

**RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
on the rise or inevitable decline?**

Clément THERME

Clément THERME is an associate fellow at the Center for Turkish, Ottoman, Balkan and Central Asian Studies (CETOBaC, UMR 8032) of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). He holds both a PhD in International History from the Institute of International and Development Studies and a PhD in sociology at the EHESS. He is the author of *Relations entre Téhéran et Moscou depuis 1979* (PUF, 2012) and co-director of the book *Iran and the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century* (Mazda Publishers, 2013).

The purpose of this strategic study is to provide a better understanding of the weight of the heritage of Soviet orientalism that causes the Russian political elite to reflect on Russian policy in the area through the prism of Muslim civilisation. In particular, it analyses how Russian relations with the “Muslim world” are affected by the jihadist threats on the Russian territory and the memory of the war against the mujahideen in Afghanistan. The study concludes how the Middle East is a pivotal area of Russia-U.S. relations, making Moscow an indispensable actor in the region.

Key words: Russia, Middle East, alternative strategy, West

While a number of western elites consider Russia to be a permanent threat, we cannot ignore the fact that Russia has a much more complex reputation in the rest of the world, in particular in the Middle East. The present study “Russia’s influence in the Middle East: on the rise or inevitable decline?”, gives an analysis that strays from the well-worn, western-centred paths. Here, we want to discover whether Russia’s position in the Middle East is due to the failure of neoconservative Americans or an innovative policy in the region. Is Russia a power by default or an alternative model to the western perspective in the Middle East?

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, we have witnessed Russia’s return in the Middle East. Russian foreign policy is not unchanging, having been guided by the unfinished quest for the Russian identity, of which it has many as it is a Slavic, Muslim, Asian and European nation. It also carries a definite heritage from the Tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet periods, marked by both the interaction between the two spaces and the ideological ambitions of Moscow. Today, still, it is important to fully understand the weight of the heritage of Soviet orientalism that causes the Russian political elite to reflect on Russian policy in the area through the prism of Muslim civilisation.

Russia is therefore a nation that has built bridges with the “Muslim world”, where Putin intends to play a defining role. However, these relations are affected by the jihadist threat on the Russian territory (Chechnya and Dagestan) and the memory of the war against the mujahideen in Afghanistan. This perception gives Russian foreign policy its structure for the Middle East. Moscow intends to play its part in the fight against terrorism and avoid any eventual destabilisation of central Asia, its “near abroad”. While this policy follows the post-September 11 discourse mainly transmitted by westerners and is part of the Russian-American rapprochement, it reveals an alternative diplomatic vision to those of the western diplomatic circles. Russia claims there is a “clash of values” and is opposed to western postmodernism (democracy, human rights) and the expansion of NATO across former Soviet territories.

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Moscow has useful assets for asserting its strategic aura in the region, the primary one being its steadfast attachment to the respect of national identities and state order in the Middle East. The identity discourse and its rejection of interventionism appeal to many. Russia's stance in relation to the Syrian crisis can be understood in this sense, especially since Russia's aim is to protect Christian minorities in the east. This code to understanding the conflict also highlights the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on Moscow's foreign policy in the area. Furthermore, the conflict in Syria enables a new non-western relationship to be established, in which Russia hopes to exercise its political leadership. It is mainly hinged on an agreement with Iran, which was also marginalised in the Middle East in the 1990s, even if the differing of stances – in relation to Israel in particular – help put the notion of an agreement into perspective.

It is a capacity for dialogue with all of the Middle East's actors that is at the heart of Russian strategy in this region. Moscow makes a point of proposing a diplomatic path that runs independently to that of the West, and attracts emerging countries and non-aligned states. Russian foreign policy in the Middle East is first and foremost pragmatic, defined by a Realpolitik strategy rather than an ideological policy. Cooperation with the west appears possible, driven by the desire to avoid the collapse of state order in an unstable region. As such, Moscow is favourable to more multilateralism in order to resolve regional crises, in particular when faced with the risk of nuclear proliferation. Russia even places itself on the side of the west on the subject of strengthening the legal mechanisms that exist, even though it opposes the differences in form that these take in Washington. The Middle East is a pivotal area of Russia-U.S. relations. This complicity between Russia and the U.S. on the Middle East is part of the attempt to stabilise the region and they have in fact marginalised the other actors, in particular the European Union.

The Russian approach therefore appears as a strategy of varying shape and form. Russia – oscillating between a hindrance and a help to the political resolution of crises – is undeniably an indispensable actor in the region, offering original solutions to regional crises.