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“Russia's Role in the Middle East: The Syria and Libya Conflicts and Conflict Management”
Part of The Middle East: Understanding the Role of Regional and External Powers Series

In her seminar, Dr. Ekaterina Stepanova focused on the role Russia plays in practical conflict management solutions in both Syria and Libya.

According to Prof. Stepanova, following two years since the start of Russia's military operation in Syria, the critical vector for Moscow is shaped not so much by the military track per se, but by (a) regionalization of its Syria policy best symbolized by the Astana talks and ceasefire process; and (b) dynamic and often tense interplay of force and talks, i.e. between the negotiation process and the military track on the ground.

The Astana process has already succeeded in the sense that it addressed some key problems that had haunted previous negotiation formats and had to be solved before moving to tackle any substantive political issues. The Astana talks has involved many key armed actors on the ground (the veto players), produced the longest lasting ceasefire in Syria, and engaged several critical regional players. It also created a unique format of de-escalation zones (four areas that combine elements of ceasefire, humanitarian safe havens, rebuilding of governance, and reconciliation at the local/municipal level). The process also proved to be flexible enough and can be better described as “Astana plus”. Apart from Turkey and Iran who, alongside Russia, co-broker the mainstream Astana talks, realities on the ground dictated a parallel negotiation format for the southern de-escalation zone, with participation of Jordan and the US (both are also observers at Astana), as well as Israel, but without Iran (the Amman process), while Egypt provided a platform in Cairo for consultations on both Homs and East Ghouta zones.

The ceasefire implementation is far from complete, with spoiling continuing on both sides and the military logic still interfering at times with ceasefire policy. In particular, delineation and discrimination between ceasefire and jihadist forces in areas where they are intermixed remain a problem. One such area is the Idlib province as the main center of gravity for a loose jihadist coalition Hayat Tahrir ash-Sham (that integrates the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat an-Nusra). This interplay of force and talks on the ground is an unavoidable background for most transitions from conflict to peace. The good news is that it is not a one-way street: it is not just the military set-up on the ground that affects

ceasefire implementation – the Astana process also sets up its own imperatives. They constrain the military track, prevent large-scale ground operations even in such difficult de-escalation zones as Idlib, and underscore the need for peaceful areas under control of the Syrian opposition to emerge as a condition for progress in substantive peace talks.

The biggest remaining challenge for Russia (and for the international community at large) on Syria is how to build up upon and translate the progress on antiterrorism and ceasefire into moving towards the political solution of the Syrian crisis through a UN-level process and into progress on the humanitarian and reconstruction tracks. While Astana has been a sine qua non stage to create basic security condition and prepare technical grounds for Geneva talks to restart in earnest, neither Astana/nor Astana plus does or can replace Geneva.

As Moscow started to play a growing role on Libya, the reflex among many observers was to try to draw parallels with its engagement in Syria. These attempts, however, overestimate Moscow's interest in and leverage on Libya (that is much more limited than on Syria) and understate major differences between the two conflicts, including higher fragmentation, but much lower intensity of the Libya conflict, that also displays lack of sectarian tensions and a certain unifying role of the oil factor.

As the UN Skhirat process on Libya stumbled and chaos continued, Russia has abandoned its hands-off approach on Libya. In this, it was driven both by realization that, no matter how limited its own direct interest in Libya is, it cannot afford to distance itself from that crisis or outsource its management completely to others, and by some opportunistic motives. Moscow first joined several other actors (Egypt, UAE and even France) to show signs of support to General Khalifa Haftar backed by Tobruk-based parliament, and later moved to, first, diversification of its contact in Libya to include all main veto players and, then, to build its own peacemaking track on Libya.

As a result, while hardly the lead mediator in intra-Libyan tensions, Moscow has managed to coin a diplomatic niche for itself (by trying to mediate between Tripoli and Tobruk and even establishing contacts with the Misrata rebels). This niche falls far short of Russia's role in brokering the Astana talks on Syria, but, perhaps, aims at more, in terms of direct mediation between the Libyan parties, than the Moscow format of regional consultations on Afghanistan. It may serve as a multi-purpose instrument in Russia's relations with regional powers and with Europe, and secure some opportunistic space for it in post-conflict Libya. More generally, Moscow may be one of the few actors capable to balance the antiterrorism and peacemaking aspects on Libya. By now, it shows enough flexibility in dealing with all major local veto players needed to ensure that counterterrorism priorities do not impede peacemaking efforts – and vice versa.