



Russian Soft Power in the Middle East

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,238, July 26, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Russian soft power efforts in the Middle East are bearing fruit, as many young Arabs now view Moscow as an ally and the US as unreliable. Russia wants to build more ties with the Muslim world and views Trump's presidency as an opportunity in that regard. This ambition is tempered somewhat by the Muslim jihadist threat in Russian areas and, of course, the painful legacy of the war in Afghanistan.

For some time now, Russia has been striving to establish itself as the Middle East's preeminent external great power. Through its military involvement in the Syrian conflict and deep partnership with Iran against the US, its relations with neighboring countries have gathered new momentum.

In 2019, the Taliban and Russia gathered together and called for the withdrawal of US coalition forces from Afghanistan. Meetings were held in Moscow after the failure of direct negotiations between the US and the Taliban. They were organized not by official Russian diplomats but by an organization called The Afghan Diaspora in Russia. This event, while unofficial, involved both the Afghan diaspora and Afghan citizens and was thus a significant expression of Russian soft power within the region (although, when asked about Putin's involvement, one of the organizers said Russian diplomats had "provided only technical support"). The event included representatives of all the Taliban and Afghanistan's major politicians, including the country's most powerful leaders, and is considered to have been a success.

If the occurrence of this event itself was not enough to demonstrate the decline in Washington's regional leadership, the Taliban [attacked American targets](#) while it was going on. To all intents and purposes, Russia, not the US, is now perceived as the "sheriff" to turn to regarding Afghanistan's efforts to build a future.

The US dethronement of the Taliban in 2001 for sheltering al-Qaeda seems very far away. Today, the Taliban is an almost entirely legitimate “diplomatic actor” controlling over half the country while causing heavy casualties to US-led coalition and Afghan armed forces. According to Russia’s FM, “Russia is convinced that the conflict in Afghanistan has no military solution. The only possible way to achieve peace is through diplomatic means.”

Moscow’s current engagement with the Taliban, Syria, Iran, and Israel is a genuine grand strategy. While this strategy is not strictly in the mold of Nye’s peaceful soft power, Russia has been developing a new diplomatic soft power prototype, and with some success.

Moscow has never managed to regain the level of influence it enjoyed prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Putin is doing his best to change this, largely through soft power. The number of public diplomacy projects to promote Russia’s global image in politics, sport, culture, economy, and science has dramatically increased. At the same time, the decrease in the US’s standing in the Middle East works to enhance Russia’s position as a regional peace broker. Putin has put Russia in a preeminent regional position through the classical hard power tool of fighting in Syria while simultaneously talking “peace” with the Taliban, who are still killing Americans.

This is not a random success. As early as 2012, Putin was already openly discussing [“Russia and the changing world.”](#) According to his definition, Russian soft power can be understood as providing an opposition to the country’s negatives. He was very clear about Moscow’s soft power goals:

Russia has a chance not only to preserve its culture but to use it as a powerful force for progress in international markets. The Russian language is spoken in nearly all the former Soviet republics and in a significant part of Eastern Europe. This is not about empire, but rather cultural progress. Exporting education and culture will help promote Russian goods, services, and ideas; guns and imposing political regimes will not.

We must work to expand Russia's educational and cultural presence in the world, especially in those countries where a substantial part of the population speaks or understands Russian.

The diplomatic efforts toward the Taliban are just one example of the Russian attempt to turn itself into a modern soft-superpower. Russia has also built up the international media channel RT, formerly known as “Russia Today”. RT is working hard on its Arabic service — RT Arabic is one of the largest TV networks in the region (along with Al Jazeera). Labeled “Putin propaganda” by the US, RT is doing a great job at pushing the Russian perspective in region. Numbers don’t lie, and RT Arabic has 6.3 million

monthly users in six Arabic-speaking countries: Egypt, Morocco, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Jordan.

Another impressive effort was the establishment of the Russian diaspora agency [Rossotrudnichestvo Federal Agency](#) (the Russian version of the US Agency for International Development). It operates [Russian Centers for Science and Culture](#) (RCSC) in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and the Palestinian areas.

Russia's aspiration to become a regional "super soft-power broker" is coming to fruition. Ranging from Kabul to Israel-Palestinian-controlled territories to Libya and the Gulf countries, it is no longer just the site of mega sports events like the Sochi Olympics and the FIFA World Cup.

If there is in fact a soft power battle between Russia and the US in the Middle East, most parameters suggest that Moscow has the momentum. Two recent regional polls show that young Arabs (aged 18-24) increasingly view Russia as an ally and the US as unreliable or worse. The percentage of young Arabs who see the US as an ally dropped from 63% in 2016 to 35% last year. Russia is increasingly regarded as the top non-Arab ally by young people in the Middle East, with 20% seeing it as the region's best friend outside the Middle East and North Africa.

If Trump still believes the US should be the world's sheriff, he will have to counter Putin's soft power push. Otherwise, Washington will find itself trailing Russia's diplomatic successes in the region.

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