious answers. Yemen doesn't give any obvious answers." Jon Alterman in *The Los Angeles Times* on repercussions for Yemen of U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia, 6/13/17.

The Middle East Notes and Comment electronic newsletter is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s). © 2017 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The CSIS Middle East Program

Jon B. Alterman
Senior Vice President, Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and Director, Middle East Program

Haim Malka
Deputy Director and Senior Fellow

Emily Grunewald
Associate Director

Will Todman
Associate Fellow

Margo Balboni
Research Associate

Abigail Kukura
Research Assistant

Sumaya Almajdoub
Caroline Bechtel
Mark Berlin
Research Interns