

# Russia and the World of Islam

WITHIN AND WITHOUT

**ROBERT SERVICE**

---

Russia has taken Islam and Islamism seriously for centuries. There has never been a time when the country's leadership could afford to forget that Muslims lived in large numbers throughout its domains. Islamic doctrines and practices have changed with the passage of time. Always it behooved rulers in the Russian capital to take account of what their Muslim subjects said or did. And there was seldom a moment when rulers could ignore the interaction between those same subjects and Islamist states and organizations abroad.

Russian statehood originated in the struggle for independence from a Muslim power in the fifteenth century, and Muscovy's military victories positioned it as a Christian state ruling over a large Muslim minority. Russian Christians and Muslims have always lived side by side. The growing empire found it hopeless to convert those of the Islamic faith and easier to allow them to fulfill their religious observances on condition that they refrained from political or military defiance. Russians were brought up to look down on "their" Muslims as uncivilized and untrustworthy infidels who were lucky to have enlightened czars as their masters. At the same time, Muslims received instruction from imams who usually advised them to comply with imperial requirements though Russians were to be regarded as uncivilized, oppressive infidels. Peaceful cohabitation was the product of a shared recognition that the Romanov dynasty had the capacity and willpower to enforce its dominion with exemplary ruthlessness. Over the years, the Muslim peoples of the Russian Empire assumed that their fate would always remain in Russian hands unless events outside their control shook the status quo.

Under Peter the Great at the start of the eighteenth century, the empire spread westward, annexing territory along the Baltic coast at the expense of the Swedes and founding a new capital, Saint Petersburg. At the end of the same century, Catherine the Great ordered her armies south and seized Crimea from the Khanate, an Ottoman protectorate. Territorial expansion continued in the nineteenth century, in most cases involving the subjugation of Muslim peoples. Most of Azerbaijan became a Russian possession. Russians also overran and established imperial control over vast swaths of



Central Asia, including the vast region occupied nowadays by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan.

The Russian Empire continued the tradition of permitting religious freedom for its Muslim subjects while restricting their organizations, publications, and sermons to activities that involved acceptance of Saint Petersburg's secular authority. But freedom was anyway in short supply for nearly everyone in the imperial domains. The Russian people were in most ways no freer than the Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Turkmen, or Tajiks. Sometimes popular discontent burst forth in rebellion. The Bolotnikov and Pugachëv revolts in the late eighteenth century involved mainly Russians and Ukrainians, but there were also Muslims among them. The czars suppressed these challenges by amassing well-equipped regular forces, and the severity of their retaliation discouraged repetition. But discouragement was not the same as prevention. As the subjugation of the Caucasus proceeded in the nineteenth century, Muslims in Dagestan rose in defiance of Russian power. Imam Shamil proclaimed a religious duty to fight the Russians. The banner of jihad was raised against the Christian infidels. Russian armies learned to respect the resilience and fervor of Shamil's forces, and the superiority of their weaponry and organization wore down the resistance. Shamil capitulated in 1869.

Shamil's struggle for the independence of the Muslims of the Caucasus was not the sole military conflict in which the Russians contended against an Islamic foe. The Ottoman Empire had never reconciled itself to easy relations with the Russian Empire. As Ottoman military capacity declined in relation to its increasingly powerful neighbors in Christian Europe, Saint Petersburg pursued an ambition to exert influence across the Middle East. The British and French governments worried that the sultan, as "the sick man of Europe," would prove ineffective in resisting Russian demands. Seeking to prevent further expansion of Russian territory and influence, they landed expeditionary forces on the Crimean Peninsula in 1853. War continued until 1856. The Russians were not defeated, but they did not win either, and their humiliating incapacity to drive the foreign European powers out of their domains provoked a fundamental revision in czarist domestic policy by which Alexander II introduced a number of social and economic reforms in the 1860s.

Although the Ottomans were only marginally involved in the Crimean War, their propaganda to their subjects dwelled heavily on their fealty to Islam and their zeal to defend it against nonbelievers. Russian foreign policy became quiescent for some

years after 1856, but the ambition to possess the Black Sea as a Russian lake remained strong. It was only a matter of time until friction between the czars and the Sublime Porte resumed. In 1876, Alexander II sent his armies south to take Istanbul. Sultan Abdul Hamid, taking the banner of the Prophet Muhammed out of storage, declared a jihad against the invaders. Ottoman troops were told that they were fighting infidels and that if they should die, they would go immediately to paradise in reward for their physical sacrifice. The other European powers yet again were frightened at the prospect of a Russian victory and compelled Alexander II to accept their peace terms at the 1878 Congress of Berlin. The Russians gained a mere three provinces in Eastern Anatolia for their exertions. They had also acquired further experience of the rallying potency of Islamist appeals to Muslim conscripts.

In 1905–6, as the Russian Empire experienced the convulsions of revolution, Muslim peoples seized the opportunity to break the shackles of Saint Petersburg's authority. In the North Caucasus, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia, imams stepped forward to urge Muslim believers to assert their demands—freedom and the faith were their watchwords. Nicholas II's administration hung on by the skin of its teeth. Once suppressed, rebellions were strictly punished.

In 1916, however, insurgency returned to Central Asia when the imperial government impressed young Muslim males into military service. The official motive was to use such conscripts as laborers behind the front; it was recognized that they might be more of a problem than they were worth if they were forced to do any fighting. But their imams still claimed that they would be doing harm to fellow Muslims because the Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary, had the Ottoman Empire as their ally. Jihad was proclaimed against the Russian infidel. The government responded with a furious military expedition into Russian-ruled Central Asia—the only case in the First World War when one of the main belligerent powers sent a large regular force to carry out a repressive campaign behind the lines in its own territories. Order was still being restored in March 1917 when street demonstrations and garrison mutinies in Petrograd (as Saint Petersburg was renamed at the outbreak of war) compelled Nicholas II to abdicate in March 1917. The former lands of the Romanovs became awash with revolutionary outbursts that lasted for months, and Muslim organizations gained an unprecedented freedom that allowed Islamists to come to the fore and compete in spreading a harsh version of their shared faith in regions where Muslims constituted a majority of the population.



In November 1917, Lenin and the Communists seized power in the capital. Though the Communist administration was avowedly atheist, it pragmatically sought to assure Muslims that it would provide them with better living conditions; it also offered regional self-administration to the Muslim-inhabited lands.

The reality was that as the Red Army swept across the former Russian Empire, Muslims found they were treated no better than during Nicholas II's punitive expedition. Anti-Islamic violence was widely reported. But at the end of the civil war, the Communist leadership recognized the scale of economic collapse and restored the market economy, at least in a rudimentary way. The Communists accommodated Muslim communities by promoting nonjihadi youngsters to posts of authority. But atheistic propaganda returned with a vengeance at the end of the 1920s through the introduction of Joseph Stalin's first five-year economic plan. Imams were arrested in the following decade in line with antireligious campaigns. Armed resistance by jihadis was common in Central Asia, but the Red Army prevailed by dint of superior weaponry and number of troops. Mosques were demolished, copies of the Koran seized. Throughout the 1930s, there were sharp persecutions of believers, and Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchëv, reinforced the struggle against Islam in the 1950s. The long years of repression resulted in the development of secret localized Islamic groupings, largely cut off from the rest of the Muslim world and dependent on their own scanty resources. But faith survived not least because it offered an antidote to the Marxist-Leninist doctrines and the harshness of Communist rule.

Khrushchëv was keen on presenting the USSR as a friend of the Muslim peoples abroad as he tried to enlist the Third World in his confrontation with capitalist America. The hypocrisy of atheism at home and appeals to Muslims abroad was not lost on leaders of foreign states with Muslim-majority populations. But some of them had an "anti-imperialist" agenda that induced them to align themselves with Moscow. Khrushchëv himself was replaced as Soviet party leader by Leonid Brezhnev, who reinforced the ambition to win friends from among ex-colonial countries. Moscow sold them arms at subsidized prices and rarely insisted on being paid on schedule. Prime among the client states were Iraq, Syria, and Libya. Egypt had been one of them until 1970, when President Sadat extricated himself from the Soviet embrace and accepted military and economic assistance from the Americans. Moscow continued to play at geopolitics, turning a blind eye when Iraqi, Syrian, and Libyan Communist parties were suppressed by their autocratic rulers.

This way of thinking was modified in disastrous fashion in 1979, when the inner group of Brezhnev's Politburo decided to move from diplomatic and financial assistance to direct military invasion of the USSR's client state Afghanistan. The ruling Afghan Communists could not cope with the jihadi uprising on their own. They had turned vast swaths of society against them by their suppression of Islam, and the mujahideen succeeded in rallying widespread and active support in the civil war. The Soviet Army was not defeated after invading Afghanistan, but its commanders quickly learned that they would never achieve victory either. The Politburo, moreover, found that it had alienated global Muslim opinion. Whatever sympathy the USSR had attracted in the 1960s and early 1970s was washed away in Afghan blood. Saudi Arabia subsidized the anti-Communist rebels so that they could confront the Soviet forces with adequate modern weaponry, and America supplied Stinger missiles. At home, the Politburo noted the growth of Islamic practices in the traditional Muslim-inhabited regions of the USSR. Russian public opinion turned increasingly against fighting a war against Islamists on foreign soil.

Not until the inception of Gorbachëv's reforms in the late 1980s was the pressure of militant atheism relieved. Mosques began to be rebuilt. Imams emerged from the shadows. Gorbachëv hoped that Muslim citizens, grateful for their new religious freedom, would show loyalty to his reformed USSR. He was soon disappointed as a wide range of Islamic practice spread openly—and this included Islamists who not only wished for the demise of Soviet Communism but aspired to the creation of an Islamic state. This was noticeable in the North Caucasus and especially in Chechnya, where religion strengthened feelings of ancient hurt. In 1943, the Chechens had been deported en masse to the wastelands of Kazakhstan. Although Khrushchëv permitted their return to their mountains in the late 1950s, the embitterment lasted.

Gorbachëv was also seeking to prove that he sought a completely new approach to international relations. Its chief facet was the growing rapprochement with the United States as well as with China. Gorbachëv understood that he would have to pay the price of ceasing to prioritize support for Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Vietnam if he wanted American and Chinese cooperation. For his own reasons—reinforced by pressure from Washington and even Beijing—he pulled out of Afghanistan. In the cases of Iraq, Syria, and Libya, this meant the withdrawal of assistance to Muslim-inhabited countries; for Afghanistan it involved leaving the Afghan Communists to fight alone against the fanatical Islamist Taliban, albeit with continued Soviet military supplies. Gorbachëv and his fellow reformers insisted that they were taking an overdue basic



review of the USSR's best interests. His analysis was quietly becoming unsettling for many in the ruling Communist elite as they concluded that peace with America came at the price of a loss in global power and prestige for the USSR. They also believed, correctly, that his reform of Soviet Communism was dissolving the compound of the whole Communist order at home.

When the death knell of the USSR sounded at the end of 1991 and Russia became an independent country along with the fourteen other ex-Soviet republics, President Boris Yeltsin was too occupied with the difficulties of economic recovery to retrieve worldwide authority for the Russian state. He did, though, have to think what to do about Islam in Russia. The Chechens immediately demanded their independence and were willing to fight for it. In 1994, Yeltsin lost patience and sent the Russian Army into the rebel territory. A fragile peace accord was signed two years later. Elsewhere, Yeltsin managed to get on well enough with Muslim-inhabited areas. Islam in Tatarstan was practiced more moderately than in Chechnya, and the political leadership in Kazan gladly exercised the administrative autonomy that Yeltsin had proclaimed for every region. Chechen jihadis, however, refused to deactivate the struggle for complete independence. In 1999, Yeltsin's latest prime minister, Vladimir Putin, attributed a series of terrorist bombings outside Chechnya to the same jihadis. War resumed, and this time the Russian Army was empowered to be as brutal as was necessary to subjugate Chechnya.

Putin assumed the presidency in Russia at the start of 2000 as a consequence of Yeltsin's resignation in his favor. He completed the subjugation of Chechnya by employing the Chechen renegade jihadi Ramzan Kadyrov as his enforcer. The fact that Kadyrov was a Muslim failed to end criticism of Russia from abroad, and Saudi money flowed into the pockets of the remaining terrorist groups. Kadyrov built new mosques and spread Islamic teaching in the school system. The terrorists refused to lay down their arms and carried out bombings and abductions in the rest of the Russian Federation. This meant that the Kremlin could not take complete satisfaction from the newly tranquilized conditions in Chechnya itself. The Russian armed forces and Kadyrov's militias intensified the brutal repression.

Putin brushed aside all foreign rebukes. When President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair advised him to put an end to the atrocities in Chechnya, he simply bawled them out. In his view, they failed to understand that he was stamping out violent Islamism wherever it raised its head. He expressed surprise that they did not

recognize the international ramifications of jihadism. The rest of Europe and North America was simultaneously experiencing its tremors, and Putin urged their leaders to sympathize with Russia's efforts to tranquilize Chechnya. Putin announced the wish for a country whose Muslims are peaceful, loyal citizens who abide by moderate versions of Islam. He appeared in public with Chief Mufti Tadzhuddin. In Tatarstan, he endorsed the surge of mosque building. Putin put forward Russia as a model pluralistic society where tolerance of every traditional major religion is the norm. His basic point was that it was the other European countries rather than the Russian Federation that found themselves having to tackle unpleasant questions about Islam.

To prove his pro-Islamic credentials, he attended the Organization of the Islamic Conference in October 2003. With Saudi Arabia's sponsorship, Russia acquired associate status two years later. Putin reached out diplomatically to countries in the Middle East that had once been client states of the USSR: Iraq, Libya, and Syria. But he did not stop at this. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs successfully made overtures not only to Saudi Arabia but also to Iran—both of which states had had difficult relations with Moscow in Brezhnev's time. It is true that Putin also strengthened the improved links with Israel that Gorbachëv and Yeltsin had initiated, but the bulk of Russia's efforts in the Middle East were focused on Muslim states, and Putin was decidedly promiscuous in his search for new Islamic friends. He even began to toy with the idea of accommodating extreme Islamists. Russian agencies contacted the rebellious Taliban in Afghanistan to explore whether Russia could come to terms with them. This was a drastic turn in events. The Soviet Army had fought the Taliban as its bitter enemy, and Putin had approved a US request for airport facilities in Uzbekistan in 2001 to facilitate the invasion of Afghanistan and the overthrow of the Taliban government. Now he decided that Russian interests would be better secured by the absence of the Americans and by accommodation between Russia and the Taliban.

In 2008, Putin stepped down from the presidency in favor of his protégé Dmitri Medvedev. It quickly transpired that Medvedev wanted gentler relations with the West. The test of this policy shift came in 2011 in the course of the so-called Arab Spring. France and the United Kingdom, with the reluctant support of President Obama, asked the United Nations Security Council to approve a Libyan no-fly zone with the aim of preventing Muammar Gaddafi from bombing rebel forces. Medvedev gave his consent. As Libya fell apart in civil war and anarchy, Putin's less flexible attitude to Western pretensions came to the fore in Russian diplomatic maneuvers even before he returned to the presidency in 2012 for a third term.





Putin emphasized the principles that underlay his foreign policy. He detested what he saw as US ambition to impose its hegemony over world politics. Though Putin considered this a vain objective on Washington's part, he also contended that US interventions were producing immeasurable misery. Afghanistan had collapsed into bitter internal strife. Iraq had succumbed to sectarian civil war and disunity. Libya was irredeemably lawless. According to Putin, tragedy after tragedy had been caused by a failure to understand the damage done by the attempt to spread Western "progressive" attitudes to highly traditional societies. Putin proclaimed his own conservative values. He praised the importance of family, seeing no reason why governments should interfere in what happened in people's homes. He criticized promoters of LGBT rights. He upheld the idea that every state should be allowed to develop in its own chosen fashion without intervention by foreign armed forces. He defended the beneficial effects of a religious upbringing. (He implicitly excluded jihadis from this mode of assessment.) Putin claimed that the Middle East had suffered particularly heavily from the United States' reckless incursions. He insisted that Russia had an understanding of the problems that had arisen and would help to resolve them.

Putin derided the West for its refusal to copy Russian methods. His own preference has been to combine a positive appeal to moderate forms of Islam in Russia and around the world with a ruthless campaign to crush militant jihadism. He points out that the United States, Britain, and France have been the objects of recurrent Islamist terrorism. In his opinion, they have permitted terrorist groups to flourish in their own countries while censuring Russia's policy in Chechnya. He suggests that the answer is for Western countries to abandon their alleged Russophobia and join with Russia in extirpating jihadis everywhere.

His foreign policy is less coherent than he likes to assume. He courts Saudi rulers despite their chronic support for Salafism—an extreme variant of Islamism—not only in the Middle East but also in Europe. This is a turnabout on his part because he used to rebuke the Americans for indulging the Saudis when they sent financial assistance and jihadi militants to Chechnya. The Afghan Taliban, moreover, has earned his indulgence in talks initiated by the Russian side. The truth is that the Kremlin's pursuit of its avowed principles in world politics frequently takes a backseat to its practical calculations of Russia's geopolitical interests. The result is a sequence of jumbled steps as Putin picks his way forward. Sometimes this has resulted in severely contradictory tactics. Russian diplomacy has simultaneously sought the friendship of Saudi Arabia and Iran in a period when the two of them are engaged in a deadly rivalry for primacy



in the Middle East. Russia has also made overtures to Turkey, which has long resisted the rise of Iranian power. And Moscow has courted good relations with Israel, the mortal enemy of Iran.

The core of Russian foreign policy has developed into an amalgam of two elements: the struggle against American global policy and the campaign for Russia's reemergence as a recognized great power. It is an amalgam that has inevitably complicated the decisions that Moscow has found itself making.

Putin and Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev contend that the United States made mischief in the Russian Federation by aiding the Islamist insurgents in Chechnya in the late 1990s. Patrushev goes farther by attributing to successive US administrations the objective of breaking up Russia so as to get their hands on Russian natural resources. Chechnya is currently governed by the Chechen thug and ex-jihadi Ramzan Kadyrov, whom Putin personally chose to bring the republic to heel. Kadyrov, whose late father had been a renegade from the ranks of insurgency, publicizes the mosque-building program he organized in loyalty to his Muslim beliefs. In the eyes of official Russia, the program has resulted in the achievement of a peaceful Islamic administration that is the envy of the world. Putin repeatedly declared that nothing good for Russian interests would come forth from any US administration. He argued that even when US president Barack Obama declared his desire for a reset in US-Russian relations, the "bureaucracy" countervailed against his intentions. Washington, in his opinion, was predetermined to humiliate and damage Russia.

His multiple presidential terms have been characterized by what could be called a Russia First objective. In policy toward Islam, like Yeltsin before him, his priority is securing the Russian Federation and its allies in the "near abroad" against the growth of jihadism. In Christian Armenia and Georgia there are few Muslims, but it is a different matter in Tajikistan, where jihadi organizations were prominent in the civil war that swept across the country immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin quickly ordered the deployment of a locally based Russian garrison to help the Tajik side confront the Islamist fundamentalists. The war dragged on, and Russian policy was geared to establishing conditions of peace.

While preaching the need for democracy in Russia, Yeltsin deployed violence to change the constitution in 1993 and used fraudulent methods to win the 1996 presidential election, but he was never a dictator. In ex-Soviet Central Asia and Azerbaijan he



dropped all democratic pretensions and supported the new dictatorships that sprang up everywhere. Dictatorial Communism gave way to forms of rule that were still more dictatorial, including torture on a vast scale. Uzbekistan was notorious even by the region's appalling standards, and human rights were abused across the region. The president of each of the Muslim-inhabited states engaged with Islam by making a personal profession of the faith and providing funds to build mosques and Islamic schools. This was done as a way of outflanking the jihadis and gaining approval for their arrest. The persecution of Islamist fundamentalists was strengthened, and Yeltsin set the pattern for Russian foreign policy in turning a blind eye to extremes of authoritarianism. Russia's interest was seen as lying with the eradication of real and potential jihadis. Putin, Russia's own authoritarian president, followed the same policy with vigor.

The concern for Russian politicians was always that violent Islamism in the "near abroad" could leach into the territories of the Russian Federation. The adjacent Muslim-majority states had to become a sanitary cordon. Not only the North Caucasus but also Tatarstan were to be quarantined from the fundamentalist contagion.

At the same time, the Kremlin sought to increase Moscow's political and economic influence over ex-Soviet Central Asia. When the USSR fell apart, Yeltsin promoted the establishment of a Commonwealth of Independent States. All the "Muslim" states agreed to join. Russia supplied forces when requested. While fostering stability, it wanted everything on its own terms. For example, it never definitively sided with either Azerbaijan or Armenia in their long-running conflict over the Armenian enclave of Karabagh inside Azerbaijani territory. The tendency was to keep disputes festering rather than resolve them; Russia's priority was to maintain Russian dominance. Even when Putin agreed in 2001 to the Americans using an air base in Uzbekistan while invading Afghanistan, the Russians had a selfish motive. The Russian national purpose was thought to be served if the United States crushed the Taliban and thereby lessened the danger of jihadism spreading into ex-Soviet Asia and beyond. But as US-Russian relations cooled after 2004, Russian foreign policy in the region became more proprietary. Russia's military might was brandished. At the same time, a campaign of propaganda was mounted to persuade the rulers and their societies that Russia was their only reliable friend.

But policy was never entirely coherent. Seeking to expunge the jihadi threat from Russia, the Federal Security Service (FSB) hit on the idea of making an offer to known

militants in the North Caucasus to travel to Turkey at official expense. Would-be jihadis were sent to Iraq, where they could fight for the Islamist cause. The thinking behind this was that Russia itself would be made safer by the exodus of militants. Whether this was prudent is open to doubt. The FSB did not allow for the possibility that those who went could come back better trained and more determined to destabilize the Russian state order.

A more obvious problem was the spread of Chinese ambitions in the same countries. In 2013, Xi Jinping announced his Belt and Road Initiative to link China directly with Europe. He hailed this as the successor to the Silk Road of past centuries. Central Asia was one of the main regions designated for investment in large-scale infrastructural projects. Russia had to tread carefully. It had a desire for a partnership with China in world politics, a desire that increased in subsequent years. But the Kremlin leadership disliked anyone, even the Chinese, striding into what it regarded as its backyard. The difficulty was that the Russian economy suffered from the effects of the 2007–8 global recession and was in no position to offer financial benefits to the region comparable to what the Chinese were offering. The only consolation was that Beijing, which confronted its own Muslim insurgency in Xinjiang, was just as firm as Moscow in its determination to snuff out the fires of jihadism. Xi and Putin, moreover, came together in their hostility to what they saw as American pretensions in regard to countries on or near their frontiers. For Xi, it was a blessing that Putin was willing to say for the Russians what Xi thought it impolitic as yet to say for the Chinese. China wanted to maintain its favored economic operation in the United States.

Events in 2014–15 brought the tensions in global politics into focus as Putin reacted to new challenges and opportunities. In March 2014, affronted by the Ukrainian democratic revolution that overthrew President Yanukovich, Putin ordered a Russian military occupation of Crimea. He had never seen Ukraine as a truly separate nation and was horrified by the prospect of it becoming an associate member of the European Union, to the detriment of the influence that Russia had usually wielded there. Crimea was swiftly annexed to the Russian Federation after a referendum conducted under Russian control. This step had no particular implication for Moscow's policy on Islam-connected questions beyond the suppression of protests by the Crimean Tatar minority, which is largely Muslim and had nursed grievances against Russian—or rather, Soviet—power since 1944, when Stalin had deported the Tatars from their peninsular homeland. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, both ex-Soviet states with Muslim majorities, accepted the validity of the Crimean referendum



result. But this was followed by growing unease in Kazakhstan, where there was concern that Russia might soon lay claim to its northern territories just as it had done to Crimea. In Kyrgyzstan, there were denunciations of Yanukovych. Moreover, Uzbekistan wholly refused to endorse the results of the Crimean referendum.

In September 2015, Russian foreign policy became actively involved in a Muslim country outside the “near abroad.” Syria had descended into civil war three years earlier. Putin decided to take advantage of the Obama administration’s reluctance to send American troops after the traumas of Afghanistan and Iraq. Obama detested Bashar al-Assad’s dictatorship and sympathized with rebels who called for the establishment of Syrian democracy. He was willing to supply limited military equipment and to threaten to bomb Assad’s air bases in retaliation for the use of chemical weapons, but farther than that he refused to go. Putin saw his chance. Unlike Obama, he took Assad’s side. He criticized everything the Americans had done in the Middle East and spoke in favor of nonintervention except to prop up existing “legitimate” governments—and he saw Assad’s as one of these. Putin poured scorn on calls for democracy and spoke of the supreme need for stability. He warned that the civil war was having the same effects as had occurred in Iraq, where the fall of Saddam Hussein had created an opportunity for al-Qaeda to operate. As Putin saw it, Assad remained the sole guarantee against the emergence of an extremist jihadi power in Damascus.

With this in mind, he delivered military equipment and expertise to Syria. The Russian Air Force took part alongside its Syrian counterpart. The Russians received permission to build bases in the country, including port facilities at Tartus and intelligence operations at Latakia. Throughout the conflict there were reports of indiscriminate bombing with a huge number of civilian casualties. But Putin and the Russian high command shrugged off criticism. Steadily, the tide of the civil war turned in favor of Assad, who had once seemed on the brink of overthrow. Moscow spokesmen declared that if it had not been for Russia, the Islamic State—an even more barbaric force than al-Qaeda—would have marched on Damascus.

It was a complex situation capable of triggering a wider war across the Middle East. In November 2015, Russia and Turkey broke diplomatic relations when the Turks shot down a Russian military plane that had strayed into its airspace. But the crisis was resolved in the following year when Putin made a sympathetic overture to President Erdoğan after he survived an attempted military coup d’état. Putin opted to form a

tripartite alliance with Turkey and Iran to supervise events in Syria. A conference was held in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, to inaugurate the process and resolve potential misunderstandings. The Iranians were already supporting Assad both with military units and financial and technical assistance to Lebanon-based Hezbollah; they wanted a freer hand in Syria than the Russians endorsed. Meanwhile, the Turks were determined to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq or Syria. Assad lacked the resources to influence Tehran or Ankara if he desired their assistance. Tensions were not far from the surface. Whereas Hezbollah was Shia, Erdoğan was a Sunni. This was not the only problem. The conflict in Syria gave rise to a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Saudis helped the anti-Assad rebels regardless of their extremism while the Iranians were boosting not only Hezbollah but also the Shia anti-Saudi resistance in Yemen. The Israeli government watched anxiously as the Iranian nuclear weapons project neared completion.

This remains a situation with the potential to unleash a terrible war across the entire Middle East and around the globe. Russia became a prime actor in the Middle East to a greater extent than the Russian Empire of the nineteenth century or the Soviet Union of the mid-twentieth had managed. Barack Obama's abstention from intervention in the Syrian civil war produced a great-power vacuum, which Putin raced to fill. Once Russian forces were deployed, it became dangerous for any of Obama's successors to dislodge them. Coming to power in January 2017, President Donald Trump indicated his aversion to acting as the world's policeman. Apart from the occasional action against Assad's use of chemical weapons, Trump was content to remain uninvolved. He evidently sought an improved relationship with Russia, but concerns about the extent of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election reduced his options. The US Congress meanwhile increased economic sanctions against Russia.

In the Middle East, Russian influence spread, especially after the crushing of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2017. There was a degree of cooperation between Russia and the United States in securing this military result, but Moscow's celebrations were tempered by limitations on what it could achieve next. With Russia's help, Assad moved toward victory. The Russian economy, however, was not in condition to support Syria's material reconstruction. From 2012, a sequence of US sanctions inhibited economic growth in Russia. Putin's own policies had overlooked opportunities to diversify Russian production, which still relied heavily on oil and gas exports. Many Russians appreciated that if Russia aimed to be a great world power, it needed to become a technological power. Furthermore, Middle Eastern powers—especially



Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—had interests in conflict with each other. The approaching finish to the Syrian civil war has become the starting gun the starting gun for a broader struggle across the region. Russia has only a limited capacity to mold events. Peace in a pacified Syria is bound to require multiple inputs of assistance from other influential countries, including Europe and the United States. And Russia, having played the part of a disrupter power, will find that meddlesome disruption can also be performed by its rivals.

Kremlin leaders cannot depend on the permanent stability of states in Russia's own "near abroad." There is no guarantee that the antijihadist Muslim dictatorships in ex-Soviet Central Asia will always be able to crush their internal fundamentalist enemies. Nor can the Kremlin be sure that Russia's millions of Sunni citizens will never oppose Russian foreign policy in the Middle East, especially when it transparently favors a Shia power such as Iran. To the rest of the world, it often appears that Russia in recent years has achieved what it wants by turning the chessboard of Eurasia upside down. Undeniably, the chess pieces have been flung around. But when they are regathered and the board is laid out again for play, Russia's chances of victory over its opponents and not-so-friendly "allies" are not as sound as they seem. Much will depend on what the West decides to do. Any such decision presupposes that Western powers will act in unity and that Putin and his successors will fail to divide them. Confidence, will, and a sense of common purpose have never been more urgently required.



The publisher has made this work available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs license 3.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/3.0>.

Hoover Institution Press assumes no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Copyright © 2018 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order acknowledges the editorial guidance of Tunku Varadarajan in the publication of this essay series.





### About the Author



#### ROBERT SERVICE

Robert Service is a senior fellow of the Hoover Institution and emeritus professor of Russian history at Oxford University. He writes extensively on Russia from the nineteenth century to the present day.

### *The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order*

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world. Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.

*For more information on the Working Group on Islamism and the International Order, visit us online at [www.hoover.org/researchteams/islamism-and-international-order-working-group](http://www.hoover.org/researchteams/islamism-and-international-order-working-group).*