

Russia Is Already “Balancing” Iran in the Mideast

By [Andrew Korybko](#)

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Russia's predominant position in Syria & Iraqi Kurdistan places Moscow right in the middle of the misleadingly characterized “Shiite Crescent” and allows the Kremlin to “balance” Iranian influence in the Mideast better than any other country ever possibly could.

It's impossible to ignore the geopolitical reality that the “[progressive](#)” faction of Russia's permanent military, intelligence, and diplomatic bureaucracies (“deep state”) has been wildly successful in positioning their country as the [supreme “balancing” force in 21st-century Eurasian geopolitics](#), especially in the Mideast, and this has become visibly obvious after the [Putin-Netanyahu Summit](#) in Moscow during last week's Victory Day celebration. It's evident that President Putin “gave the greenlight” to “[Israel](#)” to carry out its largest bombing in Syria since the 1973 war because this dramatic attack occurred just hours after Netanyahu left the Russian capital, and the only reason why Russia would “passively allow” this to happen is because it endeavors to restore “balance” to the region following the surge of Iranian influence there over the past couple of years. Ironically, Russia itself helped make this a reality, but that may have been one of the intended geopolitical consequences of its anti-terrorist intervention in Syria, one which would then enable it to “balance” that subsequent development through a newly strengthened alliance with “Israel”.

The Basics Of “Balancing”

To explain, the essence of Russia's “balancing” strategy is that Moscow will generally assist the weakest party in any dispute in order to reestablish “parity” prior to proposing a “diplomatic solution” that it intends to mediate. At the time that it commenced its anti-terrorist mission, Iran was relatively weaker than “Israel”, but the two and half years that have passed since then have seen the regional “balance” decisively shift in Tehran's favor to the point where the Islamic Republic now wields more asymmetrical power than the self-proclaimed “Jewish State”. This outcome was predicted by many analysts at the start of Russia's intervention in Syria, but it's now been skillfully used by the country's “deep state” “progressives” in order to clinch their sought-after alliance with “Israel” and therefore solidify Moscow's role as the regional “balancer” through an interconnected series of partnerships with all relevant Mideast actors. This is precisely what President Putin himself has been [meticulously planning for years](#) now as revealed by what he said in September 2001 near the beginning of his first term in office:

“And we understand that all the positive experience accumulated over the years in the relations between Russia and the Arab countries and what has recently emerged between Russia and Israel, all that positive experience can be used to resolve this complicated situation. We are ready to put it at the disposal of the negotiating parties.” - [Interview with the German Magazine Focus](#), 19 September, 2001

Over half a year later he elaborated on this grand strategy by adding in April 2002 that:

“[Israelis] must see that Russia takes an even-handed position and pursues a policy aimed at settling the conflict and ensuring the interests of all the people who live in that region, including the interests of Israel.” – [Excerpts from a Talk with German and Russian Media](#), 7 April, 2002

Put another way, the long-term geopolitical intentions of Russia’s 2015 anti-terrorist intervention in Syria were to fulfill President Putin’s plans of positioning his country as the ultimate “balancing” force in the Mideast, one which indirectly “lends a helping hand” to the presumably weaker party and then leverages the changed status quo that it helped bring into being in order to mediate a formal or “cold peace” between the two or more conflicting actors. Now that Iran has suddenly grown so strong in such a short period of time, Russia’s “balancing” efforts are now directed towards helping the newly and relatively weakened political entity – which in this case is “Israel”, a “politically inconvenient” fact to Western audiences that Iranian media nevertheless accurately reported on – reestablish “parity”, which is already happening through Moscow’s “passive acceptance” of “Israel’s” massive attacks against the stronger party’s (Iran’s) suspected military sites in Syria. That’s not all, though, since Russia is also poised to play a crucial “balancing” role through its predominant position in Iraqi Kurdistan that gives its presence in Syria an entirely new meaning.

Controlling The “Shiite Crescent”

It’s uncontested that Russia is the most powerful force in Syria today, not only by virtue of its military controlling the Arab Republic’s airspace (and therefore indirectly facilitating “Israel’s” raids via the “deconfliction mechanism” [coordination](#) between the two) but also through the [preferential energy deals](#) that it was able to conclude with a thankful government that owes its very survival to Moscow’s decisive anti-terrorist intervention, but what most of the global public hasn’t noticed is that Russia holds similarly powerful sway in Iraqi Kurdistan as well, albeit not expressed through the headline-grabbing military form that it is in Syria. To its credit, Reuters reported in September 2017 that Russia became the [top investor in this region](#) through a \$4 billion energy deal that it sealed with the autonomous government there, and it published a [follow-up analysis about the political implications](#) of this development in April. The author also wrote about this in depth in an August 2017 piece about the “[Kurdish Kaleidoscope](#)” and a February one [asking whether it’s even possible to “betray” the Kurds](#).

The main point being elaborated upon in both analyses is that Russia strategically conceives of Iraqi Kurdistan as being a “fifth force” right in the middle of the quadri-national heart of the Mideast, thereby making it an irresistibly tempting partner to co-opt in its “progressives” grand ambition to “balance” the region. Taken together, Russia’s unparalleled military influence in Syria pairs perfectly with its equally unparalleled energy counterpart in Iraqi Kurdistan to establish powerful “facts on the ground” that make Moscow the most important player along the so-called and misleadingly characterized “Shiite Crescent”, which is the transnational corridor that Iran’s enemies fear monger that it’s trying to build in connecting the Islamic Republic with [Lebanon](#). Russia has no intention to play a disruptive role in this regard, but its “gatekeeper” presence right in the middle of Iran’s regularly denied but de-facto existing geopolitical project is obviously a key factor that its leadership must incorporate into all of its regional strategies going forward,

especially after it became obvious that Russia is indirectly “balancing” its influence through an alliance with “Israel”.

The Necessary Niche

Russia has successfully carved out a necessary niche for itself in Mideast geopolitics by making itself the ultimate go-to broker for regional affairs, with all manner of political entities seeking its “balancing” “services” at one time or another in the past two and a half years. At first, Iran needed Russia to do what it could not, which is conduct a conventional anti-terrorist military intervention against Daesh in order to save Tehran’s only Arab ally. Throughout the course of this campaign and following the [failed pro-American coup attempt against President Erdogan](#) (which President Putin [supposedly tipped him off](#) about at the very last minute and saved his life), Turkey sought to have Russia safeguard its unstated “sphere of influence” in Syria as an informal quid-pro-quo for [Ankara’s Eurasian pivot](#). Once Turkey accomplished its goal of crushing Kurdish separatism, Russia threw its weight behind this demographic’s weakened community in Northern Iraq in order to reestablish a degree of “balance”, after which Saudi Arabia took note of Moscow’s masterful multifaceted diplomacy and entered into a [fast-moving rapprochement](#) with it.

“Israel”, cramped in its occupied corner of the Mideast and watching this unprecedented “balancing” act unfold from a position of utter powerlessness after playing no part in it whatsoever, realized that it could also make strategic use of Russia’s “services” and correctly wagered that Moscow might take premier soft power pride in doing something worthwhile for America’s top ally that Washington itself isn’t even able to do. Accordingly, the Russian-“Israeli” alliance – originally formalized through the [establishment of their “deconfliction mechanism” in September 2015](#) shortly before the commencement of Moscow’s anti-terrorist military intervention in Syria – was activated to full effect and with astounding impact in seeing the Eurasian Great Power passively facilitate the “Jewish State’s” “surgical strikes” against what Tel Aviv alleged were the Islamic Republic’s military sites in Syria, which unavoidably drew the instant attention of American strategists who realized that Russia could be counted on to “contain” Iran for their own reasons, mostly having to do with wanting to make it even [more strategically dependent on Moscow](#) than it already is.

Altogether, Russia’s “balancing” act has come full circle in the sense that it was originally enacted to improve Iran’s regional position but is now being used to indirectly counteract it, having filled a necessary niche for all relevant Mideast actors at one time or another in the brief span of only two and a half years thus far. The US is undoubtedly dangling the carrot of a [“New Détente”](#) before Russia in leading it to believe that playing a more robust “balancing” role might reap the “reward” of less multidimensional international pressure against it that could in turn enable President Putin to concentrate more fully on [fixing his country’s many domestic problems](#) and [delivering on the promises](#) that he made to his citizens. It’s unclear whether Russia will go as far as to actively “contain” Iran in the Mideast, but it nevertheless has the strategic capabilities in Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan to do so if it ever decided that this gamble would be worth the risk, though in all actuality it’ll probably continue to pursue this outcome indirectly.

Concluding Thoughts

For “right” or for “wrong”, and disregarding “moral”/“ethical” arguments that are irrelevant

in determining the behavior of states in the Hyper-Realist “19th-Century Great Power Chessboard” paradigm through which they’re currently operating, Russia has come to fill the necessary geopolitical niche in becoming the ultimate “balancing” force in the Mideast. President Putin fulfilled his 2002 pledge to “Israel” in proving to the world that his country takes an “even-handed position” in all regional conflicts, with this being seen nowhere more obviously than the tricky “balancing” act that Russia is currently conducting in multi-managing the various rival forces participating in the Syrian proxy war. For the moment at least, Russia is working with “Israel” in order to indirectly mitigate the post-Daesh military influence of Iran and its Hezbollah allies in the Arab Republic, though it has the potential to take this even further into the Iraqi zone of competition by involving Tel Aviv’s historic Kurdish allies as well, though that has yet to happen and remains in the realm of scenario forecasting for now.

In any case, Russia’s present “balancing” efforts vis-à-vis Iran shouldn’t be interpreted as anything maliciously “personal” against the Islamic Republic since this strategy is really motivated by nothing more than geopolitics, which correspondingly means that it could theoretically change in Tehran’s favor provided that it’s once again considered to be the relatively weaker actor in the larger regional arrangement. As difficult as it may be for some observers to accept, Russia is only “balancing” Iran because the latter is so strong right now, but it could flexibly revert to “balancing” “Israel” or any of Iran’s other regional rivals in the future if they end up becoming too powerful by the time that everything is said and done, just like Iran ended up being as a result of Russia’s original “balancing” effort in 2015 which led to the current predicament. That won’t happen right away though just because Iranian influence really is on the rise right now, which is why the reality of Russia “balancing” Iran will probably remain a mainstay of Mideast geopolitics.

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Andrew Korybko is an American Moscow-based political analyst specializing in the relationship between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China’s One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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About the author:

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between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China's One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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