



# Russia in the Middle East

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## Abstract

It may be a cliché, but that does not make it any less true: Russia has returned to the Middle East. Since intervening militarily in Syria in 2015, Russia has transformed the battlefield, saved its allies, and established itself as the driving force in international diplomacy on Syria. Meanwhile, Moscow is selling arms worth billions of dollars to Algeria and Egypt, and has teamed up with Saudi Arabia to put its thumb on the scale of global oil prices. Russia is working closely with Iran, Turkey, and Israel in Syria, and maintains relations with Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and a host of other nations – many of which are hostile to each other but friendly to Russia.

Looking back at Russia's rise to influence in the Middle East since the 2011 Arab Spring, it seems clear that President Vladimir Putin's successes stem less from a consistently applied strategy than from the effective, pragmatic exploitation of new opportunities and unforced Western errors.

Nonetheless, there are limits to how far Russia can rise, and Putin will need to watch his step as he moves deeper into a region riddled with complex, interlocking conflicts. Even today, Moscow's regional footprint remains small next to that of the United States and, mired in economic and structural dysfunction at home, it is far from certain that the Kremlin's swelling global ambition can be sustained in the longer term. As Russia's appetite for influence increases, so do the risks.

This UI Paper traces Moscow's role in the Middle East and North Africa through Soviet times to the present day. It seeks to shed light on what drives the Kremlin's engagement with the region, how local actors respond to Russian policy, and the role Russia is carving out for itself in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup>



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# The Soviet Union and the Middle East

Russia is no newcomer to the Middle East. For centuries, Imperial Russia traded and fought with Persia and the Ottoman Empire, while the Arab World "lay just outside the limit of St. Petersburg's geopolitical ambitions."<sup>2</sup>

The Soviet Union would eventually reverse that order, albeit more out of necessity than choice. Bursting into the region like a bull in a china shop after the Second World War, it took Soviet dictator Josef Stalin only a few years to alienate every regional power of significance. In the late 1940s, a short-lived Soviet flirtation with Kurdish and Azeri separatism tipped Iran into the pro-Western camp;<sup>3</sup> military saber-rattling set neutral Turkey on the path to NATO membership;<sup>4</sup> and support for Israeli independence repelled the rising regional force of Arab Nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Stalin then turned against Israel, too.<sup>6</sup>

Although these were mostly self-inflicted wounds, they were nonetheless extremely

harmful to Moscow's strategic position. The three nations regarded in Moscow as the Middle East's northern tier – Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan – were consistently prioritized in Soviet geopolitical thinking over the mostly Arab nations further south.<sup>7</sup> As a result of Stalin's policy blunders, however, Moscow would remain at a crippling disadvantage in Turkey and Iran for the duration of the Cold War.

The growth of Soviet influence across the Arab World in the 1950s and 1960s provided some recompense. Communist doctrine remained unpopular for its atheism, but the Soviet Union's outspoken support for Third World liberation struggles struck a chord with Arab nationalists.<sup>8</sup> Anti-colonialism mingled with dreams of social equality, and Arab politics already bristled against the West over a host of grievances: Israel's 1947–1949 expulsion of the Palestinians, the 1954–1962 Algerian War, the 1955 Baghdad Pact, and the 1956 Suez Crisis, to name just a few.

By loosening the shackles of ideology, offering assistance to new and struggling nations, and latching on to popular nationalist causes such as the Palestinian struggle, Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, was able to leapfrog the Turkish-Iranian wall and establish new bases

<sup>2</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *What Is Russia Up to in the Middle East?*, Polity Press, 2018, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 110 ff; Alexey Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin*, Routledge, 2018, p. 23. Vasiliev notes that Soviet-Iranian relations improved after 1963, when the Shah promised not to allow US missiles to be based in Iran. Vasiliev 2018, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> Talal Nizameddin, *Russia and the Middle East: Towards a New Foreign Policy*, St Martin's Press, 1999, p. 221–222; Vasiliev 22–23. Turkey joined NATO in 1952, in what Trenin calls "a major coup for the West in the Cold War." Trenin 2018, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> The Soviet Union was the first country to recognize Israel, and Communist Czechoslovakia delivered much-needed arms to the Jewish forces. Aryeh Dayan, "The Communists Who Saved the Jewish State," *Ha'aretz*, May 9, 2006, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.4904990>.

<sup>6</sup> Soviet-Israeli relations deteriorated rapidly after 1948, alongside an anti-Semitic outburst in the Soviet Union itself that culminated in the so-called Doctor's Plot and was ultimately

aborted only by Stalin's death. Primakov traces the anti-Jewish campaign to a cynical ploy by feuding party chiefs. See Yevgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present*, Basic Books, 2009, p. 254–259.

<sup>7</sup> Afghanistan had served as an arena for great power conflict already in the 19th century, during the Russian-British "great game." The significance accorded to Iran and Turkey is not difficult to understand. Both are regional powers with considerable cultural influence, whose imperial pasts are closely intertwined with Russia's own. Their combined population is larger than that of modern Russia and each is strategically located in its own way, dominating the opposite shores of the Black Sea and the Caspian. Iran has large hydrocarbon resources and overlooks the world's most oil-rich region, the Persian Gulf, and the oil trade chokepoint at the Hormuz Straits. Turkey's Bosphorus Straits control access to the Black Sea, which, to quote the British specialist on Soviet strategy Michael McCWire, becomes in times of war a "grenade in Russia's gut." Michael McCWire, "The Middle East and Soviet Military Strategy," *Middle East Report* No. 151, March–April 1988.

<sup>8</sup> Vasiliev 2018, p. 24–27.



of support in the Arab parts of the Middle East.<sup>9</sup>

The centerpiece of the Soviet Union's new regional position was Egypt, where a military ruler, Gamal Abdel-Nasser, had seized power from the British-backed King Farouq. Although he started out closer to the United States, Abdel-Nasser was soon disenchanted with America's reluctance to sell him modern weaponry for the conflict with Israel. A pioneering, Moscow-facilitated weapons deal with Czechoslovakia in 1955 broke the West's monopoly on arms sales to the Arab states and drew Abdel-Nasser into the Soviet orbit. By the end of the 1950s, Egypt had emerged as the Third World's largest recipient of Soviet military aid and a jumping-off point for continued Soviet penetration of the region.<sup>10</sup>

Although Egypt remained Moscow's primary client, the Soviet Union soon established friendly ties with other republican-leftist regimes in Algeria, Libya, South Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, in addition to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

However, even if these nations cooperated with Moscow and ordered copious amounts of Soviet arms, the Kremlin's control over their behavior was very limited. Only South

Yemen was fully Soviet-aligned and under the control of a Marxist-Leninist party, and even there the Kremlin struggled to master local politics.<sup>11</sup> As a rule, the Soviet Union's regional partners were stubborn, prickly nationalists and inveterate authoritarians who would not share power either domestically or with foreign allies.<sup>12</sup> Like their US rivals, Soviet leaders repeatedly found "the tail wagging the dog," in that they were dragged against their will into unwanted disputes by Middle East allies that were "confident that circumstances would compel Moscow to go along."<sup>13</sup>

Apart from the leftist and nationalist republics, most of the rest of the Middle East remained solidly attached to the US-led Western camp, particularly the conservative kingdoms of the Persian Gulf. Most of the Gulf monarchies did not even have diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, Kuwait being a prominent exception.

Moscow had also severed diplomatic relations with Israel after the Six-day War of 1967, in which Jewish forces overran Soviet-backed Arab armies, and the Kremlin regularly castigated Israel as an outpost of US imperialism.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, while Soviet anti-Zionism was harsh and "laced with doses of anti-Semitism," Moscow's leaders stuck to the idea of some type of territorial or political compromise, instead of

<sup>9</sup> At the ideological level, Khrushchev oversaw a pragmatic softening of Party doctrine in the 1950s and 1960s, which made it known that Moscow wanted friendly ties with non-Communist groups and nations, as long as they showed signs of a "socialist orientation." Such status would soon be bestowed as "a matter of political expediency," almost like diplomatic recognition. Irina Filatova, "The Lasting Legacy: The Soviet Theory of the National-Democratic Revolution and South Africa," *South African Historical Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 3, 2012, pp. 507–537.

<sup>10</sup> Nizameddin 1999, p. 24; Vasiliev 2018, p. 35–36.

<sup>11</sup> As the senior Party official and Middle East specialist, Karen Brutents, recalled in 1998: "Despite the very close – closer than with any other Arab state – relations with South Yemen, where there were about 500 Soviet military advisers and at different times from 1.5 to 4 thousand civilians, we were not able to seriously affect the course of events in this small country." Cited in Vasiliev 2018, p. 162.

<sup>12</sup> Apart from South Yemen, no Soviet-allied Arab state allowed Moscow-backed Communist parties much room for maneuver.

For example, Abdel-Nasser continued to crack down on Communists intermittently in the 1950s and 1960s, even at the height of his relationship with the Soviet Union. In 1965 the Egyptian Communist Party was forced to dissolve in return for a subservient role within Abdel-Nasser's own Arab Socialist Union. In Iraq, the Baath Party massacred members of the Iraqi Communist Party when it briefly ruled the country in 1963. When the Baathists returned to power in 1968, they sought to co-opt Communists, largely to please the Soviet Union. However, around the time of Saddam Hussein's takeover in the late 1970s, the party was again persecuted and driven underground, where it joined the opposition and condemned the Iraqi government as "fascist." Nonetheless, Iraqi-Soviet ties continued to develop, and Soviet officials reluctantly turned a blind eye to the plight of their Iraqi comrades. For a useful survey of how Soviet-backed Communist parties fared in various Middle Eastern nations, see Vasiliev 2018, pp. 130–159.

<sup>13</sup> Primakov 2009, p. 156, 182–183.

<sup>14</sup> Primakov 2009, p. 259–261.



endorsing the call by Arab radicals for Israel's destruction.<sup>15</sup>

To all involved, the Israeli-Arab conflict was the region's central political issue, arousing interest across the world and raw passion in the Middle East. Each superpower regarded it as an arena in which it had to prove its worth, even as both "shared a healthy fear of the Arab-Israeli conflict taking on global proportions."<sup>16</sup> The closest call came during the October 1973 war, when the Soviet Union threatened to intervene unless Israel was stopped from once again routing the Egyptian Army, to which the White House responded by raising its nuclear alert level. This had a "sobering effect" and both sides quickly backed down to enforce a ceasefire.<sup>17</sup>

By then, Egypt had begun to slide out of the Kremlin's embrace, looking for a better deal from the United States. Moscow watched with mounting dismay as President Anwar al-Sadat, who had taken power on the death of Abdel-Nasser in 1970, expelled Soviet advisers, closed Soviet naval bases, and finally signed the 1978 Camp David Accords, which pulled Egypt out of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Sadat's defection was a blow from which Moscow's regional influence would never recover, and it has lingered in Soviet and Russian policymaking as a memento of the danger of over-committing to fickle local leaders. With Egypt gone, Moscow was forced to lean more heavily on Syria to remain relevant in Arab-Israeli affairs, but Soviet strategy was now entirely defensive

and reactive, and Syria's Hafez al-Assad proved a difficult, Machiavellian partner.

The 1979 fall of the Shah of Iran, a key US ally, briefly seemed as if it might turn the tables back in Moscow's favor. The Politburo did its best to court the new Shia Islamist regime, including by stopping arms deliveries to Saddam Hussein's Iraq when he attacked Iran in 1980 and launched a war that would last until 1988.<sup>18</sup> However, Ayatollah Khomeini's anti-Communism turned out to be almost as fierce as his anti-Americanism, and Tehran remained coldly suspicious of the Soviet Union.

Another seemingly positive development for the Soviet Union was the 1978 Saur Revolution in Afghanistan, which brought Marxists to power in this impoverished but strategically important neighbor. However, the Communist takeover had not in fact been engineered by the Soviet Union and served only to destabilize an already pliable neighbor.<sup>19</sup> Success soon turned to disaster as rival Afghan Communist factions fought among themselves while terrorizing the population to such an extent that the countryside exploded in rebellion. Soviet leaders began to fret about the possibility that Kabul might flip, Egypt-style, to the US side, or that the regime could fall to hostile fundamentalists, as in Iran.<sup>20</sup>

In late 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to replace the leadership in Kabul with a more pliable faction.<sup>21</sup> The invasion sparked worldwide protest and tarnished Moscow's image in the Islamic world. From the Kremlin's point of view, the invasion had been a defensive move, well

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<sup>15</sup> Nizameddin 1999, p. 111.

<sup>16</sup> Primakov 2009, p. 253.

<sup>17</sup> Sergey Radchenko, "Stumbling Toward Armageddon," *New York Times*, October 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/09/opinion/stumbling-toward-armageddon.html>.

<sup>18</sup> In a February 1981 speech, Brezhnev even hopefully suggested that the "liberation struggle can also be waged under

the banner of Islam" but still there were no takers. Trenin 2018, p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Vasiliev 2018, p. 209–211.

<sup>20</sup> Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*, Harper Collins, 2009, pp. 1–14, 49–50; Vasiliev 2018, p. 216.

<sup>21</sup> On the background to the war and its conduct, see Feifer 2009 and Vasiliev 2018, p. 208–238.



within its own sphere of influence but, however argued, it was a terrible mistake. US, Saudi Arabian, and Pakistani support quickly powered up the Islamist guerrillas, trapping the Soviet Union in an unwinnable ten-year war that drained resources, alienated allies, demoralized the Soviet citizenry, and killed more than one million Afghans.<sup>22</sup>

No less significantly for the Middle East, the anti-Soviet struggle also drew Arab volunteer fighters to the Afghan side, giving rise to the militant fundamentalist ideology now known as Salafi-jihadism. When the Soviet Union began to withdraw in 1988, one group of such fighters led by Osama bin Laden created al-Qaeda to continue the war outside Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup>

### Middle Eastern Reactions to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

Voting record on UN General Assembly Resolution ES-6/2, which deplored the invasion and called for an immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops:

*Voted in favor:* Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates

*Abstained/absent:* Algeria, Libya, North Yemen, Sudan, Syria.

*Voted against:* South Yemen

The resolution passed on January 14, 1980, with 104 votes in favor, 18 votes against and 8 abstentions.

Source: United Nations Yearbook 1980

By the time Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, the Soviet Union was backsliding economically and politically. It was stuck in a hopeless war in Afghanistan and "had no trustworthy ally in the Middle East."<sup>24</sup> Even Iraq had begun to drift away from the Soviet side, seeking US and Gulf Arab aid against Iran, and all of Moscow's Arab partners were failing to pay the debts they had amassed over years of arms supplies. Making matters worse for the hydrocarbon-dependent Soviet economy,

oil prices plummeted in 1985, partly due to Saudi Arabia's overproduction.

While enacting liberalizing reforms at home, Gorbachev also tried to put Soviet foreign policy on a more sustainable footing by pulling out of Afghanistan and seeking coexistence and cooperation with the West. His doctrine of "New Thinking" thawed relations with Israel and the Gulf monarchies, but spelled bad news for the Soviet Union's traditional Arab partners.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> "Conservative estimates put Afghan deaths at 1,25 million, or 9 percent of the population, with another three-quarters of a million wounded." Feifer 2009, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Camille al-Tawil, قصة الجهاديين العرب : القاعدة وأخواتها, Dar al-Saqi, 2007, p. 33–34.

<sup>24</sup> Nizameddin 1999, p. 40.

<sup>25</sup> Nizameddin 1999, pp. 45 ff, 56.



Oil-dependent Algeria fell into disarray in 1988. After its first free elections were aborted by a 1992 military coup, there followed a devastating civil war. Communist South Yemen withered amid byzantine infighting and economic decay, and was ultimately swallowed up by North Yemen in a 1990 merger. Libya and Syria sputtered on in dysfunctional stagnation, but the anti-Western bomb plots of Libya's leader, Moammar al-Gaddafi, drew Washington's wrath and finally led the Soviet Union to tire of him. In 1986, Gorbachev declared that he would no longer be funding Syria's rubble-burning arms race with Israel, which cooled relations with Syria and made Assad look for ways to mend fences with the United States.

Saddam Hussein's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait provided a dramatic endpoint to the Soviet era in the Middle East. Moscow first joined the chorus of condemnation and voted for an intervention at the UN, but Soviet policy then bogged down in "confused, shifting, contentious and contradictory" messages as Gorbachev's New Thinking ran up against opposite reflexes among Communist Party hardliners.<sup>26</sup> As the Soviet Union stood aside, the United States took charge of a coalition that easily ousted the Iraqi Army from Kuwait, setting the stage for a new era.

The Soviet Union reached its long-overdue end with a whimper in December 1991. Left alone and ringed by 14 newly independent nations, a truncated and disoriented Russia

would now be forced to find its own role on the world stage.<sup>27</sup>

## Post-Soviet Russian Middle East Policy

As independent Russia looked to the Middle East, it was now free of the ideological shackles that had limited Soviet policy in so many ways, but Russia was also far weaker than the Soviet Union and preoccupied with problems at home and in the near abroad. The end of the war in Afghanistan and then of the Soviet Union did not mean that Moscow could stop worrying about the Caucasus and Central Asia region. Former Soviet territory had crumbled into a messy cluster of smaller Sunni Muslim nations, several of them prone to separatist, religious, or ethnic unrest that, to Russian leaders, looked like an invitation to foreign interference via Turkey or Iran. Islamist radicalism was already seeping into the region from the Arab World and Afghanistan, raising fears that it would serve as a conveyor belt for Middle East problems into Russia itself, the population of which is 10–15 percent Sunni Muslim.

The early independence years under Boris Yeltsin, who served as Russia's president from 1991 to 1999, saw little activity in the Middle East. The Foreign Ministry continued to build on Gorbachev's legacy by repairing relations with the Gulf Arab monarchies, with an eye to new trade opportunities in

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<sup>26</sup> Graham E. Fuller, "Moscow and the Gulf War," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1991, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/1991-06-01/moscow-and-gulf-war>. Tension over the Kuwait War was one of the reasons behind Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze's December 1990 resignation, and did much to sour the mood inside the Soviet regime. The hardliners' criticism focused on the loss of prestige involved in abandoning a "strategic ally" (per the Soviet-Iraqi 1972 Treaty of Friendship of Cooperation), as well on the economic losses that would inevitably follow. Despite Baghdad's pro-US turn in the 1980s, the Soviet Union still had

major economic interests in Iraq and some estimates put potential Soviet losses from the conflict at \$18 billion. However, Gorbachev's stance also won the Soviet Union some Gulf Arab economic aid and credits. Nizameddin 1999, pp. 61–65, 189–190.

<sup>27</sup> As Russian Middle East expert Dmitri Trenin has put it, "The Soviet Union was about an idea. Russia's idea is about Russia itself." Quoted in Michael Young, "The View from Moscow," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, January 14, 2019, [carnegie-mec.org/diwan/78114?lang=en](https://www.carnegie-mec.org/diwan/78114?lang=en).



particular. However, the Middle East still stood for less than 1 percent of Russia's annual trade in the mid-1990s.<sup>28</sup> Moscow also began to build a new and close relationship with Israel, aided by the fact that Soviet Jewish emigration had created a large Russian-speaking population in Israel.

"In the past our country relied on just a handful of states in the region – Iran, Iraq, Libya, etc. But that was an extremely unfortunate choice," Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev said when touring the Gulf monarchies in 1992. "Now we prefer to deal with stable, moderate regimes."<sup>29</sup>

Contacts with former Cold War partners such as Syria and Algeria dropped off precipitously. They had little to offer except to repay their enormous Soviet-era military debts and, no matter how much Moscow complained, they did not. However, Russia chose to maintain a little-used naval depot in the Syrian port city of Tartous, which, after bases in Vietnam and Cuba closed in 2002, would become its last remaining military facility outside former Soviet territory.

## The Chechen Trauma

In 1994–1996 and again from 1999, Moscow waged an exceedingly violent war against separatist fighters in Chechnya, a Sunni Muslim region in the Caucasus. Recalling the specter of Afghanistan, the Chechen conflict was distasteful and demoralizing even to Russians who supported the crackdown, and it created serious friction

with Sunni Muslim nations abroad. It did not help that Russia also backed Serb forces against Sunni Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–1995) and Kosovo (1998–1999).

Although the Chechen rebellion had begun as a nationalist affair, fighters were mobilized using religious slogans and the uprising quickly radicalized amid civilian trauma and displacement. A contributory factor was the involvement of Salafi fundraisers and clerics in the Gulf who sent money, religious literature, and even a small number of Arab volunteer fighters into the Caucasus, many of them veterans of the Afghan war.<sup>30</sup>

The Chechen conflict thus drew Russia's attention once more to the risk of religious extremism and instability along its southern border, where Caucasian and Central Asian nations were exposed to political and religious influences from the Middle East, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey. Chechen violence also inspired a harsh Islamophobic backlash in Russia, undermining cohesion in wider society.

Throughout the late 1990s, Russia accused Saudi Arabia of supporting the Chechen insurgency or, which was perhaps more likely, turning a blind eye to those who did. Riyadh denied Russia's accusations, but the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States changed the situation. Now Washington also brought pressure to bear on Saudi Arabia to shut down jihadi-linked charities, including those involved with Chechnya. As the fighting in Chechnya died

<sup>28</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russian Policy Across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods," Chatham House, February 21, 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russian-policy-across-middle-east-motivations-and-methods>, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Nizameddin 1999, p. 190.

<sup>30</sup> Mark N. Katz, "Saudi-Russian relations in the Putin era," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 4, Autumn 2001, pp. 612–617; The most famous of these foreign fighters was a Saudi veteran of the Afghan jihad known as Khattab, who worked with a hardline band of Chechen rebels led by Shamil Basayev and contributed greatly to their indoctrination with Salafi-jihadi

teachings. In 1996, the Egyptian jihadi and current al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was arrested in Dagestan. Zawahiri apparently managed to keep his identity secret and ended up being charged with nothing more serious than illegally crossing the Russian border. On his release, he left for Afghanistan to join Osama bin Laden. Paul Tumelty, "The Rise and Fall of Foreign Fighters in Chechnya," *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, January 31, 2006, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-rise-and-fall-of-foreign-fighters-in-chechnya>; Camille al-Tawil, قصة الجهاديين : القاعدة وأخوانها، العرب، Dar al-Saqi, 2007, p. 290.



down in the early 2000s, the Russia-Saudi Arabia relationship recovered.

Afghanistan was another major concern throughout the 1990s, radiating instability and extremism into post-Soviet Central Asia and southern Russia. The Taliban movement, which seized Kabul in 1996, had quickly linked up with the Chechen rebels and also began to host Uzbek and other Central Asian extremists. Moscow tried to weaken the Taliban by funneling weapons to the coalition of warlords known as the Northern Alliance, but had no stomach for deeper involvement in Afghan politics.

Ironically, the Shia theocracy in Iran would turn out to be Russia's most useful partner in containing Islamist militancy. Iran had by and large ignored the Chechen issue, partly because it was uneasy over the rebels' Saudi and Sunni-Salafi links – Iran is Shia and hostile to Saudi Arabia – but mostly to avoid provoking the Russians. According to Rouzbeh Parsi, head of the Middle East Program at the Swedish Institute for International Affairs, "It doesn't matter how Muslim the Chechens are – Iran would still never lift a finger to help them, because the relationship with Russia trumps that." He characterizes the Russia-Iran relationship as "highly pragmatic on both sides."<sup>31</sup> Tehran also shared Moscow's hostility to the Taliban for reasons of its own, and worked effectively with Russia to shut down a 1992–1997 civil war in Tajikistan.

Moscow and Ankara were more clearly at odds over Chechnya, although neither side wanted to let their differences slide out of control. In early 1994, Russia delivered a subtle warning to Turkey that any interference in Chechnya would be countered by support for the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a former Soviet client still battling the Turkish government. Taking the hint, Ankara agreed in a series of secret talks to curb support for the Chechens, even as it continued to assail Russia's conduct in public.<sup>32</sup> Moscow returned the favor when PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was expelled from Syria in 1998 by denying him asylum. He was later captured in Kenya and brought to Turkey, where he remains in jail.<sup>33</sup>

The Chechen rebellion petered out in the early 2000s. Russia won the war by applying overwhelming force and splitting the separatist movement. Hardline remnants of the insurgency continued to melt into the international jihadi landscape and committed a long string of gruesome suicide attacks on Russian civilians.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, the pro-Russian local government wound up in the hands of Ramzan Kadyrov, an ex-rebel backed by the Kremlin. Kadyrov's clannish and religiously conservative state-within-a-state has embarrassed Moscow by kidnapping and shooting dissidents and engaging in all manner of organized crime.<sup>35</sup> However, Chechnya is not a hornets' nest the Kremlin is eager to kick again, and so Kadyrov has been left to his own devices.

<sup>31</sup> Author's interview with Rouzbeh Parsi, Stockholm, October 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Olson, "The Kurdish Question and Chechnya: Turkish and Russian Foreign Policies Since the Gulf War," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. IV, No. 3, March 1996, <https://www.mepec.org/node/4813>.

<sup>33</sup> On Öcalan's 1998–1999 odyssey and on the PKK more generally, see Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, New York University Press, 2007, pp. 271–279.

<sup>34</sup> Adam Taylor, "Analysis: The recent history of terrorist attacks in Russia," *Washington Post*, April 3, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/04/03/the-recent-history-of-terrorist-attacks-in-russia>. In 2007, a "Caucasus Emirate" was declared as a jihadi government across the Caucasus. It would later be displaced by a local affiliate of the so-called Islamic State. "The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?," International Crisis Group, *Europe and Central Asia Report* No. 238, March 16, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/north-caucasus/north-caucasus-insurgency-and-syria-exported-jihad>, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> "Like Walking a Minefield: Vicious Crackdown on Critics in Russia's Chechen Republic," *Human Rights Watch*, August 2016, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/chechnya0816\\_2.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/chechnya0816_2.pdf).



The wars in Chechnya are now slowly fading into history, but their unsavory and unsatisfying legacy is very much present. The situation in the Caucasus continues to serve as a potent reminder to Russian policymakers of the role that Islamism and chaos in the Middle East can play in unsettling Russia's "soft underbelly."

## Reasserting Russian Particularity

By the mid-1990s, the Western-friendly foreign policies represented by Kozyrev were being edged aside by resurgent nationalism and superpower nostalgia. Russia's turn back to a more hard-nosed and independent foreign policy was symbolized by the rise of Yevgeny Primakov, a well-known Arabist and former *Pravda* Middle East correspondent who assumed office first as foreign intelligence chief (1991–1996), then as foreign minister (1996–1998), and finally as prime minister (1998–1999).

Primakov had no desire to return to the "bogus ideological concerns" of Soviet days, but he envisioned a Russia that stood clearly apart from the West, although not necessarily in constant opposition to it.<sup>36</sup> He repeatedly challenged the United States and Europe, including over Kosovo, which drew applause from a public frustrated by Russia's post-Soviet international impotence.

In the Middle East, Primakov worked to rebuild relations with Iraq, lobbying for softer UN sanctions and condemning US air raids in 1996 and 1998. He also sought out

other actors shunned by the West. Under Primakov, the Foreign Ministry would meet with both Israel and Hezbollah, brushing aside Israeli and US objections to what they regarded as a terrorist group.<sup>37</sup> The protests were perhaps part of the attraction – Primakov's Russia wanted to carve out a niche for itself that was specifically *not* in the Western mold.

Nonetheless, Primakov had a weak hand to play in the region closest to his heart. He tried in vain to raise Russia's profile by engaging with the Israel-PLO and Israel-Syria peace talks, but was rejected: "We only need one intermediary and that should be the United States," snapped Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres. Primakov found such attitudes "quite unacceptable" but could do very little about it.<sup>38</sup> Louder language and sharper elbows could not conceal the fact that Russia remained a weak and crisis-ridden nation, which defaulted on its debts in 1998.<sup>39</sup>

Primakov had hoped to succeed the ailing Yeltsin but was blindsided by Vladimir Putin's sudden ascent from the depths of the intelligence apparatus.<sup>40</sup> Putin was appointed acting president on December 31, 1999, and he was formally elected in March 2000. Originally perceived as the more West-friendly figure of the two, Putin continued to build on parts of Primakov's popular, nationalist legacy. In particular, he adopted Primakov's overarching vision of a "multipolar" world, in which Russia should coexist with the United States as a major power among others.

<sup>36</sup> Primakov 2009, p. 62.

<sup>37</sup> Nizameddin 1999, p. 176.

<sup>38</sup> Primakov 2009, p. 296-297.

<sup>39</sup> Post-Soviet economic woes also blunted Moscow's tools for Middle Eastern engagement: Russia's cadre of regional specialists withered, as trained linguists and political scientists left for better-paid jobs in the private sector or at universities abroad. By 1997, even the Institute for Oriental Studies in Moscow – a venerable institution particularly close to the heart

of Primakov, who had been its head from 1977 to 1985 – had seen its salaries so badly hollowed-out that "the academic and nonacademic staff spend most of their working hours at other jobs in the private sector." Garay Menicucci, "The Privatization of Russian Middle East Studies," *Middle East Report*, No. 205, Winter 1997.

<sup>40</sup> Michail Zygar, *Männen i Kreml: Inifrån Putins hov*, Ordfront, 2018, p. 12–25. Primakov quickly made his peace with Putin after losing the power struggle and was allowed to ride off into the sunset as head of Russia's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, with occasional side missions as a foreign policy fixer.



## Middle East Engagement under Putin

According to Talal Nizameddin, a scholar of Russian-Arab relations, Moscow's Middle East policy in the late 1990s aimed "to ensure stability, to minimalise US influence, and to allow fair access to trade and general economic relations."<sup>41</sup> In this calculus, some countries loomed larger than others: Turkey, Iran, and Iraq were deemed most worthy of Russia's attention, while Syria, Israel, and Saudi Arabia formed a second tier.<sup>42</sup>

The Arab World remained largely unaffected by the wave of political liberalization that had swept the world after the fall of the Soviet Union. With the exception of South Yemen, which had ceased to exist, and Algeria, which had ended its one-party state and was just emerging from civil war, little seemed to have changed since the final years of the Cold War. Moammar al-Gaddafi continued to rule Libya, Saddam Hussein governed Iraq, and Hafez al-Assad's son, Bashar, had inherited power in Syria. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remained the Arab World's central preoccupation, and Yasser Arafat still controlled the PLO.

However, the regional balance was no longer the same. The Arab World's center of gravity had shifted decisively toward the Gulf, and oil-wealthy conservative kingdoms such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar were now top names in Arab politics. By 2002, the victory of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's reformist-Islamist AK Party in Turkish elections would

add another element to the mix by making Turkey a player in Arab politics.

On September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda attacked the United States, which reacted by launching a "war on terror" that has yet to end. In crisis, Putin saw opportunity: he offered himself up to US President George W. Bush as a counterterrorism partner, highlighting Russia's history with Chechen jihadis. Soon after the attacks, Russia also facilitated the US invasion of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, even though it brought American troops uncomfortably close to Russia's own borders.

However, problems began to pile up soon after. Russian leaders were angered by new US missile defense plans (officially aimed at Iran) and NATO expansion into Eastern Europe. They were irritated by US criticism of the Kremlin's democratic record and of its abuses in Chechnya, and troubled by US influence creeping deeper into Central Asia after the fall of the Taliban.

The US rush to war in Iraq in 2002–2003 put a deeper crack in the US-Russian relationship.<sup>43</sup> Russia opposed the war, anticipating correctly that it stood to lose a major arms client and oil industry partner, and that Saddam Hussein's fall would whip up regional instability. Most of all, Putin refused to accept that the United States could unilaterally depose undesirable governments. For the first time since the mid-1980s, Moscow took a hard stance against Washington over a Middle East problem. Russian diplomats linked up with France in the UN Security Council to deny Bush the UN resolution he had sought, and Primakov was dispatched to Baghdad on a quixotic peacemaking mission.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Nizameddin 1999, p. 270.

<sup>42</sup> Nizameddin 1999, p. 254.

<sup>43</sup> Zygur 2018, pp. 54–60. On Russian objections to US missile defense plans, see Ida Nygaard and Una Hakvåg, "Why Russia opposes a NATO missile defence in Europe – a survey of common explanations," *Norwegian Defense Research Institute*

(FFI), FFI-2013/00111, January 3, 2013, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/13-00111.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup>

John Tagliabue, "France and Russia Ready to Use Veto Against Iraq War," *New York Times*, March 6, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/06/international/europe/france-and-russia-ready-to-use-veto-against-iraq-war.html>; Primakov 2009, pp. 320–321.



Nothing worked: the United States and its “coalition of the willing” invaded as planned in March 2003. Instead of demonstrating Russia’s determination, the invasion of Iraq highlighted its irrelevance, humiliating Putin and poisoning US-Russian relations. American talk about a campaign to democratize the Middle East, with voices on the US right advocating invasions of Syria and Iran next, struck a raw nerve in Russia, where policymakers and nationalist media were already fretting over the phenomenon of “color revolutions.”

The term refers, in Russian politics, to a string of civil uprisings across the former Eastern Bloc, most notably in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005). The protests targeted Russia-friendly autocrats, were Western-endorsed and, to a much lesser extent, Western-supported. Since the early 2000s, growing numbers of Russians, including policymakers, have embraced the idea that the United States is trying to topple Russian allies by both military (Iraq) and “hybrid” (color revolutions) means; and that unless Russia acts decisively the tumbling dominoes may reach the Kremlin itself.

Ironically, events in Iraq also made another, even greater, contribution to the radicalization of Russian foreign policy: they helped trigger the 2003–2008 surge in oil prices that lifted Russia out of its post-Soviet economic malaise and gave Putin the muscle to match his growing ambition.

## Talk to All, Trade with All

The Iraq war transformed Arab politics. Rising oil prices and the installation of a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad empowered Iran, which in turn triggered deep fears among the Saudi-led Gulf Arab

kingdoms. Saudi-Iranian rivalry dovetailed with the Sunni-Shia conflict that had erupted across occupied Iraq, and this lethal combination sent ripples of religious sectarianism across the region.

Russia had little interest in Sunni-Shia infighting but was considerably more keen to share in the oil bonanza. Yeltsin had never bothered to visit the Middle East and neither had Putin in the first four years of his presidency, but that changed. In December 2004, the Russian president made a first state visit to Turkey, quickly followed by Egypt, Israel, and Palestine in 2005. In 2006–2008, he toured Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Turkey (again), the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and Libya. These were nations in which Russia had commercial and political interests. A former Soviet ally such as Syria, which offered neither, did not make the president’s itinerary.

Nonetheless, the Russian president moved to re-energize ties with Moscow’s traditional partners as part of a broader strategy to cut loose from the Soviet Union’s tangled economic legacy.<sup>45</sup> After a decade and a half of fruitless haggling over multi-billion debts owed by Algeria, Syria, Iraq, and Libya, Russia simply wrote them off to clear the way for new contracts, especially arms exports – this time on strictly commercial terms.

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<sup>45</sup> Lyudmila Alexandrova, “Why Russia forgives debts,” TASS, May 22, 2014, [tass.com/opinions/763287](http://tass.com/opinions/763287).



### Russian debt write-offs to Middle East nations

Syria	\$9.8 billion	2005 <sup>46</sup>
Algeria	\$4.7 billion	2006 <sup>47</sup>
Iraq	\$12 billion	2008 <sup>48</sup>
Libya	\$4.5 billion	2008 <sup>49</sup>

Politics were not entirely neglected. Russian diplomats continued to show up to Middle East peace conferences, even though they had little influence.

In 2002, the Foreign Ministry began a campaign of Muslim outreach and sought entry to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Putin argued that Russian Muslims “have a right to feel part of the Muslim world,” apparently in an attempt to repair some of the damage done by the Chechen war.<sup>50</sup> Observer membership was granted in 2005.<sup>51</sup>

Efforts were also made to promote Russia’s own politics. The state-run Arabic-language propaganda station *Rusiya al-Yawm*, based on the *Russia Today* template, began television broadcasts by satellite in 2007. However, although Moscow was eager to air its opinions, it mostly tried to remain aloof from regional disputes. In part, this was a consequence of Russia’s lingering weakness – a lesson taken to heart after the Iraq war – but it also reflected a determination not to get trapped in divisive,

Soviet-style partisanship. Moscow’s new game plan was to actively but prudently build ties across all ideological divides, focusing on economic gain and shunning investments that did not make sense on their own terms.<sup>52</sup> As Putin later put it, in his trademark, off-color way:

Back in Soviet times, you’ll recall the developments in Egypt, where we invested unilaterally for political and ideological reasons. And then – bang – the situation changed, and where did all our investments end up? It would not be proper to say it to this audience, but you understand what I mean.<sup>53</sup>

Events in Syria and Lebanon in 2004–2006 demonstrated the limits of Russia’s commitment to old allies, and the priority often accorded to more important Western or regional partners.

Russia had drawn closer to Bashar al-Assad’s government in Syria after the Iraq war, irritated by US threats against

<sup>46</sup> *ديون-من-73-تشطب-روسيا*, Aljazeera, January 25, 2005, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/ebusiness/2005/1/25/ديون-من-73-تشطب-روسيا>.

<sup>47</sup> Olivia Marsaud, “La Russie efface la dette algérienne,” RFI, March 10, 2006, [www1.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/075/article\\_42379.asp](http://www1.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/075/article_42379.asp).

<sup>48</sup> Sami Amara, “موسكو تشطب 12 مليار دولار من ديون العراق,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 12, 2008, <http://archive.aawsat.com/print.asp?did=458198&issueno=10668>.

<sup>49</sup> Oleg Shchedrov, “Russia writes off Libya’s cold war debt in exchange for contracts,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/17/business/worldbusiness/17iht-rusbiz.4.12106999.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Steven Lee Myers, “Putin To Attend Islamic Conference,” *New York Times*, October 16, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/16/world/world-briefing-europe-russia-putin-to-attend-islamic-conference.html>.

<sup>51</sup> “Observer’s role strengthens Moscow’s relations with OIC,” *Arab News*, June 12, 2011, [www.arabnews.com/node/380454](http://www.arabnews.com/node/380454).

<sup>52</sup> “I would like to tell you that in the past decade we did not make any major investments in any country for ideological reasons,” Putin told the State Duma in 2012. “Everything what happened was on a market basis. We did not present any gifts to anyone.” “Prime Minister Vladimir Putin delivers his report on the government’s performance in 2011 to the State Duma,” Russian Prime Minister’s Office, April 11, 2012, [archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/18671/print](http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/18671/print).

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*



Damascus and eager to push back against regime change narratives.<sup>54</sup> However, when Saudi Arabia, the United States, and France teamed up to pressure Assad to pull his army out of Lebanon, where it had loitered since 1976, Moscow urged Assad to comply. Even after street protests brought Lebanon's pro-Syrian cabinet down and forced Assad's army out in the spring of 2005, Moscow resisted the temptation to fall back on its color revolution narrative. Instead, Russian diplomats seemed to accept that the Syrians had blundered and would have to pay the price.<sup>55</sup> When Israel then invaded Lebanon in response to a Hezbollah attack in the summer of 2006, Moscow adopted a nuanced approach that apportioned blame on both sides, even though it grew more critical of Israel's refusal to accept a ceasefire as the war went on.<sup>56</sup>

The Iranian nuclear crisis offered another look at Russia's balancing of different interests. Iran had come under Western pressure, underpinned by threats of an Israeli or perhaps even a US attack, after secret elements of its nuclear research program were revealed in 2002–2003. Suspicions that Iran was building a nuclear bomb were serious enough, but they gained added importance due to Iran's increasingly influential role in Iraqi, Lebanese, and Palestinian politics.

Moscow took an active role in the P5+1 Group established in 2006 by the five permanent members of the Security Council and Germany. The role of the P5+1 was to develop the right mix of UN sanctions and negotiations to get Iran to commit to a monitored, nonmilitary nuclear program. Part of the appeal of the P5+1 construct was that it satisfied the Kremlin's craving for recognition as a major power, but Russia had many other reasons to get involved. It disliked the idea of an Iranian bomb, both in and of itself and because it might trigger copycat efforts across the Middle East.<sup>57</sup> Moscow was equally concerned, or perhaps more concerned, by the risk of a breakdown in negotiations. In the absence of a peaceful resolution, US or Israeli attacks might spark massive instability in Russia's backyard. Last but not least, Russia wanted leverage over Iran, a highly prioritized goal going back to Soviet days and before. Despite some tension with hardline US and European actors, Russia therefore stayed engaged with the P5+1, trying to pitch creative solutions and often appearing as Iran's best friend in the group.<sup>58</sup>

In 2007, *Russia in Global Affairs* editor Fyodor Lukyanov described Russia's "somewhat erratic" Middle East policy as a three-pronged effort:

- Russia wanted to restore its independent relevance and great-

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<sup>54</sup> Vassili 2018, p. 384-389.

<sup>55</sup> The protests had been triggered by the February 2005 murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, a Saudi-French ally and leader of Lebanon's Sunni community. Hariri's death was widely blamed on Assad and his Lebanese allies (in 2011 an international tribunal formed by the UN indicted members of Hezbollah for the murder) and became a rallying point for an otherwise disparate coalition of nations and groups that wanted Syrian forces out of Lebanon. Russia refused to blame Damascus and rejected talk of UN sanctions, but made no meaningful effort to help Assad defeat Saudi, US and French pressure. I am grateful to Hanna Notte for insights on Russia's attitude to the Hariri affair and the Syrian presence in Lebanon.

<sup>56</sup> For example, "Security Council debates escalating crisis between Israel, Lebanon; UN officials urge restraint, diplomacy, protection of civilians," Security Council, SC/8776, July 14, 2006, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8776.doc.htm>; "Russia's

Position on Middle East Conflict," Russian Foreign Ministry, August 3, 2006, [www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/conflicts/-/asset\\_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/395882](http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/395882).

<sup>57</sup> Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said in 2018 that Saudi Arabia would build its own atomic bomb "as soon as possible" if Iran were to acquire a nuclear weapon. "Saudi Arabia pledges to create a nuclear bomb if Iran does," BBC, March 15, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43419673>.

<sup>58</sup> In 2009, Moscow immediately accepted the disputed re-election of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called the protests an "internal affair of Iran." Natalya Shurmina and Guy Faulconbridge, "Russia, China congratulate Ahmadinejad on vote win," Reuters, June 16, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-president-sb/russia-china-congratulate-ahmadinejad-on-vote-win-idUSTRE55F0YA20090616>.



power status through involvement in the Israel-Palestine peace process, and by constructively engaging “rogue” nations and groups shunned by the West.

- Russia wanted to maintain regional stability by preventing a US attack on Iran, but also by pragmatically seeking solutions to the wars in US-occupied Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Last but not least, Russia needed to pay special attention to oil and gas producers such as Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Qatar, and Iran, in order to promote Russian energy interests.<sup>59</sup>

Beyond the Middle East, however, the Kremlin’s attitude to the West was taking a more confrontational turn. In a much remarked-on speech to the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin launched a scathing attack on US interventionism and unilateralism, making clear Russia’s rejection of the US-led post-Cold War order. The speech touched only briefly on the Middle East but where it did, Putin once again stressed the need for stability:

The increasing social tension in depressed regions inevitably results in the growth of radicalism, extremism, feeds terrorism and local conflicts. And if all this happens in, shall we say, a region such as the Middle East where there is increasingly the sense that the world at large is unfair, then there is the risk of global destabilisation.<sup>60</sup>

## The Medvedev Interregnum

In May 2008, Putin’s designated successor, Dmitry Medvedev, took over as president while Putin slid into Medvedev’s old job as prime minister, thus respecting the constitution’s two-term limit. As a leading light of the Kremlin’s liberal wing, Medvedev was thought to want closer ties with the West and more focus on economic development, but it was not clear how much power he had. Putin continued to wield influence from behind the scenes and was widely believed to be planning to retake the presidency in 2012, which in fact he did.

Friction with the United States and Europe continued to grow during Medvedev’s single term as president. In 2008, a brief war with Georgia drew Western condemnation and sent a chill through Russia’s European neighbors. The war also prompted a major military build-up. Although Russia had easily defeated Georgia, a much smaller country, the performance of its armed forces had been lackluster. Flush with oil wealth, the Kremlin responded by initiating the “most radical military reform since the creation of the Red Army,” drawing up an unprecedented 19 trillion ruble (\$635 billion) budget for 2011–2020.<sup>61</sup> The aim was to modernize the military in line with a longer-term goal of creating a “combat-ready force consisting of contracted professionals.”<sup>62</sup>

Russia’s military spending spree primarily sought to make up for two decades of neglect, but the reforms also reflected the Kremlin’s “broadly consistent, albeit pessimistic, strategic assumptions” about a “Hobbesian” future riven by sub-state strife,

<sup>59</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, “Russia’s Path in the Middle East,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, November 28, 2007, [eng.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/n\\_9861](http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/n_9861).

<sup>60</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy,” Russian presidency, February 10, 2007, [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034).

<sup>61</sup> Moneghan 2017, p. 69; Susanne Oxenstierna, “Russian Military Expenditure,” in Gudrun Persson (ed.), *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective—2016*, Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), FOI-R--4326--SE, December 2016, p. 140.

<sup>62</sup> Moneghan 2017, p. 69.



extremist ideologies, hybrid and transnational threats and intensified great-power resource competition.<sup>63</sup> In such a world, Russia would need both a powerful deterrent force and a capacity for quick deployment in troublespots beyond its borders.

While there was no specific Middle Eastern element to the military build-up, it did call for a restored blue-water navy and for a Russian military presence in the Mediterranean.<sup>64</sup> That brought renewed attention to the dilapidated refueling station at Tartous in Syria, and by 2008 a repair and expansion program was under way.<sup>65</sup> Still reeling from events in Iraq and Lebanon and in acute need of major allies, Assad could not have been more eager to comply. On a visit to Russia in 2008, he praised the Russian operation in Georgia as a “defense of its legitimate interests” and called for a larger Russian role in Syria and the Middle East.<sup>66</sup> Two years later, with new arms contracts concluded, Medvedev traveled to Damascus for the first-ever visit to Syria by a Russian president.

## Russia and the Arab Spring

The wave of uprisings that rolled across the Arab World in early 2011 were certain to attract the attention of Russia, a nation bound to the Middle East by “numerous invisible threads.”<sup>67</sup> Whereas many US and European politicians rallied enthusiastically to the side of the protestors, envisioning a youthful democracy movement patterned

on the European revolutions of 1989, Russia’s leaders read the situation quite differently. To them, the Arab uprisings seemed both more complex and more sinister: a chaotic rupturing of a stagnant and flawed socio-political order, likely to provoke long-term unrest, extremism, and perhaps interstate wars. The situation was not a 1989, but maybe an 1848.

Russian media was filled with conspiracy theories portraying the uprisings as nefarious color revolutions hatched in the United States. This line of reasoning apparently had some takers in the Kremlin, too, but senior Russian officials generally took a more sober view. For example, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov highlighted the Arab World’s social and political gridlock as a proximate cause of the upheaval, although he noted that external interests had quickly “superimposed” themselves on internal contradictions.<sup>68</sup>

Putin, who was still prime minister, bluntly pointed the finger at Western governments over what he saw as their naive encouragement of revolutionary change in a region that was not ready for it. “Let’s take a look back at history, if you don’t mind,” he told reporters in February 2011:

Where did Khomeini, the mastermind of the Iranian revolution, live? He lived in Paris. And he was supported by most of Western society. And now the West is facing the Iranian nuclear programme. I remember our partners calling for fair democratic elections in the Palestinian territories. Excellent!

<sup>63</sup> Moneghan 2017, pp. 22–28, 32. See also Jakob Hedenskog, Gudrun Persson, and Carolina Vendil Pallin, “Russian Security Policy,” Gudrun Persson (ed.), *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective—2016*, Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), FOI-R--4326--SE, December 2016, p. 114–116.

<sup>64</sup> Guy Faulconbridge, “Russian navy to start sorties in Mediterranean,” Reuters, December 5, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-navy/russian-navy-to-start-sorties-in-mediterranean-idUSL0518563620071205>.

<sup>65</sup> “البحرية الروسية تعود الى ميناء طرطوس السوري,” BBC Arabic, September 13, 2008, [news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/news/newsid\\_7613000/7613724.stm](https://www.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/news/newsid_7613000/7613724.stm).

<sup>66</sup> “الأسد يدعم روسيا بالكامل ويشجب المحاولات الغربية لعزلها,” al-Ittihad, August 21, 2008, <https://bit.ly/2H1aBJ0>.

<sup>67</sup> “Visit to Uzbekistan,” Russian Presidency, June 14, 2011, [www.en.special.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/11558](http://www.en.special.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/11558).

<sup>68</sup> Vasiliev 2018, p. 430-432.



Those elections were won by Hamas. They declared it a terrorist organisation and confronted it shortly thereafter.<sup>69</sup>

“Look at the current situation in the Middle East and the Arab world,” Medvedev told a counterterrorism meeting in February 2011, when the regional upheaval was still in its early stages:

It is extremely difficult and great problems still lie ahead. In some cases it may even come to the disintegration of large, heavily populated states, their break-up into smaller fragments. The character of these states is far from straightforward. It may come to very complex events, including the arrival of fanatics into power.

Medvedev then struck a more conspiratorial note, which appeared to reference Chechnya and the color revolution narrative:

In the past such a scenario was harboured for us, and now attempts to implement it are even more likely. In any case, this plot will not work. But everything that happens there will have a direct impact on our domestic situation in the long term, as long as decades.<sup>70</sup>

Moscow’s lack of enthusiasm for the Arab Spring included the early uprisings in January and February 2011 that toppled Tunisian President Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali and President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, despite the fact that both men were longstanding Western allies.

<sup>69</sup> “Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso give a news conference following the meeting of the Russian government and the EU Commission,” Russian Prime Minister’s Office, February 24, 2011, [archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/pressconferences/14257](http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/pressconferences/14257).

“It was clear that the subject of Islamists was a fundamental obstacle to Russia, which preferred regimes not allied to itself in Egypt and Tunisia over [the prospect of] a democratic regime that carried a risk of Islamists coming to power,” concluded Azmi Bishara, a Palestinian politician and intellectual who, during the Arab Spring, worked hand in glove with the Qatari government to support dissidents in Syria and elsewhere.<sup>71</sup> However, the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt did not directly affect Russia’s economic or political position. Despite the president’s ominous rhetoric, official Russia did not seem to be in a panic, and there was anyway little that Moscow could do to influence events in either country.

The uprisings in Libya and Syria, which erupted in February and March 2011, were a different matter. Both nations had a Cold War history with Russia, but Moscow reacted not so much in solidarity with the incumbents as in vehement revulsion at their opponents. To Russia, the forces challenging Gaddafi and Assad appeared to be disorderly, US-backed, color revolution-style rebellions with a strong Sunni Islamist streak – a nightmarish cocktail of everything the Russian national security elite had been primed to fear and oppose since the break-up of the Soviet Union.

## The Libyan Turning Point

On instructions from President Medvedev, Russia abstained in the March 2011 vote on UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which empowered member states to “take all necessary measures [...] to protect civilians” in Libya. Western and Gulf Arab nations went to war as soon as the text was passed,

<sup>70</sup> “Dmitry Medvedev held a meeting of the National Anti-Terrorism Committee in Vladikavkaz,” Kremlin website, February 22, 2011, [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/10408](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/10408).

<sup>71</sup> Azmi Bishara, سوريا درب الالام نحو الحرية: محاولة في التاريخ الراهن, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013, p. 480.



and France, the United Kingdom, and Qatar played early lead roles in what had soon evolved into a NATO-led operation to overthrow Gaddafi. Russia did not take part in the hostilities, but its abstention was crucial to passing the resolution.

“Mr Gaddafi did not have many friends anywhere in the world, including in Russia, but everyone loved Libya for its oil reserves and other riches,” says Dmitri Trenin of the Carnegie Moscow Center, summarizing the Kremlin’s attitude: “So we’ll join with the West and we’ll be among the winners in that war and we’ll get our share of the spoils.”<sup>72</sup>

As Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov noted later, however, the Russian government “had more than one opinion” on how to handle the Libyan crisis, and the main dissenter was none other than Vladimir Putin.<sup>73</sup> Even though the prime minister had no formal role in foreign policy, Putin informed reporters that in his “personal opinion,” resolution 1973 was akin to “a medieval call to crusade” that would endanger Russia by encouraging US interventionism.<sup>74</sup> Medvedev fired back: he took full responsibility for the vote and said talk of a crusade was “unacceptable.”<sup>75</sup> Putin backed down but continued to grumble over what he allegedly considered an “unforgivable sign of weakness” on Medvedev’s part.<sup>76</sup> Soon enough, Russia

began to protest the bombings in Libya, and its diplomats claimed that the West had willfully misinterpreted resolution 1973. Medvedev later joined the chorus of critics, complaining that he had been exposed to a “cynical deception at the UN Security Council round-table.”<sup>77</sup>

The argument was transparently insincere – Russian diplomats were skilled enough to understand the significance of a phrase like “all necessary measures.” Russia’s behavior was nonetheless perplexing. *Al Jazeera’s* Moscow bureau chief, Jamal al-Erdawi, asked: “How is it conceivable that the Russian Foreign Ministry with all its accumulated expertise in dealing with the West and its policies could not read the situation after the no fly zone in Libya.”<sup>78</sup>

Some observers have interpreted the disagreement between Putin and Medvedev as political theatrics, but that does little to explain what Russia was trying to achieve by permitting the intervention. By contrast, the Russian journalist Mikhail Zygar views the Libya vote as a sincere disagreement and places it as the starting point of a rift with personal, factional, and ideological dimensions that culminated in Putin’s September 2011 announcement that he would seek a third term.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Dmitri Trenin, telephone, November 2018. Bogdanov also highlighted Arab League support for the resolution as a reason for Russia’s abstention. Vasiliev 2018, p. 435.

<sup>73</sup> Vasiliev 2018, p. 433.

<sup>74</sup> “Prime Minister Vladimir Putin comments on the situation in Libya during a meeting with workers at the Votkinsk plant in Udmurtia,” Russian Prime Minister’s Office, March 21, 2011, [archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/14542](http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/14542).

<sup>75</sup> “Statement by Dmitry Medvedev on the situation in Libya,” Russian Presidency, March 21, 2011, [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/10701](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/10701).

<sup>76</sup> Zygar 2018, p. 280. As the conflict worsened, Putin lamented Russia’s loss of “multi-billion contracts,” warned against killing Gaddafi, and returned to attacking the intervention as such. “Is there a lack of crooked regimes in the world?” he asked in April. “What, are we going to intervene in internal conflicts everywhere?” “Vladimir Putin and Borut Pahor hold a news

conference after Russian-Slovenian talks,” Russian Prime Minister’s Office, March 22, 2011, [archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/pressconferences/14568](http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/pressconferences/14568); “Prime Minister Vladimir Putin delivers a report on the government’s performance in 2010 in the State Duma,” Russian Prime Minister’s Office, April 20, 2011, [archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/14898](http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/14898); Gleb Bryanski, “Putin: Libya coalition has no right to kill Gaddafi,” Reuters, April 26, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-libya-idUSTRE73P4L920110426>.

<sup>77</sup> “Медведев обвинил НАТО в циничном обмане в Ливии,” Rosbalt, November 13, 2018, [www.rosbalt.ru/russia/2018/11/13/1746113.html](http://www.rosbalt.ru/russia/2018/11/13/1746113.html). Translation by Liliia Makashova.

<sup>78</sup> Jamal al-Erdawi, “الأساطير المؤسسة للقيتو الروسي على الربيع العربي,” *Aljazeera Studies Center*, October 26, 2011, [studies.aljazeera.net/ar/issues/2011/10/2011102693953182329.html](http://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/issues/2011/10/2011102693953182329.html).

<sup>79</sup> Zygar 2018, pp. 270–274, 280–283.



By then, Gaddafi's regime was crumbling. The Libyan leader was dragged out of hiding and killed by rebels in October 2011. As no functioning government stood ready to take his place, Libya sank into failed state status, torn between hyper-local militias, Islamist radicalism, and proxy conflicts. If Russia (or Medvedev) had wagered that allowing a Western intervention would bring rewards, that bet failed.<sup>80</sup> "In the end the Russians got nothing from this operation. They saw how this, in their own thinking, very magnanimous and very friendly gesture was taken for granted," Trenin says. "There was this bitter feeling of being used, of being duped, of being sidelined."<sup>81</sup>

## Nationalist-Authoritarian Retrenchment

The Russian parliamentary elections of December 2011 were widely seen as a dress rehearsal for Putin's re-election as president in the following spring. It was therefore all the more disturbing to the prime minister when allegations of vote-rigging drew large crowds of angry demonstrators on to the streets of Moscow. The demonstrations raised the specter of a popular protest movement forming in time for the presidential polls. To Putin and his allies, a Russian color revolution appeared to be in the making, perhaps with the support of disgruntled elements around Medvedev.<sup>82</sup> In early December, the prime minister lashed out at US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton,

accusing her of having instigated the protests.<sup>83</sup>

Putin safely regained the presidency in March 2012 and the demonstrations petered out. Even so, the combination of real and perceived threats in 2011 and 2012 accelerated the authoritarian and nationalist turn already under way in Russia. New legislative and bureaucratic measures to control politics and shore up internal security have since been adopted at a "startling rate," while official rhetoric and domestic propaganda have promoted nationalist, anti-Western themes.<sup>84</sup> Narratives about Russia as a beleaguered island of common sense and conservative values, defending itself and the principle of national sovereignty against the West's nihilistic and hegemonic impulses have become central to how the Kremlin describes international affairs.<sup>85</sup>

In terms of foreign policy, "the watershed moment really is the Arab Spring," according to Hanna Notte, a specialist on Russian foreign policy. After March 2011, Moscow's quest for economic gain slid down the ladder of priorities in the Middle East and national security-related goals rose to the top. This transformed Russian Middle East policy into "a pro-status quo, anti-color revolution policy."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> On the contrary, officials overseeing Russian arms exports spoke of "tens of billions" in potential future losses. Alexei Anishchuk, "Gaddafi fall cost Russia tens of blns in arms deals," Reuters, November 2, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-libya-arms/gaddafi-fall-cost-russia-tens-of-blns-in-arms-deals-idUSL5E7M221H20111102>.

<sup>81</sup> Interview, Trenin.

<sup>82</sup> Zygar 2018, p. 284 ff.

<sup>83</sup> David M. Herszenhorn and Ellen Barry, "Putin Contends Clinton Incited Unrest Over Vote," *New York Times*, December 8, 2011,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/09/world/europe/putin-accuses-clinton-of-instigating-russian-protests.html>.

<sup>84</sup> Hedenskog, Persson, and Vendil Pallin 2016, p. 101 ff.

<sup>85</sup> "The very notion of state sovereignty is being washed out," Putin complained at a meeting of Russia's Security Council in 2014. "Undesirable regimes, countries that conduct an independent policy or that simply stand in the way of somebody's interests get destabilised. Tools used for this purpose are the so-called colour revolutions, or, in simple terms—takeovers instigated and financed from the outside." "Security Council meeting," Russian Presidency, July 22, 2014, [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46305](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46305). See also Hedenskog, Persson, and Vendil Pallin 2016, pp. 114–116.

<sup>86</sup> Interview, Notte.



## Syria as a Problem and an Opportunity

Protests erupted in Syria in March 2011, just before the Libyan intervention. By the time US President Barack Obama and his allies called on Assad to step aside in August 2011, the Kremlin had already resolved “not to let Syria become another Libya.”<sup>87</sup>

Already in the first weeks of Syrian demonstrations, a pro-opposition bloc crystallized around the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar, as well as several other Western or Sunni Arab governments. For Russia to join Iran on Assad’s side was hardly unproblematic, given that Russian diplomats had spent two decades trying to woo some of the nations in the pro-opposition bloc, but Putin never seems to have wavered: “Far from shying away from the Syrian crisis, Russia sought to play a leading role,” concludes Christopher Phillips in *The Battle for Syria*, a book on the international dimension of Syria’s civil war.<sup>88</sup>

The Kremlin’s strong pro-Assad stance seemed to be motivated by a combination of factors, chief among them a visceral rejection of any US-backed regime change. There was also a perceived need, after Libya, to prove Russia’s reliability as an ally, and a desire to protect lingering economic and strategic interests, such as arms sales and the Tartous base. To these were added a strong mistrust of the Syrian opposition and hostility toward its armed elements,

some of which had links to extremists in Russia, as well as a fear that the likely consequence of Assad’s fall would be either direct Islamist rule or an ungoverned space that would allow extremists to organize.<sup>89</sup>

To prevent either outcome, Russia seemed prepared to support almost any type of behavior by the Syrian government, which bombed civilian targets and ‘disappeared’ thousands of citizens.<sup>90</sup> Officially, Russia insisted that its commitment was to international law and to the Syrian state, not to Assad personally. Numerous US-Russian meetings and attempts to engineer a peace process took place on that basis, but US officials later concluded that Moscow’s willingness talk about a political transition was just a way of stringing them along.

“Their main goal was to prevent regime change and keep Assad in power, and they humored us with discussions about governance and other stuff,” recalled Philip Gordon, who coordinated Obama’s Middle East Policy from 2013 to 2015. “We tried to proactively say, what about this, or how about this list of potential leaders? And they would say, yeah whatever. In retrospect what’s clear is they wanted us to be defeated, they wanted to maintain a heavy Russian role, they wanted to prevent regime change, they wanted to fight jihadis. And Putin’s counterterrorism recipe is quite well known – bomb them.”<sup>91</sup>

After a major chemical attack on opposition-controlled areas in August 2013,

<sup>87</sup> Interview, Trenin.

<sup>88</sup> Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale University Press, 2016, p. 92.

<sup>89</sup> There are reports that the Russian authorities tolerated the flow of Russian jihadis to Syria in the early stages of the war, hoping to rid themselves of remaining Caucasus insurgents in this way and, perhaps, to avoid trouble at the February 2014 Sochi Olympics. However, by the latter half of 2014 – after the rise of IS – the authorities clamped down hard on what remained of the insurgency. International Crisis Group 2016, pp. 16–18.

<sup>90</sup> “Syria: ‘Between prison and the grave’: Enforced disappearances in Syria,” *Amnesty International*, MDE 24/2579/2015, November 5, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2579/2015/en>; “Syrian and Russian forces targeting hospitals as a strategy of war,” *Amnesty International*, March 3, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/03/syrian-and-russian-forces-targeting-hospitals-as-a-strategy-of-war>

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Philip Gordon, former special assistant to the president and White House coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Persian Gulf (2013–2015), Washington, DC, October 2018.



Russia and the United States jointly agreed to eliminate Assad’s chemical weapon stockpile through the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), as an alternative to US airstrikes. The deal eventually succeeded in destroying 1300 tonnes of chemicals, and there briefly seemed to be a chance to put US-Russian relations on a sounder footing. Reports of cheating and of sporadic chemical weapon use persisted, however, and Russia blocked every US attempt to hold Assad accountable.<sup>92</sup> In the end, the episode created more ill-will than sustained collaboration.

Even before the chemical weapons deal had run its course, Russian-Western relations

had deteriorated dramatically for reasons unrelated to the Middle East. In the spring of 2014, Russia invaded and forcibly annexed Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula, bringing Russian-Western relations to their lowest point since the Cold War. The United States and the EU responded with economic sanctions, but Putin doubled down on what Ingmar Oldberg has characterized as a “mainly revisionist” foreign policy, seeking to upend elements of the post-1991 status quo and reassert a global role for Russia.<sup>93</sup> Increasingly, Syria, too, was framed in terms of Russian national interests – and in 2015 a Foreign Ministry spokesperson announced that a Libyan-style state failure in Syria would be “a direct threat to our national security.”<sup>94</sup>

### **Middle East Reactions to Russia’s Annexation of Crimea**

Voting record on UN General Assembly Resolution 68/262, which affirms Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty over Crimea

<i>Voted in favor (pro-Ukraine):</i>	Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Turkey
<i>Abstained/absent:</i>	Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Yemen
<i>Voted against (pro-Russia):</i>	Sudan, Syria

The resolution passed on March 15, 2014, with 100 votes in favor, 58 abstentions and 11 votes against.

Source: UN General Assembly voting record for resolution 68/262. “Territorial Integrity of Ukraine.” UN General

<sup>92</sup> Aron Lund, “Russia has finished off the UN’s Syria chemical attack probe. What now?,” IRIN News, November 20, 2017, [www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/11/20/russia-has-finished-un-syria-chemical-attack-probe-what-now](http://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/11/20/russia-has-finished-un-syria-chemical-attack-probe-what-now).

<sup>93</sup> Ingmar Oldberg, “Is Russia a status quo power?” Swedish Institute of International Affairs, *UI Paper* No. 1, 2016,

<https://www.ui.se/globalassets/butiken/ui-paper/2016/is-russia-a-status-quo-power---io.pdf>, p. 15.

<sup>94</sup> “МИД РФ: разрушение государственности Сирии станет угрозой национальной безопасности России,” TASS, September 18, 2015, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/2275002>. Translation by Liliia Makashova.



## The Russian Intervention

Russia launched an aerial intervention in Syria on September 30, 2015. Publicly, Russian diplomats cited the threat from the Islamic State (IS), a jihadi group that had seized large areas of Syria and Iraq in the summer of 2014 and which was already under attack from a US-led intervention. In practice, Russian jets bombed anyone who happened to stand in Assad's way. Regional reactions were predictably mixed.

"Victories are not declared at the start of the war," cautioned Ghassan Charbel, editor-in-chief of the Saudi-owned *al-Hayat* newspaper, adding, "It is difficult to imagine" that Putin "is planning to crush the entire Syrian opposition even at the cost of ruining his country's ties to the Sunni world."<sup>95</sup>

Ibrahim al-Amin of *al-Akhbar*, a Lebanese daily sympathetic to Hezbollah and Iran, was more enthusiastic: "Yesterday, Russia turned a new page in the history of the world." But Amin also warned that the war was far from over and that allies of Assad and Iran should not misunderstand Russia's motives: Moscow was acting as a "a supportive party, not a member of the resistance axis."<sup>96</sup>

In Egypt's *al-Shrouq*, the influential political journalist Fahmi Howeidi warned that Putin was stepping into a "swamp of blood," but took note of the fact that the intervention had changed the rules of the game: Assad could no longer be overthrown

militarily, and Russia would have a say in any future political deal.<sup>97</sup>

Many Arab commentators also viewed the intervention in terms of Moscow reclaiming a long-lost regional role. The veteran Egyptian pundit Mohammed Hassanein Heikal argued that Putin had exploited US weakness and European distraction to engineer, through Syria, a "restoration of the glory of the Soviet state."<sup>98</sup>

The intervention had certainly sent a signal about Russia's enhanced military capabilities. Characterized by "remarkable speed and sophisticated planning," the move into Syria appeared to be a testament to the effectiveness of its 2011–2020 military reforms.<sup>99</sup> "Moscow would not have intervened in the Middle East if it had not had the toolbox," notes Trenin, and it is hard to escape the conclusion that Syria must have seemed like a highly suitable nail for the Kremlin's brand new hammer.<sup>100</sup>

While the intervention's direct objectives were clear enough – save Assad, kill Islamists – it also seemed to have an international political component. Russian-Western relations were in the deep freeze due to the annexation of Crimea, and the one issue on which Russia had enjoyed the status it sought, the P5+1 Group's nuclear talks with Iran, had wrapped up earlier in the year. By intervening in Syria, Russia hoped to prove its mettle as a great power actor, box in the United States politically and "broaden the confrontation [with the West] on terms more favorable to itself."<sup>101</sup> Ultimately, the goal was to force "a

<sup>95</sup> Ghassan Charbel, "الشيطان الأكبر الروسي," *al-Hayat*, October 5, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2TtEDea>.

<sup>96</sup> Ibrahim al-Amin, "نحو شرق أوسط جديد," *al-Akhbar*, October 1, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2VCI2VF>.

<sup>97</sup> Fahmi Howeidi, "روسيا في مستنقع الدم," *al-Shrouq*, October 3, 2015, <https://bit.ly/1PftAfb>.

<sup>98</sup> "هيكل بوتين يريد استعادة أمجاد الدولة السوفيتية بتدخله في روسيا," *al-Masry al-Yawm*, October 9, 2015, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/824186>.

<sup>99</sup> Roger McDermott, "Russia's Strategic Mobility and its Military Deployment in Syria," FOI Memo 5453, RUFBS Briefing No. 31, Swedish Defence Research Institute, November 2015, [https://www.foi.se/download/18.2bc30cfb157f5e989c31823/1477482863831/RUFBS Briefing No. 31 .pdf](https://www.foi.se/download/18.2bc30cfb157f5e989c31823/1477482863831/RUFBS%20Briefing%20No.%2031.pdf), p. 1.

<sup>100</sup> Interview, Trenin.

<sup>101</sup> Kofman and Rojansky 2018, p. 4-5.



lukewarm friendship” on Washington without having to surrender gains in either Ukraine or Syria.<sup>102</sup>

Throughout late 2015 and 2016, the US administration found itself pelted with repeated Russian proposals on how to merge the two aerial interventions into a single anti-jihadi alliance. These were rejected out of hand. Washington had no interest in bestowing legitimacy on Putin’s Syrian project and viewed Russia’s bombardment of US-backed rebels as a hostile act, not a platform for collaboration. If Putin had sincerely believed he could use Syria to reset the broken relationship, it was a baffling misreading of Washington’s perspective – made all the more ironic by the US failure to understand the Kremlin’s ambitions in Syria.

While Russia did not get the recognition and cooperation it sought, it did turn the war around. Russian military tactics met with strong criticism from Western governments and human rights groups. Amnesty International warned of “horrific violations” of human rights.<sup>103</sup> Moscow brushed off the criticism, however, and its methods, while brutal, proved effective. In late 2016, Assad’s forces won a highly symbolic victory in the city of Aleppo.<sup>104</sup> “The disintegration of the Syrian state was prevented and the chain of colour revolutions that multiplied in the Middle East and Africa was cut short,”

Putin told a meeting of Defense Ministry officials.<sup>105</sup>

Shortly thereafter, the new US President, Donald J. Trump, began to scale back US involvement in Syria. Although the conflict continues to demand Moscow’s attention, Russia appears to have secured a strategic victory for itself and for Assad. The material costs have been limited and so far remain bearable, even considering Russia’s financial problems.<sup>106</sup> In so doing, Russia has defended and expanded its foothold in the eastern Mediterranean by securing long-term control of the Tartous naval facility and adding a nearby airbase at Hmeymim.<sup>107</sup>

## Flipping Turkey

Russian success in Syria was not just a military endeavor. The political effects of the intervention were no less important, as Russia forced external backers of anti-Assad forces either to fall in line or to get out of the way. Jordan’s King Abdullah II, a grudging supporter of the rebels, to whom the Syrian war seemed a hopeless mess, immediately called for the Russian presence to be dealt with constructively, which, he said, offered “an opportunity to move this in the right direction.”<sup>108</sup>

The most consequential change, however, came from Turkish President Recep Tayyip

<sup>102</sup> Hanna Nötte, “Russia in Syria: Domestic Drivers and Regional Implications,” Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, *Policy Paper* No. 8, January 2017, [www.kas.de/wf/en/33.47817](http://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.47817), p. 24.

<sup>103</sup> “Syrian and Russian forces targeting hospitals as a strategy of war,” *Amnesty International*, March 3, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/03/syrian-and-russian-forces-targeting-hospitals-as-a-strategy-of-war>; “Syria: Putin takes hypocrisy to a new level with remarks on Raqqa civilian deaths,” *Amnesty International*, July 17, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/07/syria-putin-takes-hypocrisy-to-a-new-level-with-remarks-on-raqqa-civilian-deaths>.

<sup>104</sup> Aron Lund, “A Turning Point in Aleppo,” Carnegie Middle East Center, December 1, 2016, [carnegie-mec.org/diwan/66314](http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/66314).

<sup>105</sup> “Expanded meeting of the Defence Ministry Board,” Russian Presidency, December 22, 2016, [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53571](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53571).

<sup>106</sup> Interview with Fredrik Westerlund and Jakob Hedenskog, deputy research directors with the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) project on Russian Foreign, Defence and Security Policy (RUFSP), Stockholm, October 2018. See also Kristian Åtland, Tor Bukkvoll, Johannes Due Enstad, and Truls Tønnessen, “Russlands militære intervensjon i Syria – bakgrunn, gjennomføring og konsekvenser,” Forsvarets forskningsinstitutt (FFI), FFI 16/00500, March 15, 2016, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/16-00500.pdf>, p. 33-34.

<sup>107</sup> Lund, *Syria’s Civil War*, 2018, p. 27.

<sup>108</sup> “Interview with His Majesty King Abdullah II,” Website of King Abdullah II, November 11, 2015, <https://kingabduallah.jo/en/interviews/interview-his-majesty-king-abduallah-ii-4>.



Erdogan. Initially a fierce opponent of the Russian presence, his air defenses had downed a Russian Su-24 alleged to have crossed into Turkish airspace in November 2015, raising fears of a Russia-NATO clash. Instead of responding directly to the incident, Moscow ramped up its bombing of Turkish-backed Syrian rebels. Economic sanctions were instituted that nearly halved Russian-Turkish trade between 2014 and 2016, dealing a serious blow to Turkey's already ailing economy.<sup>109</sup> As in the 1990s, Russia also played the Kurdish card, apparently delivering one or several anti-aircraft missiles to PKK rebels for use against military aircraft in Turkey.<sup>110</sup>

By the early summer of 2016, Turkey had had enough. Erdogan no longer saw a path to victory in Syria and faced a bigger problem: the United States had thrown its support behind pro-PKK Kurdish groups in the war on IS. According to persistent rumors, Russia had also provided timely assistance in staving off a coup against Erdogan in July 2016.

Turkish-Russian hostility transformed into wary cooperation as Russia facilitated a series of Turkish military interventions and Turkey redirected its rebel clients toward Syrian PKK sympathizers.<sup>111</sup> By 2017, Russia, Turkey, and Iran were holding regular talks in the Kazakh capital, Astana, trading favors to steer the war's endgame. The unspoken assumption seemed to be that Assad had won, but that Turkey might still hang on to certain border territories in the absence of a satisfying political resolution.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Selin Girit, "Turkey faces big losses as Russia sanctions bite," BBC, January 2, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35209987>.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with anonymous source, 2018; Erin Cunningham, "Kurdish militants reportedly shoot down Turkish security forces helicopter," *Washington Post*, May 14, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/05/14/kurdish-militants-just-challenged-turkish-air-power-in-a-major-way>.

<sup>111</sup> "After Erdogan went to St Petersburg [in August 2016] and sat face to face with Putin, he rebuilt the Syria strategy from

scratch." Aydin Selcen, Turkish political journalist and former diplomat, author interview, Istanbul, December 2018.

Putin has argued that the 2015 intervention staved off the worst possible outcome, not just for Russia but for the region and the world:

Full 'somalisation' of that region, complete degradation of statehood and infiltration of a significant part of the militants into the territory of the Russian Federation and into the territory of neighbouring states with which we have no customs barriers, or borders in fact, a visa-free regime [i.e., Turkey]. That would have posed a real, serious danger to us. But we have largely ruled out that risk by our actions, because we did a lot of damage to the terrorists in Syria [...and...] we have preserved Syrian statehood and in this sense helped stabilise the region.<sup>113</sup>

## After Syria: Taking Stock of Russia's New Role

Eight years after the Arab Spring, the Middle East is still seeking a new balance. Libya and Yemen have crumbled and could remain failed states indefinitely. Syria has broken apart into rival territories: Assad is in control of most of what matters but so far unable to reclaim the rest. Lebanon wallows in internal dysfunction but, like Jordan, has at least avoided a major breakdown. Iraq is still fragile after defeating IS, and Turkey struggles with a faltering economy and

scratch." Aydin Selcen, Turkish political journalist and former diplomat, author interview, Istanbul, December 2018.

<sup>112</sup> Aron Lund, Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), FOI-R--4640--SE, 2018, <https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI-R--4640--SE>, p. 29-30, 52-58, 64-65.

<sup>113</sup> "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club," Russian Presidency, October 18, 2018, [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58848](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58848).



tense internal politics under Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian rule.

In the Gulf region, the old rivalry between Qatar, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, on the other, has been fiercer than ever since 2017. Meanwhile, Iran's power has grown across the region, even though the Iranian economy is in terrible shape due to US sanctions.

Israel's military and political position has improved, but the country struggles to roll back Iranian influence in Syria and is internally drifting deeper into far-right ethno-politics in the absence of a solution to the Palestinian issue.

In North Africa, President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi's iron-fisted rule remains at risk due to Egypt's poor economic performance. Maghrebi giants Algeria and Morocco have changed little, but attempts to ram through a fifth term for Algeria's elderly and ailing president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, drew protestors on to the streets in early 2019. In Sudan, too, the economic distress that followed the secession of oil-rich South Sudan in 2011 has triggered major protests. Tunisia's fragile democracy still splutters on but the country is struggling to stay afloat economically.

In short, the region is not in a healthy state and Russia's leaders appear to feel fully vindicated in their early opposition to the Arab Spring.<sup>114</sup> Nonetheless, Russia has in some ways profited from the chaos of the post-2011 period.

Through Syria, Moscow has established itself as an active regional player with a "simultaneous ability to speak to every regional government while also possessing visible coercive power."<sup>115</sup> This influence has since spread beyond Syria, but Russia's lack of economic muscle is making it difficult to sustain new relationships and ambitions in the longer term.

"The bigger picture shows that politically, yes, there's a lot of progress, but it's not necessarily linked to real stuff that you can measure economically," argues Yury Barmin of the Russian International Affairs Council. "But maybe Vladimir Putin capitalizing on his influence in the Middle East financially is not the goal itself – maybe the optics of a huge presence is the end goal?"<sup>116</sup>

### The Gulf Arab Nations

Fears that Russia's relations with the Sunni monarchies in the Gulf would collapse over its support for the "Shia" camp of Damascus, Tehran and Hezbollah have proved unfounded. On the contrary, relations have intensified. Although unhappy about many of Russia's policy choices, Gulf Arab leaders have concluded that Moscow is an assertive and relevant power that must be engaged with constructively. They place value on Russia's "support for political stability and economic engagement without any human rights conditionality" and, with the exception of Qatar, share Moscow's disdain for the Arab Spring.<sup>117</sup>

Putin has held several meetings with current Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin

114 "Unsuccessful attempts to spread Western models of democracy to a social environment that is not suited for this have resulted in the demise of entire states and have turned huge territories into zones of hostility," Medvedev complained in 2016. Transcript of Dmitry Medvedev's speech at the 2016 Munich Security Conference, Russian Government, February 13, 2016, [government.ru/en/news/21784](http://government.ru/en/news/21784).

115 Stephen Blank, "The Foundations of Russian Policy in the Middle East," Jamestown Institute, October 2017,

<https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/WS1-Blank-FINAL.pdf>.

116 Interview with Yury Barmin, telephone, March 2019.

117 Wolfgang Mühlberger and Marco Siddi, "In from the Cold: Russia's Agenda in the Middle East and Implications for the EU," *EuroMesco Policy Brief*, No. 91, February 4, 2019, [https://www.euromesco.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Brief91-In-from-the-cold\\_Russia\\_Agenda\\_In\\_The\\_Middle\\_East-1.pdf](https://www.euromesco.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Brief91-In-from-the-cold_Russia_Agenda_In_The_Middle_East-1.pdf).



Salman since 2015. In a move symbolic of Riyadh's decision to engage with Russia despite disagreements over Syria and Iran, King Salman became the first Saudi monarch to visit Moscow in late 2017. Commenting on the visit, Salman al-Dawsari, the editor-in-chief of the royal family's *al-Sharq al-Awsat* daily, noted that "the return of the Russian bear" to the Middle East had provoked sharp disagreements over issues like Syria, but insisted that both nations "prefer to focus on the shared interests that exist on promising issues rather than on disagreements."<sup>118</sup>

For Saudi Arabia, constructive engagement with Russia is in part intended to prevent closer Russian alignment with Iran or Qatar. Saudi Arabia also shares Russia's preference for a region kept stable by pragmatic, non-Islamist autocrats; Egypt's Sisi is a model for what both sides can live with. Last but not least, both nations depend on high oil prices. Russia-Saudi Arabia cooperation in late 2018 was instrumental in bringing down the global output of crude oil by 1.4 million barrels per day, thereby increasing market prices<sup>119</sup>

Beyond top-level deals over oil production, however, Russian-Saudi trade is meager. Russia accounted for just 0.2 percent of Saudi foreign trade in 2016 and its investments in the Saudi Arabian economy were "insignificant."<sup>120</sup> "For some reason [Russian businessmen and officials] can't break that glass ceiling and it's really hard to

follow through on these deals," says Barmin. "A lot of promises but not much work, to be honest."<sup>121</sup>

Some Gulf leaders appear to be using Moscow to extract favors from their main patron, the United States, and the Saudi-Emirati conflict with Qatar has also spurred both sides to compete for the Kremlin's favor. All three nations are in talks about buying Russian arms, and Qatar made a rare, major investment in the Russian oil company Rosneft in 2016.<sup>122</sup> Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of the United Arab Emirates, who appears to see Russia as a fellow proponent of authoritarian anti-Islamism, has jetted back and forth from Moscow.<sup>123</sup>

Even so, Russian hopes for closer ties with the Gulf Arabs will struggle to overcome countervailing pressures from the United States and Russia's own lack of attractiveness as an economic partner. While cooperation might intensify in certain political and economic niches, Moscow seems unable to compete with the depth and breadth of US penetration of the Gulf region.

## Egypt

In Egypt, Russia faces some of the same obstacles as in the Gulf but seems to be making more headway. Although Putin pragmatically sought good relations with Mohammed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood democratically elected

118 Salman Al-Dawsari, "السعودية وروسيا ليستا خصمين", *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 5, 2017, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/1042826/السعودية-الدوسري-سلطان-الخصمين-ليستا-وروسيا>.

119 الملك سلمان وبوتين يتفقان على تعزيز العلاقات السعودية الروسية وضبط سوق "الطاقة", *al-Hayat*, February 20, 2019, [www.alhayat.com/article/4622250/سياسة-الخليج/العلاقات-السعودية-العلاقات-تعزيز-على-الطاقة-سوق-وضبط-الروسية-السعودية-العلاقات-تعزيز-على](http://www.alhayat.com/article/4622250/سياسة-الخليج/العلاقات-السعودية-العلاقات-تعزيز-على-الطاقة-سوق-وضبط-الروسية-السعودية-العلاقات-تعزيز-على).

120 Grigory Kosach and Elena Melkumyan, "Possibilities of a Strategic Relationship Between Russia and Saudi Arabia," Russian International Affairs Council, *Policy Brief* No. 6, August 2016, [russiancouncil.ru/upload/Russia-SaudiArabia-policy-brief-6-en.pdf](http://russiancouncil.ru/upload/Russia-SaudiArabia-policy-brief-6-en.pdf).

121 Interview, Barmin.

122 "السعودية تعزز قدراتها العسكرية بمنظومة أس 400 الدفاعية الروسية المتطورة", *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 5, 2017, <https://aawsat.com/print/1043361>; "روسيا تتلقى قيمة حصصة قطر في", *al-Arab* (Qatar), December 24, 2016, <https://s.alarab.qa/1045321>.

123 Liz Sly, "In the Middle East, Russia Is Back," *Washington Post*, December 5, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-the-middle-east-russia-is-back/2018/12/04/e899df30-aaf1-11e8-9a7d-cd30504ff902\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-the-middle-east-russia-is-back/2018/12/04/e899df30-aaf1-11e8-9a7d-cd30504ff902_story.html).



president in 2012, he immediately embraced Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi's 2013 military coup and has continued to praise the Egyptian president since. "Just look," Putin told reporters in 2014, "there are problems in Afghanistan; Iraq is falling apart; Libya is falling apart. If General el-Sisi had not taken control in Egypt, Egypt would probably be in turmoil now as well."<sup>124</sup>

Sisi's main backers are the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, but Russia was the first country to invite Sisi for a state visit after the coup, for which the Egyptian president later thanked Putin.<sup>125</sup> Moscow also stepped in to sell arms when Washington froze part of its military assistance to the Egyptian Army in October 2013.<sup>126</sup> Putin and Sisi have met nine times since 2013, and several so-called 2+2 meetings have been held between the countries' foreign and defense ministers.<sup>127</sup>

Egyptian-Russian relations were complicated in October 2015 when IS bombed a Russian aircraft flying from Sharm al-Sheikh to St Petersburg, killing 225 people.<sup>128</sup> Egyptian authorities initially refused to admit that the aircraft had been bombed, prompting Moscow to shut down tourist air travel – a painful blow to Egypt's already ailing economy. In February 2016 Sisi backed down, but flights did not resume

until 2018 due to continuing Russian complaints about Egypt's capacity to guarantee safe air travel.<sup>129</sup> Some suspect that Moscow may have used the tourism ban to win concessions on security affairs.<sup>130</sup>

Russia appears to be focused on economic gain and security affairs, but may also see symbolic value in rebuilding the relationship with Cairo. Egypt, in turn, sees the possibility of reducing its dependence on the United States, which in the eyes of its current leadership proved an unreliable ally in 2011, and of profiting from a meeting of minds with Putin over regional affairs. Sisi's "Egypt First" policies combine anti-Islamism and nationalism with a fixation on regional stability and national sovereignty, which is an excellent match with Russia's own regional priorities.<sup>131</sup>

What Egypt primarily needs is economic support, which Russia is not in a position to provide. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have extended billions of dollars in economic support to Egypt since 2013, and Russia is keen to get a slice of the pie.<sup>132</sup> In practice, Russian trade with Egypt has been dominated by arms sales, grain exports, and an agreement that Rosatom will build Egypt's first nuclear reactor, which has been celebrated by both countries as an important milestone.<sup>133</sup>

124 "Answers to journalists' questions," Russian Presidency, July 17, 2014, [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46236](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46236).

125 "روسيا تزيد تجارتها مع مصر عقب تردي علاقاتها بالغرب," *Aljazeera*, August 12, 2014, <https://bit.ly/2NJEON3>.

126 صحيفة فيدوموستي مصر وروسيا وقعتا بالأحر فالأولى صفقة أسلحة قيمتها 3 "مليارات دولار," *al-Ahram*, February 15, 2014, <http://www.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/259781.aspx>.

127 "Foreign, defense ministers of Russia and Egypt to meet next week," TASS, May 13, 2018, [tass.com/politics/1003990](https://tass.com/politics/1003990); "العمامة الاستعلامات زيارة السيسي لروسيا محطة مهمة في علاقات البلدين," *Sputnik Arabic*, October 16, 2018, <https://sptnkne.ws/jMEb>; Sly, "In the Middle East, Russia Is Back."

128 "FSB chief: Russian A321 plane blown up by homemade explosive device," TASS, November 17, 2015, [tass.com/politics/837087](https://tass.com/politics/837087).

129 "بالفيديو السيسي من أسقط الطائرة الروسية كان يقصد ضرب العلاقات مع روسيا," *al-Yawm al-Sabea*, February 24, 2016, <http://www.youm7.com/2600385>; Iyad Qasim, "بوتين يوقع مرسوماً," *Rusiya al-Yawm*, January 4, 2018, <https://ar.rt.com/jpcr>.

130 David D. Kirkpatrick, "In Snub to US, Russia and Egypt Move Toward Deal on Air Bases," *New York Times*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/world/middleeast/russia-egypt-air-bases.html>.

131 Michael Wahid Hanna and Daniel Benaim, "Egypt First: Under Sisi, Cairo Is Going Its Own Way," *Foreign Affairs*, January 4, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/2018-01-04/egypt-first>.

132 On Gulf support to Egypt, see e.g. "8 مليارات دولار مساعدات" *al-Arabiya*, July 9, 2013, <https://www.alarabiya.net/pdfServlet/pdf/eb499ac5-5766-4644-85bf-64aef8a887b1>; Khaled Hosni, "23 مليار دولار دعم واستثمارات," *al-Arabiya*, June 20, 2014, <https://www.alarabiya.net/pdfServlet/pdf/418ab454-9bca-4292-9bec-5902836f6e12>; Ahmed Sami Metwali, "أربع مليارات دولار من," *al-Ahram*, April 23, 2016, [www.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/503534.aspx](http://www.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/503534.aspx).

133 Wissam Abdelalim, "الرئيس السيسي يشيد بالجهود الروسية الجادة لتحقيق," *al-Ahram*, January 29, 2019, [gate.ahram.org.eg/News/2103163.aspx](https://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/2103163.aspx).



Security cooperation has also intensified, and there have been major arms deliveries and small but symbolic joint military exercises since 2016.<sup>134</sup> Russia and Egypt have even discussed a deal that would give Russia some form of access to Egyptian airbases.<sup>135</sup> However, Egypt has thus far been careful to maintain its post-Sadat partnership with Washington, and Sisi's outreach to Russia appears to represent an attempt to diversify rather than abandon its relationship with the United States.

Counterterrorism is another area of joint interest, not least in the light of the 2015 aircraft bombing. Like many other nations, Russia is concerned about threats to Egypt's internal order and views a stable Egypt as a cornerstone of Middle East security. Since the 2013 coup, Islamist violence has killed around 1400 members of the Egyptian security forces, which, in turn, have killed many times that number in a counterterrorism campaign marked by inefficiency and heavy-handedness.<sup>136</sup> Russia has nonetheless offered full-throated support for Sisi. For instance, Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev lauded the Egyptian president's efforts to "drive back that epidemic" during a visit to Cairo in the spring of 2019.<sup>137</sup>

Foreign policy also offers room for cooperation. Although Egypt does not officially take sides in the Syria conflict, Sisi clearly leans toward Assad and is hostile to the Islamist-dominated Syrian insurgency, which includes Muslim Brotherhood

members and a smattering of exiled Egyptian jihadis. In 2016, Sisi implicitly endorsed the Assad government by stating that "Arab national armies" should "impose control over their state territories and restore stability" in Libya, Syria, and Iraq.<sup>138</sup> Russia consequently supports Egyptian attempts to get involved in Syria's peace processes and has pursued policies friendly to Egypt in Libya (see below).

On the occasion of Putin's most recent visit in 2017, the official *al-Ahram* daily lauded Russia's role and influence in the Middle East, noting that both countries want to see the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen stabilized and have broadly similar views on the Israel-Palestine issue.<sup>139</sup> For its part, Russia's *Gazeta.ru* reported that Sisi had sought Putin's support against Islamists in Libya and against the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. In an aside, the newspaper noted that Sisi's translator had "accidentally or deliberately" addressed Putin as "Your Majesty," which, when it happened for the third time, "caused a slight smile from the Russian leader."<sup>140</sup>

## Israel

Russia's relationship with Israel has always been close and complicated, and the Syrian intervention has made it more so. On the one hand, 12 percent of Israel's population speak Russian as their first language and Putin is "the most pro-Israel, pro-Jewish leader Russia has ever known."<sup>141</sup> On the other hand, Russia is now working closely

134 مصر وروسيا تجريان التدريب المشترك (جماعة الصداقة 3) بمشاركة المظلات  
"بمشاركة المظلات" al-Masry al-Yawm, October 15, 2018,  
<http://www.youm7.com/3989617>.

135 In 2017. David D. Kirkpatrick, "In Snub to U.S., Russia and Egypt Move Toward Deal on Air Bases," *New York Times*, November 30, 2017,  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/world/middleeast/russia-egypt-air-bases.html>.

136 "Egypt Security Watch: Five Years of Egypt's War on Terror," Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, July 24, 2018,  
<https://timep.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/TIMEP-ESW-5yrReport-7.27.18.pdf>.

137 Abdelalim, "الرئيس السيسي يشيد بالجهود الروسية."

138 "السيسي لدعم الجيوش الوطنية في سوريا وليبيا والعراق," al-Arabi, November 23, 2016, <https://www.al-arabi.com/s/8152>.

139 "رأى الأهرام زيارة بوتين," al-Ahram, December 10, 2017,  
[www.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/626905.aspx](http://www.ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/626905.aspx).

140 Ignat Kalinin, "Сирия – Египет – Турция: дипломатический блиц Путина," *Gazeta.ru*, December 12, 2017,  
[https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2017/12/11\\_a\\_11350268.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2017/12/11_a_11350268.shtml).  
Translated by Lillia Makashova.

141 12 percent: Joshua Krasna, "Moscow on the Mediterranean: Russia and Israel's Relationship," Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/wp->



with Israel's chief adversaries, Iran and Hezbollah, in Syria, dominating airspace in which Israel seeks freedom of action.

Despite its strong ties to the United States, Israel has gone to great lengths to remain friendly with Russia. To the frustration of its Western allies, Israeli diplomats refused to show up for a UN vote condemning the annexation of Crimea, and the Israeli Foreign Ministry issued only a vague statement about the Skripal poisoning in the United Kingdom.<sup>142</sup>

Since 2015, Russia has laid down a fairly generous set of red lines for Israel's military activity in Syria. Israeli officials have claimed that the Russian military is helping to prevent Iran-Hezbollah arms smuggling through Syria to Lebanon, and Israeli-Russian understandings have allowed Israel to launch more than 200 airstrikes against alleged Iran- or Hezbollah-linked targets in Syria since early 2017.<sup>143</sup> To the frustration of Damascus and Tehran, the Kremlin has apparently informed Israel that it is free to do as it pleases as long as this does not endanger Russian soldiers or destabilize Assad's regime.

Russia's red line was put to the test in September 2018 when Syrian air defenses downed a Russian signals intelligence Il-20 off the Syrian coast during an Israeli raid, killing 15 crew members. Moscow blamed Israel for having triggered the incident and announced that it would retaliate by donating S-300 missiles to Syria. Until then, Russia had repeatedly threatened to deliver

the powerful air defense system to Syria but always ultimately held off from doing so in response to Israeli pressure and enticements.<sup>144</sup>

Israeli air raids in Syria soon picked up again, however, and neither side seemed willing to let the incident ruin relations. In February 2019, Putin finally agreed to meet Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, after a six-month boycott. It was the 11th time the two leaders had met in person since Russia's 2015 intervention, and the presence of foreign (Iranian and US) forces in Syria seems to have been high on the list of priorities discussed.<sup>145</sup>

### The Palestinian Question

The Israel-Palestine question was once central to Soviet and Russian diplomacy in the Middle East but as international attention to the conflict faded after 2011, Russia's active interest diminished somewhat. Moscow maintains a more or less even-handed view of the problem, benefiting from the Soviet Union's pro-Palestinian legacy but now broadened by active engagement with Israel. Politically, Russia stays close to the EU position and to the concepts underlying the Oslo Agreement, often voicing its explicit commitment to a two-state solution and shared rights to Jerusalem. However, unlike most EU member states, Russia has no qualms about engaging with Hamas or other groups listed as terrorists by the United States and Europe, and it has

content/uploads/2018/06/krasna2018.pdf, p. 10; Putin: Trenin 2018, p. 88.

142 "US 'Surprised' Israel Did Not Support UN Vote on Ukraine's Territorial Integrity," *Jerusalem Post*, April 15, 2014, <https://www.jpost.com/International/US-surprised-Israel-did-support-UN-vote-on-Ukraines-territorial-integrity-348564>; Herb Keinon, "UK not pleased with Israeli response to poison attack on ex-Russian spy," *Jerusalem Post*, March 20, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Britain-not-pleased-with-Israeli-response-to-Russian-poisoning-546601>.

143 Herb Keinon, "Top official: Due to IDF action, Hezbollah only has few dozen accurate missiles," *Jerusalem Post*, December 6, 2018, [https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Senior-official-Russia-helping-stop-weapon-transfers-to-Hezbollah-](https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Senior-official-Russia-helping-stop-weapon-transfers-to-Hezbollah-573647)

573647; Yoav Zitun, "IDF says it launched 200 strikes in Syria over past 1.5 years," YNet, September 4, 2018, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5341135,00.html>.

144 "Three Russian S-300PM battalion sets delivered to Syria free of charge – source," TASS, October 8, 2018, [tass.com/defense/1025020](http://tass.com/defense/1025020).

145 Herb Keinon, "Netanyahu lands in Moscow for meeting with Putin over Syria," *Jerusalem Post*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/PMs-Moscow-visit-seen-as-symbolic-end-to-tension-over-spy-plane-downing-581834>; "Russia, Israel to set up working group on removing foreign forces from Syria – source," TASS, February 28, 2019, <http://tass.com/world/1046768>.



formally recognized Palestine as an independent state.<sup>146</sup>

In 2017, Moscow took the unusual step of recognizing West Jerusalem as Israel's capital, while maintaining that East Jerusalem should be the capital of Palestine.<sup>147</sup> This is in line with PLO demands but most nations seeking a two-state solution have stuck to the UN formula that the status of Jerusalem remains a subject for final-status negotiations. Israel, for its part, claims the city in its entirety. When the United States recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, with no mention of a role for the Palestinians, the Russian Foreign Ministry criticized the US decision as a hindrance to peace talks.<sup>148</sup>

In November 2018, Lavrov indicated that Russia would be willing to host Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, apparently in an attempt to exploit the Trump administration's inability to restart negotiations. Palestinian officials responded enthusiastically.<sup>149</sup> Russia began to prepare for reconciliation talks between the two main Palestinian factions, Fatah and Hamas, but immediately ran into Israeli objections and Palestinian infighting. A scheduled visit to Russia by the Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyeh, was postponed. When intra-Palestinian talks in Moscow finally began in February 2019, they involved the full range of factions – Fatah, Hamas, the Popular Front for the Liberation

of Palestine, Islamic Jihad, and so on – but the mood was fairly sour.<sup>150</sup>

## Iran

Russian-Iranian relations have grown in depth and scope as the two countries have worked side by side to support Syria's Assad, setting in motion a stream of diplomatic and military visits between Moscow and Tehran. The 2015 nuclear deal also removed an obstacle to closer engagement, and the Kremlin has aligned itself with Tehran since then. Predictably, Russia declared itself "deeply disappointed" by the US decision to reimpose sanctions on Iran in 2018.<sup>151</sup>

"The present relations between Russia and Iran are of a strategic nature," Iranian President Hassan Rohani said during a meeting with Putin in 2018, adding, "There has never been such a level of trust between the two sides in the history of our countries as there is today." Putin concurred but added that there was "still a lot to be done" to promote deeper economic ties.<sup>152</sup>

Indeed, while events in Syria have led Russia and Iran to develop ties of a kind never seen before, the economic side of the relationship remains feeble and has not improved in recent years. There are also sources of tension both inside and outside Syria, amplified by historical mistrust.

146 Alexei Anishchuk, "Russia's Medvedev backs independent Palestine," Reuters, January 18, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-israel-russia-idUSTRE70H3VV20110118>.

147 "Foreign Ministry statement regarding Palestinian-Israeli settlement," Russian Foreign Ministry, April 6, 2017, [www.mid.ru/en/press\\_service/spokesman/official\\_statement/-/asset\\_publisher/t2GCdmD8RN1r/content/id/2717182](http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/official_statement/-/asset_publisher/t2GCdmD8RN1r/content/id/2717182).

148 "Comment by the Information and Press Department on US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel," Russian Foreign Ministry, December 7, 2017, [https://washington.mid.ru/en/press-centre/news/comment\\_by\\_the\\_information\\_and\\_press\\_department\\_on\\_us\\_recognition\\_of\\_jerusalem\\_as\\_the\\_capital\\_of\\_isr](https://washington.mid.ru/en/press-centre/news/comment_by_the_information_and_press_department_on_us_recognition_of_jerusalem_as_the_capital_of_isr).

149 Kifah Zabboun, "ندعم تحرك روسيا لإحياء العملية السياسية القيادي في منظمة التحرير وأصل أبو يوسف", al-Sharq al-Awsat, November 25, 2018, <https://aawsat.com/node/1477086>.

150 "في موسكو 'فتح' و'حماس' روسيا تعرض عقد اجتماع بين", al-Arabi al-Jadid, December 21, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2ExFqBz>; "فتح بيتت النية", لإفضال حوارات موسكو أبو مروزق", Aljazeera, February 19, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2EH6KOM>.

151 "Comment by the Information and Press Department on the reinstatement of extritorial US sanctions against Iran," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, August 7, 2018, [www.mid.ru/en/diverse/-/asset\\_publisher/zwl2FuDbhJx9/content/kommentarij-departamenta-informacii-i-pecati-mid-rossii-v-svazi-s-vosstanovleniem-eksterritorialnyh-sankcij-ssa-protiv-irana](http://www.mid.ru/en/diverse/-/asset_publisher/zwl2FuDbhJx9/content/kommentarij-departamenta-informacii-i-pecati-mid-rossii-v-svazi-s-vosstanovleniem-eksterritorialnyh-sankcij-ssa-protiv-irana).

152 "Meeting with President of Iran Hassan Rouhani," Russian Presidency, September 7, 2018, [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58484](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58484).



Iranians have not forgotten Soviet attempts to occupy and dismember Iran.

When Moscow announced in 2016 that it would be using Iran's Hamedan airbase to strike targets in Syria, based on a deal previously undisclosed to the Iranian public, the authorities in Tehran faced an immediate nationalist backlash and were greatly irritated by Russia's lack of diplomatic tact. The Iranian defense minister assured the public that "under no circumstances will we ever provide Russians with a military base. They have not come here to stay."<sup>153</sup> The affair ended with Russia being shut out of the base once again, although undeclared use may have resumed since.<sup>154</sup>

According to Barmin, "The Iran relationship only hinges on Putin's desire to be closer to Iran in Syria":

Of course there are all kinds of constraints here, in terms of sanctions and other things, but institutionalizing the ties with Iran is what Moscow failed to do and that's a great miscalculation. I think after Syria, the relationship might go to shit, both due to differences in Syria and because there are still so many disagreements in other fields, including over gas and in Russia's immediate backyard – Azerbaijan, Armenia, the Caspian Sea. All of these differences may resurface after Syria.<sup>155</sup>

Differences are already apparent, most notably over Russia's attempts to build closer ties with Iran's arch-enemies Israel and Saudi Arabia. Russia's coordination of oil policy with Saudi Arabia appears to take advantage of sanctions on Iran, and Iranian leaders have not failed to note Moscow's eagerness to sell advanced S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems to Saudi Arabia and Turkey, even as Iran had to wait nearly a decade to get the less advanced S-300 system.<sup>156</sup>

Like Israel, Tehran attempts to compartmentalize its disagreements with Moscow, but often ends up having to accept that Russia refuses to pick sides, preferring instead to negotiate solutions on a case-by-case basis. For example, Tehran was frustrated when Russia approved a UN arms embargo against the Iranian-backed Houthi militants in Yemen in 2015. Three years later, however, Iran was relieved to see Russia use its veto powers to kill a draft resolution that would have sanctioned Iran for breaching that same embargo.<sup>157</sup>

Although Iranian leaders often grumble about Moscow's behavior, they "can't cherry pick," according to Dina Esfandiary, an expert on Iranian foreign policy: "They don't have that many allies and they are still grateful to countries like Russia and China, because these are countries that have dealt with Iran in times of hardship without dangling human rights and their nuclear program as a condition."<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> "DM Dehghan: Russia announced use of Hamedan airbase without prior notice," Mehr News Agency, August 22, 2016, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/119130/Russia-announced-use-of-Hamedan-airbase-without-prior-notice>.

<sup>154</sup> Omid Shamizi, "Iran allows Russia to use airbase for refueling," Anadolu Agency, April 14, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/iran-allows-russia-to-use-airbase-for-refueling/1117681>.

<sup>155</sup> Interview, Barmin.

<sup>156</sup> Sune Engel Rasmussen and Benoit Faucon, "Russia and Iran, Military Allies, Are Fast Becoming Economic Rivals," *Wall*

*Street Journal*, September 23, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-and-iran-military-allies-are-fast-becoming-economic-rivals-1537704000>.

<sup>157</sup> "Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2402 (2018), Security Council Renews Sanctions against Yemen, Rejects Alternate Draft after Veto by Russian Federation," United Nations Security Council, 8190th Meeting, SC/13225, February 26, 2018, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13225.doc.htm>.

<sup>158</sup> Interview with Dina Esfandiary, a fellow at The Century Foundation and international security program research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, phone, September 2018.



## Turkey

Russia's most tangible gain from the Syrian conflict is probably Turkey's political volte-face in 2016, which has since translated into a rapid deepening of Russian-Turkish relations.<sup>159</sup> Turkey's turnaround was in large part provoked by US support for PKK-linked Syrian Kurdish militants and a general disenchantment with the United States, rather than any newfound affinity for Putin's Russia. Nonetheless, Russian-Turkish relations have continued to grow closer over time, and now seem to have developed a dynamic of their own as Erdogan doubles down on his anti-Western rhetoric.

"Much of Russian-Turkish diplomacy today appears to consist of an exercise in cleansing the relationship of Western influence," Turkish political scientist Selim Koru wrote in a 2018 report. "Both countries seem to agree that Western influence is a silently imposed, malicious presence that poisons the daily lives of their citizens."<sup>160</sup>

Trade has yet to recover from the sanctions imposed on Turkey by Russia in 2015–2017, but Putin and Erdogan now meet far more frequently than Erdogan and Trump, and their cooperation has expanded to military affairs. Turkey has signed an agreement to purchase Russian S-400 air defense systems, in the face of vehement US objections.<sup>161</sup>

Internally, Russia-friendly "Eurasianist" circles have reportedly gained a measure of influence in Turkey's traditionally pro-US security establishment, partly due to the

massive purges that followed the attempted coup in July 2016. However, their relevance remains uncertain.

Through Syria, each country exercises some degree of leverage over the other. Russia needs Turkey to "freeze" frontlines with Ankara-backed rebel forces in northwestern Syria, and to push for a political solution that spares Assad. For its part, Turkey wants Russia to withhold support for renewed Syrian army offensives that could send additional hundreds of thousands of refugees into Turkey, and to support Turkish interests in northern Syria, such as border security, anti-PKK measures and perhaps a resumption of trade.<sup>162</sup>

However, their interests in each other extend far beyond Syria. Erdogan is using Russia to gain greater practical autonomy from the United States and, instrumentally, to pressure Washington to change its pro-Kurdish policies. However, while ideology and anti-US nationalism should not be disregarded as genuine motives for Erdogan's conduct, he is probably wary of sliding too deep into Russia's embrace. In particular, if US forces were to withdraw from Syria in 2019, as has previously been suggested by Trump, this could pave the way for a reboot of the Turkish-US relationship.

If so, it would be a bitter setback for Moscow. Turkey matters greatly to Russia not just as a neighbor, a trading partner, and a major member of NATO, but also as a potential node in the "multipolar world order" that remains the stated goal of Russian foreign policy.<sup>163</sup> Turkey's 2016

<sup>159</sup> Selim Koru, "The Resiliency of Turkey-Russia Relations," Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/bssp2-koru.pdf>.

<sup>160</sup> Koru, "The Resiliency of Turkey-Russia Relations," p. 17.

<sup>161</sup> "Turkey's purchase of S-400s from Russia 'done deal,' FM Çavuşoğlu says," *Daily Sabah*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2019/02/26/turkeys-purchase-of-s-400s-from-russia-done-deal-fm-cavusoglu-says>.

<sup>162</sup> Aron Lund, "After Russia-Turkey deal, the fate of Syria's Idlib hangs in the balance," IRIN News, October 2, 2018, <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2018/10/02/after-russia-turkey-deal-fate-syria-s-idlib-hangs-balance>.

<sup>163</sup> Interview with Maxim Suchkov, a non-resident expert at the Russian International Affairs Council and at the Valdai International Discussion Club, phone, January 2019.



policy flip was a precondition for the Astana process, which has, for the first time, allowed Russia to line up both of its major Middle East neighbors in a collaborative arrangement under Russian oversight. Given Russia's longstanding strategic fixation on Iran and Turkey in the Middle East, Moscow would probably be thrilled to see an Astana-style arrangement broadened to include other regional issues. That, however, will be easier said than done, given the lack of a clear institutional basis for such cooperation and the numerous areas of disagreement between all three nations.

### The International Level

Although Russia's role in the Middle East has grown since the 2015 intervention, Putin's Syrian adventure has produced somewhat more mixed results at the international level. The war has certainly helped raise Moscow's political stature and bring back some of the great power flair lost in 1991, fulfilling one important goal of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy. It has also blunted the West's appetite for regime change and proxy warfare in the Middle East, ticking another box on Russia's policy score sheet. While winning in the Arab World is all well and good, however, Russia's strategic vision remains fixated on the United States, and that relationship remains both troubled and unequal.

Defying Putin's hopes in 2015, Syria has neither helped Russia transcend its disputes with the West over Ukraine, nor created meaningful leverage over the United States and Europe on other issues. Instead of changing its attitude to Russia, the United States is now simply withdrawing from the conflict, leaving Moscow in charge of a

messy, unstable situation that offers no obvious spoils to the victor. Meanwhile, Russian-Western ties continue to deteriorate on other matters, as evidenced by the 2019 collapse of the INF Treaty, a key piece in the US-Russian arms control architecture.

In so far as the Syrian conflict has contributed to the overall deterioration in relations with the United States and Europe, this may, in retrospect, come to outweigh any gains made in the Middle East. Putin remains defiant but by doubling down on confrontative, anti-Western policies, he may end up saddling Russia with political and financial commitments it cannot realistically sustain. Russia's economy is hydrocarbon-dependent and weak, and Western sanctions have contributed to its dysfunctionality. Social discontent is once again becoming a real concern for the Kremlin, particularly after Putin's 2018 roll-out of unpopular cost-cutting pensions reforms.<sup>164</sup> Even the president's pet budget item, the military, is now suffering cutbacks. In 2016, for the first time since Putin became president in 1999, Russia's military expenditure was not increased. Instead, spending was slashed by 20 percent.<sup>165</sup>

Behind Russia's ambitious regional posture and its triumphalist messaging there lies a sobering reality of weak economic foundations, a political/military footprint limited to specific countries and issues, and a lack of reliable and mutually beneficial alliances. Given that Russia also faces numerous other challenging problems, there is a hard limit to how much power Moscow can aspire to in the Middle East. The question is: does Putin recognize that limit?

<sup>164</sup> Andrei Kolsenikov, "No Left Turn in Russia," Carnegie Moscow Center, November 9, 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77683>; Tatyana Stanovaya, "The Illusion of Control: The Kremlin Prepares for Falling Ratings,"

Carnegie Moscow Center, November 13, 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77702>.

<sup>165</sup> "Global military spending remains high at \$1.7 trillion," SIPRI, May 2, 2018, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2018/global-military-spending-remains-high-17-trillion>.



## Economic Interests Remain Key

In response to the imposition of US and EU sanctions, Russian policymakers have sought to boost trade with non-Western countries, including those in the Middle East. In 2019, for example, Russia's Deputy Minister of Industry, Sergey Tsyb, announced that Russia hoped to sign free trade agreements with Israel, Iran and Egypt.<sup>166</sup> However, Russian trade with the Middle East and North Africa region remains limited, at \$45.5 billion, or 8 percent of Russia's global trade, in 2017. Nearly half of this amount was Russian-Turkish trade (\$21.6bn), followed by trade with Egypt (\$6.7bn), Algeria (\$4.7bn), Israel (\$2.5bn), Iran (\$1.7bn), and the United Arab Emirates (\$1.6bn).<sup>167</sup> Russia's economic activity in the region continues to focus on its traditional areas of strength: energy cooperation (oil, gas, nuclear) and Russian exports of arms and grain.

### Oil, gas, and nuclear energy

Russia's economy is highly dependent on oil and gas exports, which makes it sensitive to oil price fluctuations. Moscow therefore pays close attention to the energy markets. As one of the world's three largest oil producers – the other two are the United States and Saudi Arabia – Russia has considerable influence over output and price.

In recent years, Russia has cooperated with OPEC, the oil producers' cartel, of which it is not a member, to push prices up to around \$60/barrel, which is Moscow's preferred level. Russia has worked closely with Saudi Arabia on oil prices since 2017. By 2018–2019, Russian-Saudi influence was such that OPEC members were complaining about being sidelined. Qatar and Iran seemed particularly perturbed.<sup>168</sup> However, oil prices remain under pressure, and US production is projected to rise significantly in 2019 and 2020.<sup>169</sup>

Russia is also the world's largest gas producer. Its exports to Europe serve both an economic and a strategic function. Gas prices are not as easy to manipulate as oil prices; gas markets are not global, but regional and tied to transport routes such as pipelines. Nonetheless, Moscow has long sought increased coordination with leading regional exporters such as Qatar, Iran, and Algeria. However, while energy creates opportunities for cooperation, Russia also fears competition. For example, Moscow is worried that Iran might undercut its hold on European markets. Russia has repeatedly offered to invest in pipeline projects that would see Iranian gas move east to Pakistan rather than west to Europe.<sup>170</sup>

Turkey is a major buyer of Russian gas, exporting some onwards to the EU. Two Russian pipelines cross Turkish territory: BlueStream, constructed between 1997 and 2005, and TurkStream, which, after a delay

<sup>166</sup> "Russia plans to sign free trade zone agreements with five countries soon," TASS, February 6, 2019, [tass.com/economy/1043470](https://tass.com/economy/1043470).

<sup>167</sup> "Russia's Trade with the Middle East Countries in 2017," Valdai Club, May 21, 2018, [valdaiclub.com/multimedia/infographics/russia-s-trade-with-the-middle-east-countries-in-2017](https://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/infographics/russia-s-trade-with-the-middle-east-countries-in-2017).

<sup>168</sup> Ariel Cohen, "High Five At OPEC: Russia And Saudi Arabia Agree To 1.2Mbd Production Cut," *Forbes*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2018/12/07/high-five-at-opec-russia-and-saudi-arabia-agree-1-2mbd-production-cut/#455823886d24>; Summer Said and Benoit Faucon, "Saudi-Russia Ties Raise Concerns Among OPEC Members," *Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 2018,

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-russia-ties-complicate-opec-oil-output-decision-delegates-say-1543959899>; Nikolay Kozhanov, "Iran threatened by Russia-Saudi oil pact," *Al-Monitor*, February 23, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/02/russia-saudis-iran-oil-opec.html>.

<sup>169</sup> Javier Blas, "Texas Is About to Create OPEC's Worst Nightmare," *Bloomberg*, November 21, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-11-21/opec-s-worst-nightmare-the-permian-is-about-to-pump-a-lot-more>.

<sup>170</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russian Policy Across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods," Chatham House, February 21, 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russian-policy-across-middle-east-motivations-and-methods>, p. 18.



due to Russian-Turkish friction over Syria, is set to be operational by the end of 2019.<sup>171</sup>

Russia's state-owned Rosatom company is also the undisputed world leader in nuclear power plant construction, although it is starting to face competition from China. The Middle East has become a significant market. Rosatom has already built the Bushehr reactor in Iran and is now constructing a nuclear power plant in Turkey, in a contract worth \$20 billion. The company has also signed deals to construct reactors in Egypt and Sudan.<sup>172</sup>

### Military exports

The arms trade has been an important part of Moscow's relationship with the Middle East and North Africa region since Soviet times. While most Soviet-era exports took the form of politically motivated donations, sales on long-term credit, or loans that were rarely repaid, Russia sells weapons for a profit.

The Middle East-North Africa region is a sizable market for Russian arms, accounting for roughly one-fifth of exports in 2013–2017.<sup>173</sup> However, Russia still lags far behind the United States in overall weapons deliveries to the Middle East, given the enormous purchases of US arms by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab nations.<sup>174</sup>

Algeria has long been Russia's most important customer in the region, and one of the most important globally. According to SIPRI, Algeria was the world's third-largest importer of Russian arms in the 20-year period 1997–2017, albeit well behind the top two importers, India and China. Two other Middle East states, Iran and Egypt, ranked sixth and seventh.<sup>175</sup> In recent years, Algeria has imported Russian T-90 tanks, Su-30 fighter jets, S-300 air defenses, Iskander ballistic missiles and other high-end equipment.<sup>176</sup> In total, four-fifths of Russia's arms exports to Africa in 2013–2017 went to Algeria.<sup>177</sup>

The Syrian intervention has served as a marketing opportunity for Russia, which has publicly advertised its weapons as tested on the Syrian battlefield.<sup>178</sup> Russian analysts estimated in 2016 that the intervention could bring a \$6–7 billion windfall in weapon sales, both as a demonstrator of military technology and by casting Russia in the role of a victorious great power, since "people don't buy weapons from losers."<sup>179</sup> Arms sales have indeed picked up since 2015 and new clients – such as Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – have declared an interest in buying Russian arms. Breaking into the Gulf markets would be an important step forward for Russia.

171 "TurkStream will be operational by end of 2019: Gazprom," *Hürriyet Daily News*, November 9, 2018, [www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkstream-will-be-operational-by-end-of-2019-gazprom-138724](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkstream-will-be-operational-by-end-of-2019-gazprom-138724).

172 "Russia leads the world at nuclear-reactor exports" *The Economist*, August 7, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/08/07/russia-leads-the-world-at-nuclear-reactor-exports>.

173 According to SIPRI, the Middle East (which is defined as including Egypt) accounted for 11 percent of Russian arms export in 2013–2017 and Africa for another 13 percent. Of sales to Africa, four fifths went to North African nations (78 percent to Algeria, 1 percent to Libya). SIPRI Arms Transfers Database ([www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org)) and "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2017," SIPRI, March 2018, [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/fssipri\\_at2017\\_0.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/fssipri_at2017_0.pdf), p. 4, 7.

174 "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2017," SIPRI, p. 10.

175 Figures drawn from the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database ([www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org)), December 2018.

176 Andrew McGregor, "Defense or Domination? Building Algerian Power With Russian Arms," *Jamestown Institute-Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 15, No. 122, September 5, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/defense-or-domination-building-algerian-power-with-russian-arms>.

177 "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2017," SIPRI, p. 4.

178 Kofman and Rojansky 2018, pp. 14–15.

179 Alec Luhn, "Russia's campaign in Syria leads to arms sale windfall," *The Guardian*, March 29, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/29/russias-campaign-in-syria-leads-to-arms-sale-windfall>.



### Grain

After a decade of increasing sales, Russia emerged as the world's top wheat exporter in 2016, aided by a genuine increase in capacity and the fact that the slump in the ruble has helped Russian traders outcompete more expensive EU grain. Export revenues from agriculture topped \$20 billion in 2017 and grain sales have overtaken arms as a source of income for

Russia, leading a former agriculture minister to quip that it has become the country's "second oil."<sup>180</sup>

Several major importers of Russian grain are found in the Middle East, in Egypt, Turkey and, more recently, Sudan. Russia also hopes to break into the large Algerian market, which until now has been a virtual French monopoly.<sup>181</sup>

#### Russian arms exports to the Middle East

	<u>1991–2010</u>		<u>2011–2017</u>
Algeria	5,631	Algeria	4,990
Iran	3,396	Egypt	1,874
UAE	1,433	Iraq	1,153
Yemen	1,180	Syria	992
Egypt	1,055	Iran	479
Sudan	753*	UAE	270
Syria	524	Sudan	244
Kuwait	346	Kuwait	113
Iraq	257	Jordan	84
Turkey	201	Libya	36
Morocco	156	Qatar	4
Jordan	148		
Libya	54		
Palestine	29		

\* Incl. South Sudan

Note: Values in millions of US dollars were calculated according to SIPRI's trend-indicator value system and do not represent sales prices. Source: SIPRI

### Russia's Increasing Appetite: The Cases of Libya and Lebanon

From Moscow's point of view, the Middle East is a source of opportunity but also of

risk. The region is likely to suffer continued instability for a variety of reasons: political and systemic failures, low and uneven economic growth, overpopulation and youth bulges, resource-consuming wars, globalization-fueled radicalization, and water shortages and climate change that

<sup>180</sup> "Russia has emerged as an agricultural powerhouse," *The Economist*, November 29, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/business/2018/12/01/russia-has-emerged-as-an-agricultural-powerhouse>.

<sup>181</sup> Agnieszka de Sousa and Anatoly Medetsky, "Europe Has Most to Lose From Russia's Expanding Wheat Empire," *Bloomberg*, October 1, 2018,

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-01/europe-has-most-to-lose-from-russia-s-expanding-wheat-empire>; "Blé russe ou blé français ? : L'Algérie face à un choix décisif," *El Watan*, October 14, 2018, <https://www.elwatan.com/a-la-une/ble-russe-ou-ble-francais-lalgerie-face-a-un-choix-decisif-14-10-2018>.



will damage ecosystems and affect crop production. Some of these problems helped trigger the Arab Spring, but they have not been resolved by it. Instead, the situation is now worse in many ways.

Russia's bleak view of the region's future incentivizes continued engagement, to promote stability and to knock down new threats as they arise, but also because regional needs create opportunities for Russian exports. The success in Syria, such as it is, also appears to have created a new appetite for involvement for involvement's sake.

### Russia and Libya

In Libya, which remains in chaos, Russia has joined Egypt and the United Arab Emirates in backing Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, a powerful eastern Libyan warlord whose bid for power doubles as an anti-Islamist campaign.<sup>182</sup> Unconfirmed reports in late 2018 claimed that Russian military intelligence (GRU) officers had set up camp in eastern Libya alongside mercenaries from the Wagner Group (see below).<sup>183</sup>

However, Russia is not wedded to Haftar. Its "very prudent" policy focuses on practical gain and includes maintaining relations with Haftar's Islamist opponents in Tripoli, "because that is where the dough is."<sup>184</sup>

Casting a wide net, Russia declared in late 2018 that it even sees a role for Gaddafi's son, Seif al-Islam, in Libya's future. "We

support everyone. We don't think anyone should be isolated or excluded from playing a constructive political role," Deputy Foreign Minister Bogdanov explained, adding, "Seif al-Islam enjoys the support of certain tribes in Libya and for all these reasons he must be a part of the comprehensive political process in partnership with other political forces."<sup>185</sup>

Russian engagement in Libya appears to serve a variety of interests that do not necessarily amount to a full-fledged strategy or long-term plan. Working with Haftar helps to grease relations with Egypt and the Emirates and might give Moscow some independent leverage. Libya's role as a major oil producer and a jumping-off point for refugee ships makes the country important to Europe, which is another reason to stay involved. However, even though Russia has signaled that it could mediate between Libya's rival forces, it has so far produced nothing resembling a plan to put Libya back together again.<sup>186</sup> Russian diplomats and analysts appear to see Libya as "completely unripe for any sort of resolution."<sup>187</sup> Should that change, Libya might conceivably develop into another area where the Kremlin tries to enlist Western and Arab nations in a joint effort, both to promote common goals (such as Libyan stability) and to reconfigure its relationship with Brussels and Washington.

182

As a colonel in the Libyan army, Haftar defected from Gaddafi's forces in the 1980s and went into exile in the United States, where he was widely assumed to be working with the CIA. In 2011, he returned to Libya alongside the NATO intervention forces, emerging as one of several strongmen in the Benghazi region of eastern Libya. In recent years, Haftar – now styling himself as field marshal – spearheaded an Egyptian- and Emirati-backed offensive against jihadi and Muslim Brotherhood influence, unsuccessfully attempting to topple a rival Islamist-led, Qatari-backed government in Tripoli.

183

See e.g. Tom Newton Dunn, "Putin Troops in Libya," *The Sun*, October 8, 2018, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/7448072/russia-missiles-libya-warlord/>; Paul Goble, "Moscow Laying Groundwork for Deeper Military Involvement in Libya," *Eurasia Monitor-Jamestown Foundation*, November 13, 2018,

<https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-laying-groundwork-for-deeper-military-involvement-in-libya/>; Kirill Semenov, "Russia sends its own signals on Libya by hosting Haftar," *al-Monitor*, November 12, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/11/russia-libya-haftar-military.html>.

184

Interview Jalel Harchaoui, French researcher focusing on Libya at Paris 8 University, Online, October 2018.

185

"روسيا لمسيف الإسلام القذافي دور في المشهد السياسي الليبي" *al-Quds al-Arabi*, December 25, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2SBVozn>.

186

"روسيا تسعى للعب دور الوساطة بين الأطراف الليبية" *El Khabar*, March 3, 2017, <https://www.elkhabar.com/press/article/119054>.

187

Interview, Notte.



## Russia and Lebanon

Libya is in some senses an engagement of choice, but Russia's growing influence in the Middle East has also created new liabilities and side issues that need to be addressed. Although Lebanon is in itself of limited importance to Moscow, the country plays an outsized role in the national security strategies of Syria, Iran and Israel; and, as it drifts closer to Iran and Syria, it offers an environment more friendly to Russia than in the past. Hezbollah's growing influence could trigger internal instability and spark wars with Israel, which is also a matter of concern to Russia.

Since 2015, Russia has deepened its contacts with Lebanese politicians and business owners, including Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri. It has opened several Russian cultural centers in Lebanon and is working to repatriate refugees to Syria, which is a popular cause among the Lebanese.<sup>188</sup> Russian companies have also moved into offshore gas exploration, building on similar agreements to those with Syria.<sup>189</sup>

One longstanding Russian goal is to build a relationship with the Lebanese military, which Moscow sees as both a conduit for political influence and, if Gulf economic aid foots the bill, a potential customer.<sup>190</sup> Western pressure on the Lebanese military has so far limited the Kremlin's advances. After much stalling, the Lebanese military reportedly rejected a donation of free

ammunition from Russia in 2018, for which Moscow blamed US interference.<sup>191</sup> Later reports indicated that the gift might instead be accepted by an internal security body linked to Hariri, who seeks Moscow's favor to manage his difficult relationship with Damascus and Hezbollah.<sup>192</sup>

## The Authoritarian Advantage

Most Western leaders have come to view Vladimir Putin as a maddeningly unreliable and frustrating figure, but some of the rulers in the Middle East appear to see his regime in a different light. It is probably less of a chore for an authoritarian king or president to deal with Russia than with democratic nations in Europe or the United States, where decision-making is constrained by nosy journalists, volatile public debate, and an explicit (even if insincere) commitment to liberal values. Putin is a ruler much more in their own mold: he takes a transactional approach to politics, has no ambition to spread democracy (or any other ideology) and can settle deals with a handshake without waiting for parliament to agree. In short, in the world's least democratic region, Russia enjoys an authoritarian advantage.

Russian diplomats take every chance they can get to highlight their policy of non-interference in domestic affairs, sometimes even inserting themselves into human rights-related disputes that Russia is not a

188 Mohanad Hage Ali, "Our Comrades in Beirut," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 25, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/76164>; Mohanad Hage Ali, "Moscow Time?," Carnegie Middle East Center, September 7, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77192>; Mohanad Hage Ali, "Land of Opportunity," Carnegie Middle East Center, January 30, 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/78239>.

189 Nour Samaha, "Is Lebanon Embracing a Larger Russian Role?," *The Century Foundation*, August 7, 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/lebanon-embracing-larger-russian-role-country>.

190 The United States is the main patron of the Lebanese armed forces, but refuses to provide advanced weapons that could limit Israel's freedom of action in Lebanon or fall into the hands of Hezbollah. In an analysis of Russian policy published in the Lebanese armed forces quarterly *al-Difaa al-Watani al-*

*Lubnani*, Col. George al-Khouri notes that Moscow is "trying to take advantage of the Western hesitation" to equip Lebanon for the "war on terror." George al-Khouri, "السياسة الخارجية الجديدة لروسيا"، وتأثيرها على دول الشرق الأوسط ولبنان، No. 105, July 2018, <https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/sites/default/files/105.pdf>, p. 33-34.

191 Raed Jaber, "اتفاقية عسكرية روسية - لبنانية قريباً تفتح الباب على مرحلة جديدة من العلاقات"، *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 7, 2018, <https://aawsat.com/node/1167016>; "لبنان يرفض هبة عسكرية روسية"، *al-Akhbar*, November 26, 2018, <https://goo.gl/zimupS>.

192 Anna Borshchevskaya and Hanin Ghaddar, "How to Read Lebanon's Acceptance of Russian Military Aid," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 7, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-to-read-lebanons-acceptance-of-russian-military-aid>.



party to. For example, when Saudi Arabia grew irritated by Canadian criticism of the 2018 jailing of high-profile female dissidents, a Russian spokesperson lashed out at the Canadians and asserted that Riyadh “has the sovereign right to decide how to move forward.”<sup>193</sup> More recently, when the murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018 put a strain on the US-Saudi Arabian relationship, Putin breezily dismissed the scandal and greeted Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman with a grinning high-five at a G-20 meeting.<sup>194</sup>

Similarly, when the United States temporarily froze arms sales to Egypt in response to Sisi’s 2013 military coup and subsequent repression, Putin immediately conveyed an offer of Russian weapons instead.<sup>195</sup> In 2017, Russian arms sales to Egypt vastly outstripped those of the United States for the first time since the 1970s.<sup>196</sup>

Russia has long made a point of ignoring Western injunctions about the need to isolate “rogue states,” pointing out, with some merit, that the United States takes a rather different attitude to its own undemocratic allies. However, the Kremlin now appears to be intensifying its cultivation of authoritarians ostracized by the United States. Such governments are generally eager to strike up a relationship

with Russia, and many have been impressed by the Kremlin’s ruthless defense of its ally in Syria.

Sudan is a case in point. There has been a warrant for the arrest of its president, Omar al-Bashir, since 2009 for trial in the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide. In 2017, however, Bashir was hosted in Moscow, where he praised Putin for standing up against hostile US practices and proposed the establishment of a Russian naval supply depot on Sudan’s Red Sea coast.<sup>197</sup>

The idea of a Russian Red Sea base came up again in a 2019 *Sputnik News* interview with Maj. Gen. al-Hadi Adam, the head of the Sudanese Parliament’s Defense and Security Committee. At the time, Sudan was experiencing growing street protests against Bashir’s rule and Adam seemed to have recent history on his mind: “Every state needs an ally and the strategic ally, you might say, is the one who is a friend in times of need, when others abandon you.” Adam added that “we’re seeing this now, for example, in the strategic relationship between Russia and Syria.”<sup>198</sup>

<sup>193</sup> “Russia says Saudi Arabia critics shouldn’t claim superiority,” Associated Press/*Washington Post*, August 8, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/russia-says-saudi-arabia-critics-shouldnt-claim-superiority/2018/08/08/e2e33622-9b2e-11e8-a8d8-9b4c13286d6b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/russia-says-saudi-arabia-critics-shouldnt-claim-superiority/2018/08/08/e2e33622-9b2e-11e8-a8d8-9b4c13286d6b_story.html).

<sup>194</sup> “Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia,” the White House, November 20, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-standing-saudi-arabia>; Kate Sullivan, “Top Republicans slam Trump for statement backing Saudi Arabia,” CNN, November 21, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/11/20/politics/top-republicans-slam-trump-saudi-arabia-khashoggi/index.html>; “Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Full Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 15th Annual Meeting,” Valdai Discussion Club, October 18, 2018, [valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-meets-with-valdai-discussion-club](http://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-meets-with-valdai-discussion-club); “Kremlin sees no reason to question Saudi Royal Family’s statements on Khashoggi case,” TASS,

October 26, 2018, [tass.com/politics/1027980](http://tass.com/politics/1027980); “Putin and Saudi crown prince high five,” BBC, November 30, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-46405802/putin-and-saudi-crown-prince-high-five>.

<sup>195</sup> “Putin vows to boost Egypt arms sales,” Al Jazeera English, August 12, 2014, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/putin-vows-boost-egypt-arms-sales-20148121660566289.html>.

<sup>196</sup> For details, see SIPRI’s arms trade database at [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org).

<sup>197</sup> Taha Abdelwahid, “البشير يطلب من روسيا حماية لمواجهة أميركا العدائية,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 24, 2017, <https://aawsat.com/node/1093336>; “روسيا ترد على اقتراح البشير بشأن القاعدة العسكرية في السودان,” *Sputnik News*, September 6, 2018, <https://sptnkne.ws/hJbU>.

<sup>198</sup> “السودان يلمح إلى إقامة قواعد عسكرية روسية على أرضيه,” *Sputnik News*, January 12, 2019, <https://sptnkne.ws/k2D7>.



# Who Runs Russian Middle East Policy?

Russia's face to the world, its Foreign Ministry, is viewed by most Middle East watchers as politically abrasive but competent and well trained. Some Russian diplomats appear to have impressive knowledge of Arabic.<sup>199</sup>

Western diplomats describe Sergei Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister since 2004, as a skilled and highly experienced professional with an outstanding memory for detail and a capacity to argue even the most absurd points with a straight face.<sup>200</sup>

Middle East diplomacy is overseen by one of Lavrov's deputies, Mikhail Bogdanov. Bogdanov is an Arabic speaker with a PhD in Russian-Egyptian relations who doubles as Putin's personal Middle East and North Africa envoy. Bogdanov, too, receives high marks from Western diplomats.<sup>201</sup>

While Bogdanov is the only deputy foreign minister specifically assigned to the Middle East, some of his nine colleagues hold related portfolios. Sergei Ryabkov handles US affairs but is also in charge of the Iranian nuclear file. The former Federal Security Service (FSB) counterintelligence chief, Oleg Syromolotov, holds the antiterrorism portfolio.<sup>202</sup> In March 2018, the former head

of the ministry's Middle East desk, Sergei Vershinin, another Arabic speaker, was also raised to the rank of deputy foreign minister, reportedly sidelining Bogdanov to some extent. Vershinin has played a key role in overseeing diplomacy on Syria.<sup>203</sup>

Despite this impressive pool of talent, the Foreign Ministry "is not a decision-making structure," cautions Nikolay Kozhanov, a former Russian diplomat and a Middle East expert:

It is basically a kind of postal service, receiving incoming messages from other countries and sending the messages they're asked to deliver. As for the decision-making structures, that depends on the issue. It might be the Security Council of the Russian Federation or a certain group of people within the Security Council. Some issues may be handled by the Presidency or by certain people in the Presidency, or indeed by the president himself.<sup>204</sup>

The Security Council is a consultative body appointed and chaired by the president, tasked with overall strategic planning.<sup>205</sup> Its core group of 12 members comprises the cabinet ministers with foreign or security portfolios, the heads of intelligence, and other key officials. It is notable for the absence of, for example, economic specialists. Putin's successor as FSB chief, Nikolay Patrushev, has served as secretary

<sup>199</sup> Syrian opposition figures involved in talks with Russian diplomats since the 2015 intervention have noted strong language skills among Foreign Ministry personnel. One person interviewed in Lebanon in 2015 expressed surprise at how fluently his Russian interlocutors conversed and even took notes in Arabic. Others felt spied-on by diplomats who seemed to know more than they let on: "They seem to know Arabic. They don't say anything, but sometimes you can tell from their body language that they understand," noted a Syrian interviewed in Turkey in 2018.

<sup>200</sup> Interviews with Western diplomats, 2018.

<sup>201</sup> A Western diplomat familiar with Bogdanov describes him as "among the most astute, well-informed, careful and insightful Arabists I have known," adding that "he is devoid of illusions

about the Arab world and would push back against any tendencies toward mission creep." Communication with the author, 2015.

<sup>202</sup> For a list of Russia's deputy foreign ministers, see [www.mid.ru/en/about/structure/deputy\\_ministers](http://www.mid.ru/en/about/structure/deputy_ministers).

<sup>203</sup> Interviews, analysts and non-Russian officials, 2018.

<sup>204</sup> Author's interview with Nikolay Kozhanov, Skype, 2016.

<sup>205</sup> Moneghan 2017, p. 21; Hedenskog, Persson and Vendil Pallin 2016, p. 100. For an official presentation of the Security Council, including its membership, see "About Security Council," Russian Presidency, [en.kremlin.ru/structure/security-council](http://en.kremlin.ru/structure/security-council).



of the Security Council since 2008 but the council's influence has grown in recent years, since "just about every sphere of Russian policy making" has come to be viewed as a national security matter.<sup>206</sup>

The outsized role that national security officials play in Russian policymaking creates its own structural biases, according to Yury Barmin who says that senior military and intelligence figures seem to prioritize ideological and military-strategic goals over sustainable economic choices. He noted that many senior officials have been suspicious of Saudi Arabia since the Chechen wars, and appear to have pushed back against Russian attempts to deepen ties with the Gulf: "Of course, the diplomats are more open-minded but when it comes to the Middle East, the diplomats do not play the leading role: it's the security elites." Barmin added: "A lot of them still think the [Gulf] is an American playground."<sup>207</sup>

Since the 2015 intervention, the Defense Ministry has by and large led policy development in Syria alongside the Presidency. The Russian military headquarters at Hmeymim has completely overshadowed the role of the Russian Embassy in Damascus.<sup>208</sup> On diplomatic matters, however, Vershinin runs the show alongside the presidential Syria envoy, Alexander Lavrentiev.<sup>209</sup>

Ultimately, the president controls all major foreign policy decisions, to the extent that policymaking "comes to a standstill when Vladimir Putin is absent."<sup>210</sup> Putin is nonetheless known to consult an inner circle, which also appears to be heavily dominated by national security figures cut from same cloth as the president. For example, Putin has said he ordered the invasion of Crimea in 2014 after discussions with Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and three other senior officials, all of whom are old KGB hands from his St Petersburg days: Presidential Chief of Staff Sergey Ivanov, Nikolay Patrushev of the Security Council, and FSB chief Alexander Bortnikov.<sup>211</sup> High-stakes decisions on the Middle East, such as the 2015 Syria intervention, were presumably made in a similar setting.<sup>212</sup>

## Kadyrov: Proxy or Freelancer?

A peculiar element of Russia's role in the Middle East is the personal diplomacy of the President of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov. Styling himself a benefactor of Sunni Islam and a proponent of Sufism against Salafi teachings, Kadyrov has, to Moscow's dismay, ordered the imposition of some elements of sharia law in Chechnya.<sup>213</sup> His eccentric strongman rule at home has been matched by an energetic political and

<sup>206</sup> Hedenskog, Persson and Vendil Pallin 2016, p. 100.

<sup>207</sup> Interview, Barmin.

<sup>208</sup> Interviews, Western officials and diplomats, 2015 and 2018. In December 2018, a round of urgent talks with Turkey on how to handle the US withdrawal from northeastern Syria was attended by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, Presidential Envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentiev and presidential aide Yury Ushakov – a delegation that was two-fifths military/Defense Ministry, two-fifths presidential and one-fifth diplomat. "Turkey, Russia agree on coordination in Syria amid US withdrawal." *Hürriyet Daily News*, December 29, 2018, [www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-russia-agree-on-military-coordination-in-syria-amid-us-withdrawal-140110](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-russia-agree-on-military-coordination-in-syria-amid-us-withdrawal-140110).

<sup>209</sup> Interviews, Western officials and diplomats, 2018.

<sup>210</sup> Hedenskog, Persson, and Vendil Pallin 2016, p. 99; Zygar 2018, p. 330 ff.

<sup>211</sup> Zygar 2018, s. 378.

<sup>212</sup> A Security Council meeting that dealt with Syria policy in December 2018 was, according to the state-owned TASS news agency, attended by President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, the speakers of both parliamentary chambers, Valentina Matviyenko and Vyacheslav Volodin, Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov, SVR Director Sergei Naryshkin, and Special Presidential Representative for Nature Protection, Ecology, and Transport Issues Sergei Ivanov. "Putin, Security Council discuss Syrian settlement – Kremlin," TASS, December 28, 2018, <http://tass.com/politics/1038369>.

<sup>213</sup> Fred Weir, "Kremlin frets as Russia's once restive Islamist region takes up political Islam," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 20, 2017, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2017/0920/Kremlin-frets-as-Russia-s-once-restive-Islamist-region-takes-up-political-Islam>.



religious activism abroad. In particular, Kadyrov has built relationships with several Gulf royals, holding personal meetings with the powerful crown princes of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia's King Salman and the Emir of Qatar.<sup>214</sup>

One facet of Kadyrov's activism is related to security matters. For example, he has supplied Chechnyan troops for Russia's intervention in Syria. Commercial military services have also been offered to governments in the Gulf.<sup>215</sup> Kadyrov engages in religious diplomacy, humanitarian projects, and other soft power exercises as part of a broader outreach that seems designed to project him as a patron of Sufi-inspired Sunni Islam.<sup>216</sup> In Syria, for example, the Chechen government has funded high-profile projects to restore Aleppo's Great Mosque and the Khaled Ibn al-Walid Mosque in Homs.<sup>217</sup>

The extent to which Kadyrov operates on behalf of the Kremlin remains somewhat unclear. Although the Putin-Kadyrov relationship is indisputably one of patron and client, the Chechen leader seems to be acting autonomously and it is not always clear who is using whom. Kadyrov does not travel abroad as Moscow's formal envoy,

but he is nonetheless received as a visiting dignitary and invited to talk about bilateral relations with Russia. He has also been known to bring Russian officials and businesspeople to meet the Gulf royals.

However, there is occasionally friction with the Kremlin, especially in relation to Kadyrov's loose-cannon religious activism. In August 2016, Kadyrov convened a theological conference for traditionalist and non-Salafi Sunnis in Grozny. Among the attendees were senior state-appointed Sunni clerics from Syria, Egypt, and Jordan, as well as Sufi figures with links to the United Arab Emirates and other anti-Islamist Arab governments.<sup>218</sup> To the horror of some attendees, Kadyrov concluded the meeting by announcing that it had approved a statement excommunicating Salafism from the fold of Sunni Islam.<sup>219</sup> Kadyrov's "conference fatwa" triggered an outraged backlash against Russia from the powerful Salafi clergy in Saudi Arabia, and some conference-goers found the situation so embarrassing that they publicly disassociated themselves from the event.<sup>220</sup> Kadyrov was forced to tour the Gulf to patch up relations, explaining that he was

214 (فيديو) أمير قطر يلتقي قادروف ويقبل دعوته لزيارة غروزني " Rusiya al-Yawm, January 19, 2016, <https://ar.rt.com/hbfx>; محمد بن سلمان " يبحث مع رئيس الشيشان العلاقات الثنائية al-Arabiya, August 22, 2018, <https://www.alarabiya.net/pdfServlet/pdf/541ed6c4-59f6-42b5-9d8d-ef2c188a1157>; رئيس الشيشان يلتقي الملك سلمان ويطوي مرحلة مؤتمر " al-Khaleej Online, October 7, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2EspZuo>; "قادروف يكشف فحوى محادثاته مع محمد بن زايد" Rusia al-Yawm, November 20, 2018, <https://ar.rt.com/l31x>.  
215 "رئيس الشيشان يقر بإرسال جنود لسوريا ولقائهم ماهر الأسد" al-Khaleej Online, January 24, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2NE3yGv>; Neil Hauer, "A War Within a War: Chechnya's Expanding Role in Syria," *Syria Deeply*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/11/30/a-war-within-a-war-chechnyas-expanding-role-in-syria>; Neil Hauer, "Russian diplomacy in Syria bolstered by Muslim minority outreach," Middle East Institute, February 6, 2018, [www.mei.edu/content/article/russias-north-caucasian-outreach-syria](http://www.mei.edu/content/article/russias-north-caucasian-outreach-syria); Neil Hauer, "Princely ties: The growing Chechnya-Gulf security relationship," *Defense Post*, December 27, 2018, <https://thedefensepost.com/2018/12/27/russia-chechnya-gulf-security-relationship>.

216 Hassan Hassan, "Moscow's Little-Noticed Islamic-Outreach Effort," *The Atlantic*, January 5, 2019,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/01/russia-promotes-politically-pacifist-islam/579394>.

217 "قاديروف الرئيس الأسد شكرنا علي المساعدات وفرع لجامعة دمشق غروزني" al-Watan, April 26, 2017, [alwatan.sy/archives/101475](http://alwatan.sy/archives/101475); "دياب يشكر " رئيس الشيشان على عزمها ترميم جامع حلب الكبير al-Watan, May 15, 2017, [alwatan.sy/archives/103769](http://alwatan.sy/archives/103769).

218 Kristin Smith Diwan, "Who Is Sunni?: Chechnya Islamic Conference Opens Window on Intra-Faith Rivalry," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, September 16, 2016, [www.agsiw.org/who-is-a-sunni-chechnya-islamic-conference-opens-window-on-intra-faith-rivalry](http://www.agsiw.org/who-is-a-sunni-chechnya-islamic-conference-opens-window-on-intra-faith-rivalry);

219 "Who are the Ahl al-Sunna?" Final Statement of the Grozny Conference, August 27, 2016, <https://chechnyaconference.org/material/chechnya-conference-statement-english.pdf>.

220 "كبار العلماء تحذر من التفرقات بين الفرق الإسلامية" al-Arabiya, September 2, 2016, <https://www.alarabiya.net/pdfServlet/pdf/31bc07de-b6e5-49f9-9c5a-c267b4d4718e>; Walid Abderrahman, "شيخ الأزهر ينيراً مجدداً من " بيان مؤتمر غروزني al-Sharq al-Awsat, November 19, 2016, <https://aawsat.com/node/787826>.



not against “true” Salafis, just the bad kind.<sup>221</sup>

A year later, Kadyrov again drew Moscow’s ire by defiantly staging large demonstrations in Grozny to protest against Russia’s support for the government of Myanmar, which stands accused of massacring Rohingya Muslims.<sup>222</sup>

## The Wagner Phenomenon

There has been a growing role for Russian security contractors, or mercenaries, in conflict zones in recent years. This is a murky and poorly regulated market.<sup>223</sup> The most prominent company involved is the Wagner Group, which first gained attention in Ukraine. In Syria, Wagner contractors are thought to account for a large proportion of all Russian casualties.<sup>224</sup>

Formed in 2013, and reportedly controlled by businessman Yevgeni Prigozhin, a Putin ally who has ties with the Russian military, Wagner received considerable backing from the Defense Ministry for its activities in Syria after 2015. At its peak in 2016, the company reportedly deployed “equipment and manpower equivalent to an infantry regiment, with access to tanks, rocket

artillery, howitzers, and air support, from the Russian Ministry of Defence.”<sup>225</sup>

Since 2016, Wagner’s operations in Syria appear to have slowed down. The company’s activities at the time were said to be financed by deals between Prigozhin-linked companies and the Syrian government.<sup>226</sup> In December 2017, the AP news agency published what appeared to be a contract between Evro Polis, a company owned by Prigozhin, and a state-owned Syrian oil firm. According to this document, the authenticity of which AP could not confirm, Evro Polis would receive a 25 percent share of the proceeds from any oil or gas fields recaptured on behalf of Damascus.<sup>227</sup> Unsurprisingly, Wagner has been accused of serving as a front for the GRU but others see it as a commercial enterprise with strong links to the national security environment, created to win favor with the Kremlin.<sup>228</sup> The line is certainly blurred, and one does not exclude the other.<sup>229</sup>

In February 2018, US forces claimed to have killed 200–300 personnel attacking US allies in eastern Syria, in violation of a deconfliction line negotiated by American

221 رئيس الشيشان للشرق الأوسط علاقتنا مع السعودية طويلة الأمد ولا تتأثر بالتغيرات العالمية,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 20, 2016, <https://aawsat.com/node/788361>; “رئيس الشيشان يلتقي الملك سلمان ويطوي ”، *مرحلة مؤتمر غروزي*, *al-Khaleej Online*, October 7, 2010, <https://bit.ly/2EspZuo>.

222 Kathrin Hille, “Chechen ruler hits out at Russia over Myanmar policy,” *Financial Times*, September 4, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/f25212fa-918d-11e7-bdfa-eda243196c2c>.

223 Nils Dahlgvist, “Russia’s (not so) Private Military Companies” Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), FOI MEMO 6653, January 2019, <https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI%20MEMO%206653>.

224 John Sparks, “Revealed: Russia’s ‘Secret Syria Mercenaries,’” *Sky News*, August 10, 2016, <https://news.sky.com/story/revealed-russias-secret-syria-mercenaries-10529248>. Moscow has acknowledged only 112 military deaths between September 2015 and September 2018, but journalists had by then tracked “over a hundred” additional Russian deaths among security contractors. “Russia lost 112 servicemen over three years of counter-terror operation in Syria - MP,” *TASS*, September 30, 2018, [tass.com/defense/1023714](http://tass.com/defense/1023714); Maria Tsvetkova, “Military veterans to Kremlin: Come clean

about Syria mission,” *Reuters*, July 5, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-contracto/military-veterans-to-kremlin-come-clean-about-syria-mission-idUSKBN1JV2QL>.

225 Dahlgvist 2019, p. 2.

226 *ibid.*

227 Nataliya Vasilyeva, “Thousands of Russian private contractors fighting in Syria,” *Associated Press*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.apnews.com/7f9e63cb14a54dfa9148b6430d89e873>.

228 Andrey Pertsev, “Overhyped: How ‘Putin’s Chef’ Became One of the Most Influential People in Russia,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, February 19, 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/78390>.

229 “Another example is Konstantin Malofeev, an ultra-conservative businessman who funded paramilitary groups in Ukraine,” according to Martin Kragh, head of the Russia-Eurasia program of the Swedish Institute for International Affairs: “One might call it extrabudgetary resources – financing that does not appear in the state budget and remains invisible, but that can still be very important.” Interview with Martin Kragh, Stockholm, November 2018.



and Russian officers.<sup>230</sup> Casualty estimates varied, but most of the attackers were said to have been Wagner employees, including an indeterminate number of Russian nationals. The Russian government reacted in an uncharacteristically subdued fashion, unwilling to either accept responsibility for the raid or counter-escalate in response. Much remains unclear about the incident.

## Conclusions: Strategy or Improvisation?

Few analysts appear to believe that Russia is pursuing a clear strategy in the Middle East, beyond being guided by certain interests, such as energy cooperation, counterterrorism, and trade; and fears, such as of political upheaval, US influence, and Sunni Islamism. Within these parameters, the Kremlin's current role in the Middle East appears to have been improvised step by step, evolving along a path-dependent trajectory in response to changing domestic and international constraints. The surge in Russian involvement in the region "came about almost by chance," according to Trenin:

Had there been no Arab Spring and had there been no need to show Russia's resolve, Russia's muscle, and Russia's ability to nix some US policies in the Middle East, then maybe Russia would have taken a much less energetic approach to the

region. But the confluence of those facts resulted in what we saw started in 2015.<sup>231</sup>

Assumptions that Russia must have some form of master plan for the Middle East smack of overthinking. It is a fact that Western nations have also largely improvised their responses to events since 2011, and why would Russia be any different? In any event, it is hard to imagine what sort of plan could productively have guided Moscow through the chaos of recent years.<sup>232</sup>

"I think the idea of Moscow having a strategy is derived from the fact that a lot of Western countries, including the United States and the EU, do not have such a strategy", said Russian foreign policy expert Maxim Suchkov. "When they look at what Moscow is doing it appears rather successful – so there *should* be some strategy behind it." He added that he did not necessarily view the absence of a Russian strategy as a negative factor: "On the merits, the Middle East is so complicated and turbulent that it really is hard to think several years ahead."<sup>233</sup>

But the absence of an explicit Russian plan or formula for the Middle East does not mean that Russian diplomacy operates in a vacuum or at random. On the contrary, Russia appears to be carving out a highly specific niche in the Middle East's political environment: that of a self-interested and pragmatic status quo power.<sup>234</sup> It is strategic entrenchment by praxis, rather than plan or doctrine, but, in so far as it is established

<sup>230</sup> Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How a 4-hour battle between Russian mercenaries and U.S. commandos unfolded in Syria," *New York Times*, May 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html>.

<sup>231</sup> Interview, Trenin.

<sup>232</sup> As Andrew Moneghan notes, "assertions of a Russian 'master plan' often simply amount to joining up some dots of various externally visible activities and deducing that they are driven by a strategic agenda – regardless of the inherent

difficulties of strategy-making and any Russian internal complexities." Moneghan 2017, p. 5.

<sup>233</sup> Interview, Suchkov.

<sup>234</sup> According to Hanna Notte, "The way Russia portrays its Middle East policy – or its Syria policy for that matter – is as that of the conservative, responsible global power that protects minorities in the Middle East and advocates for a truly multipolar world, standing against Western unilateralism and regime change policies that force the West's understanding of democratization or of social and political change on the region." Interview, Notte.



and recognized, it may nonetheless add some future consistency to a Russian Middle East policy that has until now been characterized by constant evolution and opportunistic improvisation.

Despite the undeniable reputational costs and heightened tensions with the United States, Russia's post-2011 engagement with the Middle East has brought net benefits: enhanced global prestige, greater regional influence, some new economic investment, and added leverage over Western adversaries. As currently configured, the

country's role in the region appears both effective and sustainable.

That said, serious questions remain about Russia's structural and economic health, and about Putin's approach to foreign policy. If the Kremlin's spiraling ambition – and the inevitable Western pushback – end up creating resource-draining commitments elsewhere, or inspire Russian overreach in the region, or force a retreat to Soviet-style partisanship, Moscow's investment in the Middle East could once again turn from asset to liability.



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**Russian presidential visits to the Middle East**

1991	Yeltsin	—
1992	Yeltsin	—
1993	Yeltsin	—
1994	Yeltsin	—
1995	Yeltsin	—
1996	Yeltsin	—
1997	Yeltsin	—
1998	Yeltsin	—
1999	Yeltsin/Putin	—
2000	Putin	—
2001	Putin	—
2002	Putin	—
2003	Putin	—
2004	Putin	Turkey
2005	Putin	Egypt, Israel, Palestine
2006	Putin	Algeria, Morocco
2007	Putin	Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Turkey, UAE, Iran
2008	Putin/Medvedev	Libya/—
2009	Medvedev	Egypt
2010	Medvedev	Syria, Turkey, Algeria
2011	Medvedev	Palestine, Jordan
2012	Medvedev/Putin	—/Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Turkey
2013	Putin	—
2014	Putin	Turkey
2015	Putin	Egypt, Turkey, Iran
2016	Putin	Turkey
2017	Putin	Turkey, Iran, Syria, Egypt, Turkey
2018	Putin	Turkey, Iran, Turkey, Turkey
2019	Putin	—

**Number of visits:** Turkey (12), Egypt (4), Iran (4), Palestine (3), Algeria (2), Israel (2), Jordan (2), Syria (2), Morocco (1), Saudi Arabia (1), UAE (1), Qatar (1).

Source: The list of Russian presidential trips to the Middle East has been compiled from several sources, such as compilations on the English-language versions of Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)) and the website of the Russian presidency ([www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru)). Although verified to the extent possible, it is not necessarily exhaustive.



### Map of the Middle East and North Africa



Source: Shutterstock



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