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BOOK REVIEWS

What is Russia up to in the Middle East, by Dmitri Trenin, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018, pp. 144.

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The civil war in Syria has entered its ninth year and for the time being it seems that the preservation of the authoritarian regime headed by Bashar al-Assad is going to be its final outcome. Many ask what future awaits Syria and the Middle East afterwards. In parallel, Dmitri Trenin, the Director of Carnegie Moscow Center, raises a more fundamental question about the geopolitical implications of this conflict. In his essay-turned-book *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?*, Trenin draws the reader's attention to the fact that the conflict in Syria has "global consequences" (p. 1). To him, Kremlin has intervened there not only to save a client authoritarian regime, but to assert itself in the region, which serves as a microcosm of the XXI century global politics. From the author's perspective, "for the past 25 years, Russia is unexpectedly back in the game, and with gusto" (p. 2). But is it?

To develop his argument, Trenin analyzes the new-found Russian engagement in the Middle East through four different macro-domains which are neither mutually exclusive nor have the intention of being exhaustive: "History," "War," "Diplomacy" and "Trade."

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In the first chapter, devoted to what the author calls a “rich historical experience with the Middle East,” Trenin aims to illustrate how Russian elites have learned from their past mistakes in the region and currently play a more nuanced strategy. To show how incomparable strategies of Vladimir Putin’s administration are to their Soviet and Czarist predecessors’, he takes the reader on a historical tour starting with Moscow’s presumed inheritance from Byzantium in the mid-XV century, moving to Russian spiritual presence in the Levant through a Russian Palestinian Society formed in 1882, and infamous involvement of the foreign minister Sazanov in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1915. Later on, Trenin fast-tracks through a brief Soviet-Egyptian love affair under Nasser, and then traces how, after the dissolution of USSR, Russia took a step back from the global stage and the region to return 25 years later with an intervention in Syria, taking a stand against perceived Western-orchestrated regime changes of the Arab Spring and Color Revolutions.

Though informative for first-time readers, the chapter fails in achieving its goal and substantiating how the political learning process occur and how history informs the decisions of incumbent Russian elites. Instead, at many points the chapter offers vivid, but non-substantiated generalizations and metaphors, which in fact do little to help the reader untangle the complicated causal mechanisms behind Russian involvement in the Middle East. Propositions like “sparks from the Arab revolutions could ignite Russia’s geopolitical underbelly” (p. 42) often remain pundit-type one-liners without further elaboration.

On “War,” Trenin traces Russian military engagement in Syria since September 2015. Here he rightfully pinpoints that saving al-Assad was instrumentalised for engaging the U.S. as peers. The author does a good job in describing how the latest Russian military campaign is different from any of the previous ones: Russia shares no direct border with Syria, fights an air war and in parallel aims to lead dip-

lomatic efforts to solve the conflict. However, some propositions found in the chapter are highly debatable. For instance, Trenin argues, that “at the cost of the equivalent of \$4 million a day, the military intervention in Syria has been reasonably affordable to the Russian budget” (p. 79). Taking the ensuing domestic protests and discontent over the raise of retirement age in Russia (Kluge 2018) into account, “affordable” sounds highly questionable.

Moreover, Trenin pays no attention to private war companies in Syria (Sukhankin 2018), which misses an important aspect of modern Russian warfare and extra costs of its heightened “international prestige.” Finally, Trenin misreads the situation by calling Syria Putin’s “war of choice.” He maintains that the likely collapse of the Syrian state and parallel victory of jihadi groups were too dangerous to be allowed in Putin’s view, because he “rose to the leadership of Russia an implacable fighter against terrorist and other jihadis, ready to go all the way to do them in” (p. 58). Many would argue that this is a naïve reading of Kremlin’s strategical calculations, since it has previously domesticated groups that may be perceived as “terrorist” and instrumentalised them for keeping a grip on power at home. As the most vivid example, the current administration in Chechnya is headed by Ramzan Kadyrov, a former participant in a jihad against the same Russian regime.

In the third chapter, the author looks at Moscow’s diplomatic initiatives and highlights its ability to talk to conflicting sides at the same time and keep the appearance of an “honest broker.” Chapter is built on a series of circumscribed case studies of Russia’s (possible) involvement in main regional conflicts (such as Israeli-Palestinian conflict, disputes between Iran and Israel, Turkey and the Kurds, Iran and the Gulf States), which to a more expert readership may appear rather shallow. Trenin concludes that “the Russians with their vaunted pragmatism and a fair share of cynicism, appear well-suited for this environment” (p. 110) and suggests that

while Moscow does not have a grand strategy for the Middle East, by successfully negotiating regional divides it could deliver ‘public goods’ and establish itself as a true great power globally. Though thought-provoking, Trenin makes it obvious that these “public goods” would only come about as side-effects of Kremlin pushing for its own interests in the region. How these positive externalities could work in practice, remains to be substantiated.

On “Trade,” in the light of poorly diversified Russian economy, the chapter focuses on four sectors (energy products, metals, timber and food) and aims to convey the added value of doing business with Middle Eastern countries after imposition of Western sanctions in return of Russia’s invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Nonetheless, the overview remains more of a mapping exercise and does not flesh out any theoretical implications. However, it touches upon an interesting people-to-people linkage, encompassing diverse aspects such as political influence of Russian speakers in Israel, symbolic importance of the Holy Land for the traditionalist ideology of Putin regime, cultural and economic encounters Russians have with the Middle East by simply going there as tourists, as well as the impact of the Arab world on Russia’s Muslim communities. This has so far stayed out of the mainstream academic and policy debates, concerned more with regime dynamics and interactions of political elites rather than transnational social connections, and deserves a deeper look in further reiterations of the essay.

Concluding and to some degree self-contradicting, Trenin again states that although Moscow does not have a Grand Strategy in the Middle East, it “has demonstrated that a combination of a clear sense of objective, strong political will, area expertise [...] can go a long way to help to project power onto the top level” (p. 134). For scholars of the subject, this as much as the rest of the essay, hardly provides any eye-opening arguments. However, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?*

should serve as a good source for students and the general public aiming to orientate themselves in the nuances of the regional developments of Russian foreign policy. Hopefully, the sketch provided in the essay will be substantiated in its next reiterations, also to appeal to a more specialized audience.

References

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