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Russia and the Muslim World:

Challenges in the Middle East, Central Asia, South Caucasus and from Within (Conference papers)

Zeev Levin (Ed.)

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Introduction

Russia and the Muslim World: Challenges in the Middle East, Central Asia, South Caucasus and from Within

Zeev Levin

Russia has had more than a century-long involvement in the Middle East. This involvement reached its peak during the Cold War era, but declined dramatically during the Perestroika era. Today, when political confrontations between Russia and the West have become frequent and radical Islamic movements have become much more politically active following the "Arab Spring", it is safe to assume that that Russian involvement in the Middle East is back and here to stay for a long time.

This project aims to spotlight these processes and policies, to foster research on what was once important - but today much neglected - Russian involvement in the Middle East. Furthermore, this research aims to trace and compare post-Soviet policies in the Middle East, and Russia's involvement and influence in the Central Asian republics and with Russia's Muslim populations. Regions and populations which were traditionally included under Russian inner policies, but have come under the direct influence of radical Middle East movements over the past decades, are now a factor that Russian foreign policy makers cannot neglect.

Following the breakup of the USSR, Muslim domains have seen trends that can be described as the politicization and radicalization of Islam - or rather, the proliferation of its nontraditional interpretations, often referred to as Wahhabism, Salafism, fundamentalism, and Islamism. The two Chechen wars (1993–96 and 1999–2003), magnified religious radicalism and extremism. In addition to that, last year's annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation will inevitably give rise to the issue of the Crimean Tatars, some of whom espouse rather radical views and most of whom are opposed to the peninsula's secession from Ukraine.

According to the Russian census, there were 14.5 million ethnic Muslims in Russia in 2002. The Muslim population has grown over the past 12 years, and is likely to be approaching (if not already exceeding) 16 million. In 1937, Muslims accounted for 5.9 percent of the population of the Russian Soviet Socialist Federation; in 2009, their respective share was 11 percent (this includes citizens of the Russian Federation only). Adding the work migrants from Central Asia and Azerbaijan would bring the total Muslim population of the Russian Federation up to roughly 20 million (of 140 million total), while the number of Muslims in Moscow itself hovers around 1.5 million. Thus, Muslim impact is not only an external issue for Russian policymakers, but, indeed, an inner factor they can't neglect. This is especially true regarding the religious and political developments in Chechnya.

The Muslim community in Russia is influenced by the general situation in the Muslim world—especially the consequences of the Arab Spring—from which it can

never be isolated. Radical Islam, despite a number of setbacks, is still very vibrant and has ample political and military potential. This is especially true when taking into account the large number of citizens from Russia and the neighboring Muslim republics who have taken active fighting roles in the ranks of ISIS.

In order to foster research on this topic, the Central Asia Unit at the Truman Institute initiated a research project which received a generous grant from The Polonsky Foundation. This project brought many scholars to Jerusalem to attend a multi-disciplinary workshop that took place on May 13-14, 2018 at the Truman Institute. More than a dozen prominent scholars from Europe, the US, Russia, Central Asia and the Middle East came together to discuss their current research in this field.

The conference was opened by the Director of Truman Institute, Prof. Menachem Blondheim and the head of the unit, Dr. Zeev Levin. The first session was dedicated to Russian attitudes toward the Circassian Genocide and Memory as Identity Preservation. Professor Walt Richmond of the Occidental College, Los Angeles described the Circassian Factor in Russian-Muslim Relations. Professor Lars Funch Hansen from Malmö University presented issues with regard to Ethnicity and Education: Towards a Renewed Arena of Conflict in the North Caucasus, and Dr. Chen Bram, from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem presented issues concerning the Colonization of the Caucasus Between Past and Present: Russia and the Struggle over the Circassian Genocide.

For the keynote address, MK Ksenia Svetlova spoke about Russia and the Muslim World in a Changing Geopolitical Environment, which was followed by a fruitful discussion.

The second day of the workshop opened with a panel on issues connected to Russia in the Gulf. Dr. Igor Delanoë from the French-Russian Analytical Center Observo, discussed New Perspectives and Challenges Connected to the Trade between Russia and Petro-Monarchies of the Persian Gulf. Dr. Clément Therme from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Paris, discussed the possibilities of an Iranian-Russian Alliance, while Ms. Bat Chen Druyan-Feldman, a research student at Ben-Gurion University, presented issues of Russian Orientalism and the Contemporary Image of Iran. The session culminated with a thought-provoking presentation by Alex Grimberg from Tel Aviv University, comparing Images of Russia and Iran and pointing out numerous surprising resemblances between the political and ideological similarities of the two. This panel was headed by Professor Moshe Maoz of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who provided thought-provoking insights based on his experience and academic research.

The afternoon panels dealt with Russian relations in Central Asia and were chaired by Professor Emeritus Yaacov Ro'i of Tel-Aviv University. Professor Mirzohid Rahimov of the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan described the New Dynamics of Russian and Central Asian Relations; Mr. Dawood Azami, a reporter for BBC London, presented Russia's Assertiveness in Afghanistan and Pakistan; and Dr. Zeev Levin from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem discussed the various aspects of Russian Heritage in Central Asia.

Another session focused on Russia and the Muslim World in History and Memory.

Professor Alikber Alikberov from the Moscow Academy of Sciences presented the main stages of development of Russia's Interaction with Muslim Lands; and Professor Zhar Zardykhan from KIMEP University in Almaty, Kazakhstan, discussed Russian Attempts to Win over Muslim Hearts in Times of Trouble, bringing examples from the World War I and the current Syrian conflict. Research student Tim Kucharzewski, from the University of Potsdam, presented the Deconstruction of Memory in Images of Russian Wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya.

The workshop culminated with a roundtable discussion on the Future of Russian Presence in the Muslim World.

The following texts are summaries of some of the presented papers.

Zeev Levin

Jerusalem, 2019

The Circassian Factor in Russian-Muslim Relations

Walter Richmond

This paper discusses the unique and largely unexamined role played by the Circassian people - an indigenous people of the Northwest Caucasus and one of the oldest inhabitants of the region - in Russian-Muslim relations, both in Russia and in diaspora in the Middle East. After a protracted war, the Russian Empire expelled the vast majority of Circassians from the Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire in 1864. The majority were sent to Anatolia, while a significant minority were settled in Bulgaria. This second group was driven out of Bulgaria during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, and ultimately sent to the Syrian desert, both to reclaim the area and defend settlements further north from Bedouin attacks. Today, there are approximately 50,000 Circassians in Syria and 100,000 in Jordan.[1]

From the time of their deportation, the Circassians have struggled to live in Arab society while maintaining some sense of national unity. Arab nationalists, perceiving them as colonists and representatives - first of the Ottoman state and then of the French mandate - have long been suspicious of the Circassians. Even today, they are seen as outsiders, despite their significant political and economic power (particularly in Jordan), and they themselves have resisted integration into Arab society.[2] On the other hand, at the time of their deportation, the Circassians were at a stage of tribal feudalism; although they recognized each other as belonging to the same ethnos, loyalty to tribe or community was often stronger than loyalty to the entire Circassian people.

Dispersal across the Middle East further fragmented Circassian identity, as each community became influenced by the culture and politics of its new home. Further muddling their understanding of their own history was the promotion, by both Russia and the Circassians' host nations, of what could be labelled the muhajir narrative to explain the Circassians' departure from the Caucasus. According to this version, the Russian Empire gave the Circassians the choice of living under Russian rule or emigrating to the Ottoman Empire, and the vast majority voluntarily chose Islamic hijra, or religious migration.[3] This story became part of Circassian family narratives in the Middle East, and has been actively promoted by the governments of the Circassians' adopted homes, as well as Russia.[4]

1. Akbulat, Emir Fatih. "Syrian Circassians in the Context of the Syrian Refugee Issue: Nature of the Problem on the Basis of the International Community in Turkey and Russia and Suggested Solutions," *Central European Journal of Politics*, Volume 3 (2017) Issue 1, p. 3.

2. Richmond, Walter. *The Circassian Genocide*. Rutgers University Press, 2013, pp. 114-23.

3. Bliev, Mark. *Rossiia I Gortsy Bol'shogo Kavkaza: Na Puti k Tsivilizatsii*. Moscow: Mysl', 2004, pp. 786-94 is a good example of this line of reasoning.

4. Youghar, I. (2013, 20 May). Personal interview.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, a second narrative appeared and challenged the muhajir version, asserting that the Russian government placed impossible terms on the Circassians who wished to remain in the Caucasus, and ultimately gave the overwhelming majority no choice.[5] Still, there was little organized effort to challenge the muhajir narrative until the 2008 opening of the Georgian archives, where documents chronicling the actual events of 1863-64 were located. The advent of social networking at nearly the same time gave Circassian activists and researchers a vehicle for disseminating this information, as well as providing a global platform for Circassians for the first time.

A series of events accelerated the Circassian effort to assert their right to return to the Caucasus. First was the dedication of the Circassian Genocide Memorial in Anaklia, Georgia in May 2012, underscoring the Georgian government's 2008 decision to recognize the events of 1864 as genocide. On one hand, this action seemed to be an affront to Moscow in response to Russia's invasion of South Ossetia, but there was perhaps a second motivation. By championing the Circassian cause, it naturally drew many Circassian groups closer to Tbilisi, and this in turn drove a wedge between the Circassians and their close relatives, the Abkhazians. Since their victory over Georgia in 1993, aided by Russian intervention, the Abkhazians have had few allies and consider Georgia an open enemy. Appeasing the Circassians has drawn many of them into the Georgian camp, depriving the Abkhazians of a potential ally. It is also interesting (and typical of Caucasus geopolitics) that the Christian Georgians have allied themselves with a Muslim nation against two other Christian nations.

An even more significant event was the run-up to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. Sochi was Circassia's short-lived capital, and Krasnaya Polyana, the field on which the Olympic stadium was built, was the site of the Circassians' last battle with the Russians. Further offending the Circassians was the fact that 2014 was the 150th anniversary of the deportation. Circassians in the diaspora conducted a series of protests and attempted to publicize their No Sochi campaign but, despite a tremendous amount of effort, No Sochi failed to gain widespread attention. It did, however, mobilize Circassians worldwide, and prepare the way for a more organized effort in the future.

In response to Circassian efforts to change the narrative, Moscow called upon historians, archivists and others to establish documentary evidence that the muhajir version was the correct account.[6] Further, both the Russian government and Russian news agencies argued that Circassian efforts to revisit the events of 1864 were being driven by a small radical fringe living in the diaspora and directed by British, Turkish and American political elites.[7] By early 2014, the Russian press began portraying the No Sochi movement and Circassian demands for recognition of the genocide as orchestrated by Turkey and the United States, and aimed at manipulating public opinion to create chaos in the Caucasus.[8]

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5. Richmond, Walter. *The Circassian Genocide*, 54-97.

6. Baderkhan, Fasikh. Severokavkazskaia Diaspora v Turtsii, Sirii i Iordanii. Moscow: IV RAN, 2001; Bliev, Mark. Rossiia i Gortsy Bol'shogo Kavkaza .

7. Gulevich, Vladislav. (2015). "Cherkesskie Motivy Siriiskoi Tragedii," https://www.fondsk.ru/news/2012/02/13/cherkesskie-motivy-sirijskoj-tragedii-12797.html?print. Retrieved 2/6/2018.

8. Atakhukin, R. (2014) "Kavkazskii Podlog." http://www.segodnia.ru/content/134469. Retrieved 1/6/2018; Gulevich, V. (2015). "Cherkesskie Motivy Siriiskoi Tragedii".

It was, however, the Syrian crisis that most directly served as a catalyst for Circassian efforts to return to their ancestral homeland, and it was this crisis that thrust the Circassian issue into the international arena. As mentioned above, Circassians have always been in an ambiguous position in Syria, beginning with their role as guardians of the region under the Ottomans. In 1963, the Circassians, who occupied important posts in both the military and administrative branches of the government by this time, retained their influential positions by supporting the Ba'ath Party. However, the ensuing wave of Arab nationalism threatened to destroy the Circassians' cultural heritage, and by 2011 they had been purged from the upper ranks of the military and were forbidden to serve in any administrative offices.[9] At the outset of the Syrian civil war, the Circassians officially supported the Assad regime but the people themselves took no part in the conflict. In response, some groups within the Free Syrian Army declared that once they overthrew Assad, the Circassians would be purged from Syria. The Circassians responded by creating self-defense units, and some began expressing a desire to return to their homeland because of the violence. This in turn led to harassment from both the opposition and government forces. Many Circassians fled, along with other Syrians, to Turkey and Jordan, and are afraid of returning because of the threats issued against them by both sides in the conflict.[10]

At the beginning of hostilities, the Syrian Circassians turned to Russia for permission to return. Multiple petitions have been submitted to Moscow, although the Russian government has not recognized many of them. Officially, the Russian Duma passed a law in 1999 permitting repatriation of Russian nationals, but Moscow has argued that since the Circassians left Russia "voluntarily" and accepted Ottoman rule, they relinquished their Russian citizenship and therefore their descendants do not have a right to return.[11] Fear of Islamic radicals infiltrating Russia has been put forth as an official explanation for rejecting Syrian Circassians' petitions, although a more likely reason is that the prospect of tens of thousands of Syrian Circassians who speak neither Circassian nor Russian coming to the Caucasus and disrupting the current complex ethnic and religious demographic is unacceptable to Moscow.[12] Circassians wishing to immigrate to Russia must appeal as foreign nationals, a slow process with a large numbers of applicants. The Circassians have remained persistent, however, with even organizations seen as loyal to Moscow pressuring the Kremlin to admit the refugees.13

The issue creates potential problems for Russia, both at home and in its relations with Syria and other Muslim nations. Domestically, Russia cannot allow thousands of Syrian Circassians to settle in the North Caucasus, as the ethnic/religious balance in the

9. Akbulat, Emir Fatih. "Syrian Circassians . . ., p. 11.

10. Akbulat, Emir Fatih. "Syrian Circassians" . . ., pp. 12-13.

11. ----------. (2015) "MID Rossii ne Schitaet Predstavitelei Zarubezhnykh Cherkesskoi Diaspory Sootechestvennikami." https://aheku.net/news/society/6409. Retrieved 2/6/2018.

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13. ----------. (2015). "V Maikope Provedeny Ocherednye Odinochnye Pikety po Sochnoi Evakuatsii Cherkesov Sirii." http://www.natpressru.info/index.php?newsid=9902. Retrieved 2/6/2018; Kapaeva, A. (2015). "Bezhentsy ne Imeiut Natsional'nosti." http://kavpolit.com/articles/bezhentsy_ne_imejut_natsionalnosti-20494/. Retrieved 2/6/2018.

Caucasus would be so drastically altered that inter-ethnic conflict would be sure to ensue. Therefore, Moscow will have to deal with possibly increasing unrest among the Circassians in the Caucasus, should the situation of their compatriots in Syria worsen and international pressure increase. Internationally, the Kremlin has officially endorsed the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity, so any move to repatriate large numbers of Syrian Circassians could be seen as a violation of that position. Further, the governments of Syria, and possibly Jordan, could lose some Circassian support, which they have always enjoyed, if there is no official pressure by their governments on Russia to accept the Syrian Circassians. While this may never escalate into a major issue, it is certainly one that will add to the complicated situation in the Russian Caucasus and in Russian-Muslim relations for the foreseeable future.

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Perceiving the Colonization of the Caucasus, Past and Present: Russia and the Struggle Over the Circassian Genocide

Chen Bram

Until the second half of the 19th century, the Circassians – especially the Adyghe (the self-name of the largest Circassian population segment) - were the largest group in the north Caucasus. Following the last stages of Russian colonization, only small enclaves of Circassians remained in the Caucasus. The fate of most of the Circassians is at the center of a current bitter debate. Russian sources largely hold the position that many Circassians chose to leave the Caucasus and migrate to the Ottoman Empire. Most Circassian scholars and activists, however, stress that they were victims of organized ethnic cleansing and genocide. Some of these claims are supported by recent research. Based on materials that were recently reopened in the Tsarist imperial archive in Tbilisi, Richmond (2013) describes an organized, well-planned Russian campaign which led to the killing of some three quarters of a million Circassians, and forced a similar number to leave the Caucasus.

Over the past decade, activists in the Circassian diaspora have launched a struggle demanding the recognition of the "Circassian genocide." Based on long-term, multi-sited anthropological study and on media sources, this paper analyzes the Russian response to the demand of genocide recognition. The study of the Circassian struggle and Russian responses to it connect questions of current Russian policy in the Caucasus and relations between Russia and the Circassian diaspora in Turkey, the Middle East and the West.[1] This paper, however, seeks to go beyond the political sphere, and examine cultural perceptions and historiographical assumptions that lie beneath the rigid Russian approach to the Circassian struggle.

The Circassian Struggle for Recognition

First demands for recognition of the Circassian genocide began in the early 1990s, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the rise of Circassian ethno-nationalism. In 1991, the Circassian International Association (CIA) was founded, and Circassians from the different republics in the Caucasus, and from different diasporas, gathered in national congresses in the Caucasus. The recognition initiative of that period, however, "appealed primarily to Russia's historical duty rather than any legal obligation arising from a body of domestic or international law" (Catic 2015: 1696-7). But this began to change in the late 1990s with the rise of Putin's regime.

Putin's centralist policy involved harsh treatment toward the local people of the

1. There are no reliable data as for the number of Circassian in diaspora. Estimates are 3 to 5 million people, among them Adyghe are the majority. See Jaimoukha 2001, Hansen 2014.

Caucasus, with little differentiation between Islamic revivalism and ethno-national initiatives. New laws and regulations practically stopped any advancement or negotiations relating to Circassian ethno-national aspirations. In this context, history and memory became the main arenas that were left for national activists, and some of them tried to transform them into political tools of resistance. Activists, both in the Caucasus and in the diaspora, started to stress the issue of genocide. Their initiative can be seen as "an identity-driven project of a vulnerable and fragmented group" (Catic, 2015: 1686).

Unexpected influences on the Circassian struggle for recognition developed as a result of international events. The first was the 2007 decision to hold the winter Olympic Games of 2014 in Sochi - an area that was a Circassian center prior to the Russian colonization. The second was the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008, and its effect on the status of Abkhazia, which was officially recognized by Russia. Georgians were now looking for alternative channels for resisting Russia's growing influence in the region. Both events played a crucial role in adding an international dimension to the Circassian campaign.

Following the 2008 Russio-Georgian war, Georgia began to promote an alliance with the Circassian diaspora, based on support for the claim of genocide. Georgia invited Circassian activists and scholars to examine documentation in the Tbilisi Imperial Archive. Exploration uncovered Russian Imperial Army documentation of the extermination of the Circassians. In 2011, Georgia recognized the Circassian genocide. These events signaled a new development in the political discourse of the genocide, and the use of this issue in international politics. At the same time, once the archives were open, the historical findings boosted the Circassian struggle for recognition – but also shaped the Russian response, allowing it to concentrate more on political circumstances than historical findings from the archives.

Meanwhile, the decision to hold the 2014 winter Olympics games in Sochi furnished an additional arena of struggle with history and memory. Using various methods, especially the internet and social media, a small but highly-motivated group of activists was able to launch an organized protest against holding the Sochi Olympic on "Circassian mass graves," and calling for recognition of the genocide.

Russian Response: Political and Organizational Dimensions

Russian authorities aimed to avoid any discussion of the genocide claim. Their first response was placing pressure on activists who raised the issue of genocide.[2] Another channel was co-opting the Circassian International Association, a once-vivid arena for cooperation and dialogue between Circassians in the Caucasus and in the diaspora that became a tool of Russian policy.[3] Through the leadership in the Caucasus, Russia also

2. Bullough (2010) describe such a pressure on a Maikop activist in 2006. See also cases of Andzor Akhokhov in 2014, Adnan Khuade in 2015 (Circassian Times reports: 16.12.2014; 30.5.2015).

3. For example of the echoes of these attempts among the Circassians : see Gileva 2017.

tried to influence the diaspora leadership not to risk its relations with the Circassian republics in the Caucasus by supporting the genocide campaign. Another response was cultural appropriation. During the Sochi winter Olympics, the Russians erected a "Circassian house" with demonstrations of Circassian folklore. In addition, the new situation of Abkhazia after the 2008 war brought about new tensions between the Adyghe and Abkhaz in the diaspora. These tensions were used and encouraged by the Russians – and to some degree by the Georgians as well.

The Syrian civil war gave Russia another card to play against the Circassian campaign. Circassian diaspora leaders hoped that Russia would receive Syrian Circassian refugees. While these hopes did not materialize on a large scale, the Russians did receive small groups in the north Caucasus. The policy of accepting a very limited number of refugees created a dilemma for activists in the diaspora, who debated to what extent their struggle for recognition of the genocide could place at risk the options of more refugees for finding shelter in their ancestors' homeland.[4]

Russian Response: Cultural and Historiographical Dimensions

Moscow also took active symbolic steps to highlight an alternative narrative. Already in 2007, these efforts were expressed through a symbolic celebration in Nalchik marking the "450th anniversary of the voluntary adherence of Kabarda to Russia."[5] The Russians choose this event to stress that long before the 19th century, north Caucasus was part of the Empire.[6] These celebrations, however, did not make an impact on the emerging discourse of the genocide, but served as a platform for the position that discussion of the 19th century Caucasus war is an internal Russian issue.

From 2008 onward, with the opening of the Tbilisi archives and the emerging No Sochi campaign, the international dimensions of the Circassian struggle became salient. The major theme of the Russian response was the claim that the struggle of the Circassians was mainly a product of a western and Georgian conspiracy. For example, in 2011, Sergei Makarov, vice-chairman of the Duma Committee for Public Associations and Religions Organizations, claimed that the source of instability in the Caucasus was the involvement of foreign forces who "wish to blow up the Russian Caucasus…". Makarov stressed the connection between the Circassian issue and other struggles over historiography which aimed to weaken Russia by spreading false history.[7]

In 2014, a Russian newspaper writer repeated these ideas, and claimed that., "… the idea of "Great Circassia" is part of the plans of those who, from the USA, have arranged

4. On Circassians activists evaluation of Russian policy towards the Syrian refugees see Dzutsati 2016.

5. Based on a treaty between the Kabardian prince Temryuk, of Kabarda, and Ivan the Terrible. See also Alexseev M., & Zhemukhov S. (2017), p. 20.

6. Similar celebrations (to mark 400 years anniversary) were first initiated in 1957. See Namitok 1956 for the reaction of a Circassian historian in the diaspora to this event.

7. Interview to "Voice of America" by Alexei Pimenov, Kavkaz Cevodniya (КАВКАЗ СЕГОДНЯ). 16 May, 2011.

and keep trying to arrange various color revolutions and 'Maidans' in the post-Soviet space…" Again, the struggle is recognized as a battle over history, and answered with an alternative narrative of the Caucasus war: "…The local parliamentarians have simply forgotten that Georgian warriors fought together with the Russians in their struggle against the Turks …"[8]

While some Russian scholars reproduced the official position of Moscow, the Russian academy in general kept a distance from getting deeper into this sensitive debate. Timur Aloyev, a young scholar from Kabardino-Balkarya claimed that, "…the Russian scientific community hasn't really proposed any elaborated objections to the legitimacy of the Circassian position for more than a decade." [9] Aloyev describes how "scientific forums in Kabardino, Balkar and Adygea have accepted documents that recognized the atrocities of the Czarist government toward the Circassians as an act of genocide, and addressed a corresponding letter to the Russian Duma…." but their appeal was ignored. With few exceptions, the academics that did refer to the debate followed the politicians and the media, stating that "it is an inner Russian issue" and that the Circassians should not engage outside bodies in discussing it.[10] Later, with the growing activities of the No Sochi campaign, the Russians organized conferences in order to express and disseminate their view on the history of the colonization of the Caucasus, and to give an alternative to conferences organized by the Circassians (Tsibenko 2015).

Cultural and Historical Sources of the Russian Approach

The Russian response seemed to evolve not only from the political sensitivity of the Caucasus issues, but also from the potential of the genocide claim to destabilize basic notions on the nature of the Russian Empire. Nineteenth century encounters with the Caucasus have played a substantial part in the formation of modern Russian culture and identity. The years of colonization were fruitful years for famous writers, poets and artists who became the central pillars of Russian culture. Susan Layton has argued that Russian belletrists orientalized the Caucasus so as to boost their claim as members of the civilized part of the world (Layton, 2015). Anthropologist Bruce Grant examines the centrality of the "prisoner of the Caucasus" theme in Russian culture and how it was reproduced from Pushkin, Tolstoy and Lermontov to the end of the 20th century in poems, novels, theater and movies: "Through captivity narratives and other genres, Russia found its own civilizing mission - its own giving potential" (Grant, 2007: 94). For Russians, the colonization of the Caucasus is not a story of brutality and ethnic cleansing (even though violence was sometimes necessary in this process), but rather an important phase in the Empire's mission of giving the gift of civilization.

8. Maxim Makarichev, RG.RU (The Russian Newspaper), 25.10.14.

9. Timur Aloyev (Candidate of Historical sciences, Kabardino- Balkarya)," Aheku.net. 08.12.2014.

10. For example, see : an expression of this position by Fasikh Baderkhan, a senior researcher at the institute of eastern studies (RAN). See Aslan Bogatirev, *Kavkaz today,* 22.12.2015.

In 1861, Tzar Alexander II issued the Emancipation Act and the abolition of serfdom. The very same years when the Circassian ethnic cleansing was planned and executed were thus years which are considered as signs of modernity and enlightenment. The new findings on the systematic annihilation of Circassian villages, and the massive attack on civilians, including children, woman and elders, stand in clear contradiction to the Russian collective memory of these years, which connect the heroic battles in the Caucasus and the civilized mission of the Empire. These contradictions are expressed in the following counter-narrative to the Circassian claims: "What was the purpose of the Russian administration? .... (It was) recognition of the Czarist government; ending the support of enemy Empires and the ending of the raids. …It is the Russian colonization that has saved the Circassian peoples from a horrible disaster, when neighboring tribes were murdering and robbing each other, taking hostages and selling people (...). Yes, there were mass killings of rebels. But there was no elimination of people according to ethnic principle."[11] According to the Russian understanding, therefore, Circassians should be thankful to the Russians, who saved them from themselves.

Russia's Putin stresses the continuity between Russia's imperial past, its present and its future. There is a clear resonance between Russia's self-understanding and its reaction to the Circassian struggle for recognition. Russia's regime and elite see post-communist Russia as the heiress of a glorious civilization, which brought "the gift of civilization" to the Caucasus. The hidden, but not less important, dimension of the denial of the Circassian tragedy is connected to its potential for putting a risky question mark next to essential aspects of Russia's self-portrait and claims of civilization.

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Framing, Othering and "Saming" Chechnya: Deconstruction of Memory on the Basis of Popular Culture[1]

Tim Kucharzewski

History Under Construction

In certain contexts, history is not (only) about the past, but also about the present and the future. History becomes weaponized by becoming a prime motivator and agitating factor for policies. To varying degrees, the underlying mechanisms of this phenomenon can be observed in all areas of the former Soviet Union, the former Eastern bloc, former and active dictatorships, and sometimes even in full-fledged established democracies. It comes as no surprise that the history-as-weapon condition becomes supercharged in a conflict situation. In such an event, contesting political narratives usually tend to stretch beyond the acute apple of discord into a yet-uncertain future and a seemingly just as controversial past. In this type of situation, a factual murkiness of the past usually allows for diametrically-opposed interpretations which are respectively claimed by the opposing parties. As I have written elsewhere, what history boils down to is always a narrative (Kucharzewski; Nicola, 2017, p. 274).

As a heritage from Soviet times, many museums in Russia, the Caucasus and the regions connected to it by geographical, political, and/or historical ties, share certain particularities. Often the major focus of the exhibition is placed on geology, stones, flora and fauna. In chronological made-up showrooms, this is followed by representations of some more-or-less-forgotten ancestral tribe which roamed the given regions eons before the dawn of Gutenberg's printing press. More recent history, in which sociological and political factors might take precedent over anthropological paradigms, is more often than not hidden away behind sections barricaded by "under construction" signs.

All this is done to avoid venturing into any even remotely-volatile element of history. Any political connotation or relation to current affairs is silenced. This silence is an element well known in historiography everywhere, and at all times since the creation of this scientific art. Arguably, the most drastic example that can be drawn upon to illustrate this condition can be found in (West) Germany of the 1950s. Germans on all levels - whether politicians, professional historians or simply society in general - pretended that the 1930s and 1940s never happened. Ralph Giordano accusingly and fittingly coined the term "the second guilt" (Giordano, 1987) for this behavior.

An exception to this omnipresent silence on and near the region of the former USSR can be found in regard to the remembrance of wars and upheavals that occurred during the 1990s in the aftermath of the communist collapse. In many post-Soviet

1. My research on which this paper is based has been made possible by a scholarship from the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, to which I would like to express my gratitude.

areas, and even for many former members of the bygone Warsaw pact, the wars and conflicts emanating from the dismemberment of the Union became essential founding myths. While this is supposed to function as a consolidation mechanism for internal, in-group consumption, outsiders like tourists often find that guided tours only fleetingly touch upon these more recent events, if they are not skipped entirely. This, of course depends on the broader political context. I experienced it in Azerbaijan[2] , where gaining international support and esteem is considered to be an essential asset of foreign policy. In Abkhazia on the other hand, where foreign political recognition in most forms would be a far-fetched hope anyway, museum guides proudly show and tell their historical narrative about the war in which the de facto political entity which they desire to represent originated. It is self-evident, though, that certain aspects of these respective founding myths still need to be shrouded in silence in order for them to function as a rallying call, instead of encouragement for critical reflection.

Returning to this paper's area of interest, the list of taboo topics and periods was expanded so much during the height of Soviet censorship that the concept metastasized to forbid analysis, and often mere depiction of almost all of human history that included rational choice and any form of cognitively political society. It can be stated with some justification, as outlined above, that in some former Soviet areas, this silence encompassed (and often still encompasses) almost all history that occurred after ancient times (with the notable exception of the glorification of the "Great Patriotic War," as World War II is denoted in Russia). This silence on the official level of memory involuntarily spawned an alternative outlet of social communicative memory.

The exact topics that were most repressed by the official state history apparatus, of course, held a place of honor in the alternative social variation of memory. In Chechnya, the most widespread and important topics included, without question, the deportation of the entire population under Stalin and other atrocities during that reign of terror. While the restitution and right of return had been commemorated by naming a square in Grozny after Khrushchev (Kilner, 2018), and thereby found their way into an official manifestation of collective memory, the preceding crime of deportation that was repealed by Stalin's successor remained shrouded in official silence.

Professional historiography – which can be seen as another important pillar of collective memory – outside of the former USSR seems to have produced more research on these topics than the domestic, long restricted academia. Often, that research has been conducted by members of the involved diasporas. "Western" mainstream popular culture, on the other hand, surprisingly shied away from taking on any Chechen topic as source material. This is despite the fact that the often- dramatic and catastrophic history of the region offers all the ingredients fit for movies and novels. For this reason, Chechnya has not been entirely neglected by creators of fiction in the West, even if the sources are

2. I would like to gratefully acknowledge that this research trip to Azerbijan, I took part in, was sponsored by the Humboldt University, Berlin Germany.

found in rather alternative, non-mainstream publications. At least two French language BDs/graphic novels (*Chroniques du proche étranger en Tchétchénie*, Rash et Tamada, 2007 and *S'enfuir. Récit d'un otage*, Delisle, 2016), an Italian graphic novel (*The Ukrainian and Russian Notebooks: Life and Death Under Soviet Rule*, Igort, 2016), highbrow literature (*A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*, Marra, 2013) and an American adventure novel (*Grey Wolves Howling: A Novel of Chechnya*, O'Neill, 2000) are among these alternative fictional accounts of Chechen history. Sometimes, even popular books turn in some way to Chechnya, if only as a backdrop or background story. One example for this can be found in *Stalin's Ghost* (Smith, 2007).

Surprisingly, video games - a medium that inherently exploits each and every war scenario for the creation of its diegetic settings - rather seldom turn to the Chechen theater of conflict. There are indeed some virtual recreations in games like *Black* (Electronic Arts, 2006) or *Conflict: Global Storm* (2K Games, 2005), but these are almost exclusively single levels. Almost no entire gameplay campaigns take place there. A Western domination of the market might explain that, despite the fact that narratives of both anti-terrorism warfare and actual terrorist organizations used video games to mass-communicate their agenda (Kucharzewski, 2017), neither the Russian nor the Chechen point of view has found a major coded virtualization as of yet. Only homebrew modifications of triple-A titles like *Arma 3* (Bohemia Interactive, 2013) are available to players inclined to replay the conflict in the safely-lit environment of a screen.

While, all these artifacts of fiction outside Russia aim at raising awareness about a war and a region that are more often than not neglected in the mainstream discourse and media, fiction inside Russia is based on a quite-different motivational foundation. Here, fiction - especially movies – is a weapon in the arsenal of historical contests. Various methods are applied in an attempt to educate viewers regarding the officially sanctioned narrative. Often, this almost forays into the familiar arena of old-fashioned propaganda. This shall be explored in greater detail within the analytical section of this paper.

To recapitulate and expand on the above-mentioned observations: at least four main forms of collective memory can be discerned. Other academics and observers have found different terms and varying definitions for these concepts. Based on the groundbreaking conceptual works of minds such as Maurice Halbwachs, James E. Young, Kiyoshi Tanimoto, Pierre Nora, or Tony Bennett, to name just a few, these are the adapted definitions upon which my work bases assumptions:

National official collective memory: This is the most visible form of memory. It manifests itself in museums, parades, official speeches and ceremonies. It represents the official usually state-sanctioned form of remembrance.

Social communicative collective memory: On the territory of the former USSR, this is a kind of counter-memory culture that stands in contrast to the official version. It is widespread anti-narration that is found in opposition actions, publications and events.

Oral sources are the main method of dissemination here.

Personal individual historic memory: Since a collective consists of the sum of its parts, a society has as many versions of historic memory as it has members. This is an academic observation to be kept in mind, but hard to reconcile with any analytical endeavour.

Professional historiography: This is the realm of academia, universities and the professional publication and research sector. In a functional democracy, it should usually be free from state interference or even control. However, like all the other described instances of memory, it can stand in opposition to, overlap, or even merge with all the other instances.

Popular culture, in films and other forms, draws on and plays with all these levels of memory. A closer look on how this functions will be explained with the help of concrete examples later in this paper. In certain ways, on the level of (popular) culture, films and other media become part of a meta-war. Wars are usually fought not only with bullets and RPGs, but also with ideas, narratives and celluloid. This general observation shows itself to be especially obvious in the war of the Russian Federation against its Chechen subject separatists' attempts. Films are almost always more political than they appear on first glance. In the case of movies about the Chechen wars, they are even more complex than mere entertainment or even commentary. They are, more often than not, attempts to write the state-sponsored version of history and thereby shape the collective vision of "truth" about the war.

A notable feature of Soviet and post-Soviet historiography is that the craft has always been hampered by restrictive access to sources. Hardly-accessible archives are the most evident example, but close-lipped potential oral sources and a hermetically-barricaded political apparatus are similar hurdles. This is one of the reasons that a partial equalization of all sources has occurred in this part of the world. Any and all sources are taken at face value, and most deeper contextualization or source criticism can be depreciated as superfluous. Based on this questionable rationale – at least for a European scholar – Lep Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat* (*Хаджи-Мурат,* 1912) becomes just as valid a source as written contemporary military documents. Of course, both of these texts *are* sources. However, a meaningful analysis would be improved if they were considered based on their context, intention and historicity. These prerequisite thoughts are not always applied, least of all in the realms of popular, social and national memory. This adds to the already-considerable power of moving picture fiction, as its audio-visual representations hold the potential to function as quasi-historical-sources themselves.

Yet another particularity of historiography in the region is that history is often depicted as indivisible and absolute. *О*т войны до войны (From War to War, 2003), by the group Голубые Береты (Blue Berets), is one of many excellent albums of Russian war-themed songs. All major "Russian" wars of modern times (meaning mostly the "Great Patriotic War," Afghanistan, and Chechnya) are, from that perspective, seen as similar

events in different historical and political context. This notion often even seems to surpass the level of mere comparison by merging these wars into basically the same intermittent war. Popular narratives often depict these normatively clearly distinguishable wars into one prolonged, potentially everlasting struggle for the existence of the motherland. Another illustrative example shows that this observation is not limited to the region. It extends to foreign views about the region as well. The above-mentioned Tolstoy novel *Hadji Murat* is based on semi-autobiographical experience the author gained in the Russian military by fighting in the Caucasus in middle of the 19th century. The cover of a recent English-language reprint of that novel (Tolstoy, 2006) shows a photograph of a modern Chechen soldier, obviously taken during the recent wars, which took place almost one and a half centuries later. History in the Caucasus sometimes appears not glacially slow, but stopped entirely. Often, the past, present and future appear to be conserved in the collective mind of the region as one and the same.

History Under Fire

During many wars like the ones in Chechnya, history came under fire. Physical manifestations of collective memory, like archives and sights of remembrance, were targeted. In the Chechen example, it remains unresolved if these attacks were conducted intentionally or if they were, in the terminology of modern warfare, matters of collateral damage. As Radio Free Europe put it:

"*The loss of multitudes of Chechen literary works contributed to the broader destruction of the region's cultural patrimony. It is a common result of war--and often a deliberate means of warfare--when museums, historic architecture, and even libraries are caught in the crossfire.*" (Thompson, 2015).

Historic precedents have been be cited to undermine this assumption:

"*Chechen literature was targeted before the depredations of the Chechen Wars of the 1990s and 2000s. Books were destroyed en masse during the Soviet deportations of Chechen and Ingush peoples to Siberia and Central Asia in the 1940s under Stalin. Residents of Grozny tell of books piled on bonfires that burned for days.*" (Thompson, 2015).

Whatever the case may be, even the mere fact that allegations were made by the Chechens that these actions were direct attacks on their identity and culture, indicates how history is a living political entity in this region. It is far more than some words written on paper or carved in stone, and even more than something to be merely analyzed. It is a proactive force for shaping policy and framing. History is simultaneously a weapon and a shield.

This is one of several reasons that academic analysis of Soviet/Russian wars has been hampered by many hurdles. Archives that had been briefly opened in the wake of the glasnost period closed their documentary coffers once again when Vladimir Putin gained power. Propagandistic media campaigns and "fake news" are rampart on behalf of all involved parties, which, in our modern, globally connected, world always

means more than just the two main antagonists. While this poses major problems for an objective in-depth academic (or even journalistic) inquiry, it has also spawned an oversaturated genre of fictional war accounts.

The popular collective memories in Russia, the affected regions of fighting, the "West," and the Muslim-majority parts of the world, usually appear to be shaped more by this kind of politicized fiction, than by any approximation of an objective "truth." From a constructivist point of view, these fictional accounts became more real in the collective minds of nations, made up of people who did not experience the war first-hand, than the actual events themselves.

In contrast to the currently ubiquitous concept of "fake news," it is remarkable that said fictional recreations of wars mostly did not have to rely on outright lies. As in most wars, lies of omission are a generic feature, but more often than not, simply putting the focus on certain aspects or setting a scene in a certain way is enough to propagate a partisan standpoint. A very famous example may be drawn upon to expose this mechanism: Sergey Eisenstein's masterwork *Battleship Potemkin* (Mosfilm, 1925). The famous stair scene, renowned for its ground breaking cinematography, did not, in fact, lie about the brutality and inhuman actions of the Tsarist troops. However, it did ignore much of the broader context, deliberately took the focus away from any other controversial aspects of that event, and solely zoomed in on that one factor.

It might be rather obvious to state that it remains a chicken-or-egg question whether fictional accounts shape collective memory or if, vice versa, collective memory itself frames these accounts. Whatever the case may be, fictional accounts possess a non-fictional impact and offer a veritable cornucopia for academic analysis. And they do offer an alternative worth, considering the hard-to-come-by facts that are, as stated above, not only well-kept secrets, but also blurred by and merged with myths and communicative urban legends.

Yet another, more sinister problem bars the gathering and analysis of actual facts when it comes to Russian warfare and conflict management. Actual journalistic groundwork has oftentimes been cut short by the prohibiting twist that the investigative journalists turned up dead. Anna Politkovskaya, who wrote, among other things, the classic account, *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches From Chechnya* (2003), is probably the most famous name in this context. However, her tragic fate is just one among many similar others. Quite recently, circumstantial evidence has overwhelmingly pointed to the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal, which led to a crisis and further deterioration of the relations between the UK/EU and the Russian Federation. The even more-recent, stranger-than-fiction plot about the fake assassination of Arkady Bachenko, who wrote the fictional account *One Soldier's War* (2008) about his time in the Chechen wars, can be added to this notorious list.

Within the following passages, I will deconstruct the artifacts of popular culture framing these wars. Placing the major focus on Russian films, this part of the paper

will offer a concise version of the insights gained from deconstructing the framing and narratives regarding the two wars fought in a region with an overwhelmingly Muslim population that shared the same geographic national parameters with the Russians. To be transparent, it should be stated that this research is connected to my PhD work. Within it, I attempt to reveal political constructions and framing that have been used to influence societal perceptions and thereby, real policy. A potential embedding of this analysis into a broader global political context and other framing - like the Global War on Terror, for example - could even offer possibly generalizable observations, although this would require further research which remains beyond the limits of this paper.

One Nation under History: Framing, Othering and "Saming"

"Cinema is, for us, the most important of all arts," proclaimed the inscription displayed on all movie theaters during Communist rule throughout the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Youngblood, 2007, p. ix). This was evidence that the rulers of that bygone political society acknowledged and understood that movies can be more than simple entertainment and a time for consuming popcorn. To varying degrees of success, they attempted to harness the inherent power of the silver screen and use it to shape and change a mass (sub)consciousness. In some recorded instances, Russian soldiers have been motivated by films (Ежово, 1989, p. 5); in others, films even had the power to alter the recollection of Russian veterans (Galbas, 2018, p. 153). The analytical part of this paper is based on these rather extensive, although preliminary, observations. In the next paragraphs, I will outline and explain the main mechanisms, tools and inner workings of the Chechen war-themed films that I have identified. In order to achieve as broad a perspective as possible, I have viewed, to the best of my knowledge, all movies that have been released about the Chechen wars.

On the most basic level, two main tools to create certain versions of instances of collective remembrance are clearly discernible in any of the relevant fictional reenactments. These are especially distinct in the Russian ones, but on closer inspections just as valid in "Western" popular culture: the embedding in generic master narratives (*framing*) and the contrasting of the respective "ingroup" against the more-or-less-demonized "outgroup" (*othering*). Detailed aspects of these tools change with the (geo-) political historical landscape, but the underlying mechanisms remain unchanged.

Paradigm shifts, like the end of the Cold War or the large-scale terrorist attacks of 9/11, changed the framing into which these conflicts were categorized. In the West, the "freedom fighters" of Afghanistan, became the "terrorists" that the Soviets/Russians had always framed them to be in the first place. In terms of pop-cultural representations of this paradigm shift, the movie *Rambo III* (TriStar Pictures, 1988) ranks among the most distinct examples. In its pre-9/11 VHS release, there is a quote at the end of the movie, right before the credits start to roll, that dedicates it to "to the brave Mujahideen fighters." Later the quote was changed to "the gallant people of Afghanistan." (There is slight controversy regarding this issue: it seems that this alternative quote was also

featured in the original cinema version, which led the Wikipedia article[3] on the movie to controversially conclude that the original VHS quote must have been fake. However, the fan-created "Rambo Wiki," which is dedicated entirely to the franchise, as well as many other sources, acknowledge the existence of the changed title card.[4] Whatever the case may be, even the less controversial quote gained a curious aftertaste due to the change in framing). This shifted perspective also led the "West" to turn a blind eye to the seemingly not as clear-cut war in Chechnya, while the Russian master narrative embedded the proclaimed "anti-terrorist" operation in Chechnya rhetorically into the frame of the global war on terrorism.

Othering is a natural feature of fictional stories and social interactions in general. It basically states the observation that we often define our own identity not only by distinguishable, unique particularities, or own features, but by defining what we are not; demarcating ourselves by features of others that we do not share. The philosophical ideas of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (Hegel, 1807) and sociological notions of Edward Said (Said, 1978) are usually among those credited with defining, or respectively fine-tuning the paradigms of this concept.

Othering is generically used to draw a demarcation line between the "good" protagonists/heroes and the "bad" antagonists/villains in a diegetic world. Of course, fictionalizing real world events is an advantageous tool for political propaganda; and just as obvious, it is a perilous undertaking to boil down the complexities of the real world into these drastically oversimplified dualities. All shades of grey and differentiation are left out of the accounts to promote easy-to-digest versions of the given war, which reinforce the point of view of the ingroup.

To give just one blatantly obvious example of this othering tool in action, a generic feature of Russian films about the Chechen (and to a lesser degree, also Georgian) war(s) can be seen in films like Прорыв (literally *"Breakthrough,"* released in Germany as *War Fighter 2*, Paradise Digital, 2006) and Чистилище (Purgatory, OPT-Видео, AGN Company, 1997). In both films, the Chechen fighters are supported by mercenaries. These paid-support fighters are evidently of U.S.-American origin. However, since "Caucasian" U.S.-American men generally look virtually indistinguishable from Slavic Russians, the actors cast to play these roles are – in virtually all the movies I reviewed that featured them – black. In some variations, like *Марш Бросок* (aka Chechenia Warrior 3, Студия «Новый век», 2003), the origin of these black fighters remains unclear. They might just as well be meant to represent foreign Islamist radicals or mercenaries without any affiliation or ideology (as the characters speak neither in English nor any language at all). In any case, here, a visible othering component is applied that crosses the line of racist depiction. These mercenaries are depicted as unrestrained, aggressive, and prone to defiling corpses and laughing at the suffering of their enemies, while they are solely motivated

3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rambo_III#cite_note-Maslin-11

4. http://rambo.wikia.com/wiki/Rambo_III

by monetary gain and operate beyond any conventional morals.

On the other side of the coin there is a mechanism, which I identified and call "saming." I define the term saming as an intentional evocation of a shared past and cultural identity which aims to promote a hegemonic coexistence under the hegemon's aegis. This is a general mechanism that can be observed as a narration in various conflict scenarios, both in fiction and in fact. In the Chechen war case, it is a narration that tries to establish the idea of one *narod* under Russian hegemony. Saming is about seemingly equalizing two different national, religious or social identities with political intent to appease or devaluate contesting claims of the given targeted group.

Demarcation lines between the (slavic) Russians (i.e. русский as opposed to the more ethnically inclusive Россияне) and the Chechen *narod*s are well known and clearly drawn, at least in cliché. Chechens are often seen as "mountain people," cut off from and indifferent to the outside world, who fiercely resisted russification. At one point or another, most longer publications on the Chechen conflicts cite Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's classic *Gulag Archipelago* (Solzhenitsyn, 1973). In that book the dissident Soviet writer describes how the Chechens were the only people whom the gulag system was unable to break (Solzhenitsyn, 1973, p. 403-405). Their psyche, according to common stereotype, is different from the average Russian. Conscious efforts are made to counter and smooth over all these claims by saming.

Several elements are drawn upon to achieve this special kind of framing. In the specific Russian/Chechen case, a shared past is evoked – such as recalling the fact that Chechens and "ethnic" Russians fought together in the Afghan war during the 1980s, side by side as brothers-in-arms. A dialogue between a Russian commander and Chechen leader in *Марш Бросок* is an example of this observation. In this conversation, they indulge in reminiscing about the bad old days fighting against the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, and the audience learns that the Chechen even saved the Russian commander's life during that bygone war. In the scenes building up to this key moment, the Chechen character repeatedly finds himself in situations where he doubts his side's cause and methods. In the real world, this framing and saming, combined with a policy of "Chechenization," seemed to have more or less worked out as intended. President Akhmad Kadyrov pledged loyalty to the Kremlin, in speeches often personified as Putin. Indeed, even some of the most devoted Chechen fighters against Russia underwent a 180° turning process of saming, and are now, in the words of *Foreign Policy* (FP) magazine, "Russia's best killers" (Galaeotti, 2018).

One of the variations of saming also shares some ground with the category of othering and merges into an amalgam. In one scene from the film *Марш Бросок,* the domestic Sufi elders confront the foreign Wahabis. The two groups have a heated argument in which the older men criticize the newcomers for their ideas and denounce their violence. Concisely paraphrased, the essence of the debate is that the old established village elders express the opinion that living under Russia's rule might not have been a perfect situation, but at least they had stability, a level of prosperity, and peace, while the

imported Wahabism offers only terrorism and war crimes against women and children. Peace, stability and shared history are the ideals most often invoked for the saming in this case.

Another generic element of films produced in Russia about the wars in Chechnya is a clear-cut, post-Soviet phenomenon: the resurgence of Christian imagery. After the atheist repression of the communist regime, religion - what Marx famously called "opium for the people" - was openly reinstituted into the highly esteemed position it had always held (even when hidden) in Russian society. The canon of Christian imagery in post-Soviet films ranges from the depiction of an orthodox funeral (eg: *Марш Бросок*) to the martyrdom - and literal crucifixion - of a Russian soldier. Interestingly, during the early period of Russian (i.e. Soviet) cinema, the depiction of Christian imagery had been quite a common practice. Even the influential *Battleship Potemkin* featured Christian symbolism, like many contemporary films up to the post-war period. Later, this cinematic practice vanished, returning with full force with the ending of the USSR.

Чистилище, a very graphically violent film in general, ends with a finale that reaches almost splatter-movie-like dimensions. Thinly veiled beneath the obvious violence, however, is a not-very-subliminal religious subtext. A Russian tank driver gets captured by Chechen fighters. He literally gets nailed to a wooden cross, which then is erected in a church-like arch. When the Russian commander finally shoots the Chechen leader, the martyr figure on the cross smiles a blood-soaked smile, in a moment evidently intended as visual catharsis. This scene is probably the most extreme example of the resurgence of Christian imagery in Russian war films. In general, less dramatically- obvious ways, however, it has found an integral place in the genre. These other manifestations include symbolic crosses around soldiers' necks and verbal invocations of religion. In certain ways, through the use of these techniques, the entire Chechen conflict is framed almost as a holy war. All this indicates that religion returned as a potent motivator and catalyst for narrating conflict and promoting ideas, values and policy in post-Soviet Russia.

(Re-)introducing this quasi-fundamentalist, less secular vision of religion notably fabricates parallels with the Russian Army's ascribed fundamentalist foe. Interestingly, one result of this is that the cliché self- and foreign identification of both Jihadis and Russian soldiers prominently includes determinism, stoic endurance and martyrdom as key elements of their constructed identity. While these attributes have always been important features for the concept of the Tsarist/Soviet/Russian soldier, they were recharged with the fuel of religious connotation from the middle 1990s onwards.

Conclusion

One observation should be crystal clear at this point: History is often anything but historical. It is not always a passive retrospective on a past timeline, but a world view-shaping narrative and a contextualization of ideology and/or actions. On all main levels of collective memory (official national, popular social communicative, individual and professional historiography), there are instruments to shape, redefine, and conduct

revisionism of the abstract concept of "history." Films touch upon all these levels. They capture the attention of the individual viewer, reach mass audiences, are often instructed by official lines of narration, and serve as sources for academic discourse.

While it is, without question, necessary to continuously revise history, as it is a living organism that needs perpetual attention, the matter becomes problematic when history becomes a henchman for politics and ideology. In a functional democratic society, it is a desirable aim that new revelations, brought on by meticulous, fact-based, myth-debunking historical research, may create ripples or even changes in the collective mind of a society.

Like almost all powerful things, however, this force can be turned into something sinister. Actors can abuse history to push through their own personal agenda. Historical lessons, then, are not deductively learned from historical failures, catastrophes and approximations of some kind of objective truths. Historical lessons are bent to fit the preset needs of those wielding the aforementioned tools and instruments, to reshape a collective state of mind into something suitable to the given cause. Museums, parades, movies, and even the official academic publishing business, all involve considerable amounts of money and political clout. This makes it easier for those inclined to abuse these manifestations to spread their gospel. However, as mentioned before, there is always the alternative form of collective memory, cradled in the more individual social communication of a group.

The versatile American author Harlan Ellison once wrote a potent sentence concerning tenacious childhood memories: "*Is it impossible to realize that those memories are merely the dead, ineffectual past; that they need not chain us*?" (Shatterday, p. 196). This is a position that may seem valid for some constraining instances of collective memory as well. Yet, just as equally valid, there stands the often understandably fortified position of all the pledges to *never forget*. From perspectives of normative morals, reconciliation efforts, peace building, conflict and war research, each of these standpoints has its time(s) and place(s). This, arguably, one should never forget.

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Trade Between Russia and Petro-Monarchies: New Perspectives, New Challenges

Igor Delanoë

Although one could have expected a degradation of relations between Russia and the Gulf monarchies in the context of the Syrian crisis, they have actually expanded the scope of their bilateral agenda since 2015. During the two past years, almost all Arab leaders from the Gulf have paid at least one visit to Moscow, where they promised big investments in Russian economy and participation in Russian energy projects. Overcoming a difficult historical background, Russia and the petro-monarchies have intensified their contacts in the double context of the Syrian conflict and the deflation of oil prices. Their bilateral trade has benefited from this new impetus, despite poor geographical connections and the relative incompatibility of their respective economies, oriented toward energy exports.

Through the analysis of Russian Federal Customs' database, this paper tackles the economic ties between Russia and the Arab petro-monarchies of the Gulf since the end of the 2000s, highlighting the deep trends characterizing their business relations. Understanding the economic dynamics between Russia and the Gulf monarchies requires looking back before the Syrian crisis, since some positive signs had already appeared way before Russia's military campaign in the Levant. Focusing on the commercial balance and the flux of foreign direct investments to and from Russia allows us to better grasp the fluctuation of the Russia-petro-monarchies political-economic agenda. Although substantial progress has been achieved, persisting challenges still hamper the positive development of Russia-Gulf monarchies relations.

Since 2014, Russia's economy has experienced several challenges: brutal deflation of oil prices down to less than $30 per barrel in January 2016, Euro-American sanctions, economic slowdown, etc. In that context, expanding its commercial trade to new partners while enhancing economic cooperation with other countries has been a key objective for Moscow. In the Middle East, the countries belonging to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have particularly attracted Russia's interest. However, Moscow has had to overcome a series of challenges: Russia has had to develop a "business approach" it is not really familiar with. In the Middle East, Moscow previously articulated its policy around axes like Egypt, Syria Iraq, Iran or Yemen. Therefore, it has had to enhance its knowledge of the GCC countries' social, political and economic realities. Moreover, bilateral relations between the Kremlin and Sunni petro-monarchies have historically been thorny. Today, although these relations have expanded, they are still characterized by a poor level of trust.

In addition, broadly speaking, GCC countries still belongs to the Western area of influence. Russia's widening business interest with Middle Eastern states was not born in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis. During the 2000s, Russia had already undertaken

to build up its relations with the region. However, the 2008 economic crisis convinced Moscow that it was in its interest to broaden its economic partnerships, and not rely on trade and financial relations with the Western world. Later, Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012 gave an impetus to Russia's relations with the East (Middle and Far East). Therefore, the 2014 crisis has somehow fostered a dynamic that was already active prior to the Ukrainian crisis, although a few achievements could have been noticed by then. The region fits in with Russia's policy of diversification of export and import markets, on the one hand, while on the other, it can offer some options for Moscow's localization of production policy. Both were initiated in the aftermath of the 2014 crisis, in the context of EU-US sanctions on Russia and the Russian embargo.

In less than four years, Russia has achieved more, politically and economically, with the GCC countries than at any other time in the 2000s. Discussion platforms have been multiplied over the past years: OPEP+ dialogue, the Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum, the Ministerial Strategic Dialogue between the Russian Federation and GCC countries, etc. However, despite noticeable progress in their trade, Russia and GCC countries still face structural challenges which hamper them in critically widening the volume of their commerce: low economic compatibility, poor Russian supply which can hardly meet GCC's demands, lack of connections between the two worlds and others.

Chart 1: Russian foreign trade volume and Russia-Middle East commerce turnover (2008-2017), $US thousands

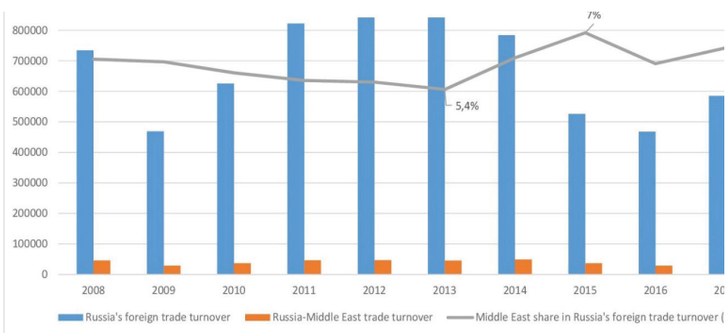

Chart created by the author based on Russian Federal Customs Service database

Since 1995, Russia's trade with Middle Eastern countries[1] has expanded: in 1995, it accounted for 3.9% of the overall Russian foreign trade; it was already 6.6% by 2004; and in 2017, it amounted to $38.7 billion (6.6%).[2] While the Middle East's share in overall Russian trade has increased since 1991, it remains at a modest level. For example, in

1. Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Bahrein, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Yemen, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestinian Authority, Egypt.

2. Russian Federal Customs statistics.

2015, trade between Russia and Germany reached $25 billion, while Russian-Chinese commerce amounted to $64 billion. Under Dmitri Medvedev's tenure, Russia's commerce with the Middle East steadily decreased, reaching its lowest volume for the 2008-2017 period in 2013 (5.3%), when Vladimir Putin was back in the Kremlin. The highest volume of exchange was reached in 2015, when Russia-Middle East trade represented around 7% of Russia's foreign trade. Over the decade of 2008-2017, Russia-Middle East trade has demonstrated its resistance to economic crisis (2008) and geopolitical shocks (Arab Spring, 2011; Syrian crisis) while staying at a modest level.

Russia enjoys a positive trade balance with all Middle Eastern countries, with the exception of Qatar[3] . Yet, Russia's trade remains highly unbalanced since Russian exports (wheat, hydrocarbons, woods, diamonds, meat, etc.) far exceed Russian imports (agricultural products, petrochemical products, manufactured goods, high technologies, textile, etc.) from the region.

Russia's main trade partner in the Middle East is, by far, Turkey. In 2017, Russian-Turkish commerce amounted to $21.6 billion, which represented a 37% growth in comparison with 2016. Moscow and Ankara have continued mending their business ties since the 2015 dispute over Syria. In 2017, they traded roughly as much as in 2015 ($23.4 billion). Russia's second trade partner is Egypt with $6.7 billion of trade volume in 2017, which is 1.5 times more than in 2016. Russian-Egyptian trade crossed a threshold in 2014: while between 2008 and 2013, it had revolved around $2 billion or, at best, $3 billion per year, it reached $5 billion after 2014 and has never dropped below $4 billion per year since then. Dynamic bilateral economic ties illustrate the vitality of the Moscow-Cairo partnership that has been revived since Marshal al-Sissi took office in 2013-2014. Russia's third main trade partner in the Middle East is Israel, with $26 billion of aggregated commerce over 2008-2017 - an average of $2.6 billion per year.

Chart 2: Russian trade balance with GCC Countries (2008-2017), US thousands aggregated

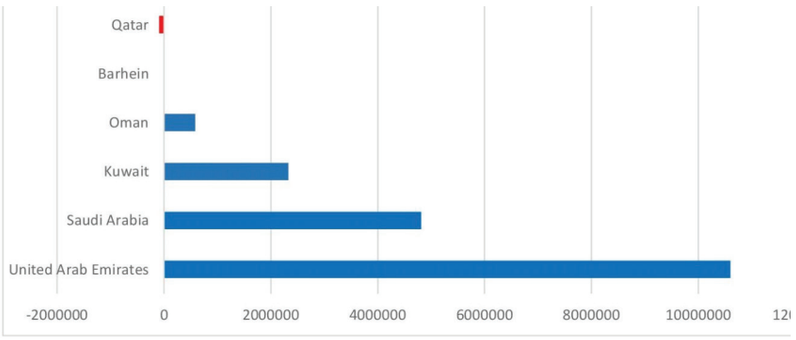

Chart created by the author based on Russian Federal Customs Service database

3. With Bahrein also, but year on year, the trade balance could be positive.

Where does the GCC fit in the picture of Russia's trade with Middle Eastern countries? Russia-GCC trade turnover represents 6.1% of Moscow's commerce with the region for 2008-2017. However, for the same years, the GCC share in Russia's foreign trade turnover was 0.5%. While modest in volume, Russia-GCC commerce increased almost constantly during the 2008-2017 period, from $1.4 billion in 2008 to $3.4 billion in 2017 – a peak for that decade. Over this period, the aggregated volume of commerce between Russia and the Sunni petro-monarchies amounted to $24.8 billion, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) being Moscow's main trade partner among GCC countries. In 2017, Russia and the UAE traded $1.6 billion, 30% more than in 2016. For 2008-2017, the Russian-Emirati commerce turnover amounted to $13.3 billion. On the other hand, Russian-Saudi economic ties remain deeply underdeveloped. In ten years, Moscow and Riyadh traded as much as Moscow and Damascus, respectively $8 billion (Russia-Saudi Arabia) and $8.6 billion (Russia-Syria). Moscow has committed efforts to depoliticizing its economic agenda with Riyadh. The visit of King Salman to Moscow in early October 2017 has yet to give an impetus to Russian-Saudi business.

Chart 3: Russia-Iran and Russia-GCC trade - Converse dynamics

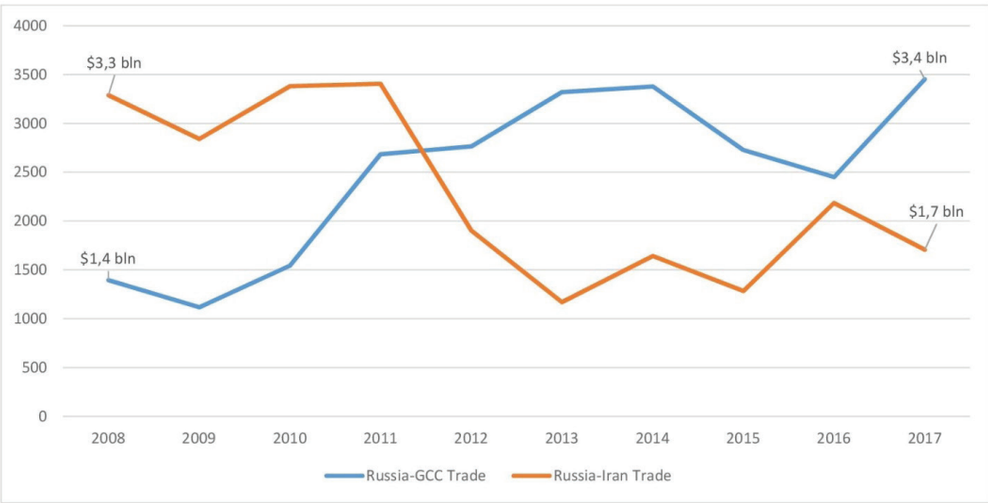

Chart created by the author based on Russian Federal Customs Service database

If we compare Russia-GCC trade on the one hand, and Russia-Iran trade on the other, we can see totally converse dynamics. If the former expanded over the 2008-2017 period, the latter constantly deflated, down to $1.7 billion in 2017 from $3.3 billion in 2008. The incoming US sanctions may give an impetus to Russia-Iran commerce, but they are unlikely to make a tremendous difference since Russian-Iranian trade has been deflating since the end of the 2000s, when Teheran was under international sanctions. The overall Russia-Iran and Russia-GCC trade turnover for 2008-2017 is relatively similar: $24.8 billion and $22.8 billion respectively. In order to foster their bilateral trade, Moscow and Teheran have figured out various options: the creation of a free trade zone between Iran

and the Eurasian Economic Union;[4] the establishment of a north-south corridor with Azerbaijan.[5] Back in 2007, when their commerce amounted to $3 billion, the Russians and Iranians set the objective of $100 billion of trade volume by 2017.

In the context of post-2014 Euro-US sanctions, Russia has sought to attract foreign direct investments (FDI) to bring fresh money to a Russian economy under pressure. Middle Eastern countries in general, and GCC states in particular, have been solicited by Moscow, which has undertaken to privatize some large state energy and defense corporations (Helicopters of Russia; Rosneft) and airports (Pulkovo, in Saint-Petersburg) since 2014. The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) – a federal structure responsible for engaging foreign sovereign funds – has forged partnerships with 25 foreign investment funds, including nine Middle Eastern ones.[6] During the 2015 Saint-Petersburg International Economic Forum, Saudi Arabia committed to invest up to $10 billion in the Russian economy within the next five years. The Emirati fund Mudabala, for its part, committed $7 billion, and DP World, $2 billion.[7] Although modest in volume, GCC FDI in Russia have constantly increased over the past decade, with critical investments recently committed. Qatar, for instance, played an apparently major role in the Rosneft privatization in late 2016, where it reportedly invested $2.5 billion.[8] Earlier, in the summer of 2016, the Qatar Investment Authority bought stakes in the Saint-Petersburg airport.[9] More recently, Rosneft opened a representative office in Doha in late March 2018. In many respects, these financial operations reflect expanding political ties.

In summary, Russian commerce with GCC countries has expanded over the 2008-2017 period, while staying at a modest level in relation to the tremendous economic and financial potential of Sunni petro-monarchies. Although Russia has successfully depoliticized its economic ties with the Gulf petro-monarchies, direct investments remain deeply tied to the political agenda Russia has with each of the GCC countries. In that regard, the UAE turns out to be Moscow's best trade partner among them by far. Growing trade turnover has opened new perspectives for Russia-GCC business. Yet, a glass ceiling seems to prevent Russia and Sunni petro-monarchies from further expanding the scope of their commerce. Poor economic compatibility – both are among the world greatest energy exporters – and GCC demands for high technology products are persistent challenges, while Western influence has been partially alleviated since

4. "Russia Ratifies Interim Deal on Iran-EEU Free Trade Zone", *Financial Tribunes*, November 30, 2018.

5. Yana Zabanova, "Connecting Iran and the South Caucasus: Competing Visions of the North-South Corridor", *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, n° 92, February 2017, p. 7.

6. Qatar Holding, Mudabala (UAE), DP World (UAE), le Public Investment Fund (Saudi Arabia), Kuwait Investment Authority, Mumtalakat (Bahrein), Rönesans Holding (Turkey), Turkiye Wealth Fund Management and the Egyptian Ministry for Investments.

7. Russian Direct Investment Fund website.

8. "Russia Sells $11 Billion Stake in Rosneft to Glencore, Qatar", Bloomberg, December 7, 2016.

9. "Qatar Investment Authority buys stake in Russian airport", Doha News, August 1, 2016.

the beginning of the 2010s. Russia and GCC, however, share the need to diversify their respective economies and to break their dependency on gas and oil exports. This new challenge could pave the way for them to enhance their economic agenda around a new axis of growth and partnership (logistic, ports, ground transportation, etc.).

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Iran and Russia: Moving Toward an Alliance?

Clément Therme

Since the end of the Cold War, Iran and Russia have been increasing their bilateral cooperation in the field of energy, in both the oil, gas and nuclear civil field and the spatial and military sphere. Russia was not the first choice for Iranian policy makers in the 1990s. But faced with the economic consequences of Western containment, Iran put aside its historic rivalry with Russia, and included it in its Asian Triangle policy (*mosallas asiai*) – referring to China, Russia and India. Iran's inclusion of Russia in its Eastern vision is a political choice by Iranian Islamists in general and the Supreme Leader in particular. Indeed, has been a political move, with the main objective of challenging the West. Despite limits in the bilateral partnership, one must recognize the relative success of Iran's Islamists in transforming Russia from a historical enemy into a partner, a task that the communist Tudeh party failed to achieve from the Second World War until its elimination from Iranian politics in 1983.

At a time of growing hostility between Tehran and Washington, what are Iranian policy options in its relations with Russia? According to official Iranian discourse, the Iran-Russia partnership has never been as advanced as it is now, because of their cooperation in the fight against "terrorism" in general and Sunni jihadism in particular. It is indeed remarkable that Iranian-Russian relations have moved from an entente designed mainly to challenge Western-dominated international order in the 2000s toward a regional partnership and military entente in Syria to fight what the Islamic Republic called the "takfiri" groups. This article will shed light on Iranian ability to resist U.S. attempts at disrupting its bilateral cooperation with Moscow, as well as its regional entente. The challenge will be for Iran to limit its dependency on Russian support and avoid becoming a pawn in Moscow's global ambitions.

Dynamics of Russian and Central Asian Relations

Mirzokhid Rakhimov and Saidhon Saidolimov

All of the Central Asian countries consider Russia to be a major foreign policy priority, and recognize its interests in Central Asia. The Russian Federation, in turn, also expresses the importance of developing relations with the countries of the region. However, the relationship between Russia and the Central Asian republics has been affected by challenges and bilateral, multilateral and global factors.

Since 1991, Russian has established diverse ***bilateral*** political and economic relations with Central Asia republics, signing strategic agreements of unity (*soyuznichekie*). Russia is one of the largest investors and economic partners in region: in 2017, Kazakhstan was Russia's greatest trade partner, with 14.4 billion USD. Uzbekistan's newly elected president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has expressed great interest in bilateral cooperation with Moscow. During his visit to Moscow in April 2017, he signed more than 50 bilateral documents worth more than 15 billion USD[1] in the fields of economy, transport, agriculture, industry, military, migration, health, culture and others.

Russia's general policy regarding Central Asia lacks a clear strategy toward the region as a whole, as well as toward individual countries. There are different opinions and views on the Russian approach to Central Asia, ranging from considering them to be normal interstate relations to characterizing them as imperial ambitions. Destabilization in Ukraine, and especially the annexation of Crimea, have raised concern in Central Asia – for instance, regarding the future of Kazakhstan's multi-vectored foreign policy.[2] From 2014 to 2017, due to the economic difficulties in Russia caused by international sanctions and falling oil prices, the escalation of the situation in Ukraine significantly reduced economic indicators in relations between the Central Asian republics and Ukraine. Foreign ministries of all Central Asian states favor solving the Ukraine crisis by peaceful means within the framework of international law.

Russian-Central Asian relations are increasingly stressed by Central Asian migration to Russia, as well as the millions of Russian citizens living as ethnic minorities in the Central Asian Republics. Several publications and speeches mention discrimination against the Russian language in the region, despite the fact that Russian remains the most common language in Central Asia. At the same time, the Central Asian countries bear a complex array of attitudes toward Russia, leading to frequent perturbations in political and economic relations.

1. http://mfa.uz/ru/press/news/2017/04/10625/. (04.07.2017).

2. Frederick Starr, Bulat Sultanov et al., "Looking Forward: Kazakhstan and the United States," *Silk Road Paper*, September (2014): 10.

Over the past decades, Russia has tried to extend its sphere of ***multilateral*** influence in Eurasia. In December 1991, the Central Asian states were among the founding members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) which, besides being a platform for coordinating member countries, is an important tool for Russia to maintain its sphere of interest. Several thousand documents on various economic, military, and political issues were signed at summits of the CIS Council in 2009-2017, most of which only exist on paper. There are also structural limitations within the CIS. For example, its nine member states, including the Central Asian states, signed a free trade zone agreement that cancelled duties, taxes and fees. However, in reality, each country has upheld its respective customs procedures.

In 2011, Vladimir Putin proposed the creation of a "Eurasian Union," and after his reelection in 2012, reformulated Russia's foreign policy. In 2013, it approved the "concept of foreign policy of the Russian Federation," which defined active support of Eurasian economic integration as the main task of Russian foreign policy.[3] The concept aimed to extend and deepen Russian influence in Eurasia. In May 2013, the presidents of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan held a meeting in Astana of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, the main body of the Customs Union.[4] The primary outcome was the decision to initiate the Eurasian Economic Union in January 2015. That year, Armenia and Kyrgyz Republic joined the Eurasian Economic Union, expecting economic support.

Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan and Tajikistan are currently members of Russia's main military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).[5] However, a number of problems have surfaced within the CSTO's operations, and a number of member countries have expressed a variety of opinions and assessments regarding the status and prospects of cooperation. In particular, when Uzbekistan secured its CSTO membership in 2008, it refused to sign a number of CSTO documents, including the prohibition of placing foreign military bases on a member state's territory without the consent of the other member states. This violated the organization's principle of consensus. Uzbekistan also refused to participate in the creation of the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces, and has not signed an agreement on the participation of national military forces in possible conflicts in some of the CSTO member states. As a result, in 2012, Uzbekistan officially announced its withdrawal from the CSTO, but it was suspended by the organization.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, a new stage of geopolitical transformation

3. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, Approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on 12 February 2013. http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D.

4. Customs Union was created in January 2010 by Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan and with aim to create a single customs territory with common boundaries and customs tariffs and in the following years customs were eliminated between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus.

5. CSTO was created on the basis of the Collective Security Treaty signed in May 1992 and includes Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Then he was joined by Azerbaijan, Georgia and Belarus. The Treaty entered into force in 1994, but in 1999, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Georgia have refused his prolongation membership. In 2006, Uzbekistan has restored its membership in the CSTO.

has been taking place in Eurasia, as its main actors increasingly compete with one another. A number of multilateral initiatives with different interests have been initiated in Central Asia: US (NATO, C5+1), Russian and Chinese (CIS, CSTO, EEU, SCO, Silk Road Economic Belt), EU (the strategy toward Central Asia), Japan and South Korea (Central Asia plus Japan, Central Asia – Republic of Korea). In this regard, one of the main factors for providing regional security and stability in Central Asia is the maintenance of a geopolitical balance and the creation of a multi-level system of partnerships with different countries and international organizations.[6]

In 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was founded. It passed through a number of interesting phases in its institutional and political evolution, and at present represents an international instrument to coordinate areas of multilateral cooperation. In June 2017, India and Pakistan were granted membership in SCO - the first time that the organization added new members.

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the creation of the Silk Road Economic Belt, and 2014, the Silk Road Fund (50 billion USD) was established. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB, more than 100 billion USD) was founded in 2016, with the aim of providing investment and financial support for cooperation in infrastructure, resources, industry and the financial sector, as well as other transport communication projects involving various countries along the economic belt in the framework of the "Road and Belt" initiative. Central Asian republics have expressed their support of this mega project, along with republics that were among the cofounders of the Chinese-led AIIB financial institution. In May 2015, during the 70th anniversary of the victory of the Great Patriotic War, President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping signed a partnership agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union and the Chinese initiative Silk Road Economic Belt. In the document, the two sides agreed to set up a dialogue mechanism for its integration.[7] But there is no clear road map for how the two partners will carry out joint activity.

The leading external actors in contemporary Central Asia have declared their support for stability and regional cooperation. But Russia traditionally views the region as being within its sphere of influence, and China has considerably extended its economic presence in the region. While the EU has achieved some progress in the region, it still has limitations. Russia and China on one side, and the US and EU on the other, have a different security institutional approach to Central Asia. Several Central Asian members of Russia lead the military alliance CSTO. At the same time Central Asia participated in

6. See Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The new Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Marlene Laruelle, Sebastien Peyrouse, *Globalizing Central Asia. Geopolitics and the Challenges of Economic Development* (Routledge, 2013); S. Jonboboev, M. Rakhimov, R. Seidelmann (ed.), *Central Asia. Issues, Problems, and Perspectives* (Göttingen: Cuvillier Verlag, 2015); Gulshan Sachdeva, *India in reconnecting Eurasia (*CISS, Washington DC, 2016).

7. Tian Shaohui, ed., "China, Russia agree to integrate Belt initiative with EAEU construction," accessed May 9, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-05/09/c_134222936.htm.

the NATO's Partnership for Peace programs

It should be noted that the Central Asian states voiced their interest in developing mutually beneficial relations with different Asian regions and leading countries like Japan, the Republic of Korea, India, Turkey, Iran and others. Today, the role of India is very important in Central and South Asian cooperation, and India expresses a desire to take part in realization of North-South trade corridor initiative. India has also expressed interest in trade and ensuring energy security. Improvements of Indian-Pakistani, as well as Afghan-Pakistani relations would be an important factor in connecting South and Central Asia. There are challenges, but there is also potential for Central Asia's cooperation with other regions of the world.

In conclusion, the relationship between Russia and the Central Asian republics has faced difficulties due to a number of factors. The Central Asia-Russia partnership, despite differences in positions and assessments, is quite pragmatic in the political, economic, military, educational and cultural fields. The presence of the US, China, EU and other countries in the region is a very important aspect of Russia's policy. There is a range of common challenges that pose a serious threat to regional and international security – such as terrorism and illegal drug trafficking. This is highly relevant for the countries of Central Asia and Russia, through which Afghan heroin is delivered to Europe. In conclusion, Russia need develop a clear, open and long-term strategy in relation to the Central Asian countries, where strengthening cultural aspects and public diplomacy should take place alongside political dialogue.

The Bear is Back:
Russia's New Assertiveness in Southern and Central Asia

Dawood Azami

This paper explores Russia's increasing assertiveness in Southern and Central Asia, with a special focus on the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. The paper analyzes Russia's reappearance in Afghan affairs since the withdrawal of Soviet forces from the country in 1989 and assesses Moscow's unprecedentedly warm relations with its Cold War rival, Pakistan. The paper also examines Moscow's alleged links with the Afghan Taliban and assesses its threat perception vis-à-vis the emergence of the Islamic State's Khorasan branch in South-Central Asia. Drawing on several trips to the region, the paper argues that Russia's increasing forcefulness is linked to wider regional realignments and larger political and strategic developments, including its strained relations with the West and the presence of US/NATO forces in Afghanistan. The paper concludes with a discussion about how the soaring US-Russia tension is becoming more tangible in the region, especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and assesses how the rivalry between the two world powers has complicated an already-precarious security and political situation in Afghanistan and the surrounding region.

Russia's relations with Afghanistan can be divided into four major phases. The first known Russian-Afghan political contact can be traced back to the 15th century, when large part of modern Afghanistan was part of the Timurid dynasty. In early 1760's, a tsarist envoy arrived in Afghanistan with a letter from the tsar to the founder of the modern Afghan (Durrani) Empire, Ahmad Shah Durrani, with the aim of establishing diplomatic relations and expanding trade and cooperation.[1] In modern history, Russia's involvement in Afghan affairs increased significantly in the 19th century, when Imperial Russia and the British Empire were engaged in a geopolitical rivalry over Afghanistan commonly known as "the Great Game." The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and its traumatic experience and withdrawal in 1989 -- commonly called "the Afghan Syndrome"[2] -- comprised Moscow's third and most extensive interaction with Afghanistan. Russia continued its interference in Afghan affairs even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the 1990s factional war, Moscow supported the governing faction in Kabul, which was headed by a former mujahideen leader, Burhanuddin Rabbani. After the emergence of the Taliban in the mid-1990s, Russia became a principal supporter of the anti-Taliban "Northern Alliance" and provided it with logistical, financial

1. Gankovsky, Yu. V, (1958). The Mission of Bogdan Aslanov to Afghanistan in 1764. *Soviet Oriental Studies*, Vol 2, pp.82 - 87.

2. Sarin, Oleg Leonidovich and Dvoretsky, Col. Lev, (1993). *The Afghan Syndrome*: *The Soviet Union's Vietnam*. Novato, CA: Presidio; Braithwaite, Rodric, (2011). *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. London: Profile Books; Coll, Steve, (2004). *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. New York: Penguin Group.

and political support.

The fourth major phase of Russia's engagement in Afghanistan started after the US-led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001. Moscow supported the US/NATO mission in post-Taliban Afghanistan, as it suited Russia's foreign policy goals of tackling the threats of violent extremism and narcotics emanating from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Meanwhile, Russia mostly disengaged itself from the Afghan scene and left the task of Afghanistan's reconstruction and stability to the US and its allies.

Russia's Reappearance and the New "Great Game"

The consensus that existed among regional and global powers regarding the US-led mission in Afghanistan in the early 2000s unravelled in the second decade of US intervention in the country. As the war in Afghanistan intensified, coupled with record high levels of opium production, suspicion and mistrust emerged among key players in the country. Russia also became anxious about the expansion of both militancy and the long-term presence of US/NATO forces in its "backyard."

Meanwhile, the resurgent Taliban and the emergence of the so-called Islamic State (ISIL/ISIS) in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region altered political calculations in several regional powers including Russia, Iran and China. By 2015, the strategic landscape of Afghanistan started to change as regional powers forged links or strengthened their existing ties with the Afghan Taliban, and vied to outdo each other in what is being seen as a new "Great Game."[3]

The US has repeatedly accused Russia of trying to destabilize Afghanistan by supporting the Taliban insurgents financially and even militarily - charges denied by both Russia and the Taliban. Russian officials and politicians have even implied that the US supports ISIS in Afghanistan to destabilize Central Asia and the areas close to its borders as well as China's Xinjiang region – another charge that the US vehemently denies. The intensifying rivalry between the US and Russia, and the wider blame game between the two world powers, come amid what seems to be a "new Cold War."[4]

The Taliban and Russia have a history of animosity spanning several decades. Softening its approach towards the Taliban is a dramatic and somehow unexpected shift for Russia.[5] Russia's recent push for influence in Afghanistan also involves establishing "contacts" with prominent politicians and local strongmen, especially in the north of Afghanistan.[6] Meanwhile, Moscow strives to maintains its "good" relations with the Afghan government

3. Azami, Dawood, (2017). World Powers Jostle in Afghanistan's New 'Great Game'. *BBC*, 12 Jan. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-38582323.

4. Azami, Dawood, (2018). Is Russia Arming the Afghan Taliban? *BBC*, 2 April. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-41842285.

5. Azami, Dawood, (2015). Why Taliban Special Forces are Fighting Islamic State. BBC, 18 December. http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-35123748.

6. *Ibid*. Is Russia Arming the Afghan Taliban? Op. cit

and has helped it in a variety of ways, including giving scholarships to Afghan students and officials.

Regional Realignments

Russia's increasing forcefulness is linked to the larger political and strategic developments and realignments in the region. After decades of hostility, Russia is embracing its Cold War foe, Pakistan. As the rift between Washington and its historical ally, Islamabad, grows over the war in Afghanistan, Russia and Pakistan are building unprecedented military, diplomatic and economic relations. It is a remarkable turnaround from the 1980s, when Pakistan hosted the leadership of the US-backed Afghan mujahideen battling Soviet troops in Afghanistan and helped channel money and weapons to the resistance fighters. Russia and Pakistan were again on opposite sides during the 1990s, when Russia, along with Iran and India, supported the coalition of commanders commonly known as the Northern Alliance, which was fighting against the Pakistan-backed Taliban.

The recent warming in Russia-Pakistan relations has both bilateral and regional aspects. Pakistan, faced with increasing isolation and criticism by the US/NATO because of its reported links with the Afghan Taliban and other extremist groups, is desperate to find another powerful regional ally apart from its "all-weather friend," China. Meanwhile, tensions between the US and Russia have grown over the past few years. Therefore, both countries have found common ground on several issues for moving closer in the face of western pressure and isolation.

Russia and Pakistan signed a defense cooperation agreement in November 2014, aimed at strengthening collaboration in various military fields and sharing experiences. In October 2015, the two countries inked a military-technical cooperation accord, which allows arms trade and cooperation in weapons development.[7] By doing so, Russia lifted its decades-old arms embargo against Pakistan, and agreed to sell Mi-35 combat helicopters and engines for the Pakistani Air Force's JF-17 fighter jets that Pakistan's military assembles on its own soil.[8]

In September 2016, Russian and Pakistani special forces held their first-ever joint military exercises, codenamed "Druzhbha-2016" -- Russian for "friendship" -- in northern Pakistan's Cherat, home of Pakistan's special forces.[9] These were followed by similar exercises in Russia the following year. Later on, the two countries agreed to set up a

7. Pakistan, Russia agree to boost military cooperation. *Dawn*, April 25, 2018. https://www.dawn.com/news/1403729/pakistan-russia-agree-to-boost-military-cooperation.

8. Jorgic, Drazen, (2018). With gas and diplomacy, Russia embraces Cold War foe Pakistan. *Reuters*, March 5. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-russia/with-gas-and-diplomacy-russia-embraces-cold-war-foe-pakistan-idUSKBN1GH27P.

9. Joint exercise with Russia progressing well: ISPR. *Dawn*, September 28, 2016. https://www.dawn.com/news/1286616.

commission for promoting military cooperation.[10]

Ties between Moscow and Islamabad are also linked to strategic and political realignments in the South Asian region. Moscow is irritated by the unprecedented improvement of military-to-military relations between the US and its traditional ally, India, which stood in the Soviet camp during the Cold War era. Relations between Russia and India - Pakistan's neighbor and arch rival - remained close after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with Russia calling India a "strategic partner." Therefore, Russia's warming relations with Pakistan are also seen as a message to India not to fully enter the US orbit.

Central Asia

Russia uses a multidimensional approach to enhance, influence and ensure Moscow's interests in Central Asia. Firstly, Moscow fosters elite ties between Russian and Central Asian officials. Close ties between the respective security, intelligence and military establishments bring Moscow unparalleled influence in Central Asian republics. Secondly, Moscow's military diplomacy, in the form of military assistance and military presence, ensures the existence of a Russian troop contingent in Tajikistan and military bases such as Kant in Kyrgyzstan and Ayni in Tajikistan to support existing regimes, while highlighting Russia's indispensability in the process. Thirdly, co-opting and economic instruments, including large scale investments, are employed by Moscow to remain relevant in Central Asian affairs.[11]

In addition, the emergence of the Islamic State group, which attracted thousands of Central Asian citizens, and increasing drug production and narco-trafficking via Central Asian states and Russia, have combined to create a compelling rationale for increased Russian engagement in Afghanistan and the wider Central Asian region.[12]

These threats also provide the pretext for strengthening inter-service ties, and serve Russia's great-power aspirations. In addition, the "failure" of the Arab Spring, and Russia's effective role in Syria, have further strengthened Russia's position in Central Asia, where local rulers and large segments of the population are wary of political unrest and security threats.

Reasserting Russia

Moscow's international resurgence under President Vladimir Putin has played a key role in its foreign policy. In addition, the relationship between Washington and Moscow

10. Pakistan, Russia Agree to Boost Military Cooperation. *Dawn*, April 25, 2018. https://www.dawn.com/news/1403729/pakistan-russia-agree-to-boost-military-cooperation.

11. Lo, Bobo, (2015). Frontiers New and Old: Russia's Policy in Central Asia. IFRI, p. 16, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ifri_rnv_82_central_asia_bobolo_eng_january_2015_0.pdf

12. Skalamera, Morena, (2017). Russia's Lasting Influence in Central Asia. *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* , **Vol** 59, No. 6, (pp 123-142), December 2017–January 2018. http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/survival/sections/2017-579b/survival--global-politics-and-strategy-december-2017-january-2018-a19c/59-6-10-skalamera-2369.

is icy, and the tension between the two traditional rivals is becoming more tangible in many parts of the world. As seen in Syria, Ukraine and Georgia, Russia is leveraging its power to enhance its influence and protect its political and security interests in Central and South Asia and beyond. Russia considers Central Asia as its "backyard" and is keen to maintain its influence in a region vital for its geopolitical supremacy.

Russia's assertive role in Afghanistan is seen as part of an effort to secure Moscow's interests and ensure a seat for itself at the top of the table in any future arrangement in the country. In addition, the US-Russia blame game over Afghanistan is largely a derivative extension of its tension in other parts of the world, especially Ukraine and Syria. By establishing links with the Taliban, Moscow also seems to be aiming to pressure - and even undermine - the US and NATO. Pakistan, Russia's former adversary, is among several nations, including the Philippines and Qatar, that have been courted by Moscow after falling out with Washington.

All of this comes at a time when US-Russian relations are at a low point and the geopolitical situation is changing fast. The rivalry between the two world powers further complicates the situation in Southern and Central Asia and makes it even harder to achieve peace and stability in this part of the world plagued by decades of war and conflict.

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Iran-Russia Relations: The Burden of Historical Memory

Vladimir Mesamed

Russia and Iran (Persia until 1935) are natural partners, with a history of diplomatic relations going back to 1586. Both countries are important to one another, as time-tested neighbors and as giants surrounded by rather small states.

The countries' relations over the years have been characterized by "periods of activity and decline, of natural mutual attraction of two neighboring peoples, as well as mutual distrust between both sides." This 30-year-old description can also be applied to current relations between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which evolved out of ties with the USSR. The latter "did not bring anything constructive to the Iranians," according to Soviet diplomat L. Vasilyev, who worked in Tehran for many years before fleeing to the West. But this does not necessarily mean that dialogue between Russia and Iran developed consistently. During the Yeltsyn years, there was no comprehensive, holistic approach to actual problems, and Russia's foreign policy was essentially pro-Western. The Iranian component got lost in the shadow of hard-won, pro-Western foreign policy, which essentially prioritized America.

After orientalist E. Primakov replaced A. Kozyrev as head of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, the Near-East policy returned from oblivion, and Iran soon found its place in both the existing economic-trade situation and the gradually-forming political sphere. The nascent anti-NATO direction of Russian foreign policy naturally coincided with the formation of the anti-NATO bloc. The logic of Islamic Iran's foreign-policy activities predetermined its actions in this area, because "the threat of strengthening the Western structure, beginning with NATO, existed for both Iran and Russia." Furthermore, the idea of a Russia-Iran political and military alliance was gradually formed as a doctrine, intended to be a powerful counterweight to NATO. Many outstanding Russian politicians consider that "the chief concern for Russia in the Islamic world is a strategic partnership with Iran."

Strengthening relations with Iran is vital to Russia, because geopolitical tensions among Western Europe, Russia and the USA have worsened in recent years, especially against the background of the Ukrainian crisis and Russia's military action in Syria. It would be reasonable to pay attention to the fact that Russo-Iranian relations are a major factor for stability in a huge region between the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

The leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) consider their state to be a Muslim country with a progressive political regime and a rather developed democracy. In their view, IRI is turning into a regional power that is claiming leadership in the Near East. Several leaders have repeatedly stressed that IRI is not a regional superpower, but rather a global one. Russia has also claimed to be such a power in recent decades. According to statements of Iranian leaders, this status of Russia is recognized by Tehran, which

clearly considers Russia to be one of the chief strategic players on the world stage, with stable positions in leading international structures – most importantly as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. This has led to a rapprochement between the two countries, which Russia considers to be a shift to a strategic kind of relations.

This rapprochement is hindered by the fact that the two countries have substantially different political systems. The lack of common values around which cooperation could be formed is also important. That is why relations between the countries must be restricted to purely pragmatic approaches, and cooperation must rely only on economic interests. However, economic cooperation cannot create the necessary platform for dialogue, due to the defined limits of the cooperation basis in this sphere. That is why reliance on common political interests in the region have become crucial as the basis of cooperation between Iran and Russia.

But even this is insufficient. Historical memory is needed between peoples – a mutual sympathy that is free of accusations on both sides. There is also an urgent need for contact between the peoples in the sphere of the humanities, as well as broad social support. This idea was recently expressed once again by Reza Maleki, cultural counselor of the Iranian Embassy in Moscow, who stressed that broad cultural connections between the two countries will serve as a basis for closer political ties, and that bilateral Iran-Russia relations should not be limited to those of official government authorities.

Positive public opinion on this question has hardly been formed in Russia. It can be assumed that, in light of chiefly negative information on Iran in Russia's national and foreign mass media, a major part of Russian society does not favor this connection, and does not welcome strategic cooperation with Iran. Furthermore, public opinion in Iran does not support the idea of strategic cooperation with Russia. Here, the historical memory of the Iranian people plays an important role, preserving many negative lessons learned from Russia-Iran (Persia) relations. It determines "the level of negative expectations" of cooperation with Russia.

For example, the Russian Empire related negatively to the Treaty of Gulistan (1813) and the Treaty of Turkmanchay (1828), which formalized the annexation of large areas of the Caucasus and Transcaucasia. They are considered "deeply offensive to Iran," responsible for "turning Iran into a Russian vassal." These treaties are often considered in Iran as marking the beginning of the country's political decay, which is why Iran has repeatedly demanded their denunciation. The deputy of the Iranian parliament, N.Gazipur, raised this request in 2013 at the plenary meeting of the Supreme Legislative Body, calling the treaties "shameful and forced."

There is a similar attitude toward other treaties and agreements, such as the Soviet-Iranian Treaty of February 1921, which aimed to establish equitable relations with Iran and strengthen an atmosphere of trust and friendship with the new Soviet Republic. Soon afterwards, it became clear that the goal of the treaty was Russian control over Iranian territory and the installation of a pro-Soviet puppet regime. In July 1920, Iranian

prime minister Moshir od-Doule declared, "The Iranians want to be friends of Russia, but the use of Iran as a springboard for the Bolsheviks in the interest of the world revolution should be resolutely stopped."

This treaty was the first one signed by the Bolsheviks with a Near Eastern country. It was broadly used by the USSR for propaganda purposes, but it irritates the Iranians in several ways. According to M. Volodarsky, it "nullifies all noble gestures of the Bolsheviks, which were abundant in the treaty." There was also strong Iranian opposition to the Soviet-Iranian Treaty on Mutual Trade, which ended on October 20, 1927. As A.Ansari, then chief of Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated, the treaty was incompatible with "the principles of free trade accepted in the rest of the world," because of the net trade and the monopoly on foreign trade in the USSR.

Bilateral relations between the two countries were challenged yet again when Soviet troops were stationed in Iran from 1941 to 1946. It is well known that Germany widely used parts of Iran for organizing reconnaissance missions and subversive activities, because Iran shared borders with parts of the southern USSR. In return, Nazi Germany granted Iran a privileged place in the implementation of its plans for the USSR and the Near East. That is why the idea of a combined military operation of the USSR and Great Britain in Iran, proposed by then-prime minister of Great Britain, Winston Churchill, was activated. In August 1941, the USSR deployed troops to the territory of Iran, and British troops were simultaneously deployed to the south of the country. Moreover, the danger that Turkey could also be dragged into the conflict led to the deployment of two Soviet armies on its borders. Stalin had plans for annexing the Iranian Azerbaijan region and other areas of Iran. There was an economic reason: Stalin planned to take control over the oil production in Iran. The deployment area of Soviet troops included the Caspian Sea provinces, Iranian Azerbaijan and the Khorasan province, while the rest of the country became the zone of British troop deployment.

In January 1942, the Trilateral Union Treaty was signed by the USSR, Great Britain and Iran, defining the political and legislative basis of relations between these countries during wartime. It stated, among other things, that the deployment of military troops of the other two countries on Iranian territory should not be considered occupation, but rather a means for joining the efforts of all three countries in the struggle against Hitler's Nazism. It was decided that the troops of the USSR and Great Britain should leave the territory over six months after the end of the war. The allies pledged "to respect the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and political independence of Iran." The deployment of troops to the area of northern Iran in 1941 was accomplished in accordance with Article 6 of the 1921 treaty mentioned above. This article urges withdrawal of the army from Iran, "as soon as the causes of its placement are eliminated."

But, in fact, things did not take place this way. Extensive efforts were required to finally achieve the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1946. Moscow had no desire to leave the territory of Iran, with the assumption that the presence of Soviet troops could promote communist ideology and Iran's transition into the group of "friendly countries."

The USSR cherished the hope that its military presence in Iran would help place in power a government which would choose the "socialist development path" and enter the orbit of Soviet political influence. The presence of Soviet troops in Northern Iran indeed contributed to the rise of national-democratic movements in Iranian Azerbaijan and adjacent parts of Iranian Kurdistan. During the presence of Soviet troops in Iran in the autumn of 1945, the Democratic party of Azerbaijan (DPA) was created, with substantial influence and strength from Soviet army support. Along with the pro-Soviet Tudeh ("Masses" in Persian) party formed in 1941, the DPA promoted the organization of a national Azerbaijani parliament, and even established its own armed forces with support from the USSR. Parties with communist orientation obtained broad financial aid from the Soviet military command, and the northern region itself gradually became a territory under absolute power of the military administration.

The Soviet embassy in Iran made huge investments in various kinds of propaganda and the installation of libraries and exhibitions. Even a special radio station was launched, broadcasting in Persian and publicizing the successes of the USSR and the socialist lifestyle. In 1944, the Tudeh party received eight of the 120 seats in the Iranian *majlis*. Soon after this, it published a declaration demanding broad administrative and cultural autonomy for Azerbaijan within the framework of the Iranian state. In August 1945, Tudeh took practical steps toward fulfilling its plans for Iranian Azerbaijan's autonomy.

The presence of Soviet troops in the city prevented the Iranian army from wiping out the autonomists. By November, they had seized the whole region. These events culminated in the establishment of a regional government in Iranian Azerbaijan. On December 12, 1945, with the support of Soviet troops, the National Azerbaijani Parliament proclaimed the establishment of the Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan in Iran. Its leader was Iranian communist Sayyed Ja'far Pishevari, who had lived for many years in the USSR. A People's Army and police force were formed, equipped with assistance from Soviet troops.

Iran considered the help of the USSR in founding this autonomous structure to be a flagrant interference in its internal affairs, and filed a complaint at the UN. Demands to withdraw Soviet troops increased simultaneously. In December 1945, a conference of foreign affairs ministers from the three Great Powers was convened to address this problem, but a decision about the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iran was not taken. Soon after that, the UN Security Council decided that this problem must be solved by direct negotiations between the two countries. The newly-formed, pro-Soviet administration of Azerbaijani autonomy immediately began to carry out broad socio-political changes. Similar dynamic developments occurred during this period in the northern part of Iranian Kurdistan, where the Republic of Mahabad was founded, headed by Qazi Muhammad Said. The two republics signed a partnership agreement, and the central authority headed by Ahmad Qavam was forced to recognize the governments of the regional republics of Iranian Azerbaijan and Northern Kurdistan. Agreements concerning the recognition of the national *majlises* were signed as well.

The Soviet troops left Iran on May 9, 1946. The USSR claimed victory, because it succeeded in creating two pro-Soviet autonomous republics considered by Soviet leaders to be viable states, as well as in signing the contract for Iranian oil production. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iran in October 1947, the Iranian *majlis* cancelled the Soviet Iranian oil agreement because it contradicted adopted laws prohibiting petroleum possession and control to foreign countries.

In addition to these bitter experiences in the Soviet past, there have been more recent setbacks in foreign relations. One of the most painful was an agreement about the delivery of Russian S-300 air-defense missile systems to Iran. In December 2007, it was abolished by then-RF president D. Medvedev, sparking an acute crisis in mutual relations. Growing discontent among the Iranian religious elite is also taking place as a result of Russia's dominant role in the Syrian conflict, which contradicts the Iranian principle of regional policy that has no place for "strangers." This can explain the anti-Russian nature of demonstrations in Tehran following the death of ex-President Hashemi-Rafsanjani.

One of the finishing touches in the formation of Russia-Iran relations was manifest in a Russian Foreign Ministry statement of April 6, 2017, which surprisingly declared Moscow's view on the problem of Jerusalem. According to this document, western Jerusalem must be recognized as the capital of Jerusalem, whereas eastern Jerusalem should become the capital of a future independent Palestinian state. Relating to this, the Iranian internet site Tasnim published a comment on April 14 stating that such benefits to Israel from Russia were aimed at increasing Russia's influence in the Near Eastern geopolitical space. "We are not surprised that Russia acted this way, because this has always been the essence of Kremlin policy. This action places it one step ahead of the USA, whose president, D.Trump, has promised to move his embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem, but is still unable to fulfill this."

A. Vatankhah claims that the Syrian conflict has created a situation in which doors of the Middle East are open for Russia. But it is unlikely that Russia will be able to continue playing this role in the long run. Despite the fact that Irano-Russian relations encompass a huge number of contracts and agreements signed between the countries, they are tactical rather than strategic in nature.

Thus, the process of shifting dialogue into a strategic framework has been hindered by several factors. These include many events in the recent history of Iran and Russia, as well as a negative setting fed by historical memory. In this context, it would be difficult to expect real strategic cooperation supported by public opinion on both sides.

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