



The reciprocal constitutive features of a Middle Eastern partnership: The Russian–Syrian bilateral relations



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ABSTRACT

Using the concept of reciprocal socialization, this article argues that the Damascus–Moscow partnership has been since 1970 a reciprocal constitutive relation that has influenced considerably the actions, interests, and identities of the two partners. During the last two decades of the Cold War it represented an almost ideal-type example of a relationship between a super-power and its regional ally that, through its complex consequences, shaped significantly the two partners themselves, the Middle Eastern political and security environment, and the international system as a whole. Post-2003 developments and especially the present Syrian crisis also have influenced considerably the two states' identity-building processes. After the US invasion of Iraq, the patterns of renewed bilateral cooperation have mirrored, at least in part, the Cold War ones. The Arab Spring enforced this trend. Yet, today the International Relations identity of Russia is quite different from the Soviet era one. The main consequence is that Moscow's new identity prevents it from supporting the regime in Damascus at any cost. If military operations take a turn threatening seriously the survival of that regime, it is likely that the Kremlin will not escalate its pro-al-Asad involvement, thus accepting the possible fall of its Middle Eastern ally.

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1. Introduction

This article uses the concept of reciprocal socialization in order to show that since 1970 the Damascus–Moscow partnership has been a reciprocal constitutive relation that has influenced considerably the actions, interests, and identities of the two partners. Moreover, since the US invasion of Iraq, the patterns of renewed bilateral cooperation have mirrored, at least in part, the Cold War ones. The Arab Spring has enforced this trend. The article examines in what way this is relevant for the future of the Moscow's support for the regime in Damascus. Based on an analysis of

Russia's new identity, it concludes that the Kremlin uses the renewed Syrian partnership in order to reassert its great power status but is not ready to support that regime at any cost. If military operations take a turn threatening seriously the survival of the latter, it is likely that the Kremlin will not escalate its pro-al-Asad involvement, thus accepting the possible fall of its Middle Eastern ally.

The article is organized as follows: section 2 creates the appropriate theoretical framework. Sections 3–5 depict the historical development of the Syrian–Russian relationship. Sections 6–11 present its evolution during the Arab Spring. The article's findings are analysed in the final section.

2. A special type of reciprocal socialization

Constructivism states that actors of international relations are permanently involved in socialization and

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learning processes, which modify their interests and identities. In turn, the interaction of states modifies their international environment, sometimes changing the very 'culture' of international anarchy. Identity can be defined as 'relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self' representing 'a property of international actors that generates motivational and behavioral dispositions' (Wendt, 1999: 224; a discussion of the 'identity literature of IR' can be found in Flockhart, 2006: 94–97). Identities change due to international socialization that can be defined as 'a process in which states are induced to adopt the constitutive rules of an international community' (Schimmelfennig, Engert, & Knobel, 2006: 2). Its outcome is sustained compliance based on the internalization of new norms. The actor switches from following a logic of consequences to a logic of appropriateness (Checkel, 2005: 804). Jeffrey Checkel identified two types of international socialization. The simpler, Type I internalization or socialization makes states behave appropriately by learning a role. The more advanced Type II socialization goes beyond role playing. Actors accept community or organizational norms as 'the right thing to do.' They 'adopt the interests, or even possibly the identity, of the community of which they are a part' (Checkel, 2005: 804).

In most cases, it is assumed that some states are already socialized in a community or organization while others need to be adopted into the club of socialized members. Very many international socialization studies analyse this type of one-way process. However, sometimes new members try to renegotiate the current order of the community that receives them through 'reciprocal socialization' (Terhalle, 2011: 342, 349), a process that mirrors Wendt's image of states modifying their international environment. Another frequent assumption is that there is a socializing community that reunites a relatively large number of states. This article explores a special type of reciprocal socialization: that taking place within the special bilateral relations between a great power and its regional ally. On the one hand, the influence is mutual; both partners change their identities. On the other hand, this is an asymmetrical process with the great power playing the major role. It has largely superior material resources and a favourable position in cognitive terms resulting from its experience with other, possibly numerous regional allies. Therefore, it is the great power that establishes the socializing norms. Yet, because it is a state and not a large and complex community, the great power itself is vulnerable to the influence of the regional ally and might change its own identity in a certain measure. Of course, both states are also submitted to diverse external influences and interact with other actors that influence them. Yet, depending on the intensity and importance of their bilateral relations, the latter can influence considerably the key features of the two states' International Relations identity through a process that is very similar to that described by Jeffrey Checkel. In the first stage, each of the two partners learns to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new relationship while assuming its specific role. The regional ally adapts its global foreign policy orientation to that of the great power while using the support of its partner in order to increase its regional status and influence. The great

power uses its ally as a proxy in regional affairs and takes advantage of this extension of its international reach in order to enhance its global status. Progressively, this goes beyond role playing. The two partners switch from a logic of consequences to one of appropriateness, to quote Checkel once more. A superior level of socialization is reached, with the two states profoundly and durably influencing each other.

Moreover, this process is likely to have significant repercussions on the domestic characteristics of the two partners and especially on those of the local ally. Frequently, this is a medium or relatively small state located in a turbulent region. The support of an external great power increases considerably the resources, legitimacy, and stability of the regime in place. Its leader acquires the means to increase his control of the local society, which is likely to result in the creation and/or the consolidation of a strong authoritarian regime.

The Damascus–Moscow partnership is an excellent case study showing that the identities of the two partners were influenced considerably by their intense interaction. The Syrian regime could develop into a domestic dictatorship and a key regional player only due to Moscow's support; faced a major crisis from the end of the Cold War to Putin's Middle Eastern comeback; and returned to 'normality' only with the renewal of the Russian partnership. Symmetrically, Moscow used Syria as a valuable regional agent that enhanced its superpower status during the Cold War; had to abandon it during its own profound crisis of the 1990s; and turned its support for the al-Asad regime into a means of reasserting its own great power status during the Arab Spring. Therefore, it can be stated that, for more than four decades, the ups and downs of the Damascus–Moscow partnership have put in relation two mutually constitutive International Relations identities whose socializing interaction is illustrative of the theoretical model presented above.

3. The Syrian authoritarian construct

The present Syrian regime originates in the Ba'th coup d'état of 8 March 1963. In February 1966, the left-wing faction of the Ba'th Party headed by Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Asad defeated its rival and took power. Finally, in November 1970 the young and ambitious minister of defence, Hafiz al-Asad, imposed his personal dictatorship (Karsh, 1991: 5; Rabinovich, 2011: 117). In a country with a majority of Sunni Muslims (60 percent), Asad relied on the 'Alawi community (12 percent). Due to religious reasons, many members of the Sunni majority refused to accept a regime dominated by 'Alawis as legitimate (Rabinovich, 2011: 374). This hardly favoured the new regime's stability. Consequently, Asad increased repression and operated a vast network of police informers and agents. He created no less than fifteen security agencies numbering 50,000 employees (Rubin, 2007: 52). Political power resided in the hands of the President and of the small group of trusted confidants which constituted the core of his regime. Hafiz al-Asad also became the object of an aggressive cult of personality (Rabinovich, 2011: 118).

Extremely brutal repression was used against political enemies. The 1979–82 Sunni Islamist rebellion was brought to an end by the Hama massacre; between 10,000

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