



China in the “Post-American” Middle East

OE Watch Commentary: In October 2017, the Institute of West-Asian and African Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences published its “Yellow Book” report on developments in the Middle East and Africa. (The academy publishes “blue books” focused on the economy, “green books” on society and the environment, and “yellow books” on international issues.) A summary of the report, published in the Arabic-language website of the Chinese *People’s Daily Online* and excerpted here, was picked up by a handful of regional newspapers and news websites. The report focuses on three main trends: the US’s declining influence, Russia’s growing role, and the economic outlook for the region. Its authors believe the Middle East is entering a “post-American Era” in which Chinese and Russian influence are likely to grow. This perception of American retreat and Russian ascendance in the region is also shared by many local observers, including in Saudi Arabia (See: “Saudi Arabia’s Tilt Toward Russia,” *OE Watch*, November 2017).

There has been growing speculation about Beijing’s potential role in Syria’s post-war reconstruction. This is due to several reasons, including the reluctance of Western nations and Gulf monarchies to participate in any efforts that may solidify the Assad government’s hold on power; the fact that Iran and Russia will be unable to carry the economic burden of reconstruction alone; and Syria’s location as a potential key piece in China’s One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR). The second excerpt, from the pro-Hizbullah news website *al-Ahd*, argues that Russian and Chinese interests and policies are in fact converging in Syria and beyond, and that the emerging Sino-Russian alliance will “in the long-term have numerous effects on the future of both the Middle East and the Far East.”

Although China’s Middle East policy remains primarily driven by economic considerations, the presence of thousands of Uyghur jihadists from the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Syria has added a military-security component to its dealings with the region. Chinese concerns with the TIP may become more acute if the group’s havens in Syria become compromised and its fighters seek new theaters to wage jihad closer to the Chinese mainland. In late November, the Arabic-language website of Russia’s news agency *Sputnik* carried a report claiming Chinese intentions to deploy special forces to Syria to fight the TIP. The report, based on unspecified “media sources,” was picked up by a large number of Arabic-language media on all sides of the conflict, with most reporting it as fact and speculating on the implications of this alleged decision. According to the excerpted passage from the Saudi daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, the rumor was confirmed by the official Facebook account of Russian forces in Syria, although it was also denied on Twitter by Xie Xiaoyan, China’s special envoy to Syria.

End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)

“... Beijing is expected to collaborate and move closer to Russia and the Resistance Axis to resolve the Syrian crisis... This will strengthen the Moscow-Beijing position in the region while weakening the American position in West Asia...”

Source: الكتاب الأصفر يستشرف مستقبل الشرق الأوسط ما بعد العصر الأمريكي “Yellow Book Examines the Future of the Middle East in the ‘Post-American Era’,” *People’s Daily Online (Arabic)*, 27 October 2017. <http://arabic.people.com.cn/n3/2017/1027/c31660-9285925.html>

The study focused on three key issues: decline in American influence, the role of Russia, and the future of development in the Middle East... The declining American role in the Middle East has given Eastern powers, particularly Russia, a chance to strengthen their influence in this important region. At the same time, the region’s countries are increasingly confident in implementing their own development plans. The Chinese and Russian models are drawing greater attention from the countries of the region. The study also noted that the balance of power in the Middle East is moving from unipolarity to bipolarity, and from there to multipolarity. With the region’s countries turning eastward, Asian countries in turn are starting open toward the west and develop strategic partnerships with countries of the Middle East.

Source: الصين ستلعب بإستراتيجية جديدة لرسم مستقبل سوريا ابرز الأبعاد والمجالات “New Chinese policy to draw Syria’s future... Key dimensions and issues,” *al-Ahd*, 30 November 2017. <https://goo.gl/XuQqlb>

In order for China to expand its influence in the region, it must follow the Russian model, which obtained positive results in Syria and which does not intervene in the internal affairs of states, respects their sovereignty, and supports them in order to achieve shared goals and results. Beijing is expected to collaborate and move closer to Russia and the Resistance Axis to resolve the Syrian crisis. China has provided much support to the Syrian government and also supports the Russian position toward this crisis. This will strengthen the Moscow-Beijing position in the region while weakening the American position in West Asia. This will in the long-term have numerous effects on the future of both the Middle East and the Far East.

Source: قوات صينية تتوجه إلى سوريا “Chinese Forces Head to Syria,” *Sputnik (Arabic)*, 28 November 2017. <https://goo.gl/MqSS6W>

Media sources indicate that the Syrian president’s adviser spoke with Chinese military officials about Chinese special forces fighting terrorists from the “East Turkistan Islamic Movement,” which Syrian forces have found to be operating in rural Damascus. The Chinese Defense Ministry aims to deploy two units, known as the “Siberian Tigers” and the “Night Tigers” to Syria to fight the East Turkistan Islamic Movement.”

Source: الصين ترسل نمور الليل إلى ريف دمشق “China sends ‘Night Tigers’ to Rural Damascus,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 29 November 2017. <https://goo.gl/ferwmU>

Russia’s Hmeimim base, in western Syria, claimed... on its Facebook page... that sources in the Chinese Defense Ministry “confirmed its intention of sending two special forces units known as the ‘Siberian Tigers’ and the ‘Night Tigers’ to Syria”...