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Moonwalking in Syria

Doyle McManus

December 15, 2013 -- Here's how feeble U.S. influence on the outcome of Syria's dreadful civil war has become: For the Obama administration's diplomacy to succeed, it now needs help from an armed group with the unpromising name of the Islamic Front.

That wasn't where the administration hoped to be. When President Obama first got interested in Syria back in 2011, his hope was that a popular

uprising just needed a little moral support from the outside world to topple the brutal regime of Bashar Assad. When that didn't work, Obama offered modest, mostly non-military aid to moderate groups in the Syrian opposition, enough to raise their hopes but not enough to ensure success on the battlefield. And when Assad used chemical weapons against civilian neighborhoods, Obama threatened military action — only to back off, again dashing the hopes of pro-U.S. factions in the opposition. Meanwhile, other forces were competing for influence in the Syrian snake pit, too. Al Qaeda and its allies sponsored jihadist groups that imported aspiring terrorists from Iraq and other countries. Saudi Arabia and other wealthy Persian Gulf countries also funded armed factions. The United States, worried about weapons falling into the wrong hands, moved cautiously; the Saudis and others were quicker and more generous. Many young rebels, following the money (and, more important, the weapons), voted with their feet and joined the Islamic Front. And that brings us to the situation in Syria today: a civil war among four main factions, in which the group supported by the United States, the Free Syrian Army of Gen. Salim Idriss, appears to be the weakest. Last weekend, the headquarters and main warehouse of the FSA were overrun by troops of the Saudi-funded Islamic Front. The attackers made off with much of the U.S.-supplied equipment there, including trucks and food rations (but not weapons, officials say). One spokesman for the FSA told reporters that Idriss' forces surrendered amicably because they weren't strong enough to defend the facility against a threatened attack by more radical jihadists. No matter how friendly the transaction, that wasn't a good sign. The dust-up had the effect of both embarrassing Idriss, who spent much of the week denying that he had fled the country, and confirming the most important new fact on the ground: The strongest player in the opposition now is the Islamic Front, a loose alliance of seven factions that wants Syrians to live under Sunni Muslim law. "They're Salafists but not extremists," explains Andrew J. Tabler, a Syria expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. What that means is that although members of the front want a government dominated by devout Sunnis, and they probably aren't reliable pluralist democrats, they're at least not Al Qaeda-style terrorists. That's why U.S. diplomats have been trying to persuade the Islamic Front to join — or at least endorse — the peace conference that's scheduled to begin in the Swiss city of

Montreux next month. The top U.S. negotiator on Syria, Ambassador Robert Ford, met in Turkey recently with representatives of the most important faction in the Islamic Front, sources told me. But the outcome of the talks isn't clear, and in previous statements, the Islamic Front's leaders have said they will not participate in any talks that include the Assad regime.

In fact, the Assad regime is the only faction in the four-way conflict that has clearly committed to attend the talks, which Secretary of State John F. Kerry has been laboring to organize for more than a year. Even the U.S.-backed civilian groups in Syria's opposition haven't confirmed that they are coming. But the United States and Russia will be there, along with as many as 30 other countries, possibly including Iran. The one thing the peace conference isn't expected to accomplish is its main goal: to set up a transition government for Syria — one that, in the eyes of the Obama administration, cannot be headed by Assad. Assad and his main backer, Russia, have chosen to ignore that demand.

Instead, officials say, the conference will attempt to launch direct negotiations among Syrian factions, initially on lesser issues — local cease-fires, humanitarian aid — leading, eventually, to talks on what a future government could be. Meanwhile, though, the civil war will continue, and the Obama administration will face the same unappetizing choices it does now about whether to continue supplying aid to Syrian rebels and, if so, how much and to whom.

The administration could change course and decide that living with Assad is better than the danger of a fragmented Syria overrun by Al Qaeda-backed jihadists. (Former CIA Director Michael Hayden endorsed that option last week, telling a Washington audience that it might be "the best ... [of the] very ugly possible outcomes.") But that would mean a straightforward admission of defeat.

Or the administration could continue what it's doing now: trying to resuscitate Idriss' Free Syrian Army, seeking a rapprochement with the Islamic Front and working to keep diplomatic talks alive.

Frederic C. Hof of the Atlantic Council, another Syria expert, calls that "the moonwalk option" — the illusion of forward motion while standing in place — and it's the most likely outcome. It won't end the agony of Syria's people or eliminate the danger of jihadist mini-armies. But it will minimize

the immediate risk of U.S. military entanglement — and that, like it or not, has been Obama's first priority all along.

[Article 2](#)

Agence Global

Is John Kerry Serious?

Rami G. Khouri

14 Dec 2013 -- BEIRUT—We seem to have entered that inevitable moment that we all knew was coming one day, when the United States would stop trying to be a low-key and totally ineffective mediator between Israelis and Palestinians, and instead play a more decisive role by offering its own proposals on a permanent peace agreement. Press reports on the reported American approach of proposing a framework agreement offer a range of expectations. Most of them are depressing from the Palestinian perspective, because the American government still sees Israeli security, rather than mutual and equal national sovereignty and rights, as the center-piece of its proposals.

The few leaks available also seem to continue the American official tradition of paying much more attention to core Israeli needs than to Palestinian ones—like demanding some form of clear Arab recognition of the Jewish nature of the Israeli state, rather than demanding any level of Israeli recognition of the crimes committed against Palestinians in 1947-48 that created the Palestinian refugee condition in the first place.

Nevertheless, we should withhold judgment and wait until the Americans put their ideas on the table, when we can then assess matters on the basis of facts, rather than leaks and rumors.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's intense pursuit of this issue—this is his tenth visit to the region since assuming office—reflects a deeper motivation that is both striking and somewhat unclear. The best explanation on Kerry's energy on this issue that I have heard from Americans close to the Obama administration is that the persistence of the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts in their present form has become a strategic liability for the United States in the region, because public opinion in the Middle East sees the U.S. as heavily favoring Israel and its colonization of Palestine, rather than being an impartial mediator.

This hurts the United States in the region in many ways, including in security realms.

This point also has been made in public by senior American military officials. So the United States is wise to make substantive changes in the two areas that matter most in this respect: Arab-Israeli issues and relations with Iran (the third area, which is American support for Arab autocrats and dictators, has been taken in hand by Arab citizens themselves who have given up on any American or European moves in this respect).

What should we look for to find out if the United States is more serious than it was in previous decades about brokering a just and permanent Israeli-Palestinian peace accord? I would suggest five markers:

1. Legitimacy: Does the proposed American framework agreement address the core issues that matter to both sides, or only the superficial or temporary issues that are needed to avert renewed short-term violence by both sides? Legitimacy requires addressing the issues that matter to the protagonists, which was not done sufficiently in the past.
2. Legality: Does the proposed American framework reflect and respect existing international law, global conventions, and UN Security Council resolutions? Is it anchored in legal dictates that are globally respected, or only in regional balance-of-power equations or the bizarre domestic policy flows in the United States?
3. Equality: Does the proposed American framework give equal weight to the rights, demands and aspirations of Israelis and Palestinians alike? Or does it favor the needs of one side over the other? The United States historically has paid much more attention to Israeli security than to Palestinian national integrity and sovereignty, and a repeat of this approach would only result in renewed failures.
4. Compassion: Does the proposed American framework understand and touch the inner human sentiments of both Israelis and Palestinians? Does it really grasp the Israeli need and right to live in peace and be accepted as a normal and legitimate country in the region, and the Palestinian need to end refugeehood and reconstitute a national community that enjoys both integrity and sovereignty? Does Washington feel the pain and humanity of both sides?
5. Hearts, Stomachs and Security: Does the proposed American framework give equal weight to the three arenas where a lasting and just peace accord

must make a credible mark in order to succeed? These are “hearts” (what it means deep inside to be an Israeli or a Palestinian, see point 4 above); “stomachs” (socio-economic development, opportunity, and prosperity, including tens of billions of dollars in new gains for both sides); and, “security”, the verifiable certitude that your kids can go to school and return home without being bombed, colonized, shot, expelled, placed under siege, or imprisoned, as has happened to both sides.

A genuine peace cannot be bought with money, forced with security guarantees, or achieved with feel-good happy talk of coexistence. It requires all three to converge, which has never happened in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, which is why we are here again still trying to make this happen today.

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[Article 3.](#)

Project-Syndicate

Middle East Frenemies

Bernard Haykel & Daniel Kurtzer

Dec 13, 2013 -- Princeton – The recent interim nuclear agreement between Iran and the so-called P5+1 countries, led by the United States, has provoked unprecedented criticism of US policy from two of its strongest Middle East allies: Israel and Saudi Arabia. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has called on his ministers and his supporters in the US to lobby Congress to oppose the agreement. Meanwhile, Saudi officials have accused the US of selling out its allies for little security in return. The apparent coincidence of Israeli and Saudi interests over Iran has fueled media reports that the two countries are coordinating strategies to confront the Islamic Republic. Some suggest that Saudi Arabia will open its air space to assist an Israeli attack. Although such coordination would undoubtedly be covert, and would not prevent Riyadh from subsequently

criticizing Israel's military action, it would serve both countries' national interests. It has long been an open secret that Saudi and Israeli officials talk regularly and probably share intelligence. But their concerns about Iran are far from identical, and their scope to depart from US policy varies widely. Joint Israeli-Saudi diplomatic and military coordination makes for good news copy, but it is probably fiction. Israelis are primarily concerned about Iran's nuclear ambitions. Unlike Iran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and other forms of terrorism, which Israel can manage, the nuclear question represents an existential threat. If diplomacy had succeeded in ending Iran's nuclear-weapons program, Iran would no longer be the main focus of Israel's foreign policy. Saudi anxieties about Iran, however, go deeper and are more complex. At their heart is Iran's interference in internal Arab affairs, particularly in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Bahrain. Although Iranian-Saudi enmity dates back many decades, it became acute after the 1979 Islamic Revolution when Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, began to spread his revolutionary brand of Shia Islam across the region.

The impact was not immediately evident. Iran's war with Iraq in the 1980's, and the low price of oil throughout the 1990's, kept the Islamic Republic weak. This changed during the following decade, as Iran supported Hezbollah's rise in Lebanon and came to dominate Iraqi politics after the Shia majority there came to power in the wake of the US-led invasion. In 2006, Iran managed to draw the Palestinian movement Hamas away from the Saudi sphere of influence and into the embrace of its ally, Syria. Hezbollah's successful resistance during a month-long war with Israel that year invigorated Iran's so-called "axis of resistance." At the same time, high oil prices boosted Iran's ability to bankroll its new proxies. This dramatic reconfiguration of the regional balance of power has been particularly worrying for the Gulf states. As well as their differing concerns about Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia also have profoundly different relationships with the US, which define their scope to act in the short and long term. Israel's political, cultural, and religious connections with the US are strong, and America is the country's only reliable and constant ally. But Israel has long been able to act independently on critical security issues, without seriously damaging the bilateral relationship. Indeed, the relationship would almost certainly survive even if Israel, contrary to US

advice, were to attack Iran. Saudi Arabia's relationship with the US is more superficial. The Kingdom relies on the US military for protection, without which it would be unable to resist an attack by Iran. In return, the Saudis use their massive oil reserves and spare capacity to ensure world oil supplies and stable prices. Unlike Israel, Saudi Arabia has little influence in US domestic politics, beyond the support of a few oilmen and arms manufacturers. The Saudi royals do not even enjoy the warm personal relationship with President Barack Obama that they once had with Presidents George Bush (both father and son) and Bill Clinton, who managed bilateral relations directly.

Perhaps the most significant factor limiting the prospects for Saudi-Israeli cooperation is the general attitude of the Arab world, including the Kingdom itself, to the Jewish state in its midst. Israeli use of Saudi air space, for example, would not remain a secret for long, forcing Saudi rulers to contend with a massive, popular anti-Zionist backlash at home and across the Arab world. While Israel might countenance some official Saudi criticism as the price of its support, Arab public opinion might not be so easily mollified, especially in the absence of progress on the Palestinian issue. Ultimately, the Saudis would be seen as collaborating with the more hated adversary against a Muslim state (albeit also an enemy).

Just as neither Saudis nor Israelis are likely to downgrade their relations with the US, they are even less likely to embrace each other. But this should not make the US complacent about the deep disaffection of either ally. Their disagreements – not only on Iran, but also on Syria and the Palestinian question – seriously diminish American influence in the region.

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[Article 4.](#)

Today's Zaman

Kurdistan: another state in the making in the Middle East?

Robert Olson

2013-12-11 -- That yet another state is in the making in the Middle East is enough to make the people's of the Middle East, let alone Americans and Europeans', heads swim. But this is a real possibility in the next decade. The state will be called Kurdistan. I had the privilege of attending and speaking at an international conference on this very topic held in Beirut, Lebanon, from Nov. 27-30.

The conference was attended by 45 scholars of Middle Eastern and Kurdish studies from the United States, Europe and the Middle East. The consensus of the conferees was that the possibility of the emergence of a Kurdish state in the Middle East is feasible in the near future. The appearance of such a state would be only the second state -- the first being Israel in 1948 -- to be created in the Middle East since the end of World War II.

Given the geopolitical ramifications of the creation of Israel and its global repercussions, it is surprising and unanticipated that another state with even more geopolitical significance could emerge in the Middle East.

But this is what is happening.

There are several reasons why the emergence of a Kurdish state is important. The first is that unlike other developments in the Middle East -- such as in Iran, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, which involve only two states or two non-state actors, such as the Arab-Israel conflict, the division of Iraq into Arab and Kurdish sections and the fragmentation of Syria into Arab (Sunni) and Shi'a (Alawite) and Kurdish regions -- the emergence of a Kurdistan affects four countries: Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran.

There are an estimated 33 million Kurds in the above four countries: 16 million in Turkey, 8 million in Iran; 6.5 million in (northern) Iraq and 2.5 million in Syria. Kurds live and work all over these four countries.

However, the bulk of them, an estimated 20 million, comprise contiguous geographical regions in Southeast Turkey, northwestern Iran, northern Iran and northeastern Syria.

The Kurdish nationalist movements in all four of these countries, which had existed since World War I, were defeated by brutal and oppressive actions on the part of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, all of which have had largely dictatorial and authoritarian regimes and governments since World War I. This gave rise to what historians who study the developments call “the Kurdish question,” i.e., how these governments control and manage the challenges of Kurdish nationalist movements in their respective countries.

The management of Kurdish nationalist challenges was dealt with by brutal force, including air power and extensive bombing campaigns, and by cooperative security agreements among all four states.

Intervention by dominant world powers

It was often stated by scholars of Kurdish history that it would only be with the intervention of one or more of the dominant world powers aiding the Kurds that they would be able to achieve political autonomy and/or independence within their respective states.

The above seemed unlikely to happen until the US war against Iraq in 1991 resulted in the US and allied powers creating a safe haven for the Kurds in northern Iraq. The Kurds of Iraq managed to hold on to this “safe haven” until the second US war against Iraq in 2003. The Kurds of Iraq had the foresight to align with the US forces that occupied Iraq from 2003 until December 2011, by which time they had achieved quasi-independent status within Iraq. Since 2003, the Kurds of Iraq, with pressure from the US, have decided to remain within Iraq, at least for the time being.

But the Kurdish success of achieving political autonomy within Iraq has spurred the nationalist Kurds of Turkey to also demand political autonomy in the southeastern and eastern regions of Turkey that they dominate. They are engaged in low-profile armed conflict with the Turkish government in order to achieve this goal via armed might or negotiations.

As a result of the civil war in Syria, some of the nationalist Kurds there, especially in northeastern Syria, have declared that they will seek autonomy in the regions they control. This means that two Kurdish nationalist groups -- in Iraq and Syria -- have declared and exercise autonomy in large geographical regions they control militarily. The Kurds of Turkey are attempting to achieve the same autonomy via negotiations. If they succeed, this means that two Kurdish entities -- in Iraq and Syria --

will have achieved autonomy, a third -- in Turkey -- is on the way to doing so and a fourth -- in Iraq -- is abiding a propitious time to further develop its autonomous status.

These developments suggest that a viable independent Kurdish state, although not comprising all Kurds, may well be established in the next decade.

Ahmet Türk, head of the Kurdish Democratic Congress (KTK), has used the term “Kürt coğrafyası” (Kurdish geography) to emphasize that the heavily populated Kurdish regions of Turkey east of the Euphrates River are indeed parts of Kurdish geography and it is this region in which many of the depredations and atrocities committed by the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) and Ergenekon were carried out.

Since Türk began to use the term extensively in 2009, its usage has continued to increase in frequency, not just among Kurds but among Turks as well, including Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who also used the term “Kurdistan” in a speech he made on Nov. 16 in Diyarbakır with Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Massoud Barzani at this side. Subsequently, Diyarbakır Mayor Osman Baydemir has also begun to use the term publicly.

But even before this, it was not just members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) or Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) or BDP officials who were using the terms “Kurdistan” and “Kürt coğrafyası.” Galip Ensarioğlu, himself a Kurd, a member of Diyarbakır's business class and a mayoral candidate on the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) ticket, also stated on Dec. 3 that he “would not hesitate to call every territory where Kurds live ‘Kurdistan.’ I myself am Kurdish as well, and I live there.”

Use of the term “Kürt coğrafyası” is telling in that it is much more inclusive than the terms “sovereignty,” “autonomy,” “political autonomy,” “homeland,” etc. All of these terms have a degree of imaginativeness about them, implying that the Kurds are a kind of imagined community. But the term “Kürt coğrafyası” expresses a definite and defined sense of place and geographical reality.

The Kurdish nationalist movements in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran will continue to confront the vicissitudes of opposition in the coming years, but

it now seems certain that the reality of solidarity expressed in the term “Kürt coğrafyası” will remain.

Robert Olson is a Middle East analyst and author of “The Kurdish Nationalist Movements in Turkey: 1980-2011.”

[Article 5.](#)

The American Interest

Russia’s Return to the Middle East

[Michael Weiss](#)

December 13, 2013 -- Russia is back. At least that’s what they say—especially the Russians. 2013 marks the year that the Kremlin reasserted its power abroad in ways not seen since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and nowhere has this reassertion been more obvious than in the Middle East. From Syria to Egypt to Iran to Israel, Moscow is now seen to be moving in on America’s turf, usurping the only superpower’s traditional role as safeguard of a region that, whether or not it cares to admit it, has always looked to the United States to solve its problems. But now a new patron has arrived in the neighborhood with the offer of advanced weaponry and a cold disregard for how dictatorial regimes choose to conduct their “internal” affairs. Unlike Washington, this patron has shown a willingness to stand by its friends in extremity and is more than happy to wage diplomatic war with the West if those friends’ survival is ever called into question. Russia’s restoration in the Middle East has been built upon America’s abdication.

Without a doubt, the crowning ceremony was the Kremlin’s deft ownership of international diplomacy on the 18-month crisis in Syria, one that has so far killed more than 120,000 people, including by the repeated use of chemical weapons, and yet has remarkably culminated in the re-legitimization of the person responsible for it, Bashar al-Assad. The Syrian civil war—particularly the White House’s inept and improvisational response to it—has accidentally transformed Putin into a major power-broker for the post-Arab Spring Middle East. (This is no small feat considering that Sunni Muslim antipathy toward Russia is at a record high

because of Syria.) It has turned Moscow into the new hub for geopolitical influencing in the region, the world capital where the Egyptian general staff, the Saudi intelligence chief, the Israeli prime minister and even now the U.S.-backed Syrian opposition all feel they must pay call in order to get things done. And while it's true that Russia hasn't the GDP, military reach, or reputation to completely hobble U.S. influence in the Middle East, it doesn't need to do that to pose a threat to U.S. interests. Putin's objective is to offer himself as a steady alternative to a fickle Obama: a partner in arms deals and Security Council obstruction who won't run away or downgrade a relationship over such trivia as human rights, mass murder or coups d'état. Putin has apologized for and facilitated the worst humanitarian catastrophe of the 21st century under the guise of international law and a respect for state sovereignty. This is an invaluable friend for a dictator to have in his corner.

An old anecdote has it that in the dying days of Communism, a senior Syrian official was found wandering the halls of the Kremlin saying, "We regret the Soviet collapse more than the Russians do." The Syrian-Russian relationship was always rather complicated, full of mutual suspicion and attempts by Moscow to impose an ideology that Hafez al-Assad didn't much care for, in exchange for military and intelligence assistance that Syria couldn't do without. But Damascus isn't just a resurrected strategic ally following years of desuetude under the Yeltsin government; it is Putin's last-stand client in the region against what he sees as American hegemony. The Cheka's old hold on Damascus looms large in Putin's imagination, as does the precipitous collapse of Moscow Centre's influence abroad. In interviews, he often recalls how, as a young KGB officer, he was stranded in Dresden when the Wall came down and Germans tried to storm the KGB rezidentura. "Moscow [was] silent" was his ashen-faced pronouncement on that occasion. Putin then famously "joked" upon assuming the presidency in 2000 that the security organs had now seized control of the government. Moscow won't be silent again. Syria has amplified its voice.

It has also given Putin the joy of watching as Assad's many enemies come begging and scraping before a Kremlin they see as a rising new custodian of regional stability. Assad's many enemies come begging and scraping before a Kremlin they see as a rising new custodian of regional stability.

Before the Saudi government decided to vent its anger with the Obama Administration's Syria policy by issuing statements in the Western press and by refusing to join the United Nations Security Council as a rotating member (after two years of lobbying vigorously for the post), Riyadh tried an alternative method of advancing its interests in the Levant. It dispatched its intelligence chief and former U.S. bosom buddy Prince Bandar bin Sultan to Moscow in early August, weeks before the August 21 sarin gas attacks on Ghouta, to negotiate with the one actor who might bring the Syria crisis to an expeditious and satisfactory close. Bandar allegedly offered a \$15 billion arms purchase of Russian weaponry, plus assurances that the Gulf states wouldn't interfere in Russia's energy dominance in Europe, in exchange for the guarantee that the Kremlin wouldn't block future Security Council resolutions on Syria. The Kremlin refused, but the details of the offer were leaked to the press by Middle Eastern and Western sources, and then subsequently denied by the Russian Foreign Ministry. It must have been the happiest denial the ministry has issued in years. Not only did Prince Bandar's abortive brokerage furnish additional proof that Putin sticks by his clients even when offered Dane geld to abandon them, but it also helped isolate and embarrass Syria's main antagonist in the Gulf, which happens to be one of America's most powerful and seriously pissed-off allies. A fine double play without expending much energy.

Putin's next step was then to directly humiliate the United States.

September 11 marks the day of the worst attack on American soil since the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Putin was once known as the first world leader to ring up George W. Bush and offer his condolences and support on that grim occasion. But 12 years on, the Russian president used the anniversary of 9/11 to issue indirect threats against U.S. national security, rub Washington's nose in its foreign policy failures, and remind Americans that there isn't anything really "exceptional" about their country at all in the emerging new world order. He did this with a troika of passive-aggressive moves.

First, via the Ketchum public relations company, Putin published an op-ed in the New York Times—it went live on the newspaper's website on September 11—in which he cautioned against getting involved in Syria. He cited recent U.S. experiences in Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan as proof that it should sit this Middle Eastern quagmire out and not interfere with the

Kremlin's tried-and-true dictatorship-promotion in the Levant. The op-ed was the perfect example of what the KGB used to call "active measures": misinformation and agitprop designed to sway public opinion against the West and principally the United States, typically in contested Third World countries. Though this turn was especially brilliant considering that it was American public opinion Putin was now swaying. Obama's decision to give a badly divided legislature the task of choosing how to respond to the use of chemical weapons presented a rare opportunity for Russia to directly influence and shape the American policy debate. The op-ed was visible to millions on the anniversary of a national tragedy, run in the U.S. newspaper of record, and tailored exclusively for a war-weary and isolationist electorate to emphasize the virtues of thinking more like Russia. Conveniently left out of Putin's appeal for "caution" was his continued military support for a regime that has carpet-bombed whole cities, slaughtered infants, gang-raped women and men in dungeon prisons, and used chemical weapons more than a dozen times. Putin even managed to get past the Times editorial board's fact-checkers a recapitulation of the serially debunked conspiracy theory that Syrian rebels, rather than the regime, deployed sarin gas against thousands in Ghouta. (That Russia knows full well who was really responsible is evidenced in a superb Wall Street Journal [reconstruction](#) of the attack from the point of view of U.S. intelligence, which intercepted freak-out communications from Moscow to Damascus on August 21.)

Next came Alexei Pushkov, the head of the Duma's foreign affairs committee, who on September 11 [suggested](#) to his colleagues in Russia's sycophantic parliament that, in the event the United States did bomb Syria, Russia should reconsider selling high-tech weaponry to Iran and put an end to the northern distribution network to Afghanistan by which the Pentagon transports men and materiel through Russian territory. (This was a feint, as Russia is gravely concerned about a full U.S. and NATO troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, not least because it considers the country's burgeoning heroin trade a national security threat.) How better to commemorate 9/11, after all, than to warn the victim that Russia would gladly arm a leading state sponsor of international terrorism and acquiescence to the reconstitution of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the country where the attacks were first plotted?

Finally, the Russian Foreign Ministry ended the day by [leaking](#) news that its formerly cancelled deal for to sell S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Iran had been reactivated, rendering moot a multi-billion dollar lawsuit initiated by Tehran for breach of contract. That much-discussed arms deal, nixed in 2009 during the inaugural days of the “reset” and thought to be an encouraging sign of Russia’s sincerity in helping the United States and Europe stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, was in fact a cleverly executed stratagem for getting something for nothing out of a new and untested White House. Putin, acting through his marionette Dmitry Medvedev, got a more accommodationist posture from Washington—gone were any outspoken criticisms of Russia’s human rights abuses—as well as congratulations for not helping to bolster the defensive capabilities of a heavily sanctioned rogue regime. A friendly source on the Hill describes this as the apogee of the Putinist method for hoodwinking the Obama administration: “Create a problem, solve it, then take a bow.”

Russia’s real victory on Syria, however, was the chemical disarmament accord it first suggested, which the White House spun as the accidental fruit of a Secretary of State John Kerry’s “gaffe”, an off-the-cuff speculation that a Congressional vote on airstrikes could be forestalled if Assad handed over his nerve agent stockpiles. However, subsequent press reports (including David Rohde’s recent [profile](#) of Kerry) have revealed that Putin broached the idea repeatedly for more than a year in a geopolitical wrangle between Washington and Moscow—the last time directly to Obama himself at the G-20 summit in St. Petersburg in early September. Obama then informed his national security advisor Susan Rice, who then relayed it to a supposedly improvisational Secretary of State. Putin’s triumph here was in offering a compromise that not only precluded an act of American military “aggression” but also re-legitimized Assad as a necessary international partner in counter-proliferation. Syria now has until the end of June 2014 to comply with the total cataloging and neutralization of its chemical stocks, now set to be burnt up at sea—assuming they can be safely transported out of an active war zone. (That’s not only questionable but the conditions for doing so will [involve](#) more scorched-earth military operations by Assad and his Iranian-trained proxies — more atrocities against civilians.) Washington and Moscow are therefore lawfully wedded to Assad for the foreseeable future, rendering any pressure that the

“Friends of Syria” coalition might bring to bear on the regime negligible and any proposed plans to hold a meaningful peace conference in Geneva, now scheduled for January 22, as laughable. Moreover, Russia earned congratulations for fashioning the very loophole through which the U.S. Commander-in-Chief escaped his own policy muddle on Syria, a muddle that evidence now suggests may have owed to his wariness to upset a grand bargain with the Iranians.

The only thing better than Russia’s re-emergence as a great power is predicating that re-emergence on America’s exhaustion and self-evident ambivalence about its future role in the world. As Alexander Rahr, a Putin biographer and analyst at the German-Russian Forum, told [Bloomberg](#): “If Russia’s proposal stops the U.S. from conducting war, it will be a major diplomatic coup.” So it was. And nowhere was this coup better celebrated than in Russia’s pro-government press. An editorial in Izvestia was ecstatic about Russia’s return to global prominence by its eleventh-hour deal-making. “Suddenly it turned out that everybody needed Russia and with it, it was impossible to move the issue beyond an impasse,” Boris Mezhyuev [wrote](#), perhaps forgetting that actually bombing Syrian military targets in order to degrade them was an alternative way to move the issue beyond an impasse. “Of course this was a brilliant diplomatic step, immediately resolving an entire number of international conflicts.” On the contrary, it didn’t even resolve the one in Syria.

Unfortunately, the person who should have felt most chastened when outmaneuvered by Russia welcomed it the most and seemed eager to reassure his opponent. President Obama’s speech at the U.N. General Assembly in September, in which he articulated once more with feeling his unwillingness to involve the United States in “someone else’s civil war,” was also designed as another milksop to Russia. The speech used precisely the language that the Kremlin uses whenever it wants to accuse the United States of acting like a superpower: “This is not a zero-sum endeavor,” Obama [said](#) of the current geopolitical landscape. “We are no longer in a Cold War. There’s no Great Game to be won.”

The best adversary a KGB agent could hope for is one who doesn’t believe himself to be an adversary. And Putin no doubt takes extra comfort in the fact that American folly has lately been dressed up as the premeditated policy agenda for the Obama administration’s second term. Putin no doubt

takes extra comfort in the fact that American folly has lately been dressed up as the premeditated policy agenda for the Obama administration's second term. As dutifully explained by Susan Rice to the New York Times, America's role in the Middle East will now be confined to the narrower prerogatives, in the words of the [Times](#), of "eschewing the use of force, except to respond to acts of aggression against the United States or its allies, disruption of oil supplies, terrorist networks or weapons of mass destruction." Stopping an Iranian nuke, solving the Israel-Palestine problem, and "mitigating the strife in Syria"—though not trying to end it—are to consume the President's attention in the region for the next three years.

Yet three years is a long time to fill a power vacancy in the Middle East. And while Leon Aron exaggerates slightly in his [assessment](#) that, after the Syrian chemical deal, "Russia is on equal footing now as a power in the Middle East," he rightly discerns Moscow's energetic efforts to make that characterization true. Just look at how Arab states have been lining up to do business with Russia in the past several months—most conspicuously, Egypt.

Following his categorical and embarrassing defeat in the Six-Day War, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, already a Soviet client, reaffirmed his fealty to Moscow Centre by [telling](#) Nikolai Podgorny, the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet: "What is important for us is that we now recognize that our main enemy is the United States and that the only possible way of continuing our struggle is for us to ally ourselves with the Soviet Union... We are ready to offer facilities to the Soviet fleet from Port Said to Salloum and from al-Arish to Gaza."

With Nasser's death in September 1970, and the inauguration of Anwar Sadat as Egyptian President, the Soviet-Egyptian relationship quickly deteriorated. The KGB then resorted to active measures to try to undermine Sadat's rule, including portraying the president's 30-year-old son-in-law and Foreign Minister, Ashraf Marwan, as a CIA agent, an embezzler and the man responsible for cuckolding Sadat. The 1979 Camp David Accords, upon which the U.S.-Egyptian strategic relationship was founded, represented the end of Soviet influence in Egypt. Any KGB officer worth his epaulettes won't have forgotten the loss to Washington of what was

once a highly valued prize in North Africa. The unraveling of the Arab Spring made that prize attainable again.

As Georgy Mirsky, a pro-Kremlin Arabist, [told](#) the Financial Times: “Our government was always very apprehensive about the Muslim Brotherhood and might feel that with Abdel-Fatah al-Sisi [the defence minister and de facto leader] in power, Egypt could resume its status as the leading Arab nation and help Russia restore its influence in the Middle East.” Not for nothing did Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy choose Moscow instead of Washington as the destination for his first overseas trip after being appointed by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s new junta—the added insult being that Fahmy was formerly the Egyptian ambassador to the United States. Fahmy later denied this indicated anything amiss with the old friends in Washington; the Russians, he said, were simply the first to respond to his offer for a visit. He met directly with Putin in Moscow in September. A month later, following the U.S. decision to freeze a sizable chunk of the annual American military subsidy to Egypt—this included 10 Apache helicopters collectively worth \$500 million dollars, M1A1 tanks, Harpoon anti-ship missiles, F-16 warplanes and about \$260 million in other aid packages—Fahmy took to CNN to threaten that in this rescission of aid would prompt Egypt to “find other sources” to safeguard its national security. “If your friends in the region, when they’re facing terrorism in particular, cannot depend on a continuous supply of equipment that deals with terrorism,” Fahmy [told](#) Christiane Amanpour on October 17, “then you are obviously going to raise questions in the mind of those friends about your dependability.” Putin is dependable because not only does he not care if you arrest members of the opposition or stage show trials for them or shoot protesters dead, but such actions endear you to him.

Britain’s Sunday Times [reported](#) in October that Russia had already begun to present itself as just such a willing and happy benefactor. Putin has set his eyes on Egyptian ports (recall Nasser’s promise to Podgorny) for hosting Russian naval ships, likely as an improved backup in the event that the Syrian regime does collapse and Moscow loses its only warm-water port at Tartus. “Tartus is vulnerable and not good enough and the Egyptian ports are perfect for the Russian navy,” an unnamed Israeli defense official told the Sunday Times. And an advisor to new Egyptian President Adly Mansour added that Russia’s stock was rising in Cairo as a direct result of

its government's support for the still-popular military regime: "The positive stance of President Vladimir Putin towards the June revolution was behind the rise in his popularity." Portraits of Putin today hang alongside those of Sisi in Cairo.

The Russian-Egyptian relationship has only strengthened in the months that followed. In late October, an Egyptian public diplomacy delegation traveled to Moscow, including its Writers' Union whose head [hailed](#) the Kremlin's "cautious and objective positioning" with respect to the coup. According to Ruslan Pukhov, a member of the Russian Defense Ministry's advisory board, Egypt is now set to purchase \$2 billion worth of MiG-29 jets, anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems from Russia, building on earlier reports that suggested such arms deals would be partly financed by Saudi Arabia (if true, this would show that Riyadh is not so distraught over the failure to terminate Putin's support for Assad that it won't facilitate Sisi's shopping for another arms broker). Lieutenant General Igor Sergun, the chief of the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency, went to Cairo on October 29 for high-level talks with Egyptian intelligence officials. Then, on November 11, the Russian missile cruiser Varyag docked at the port of Alexandria—the first time a Russian warship has done so in twenty years—amid the announcement that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu would be traveling to Cairo that same week for talks with their Egyptian counterparts on "military-technical" cooperation. To mark that fruitful confab, Fahmy went on the Kremlin-controlled propaganda channel RT to reaffirm Egypt's and Russia's commitment to a "political solution" for the Syria crisis, an alignment of interests that was happily [picked up](#) by Assad's Syrian Arab News Agency. Sisi may only be trying to put the Obama administration on notice that he's a dissatisfied spouse not afraid of taking an attractive new lover; and Russia may only be interested in delighting at how Washington squirms over the affair. Regardless, Rosobonorexport, Russia's state arms dealer, is set to make more money and Egypt will receive the weapons it wants no matter how many people it throws in jail or shoots dead in the street. Moreover, given the imaginative accusations that all segments of the Egyptian political class have leveled at the United States—namely, that it ideologically supported the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed Morsi's presidency—Moscow has ample material to work with to further vitiate

Washington's stature in Egypt. Russian state media, after all, has perfected the art of dressing up conspiratorial nonsense about the crimes and follies of the United States, and trafficking in 9/11-denialism and elaborate theories about clandestine American support for jihadist groups—all of which will not go unnoticed or unappreciated in paranoid Cairo. Moving eastward, Russia hasn't shied from making money and new friends with other states thought to be beholden to a tenuous Pax Americana. Despite Putin's well-known opposition to the Iraq War, he is also cultivating a strong military and energy-based relationship with the post-Saddam government in Baghdad. Gazprom and Rosneft have moved in to capitalize on Iraq's increased oil and gas outputs. Last summer, contracts were signed for Russia to sell Iraq \$4.2 billion worth of military hardware including 36 Mi-28 "Night Hunter" attack helicopters, 42 Pantsir surface-to-air missile systems and 28 Czech aircraft for training purposes. The deal was to have made Russia second largest arms dealer to Iraq after the United States. But then the deal was abruptly cancelled in mid-November, owing to what Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's spokesman told the BBC were suspicions of "[corruption](#)." The Russian press has tried to lay blame for this on U.S. pressure exerted on Maliki during his visit to Washington last October, his first ever since winning the premiership in 2006. (He had already traveled twice to Moscow in the past year.) But while it's true that the White House wasn't happy about the deal, a financial scandal was indeed the real reason for its cancellation, according to Kirk H. Sowell, a Jordan-based political risk consultant and the editor-in-chief of Inside Iraqi Politics. "The bottom line is that the original deal was negotiated by Defense Minister Saadun al-Dulaymi, and it was burdened with commissions/kickbacks," Sowell emailed me. "Maliki voided the deal, and had National Security Adviser Falih al-Fayyad renegotiate it. As best as I can tell, Maliki got more weapons for the same price, the 'Night Hunter' choppers have started arriving in Iraq, Dulaymi and a wide range of others remain nominally under investigation, and parliament to this day has not been able to question an executive branch official over the scandal." Moreover, the Iraqis are especially eager to receive the F-16 fighter jets the Pentagon agreed to sell them in 2011 for the purposes of maintaining air sovereignty (those Russian-sold Czech planes are meant as place-holders until the American F-16s arrive). But the slow delivery of these jets has got

Baghdad now entertaining alternate vendors. “We will look for another source if Iraq cannot get the arms systems that were agreed with Washington,” one official [told](#) Al-Hayat newspaper. Guess which one he had in mind.

Russia also has nuclear know-how to hawk. In October, Jordan announced that it had selected two Russian firms to construct and maintain its first nuclear power plant, a project slated at around \$10 billion. Rusatom Overseas will do the operating; Atomstroyexport will send the technology to the Amra, a desert area north of Amman, where the plant will be built by 2023. Just days earlier, Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, announced that Russia had agreed to construct a second nuclear power plant for the Islamic Republic, just as it was handing over operational control to the Iranians for the first facility it built in Bushehr. Russia is a vocal opponent of any additional international sanctions on Iran (now on hold anyway following the the interim “freeze” deal inked between the P5+1 nations and Iran in Geneva last month), as well as a willing banker for Iranian institutions implicated in the nuclear program. The U.S. Treasury Department has warned Russia about Mir Business Bank CJSC, a Moscow-based subsidiary of Bank Melli Iran, the largest commercial bank in the Islamic Republic, which is sanctioned by Washington but not by the U.N. Russia responded by calling the restrictions of “certain Western countries” on trade with Iran “one-sided.” Sensing a softening approach by Washington toward Tehran, if not outright attempts at a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement, the Kremlin may continue to spoil or harry international efforts to uphold the core sanctions that were unaffected by the Geneva deal and get away with it.

Russia’s centrality in Iran’s nuclear program has also lately made it a destination for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who traveled to Moscow to lobby the Kremlin to stop the Geneva deal from going forward. This may have been wishful thinking on Netanyahu’s part, but he evidently thought it worth a try. “The Russians have already surprised us in the past,” one senior Israeli official [told](#) YNet, “and they don’t like the idea that America is the hero of this story. They also don’t like the idea of a nuclear bomb in their own backyard.” That Israel would be willing to exploit Russia’s desire to rob the U.S. of “hero” stature on Iran is both interesting and worrisome. That Israel would be willing to exploit Russia’s

desire to rob the U.S. of “hero” stature on Iran is both interesting and worrisome.

The one accusation that even his vehement critics cannot level against Vladimir Putin is that he’s an anti-Semite. He is genuinely impressed by the survival of the Jewish people throughout history as he is by Israel’s martial prowess, counterterrorism savvy and the perceived—and much caricatured—hyper-masculinity of its culture. Bad behavior in this regard is even championed by a Russian elite which thinks a whale-harpooning, amphorae-diving, tiger-tagging president a thing of pride. When former Israeli President Moshe Katsav was charged with multiple counts of rape and sexual assault in 2007, Putin was given to [remark](#): “He raped ten women. We never knew he had it in him. We all envy him.”

When Putin traveled to Israel in June 2012, he was the guest of honor at an unveiling ceremony in the coastal city of Netanya. What was [unveiled](#) was the first monument to the Red Army ever to be constructed since the fall of the Soviet Union. This memorial, which underscored Russia’s indispensable role in World War II and in ending the Holocaust, had first been suggested by Netanyahu on a previous trip to Moscow and, in a fitting tribute to the country he meant to honor, was then designed by three Russian artists. The monument at once appeals to Israel’s growing number of immigrants from the former Soviet Union—[calculated](#) at over a million in 2009, or some 20 percent of the total population—as well as to Putin the nostalgist who infamously said that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the twentieth century.

Both Israel and Russia have in fact been growing closer to each other for several years, with small gestures of mutual accommodation. Israel [agreed](#) to return the Sergei courtyard in Jerusalem to Russia in 2008, a small strip of land in a religiously and ethnically divided city that had been sold in 1964 for a load of oranges. It then halted arms shipments of defensive weapons to Georgia following the 2008 war with Russia, and owing to Kremlin pressure. Zvi Magen, the former Israeli ambassador to Russia, [credits](#) this warming bilateral relationship in part to the rise of Avigdor Lieberman, the former Moldovan nightclub bouncer turned Israeli foreign minister who was just cleared of corruption charges. Lieberman not only congratulated Putin on his party United Russia’s parliamentary “victory” in 2011—he was the first foreign politician to do so, in fact—but declared

that the election “[absolutely fair, free and democratic](#),” something which no independent internal or external monitors of that poll could not bring themselves to do, much less any high-ranking politician from a non-dictatorial state. (Rigging of that election was so notorious that it led to Russia’s largest anti-government protest movement since the fall of Communism.) The overt anti-Arab racism in Yisrael Beytenu’s campaign in 2008, and the fact that it has now merged with Likud, may be a national embarrassment to many Israeli liberals, but it, too, illuminates another tempting pathway for Putin’s outreach to a changing Middle East. A fellow traveler who commands a hugely influential political party in the Jewish state, as well as a growing constituency of Soviet-born Israelis, and may even stand a chance someday of being elected prime minister—all this without even trying.

Indeed, according to a U.S. State Department cable [published](#) by WikiLeaks, in June 2009 Lieberman traveled to Moscow where, in the assessment of one Israeli diplomat present, he comported himself like an “old friend.” “Lieberman conducted his meetings in Russian, shared stories about Moscow, and smoked, creating a comfortable atmosphere with his Russian interlocutors,” the diplomat relayed.

A current member of the U.S. intelligence community, who spoke to me on the condition of anonymity, said that American spies are increasingly concerned about the Russian penetration of both the Israel Defense Forces and the Israeli intelligence services. American spies are increasingly concerned about the Russian penetration of both the Israel Defense Forces and the Israeli intelligence services. A concomitant fear is that Israel doesn’t yet take this threat seriously enough. The source described what he sees as a plausible future “drug deal” made with the Russians in which U.S. secrets are traded for “whatever the Israelis want from Moscow”—a scuttled defense arrangement with a rogue state, or a favor at the Security Council pertaining to the conflict with the Palestinians. Furthermore, there is zero confidence that the current White House has devoted any real attention to this hazard. The phrase my source kept using was “collective denial.” Whether or not it originates in the zombie-corpse of the U.S.-Russian “reset” or in Washington’s shrugging indifference is open to speculation.

According to John S. Schindler, a former NSA agent and now a professor at the Naval War College, it's not quite true that the Israelis have adopted a see-no-evil-hear-no-evil attitude to Russian interest in their security services. "Shabak is really worried about this," Schindler told me, referring to Israel's FBI. "But there's not much they can do. It's political football. Russians vote Likud or are aligned with Likud." Also, there's plenty that Russia stills does in Israel's backyard that exercises Jerusalem. Positioning itself as protector of Christians in the Middle East, for one, a self-anointment that dates back to the Treaty of Kutchuk-Kainardji during Ottoman Empire and led to several attempts at imperial adventurism, from Greece to Syria to Bulgaria, which did indeed result in a Russian intervention in the 1877. And Russia's continued arms sales to Syria and Iran, both of which pass on such materiel to Hezbollah and—at least until recently— Hamas. Yet as Israeli internal politics changes, so too will its weltanschauung. "Israelis are not stupid, they understand what's going on," Schindler said. "There's a huge human connection between Israel and Russia that never existed before. They're not partners per se, but there's a cozier relationship than there's ever been."

So where might this cozier relationship lead? Probably not to a rupture in the U.S.-Israeli special relationship (which is at its worst crisis-point in decades but will endure beyond the Obama presidency and the Netanyahu premiership), but to Israel's quest for alternative patrons or back-up allies. Jerusalem may also gain more leverage with the Kremlin as time goes on and as America's footprint disappears in the Middle East. When Netanyahu met with Putin in Sochi last May, he prevailed upon him not to deliver S-300 missiles to Assad. At the time, Putin reportedly refused to comply, citing an outstanding contract for the anti-aircraft systems which, in his characteristic excuse-making, he said was fully consistent with international law. Yet the full S-300 system has not yet reached Syria (rumor has it that Netanyahu might have got the deal squashed at his most recent meeting with Putin over the Iran negotiations in Geneva), nor has the Israeli Air Force's destruction of newly arrived Yakhont missiles in Latakia several months ago jeopardized Israeli-Russian relations.

Another incentive for Israel to court the Kremlin is that it clearly admires Russia's approach to combating its enemies. In 2004, Russian secret agents assassinated Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, a warlord and vice president of the

breakaway republic of Chechnya, as he ferried his 13-year-old son down the streets of Doha and away from the mosque where they had just participated in Friday prayers. An intense diplomatic row ensued between the Kremlin and the Qatari government after the latter arrested three suspects, one of whom was the first secretary in the Russian embassy in Doha (he was freed from jail but not allowed to leave the country). In retaliation, Russia then arrested two Qatari nationals who were members of the emirate's Olympic team at Moscow's Sheremeteyvo Airport on the pretext that they were involved in Chechen terrorism. A phone call from Putin to Hamid bin Khalifa al-Thani, the then emir of Qatar, secured the first secretary's transfer back to Moscow and the release of the two detained Qataris in Russia. But the other two assassins in Doha were tried behind closed doors and sentenced to life in prison, then convicts were released to Russian custody on the condition that they serve their jail time in their native country. Instead, they were flown back to Moscow, given a hero's welcome, then let go.

According to Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, authors of *The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia's Security State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB*, this operation—equal parts targeted assassination and diplomatic blackmail—“helped create a new strategy, one that would launch operations beyond the borders of the country. Russian officials said they were impressed by the Israeli example of hunting down enemies abroad. After Yandarbiyev's assassination, one FSB colonel in the elite group Vympel told Soldatov: ‘Take a look at the Mossad. Why cannot we do the same with our terrorists?’”

Of course, what Russia can do with its terrorists, it can also do with its dissidents. Ask Marina Litvinenko, now denied a state inquest into the 2006 polonium poisoning of her husband in central London owing to what the British Home Secretary has admitted would spell a real headache for bilateral relations. Or ask the family of Leonid Razvozzhayev, an opposition figure associated with the radical Left Front movement, who was snatched by Russian security agents in broad daylight on the streets of Kiev, outside the offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, just as he'd finished inquiring about gaining asylum in Ukraine. Razvozzhayev was shoved into a black van, tortured for two days, and driven back to Moscow, where he says he was coerced into signing a

confession that he was trying to destabilize the Russian government by organizing mass riots at the behest of Tbilisi. He later retracted this confession. Razvozhayev has languished in jail for a year. He was even sent to a gulag in Siberia on specious charges of hat theft dating back to 1997, the statute of limitations on which have expired. He's now in pretrial detention in Moscow.

Clearly, Russia has benefitted more by America's pivot away from the Middle East than by its own pivot toward it. There are indications that Washington may even welcome this development. Whether by openly endorsing Russian rhetoric about an end of the Cold War and the Great Game, as President Obama did at the U.N. General Assembly in September, or by coining new euphemisms for a reluctance to involve itself in regional wars ("leading from behind"), the current administration has created a void in one of the most strategically vital regions on the planet into which a refractory and revanchist regime has wasted no time in rushing. Russia's resurgence in the Middle East, therefore, should be graded on a curve whereby a little performance can look like a lot simply because the competition has performed so poorly.

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