

INTRODUCTION

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This special issue of the Estonian Journal of Military Studies titled **“Russia, Syria and the West: From the Aftermath of the Arab Spring in the Middle East to Radicalisation and Immigration Issues in Europe”** takes a closer look at Russia’s activities and its growing influence in Syria and in the wider region, focusing on its larger implications for the Middle East and for all the parties involved, including the West. As regards the latter, and specifically European security, the challenges and issues related to the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War include the 2015 migrant and refugee crisis, the multiple threats posed by ISIS (incl. the rise of terrorism), and finally, the radicalisation of sections of European societies. Furthermore, Russia’s involvement in the Middle East has added an extra twist to the situation. The resulting triangle involving implications for the West and Europe warrants more comprehensive analysis, and this collection of articles intends to offer some insights.

The truism that the world is growing increasingly interdependent has been applicable to developments in the Middle East for a long time. The position and impact of the region is such that any changes in its political or economic balance reverberate across the world. The past decade has once again made its influence particularly clear for the West, sometimes even in painful ways. However, it must be admitted that this is a reciprocal relationship, the Middle Eastern perspective often conveying the same about Western influence. In this context, the somewhat unexpected move by Russia to intervene directly in the Syrian Civil War has managed to reshuffle the pack of cards once more, posing many questions that require answers. While there have already been many engaging analyses of these issues, they have mostly concentrated on Syria itself or focused on Russia’s goals and actions in the region. However, there have not been many comprehensive attempts to tie together the Middle East, Russia’s strategy and Western efforts. This volume intends to do precisely that. Altogether, this special issue is intended to offer a wider perspective with several articles pursuing threads that more or less explicitly tie all the three elements together. In addition, we will also offer more detailed accounts of specific critical aspects of the conflict.

The focal point of this volume is Russia's intervention in Syria that calls for closer scrutiny, both from political and military vantage points. Of particular interest here is the use of private military companies, which deserves scrutiny, especially in the case of Russia. However, the situation in Syria is also a story of several peoples and many intersecting interests, and in that context, for example, the question of the Kurds and their efforts to achieve greater autonomy is also relevant, especially considering that the U.S. withdrawal and Russia's intervention may have opened a way for Turkey to make some critical moves. Speaking of Syria, one can hardly overlook the question of ISIS, especially its identity and ideology. What are its core elements and how has it developed? What is Russia's stance towards ISIS, and how does it manage its tightrope act of balancing the interests of the Shia and the Sunni communities in the Middle East? In addition, the prolonged conflict has had several side effects, one of the most critical being the issue of migration. Is it something that could be understood also in terms of hybrid war, in the context of Russia's strategic interests and the apparent vulnerability of European societies? Furthermore, in addition to the larger issue of migration, the overwhelming refugee crisis that hit Europe in 2015, warrants deeper exploration of weaponising large-scale forced migration. The changes in the Middle East have also had an impact on the radicalisation of societies, including in Europe, raising urgent questions of how to better understand that phenomenon, especially in the context of Russia's efforts, but also in terms of finding effective long-term solutions.

Of special interest for this volume is Russia, its objectives and interests. It bears noting that Russia's involvement in the region is hardly a novelty, despite the surprise effect it first generated when coming to Assad's rescue in 2015. Historically, Russia has had a long relationship with the Middle East and especially Syria, dating back to at least the 18th–19th centuries. However, it is also imperative to understand how this history relates to Islam, especially with regard to Russia's pursuits in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In this regard, the factors that have contributed to the shaping of Russia's experiences with Islam and radical Islamism deserve closer scrutiny. While Russia shares a long history with the Muslim peoples and countries in its immediate vicinity, another important perspective is provided by studying the patterns of its actions in the Middle East proper.

Overall, it seems that Moscow does not merely want to acquire a more important role in the Middle East; indeed, it is determinedly pursuing the status of the main power broker in the whole region. After the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and Syria, Moscow has been eager to demonstrate that it

has assumed the mantle of the new ‘custodian’ of the Middle East. Among Russia’s closest allies in this region is the Shia axis, comprising Iran, Bashar al-Assad’s Syria, and such organizations as Hezbollah. However, in order to be a successful custodian of the peace in the Middle East, Russia cannot rely only on the Shia and has also, rather successfully tried to establish ties with the Kurds and the wider Sunni world as well.¹

Russia’s strategic interests in the Middle East can also be approached from the perspective of restoring the status that was enjoyed by the former Soviet Union. In the foreign policy sphere, it means disrupting the existing international order and security architecture, and curtailing the spheres of influence of the Euro-Atlantic alliance. For that purpose, Russia utilises asymmetric methods. Having become quite adept at it in recent years, the subtle art of hybrid warfare has become the main weapon used by Moscow in its attempts to change the existing world order. In that context, all of Russia’s old connections may prove extremely valuable. For one, in addition to Russia’s special relationship with Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria, it is also known that former Iraqi army officers and members of the Ba’ath party studied in Moscow during the Cold War and probably developed connections with the KGB.² Considering that many of those people now play a significant role in ISIS, an investigation into the continued existence of those connections in the present time is warranted. If this hypothesis turns out to be valid, there might be an exclusive line of communication available between the Kremlin and the leaders of ISIS, deserving careful attention and analysis.

As regards the content of this volume, the first article by Illimar Ploom, Vladimir Sazonov and Viljar Veebel outlines the positions of Russia and the West vis-à-vis the Middle East and their larger implications, among them the conditions surrounding the interventions by Russia and the West, Russia’s strategy for the Middle East and the methods it has used. The larger implications of Russia’s activities, and their impact on future relations with the West are also considered. The following article by Col. (Ret.) Zdzislaw Sliwa narrows the focus to Syria and considers in detail the political and military aspects of Russia’s intervention, with particular attention given to the analysis of Russia’s military campaign and the capabilities involved.

¹ Sazonov, V. 2015. Putin’s Game of Thrones in the Middle East. – *Diplomaatia*, December 18. <https://icds.ee/putins-game-of-thrones-in-the-middle-east/> (17.12.2019).

² **На стороне ИГИЛ воюют генералы с советской выучкой и образованием.** Зачем России присутствие в Сирии. – *Новый день*, 04.02.2016. <https://newdaynews.ru/ekb/interview/556654.html> (17.12.2019).

The article by Hille Hanso focuses on a specific but revealing aspect related to the Syrian Civil War and its development, by considering the fate of the Syrian Kurds in the context of Turkey's plans to divide this community by introducing a new version of 'the Arab Belt' for the purposes of ensuring its own security. The article on the ideological core of ISIS by Vladimir Sazonov and Illimar Ploom maintains the focus on the Middle East, shedding light on another prominent stakeholder in the conflict by analysing its radical ideas and their political meaning, with a special emphasis on outlining the Arab nationalist element alongside its Salafist-Wahhabist core.

Thereafter the volume attends to the broader and more indirect effects of the conflict and Russia's involvement. The article by Col. Yurii Punda, Lt.Col. Vitalii Shevchuk and Viljar Veebel takes the framework of hybrid war to inquire about the extent to which Russia takes advantage of migration issues. Then, Yevhen Mahda, Valentine Bieliaiev and Artur Borsuk discusses the same topic through the lens of weaponisation of migration. The following article by Heidi Maiberg considers the methods of de-radicalisation in Europe, an area of study that is gaining more and more prominence in the context of the prolonged conflicts in the Middle East that have attracted volunteer fighters from Europe. This, in turn, is complemented by research conducted by Katrin Tammekun whose article focuses on wider issues related to radicalisation in the context of Russia's hybrid campaigns, bringing together the European refugee crisis, Russia's activities and the root causes of radicalization in Estonia.

Finally, in the light of recent reports regarding the use of private paramilitary companies in conventional warfare, Gen. (Ret.) Ants Laaneots, former Commander of the Estonian Defence Forces, gives an in-depth overview of the establishment, development and utilisation of Russian private military companies, while also offering a comparative analysis with their Western counterparts. The main reasons behind the proliferation of such instruments appear to be similar, yet there are also significant cultural specificities that may play a decisive role in critical situations.