

RUSSIA'S GAMBIT IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

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Tohme H. Russia's Geostrategic Outlook and the Syrian Crisis. St. James's Studies in World Affairs. – Washington D.C.: Academica Press, 2020. 155 p.

In his book, Hicham Tohme, an expert on the Middle East and a Lecturer at the American University in Beirut, provides a concise explanation of Russia's decision to militarily intervene in the Syrian conflict. Traditional international relations analysis has framed Russia in a post-Cold War context. Tohme responds to Francis Fukuyama's "the end of history" concept by approaching Russian intervention in Syria from a realist framework. Tohme also critiques the Westphalian model that has been frequently used in academic literature as a point of contrast to Russia's "geostrategic vision and its perceived position on the global political map" (p. 8). He describes the Westphalian system as both theoretical and Eurocentric. Tohme reassesses this model by combining Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* with realist theory and a comparative-historical approach. Overall, Tohme succeeds in delineating how Russia has behaved as a rational actor.

The book is organized into four main chapters focusing on Syria in light of the Cold War period, the four pillars of Russia's geostrategy, Russia's return to the global stage, and the reconstruction of Syria. Empirical research is focused on "examining considerations of financial costs, foreseeable economic gains, the level and type of military involvement, and the diplomatic efforts toward the management of the crisis" (p. 11). Comparative analysis looks at Russia's actions in Georgia and Ukraine and its role in "counter-hegemonic blocs such as BRICS, CSTO, and SCO" (p. 12). Tohme tries to apply Zbigniew Brzezinski's *"The Grand Chessboard"* to how the Syrian conflict affected broader geopolitical change. His main thesis is as follows: "Russia has been playing an obstructionist role, benefiting from American missteps since the establishment of Pax Americana, to ensure that the cost of sustained global hegemony would remain too high while Russia works toward the reestablishment of a multilateral world system of governance that would allow it to resume a seat at the table of major global decisionmakers" (p. 14). Tohme effectively demonstrates how Russia has utilized its role in Syria in an attempt to construct a multipolar world order.

Chapter 1 contextualizes Russia's involvement in Syria by exploring post-Cold War era scholarship. This era is divided into three phases, with the first one having lasted from 1991 to 2003 when the United States achieved unipolar power. The second phase began with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the third phase started with the 2008 Russian-Georgian South Ossetia conflict. Tohme builds upon a wealth of Cold War and post-Cold War literature to support Brzezinski's line of reasoning that "history had not ended; the global hegemon was not eternal" (p. 18). One implication of Brzezinski's account is that the geostrategic goal of the United States was to achieve American hegemony and to prevent Russia from ever becoming a global player again. However, the U.S. policy towards Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union was marked by short-sightedness. Instead of opting for a moderate stance conscious of the risk of Russia forming a counter-hegemonic bloc with China and Iran, the United States chose a different path, first by leading NATO bombings in Kosovo, then by tarnishing its moral image with the invasion of Iraq, and finally by removing Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi from power by force. The goal of this chapter is to explain Russia's ultimate response to the Arab Spring as a logical progression of these

series of events. Russia has rearranged the chessboard in the Eastern Mediterranean and seeks to “reimpose itself as a global player” (p. 42). This chapter challenges early post-Cold War assumptions, but it does little to distinguish itself from contemporary academic frameworks. Apart from invoking Brzezinski’s chessboard metaphor, Tohme adds little to existing knowledge on Russia’s great power politics, especially if contrasted with works by Angela Stent, Jeffrey Mankoff and several other leading Western scholars on the subject.

Chapter 2 provides seminal research on how Russia’s pillars of geostrategy have both manifested themselves and further developed in Syria. Tohme argues that Russia’s resurgence evolved diplomatically through ties to BRICS and Iran, economically through energy exports to Europe, and militarily by actions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. Tohme sets forth these pillars of foreign policy as the national rationale behind intervention, economic interests, diplomatic relations, and the military dimension. His work addresses the gap in the literature of a “comprehensive survey of the reasons and means behind Russia’s intervention” (p. 47). Beyond the goal of “not repeating the Libyan mistake”, Russia sought to balance the pivotal spheres of influence in Syria between the regional players – Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Tohme strongly explains how Russia’s interest in the Eastern Mediterranean plays a role in its own identity and position on the global stage.

Tohme’s analysis of the political economy of the conflict explores how Russia’s ability to intervene at a minimal cost can be traced back to the Soviet historical roots. He also shows that Russia has learned to minimize boots on the ground and rely on existing local allies in the case of its more recent military engagements in Ukraine and Georgia. Not only did Russia have the support of the Syrian government, but it “economized further by effectively sharing the cost of military intervention with other regional allies and clients” such as the Lebanese Hezbollah militia, Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, and Syrian paramilitary organizations (p. 59). He then attempts to assess the economic gains Russia has made in Syria through increased foreign arms sales, gaining control of an energy supply route, and getting access to the natural gas and oil reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean basin. The obvious counterargument, however, is that the economic benefits Russia stands to gain from Syria seem negligible, given the enormous cost of postconflict reconstruction. Tohme also argues that Russia could have acquired nearly complete control of the natural gas flows. However, it’s unclear how Russia could achieve that, given the continuing internationalization of the Syria problem. The author himself later contradicts this suggestion by noting how natural gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean may decrease the market prices of gas and thus hurt Russia’s own energy exports.

The most compelling element of Tohme’s line of argument lies in his examination of the duality between foreign policy rhetoric and the reality of diplomatic exchanges. An important contribution he makes to understanding Russia’s behavior is to problematize “foundations of its geostrategy” and emphasize praxis over public official statements (p. 45). Russia has utilized anti-hegemonic rhetoric while also avoiding large-scale conflict with other states involved in Syria. A crucial consideration Tohme puts forward is how *de facto* demarcation lines became “a semi-institutionalized agreement between Russia and other powers” allowing for diplomatic channels (p. 77). Russia’s diplomacy indicates that it has not behaved as a “classic” belligerent state, but rather as a more flexible and pragmatic actor ready to acquiesce to international order, when deemed beneficial to its interests, as evident by how it has avoided escalation with the United States, Israel, and Turkey in Syria.

Chapter 3 challenges how analysts have evaluated Russia’s drive to “rearrange the chessboard”. Tohme counters arguments that Russia operates in countries prone to sanctions to gain an economic advantage: it is here that he acknowledges the immense obstacles for post-conflict reconstruction in Syria, in contrast to potential economic benefits

outlined in the previous chapter. Additionally, the chapter argues that the historical strategic partnership with Syria was not the only reason for Russian intervention. Tohme rightly points out that troops were not sent to Libya, Sudan, Yemen, or Venezuela, despite their long-time strategic relationships with Russia. Nor was Russia's involvement in Syria fueled by an attempt to improve the domestic support of Putin. Having addressed these inadequate explanations, Tohme clearly identifies a drive towards a multipolar world order as Russia's main motivation. Russia is not seeking to replace the United States as a global superpower – instead, it wishes to increase the importance of regional hegemony and to build a world system where multiple states' interests are considered rather than unilateral American action. The United States would have to accept this due to the inherent instability of a world order relying on unipolarity. In addition to the Russian concept of *derzhavnost'*, Tohme introduces the concept of *mumana'a* (the Arabic for obstructionism). This is a valuable contribution in explaining Russia as a rational actor, rather than as a “spoiler” force without any clear agenda. *Mumana'a* aims at increasing the cost of American hegemony while minimizing Russia's own costs, as it recognizes its own limitation and the infeasibility of ever overtaking the United States as a global hegemon.

The final chapter attempts to look ahead at Syria's reconstruction period. It relies more on the author's field research than on a theoretical or purely academic approach. Tohme identifies four main challenges facing Damascus as ending hostilities either through the government regaining full territorial control or allowing for autonomous regions to exist, the survival of Bashar al-Assad and the Ba'ath regime, Syria's ability to rebuild, and its geopolitical position in the region (p. 143). The main problem of this chapter is the rapidly changing nature of the situation in Syria. One example of this is how Tohme postulates that Syria would emerge as a victor by using the refugee crisis to gain European support of rebuilding the country and accepting the existing government. Instead, the refugee issue continues to haunt the country and the broader region, with limited help from the outside. The Russian-backed conference on the return of refugees to Syria in late 2020 was not attended by the European Union. Syria needs to prove stabilization to allow for the return of refugees but lacks the funding and active, working population to achieve this goal.

Overall, Hicham Tohme's *"Russia's Geostrategic Outlook and the Syrian Crisis"* offers a sober assessment of the pillars of Russian foreign policy and how they impact Russia's behavior in the Middle East. Although the book is not a comprehensive work on the Syrian conflict due to its brevity, it is highly recommended to those who are searching for a rigorous analysis of why Russia chose to intervene in Syria. It also shows an acute need for further research, especially in the area of political economy, and in examining the ways and means, prospects and problems of postconflict reconstruction. While at times inconsistent and contradictory, this book is also a valuable source on how the Syrian conflict can help understand the theoretical underpinnings of the way Russia sees itself on the global chessboard. Hicham Tohme contributes to a conceptual reframing of Russia as an actor seeking to be accepted as a *status quo* great power rather than a revisionist power.

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