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Silver Lining in the Clouds? Prospects for Trump-Putin Cooperation in the Middle East

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Executive Summary

The overall improvement in U.S.-Russian relations that the new Trump administration envisioned has not materialized as Washington and Moscow continue to disagree on a number of important issues such as sanctions, Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and NATO. The United States and Russia, though, do have several common interests in the Middle East. Both oppose the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, and both have good relations with most Middle Eastern governments. Still, differing Russian and U.S. attitudes toward Iran, in particular, will serve to limit – but not eliminate – the degree to which they can cooperate in the region.

Introduction

During the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed positive views about Donald J. Trump (according to Trump himself), and the U.S. presidential candidate expressed positive views about the Russian president. Both indicated that it was not just desirable, but possible to improve the state of U.S.-Russian relations, and that the two countries had common interests in many areas on which they could and should cooperate. Putin and Trump both singled out the possibility of Washington and Moscow working together against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant as something that would benefit both countries as well as many others.

But despite hopes for an overall improvement in U.S.-Russian relations, Washington and Moscow still disagree on several issues – including Syria, Crimea, eastern Ukraine, sanctions, and NATO – just as they did before. On top of this is the controversy over the relationship between members of the Trump campaign and Russia, which has affected U.S.-Russian relations. These factors complicate the prospects for U.S.-Russian cooperation in the Middle East, but they do not necessarily preclude it.

This paper will explore the rise and fall of expectations about U.S.-Russian relations at the outset of the Trump administration and evaluate how Washington's and Moscow's interests in the Middle East converge or diverge.

U.S.-Russian Relations: Clouds Not Parting

When Trump was elected president in November 2016, the prospects for U.S.-Russian cooperation initially seemed quite good. Some of the people close to Trump during his presidential campaign were strong advocates of improved U.S.-Russian relations.¹

But things did not remain smooth for long. Even before taking office, Trump indicated that he would seek to increase the U.S. nuclear arsenal.² And while it is hard to know how much their views will influence the president, some of Trump's appointees – including Secretary of Defense James Mattis and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley – expressed much more negative views about Russia. Even Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the former Exxon Mobil CEO, who some thought would be pro-Russian turned out not to be. Further, Russia-friendly ret. Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn was soon dismissed from his post as national security advisor due to not fully disclosing the content of his conversations with Moscow's ambassador in Washington, and was replaced by Russia-skeptic Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster.³

What has become clear, though, is that Trump has not yet altered the Obama administration's policies in areas of particular concern to Russia – including sanctions, Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and NATO.⁴ Growing public concern in the United States about ties between Trump and some of his close associates with Russia suggest that Trump's efforts to improve relations with Moscow could have negative domestic political ramifications for the president.⁵ Finally, when Putin proposed extending the New START Treaty during his phone call with Trump on January 28, Trump responded that this had been a "bad deal" for the United States and made clear that he wanted to increase the U.S. nuclear arsenal,⁶ which was not what Putin wanted to hear. Indeed, the relatively positive stance toward Trump that the Russian media had adopted after his election and inauguration disappeared in mid-February and was replaced by a more negative tone.⁷ Moscow's expectations, as expressed in the Russian media, that Trump would change U.S. foreign policy in ways favorable to Moscow went from being positive in the weeks following his election to more negative since mid-February.

Growing public concern in the United States about ties between Trump and some of his close associates with Russia suggest that Trump's efforts to improve relations with Moscow could have negative domestic political ramifications for the president.

¹ Rosalind S. Helderman and Tom Hamburger, "[Flynn Episode 'Darkens the Cloud' of Russia that Hangs over Trump Administration](#)," *The Washington Post*, February 14, 2017.

² Carol Morello, "[Trump Says He Wants to 'Greatly Strengthen and Expand' U.S. Nuclear Capability](#)," *The Washington Post*, December 22, 2016.

³ Jennifer Rubin, "[Russia Hawks Won the Personnel Battle, but They Need to Do More](#)," *The Washington Post*, February 22, 2017.

⁴ Josh Rogin, "[Tillerson to Testify Russia Must Be Held to Account for Its Actions](#)," *The Washington Post*, January 10, 2017.

⁵ Jennifer Rubin, "[Voters Don't Like What They See from Trump on Russia](#)," *The Washington Post*, March 8, 2017.

⁶ Andrew Roth, "[Trump's Russia Strategy Collides with Foreign Policy Reality in Leaked Call with Putin](#)," *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2017.

⁷ Michael Crowley, "[Kremlin-Backed Media Turns on Trump](#)," *Politico*, March 7, 2017.

From the time that Trump emerged as a serious presidential contender in early 2016 until just after his inauguration in January, the U.S.-Russian cooperation in the Middle East that Trump and Putin had called for was part of a broader U.S.-Russian reconciliation that both leaders appeared to envision. It is now clear, however, that a rapprochement is not going to occur due to differences over key issues elsewhere (including Ukraine, Europe, and nuclear weapons) and political concerns shared by Republicans and Democrats over Trump's ties to Russia, which limit opportunities for cooperation. Therefore, is there more common ground between Putin and Trump than previous U.S. administrations on the Middle East? And, can Washington and Moscow cooperate, or at least avoid clashing, with each other in the region when serious differences between them remain elsewhere?

Silver Lining in the Middle East?

Despite significant divergent interests, there does remain potential for the United States and Russia to cooperate on the Middle East. Putin and Trump appear to have much more convergent views on the Middle East than Putin did with former U.S. President Barack Obama. What is most important for Putin is that Trump is not attempting to democratize the Middle East, but is instead comfortable working with most existing governments (authoritarian or otherwise). Trump, then, is closer to Putin on this issue than to either Obama or former President George W. Bush (who articulated an ambitious plan to democratize the greater Middle East in 2003).⁸ Still, the commitment of Bush and Obama to democratize the Middle East should not be exaggerated: They pursued this goal when they thought it was achievable, but distanced themselves from it when it proved not to be. Still, Bush's and Obama's pursuit of democracy in the region at all aroused Putin's suspicions about their ultimate aims, which Trump's policy does not.⁹ This alone could serve to increase the prospects for U.S.-Russian cooperation in the Middle East.

While there is disagreement over several issues regarding Syria, there are also some overlapping interests, offering potential for Putin and Trump to cooperate. Both Putin and Trump oppose ISIL, as did Obama, and additionally support the Syrian Kurds who are fighting ISIL. But in the past, Putin and Obama differed sharply on whether Bashar al-Assad should remain president of Syria (with Putin seeing Assad as an ally against terrorism while Obama saw him as the cause of it).¹⁰ While Trump does not support Assad, even the Russian media says Trump is not insisting on his removal.¹¹ It is possible that fighting ISIL could be one area in which Trump and Putin could cooperate. But there is conflict among rival groups in Syria seeking to displace ISIL in the remaining territory it controls.¹² And, the Trump administration's

⁸ "President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East," *The White House*, President George W. Bush, November 6, 2003.

⁹ On how Putin views U.S. support for democratization in other countries as threatening, see Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 305-07.

¹⁰ Angela E. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 249-50.

¹¹ Alexei Muraviev, "[Trump Administration Abandons US Initial Priority in Syria to Oust Assad](#)," *Sputnik International*, March 6, 2017.

¹² Liz Sly, "[With a Show of Stars and Stripes, U.S. Forces in Syria Try to Keep Warring Allies Apart](#)," *The Washington Post*, March 8, 2017.

plan to increase the U.S. military presence in Syria aimed at combating ISIL clashes with Putin's insistence that outside governments need to obtain the Assad regime's approval before deploying armed forces in Syria. There are also sharp differences between Putin and Trump, as well as the United States' major Middle Eastern allies, over the role Iran and its Shia militia allies are playing in Syria. Nevertheless, Russian hopes for obtaining economic support from the United States (as well as its Western and Gulf allies) for reconstruction efforts in Syria give Moscow an incentive to cooperate with Washington on Syria.¹³

Relations with Turkey have been problematic for Russia, as well as the United States and other Western countries. Moscow's relations with Ankara soured when Turkish forces shot down a Russian warplane flying near the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015. They began to improve when Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan apologized to Putin for the incident and especially after Erdogan saw Putin as more supportive than Western leaders during the failed coup attempt against him in July 2016.¹⁴ After the uprising against the Assad regime that began in 2011, Erdogan and Obama shared the goal of wanting to see Assad leave office, but Turkey and the United States each sometimes objected to the Syrian groups the other supported.¹⁵ The United States (under Obama and Trump) and Russia have been supporting Kurdish Syrian forces that they both see as highly effective in fighting ISIL.¹⁶ Turkey sees the Syrian Kurds as linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is seeking secession from Turkey. While U.S. support for the Syrian Kurds would seem to present an opportunity for Moscow to side with Erdogan on an issue of great importance to him, Moscow also has good relations with the Syrian Kurds and has indicated support for their calls for a federal solution to the Syrian conflict.¹⁷ Instead of disagreeing on Turkey, Putin and Trump both face a similar challenge of trying to maintain good relations with Erdogan while at the same time cooperating with the Syrian Kurds – perhaps the only group in Syria both Washington and Moscow support.

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In Israel, Trump is far more supportive of the hard-line government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and much less sympathetic to the plight of the Palestinians than was Obama.¹⁸ Russia, of course, has long expressed support for the Palestinian cause. Under Putin, though, Russian-Israeli relations have actually grown quite strong. Russia and Israel cooperate closely in the security, economic, and cultural realms. Further, while Moscow often declares its support for the Palestinian cause and criticizes Israel's continued occupation of

¹³ Russian hopes in this regard were aired at the recent Valdai Discussion Club conference on the Middle East held in Moscow February 27-28, 2017, which the author attended.

¹⁴ "Putin Mends Broken Relations with Turkey's Erdogan," *BBC News*, August 9, 2016.

¹⁵ Semih Idiz, "Turkish-US Ties Face Fresh Turbulence Over Iraq, Syria," *Al-Monitor*, January 12, 2016.

¹⁶ Alexey Khlebnikov, "The Kurds Could Bring Russia and the US Together in Syria," *Russia Direct*, October 29, 2015; Barcin Yinanc, "US, Russia Will Never Give Up the Kurdish Card in Syria," *Hurriyet Daily News*, March 13, 2017.

¹⁷ Mahmut Bozarslan, "Syria Rejects Russian Proposal for Kurdish Federation," *Al-Monitor*, October 24, 2016.

¹⁸ Anne Gearan and Ruth Eglash, "U.S. Official: Trump Will Not Press 'Two-State' Peace Track in First Talks with Israel's Netanyahu," *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2017.

the West Bank as well as isolation of the Gaza Strip, Moscow's differences with Israel on this issue have not prevented Putin from cooperating closely with Israel in the economic and even security realms.¹⁹ Despite Moscow's rhetorical support, Putin has not given serious material assistance to the Palestinian opposition to Israel. Thus, while their rhetoric may differ, Putin and Trump both cooperate closely with the Netanyahu government. For his part, Netanyahu appears far more comfortable with both Putin and Trump than he was with Obama.²⁰ Israel, then, is unlikely to be a point of contention between Putin and Trump.

In Egypt, Putin and Trump have been – unlike Obama – highly supportive of the government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Obama imposed (admittedly weak) limits on U.S. arms exports to Egypt after Sisi overthrew the elected government of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi in 2013. Like Putin (as well as several Arab governments), Trump has a negative view of the Muslim Brotherhood, and sees the military government in Cairo as preferable.²¹ In Egypt, then, Putin and Trump are essentially on the same page.

In Libya, Putin was angry that Obama and other U.S. allies intervened to overthrow Moscow's longtime friend, Muammar al-Qaddafi. Putin blamed Obama in particular for the chaos that ensued in Libya after Qaddafi's downfall.²² While joining the United States and others in recognizing the U.N.-sponsored Libyan government of national accord based in the west, Russia has been supporting one of its challengers, Gen. Khalifa Hifter, in the east. Reuters recently reported that 22 Russian special operations forces appear to have been deployed to a base in western Egypt about 60 miles from the Libyan border,²³ from which they would be able to assist Hifter. Russia, though, is not supporting him on its own, but in conjunction with U.S. allies Egypt, the UAE, and even France.²⁴ So even if Moscow is not cooperating with Washington directly in Libya, it is cooperating there with some of the United States' allies. With Egypt in particular concerned about an unstable eastern Libya right on its border, Russia's joining Cairo in aiding Hifter has made Moscow useful to Sisi in a way that Washington is not.

Moscow has not sought to become militarily involved in the region's other ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Yemen where the United States has been more engaged. Putin was especially upset with the Bush administration for having intervened in Iraq without U.N. Security Council (i.e., Russian) approval. Still, Putin was able to establish good working relations with the Baghdad government during the Bush and Obama years, and was broadly supportive of Obama's efforts

¹⁹ Anna Borshchevskaya, "[Russia in the Middle East: Motives, Consequences, Prospects](#)," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 2016; pp. 43-44.

²⁰ Ruth Eglash, "[Israel and Russia: BFFs? Netanyahu's Budding 'Bromance' with Putin](#)," *The Washington Post*, June 8, 2016; Mark Landler, "[For Trump and Netanyahu, a Budding Symbiotic Relationship](#)," *The New York Times*, March 7, 2017.

²¹ Anna Borshchevskaya, "[Russia in the Middle East: Motives, Consequences, Prospects](#)," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 2016, pp. 20-23; Raghida Dergham, "[Egypt Bets on Strategic Relations with Trump and Putin](#)," *Al Arabiya*, December 4, 2016.

²² Angela E. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 247-49.

²³ Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, and Liz Noueihed, "[Russia Appears to Deploy Forces in Egypt, Eyes on Libya role—Sources](#)," *Reuters*, March 14, 2017.

²⁴ Barbara Bibbo, "[Can Russia Resolve the Conflict in Libya?](#)" *Al Jazeera*, March 16, 2017.

to help both Iraqi government and Kurdish forces contain and then roll back ISIL's advance.²⁵ The Saudi-led military coalition's intervention in Yemen in support of ousted President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi was supported by Obama and Trump (and indications point to greater support in the future from the new president). As in Iraq, Putin has not been deeply involved in Yemen. Russia (along with the international community) recognizes the Hadi government. Moscow, though, is also talking with its Houthi opponents while the United States has been supporting Saudi efforts to support Hadi against the Houthis.²⁶ While Trump and Putin do not appear to be cooperating in Iraq and Yemen, they are at least not working directly against each other either. Still, Moscow's ties to the Iranian-backed Houthis could lead to friction between the United States and Russia on Yemen.

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Under Obama, U.S. relations with several of the Gulf Cooperation Council states became strained because of his pursuit of the Iranian nuclear accord and hopes for a broader rapprochement with Tehran, which the Gulf Arab states have long seen as their greatest threat. In response to their perception that Obama was moving closer to Iran, some of the GCC states moved closer to Russia, even though Moscow's relations with Tehran are quite strong.²⁷ Trump's negative view of Iran is much more reassuring to the GCC states. Still, these countries are also maintaining relatively good relations with Russia: Qatar has acquired a major stake in the Russian petroleum giant Rosneft and the UAE is working with Russia on developing a new fighter aircraft.²⁸ Although Russian cooperation with the GCC states is not nearly as extensive as the United States', both Putin and Trump broadly support GCC governments. Russian support for the Assad regime, though, has been a notable point of disagreement with Russia on the part of Saudi Arabia in particular. In addition, GCC governments fearful of Iran are likely to find Trump's negative attitude toward Tehran far more reassuring than Moscow's continued cooperation with it.

Iran is the one Middle Eastern country where Trump's and Putin's policies diverge sharply. While Trump and his principal advisors have an extremely negative view of Iran, Putin clearly sees Tehran as a partner – especially in Syria. Interestingly, the Trump administration initially hoped that the prospect of an improved U.S.-Russian relationship could motivate Putin to

²⁵ Anna Borshchevskaya, "[Russia in the Middle East: Motives, Consequences, Prospects](#)," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 2016, pp. 31-35.

²⁶ Mark N. Katz, "[Russia Maneuvers Between Opposing Forces in Yemen](#)," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, January 25, 2017.

²⁷ Anna Borshchevskaya, "[Russia in the Middle East: Motives, Consequences, Prospects](#)," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 2016, pp. 41-44; Mark N. Katz, "[Convergent Hopes, Divergent Realities: Russia and the Gulf in a Time of Troubles](#)," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, November 6, 2015.

²⁸ Elena Mazneva and Ilya Arkhipov, "[Russia Sells \\$11 Billion Stake in Rosneft to Glencore, Qatar](#)," *Bloomberg*, December 7, 2016; Fareed Rahman, "[UAE, Russia to Develop Light Combat Fighter Jet](#)," *Gulf News*, February 20, 2017.

move away from Iran.²⁹ Putin, though, has shown no sign of being interested in doing this.³⁰ Putin's and Trump's views of Iran, then, appear likely to remain divided. Therefore, Trump's differences with Iran could also result in differences with Putin. Still, even though Trump and Putin are largely at odds on Iran, there may be some overlap: While Trump declared that he would "tear up" the Iranian nuclear accord when he was running for president, he has not done anything to dismantle it since taking office.³¹ Even the anti-Iranian governments in the GCC states and Israel that initially opposed the nuclear deal now reportedly prefer to leave it in place.³² Putin also wants to see it remain in effect.

Conclusion

Despite the unlikelihood of an overall U.S.-Russian rapprochement or a resolution of their differences on sanctions, Ukraine, and NATO, U.S. and Russian interests in the Middle East either overlap or, at least, are not actively in conflict – except where Iran is a factor. Since Putin and Trump each reportedly takes a transactional view of foreign policy, this suggests that they both are capable of cooperating in areas where their interests converge, even when there are other areas where they diverge. This ability, however, may not be sufficient to result in meaningful U.S.-Russian cooperation in the Middle East, since there are other factors that could limit this.

Trump will first have to overcome suspicions in the United States shared by Republicans and Democrats about his being either too close to Putin or even beholden to him. Unless Trump can do this, any effort by him to cooperate with Putin will raise doubts and concerns in the United States and elsewhere about whether Trump is acting primarily in the United States' interest or Russia's.

While Putin and Trump mostly support the same Middle Eastern governments (with the Syrian and especially Iranian governments the exceptions), this may not be enough to bring about positive cooperation between the two leaders.

But even if this obstacle can be overcome, there are others. While, as noted, Putin and Trump mostly support the same Middle Eastern governments (with the Syrian and especially Iranian governments the exceptions), this may not be enough to bring about positive cooperation between the two leaders. Both, for example, oppose ISIL in Syria. However, Washington and Moscow would each prefer that ISIL be defeated, and its territory taken over, by its own respective allies, and not the other's. The closer to achievement the common goal of defeating ISIL in Syria appears, the more this could lead to disharmony between the United States and Russia (among others) there.

²⁹ Jay Solomon, "[Trump Administration Looks at Driving Wedge Between Russia and Iran](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 2017.

³⁰ Mark N. Katz and Hussein Ibish, "[Why Moscow Won't Side with Washington against Tehran](#)," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, March 7, 2017.

³¹ David A. Andelman, "[Why Trump Won't Tear Up Iran Nuclear Deal](#)," *CNN*, March 3, 2017.

³² *Ibid.*; Imad K. Harb, "[Obstacles to President Trump's Options on Iran](#)," *Arab Center Washington DC*, March 14, 2017.

Another problem is that while the United States and Russia now have good relations with most Middle Eastern governments, these governments are well aware of the tension and rivalry between the two countries regarding other areas and issues. As in the past, Middle Eastern governments might cooperate with Moscow, in particular, to induce the U.S. and other Western governments to respond by providing more arms and diplomatic support than they are now to regional governments so that they will not move even closer to Russia. Many Middle Eastern countries actually welcomed the return of U.S.-Russian rivalry as an opportunity to play Moscow and Washington off each other, which they haven't had the opportunity to do much since Moscow largely withdrew from the Middle East at the end of the Cold War.³³ Putin's revival of active Russian involvement in the Middle East, though, has made this possible once more. The U.S.-Russian rivalry, then, is something that at least some Middle Eastern governments are going to try to exploit. Their success in doing so, of course, may serve to exacerbate it.

Third, while Trump and Putin may have converging interests in several parts of the Middle East, Russian tolerance for what the United States and several of its Middle Eastern allies consider threatening Iranian policies (including in Syria and Yemen as well as toward the GCC states and Israel) will not promote U.S.-Russian cooperation. Putin does not seem likely to distance himself from Tehran to please Trump, and Trump seems unlikely to think more positively about Iran simply because Putin does. And even if Putin were willing, it is doubtful that he would be able to mediate between Trump and the ayatollahs. Indeed, if U.S.-Iranian relations deteriorate sharply to the point of conflict, Putin is likely to at least express support for Tehran, and perhaps even do more. This could easily lead to increased tension, if not a crisis, in U.S.-Russian relations.

While it is possible, then, that Trump and Putin can work together on the Middle East even though they remain at odds in other areas, there are important obstacles within the Middle East itself to U.S.-Russian cooperation in the region. Indeed, these obstacles would still exist even if the initial hopes that Putin and Trump appear to have had for the improvement of the overall U.S.-Russian relationship had been realized. Even so, despite their differences outside of the region and over Iran inside it, the United States' and Russia's support for many of the same governments in the Middle East may serve to foster cooperation and limit confrontation between them in this region. And successful U.S.-Russian cooperation in the Middle East could even serve to enhance the prospects for their cooperation elsewhere.

³³ Ellen Knickmeyer, "[Russian Offensive Hailed in Mideast](#)," *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2008.

