Episode Transcript

Episode Title:
Russia’s Security Interests in the Middle East

Guests:
Olga Oliker, Alexey Khlebnikov, Wa'el Alzayat, and Eugene Rumer
Jon Alterman:
Stories of Russian private military companies’ presence in Libya aren’t news. Rumors of shadowy Wagner Group figures operating in western Libya have abounded since at least 2018.

News Clip:
The Wagner Group, a mercenary organization with ties to the Kremlin, has joined forces with a pro-Haftar militia to capture Libya’s biggest oil field.

News Clip:
Private Russian fighters from the Wagner Group have helped Haftar make gains in his year-long assault to try to take back the capitol.

News Clip:
It’s nearly a year now that we’ve been reporting on the increased use of mercenaries by Russia in countries across the world.

Jon Alterman:
But even a dozen years ago, Russia wasn’t militarily present in the Middle East at all.

How did Russia expand its security interests to encompass not just its immediate neighbors? How did Russia make the leap from Syria to Libya?

In this series, we will uncover the motivations and implications behind Russia’s political, economic, and security policies in the Middle East. We will look at Russian-U.S. relations in the region, Russian soft power, and how the Middle East views Russia. We’ll discuss Russia’s growing role in the region and the future of Russia’s presence in the Middle East.

I’m your host, Jon Alterman, senior vice president, Zbigniew Brezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, and this is the Russia in the Middle East podcast miniseries.

In this episode, we’ll take a closer look at Russia’s security interests in the Middle East. We’ll start with an overview of Moscow’s military presence and then look at Russia in Syria, and then in Libya.

The Russia that re-entered the Middle East in 2015 was not the Russia of the 1990s. It rebuilt its security apparatus and capitalized on a weakened U.S. presence. But as Russia has become more involved in the region, what does it see as its security interests in the Middle East?

Olga Oliker, director of the Europe and Central Asia Program at the International Crisis Group and guest from episode two, explains how Russia has frequently emphasized the link between state collapse and ensuing chaos, erosion of borders, and spillovers of violence:

Olga Oliker:
Russia is concerned about threats of Islamist violent insurrections, that they might spill over, including into Russia. It's also concerned about instability from the standpoint that if regimes are overthrown in one place, if violent revolution is successful, even if nonviolent revolution is successful in one place, then it's more plausible somewhere else. And because Russia has historically viewed color revolutions, Arab Spring, all of that as part of U.S. policy abroad, that it does not see these things as spontaneous and local. It sees them as the result of foreign interference. It looks at that and thinks, "Okay, something like this could
happen near us, or even potentially be attempted in Russia itself."

**Jon Alterman:**
Russia attributes current instability in the region to practices of geopolitical engineering.

**Olga Oliker:**
There's this very strong desire to help maintain stability, vis-a-vis any kind of revolution from below, both because of the potential for spillover and because of the potential that it doesn't so much spill over as the same things happen elsewhere, whether because of copycats, or more likely because they really do believe that this is something other countries and the United States foment and if it works here, they'll do they'll keep doing it.

**Jon Alterman:**
So from a security perspective, the threat of spillovers is one motivation. Countering Western influence is another. Opportunism is a third.

**Olga Oliker:**
The opportunity dynamic is that this is a place where Russia can play a stabilizing role. This is a place where Russia can show that it is a global power—global powers being countries that get involved in other places, that wield influence, and whose actions really do influence.

**Jon Alterman:**
That opportunism allows for Russia to form relations and get along with many of its Middle East neighbors, even those who are not traditional allies, says Oliker.

**Olga Oliker:**
It doesn't have a “with us or against us” approach. It has a, "We agree on a few things. We disagree on a few things. We can talk, we can try to advance the things we agree on, and we'll continue to compete where we disagree." So you get these odd situations where Russia and Turkey are on different sides in Syria and Libya, but Turkey is still buying Russian weapons. They're still talking. They still act like comparatively friendly countries.

You get the situation where Russia is able to deal with both the Iranians and the Israelis. And some will say that this isn't sustainable, that eventually Russia has to pick a side. And I think in some places it may, but in the meantime I think this is working for Moscow pretty well, and I wouldn't expect them to back away from it anytime soon.

**Jon Alterman:**
This approach allows Russia to build alliances that benefit it economically. Like we discussed in episode two, by partnering within the security realm, Moscow can sell arms to its allies and cement a relationship in areas further down the economic pipeline.

**Olga Oliker:**
The military component of this is actually, like a lot of Russian military activity outside of Russia over the last six years, let's say, since 2014 and the war in Ukraine, it's one of a certain low bar for the use of force, at least compared to what we expected of them in the past, that they're willing to go in and use force, but they don't use a lot of force. It's fairly judicious, and it's never all at once. There's room to escalate. There's room to build it up, dial it down, dial it up. So they give themselves a certain amount of space. And that's because they're not necessarily looking for immediate victory. They're usually bolstering somebody rather than trying to be quick and decisive.
Jon Alterman:
Part of the reason Russia is able to deploy force as needed is because of Russia’s use of private military companies, or PMCs.

Olga Oliker:
It's hard to tell what's going on with Russia's private military companies and that's intentional. One of the benefits of using tools like that is that you have deniability. Private military companies, private soldiers, are illegal in Russia. The notion that if you told the Russians, "This is a Russian private military company and it's operating in Syria or in Libya, and it would be illegal if it was operating in Russia, even if it's hired an awful lot of Russians and it's run by Russians."

Jon Alterman:
PMCs operate in a legal grey area. While they are operating under the orders of private companies with a goal to profit, they are not free from the Kremlin’s yoke either.

Olga Oliker:
But the idea is no, there are no Russian soldiers. And it's not entirely clear always how many of these people there are, or what exactly they're doing, if the Russian military is also there, as it is in Syria, what the relationship is between the private military companies and regular forces.

Jon Alterman:
Russia is public about its military presence in Syria. It is also public about the presence of PMCs in Syria and Libya. But if there are Russian troops in Libya, their presence is murkier.

Olga Oliker:
And the reason it's unclear is because it varies. It seems to be a little bit different each time. Again, it's not a huge footprint. You're often talking about some security personnel here and there, all very murky. The people who run these companies are doing this, obviously, for private gain, but also it seems highly unlikely that they would be doing it without the approval, if not the direction, of the Russian government. So, it creates room for maneuver. And I think it lets them test out some things and see what kind of response it gets without having to commit their own forces.

Jon Alterman:
Syria is Moscow’s first, and strongest, example of the benefits of Russian intervention in the region. It fit many of the security interests laid out by Oliker—the threat of spillovers, countering Western influence, and opportunism.

Alexey Khlebnikov, a Middle East and North Africa expert at the Russian International Affairs Council, explains how Syria is important to Russian security interests:

Alexey Khlebnikov:
First is to prevent the collapse of the Syrian state, of the regime institutions, because for Russia, the state system, the state regime, the state institutions, are essential for being partners with because without the state institution, the state is not functional anymore. This is why Moscow’s rhetoric regarding such issues were always referring to examples of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, where the state institutions collapsed and nothing came after that, basically leading to the high level of volatility and eventually to chaos. That was one of the most important things.

Jon Alterman:
The collapse of Syria would mean spillovers of instability to Russia’s direct neighbors, and potentially to Russia itself, just as Moscow had feared. Preventing that spread
of instability was crucial to Russia’s decision to enter Syria.

Alexey Khlebnikov:
Secondly, is to showcase its ability to prevent friendly partnering regime from falling. Damascus in this case is a partner tie coming back to the Soviet times. That was important to indicate that.

Jon Alterman:
Moscow’s success in Syria sent a message to other Middle Eastern countries that Russia was a reliable partner capable of supporting its allies. As the U.S. withdrew from some of its security commitments, regional states were looking for new partners. A success in Syria could showcase the benefits of having Russia as a partner.

The third reason, says Khlebnikov, is related. Russia wanted to prove not to just the Middle East, but to the larger global community, that it was able to act as a security provider.

Alexey Khlebnikov:
The third reason, would say that basically Syria has become the first overseas military campaign of Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Also, it was the first military campaign after the huge, or big, military reform started back in 2008, 2009 which puts to test the new Russian equipment, which were equipment, the command and control systems, the way how different types of forces communicate and interact with each other at the combat. That was also quite important. Also that sense, quite a sound signal to the outer world, basically saying that Russia is capable and able at projecting its power beyond its forces in quite an effective and quick manner. That to a certain degree was a quite successful demonstration.

Jon Alterman:
A fourth reason was competition with the United States and an attempt to break the Western-imposed isolation against Russia.

Alexey Khlebnikov:
Another important reason was to demonstrate or put itself in a position that you are an indispensable actor in this crisis settlement. When Russia came into Syria in 2015, the United States and a U.S.-led anti ISIS coalition was already there. That basically forced the United States and Europeans, and others, Israelis, to set up communication with Russians in order to set up deconfliction channels to avoid any sort of dangerous incidents in the skies, which could lead to potential escalation.

Jon Alterman:
Wa’el Alzayat was a Syrian-American diplomat who was working the Syria file for the U.S. Mission to the United Nations. He agrees.

Wa’el Alzayat:
Russia’s leverage is that they presented themselves successfully as the address for fixing Syria, and this was aided by the fact that the United States at least was not engaging with Assad directly, nor did we have any diplomatic ties with the Iranians to talk with them directly on Syria. But all in all, what the Russians presented and the world accepted, including the United States, is that really Moscow was going to be the most logical and perhaps effective place to go to convince Assad to agree on a number of issues, it all involved Russia.

Jon Alterman:
And according to Khlebnikov, that helped Russia elsewhere.

Alexey Khlebnikov:
Don’t forget that it happened at the next year after the conflict in Ukraine and Crimea events and after this Western sanctions and the Western attempts to isolate Russia, to put Moscow in isolation. By getting involved in Syria in the way Russia managed to prove that it’s impossible to isolate such countries as Russia and in order to be able to deal with conflicts elsewhere and especially in the region and in Syria in particular, you need to deal with that. You need to negotiate, you need to strike deals, so on and so forth (06:29-08:15).

**Jon Alterman:**
So Russia had very clear security interests and reasons for intervening in Syria. But would it consider Syria a success?

**Alexey Khlebnikov:**
Starting with the immediate short-term goals, I think that was achieved and it’s quite evident. The Syrian government, the Syrian regime was saved, the tide of war was changed. Now the government controls about 75, 80 percent of the country’s territory. That was quite successful.

**Jon Alterman:**
Since Russia has intervened in Syria, it has managed to prevent regime collapse.

**Alexey Khlebnikov:**
As for the mid-term goals, they were from the beginning to, to prove Russia’s importance as a broker, as an important player in the conflict. That also was achieved.

**JBA:** And Zayat said that impression helped Russia in a lot of places.

**Wa’el Alzayat:**
It demonstrates Russia's power with, not just the international community, but specifically with emerging powers, like India and Brazil, and also with traditional U.S. allies, whether they are in the region or in Europe. It helps it ensure its long-term relationship with a client state like Syria, access to the ports in the Mediterranean, but really that perceived power and importance. Turkey, the Gulf countries, others, come to Russia and say, “Hey, let's talk about energy. Let's talk about weapons. Let's talk about our own political arrangements whether on Syria or elsewhere.” And more or less, I think they succeeded at that.

**Jon Alterman:**
Some have read this as an attempt to recapture the level of influence enjoyed by the Soviet Union; others viewed it as a new strongman approach to the Middle East.

**Alexey Khlebnikov:**
For the long term, I think that we should understand that since Russia came to Syria militarily, or returned to Syria militarily back in 2015 and acquired two military bases, one in Hmeimim and one in Tartus, Russia is there to stay and they are for, at least 49 years, because then these agreements will be prolonged with Damascus for another periods of 25 years. At least for half a century, Russian military presence in Syria is already legitimized with intergovernmental agreements.

**Jon Alterman:**
But by-and-large, Syria was still an opportunistic move for Russia. It was a low-cost intervention that paid off.

Before Russia intervened in Syria, Moscow’s policies towards Libya were relatively unclear. Until late 2015, the only identifiable aspect of Russia’s policy on the Libya crisis was an aversion to external military intervention and an emphasis on the grave consequences resulting from state collapse.
After Russia’s success in Syria, Moscow was looking for new areas for low-cost, high-reward interventions, and Libya fit the bill.

Eugene Rumer is a senior fellow and the director of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

**Eugene Rumer:**
In Syria, Russia claims—with some justification—that it is present militarily at the invitation of the legitimate Syrian government. Whereas in Libya, Russian forces are really nonexistent because they are there either as a private security company or surreptitiously as quote unquote volunteers or something else.

**Jon Alterman:**
Without traditional boots on the ground, Russia relies on its PMCs to promote Russian goals in Libya. This type of opportunism means the low-cost, indirect nature of the intervention limits Russia’s ability to influence Libya’s future. Russia accepts the limitations of this strategy.

Libya is less directly relevant to Russia’s security interests in the region, meaning Russia is less invested in success in Libya.

Khlebnikov agrees, saying parallels between Russia’s presence in Libya and Russia’s presence in Syria are superficial. Russia just isn’t as interested in Libya as it is in Syria.

**Alexey Khlebnikov:**
I wouldn't say that Russia is involved or intervened militarily in Libya or at least on the scale as in Syria, but in that sense, Russia has a certain interests in Libya, but again, not on the scale as in Syria.

**Jon Alterman:**
Carnegie’s Eugene Rumer agrees:

**Eugene Rumer:**
I think their current posture in Libya reflects, again, that commitment to avoid exceedingly deep commitment, their involvement in Libya through its private security company, Wagner, which has received some attention lately, as indicative of the broader lesson and reluctance to commit too much to the situation.

**Jon Alterman:**
I asked Rumer if it mattered to the Russian strategy if Russia had international legal permission to be operating in Libya.

**Eugene Rumer:**
I think it matters to their ability to operate in Libya. So yes, I don't think they're in a position to acknowledge openly that they're present with boots on the ground in Libya. I think it's a challenge for them because they could likely take a much bigger hit in Libya without acknowledging it, just as happened in Deir ez-Zour with Russian mercenaries there. Remember, was it 2018, when supposedly as many as 300 Russian mercenaries were wiped out by U.S. strikes, and the official ministry of defense washed its hands of that situation claiming that those were not Russian soldiers.

**Jon Alterman:**
The lack of official Russian presence on the ground gives foreign governments, and particularly Turkey, greater leeway to conduct strikes at Russian targets, says Rumer.

It also constrains Russia’s own ability to act militarily. And even though there is little-to-no official Russian involvement on the ground in Libya, there have been official meetings with General Khalifa Haftar. It
benefits Russia to build contacts and negotiations in Libya. Eventually, Russia wants to reestablish economic opportunities in Libya that they lost after the fall of Gadaffi.

**Eugene Rumer:**
There have been official military contacts between the Russian military and Haftar. They hosted him in Moscow, they hosted him on that Russian aircraft carrier off the coast of Libya, so there is definitely a relationship there, but I think the limited military presence suggests that, again, they are learning certain lessons from their experience in Syria and don't want to be too heavily involved directly with quote unquote official Russian military there and would rather use their proxies to carry on the fight.

**Jon Alterman:**
And Russia learned from its intervention in Syria. Russia had completely backed President Assad. In Libya, Russia has maintained a channel of communication with the Government of National Accord in the west, in addition to General Haftar in the east.

This time, Russia is hedging its bets.

Russia’s military and security strategy in the Middle East is still evolving, and it feels like Russia is becoming an increasingly sophisticated player in the region, inserting itself militarily and diplomatically. Russia is careful not to overextend its limited financial and military resources.

At the same time, Russia has managed to craft an intricate relationship with Turkey. The two sides have worked out an expansive modus vivendi in Syria and support opposite sides in Libya. Meanwhile, Russia has sold Turkey a sophisticated air defense system that helps create tension with the United States, Turkey’s NATO ally. Russia seems to be playing a long game in the region, locking down bases for decades to come in Syria. Even so, Russia has yet to prove that its strategy will pay off. In the longer run, will the Middle East turn into a trap for Russian efforts, or will their inability to support reconstruction efforts in post-conflict environments undermine their current gains? We don’t know yet, but we need to pay attention.

Next time on the podcast, we look at Russia and great power competition in the Middle East. To do so, we are joined by Anna Borschevskaya, Becca Wasser, and my CSIS colleague, Heather Conley.

I’m your host, Dr. Jon Alterman, and this is the Russia in the Middle East miniseries. Thanks for listening. If you enjoyed this episode, please subscribe to the podcast on iTunes or Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts.