Another, but complete, Russia in the Middle East book

In recent years, ‘Russia in the Middle East’ became a widely used term. Indeed, following Vladimir Putin’s military operation in Syria in 2015 and the subsequent expansion of Russian activities to Libya, as well as the renewed ties between Moscow and several Arab capitals, attention towards Russia’s Middle East and North African (MENA) policies increased, be it from Arab, Russian, or Western writers. Hence one can refer to Kazem Hashem Naame’s book, published in Arabic in 2016,1 or Alexey Vasiliev’s, translated from Russian and published in 2020,2 or the work of Chiara Lovotti and others, published in 2021,3 to name a few, as well as dozens of edited policy reports, and perhaps hundreds of policy papers, newspaper reports and articles, and academic articles.

This volume, edited by Dimitar Bechev, Nicu Popescu, and Stanislav Secriéru, is one of the latest publications in this field. It is also one of the most complete, as it covers different aspects of Russia’s involvement, ranging from economic affairs, to military aspects, to political dimensions, among others. It also goes beyond the Arab countries in the MENA region to include Russia’s relations with Iran, Israel and Turkey. Moreover, the book brings together authors of different identities (Russians, Westerners and Arabs – although there are only two authors of MENA decent), and of different political opinions. In short, the editors have been able to offer readers a broad scope of topics and opinions, in an easy-to-read, short book (around 130 pages without notes), which avoids falling into the trap of writing an anti-Russian pamphlet.

Russia Rising shows that the return to the Middle East happened on many levels, largely as America withdrew. One of the most extraordinary examples is Iraq, a country that used to be a major buyer of Russian weapons until the American invasion in 2003, when it began to engage in rearmament with assistance from the US. Yet in 2013, ten years after the fall of Saddam Hussein and billions of US dollars later, Baghdad signed major military contracts with Moscow, almost overturning the American advances of the last decade (p. 47). The other example of Russia’s regained influence in the region is of course Syria, which is mentioned in most of the chapters. Syria is not only the place where Russia promoted its military gadgets, but also an example that Moscow has relied on to show that it does not abandon its allies.

And as Carole Nakhle demonstrates, Moscow is not only selling weapons or playing geopolitical tricks, but also striking business deals, using its formidable energy potential. The author shows how Russia and the region’s OPEC members joined forces through OPEC+ and forged a quasi-alliance that excluded the West. This is a reminder that the involvement of Russia in the region is not only about one-sided military contracts, but also about mutual interests. Another original perspective is the one developed by Florence Gaub, who claims in her chapter that Russia’s war on ISIS was a non-war, what she calls ‘a masterpiece in strategic disinformation’ (p. 39), and that most of the strikes hit the Syrian opposition rather than the Islamic State terrorists.

Some of the authors, however, make certain claims that have been discredited to a degree following publication of the volume. In Syria for instance, it is said that ‘Moscow has put on display its upgraded conventional capabilities, but it is unwilling and, in likelihood, unable to scale up its operation’ (p. 6). As the War on Ukraine proved later, Russia could have scaled up its operation, but it ultimately refrained from doing so. It is also said that Russia and Iran were bracing for disagreements in Syria given multiple disagreements between them (p. 6), an idea that is repeated in Julien Barnes-Dacey’s chapter. Yet, almost a decade...
after Russia’s involvement in Syria, Iran remains Moscow’s closest partner. And as the subsequent events in Azerbaijan and Ukraine have shown, the two regimes continue to work side by side.

Furthermore, the book has missed an opportunity to discuss the cultural aspect of Russia’s MENA presence, which could have been tracked through the activities of its cultural centres. The book could have also benefited from a chapter on Russia’s Arab propaganda, which the authors wrongly minimise, in my view (p. 7). Thus, Florence Gaub claims that ‘where Russia failed, however, was in convincing Middle Eastern audiences of its storyline: according to different surveys, two-thirds of Arabs see Russia’s role in the Syrian conflict as negative’ (p. 43). This could be true for Islamist audiences but, as the reactions to the War on Ukraine have subsequently shown, Arabs trust the Russian narrative more than the Western one.

Dmitriy Frolovskiy penned a valuable chapter on the Gulf, but he should have separated Qatar from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, even if that would lengthen the book. In fact, the relationship with Qatar has more to do with Turkey than with Saudi Arabia. What is more, the chapter does not investigate the deep ties between Moscow and Abu Dhabi, or the use of the Russian Federation’s major Islamic republics (most notably Chechenia and Tatarstan) in Moscow’s outreach to the region. Similarly, in Dalia Ghanem’s chapter on the Maghreb, the relationship with Tunisia and Morocco should have been separated from the one with Algeria, which, I believe, necessitated a dedicated chapter. We are consequently left without a clear answer as to why Russia has so little political influence in Algeria despite it simultaneously being a major economic and security partner to the country.

But overall, the book remains an important contribution to the field of ‘Russia in the Middle East’, which brings with it new insights and different perspectives. In his chapter on Turkey, Dimitar Bechev says that ‘both Russia and Turkey share a political culture prioritising the state’s security and sovereignty over individual rights’ (p. 85). This claim can be generalised to most of the MENA regimes and could explain why they will continue to look at Moscow as a strong partner, which means that Russia will continue to be relevant in the region – ironically, contrary to the book’s central thesis – and so too will this book be relevant for those interested in Moscow’s game. Russia Rising is both an academic collection and a policy one. Students of international affairs and area studies will learn a lot about the topic from reading the volume’s short chapters, and so too will political practitioners.

Notes

1. See Kazem Hashem Naame, Russia and the Middle East After the Cold War (Doha: Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2016), https://bookstore.dohainstitute.org/p-803.aspx.
2. See Alexey Vasiliev, Russia’s Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin (London: Routledge, 2020).
3. See Chiara Lovotti et al., eds., Russia in the Middle East and North Africa: Continuity and Change (London: Routledge, 2021).