

Russia's Foreign and Security Policy in the Middle East: Entering the 2020s

by Ekaterina Stepanova

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



ABSTRACT

As Russia has become a major external player in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region due to its military engagement in Syria since 2015, it has acted as a balancer and mediator in several regional controversies and has continued to serve as a security guarantor for the Syrian state. This course has brought Moscow some practical dividends, such as growing economic and military-technical cooperation with select MENA countries, and has spurred its broader international profile. However, entering the 2020s, the risks of more active engagement in the Middle East have also mounted, making Russia's balancing act more difficult. In three cases where Russia's involvement has been visible (Syria, Libya and the Israeli-Palestinian problem), evolving developments challenge Moscow's acquired influence and multi-vector approach, but also create new opportunities for its engagement and mediation. Above all, the 2020 US–Iran crisis catalysed the urgent need for structured regional dialogue, especially across the Persian Gulf. While this requires direct interaction between the region's main antagonists, the initial impulse to unlock the trans-Gulf impasse might need to come from the outside. A process-oriented blueprint for inclusive multilateral security in the Gulf proposed by Russia in 2019 is a step in the right direction, but to be activated it may need to come as part of some broader international initiative.

Russia's foreign policy | Russia's military policy | Middle East | Syria | Libya | Israel | Palestine | Iran | US foreign policy | US military policy

keywords

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



FEPS – Foundation for European Progressive Studies

Rue Montoyer 40 – 1000 Brussels, Belgium

T: +32 2 234 69 00

Email: info@feps-europe.eu

Website: <https://www.feps-europe.eu>

The **Foundation for European Progressive Studies** (FEPS) is the think tank of the social democratic political family at EU level. Our mission is to develop innovative research, policy advice, training and debates to inspire and inform progressive politics and policies across Europe. We operate as hub for thinking to facilitate the emergence of progressive answers to the challenges that Europe faces today. FEPS works in close partnership with its members and partners, forging connections and boosting coherence among stakeholders from the world of politics, academia and civil society at local, regional, national, European and global levels.

Paper produced in the framework of the FEPS-IAI project “Fostering a New Security Architecture in the Middle East”, June 2020.

The project has benefited from the financial support of the European Parliament and the Policy Planning Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation pursuant to art. 23-bis of Presidential Decree 18/1967. The views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Parliament or the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

Russia's Foreign and Security Policy in the Middle East: Entering the 2020s

by Ekaterina Stepanova*

Introduction

Russia has become a major player in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, largely as a result of its 2015 intervention in Syria, by invitation of the Syrian government. On the one hand, this action demonstrated Russia's ability to act resolutely in defence of a regional partner, prevent forced regime change and preserve Syrian statehood, while fighting terrorism. It also showed Russia's readiness and capacity to act unilaterally as an external power, withstanding strong US and Western pressure. On the other hand, in stark departure from any Soviet- or empire-style "grand strategy", Russia no longer aims at hegemony, nor at full parity, strategic balance or confrontation vis-à-vis key Western stakeholders in the Middle East, even in view of the gradual decline of their role in the region.

Instead, Moscow made a fundamental choice to regionalise its Middle East policy by adjusting to the region's inherent pluralism and multipolarity, and supporting an emerging and still largely ad hoc regional multilateralism. In practice, this has shaped three main directions for Russia's strategy in the Middle East: (a) diversification of Russia's regional contacts, through a multi-vector approach and "playing on all fields"; (b) a distinct, qualitative shift from a primarily US-centric to more region-centric approach; and (c) identification and pursuit of Russia's own interests in regional (political, economic, security) partnerships in the MENA. The latter task requires having a certain weight in the region – something that Russia has only acquired since the mid-2010s, as a result of its engagement in Syria.¹

¹ For background on the evolution of Russia's Middle East policies, see Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia in the Middle East: Back to a 'Grand Strategy' – or Enforcing Multilateralism?", in *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 81, No. 2 (Summer 2016), p. 23-35, <https://www.ifri.org/en/node/11686>; and Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia and Conflicts in the Middle East: Regionalisation and Implications for the West", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (December 2018), p. 35-57.

* Ekaterina Stepanova is a Lead Researcher and Head of Peace and Conflict Studies Unit at Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), Moscow.

· Paper produced in the framework of the FEPS-IAI project "Fostering a New Security Architecture in the Middle East", June 2020. Copyright © 2020 Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

Since then, Russia has served as a security guarantor for the Syrian state and pursued the role of balancer and mediator in several other regional controversies. Practical dividends for Russia include a moderately expanded economic presence and military-technical cooperation with some MENA countries. The upgrade of Moscow's role in the Middle East has also sharpened its international profile in other regions, at the United Nations and vis-à-vis the West, contributing to further diversifying Russian foreign policy. More recently, however, Russia's stepped-up engagement in the MENA has also faced growing risks, complicating Moscow's plans.

Growing volatility and instability in the MENA that prevent resolution of old conflicts and crises and threaten new ones are not, however, the sole reason why an update of Russia's role in the region is needed. The issue is not related to any visible shift in Russia's MENA-related goals and interests, nor to a major upgrade of its capabilities and resources in the region. The critical factor has been the rise of regional powers and regionalisation of Middle Eastern politics and security.

Growing assertiveness of regional actors has added fuel to old regional controversies, e.g., between most Arab Gulf states and Iran, and generated new crises initiated by or involving Middle Eastern powers. One case in point has been Turkey's new regional activism in Syria, Libya and beyond. At times, the new assertiveness by regional powers has been provoked or aggravated by external players, as illustrated by Iran directly targeting the US military in Iraq in January 2020, following Washington's assassination of Iran's top commander Qasem Soleimani (and remarkably, with no apocalyptic consequences for Iran's retaliation).

Turbulent developments in the MENA at the turn of the decade also show, and contribute to, growing *interconnectedness* and *interdependence* of this diverse and segmented macro-region. Various crises, conflicts and controversies in different parts of the Middle East, from the Mediterranean to the Gulf, have become increasingly interlinked and often overlapped. Should any external actor decide (as Russia did) to be a "player" rather than an "extra" in the region, it could no longer limit itself to an exclusive focus on one or two hotpots or a certain part of the region – even if it wanted to. For Russia, the MENA region is no longer just about Syria and ad hoc, opportunistic diplomacy on select hotspots (Libya) or long-time crises (the Israeli-Palestinian problem). No serious external player can afford to ignore the broader regional vision, failing to account for an increasingly interconnected and interdependent region as a whole.

This applies to all outside players who want to be seen as honest brokers or, at least, responsible actors in the MENA. Of them, Russia is definitely not the worst case. Russia is very familiar with the region, in part and as a whole. Having learnt the lessons from its Soviet experience in the MENA, Moscow now takes a markedly non-ideological approach, is mindful of regional specificities and dynamics and treats regional powers as equal, sovereign actors. Russia had become particularly sensitive to "all-regional" initiatives for the MENA even before it became a

meaningful player in the region. In fact, Russia's long-time emphasis on the need for an all-regional political and security dialogue system in the MENA could partly be a way to make up for its extreme frustration with the total failure of its main foreign policy aspiration of the early post-Soviet period – the hope for an all-inclusive collective regional security architecture in Europe.

Russia also poses an increasingly positive contrast to the lead extra-regional actor – the United States – due to the erratic activism of the Donald Trump administration, especially on Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian dossier. While EU states, individually and collectively, are more balanced players, they are still inadequate, overly moralising and insufficiently active and united in their actions, as vital European interests in the MENA would warrant.

1. Russia's balancing act in Syria

In 2015, the main drivers of Russia's military engagement in Syria had little to do with the region itself. Syria was largely instrumentalised to serve broader Russian foreign policy goals. These included using Russia's growing role in Syria as a trump card in its troubled relations with the West, which had suffered a breakdown after the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, and as a showcase of prevention of regime change by force, especially through potential Western intervention (in the post-Libya context), as well as antiterrorism concerns. In practice, however, Russia's engagement in Syria, by helping prevent further fragmentation and collapse of the country and shifting the balance in favour of the central government, not only upgraded Russia's standing, but also stimulated its growing interest in the Middle East *per se* and the regionalisation of its MENA policies.

In the Syria case, the most evident product of such regionalisation was the Astana ceasefire/de-escalation process brokered by Russia, Turkey and Iran since 2017 and involving both the government and opposition actors, including non-jihadist armed groups. The Astana process was initially meant to improve basic security conditions and prepare technical grounds for peace talks, not to address the key substantive issues of the Syrian political settlement – a role reserved for the UN-sponsored Geneva process. On the one hand, Russia's Astana partners were hardly helpful in linking Astana to Geneva (on issues ranging from the formation of the Constitutional Committee to the Kurdish problem). On the other, Russia could not afford to spoil relations with its two main regional partners, Iran and Turkey, by radically intensifying political pressure on either of them regarding Syria. In sum, turning to regional powers as Russia's main partners in conflict management in Syria required Moscow to learn the art of compromise, flexibility and resilience to all shocks and tests to the Astana format. Of those, the most critical one came in early 2020.

By 2020, the main area out of central government control, dominated by Islamist opposition forces, remained the Idlib de-escalation zone.² The latest stage of the crisis around Idlib catalysed key security issues for Russia in Syria. Russia's relations with one of its two key regional partners – Turkey – faced the hardest challenge since the start of the civil war in Syria.

The Russia–Turkey marriage of convenience on Idlib started as part of the Astana process. On 4 May 2017, Syria's northwestern province of Idlib with surrounding areas was declared one of four de-escalation zones (temporary areas for negotiating local ceasefires where military operations were allowed only against terrorists, to be separated from the moderate opposition). Between October 2017 and May 2018, Turkish checkpoints were deployed around the Idlib zone. The start of the Syrian military offensive in Idlib led Ankara, terrified by the prospect of new refugee flows, to sign an additional memorandum with Russia on 17 September 2018 in Sochi.³ The memorandum created a demilitarised area inside the de-escalation zone along its perimeter, where Ankara pledged to separate moderate anti-government elements from radicals and ensure the removal of jihadists. Turkish and Russian security forces were to carry out coordinated monitoring of the demilitarisation zone. The memorandum called to open the Aleppo–Hama–Damascus (M5) and Aleppo–Latakia (M4) national highways, blocked by Idlib-based militants, for traffic by 2019. The Sochi deal helped stop the government's military offensive on Idlib, for the time being, while Russia pledged to "take all necessary measures to prevent military operations in Idlib and ensure the status-quo", provided that other memorandum requirements were met. As for months none of these conditions were fulfilled by Turkey, the government offensive (Operation "Dawn of Idlib", April–August 2019) followed.

Gradual advances by Syrian forces to opposition-held areas in de-escalation zones, coupled with local ceasefires and corridors for evacuation of militants to remaining areas out of government control, were usually followed by new Astana deals that fixed the changes on the ground. Idlib, however, has been a special case. It is located on the border with Turkey which backed the opposition in the Syrian civil war, suffered from mass refugee flows and saw Idlib as a bargaining chip and a leverage to influence the situation inside Syria. Idlib was also the last de-escalation zone beyond government control, with the highest concentration of militants, mostly Islamist radicals, who were evacuated from other de-escalation zones or fled from elsewhere in Syria. In fact, the problem of the first three de-escalation zones was solved at the expense of Idlib. As the last mainstay of armed opposition, Idlib also retained special significance for prospects of the intra-Syrian settlement.

² Composed of the Idlib province and the surrounding areas of Latakia, Aleppo and Hama provinces.

³ Russia and Turkey, *Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-escalation Area*, Sochi, 17 September 2018, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2018/852>; <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/1.771953>.

In practice, the Idlib de-escalation zone was hijacked by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – a radical Islamist umbrella movement that integrated, inter alia, the al-Qaeda-linked group Jabhat al Nusra and gained control over Idlib's local government structures. The Russian Ministry of Defence pointed to "the Turkish colleagues' failure to deliver on their commitment to separate militants of the moderate opposition from terrorists who flooded these areas" as the main reason for the Idlib crisis of late 2019 and early 2020.⁴ Idlib-based militants also periodically mounted drone attacks against Russia's Hmeimim air base near Latakia.

It is not that Turkey did nothing to address the issue of violent Islamists in Idlib. The Islamist-leaning government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) for years backed Islamists, in and out of government, across the region. For Turkey, the main concern in Syria remained the Kurdish issue, while disarming the Islamists was never a priority. Prior to January 2020, Ankara had no sufficient military force in Idlib to fight terrorism in earnest. Also, any radical escalation in Idlib guaranteed refugee flows – not as massive as Erdoğan's claims of a million newly displaced persons, but still a major humanitarian challenge. Some of Ankara's own actions had the intentional or unintentional effect of slightly reducing the number of Idlib-based militants, through integration of some fighters into Turkish security structures and grinding down fighters, mostly from the Turkish-backed alliance of factions, in operations against the Syrian Kurds and in clashes with (pro-)government forces in the de-escalation zone. Moreover, since late 2019 Turkey has relocated a number of militants from Idlib to Libya, to fight on behalf of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA). According to the opposing side in the conflict, the Libyan National Army (LNA), by February 2020 Ankara had transported 2,900 Syrian militants to Libya and was training another 2,000.⁵

Syria's "Dawn of Idlib" operation backed by the Russian air force had limited success, but ended in August 2019 with an advance into the southern part of the Idlib zone. In the meantime, Turkey was diverted by another intervention against the Syrian Kurds, following the announced withdrawal of US forces from northwestern areas in October 2019. In December, Damascus launched another Russia-backed offensive (Operation "Dawn of Idlib-2"), supported from the north by pro-Iranian militias from western Aleppo, and made sizeable gains in the southeast of Idlib.⁶ Although interrupted by a brief ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey, the fighting resumed, provoking direct Turkish intervention in Idlib in January 2020. While the deployment of 9,000 soldiers became Ankara's largest military build-up in Syria since the start of the conflict, it also left some "windows"

⁴ "Russian Ministry of Defense Comments on the Situation in Idlib" [in Russian], in *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie* [Independent Military Review], 13 February 2020, http://nvo.ng.ru/nvo/2020-02-13/100_200213news2.html.

⁵ Al-Hadath TV channel, quoted in: "Libyan National Army Says Dozens of Syrian Mercenaries Killed in Tripoli", in *TASS*, 2 February 2020, <https://tass.com/world/1115463>.

⁶ Metin Gurkan, "Turkish Troops in Syria Threatened at Idlib Outposts", in *Al-Monitor*, 30 December 2019, <http://almon.co/3as3>.

for the Syrian army to strike at militants.

In February 2020 government forces took control of the entire M5 highway, stopped close to the provincial capital Idlib and were posed to clear the uncontrolled part of the M4. However, resulting clashes between Turkish and Syrian military raised confrontation to a new level and threatened direct conflict between Russian and Turkish forces. This provoked the harshest militant rhetoric from Turkish president Erdoğan in years, against both Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Russia. Erdoğan's warning to Moscow ("Do not stand in our way!")⁷ amounted to a de facto ultimatum to withdraw from Idlib. However, the emotional appeal of Ankara's bellicose rhetoric, largely addressed to the AKP's domestic constituencies and regional audiences, hardly impressed Russian diplomats, fully aware of Erdoğan's domestic pressures, or the Russian military, which gives priority to capacities and actions over declarations. Perhaps unexpectedly for Ankara, Russia also played tough and used its control of air space in Idlib to support Syrian troops even in their direct clashes with Turkish forces. That included strikes against Turkish tank columns and even, in the deadliest day for Ankara in Idlib, a strike, possibly on a Turkish command centre, on 27 February 2020.

While Turkey responded with counter-offensives and intensifying drone strikes, it chose to blame the Syrian, rather than Russian, air force for attacks on the Turkish military. Correspondingly, in case of an attack on a Russian target in Syria involving the Turkish military, Moscow would still blame radical Islamists. This Turkish–Russian game on the ground in Idlib (*see everything, deny direct confrontation, blame your counterpart's client*) evolved in parallel to mutual contacts, including at the level of top diplomatic, military and intelligence officials up to a direct Putin–Erdoğan meeting and regular phone calls between the two. As the crisis escalated, these contacts became more, not less, intense.

New realities on the ground included both the Syrian government and allied forces' control over the strategic M5 highway and all of the Aleppo suburbs as well as a more explicit area under direct control of the Turkish forces. A new buffer zone along contested parts of the M4 highway, under joint Russian–Turkish patrol, was required. This led to a new top-level Russia–Turkey deal. Erdoğan would have preferred to reach this deal in a broader framework (such as the Turkey–Russia–Germany–France format), to reinforce Turkey's image as part of a "great power concert" and use the refugee flow problem for his political purposes. However, Russia insisted on a bilateral deal first, signed in Moscow on 5 March 2020. European powers, meanwhile, demonstrated unwillingness to be blackmailed by Erdoğan's instrumentalisation of the refugee issue.

⁷ Quoted in: "Erdogan to Russia: We Are Addressing the Assad Regime Not You in Syria", in *Middle East Monitor*, 3 February 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200203-erdogan-to-russia-we-are-addressing-the-assad-regime-not-you-in-syria>; "Erdogan Promised to Respond to Syrian Army Attacks in Idlib" [in Russian], in *RIA-Novosti*, 3 February 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200203/1564179191.html>.

In sum, typically for the Astana powers' deliberations on Syria, a compromise was achieved. As an endgame, Russia would have preferred for the Turkish presence in Idlib to be confined to a buffer zone along the border, with Syrian control gradually restored over the rest of Idlib. However, Turkey's intervention made it clear that Assad's forces would not soon return the entire Idlib area;⁸ nor did Russia take upon itself a formal obligation to ensure Assad's control of every inch of the Syrian territory. While the March 2020 deal is likely to be temporary, it might last longer than the previous ones, if only due to major direct deployment of Turkish forces in Idlib.

Whatever the setup on the ground, the composition of key external actors and main stakeholders – the three Astana process co-brokers (Russia, Turkey and Iran) – remained unaltered. Their interests on Syria may diverge significantly, but they have remained in an active dialogue that has not stopped even on the most contested issues, such as the confrontation in Idlib. Despite everything, the parties have kept talking to each other and coordinating their actions, explicitly or tacitly. The Idlib crisis has not only ended with a new compromise, but has also added to the solid experience gained by Russia and Turkey in continuing dialogue and cooperation, despite divergent goals on Syria. As always, their pragmatic, no-love-lost bargaining has led to a trade-off.

On the one hand, the parties have exploited and manipulated each other's vulnerabilities. Turkey has been particularly vulnerable to refugee flows from Syria, as well as to accusations of foreign occupation of the Syrian territory and of alleged links to Islamist militants, including jihadists, in Idlib. In turn, Russia's heavy reliance on air strikes in support of the Syrian regime has by default made it subject to claims of lack of, or insufficient, discrimination between combatants and non-combatants, between jihadists and moderate militants. Another vulnerability is Moscow's implication, if only by association, in some of the more questionable practices of the use of force by (pro-)government forces.

On the other hand, the parties have demonstrated a capacity to separate fervent rhetoric, in Turkey's case primarily addressed to domestic audiences, from each other's real foreign policy interests, related and unrelated to Syria. Even when the regional parties' goals have stretched beyond their capacities and conflict with regional realities (e.g., Erdoğan's soft spot for a rebranded version of neo-Ottomanism or some of Iran's far-reaching regional ambitions), Russia has not allowed them to hamper pragmatic cooperation. This has been facilitated by Moscow's firm view that any hegemonic aspirations in the Middle East, including by regional actors, are doomed to fail.

The Astana co-brokers dynamically balance one another as a trio, but also as each of the pairs of actors. For Russia, Turkey and Iran effectively balance one another

⁸ The March 2020 deal called for the fight against terrorists in Idlib, but, for the first time, stressed that this should not be done at the cost of humanitarian concerns.

on Syria, giving Moscow some space for a balancing act between them.⁹ The early 2020 round of military escalation in Idlib posed a tough test to the Astana model. It showed that any regional member of the Astana trio may try to remodel or transform the process to better accommodate its interests (including by trying to reach out to other powers). However, one of the main lessons to be learnt from that test is that the Astana powers' stake in Syria remains higher than that of other external actors, reaffirming their roles as key brokers and the need to ensure mutual balance.

The balancing act is essential not only for Russia's relations with Turkey and Iran on Syria, and between Ankara and Tehran. Moscow has also tried to balance between the Syrian government and Turkey. It is a mistake to fully associate Russia with the Assad regime, especially with the part of the Syrian ruling group that is unwilling and incapable to compromise, convinced as it is that it has "won the war", and is hardly interested in refugee return. Russia's support to Assad does not mean it can always effectively constrain the regime's intransigence. Informally, Moscow may not even mind some additional constraints to somewhat rein in Damascus and make it listen more attentively to its allies (as long as this does not challenge the mainstream course of events on the ground, which favours the government side). It does no harm to remind Assad and his generals that, without Russia's help, Turkey could effectively challenge them militarily.

The Idlib crisis also has a bearing on any political/negotiation process on Syria in at least two ways. First, the lack of serious balancing against Damascus, coupled with the government forces' step-by-step military advances, will continue to question the viability of the Syrian opposition on the ground, as a party to intra-Syrian talks. This brings closer the prospect of the end of the civil war on Assad's terms. While Russia would not mind such an outcome, for Moscow this option is a Plan B only. Plan A has been a UN-supervised negotiated political settlement based on real intra-Syrian dialogue. If the main source of pressure on Damascus and major areas outside government control are the Turkish- or US-held pieces of Syrian territory, this could even strengthen the Syrian government's political stance against "foreign occupation" and "breaches of Syria's national unity and territorial integrity", at the UN and elsewhere. This may provide the rationale for inter-state (inter-government) regional compacts on Syria, but would further reduce the limited prospects for intra-Syrian political settlement.

⁹ The other regional balancer to Iran's role in Syria is Israel, with which Moscow developed a tacit special relationship, resilient to the Russian military's periodic blaming of Israel in military incidents in Syria also involving Russian targets.

2. Libya: Does the Astana model apply?

The specifics of the Syria case notwithstanding, the Astana format has become a diplomatic meme and has been cited as a “model” for dealing with other regional conflicts in the MENA. While “model” may be too strong a term, the case in point is management of heavily regionalised and internationalised civil wars by a conglomerate of regional and select extra-regional powers (not necessarily the same ones as the Astana co-brokers), playing as equals and balancing each other. The issue of whether or not this model is more effective than increasingly outdated super/great- power-led solutions is certainly worth exploring.

Since 2019, the possibility of replicating the Astana model in Libya has been discussed.¹⁰ In a way, Russia has become hostage to its new reputation in the MENA as a power on the rise, one that talks to everyone, from secular nationalist dictators to Islamists of various degrees of moderation/radicalism, and that brings different players together. Moscow is expected to get more actively involved in managing hotspots in the broader region, notably Libya.

The conflict in Libya has lasted for a decade, following the collapse of the central state in 2011, as a result of NATO's intervention in support of the Libyan opposition. Russia has been the strongest critic of the intervention and regime change. It did not show particular interest in Libya after the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, but formally supported the UN-brokered 2015 Skhirat agreement. As that non-inclusive process stumbled and the country descended into chaos, Russia started to modestly activate its policy, but developed no major stakes in Libya. Moscow's approach has been driven by a mix of broader foreign policy interests (posing both as a champion of antiterrorism and as an honest broker, mindful of regional interests) with opportunistic considerations. For instance, its initial contacts with the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar were partly a progression of its upgraded relations with Egypt and a way to offset disagreements with the United Arab Emirates on Syria. Moscow also partook in the international peace process on Libya¹¹ as a player, secondary to the more visible European and MENA stakeholders.

The conflict escalated in April 2019, due to an advance on Tripoli by forces aligned to the LNA led by Haftar and backed by the Tobruk based parliament. The growing transnationalisation of the civil war on all sides was aggravated in early 2020 with the formal deployment of the Turkish military on behalf of the weak UN-

¹⁰ Selin Caglayan, “A New Astana Model for Libya?”, in *InsideOver*, 28 December 2019, <https://www.insideover.com/?p=250139>; Kirill Semenov, “Will Russia, Turkey Launch ‘Syria Scenario’ for Libya?”, in *Al-Monitor*, 3 January 2020, <http://almon.co/3au6>.

¹¹ Ekaterina Stepanova, “Russia's Approach to the Conflict in Libya, the East-West Dimension and the Role of the OSCE”, in Andrea Dessi and Ettore Greco (eds), *The Search for Stability in Libya. OSCE's Role between Internal Obstacles and External Challenges*, Rome, Nuova Cultura, 2018, p. 89-111, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9331>.

backed Government of National Accord based in Tripoli. In January 2020, the LNA blockaded oil terminals to deprive the GNA of oil revenues supplied to the Libyan Central Bank.

Escalation on the ground in Libya, coupled with regional dynamics, including elsewhere in the MENA (notably in Syria), prompted some upgrade of Russia's involvement by 2020. The 19 January 2020 summit in Berlin was the first of the international conferences on Libya where Russia was represented by President Vladimir Putin. Moscow also insisted that the organisers abandon the idea to meet without the Libyan parties and that they invite a broader range of Libya's neighbours.¹² Russia and Turkey also set a short-lived precedent by brokering a ceasefire on Libya in January,¹³ to prepare for the Berlin conference. The conference was preceded by the Moscow round of talks on Libya, including direct dialogue between the Head of the GNA Fayez al Sarraj and General Haftar. While Haftar, in view of the LNA's advances on the ground, refused to sign a joint document in Moscow, he later agreed to send representatives to the UN-supervised confidence-building "military committee" in Geneva. The upgrade of Russian diplomatic activity did not, however, close Moscow's eyes to the reality that "a serious and sustainable dialogue between the Libyan parties is so far impossible because of the vast differences between them".¹⁴

The LNA advances on Tripoli since 2019 have complicated Russia's balancing act on Libya, seen by Moscow as a way to facilitate dialogue between the main parties. While often perceived as Haftar-biased, Russia has tried to keep equidistance from various Libyan parties, also working with the UN-backed GNA. This has involved a certain division of labour between the Russian Ministry of Defence, which is in more frequent contact with Haftar's LNA, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which engages more heavily with the GNA. Russia has also continued to quietly pursue its own negotiation strategy focused on promoting direct contacts between two veto players on the ground – the LNA and a conglomerate of Islamist militias known as the "Misrata rebels" that back the GNA in Tripoli (using the Contact Group on Libya and Chechen officials as go-betweens with the latter).

Moscow has tried to balance not only between Libya's parties (LNA, GNA and the Misrata rebels), but also vis-à-vis Russia's two regional partners – Turkey and Egypt – which back opposite sides in the Libyan conflict. At least in that respect, the transnationalised civil war in Libya resembles the situation in Syria before the Astana arrangement. As noted by Erdoğan's adviser, "Anyone who sees a strategic

¹² Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Acting Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's Statement for the Media on the Outcome of the Berlin Conference on Libya*, Berlin, 19 January 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4001846.

¹³ Russian Presidency, *Joint Statement by the Presidents of the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation*, Istanbul, 8 January 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5470>.

¹⁴ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Acting Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's Statement for the Media...*, cit.

gap enters there".¹⁵

Turkey's upgraded role on Libya has also prompted Moscow and Ankara to try to replicate some of their coordination experience in Syria. Under Erdoğan, Turkey has increasingly posed as a patron of moderate Islamists across the MENA. Most such forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood, failed to succeed in the course of the Arab Spring uprisings. Libya, however, stands out as a case where, following violent regime change, a weak government, the GNA, which domestically relied mainly on Islamist militias from Tripoli and Misrata,¹⁶ survived. This has made Libya a perfect case for Turkey to justify and expand its regional ambitions by stepping up its support to the GNA. For Russia, this is an acceptable regional ambition for Ankara, that comes at a relatively minor price as Moscow's own interest in Libya remains limited. Also, in contrast to Erdoğan's sustained dislike of the Assad regime in Syria, in Libya Moscow talks to all parties, including the GNA (whereas Ankara rejects Haftar's LNA).

For both Russia and Turkey, the mini trade-off on Libya (a ceasefire they co-brokered in preparation for the Moscow and Berlin negotiations) was also a by-product of the larger trade-off on Syria. This fell far short of the Moscow–Ankara interaction on Syria, critically important for both but especially for Turkey which shares cross-border refugee flows, militancy and terrorism with Syria in Idlib and the Kurdish areas. Lower importance attached by Turkey to Libya is also demonstrated by Ankara's decision to rely as much (or more) for its military deployment to Tripoli on "proxy" mercenaries transported from Syria as on its military personnel. In January 2020, Putin also admitted limited presence of Russian mercenaries on the LNA side, but publicly distanced the Kremlin from them, claiming they neither represent Russia's interests, nor get state funding.¹⁷ Regardless of the accuracy of that claim, speculations about a major role of Russians in the LNA operations are an exaggeration. Had they been true, the course and outcome of the LNA's advances on Tripoli would have been different: so either Russian mercenaries were poor fighters or they were not present in the LNA ranks in the inflated numbers mentioned by the media.

¹⁵ Murat Paksoy, "Turkey Proved Power on Table, Ground, Says Top Official", in *Anadolu Agency*, 30 December 2019, <http://v.aa.com.tr/1687029>.

¹⁶ The GNA relied on certain Islamist militias, including the so-called Big Four factions in Tripoli, but has been opposed by some other Islamists. For relationship between GNA and Islamist militias, see, for instance, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: *Russia's Position on the Situation in Libya* [in Russian], <https://www.mid.ru/pozicia-rossii-po-situacii-v-livii>; Kirill Semenov, "To Whom Does Libya Belong?" [in Russian], in *RIAC Articles*, 9 November 2018, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/komu-prinadlezhit-liviya>.

¹⁷ Russian Presidency, *News Conference Following Russian-German Talks*, Moscow, 11 January 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62565>. On the Russian private military companies (PMCs), see Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies. The Implications for European and Norwegian Security", in *FFI-Reports*, No. 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/en/publications-archive/russian-use-of-private-military-and-security-companies-the-implications-for-european-and-norwegian-security>.

The Astana model hardly applies to Libya, if only due to the more limited engagement of regional actors. However, if any lesson could be gleaned from the Russia–Turkey deliberations on Libya, it is that Russia keeps experimenting with more active cooperation with regional actors in conflict management in the MENA. Russia also tends to distrust initiatives on Libya pushed forward by those Western states that were complicit in violent regime change. This has been reinforced by Moscow's growing lack of confidence in non-regionally-based peace processes, and its scepticism about the LNA's propensity to succumb to foreign pressure and about the viability of the GNA. This combination explains Russia's abstention from supporting the UK-sponsored UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire in Libya on 12 February 2020.

3. Israel–Palestine: The peace process is dead, what role for Russia?

At the turn of the decade, the main development related to the Israeli-Palestinian dossier – the Trump administration's "Deal of the Century" – unfolded against the background of an already near total deadlock: the heads of states of Israel and Palestine¹⁸ had not met since 2014.

From the start, the Trump administration was determined to prioritise relations with Israel over all other US interests in the Middle East and displayed intensifying anti-Palestinian tendencies. In violation of a key condition for the UN-approved two-state solution, in June 2017 Washington recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and in May 2018 moved the US embassy there. In September 2018, Washington stopped US funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency supporting Palestinian refugees and in March 2019 unilaterally recognised Israeli sovereignty over the Syrian Golan Heights. The combination of these steps has further weakened, perhaps irreparably, the US's professed mediator role in the conflict.

The economic part of the "Trump deal", announced in June 2019 at a conference in Bahrein, leaves open the issue of economic investment in the Palestinian Territories and neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt, suggesting funds should come from Arab Gulf monarchies, Europe and Asia (and, to an extent, the United States). On 28 January 2020 the rest of the "deal"¹⁹ was announced by Trump at a joint press conference with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In this paper, the term "peace plan" is not used, as it is inapplicable to the US–Israeli (or Trump–Netanyahu) bilateral deal, which is the most pro-Israeli plan in decades. Much like the US recognition of Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights, this new initiative was also timed for the Israeli elections scheduled for 2 March 2020, to prop up embattled Netanyahu. For the Trump administration, the plan was also meant to serve as a domestic boost in light of the 2020 presidential campaign,

¹⁸ "The State of Palestine" is the official wording used in Russia.

¹⁹ White House, *Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*, January 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/peacetoprospersity>.

appealing to pro-Israeli constituencies.

The substance of the plan envisaged a patchwork Palestinian state that would abandon claims to Jerusalem, that would be demilitarised and deprived of the right to control its borders, territorial waters and air space. Instead of East Jerusalem as a national capital, the Palestinians were to reconcile for a couple of cross-the-wall outskirts, where a refugee camp is based, while Israel would get control over contested areas of the West Bank, with its sovereignty extended to the entire Jordan River Valley. The Palestinian refugee problem was left aside, to be sorted out outside the "peace" negotiations framework. Should the Palestinians agree to this plan (in the course of a four-year period), they were promised access to 50 billion US dollar investments. The plan was vehemently rejected by the Palestinians, as summed up by President Mahmoud Abbas who reiterated that "Jerusalem is not for sale".²⁰

Russia's formal response to Trump's plan was negative, but restrained. Russia officially recognises East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state – a status confirmed by General Assembly Resolution 58/292 (2004). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointed that "the establishment of settlements by Israel in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, has no legal force, and is a violation of international law".²¹ Russia's representative at the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, also pointed out that the Trump plan's map showed the Golan Heights as Israeli territory, whereas neither the UN nor Russia recognise Israel's sovereignty over that area.²² Russian academic experts were more outspoken in their criticism: some referred to an "apartheid"-style solution and suggested the death of the existing peace process and even "of any genuine hopes for the Israeli and Palestinian peoples for peace".²³

The Trump deal has had two main implications for the peace process. First, it means that, for the foreseeable future, Washington has lost its long-time position of mediator. Second, it has drawn a line on the long-established diplomatic framework for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Even in case of a change of administration in Washington, the US-led Quartet framework involving the US, the EU, Russia and the UN may be hard to revive. This, however, also means that sooner or later a new format will need to be built, with the range of mediators no longer confined to the two former superpowers of Cold War times, the EU²⁴ and the

²⁰ "State of Palestine: 'Jerusalem Is Not for Sale'. Abbas Reacts to Trump's 'Peace Plan'" (video), in *Ruptly*, 28 January 2020, <https://youtu.be/p8lfuZ4y5X4>.

²¹ Briefing by the Foreign Ministry's spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, on 6 March 2020. See Elena Teslova, "Russia Condemns Israel's Plan for West Bank Settlements", in *Anadolu Agency*, 6 March 2020, <http://v.aa.com.tr/1757202>.

²² "Russia's UN Envoy Blasts 'Deal of the Century' Map Which Shows Golan Heights as Part of Israel", in *Sputnik News*, 30 January 2020, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/202001301078180047>.

²³ Vitali Naumkin's interview for the programme "International Review" (video in Russian), in *Russia-24*, 31 January 2020, <https://youtu.be/FkiHy21Ke4k>.

²⁴ The EU could not agree on a joint reaction to Trump's plan and deferred it until Israel's March 2020 elections, while some member states pushed for recognition of the State of Palestine.

UN. This format should have broader regional representation and leave space for direct, unmediated dialogue between Israel and Palestine. It will also require a new generation of both Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

There are three ways this could help Russia advance its reputation as an honest broker in the region. First, Russia could facilitate and host direct Israeli-Palestinian talks in Track 2 or Track 1 format, or both. Moscow's 12 February 2020 proposal to the Israeli and Palestinian leaders to come to Moscow for direct talks without preconditions is the first in a series to come. Second, in any new international format on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict replacing the existing discredited mechanisms, Russia will by default play a larger role than that of almost an "extra" which it played in previous decades. Russia would also support a larger representation of regional, both Arab and non-Arab, actors in such formats. Third, Russia will continue its own efforts to facilitate intra-Palestinian dialogue and support parallel efforts undertaken by Egypt. The latest such round in Moscow took place in February 2019 at the Institute of Oriental Studies, with participation of 12 Palestinian groups and movements.

4. In lieu of conclusion: Russia's Gulf security initiatives and the 2020 US–Iran crisis

Since the mid-2010s, when Russia became an increasingly active player in the Middle East, its main proposal for a broader regional security initiative has been the Security Concept for the Gulf.²⁵ The Concept was introduced at the UN in July 2019 at the time of spiralling escalation between the United States and Iran, each backed by its regional allies.

Moscow's previous regional initiatives of the late 1990s, 2004 and 2007 were vague, boiled down to well-intentioned lip service, and hardly went beyond an abstract idea of a collective security architecture for the MENA, modelled upon the all-inclusive but weak Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Not only had the OSCE been created in a totally different era and context, when Cold War Europe was strictly divided between two opposite, well-structured political-military blocs, but it was also scarcely effective as a conflict management institution.

In 2019, Russia came up with a more down-to-earth proposal that promoted direct dialogue between the region's main antagonists as the first step to more inclusive multilateralism. Russia's initiative focused on the acute regional controversy involving Iran and the Arab Gulf states, grossly aggravated by the US and Israeli angles, as the line of tension that could escalate to a regional war and easily become

²⁵ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Russia's Security Concept for the Gulf Area*, 23 July 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575.

further internationalised.

The catalyst for Russia's new regional security concept was growing escalation of the crisis in the Gulf, mainly due to the progressively more bellicose approach to Iran taken by the US administration after it pulled out from the Iran nuclear deal – or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – in May 2018 regardless of Iran's abiding by the agreement. In the summer of 2019, in the context of the "strait for a strait"²⁶ escalation involving the capturing of an Iranian tanker in the Strait of Gibraltar and a British one in the Strait of Hormuz, Washington further emphasised "restoring deterrence", "protecting freedom of navigation" and "increas[ing...] force posture".²⁷ The only form of multilateralism admissible for Washington seems to be exclusive, confrontational blocs or coalitions, formed with the main purpose of opposing Iran, such as a bid to create a US security alliance with six Arab Gulf states, Egypt and Jordan ("the Middle East Strategic Alliance", commonly known as the "Arab NATO"), or an explicitly anti-Iranian International Maritime Security Initiative (a US-led group of close allies, such as the UK and Australia, and Arab Gulf powers created in September 2019 to patrol the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman).

Against this backdrop, Moscow has tried to capitalise on its acquired weight in the MENA, its long-time, solid relations with Iran (in contrast to the US's Iran policy), but also on its multi-vector approach, ideological relativism and contacts with all regional actors in or beyond the Gulf.

Russia needed some symbolic, notable boost of its previously relatively low-key image in the Gulf region. The first leaks about Russia's potential role in exercises in the Persian Gulf came in August 2019, during the Iranian navy commander's visit to Moscow. However, it took three months, following the US announcement of its anti-Iranian naval coalition in September 2019, and the involvement of China, for a joint Iran–Russia–China exercise ("Naval Security Belt") to be held in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman in December 2019, officially to promote antiterrorism, antipiracy and regional security. For Moscow and Beijing, this became the first-time exercise of that scale in the area,²⁸ whose symbolic and political effects were meant to exceed the military ones. This was a practical step to warn against the US-led "military solution" on Iran, but in a measured form that fell short of any formal "coalition". Moscow also observed limitations on arms trade with Iran imposed by UN Security Council Resolution 2231 for five years following the signing of the 2015 nuclear deal.²⁹

²⁶ President Hassan Rouhani's remark: "A strait for a strait. It can't be that the Strait of Hormuz is free for you and the Strait of Gibraltar is not free for us", quoted in: Babak Dehghanpisheh, "War with Iran Is the Mother of All Wars: Iran President", in *Reuters*, 6 August 2019, <https://reut.rs/2Ys6FKl>.

²⁷ US State Department, *Middle East Peace and Security*, Briefing by US Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook at the UN Foreign Press Center, New York, 20 August 2019, <https://www.state.gov/middle-east-peace-and-security>.

²⁸ Prior to that, Russia's naval cooperation with Iran was confined to the Caspian Sea.

²⁹ The US unilateral withdrawal from the 2015 deal makes it hard for Washington to further block military-technical cooperation between Iran and third countries after the five-year period expires

In early 2020, the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign vis-à-vis Iran catalysed in a "surgical", but nightmare scenario. The administration's decision to assassinate the commander of the special Quds Force of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, General Soleimani, in a drone strike on Baghdad airport on 3 January 2020, led to the worst escalation since 1979. The United States publicly assassinated the top official of a sovereign regional power, a power that took the five nuclear-armed permanent members of the UN Security Council (plus Germany and the EU) years of negotiations to convince to limit its nuclear programme. Long-term implications of that arbitrary punitive action against Tehran for the global nuclear non-proliferation regime are still to be fully comprehended. Among other things, it shows that if there is a major external destabilising force in the Middle East, it is definitely not Russia.

Washington's "maximum pressure" has met with Tehran's "maximum resistance". Iran responded with unprecedented direct missile strikes on US military targets in Iraq on 8 January 2020 that resulted in 109 injuries.³⁰ In return, Trump threatened to target 52 sites of political and cultural significance for the Iranians; dispatched several thousand more troops to the region; and implemented new sanctions against Iran's top security officials, metal exports and mining companies. While, in the short run, a further military escalation was avoided, prospects for meaningful US–Iran negotiations were also finished for the foreseeable future, leaving the region in a precarious limbo. The new escalation also killed European "mid-way" mediating initiatives (such as French President Emmanuel Macron's "oil plan"),³¹ while the EU fell short of having its own consolidated and clear say on the US–Iran crisis.

Ultimately, the main implications of the 2020 crisis for the broader region are likely to be long term. The crisis might well symbolise the beginning of the end of the US strategic dominance in the Persian Gulf as proclaimed by the 1980 Carter doctrine (Washington's commitment to repel any "assault on the vital interests of the United States of America" in the Persian Gulf "by any means necessary, including military force").³²

Mid-term repercussions may affect Iraq the most, due to its position as a junior partner to both Washington and Tehran, a host to US forces and home to local pro-

in 2020. Following years of strict sanctions, Iran needs new weapons, especially air defence systems and combat aircraft. Any deals, however, require long preparation.

³⁰ Idrees Ali, "109 U.S. Troops Diagnosed with Brain Injuries from Iran Attack: Pentagon", in *Reuters*, 11 February 2020, <https://reut.rs/31J88ur>.

³¹ France's Fall 2019 plan to revive the nuclear deal, by temporarily allowing Iran to sell oil for a limited time by lifting US sanctions in exchange for Tehran's return to talks and compliance with the agreement.

³² Jimmy Carter, "Address by President Carter on the State of the Union before a Joint Session of Congress, Washington, January 23, 1980", in Kristin L. Ahlberg (ed.), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980. Vol. I: Foundations of Foreign Policy*, Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 2014, p. 695, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d138>.

Iranian militias. Following the early 2020 escalation, Baghdad's instinctive drive to reconsider residual US military presence, while futile at first, brought the problem to the centre of the political and security agenda, as an issue for potential national consolidation. On the Afghan track, the long-prepared US–Taliban deal struck on 29 February 2020 might have been partly sped up by mounting risks along the US–Iran track. Iran can cause much trouble for the United States in Afghanistan; if Tehran did not derail the deal, it was only because the envisaged US military disengagement is in line with Iran's long-term interests. The situation in Syria, despite presence of both (pro-)Iranian and residual US forces, remains remarkably unaltered by the new round of the US–Iran controversy (partly due to the US's declining role in Syria). The Arab Gulf states have reacted to the US–Iran crisis with restraint, acutely aware that further escalation puts them on the frontline. Remarkably, there were leaks about Iraq-brokered indirect Iranian-Saudi dialogue on easing mutual tensions on the verge of Soleimani's killing, and about the Saudis' reaching out to the Iranians in the immediate follow-up to the assassination, even if such discreet contacts were not systematic.³³

Russia's immediate reaction to the US–Iran crisis has been a mix of harsh criticism, prioritising de-escalation and quietly preparing for mediation. The Russian Ministry of Defence, which had been in regular contact with Soleimani, especially on antiterrorism in Syria, has been straightforward in its condemnation.³⁴ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called the assassination unacceptable, a gross violation of international law, in his conversation with US Secretary of State Mark Pompeo,³⁵ but the Foreign Affairs Ministry's overall reaction has been calmer and linked the incident to the domestic imperatives of the US presidential campaign.³⁶ Apart from regional actors such as Oman and Qatar, three out of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council – Russia, China and France – all pose as potential intermediaries, partly building on their earlier efforts to rescue the Iran nuclear deal. Analysts have also mentioned practical steps that Russia, specifically, could undertake on Iran, ranging from actively implementing and encouraging civilian nuclear cooperation with Tehran, covered by the 2015 deal, to backing a greater role for Iran in the political settlement of Syria.³⁷

³³ Laura Rozen, "Pompeo Mocks Claim Soleimani Was Part of Iraq-brokered Iran-Saudi Indirect Talks", in *Al-Monitor*, 7 January 2020, <http://almon.co/3axb>; John Irish, "No Dialogue for Now as Saudis, Iranians Camp on Positions", in *Reuters*, 15 February 2020, <https://reut.rs/2PcoXsH>.

³⁴ "Russian Defense Ministry Highlights Soleimani's Contribution to Combating IS in Syria", in *TASS*, 3 January 2020, <https://tass.com/defense/1105511>; "Russian Ministry of Defence on the Assassination of General Q. Soleimani" [in Russian], in *Krasnaya zvezda* [Red Star], 3 January 2020, <http://redstar.ru/?p=50163>.

³⁵ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Press Release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Telephone Conversation with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo*, 3 January 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3989636.

³⁶ MFA spokeswoman Maria Zakharova quoted in: Bob Frederiks, "How the World Reacted to US Airstrike That Killed Iran General Gasse Soleimani", in *New York Post*, 3 January 2020, <https://wp.me/p3Q98d-10yOE>.

³⁷ Michel Duclos and Andrey Kortunov, "Helping Iran to Make the Right Choice", in *Institut Montaine Blog*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/helping-iran-make-right-choice>.

However, as the region came to a dangerous edge in early 2020, none of the reactive, piecemeal measures by any responsible stakeholders, nor mediation and temporary de escalation, sufficed any longer. Instead, a systemic regional solution becomes even more necessary, at least in the form of a crisis management mechanism for the Gulf, involving Iran and key Arab Gulf states. This brings us back to how Russia's 2019 concept contributes to the discussions about regional security plans that have gained further momentum in the context of the new US–Iran escalation.³⁸ As noted by Lavrov, the Russian “idea is still on the table”.³⁹

The substantive input of the Russian concept rests on inclusive multilateralism as the founding principle for a regional security mechanism. The concept suggests that inclusive multilateralism is more likely to result from a long process. At the earlier stages, the need to establish direct contacts between the main players – and keep those going no matter what – is underscored, as well as a special role for confidence-building measures including military-to-military hotlines. Initial dialogue could later lead to agreements on select issues of mutual interest (demilitarised areas, arms control and limitations, mutual security guarantees). In a sign of realism – and in a bow to Arab Gulf states that depend on the US military role for their security – the concept suggests to consider reducing foreign military presence in the Gulf only when tangible progress towards more inclusive multilateralism in regional security matters is achieved. As with any concept that pretends to offer a strategic vision, the most ambitious goal is a long-term one: the ultimate endgame is the formation of a regional organisation on security and cooperation in the Gulf where the world powers (China, the EU, India, Russia and the United States) would only play the role of observers.

Russia's concept is broader, more process-oriented and more strategic than two other main lines of thought on regional “collective security”. One of these suggested the Gulf Cooperation Council as a core of any “collective security” system.⁴⁰ While unacceptable for Iran, this idea also assumes a fully consolidated approach on the part of the Arab Gulf states (which was put in question by the 2017 Saudi-Qatari rift). The other was Iran's initiative to strike a “non-aggression” and “non-interference in domestic affairs” pact among regional actors, known as “Coalition for HOPE” (Hormuz Peace Endeavor) and introduced by President Hassan Rouhani at the United Nations in September 2019.⁴¹ It declared a trans-regional, trans-Gulf

³⁸ Patrick Wintour, “Nervous Saudis Try to Ease Middle East Tensions”, in *The Guardian*, 9 January 2020, <https://gu.com/p/d42ph>.

³⁹ Russian Foreign Ministry, *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Questions at a Plenary Session of the Raisina Dialogue International Conference*, New Delhi, 15 January 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3994885.

⁴⁰ Ray Takeyh and Steven A. Cook, “America Has a Golden Chance to Tame Iran”, in *Financial Times*, 14 October 2004.

⁴¹ United Nations, “At UN, Iran Proposes ‘Coalition for Hope’ to Pull Gulf Region from ‘Edge of Collapse’”, in *UN News*, 25 September 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472>. Iran

approach, but seemed unlikely to reverse the deep distrust between the main regional parties.

Whether or not regional security plans should come from within the region itself is a legitimate question. In any case, a plan coming from just one of the main regional antagonists hardly stands a chance of success. In theory, the only way this could work is if such a plan, from the start, comes as a joint initiative by the main opponents, such as a jointly proposed non-aggression pact. Informal contacts between Saudi and Iranian officials have been going on for some time, not to mention indirect talks through mediators.⁴² However, these on-and-off contacts will not automatically self-upgrade into a regional security dialogue. Regional mediators (Iraq, Oman, Pakistan) are useful as go-betweens, but do not have enough interest or capacity to offer a strategic vision for the region.

In sum, an initial impulse to unlock the trans-Gulf impasse might need to come from outside the region. If the US–Iran military exchange in early 2020 teaches us something, it is that no security plan for the Gulf that is initiated by the United States or its unconditional (the UK) or conditional allies (other Western states) is feasible, nor perhaps desirable.

Washington has completely ignored Russia's concept of regional security for the Gulf. So far any interest in and discussion of Moscow's proposal has been modest and has come mainly from the region itself. While regional experts see the end-result envisaged by Russia's plan as "at best a distant dream", some also deem it "a useful tool to navigate beyond the limitations of the alternative security discourses on Persian Gulf".⁴³ The plan has also received quiet support from China.

If proposed by Moscow alone, Russia's concept is unlikely to be publicly accepted by Arab Gulf states (as US strategic partners in the region). However, a joint Russia–EU–China proposal built around the same ideas could fare better, both regionally and internationally. While it will not get support from the Trump administration, it is likely to gain endorsement from the United Nations, regional powers and new great powers like India. Most importantly, it would be a multilateral, cross-cultural and trans-continental way to provide a vision for the Gulf alternative to the mix of impasse and escalation that has haunted it for decades.

proposed a collective security framework for the Persian Gulf in 2007 and again in 2015.

⁴² On contacts between the Saudi Minister of Gulf Affairs, Thamer al-Sabhan, and Husein Jaber Ansari, Senior Adviser to the Iranian Foreign Minister, see Igor Subbotin, "Saudi Arabia Caught in Secret Contacts with Iran" [in Russian], in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 20 March 2019, http://www.ng.ru/world/2019-03-20/2_7535_saud.html. On indirect talks, see Farnaz Fassihi and Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia and Iran Make Quiet Openings to Head Off War", in *The New York Times*, 4 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/04/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-talks.html>. On Riyadh's informal ceasefire talks in Jordan with the Iran-backed Yemeni Houthis, see Aziz El Yaakoubi and Michelle Nichols, "Saudi Arabia Discussing Yemen Truce in Informal Talks with Houthis: Sources", in *Reuters*, 14 November 2019, <https://reut.rs/371K2gy>.

⁴³ Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Collective Security in Persian Gulf: Can It Fly?", in *LobeLog*, 30 July 2019, <https://lobelog.com/?p=49584>.

A blueprint for inclusive, multilateral regional security in the Gulf is fully in line with Russia's strategy in the Middle East and its broader foreign policy goals and preferences. In the long term, this is the only way to fundamentally stabilise the region neighbouring Eurasia and make it more self-reliant in security matters. For Russia, this would be the ultimate product of regionalisation – a global trend that goes well beyond the Middle East and is to become one of the mainstays of the emerging multipolar world. This is seen as a goal *in its own merit*, rather than some derivative from Russia's relations with non-regional actors, including the United States and Europe. What still escapes most Western observers looking for "grand games" or "schemes" between the West and "rising powers" such as Russia is that Moscow no longer prioritises or sees the role of the West as that of indisputable lead power in and beyond the MENA.

Ironically, while not part of the Middle East, Russia feels itself more comfortable and more "an equal among equals" in its engagement with regional MENA powers than in the exclusive, Western-centric, EU/NATO-dominated postmodern European order that claims political, economic, cultural and moral superiority, while also lacking self-reliance in security terms. Posing as a peacemaker in the Middle East is also of major importance for Russia's overall relations with the Muslim world, as a macro-regional power that is not outside, but on the periphery of that world. Finally, the possibility to contribute constructively, as a responsible "honest broker", to launching and sustaining inclusive regional security dialogues in the MENA is of particular value for Russia from the point of view of boosting its global profile.

Updated 8 June 2020

References

Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Collective Security in Persian Gulf: Can It Fly?", in *LobeLog*, 30 July 2019, <https://lobelog.com/?p=49584>

Idrees Ali, "109 U.S. Troops Diagnosed with Brain Injuries from Iran Attack: Pentagon", in *Reuters*, 11 February 2020, <https://reut.rs/31J88ur>

Selin Caglayan, "A New Astana Model for Libya?", in *InsideOver*, 28 December 2019, <https://www.insideover.com/?p=250139>

Jimmy Carter, "Address by President Carter on the State of the Union before a Joint Session of Congress, Washington, January 23, 1980", in Kristin L. Ahlberg (ed.), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980. Vol. I: Foundations of Foreign Policy*, Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 2014, p. 691-700, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d138>

Babak Dehghanpisheh, "War with Iran Is the Mother of All Wars: Iran President", in *Reuters*, 6 August 2019, <https://reut.rs/2Ys6FKl>

Michel Duclos and Andrey Kortunov, "Helping Iran to Make the Right Choice", in *Institut Montaigne Blog*, 13 May 2019, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/helping-iran-make-right-choice>

Aziz El Yaakoubi and Michelle Nichols, "Saudi Arabia Discussing Yemen Truce in Informal Talks with Houthis: Sources", in *Reuters*, 14 November 2019, <https://reut.rs/371K2gy>

Farnaz Fassihi and Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia and Iran Make Quiet Openings to Head Off War", in *The New York Times*, 4 October 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/04/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-iran-talks.html>

Bob Frederiks, "How the World Reacted to US Airstrike That Killed Iran General Qassem Soleimani", in *New York Post*, 3 January 2020, <https://wp.me/p3Q98d-10yOE>

Metin Gurkan, "Turkish Troops in Syria Threatened at Idlib Outposts", in *Al-Monitor*, 30 December 2019, <http://almon.co/3as3>

John Irish, "No Dialogue for Now as Saudis, Iranians Camp on Positions", in *Reuters*, 15 February 2020, <https://reut.rs/2PcoXsH>

Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies. The Implications for European and Norwegian Security", in *FFI-Reports*, No. 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/en/publications-archive/russian-use-of-private-military-and-security-companies-the-implications-for>

europaean-and-norwegian-security

Murat Paksoy, "Turkey Proved Power on Table, Ground, Says Top Official", in *Anadolu Agency*, 30 December 2019, <http://v.aa.com.tr/1687029>

Laura Rozen, "Pompeo Mocks Claim Soleimani Was Part of Iraq-brokered Iran-Saudi Indirect Talks", in *Al-Monitor*, 7 January 2020, <http://almon.co/3axb>

Russia and Turkey, *Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-escalation Area*, Sochi, 17 September 2018, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2018/852>

Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Acting Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's Statement for the Media on the Outcome of the Berlin Conference on Libya*, Berlin, 19 January 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4001846

Russian Foreign Ministry, *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Questions at a Plenary Session of the Raisina Dialogue International Conference*, New Delhi, 15 January 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3994885

Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Press Release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Telephone Conversation with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo*, 3 January 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3989636

Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Russia's Security Concept for the Gulf Area*, 23 July 2019, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzCA/content/id/3733575

Russian Presidency, *Joint Statement by the Presidents of the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation*, Istanbul, 8 January 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5470>

Russian Presidency, *News Conference Following Russian-German Talks*, Moscow, 11 January 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62565>

Kirill Semenov, "To Whom Does Libya Belong?" [in Russian], in *RIAC Articles*, 9 November 2018, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/komu-prinadlezhit-liviya>

Kirill Semenov, "Will Russia, Turkey Launch 'Syria Scenario' for Libya?", in *Al-Monitor*, 3 January 2020, <http://almon.co/3au6>

Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia and Conflicts in the Middle East: Regionalisation and Implications for the West", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (December 2018), p. 35-57

Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia in the Middle East: Back to a 'Grand Strategy' – or Enforcing Multilateralism?", in *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 81, No. 2 (Summer 2016), p. 23-35, <https://www.ifri.org/en/node/11686>

Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia's Approach to the Conflict in Libya, the East-West Dimension and the Role of the OSCE", in Andrea Dessi and Ettore Greco (eds), *The Search for Stability in Libya. OSCE's Role between Internal Obstacles and External Challenges*, Rome, Nuova Cultura, 2018, p. 89-111, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9331>

Igor Subbotin, "Saudi Arabia Caught in Secret Contacts with Iran" [in Russian], in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 20 March 2019, http://www.ng.ru/world/2019-03-20/2_7535_saud.html

Ray Takeyh and Steven A. Cook, "America Has a Golden Chance to Tame Iran", in *Financial Times*, 14 October 2004

Elena Teslova, "Russia Condemns Israel's Plan for West Bank Settlements", in *Anadolu Agency*, 6 March 2020, <http://v.aa.com.tr/1757202>

United Nations, "At UN, Iran Proposes 'Coalition for Hope' to Pull Gulf Region from 'Edge of Collapse'", in *UN News*, 25 September 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472>

US State Department, *Middle East Peace and Security*, Briefing by US Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook at the UN Foreign Press Center, New York, 20 August 2019, <https://www.state.gov/middle-east-peace-and-security>

White House, *Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*, January 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/peacetoprospersity>

Patrick Wintour, "Nervous Saudis Try to Ease Middle East Tensions", in *The Guardian*, 9 January 2020, <https://gu.com/p/d42ph>

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI PAPERS

Director: Riccardo Alcaro (r.alcaro@iai.it)

- 20 | 16 Ekaterina Stepanova, *Russia's Foreign and Security Policy in the Middle East: Entering the 2020s*
- 20 | 15 Abdullah K. Al-Saud and Joseph A. Kéchichian, *The Evolving Security Landscape Around the Arabian Peninsula: A Saudi Perspective*
- 20 | 14 Nicola Bilotta, *Beyond the Digital Tax: The Challenges of the EU's Scramble for Technological Sovereignty*
- 20 | 13 Luca Franza, Margherita Bianchi and Luca Bergamaschi, *Geopolitics and Italian Foreign Policy in the Age of Renewable Energy*
- 20 | 12 Stefano Silvestri, *Guerre nella globalizzazione: il futuro della sicurezza europea*
- 20 | 11 Maria Grazia Caccamo, *Per ripartire. Alcune considerazioni sul modello di sviluppo e la prospettiva dell'industria della Difesa*
- 20 | 10 Daniel Kurtzer and Maira Seeley, *The Middle East's Evolving Security Landscape: Prospects for Regional Cooperation and US Engagement*
- 20 | 09 Josep Borrell, *Il mondo del dopo-Covid è già qui...*
- 20 | 08 Sabine Fischer, *Dimensions and Trajectories of Russian Foreign Policy*
- 20 | 07 Ehud Eiran, *Structural Shifts and Regional Security: A View from Israel*