



Alienating Russia: How Washington's Middle East Policy May Suffer

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There have been crucial developments on multiple fronts regarding the Middle East in recent months. The ebb and flow of the war against ISIS is the most prominent feature, but the stalemated Syrian civil war, the fragile framework agreement regarding Iran's nuclear program and the political future of Iraq, characterized by ongoing sectarian violence in that country, are also important matters. Understandably, the positions that the United States and various regional powers adopt receive the most attention. But there is another relevant player that could have a major impact, either good or bad, on all of those issues: Russia.

Unfortunately, because of the growing tensions between Moscow and the West on other issues (especially Ukraine), Russian leaders have few incentives to support Western initiatives in the Middle East, even when they are logical and constructive. Instead, Vladimir Putin's government has increasingly strong incentives to play a disruptive role and thereby retaliate indirectly for economic sanctions that the United States and the European Union have imposed on Russia because of the Ukraine dispute.

The Kremlin's decision in April to sell S300 air defense missiles to Iran is just one example of how Moscow can cause problems for the United States in the Middle East. If the nuclear framework agreement unravels, the introduction of sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles would likely embolden Tehran and greatly raise the cost and risk of U.S.-led military action against Iran's nuclear installations.

Russian involvement in Middle Eastern affairs is nothing new. The Soviet Union regarded that region as an important arena in its global Cold War rivalry with the United States and sought to cultivate a number of client states, including Egypt during the era of Gamal Nasser and Syria throughout Hafez al Assad's rule. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the massive economic woes of Russia as the principal successor state emerging from the wreckage of the USSR caused Moscow to adopt a policy of geopolitical retrenchment in the Middle East, as it did in other regions. But Russia is now once more flexing its diplomatic, economic and military muscles.

Both the West and the countries of the Middle East need to pay more attention to that development. Russia is a member of the P5+1 powers negotiating with Iran, and Moscow is perfectly placed to sabotage an agreement regarding Tehran's nuclear program. It's important to remember that the framework agreement is merely the outline of a final accord. Important details still need to be worked out by a June 30 deadline. Although Russian leaders likely do not want Iran to develop a nuclear weapons capability, they know that depriving Tehran of that capacity is a much higher priority for Washington and U.S. allies in the Middle East. Dragging its feet on an agreement would be an effective way for the Kremlin to convey displeasure with U.S. policy on Ukraine, the new NATO rapid response force, and other issues.

In addition to potential mischief regarding Western objectives toward Iran, Putin and his colleagues are also at odds with the United States and its allies regarding policy toward Syria. Moscow has made it clear that it wants Bashar Assad to remain in power, an outcome that is anathema to Washington and other NATO capitals. There are indications that Russia is supplying the Assad government with new weapons, while the Western powers continue to back non-ISIS rebel forces.

U.S. and European leaders need to view their policy toward Russia in a global context, not just as an issue on NATO's East European flank. That means setting priorities and sometimes sacrificing less important objectives. It is unrealistic for Western officials to believe that they can adopt hostile measures in response to the Ukraine quarrel and related matters without paying a geopolitical price in the Middle East and other regions where the Kremlin is a relevant player. Foreign policy is not a charitable enterprise, and the Russians have little reason at the moment to back the agenda of the Western powers in the Middle East, unless Moscow receives some tangible benefits in return.

Washington and its NATO partners must come to grips with the unpleasant reality that maintaining (much less tightening) economic sanctions on Russia may entail major geopolitical costs in regions far removed from Eastern Europe. The Middle East is likely to be a prominent arena for such blowback, unless the Western governments modify their overall policy toward Moscow.

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