

Episode Transcript

Episode Title:

How the Middle East Views Russia

Guests:

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Anna Borschevskaya**

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**MIDDLE EAST
PROGRAM**

Jon Alterman:

If you find yourself with a layover at Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport and have some time to spare, take some time to watch the news. Large flatscreen TVs are mounted all over the terminals, proudly playing news in different languages—Arabic, French, English, and Spanish.

But every television is tuned to the same channel: RT.

RT—or Russia Today, as it's more formally known—is the powerhouse of Russia's international state-run media. It operates in five languages and is broadcast across the world, reaching an audience of millions. RT first broadcast in English, and when it began to diversify in 2007, the first language it added was Arabic. I've been to the RT studios in Moscow, and I've appeared on their programming. The channel's ambitions, and its reach, have been growing. The question we have to ask is “why?”

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 look at the Russia's relationships with Israel and Iran.

We'll also take a look at how some Arab states, particularly Egypt, view Russia. And we'll cover some of Russia's soft power tools in the Arab world.

First, let's start with Israel.

Elizabeth Tsurkov is a fellow in the Middle East program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, in Philadelphia, focusing on the Levant. She's also a Ph.D. candidate at Princeton University. Tsurkov says there's a shared sense among Israeli and Russian officials that Arabs and democracy shouldn't mix.

Elizabeth Tsurkov:

Israeli officials, particularly in the military establishment, and Russian officials definitely share a very bleak view of democracy in the Middle East. For example, in the Palestinian elections when Hamas rose to power or with the elections post-uprising in Egypt. What we're seeing emerging in those types of settings are Islamists coming to power—the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas with the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West Bank and Gaza.

Jon Alterman:

In this sense, Russia and Israel share views on how the Arab world should be governed.

Elizabeth Tsurkov:

Both countries share a very negative and Orientalist and racist view of the appropriate system of government for Arabs. I think in the case of Russia, the establishment there genuinely believes in the authoritarian model.

Jon Alterman:

In Israel, this viewpoint leads to a sympathy towards Russia's approach to the region.

Elizabeth Tsurkov:

I think that both the Israeli leadership and the Russia view the Middle East very cynically and through a perception that is very much based on identifying threats, as opposed to seizing opportunities and seeing “what are some positive changes that may be happening in the region, What are some forces in the region who are pushing away from the authoritarian model who should be empowered?” This is something that does not at all interest Israeli officials or Russian officials.

Jon Alterman:

Even though Russia and Israel are not always natural allies, there are several different reasons why a good relationship with Israel matters to Russia, says Tsurkov.

Elizabeth Tsurkov:

Israel has outsized power compared to its military capabilities. It is quite influential in Washington DC. It has some influence in European capitals and it is an actor that is incredibly willing to use force compared to other actors in the region.

Jon Alterman:

But Russia’s support of other parties, including Hamas, complicates Israel’s relationship with Russia.

Elizabeth Tsurkov:

The relationship with Iran, for example, the relationship with Hamas, even the desire to not be perceived in any way as kind of in the Israeli camp. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Russia consistently maintains a stance that is supportive of Palestinian demands and is hosted and met, not only with Hamas, but even Palestinian Islamic Jihad officials, a Palestinian militant group that is supported almost entirely by Iran. So therefore, Russia definitely sees an importance in the relationship with Israel,

but it is not willing to prioritize it over other equally and maybe even more important relationships that it established throughout the Middle East.

Jon Alterman:

Tsurkov says that even though Israel matters to Russia, it does not leverage its soft power in Israel very effectively.

Elizabeth Tsurkov:

Even Syria, in Israeli policy in Syria, for example, or the Israeli policy towards Iran or Russia are not often discussed in public, whereas issues pertaining to the Palestinians very much are. Therefore I don't see any kind of a significant effort on the part of the Kremlin to try and use the fact that 10 percent of the Israeli population are Russian speakers, are people born in the USSR. I don't see that effort playing on the ground. In fact, there are embassies in Israel, such as the American and Japanese and British and French that constantly hold all sorts of events to the public. And Russia is much less active in this regard.

Jon Alterman:

Although Russian soft power in Israel is weak, many Israelis still want Russia to act as a buffer between them and Iran.

Iran and Russia have an often-tortured history that stretches back to imperial times, but in recent decades, Russia has emerged as one of Iran’s protectors from the international community. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia has the ability to block international sanctions against Iran. Since Russia’s intervention in Syria in 2015, Russian-Iranian relations have become more complex.

Elizabeth Tsurkov:

The assessment at the time, both by Russian officials and Iranian officials, is that the regime would not be able to survive without significant additional military assistance from both Russia and Iran for longer than six months. So as a result, Qasim Suleimani—who was killed earlier this year—traveled to Moscow to personally lobby Putin to intervene in the war, to provide his assistance to the Syrian regime, so that Assad will be able to remain in power despite the extreme weakness of its ground forces and depletion of armor, depletion of the Air Force.

Jon Alterman:

In some ways, the Russian intervention in Syria improved relations with Iran. Moscow and Tehran closely coordinated their activities through a joint command and intelligence center in Baghdad.

Elizabeth Tsurkov:

And this pertains also to fighting against ISIS in Iraq. There's also close cooperation on the ground between Russian officers and advisors and Hezbollah fighters and fighters of other Iranian backed Shia militias. This cooperation endowed these militias backed by Iran with skills that they did not possess in the past and garnered a great deal of respect. These Shia fighters enjoy the respect of Russians who comment about their fighting capacity, about their zeal, about their willingness to fight, which they contrast constantly with the poor state of the Syrian army, whose fighters are pressed into service, many of them would defect if it would not lead to immediate execution and are underfed, are underpaid, their morale is extremely low.

Jon Alterman:

Russia is interested in returning Syria to the status quo ante, and Iran wants to exploit Syria as a platform for its own expanded

regional influence. Russian and Iranian ambitions in Syria are beginning to diverge.

Elizabeth Tsurkov:

On the strategic level, the relationship between Russia and Iran in Syria has been largely harmonious until, I would say, more recent years is the... Let's say starting 2018, 2019, when the military victory of the regime became assured. And now both countries are competing for projects, the few profitable projects that exist on the ground, the few natural resources that are available in regime-held Syria, and they're also competing for influence over the future trajectory of Syria.

Jon Alterman:

Despite growing tensions, both countries need the current system of power to stay in place.

Elizabeth Tsurkov:

Even if not Bashar, personally, Russia and Iran are both not interested in having a democracy in Syria because of what they've done in the country in the past years of mass displacement and killing, destruction of hospitals, besieging communities, all of that has not earned them much support among the population. And, as a result, any kind of a truly democratic system would threaten their influence in the country.

Jon Alterman:

But their joint success in Syria may mean their cooperation is coming to an end. While Russia remains a protector of Iran from the international community, their regional relations are still being decided.

Russia maintains separate relationships with both Iran and Israel, two regional powers with a history of conflict. But Russia has also managed to strengthen its relationships with Arab states in the Middle East.

Mohamed Anis Salem is an experienced Egyptian ambassador with over 35 years working in humanitarian relief operations, international development, and communication. I asked him how different groups within the Arab world view Russia.

Mohamed Anis Salem:

There was a moment when this question was part of a big divide in the Arab world. You had the progressive countries, the socialist countries, led by Egypt of Nasser, who were postulating that the Soviet Union is a force for change, it is a force for liberation, and that there must be a big confrontation with the West, with colonialism, with capitalism, and so on. With another group saying that the Soviet Union means atheism, means bad development, means covering colonialist, expansionist objectives by ideological veneer. That big divide, that big debate, has been superseded now by another debate, which is: to what extent are pragmatic goals achieved by cooperation with the big powers in the world.

Jon Alterman:

Countries in the Middle East are questioning what a U.S. withdrawal means for them and if Russia can fill some of that role.

Mohamed Anis Salem:

And there is a school of thought, very strong now in the Gulf, that actually, despite all of the problems with the United States, despite the disappointments and frustrations, that the U.S., as shown in the example of the liberation of Kuwait, is a reliable guarantor of Gulf security.

Jon Alterman:

Not everyone agrees. Some Arab states, like Egypt, are diversifying their alliance systems to avoid relying solely on one global power. And some are trying to play

great powers off against each other to elicit aid from all of them.

Mohamed Anis Salem:

I think in Egypt, there has been, again, a history of trying all sorts of formulating in organizing or framing the relationship with Russia.

Jon Alterman:

During the Cold War, Egypt saw a partnership with the Soviet Union as a potential advantage.

Mohamed Anis Salem:

Some documents are showing us that at a certain moment, Gamal Abdel Nasser put on the table in Moscow having Egypt join the Warsaw Pact, and the Russians didn't agree to that. So you have from that moment, you have the counter moment, when Sadat kicks out the Russians, closes down the embassy, and becomes part of the anti-Soviet drive globally, particularly in Afghanistan. It is not a problem-free relationship, but it answers some of the needs.

Jon Alterman:

Egypt—and other Arab states—view Russia as an area of economic promise. In today's Egypt, a partnership with Russia presents opportunities in areas like tourism, arms sales, and education.

Mohamed Anis Salem:

For example, the biggest cohort of tourists coming to Egypt are from Russia. And because of this, one of the current problems is that the Russians have not sanctioned direct flights into Sharm El-Sheikh, which was one of their top destinations.

Jon Alterman:

Before 2015, Russians made up perhaps 40 percent of tourists to Egypt. Some went to the historic sites in the Nile Valley, but

millions just headed to the beaches in Sinai and the Red Sea coast. After ISIS attacked a Russian jet over the Sinai in 2015, Russia banned flights to Egypt. Russian tourism in Egypt plummeted.

Mohamed Anis Salem:

One of the questions on the minds of Egyptian is that, why is that Russia is delaying this, and is this a pressure tactic used against Egypt? So the focus is very much on a pragmatic relationship, a relationship that provides benefits to both sides.

Jon Alterman:

Tourism makes up one reason why Egypt needs Russia. Arms sales are another.

Mohamed Anis Salem:

If you look at Egypt as a power that sees itself as a middle power regional state, attempting to play an extensive role, an influential role, in this region and thinking that its military posture is an important component of that role.

Jon Alterman:

To Egypt and other Arab states, Russia presents a welcome alternative to arms sales from the United States that come with stipulations.

Mohamed Anis Salem:

You'll have to look there at some changes in the international system, where it is no longer a taboo to buy arms from Russia. It's not seen in the zero-sum game terms of the Cold War. So, places like Turkey, member of NATO, are buying arms from Russia.

Jon Alterman:

A willingness to sell weapons without regard for human rights concerns makes Russia an especially useful source of weapons for Middle Eastern governments

stymied by restrictions enshrined in U.S. law.

Mohamed Anis Salem:

So that kind of openness has made it easier to approach Russia in this situation where it's a matter of a clear purchase. No longer are we looking at the old model where the Soviet Union used to give Egypt arms on long term, soft loans, and grants and so on, that's no longer the issue.

Jon Alterman:

Russia has also agreed to finance and build a nuclear powerplant on the Mediterranean coast, in al Dabaa, adding to Egyptian prestige and aiding the Egyptian economy. And on top of that, many Arab states also view Russia as a useful avenue for areas like education and skills training.

Mohamed Anis Salem:

The thing is that the demand for certain services has mushroomed in many countries with big populations like Egypt. So you have, for example, a very big group of young people finishing school and looking for places in universities, looking for training opportunities, looking for new skills, and I think the Russians have done a good job of focusing on a number of things.

Jon Alterman:

This is Russian soft power at work.

Mohamed Anis Salem:

One, we have a Russian university now in Cairo. We have a lot of these programs, that if you look at them, they're looking at things like computer assisted design, they're looking at design of computers, computer software, etcetera. So I think the Russians have done a good job of focusing on some practical, low cost deliverables that can be channeled there.

Jon Alterman:

Like many aspects of Russian foreign policy, Russia's soft power approach is low-cost and opportunistic.

Mohamed Anis Salem:

The other area which I think the Russians have done extremely well, is the whole area of media. So if you look at their Arabic-speaking television, RT, and if you look at the kind of news generating organizations that they have, their penetration has become very, very high, particularly through social media.

Jon Alterman:

The United States is no longer as aggressive in this area, says Salem. And Russia is filling some of the gap.

Mohamed Anis Salem:

In the old days, I remember the American library part of the U.S. Embassy was a very important place to visit if you're a student at the university.

Jon Alterman:

The Washington Institute's Anna Borschevskaya, with whom we spoke in the previous episode, agrees.

Anna Borschevskaya:

We've seen Russian propaganda outlets, chiefly RT and Sputnik, being very active in the region and being very active at messaging. And messaging is extremely important because it goes to the issue of narratives. And each country, each state has a narrative. The United States narrative, unfortunately, has been confused. It's been ambivalent, it's often been hard to define just what exactly is the United States narrative in the region.

The Russian narrative is very simple and it's very clear and that has resonance. The soft

power efforts in addition to media campaign, spill into other efforts as well, such as educational exchanges. For example, in Iraq.

Jon Alterman:

When the West looks at Russia and Russian media, it tends to be suspicious. But that's not the case in the Middle East, says Borschevskaya.

Anna Borschevskaya:

By and large the region simply doesn't look at Russia the same way. And if you add to this, the fact that many in the region already perceive American outlets, Western outlets, such as CNN, as government run, which is not the case, but that's how they're often perceived. And you add this to a mixture of a very complex media environment and overall a situation where authoritarian governments already control the message. Having yet another authoritarian government that also brings its own message is simply not as troubling as it would be in a democratic setting, where you have Western media outlets that are free, that tend to be more dominant.

Jon Alterman:

That blend has made Russia's messaging surprisingly successful in the region.

Anna Borschevskaya:

And so the perception of Russia as somebody that fought ISIS. And I've heard this consistently in Iraq in particular. Russia has successfully managed to convince many that they fought ISIS. And therefore, from this image what flows is, "yeah, Russia may not be a perfect country. It's corrupt. But so are many other countries in this region. And if they're fighting ISIS, well, that's the benefit." And unfortunately, we all know that that's completely false, right? The serious analysts in the West have seen that

Russia has not fought ISIS with any consistency. We're losing a war of narratives here.

Jon Alterman:

Ten years ago, the U.S. messaging was that the region was gasping for freedom. Russia's messaging seems to be the opposite. And it's succeeding.

Anna Borschevskaya:

So this message of authoritarianism, it's a winning message because unfortunately throughout the Middle East, we're still seeing authoritarian governments as dominating. This is not to say that the people of the region do not yearn for freedom.

Jon Alterman:

But the messaging isn't necessarily aimed at the people of the region, says Borschevskaya. It's aimed at governments as well.

Anna Borschevskaya:

By and large, with notable exceptions, the region in and of itself is authoritarian, and therefore Russia has to convince the governments primarily of these countries. And in a situation where information is controlled, where conspiracy theories already proliferate, it's a lot easier to spin a false narrative. And this is where, I think, it's a big failing of ours. We tend to underestimate just how important narratives are.

Jon Alterman:

Russia's messaging—both to people and to governments—influence how people in the Middle East see both Russia as a whole and Putin as its leader. Anis Salem again:

Mohamed Anis Salem:

I think that Putin comes across as an element of stability, continuity, somebody who brought his country back from the brink. So, there's a certain element of respect. I always think that one needs to triangulate these things because the contrast becomes with the kind of leadership you see in Western countries. And we are at the moment when that leadership is in short supply in the West. So, the contrast does work in favor of Putin, so I think that there is a certain attraction there.

Jon Alterman:

But there are certain drawbacks to Putin's approach too. To some, Putin's vision of the future looks too similar to what the Middle East already has.

Mohamed Anis Salem:

Now there are handicaps because nobody has heard Putin speak in English. So you're always hearing him through translation, you're always seeing him in a rather mystical way. It sort of fulfills the image of the one person rule that many people in the Arab world want to step away from. Many people in the Arab world want to look towards democratic systems, institutional decision making processes, people with an outreach towards them, people with sense of humor, and that grim kind of countenance, I think needs a little bit of a PR makeup.

Jon Alterman:

Russia has managed to maintain complex relationships with three major groups in the Middle East: Israel, Iran, and Arab states. Russia provides something to all three of them. For Israel, Russia shares many of their threat perceptions, and Russia has a similarly jaundiced view of how soon many of those threats might go away. Israel also hopes that Russia will play a constructive role curbing hostility from Israel's adversaries, including Syria and Iran.

For Iran, Russia provides shelter and protection from the international community. Mutual involvement in Syria also creates areas of cooperation.

And for Arab states like Egypt, Russia provides relief from U.S. hegemony, tourism revenue, and no-strings-attached arms sales, along with soft power educational opportunities and news outlets. Russia isn't trying to model the Middle East in its image. In many ways, it sees the Middle East as a compatible culture that similarly responds to hard-headed expressions of power. In this

view, the United States wants the region to change, but Russia accepts the region as it is.

Next time on the podcast, we look ahead to the future of Russia in the Middle East. We're joined by Eugene Rumer and Phil Gordon for the sixth and final episode.

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