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Russia in the Middle East: Jack of all Trades, Master of None

Eugene Rumer

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Executive Summary

The 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria was a pivotal moment for Moscow's Middle East policy. Largely absent from the Middle East for the better part of the previous two decades, Russia intervened to save Bashar al-Assad's regime and reasserted itself as a major player in the region's power politics. Moscow's bold use of military power positioned it as an important actor in the Middle East.

The intervention took place against the backdrop of a United States pulling back from the Middle East and growing uncertainty about its future role there. The geopolitical realignment and instability caused by the civil wars in Libya and Syria and the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia have opened opportunities for Russia to rebuild some of the old relationships and to build new ones.

The most dramatic turnaround in relations in recent years has occurred between Russia and Israel. The new quality of the relationship owes a great deal to the personal diplomacy between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, but Russia's emergence as a major presence in Syria has meant that the Israelis now have no choice but to maintain good relations with their new "neighbor." Some Israeli officials hope that Moscow will help them deal with the biggest threat they face from Syria—Iran and its client Hezbollah. So far, Russia has delivered some, but far from all that Israel wants from it, and there are precious few signs that Russia intends to break with Iran, its partner and key ally in Syria.

Russian-Iranian relations have undergone an unusual transformation as a result of the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war. Their joint victory is likely to lead to a divergence of their interests. Russia is interested in returning Syria to the status quo ante and reaping the benefits of peace and reconstruction. Iran is interested in exploiting Syria as a platform in its campaign against Israel. Russia lacks the military muscle and the diplomatic leverage to influence Iran. That poses a big obstacle to Moscow's ambitions in the Middle East.

Russian-Turkish relations have received an upgrade as a result of Russia's intervention in Syria. Russian-Turkish relations have been improving since the fall of the Soviet Union; trade and energy ties as well as a shared sense of alienation from the West are now the key drivers of that relationship. The Russian intervention in Syria gave it a new quality, however, since it changed the Turkish calculus in Syria and left Ankara with no alternative to going along with Russian priorities there. The rift between Turkey and the West because of the former's authoritarian politics has deepened rapprochement with Russia. However, the relationship remains well short of a real partnership given the geopolitical, cultural, and historical differences that divide them.

Much like Turkey, Saudi Arabia had no choice but to upgrade its relationship with Russia. In addition to its stake in the outcome of the Syria conflict and rivalry with Iran, Saudi Arabia has a

growing interest in coordinating oil production with Russia at a time when both are grappling with a surge in U.S. energy production. Saudi King Salman's 2017 visit to Moscow was a historic first, and the two energy superpowers have pledged to coordinate their oil export policies, but much like the Israelis, the Saudis are likely to be disappointed in their hope that better relations with Russia could lead it to abandon its partnership with Iran. Still, with influential U.S. voices arguing for reducing the U.S. commitment to the Middle East, good relations with Russia provide an additional, even if not very reliable, hedge against uncertainty.

Russia's return to North Africa too has to be considered against the backdrop of the United States' disengagement from the region. The relationship between Moscow and Cairo, interrupted in the 1970s with the latter's pivot toward the United States, underwent a significant upgrade after the 2013 coup in Egypt and the rise of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to the presidency. Criticized in the West for his human rights abuses, Sisi found in Putin a convenient partner to help shore up his domestic standing and leverage vis-à-vis Washington. Egypt has emerged as an important customer for Russian arms. Russia and Egypt have partnered in supporting one of the factions in the Libyan civil war, the Libyan National Army, but the country remains too badly fractured for the LNA to score a decisive victory. Moscow expects to have a say in negotiations about the conflict and to reestablish commercial opportunities derailed by Muammar Qaddafi's demise.

By reversing the course of the Syrian civil war and saving an old client, Moscow sent a message to other Middle Eastern regimes that it is a reliable partner. Hardly anyone would question that Moscow has positioned itself as an important geopolitical and military actor at the proverbial crossroads of the world following decades of undisputed U.S. military superiority. Russia has positioned itself as a valuable interlocutor to all parties to the region's conflicts.

That said, one of Russia's key accomplishments is also symbolic of the limits of its power and influence in the Middle East. In a region torn by fierce rivalries, the ability to talk to everyone without taking sides has limited utility. Absent major capabilities for power projection and economic resources, and with its diplomatic capital confined largely to a well-advertised willingness to talk to all parties, Russia's clout is not sufficient to resolve any of the region's myriad problems.

For the United States, Russia's return to the Middle East is important, but hardly a seismic shift. Much of what Russia has accomplished is owed to the United States reconsidering its commitments in the region. The challenge for the United States is to define and defend its own interests there, to gain a better understanding of Russian interests and policy drivers, and to explore the extent to which U.S. and Russian interests truly clash and where they do not. As U.S. decisionmakers develop U.S. policy in the Middle East, they will need to think more creatively about how to build on the successful deconfliction effort with Russia in Syria and develop a model of coexistence in the region as a whole.

Introduction

The Russian military intervention in Syria in the fall of 2015 marked the major turning point in the Syrian civil war and Russia's return to the Middle East as a major power player after a decades-long absence. Russian airpower, in cooperation with Iranian boots on the ground, reversed the course of the war and saved Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government from imminent collapse. Russian President Vladimir Putin used that victory to rekindle old partnerships and strike up new ones. He has convened conferences to decide the fate of post-civil war Syria, exchanged visits with long-standing U.S. allies in the Middle East, and signed deals to sell them weapons and nuclear power plants. Russia seems resurgent from the Persian Gulf to North Africa especially as the United States, worn out by nearly two decades of endless wars, appears eager to minimize its commitments in the region. Unwilling to stand in the way of Russian ambitions, U.S. policy has become increasingly erratic and disruptive for long-standing adversaries and allies alike.

President Donald Trump's October 2019 decision to withdraw the remaining U.S. troops from northern Syria and in effect green-light Turkey's military action against U.S.-aligned Kurdish-led militias is the most dramatic manifestation of Washington's desire to put an end to nearly two decades of war. It has magnified the impression of a hasty U.S. retreat from the Middle East and Russian ascendancy. Adding insult to injury, U.S. withdrawal from northern Syria coincided with triumphant visits by Putin to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, both long-standing U.S. allies.

However, a sober assessment of the Kremlin's pursuits across the Middle East suggests that the image of its ascendancy is somewhat of an exaggeration, and that the actual accomplishments of Russian diplomacy across the region are far more modest than they seem at first blush. Of course, the Kremlin's accomplishments to date should not be minimized or ignored. But the single biggest accomplishment—a shared victory in the Syrian civil war—that has positioned Russia as the key power in the war-torn country, comes with a host of major diplomatic, military, and economic challenges, which make the task of winning the peace even more daunting than winning the war.

From the Persian Gulf to North Africa, nimble Russian diplomacy has produced an array of trade and investment-related deals and joint declarations about expanded cooperation in various spheres. However, a closer look at this impressive pattern of activity makes clear that the practical implementation of these agreements and deals is lagging or remains unfulfilled. Russia's trade with the Middle East remains exceedingly modest, and there is little likelihood that this state of affairs will change in the foreseeable future.

This study offers a broad overview of Russian policy in the Middle East in the past decade, its origins, its key drivers, its accomplishments, especially since the 2015 military intervention in Syria, as well as its prospects. It examines Russia's relationships with key Middle Eastern powers—Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran. And it concludes with implications for U.S. interests and recommendations for U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Why?—The Drivers of Russian Policy

Why is Russia returning to the Middle East? What explains its ambition to reestablish itself as a power broker in the tumultuous region? Why is it seeking a major role in a region where major powers, including the Soviet Union, have seen their ambitions thwarted and fortunes wasted in pursuit of grandiose plans? The short answer is because the Middle East is the crossroads of the world, where tradition, interests, and political ambition all mandate an active Russian presence.

Yet for some observers, the Russian military intervention in Syria that positioned it as a force in Middle Eastern politics has been easy to dismiss as a mistake or a potential invitation to plunge into new quagmires.¹ That would be wrong. It was the absence of Russia from the region in the aftermath of the Cold War that was a major departure from the norm. Moscow's post-2015 active presence marked the resumption of centuries-old Russian involvement in the region's affairs.

Russian involvement in Middle Eastern affairs dates back to the reign of Peter the Great and the founding of the modern Russian state, if not earlier. As is the case with many such long-standing foreign policy pursuits, Russian policy has combined elements of geopolitics and great-power competition with ideology and religion. At various times in history, Russian armed forces fought land battles against Persian, Turkish, British, and French armies, and confronted their navies in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

In the more recent past, after World War II, the Soviet Union emerged as a major presence in Middle Eastern affairs, securing partnerships with Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, and establishing itself as the key backer of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Soviet involvement in Middle Eastern affairs during the Cold War was multifaceted and entailed economic and technical assistance, military assistance and training, arms sales, and even direct involvement in the region's conflicts in support of client-states. The Soviet Union was a key party to efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Soviet Navy became a regular presence in the Mediterranean. Former U.S. officials recalled Soviet threats to intervene in and the risks of U.S.-Soviet confrontations in the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars.²

Russian policy in the Middle East has had multiple and diverse drivers. Geopolitical and ideological factors were influenced by its religious and cultural ties to the vast region where the Russian and Ottoman Empires played out their long-standing rivalry, from the Balkans to Asia Minor and the Levant. Over time, these drivers included the quest for warm water ports and territorial expansion, protection of fellow Orthodox Christian believers and Slavs oppressed under Ottoman rule, and support for various postcolonial or revolutionary movements and regimes. Russia was wholly engaged in the outright great-power competition for influence in the contested region, where all major powers of the day had interests and sought to project power and influence.³

Beyond history and tradition, Russian ambition to return to the Middle East can be explained by the region's proximity to Russia's borders. The claim to a major role in the affairs of the Mediterranean by virtue of being a Black Sea power has deep roots in Russian strategic thought and policy.⁴ Geography not only drives Russian geopolitical ambitions, but also has obvious consequences for Russian national security. Considering the difficult terrain and porous borders of its neighbors, the prospect of instability in the Levant spilling over into Russia's restive Caucasus region is a problem no Russian national security analyst or official can ignore. Even when there are legitimate differences of opinion on how to best secure Russia against that contingency, the existence of this problem cannot be denied.

Nor can anyone deny that Russia has interests in the region beyond historical attachments and security. It may seem, on the basis of mere statistics that bilateral trade with most individual countries is not a major driver of Russian policy in the Middle East as a whole because the region overall ranks relatively low among Russian trading partners. Russia's only significant trading partner in the Middle East in 2017 was Turkey, with the total trade volume just under \$16.5 billion.⁵ It was the fifth-largest market for Russian goods (and fourteenth-largest source of imports to Russia).

But numbers can be misleading. Several countries in the region—Algeria, Egypt, Iraq—have been historically significant buyers of Russian weapons. The arms industry is an influential interest group in Russia and arms sales have long been more than just another source of revenue for this sector of the Russian economy. During the lean times, when the Russian military's procurement budgets dried up, arms exports were crucial to sustaining the industry. More recently, arms exports have also served as an important tool of Russian foreign policy.

By far the most important Russian economic interest in the Middle East is in the region's role as the supplier of oil and gas to the global economy. As one of the world's top three producers of hydrocarbons, Russia has a vital stake in the future of the global oil and gas marketplace. The activities of Middle Eastern oil and—increasingly—gas producers have direct bearing on Russian economic well-being and political stability. Although Russia and Middle Eastern producers are

competitors, they are increasingly having to coordinate their activities as their previously dominant positions as energy superpowers are being challenged by the entry of new sources of supply and technologies.

Several Middle Eastern states have also expressed interest in investing in the Russian economy. While expressions of interest have so far exceeded actual amounts invested, they are not to be dismissed. For Russia, struggling to overcome the twin obstacles of U.S. and EU sanctions and its own poor investment climate, the prospect of investments by some of the biggest sovereign wealth funds is important and welcome as proof of its ability to break out of international isolation and economic potential.

Last, but not least, there is the domestic political context of Russian foreign policy. Throughout Putin's tenure at the helm, making Russia great again has been a major stated objective of Russian foreign policy and Putin's domestic political platform. The 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria was a critical milestone in that pursuit—a high-profile military deployment in a region long dominated by the United States, challenging the “indispensable nation's” monopoly on decisionmaking in the Middle East. Coming on the heels of the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Syrian deployment was an important juncture not merely in Russian policy in the Middle East, but Russian foreign policy in general. A successful intervention in Syria would demonstrate to Washington and Brussels that their policy of isolating Russia, marginalizing it in world affairs, and forcing it to retreat under the weight of U.S.-EU sanctions was doomed to fail; Russia could be neither marginalized nor isolated, and it would not retreat.

For decades and centuries prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the loss of territories that long had been part of the Russian Empire, Russian presence in the Middle East had been recognized as a natural phenomenon, a major element of the region's complex politics and the broader context of great-power politics. Its legitimacy was hardly ever questioned. It was to be opposed, as it was in the nineteenth century, when the United Kingdom and France fought Russia in Crimea; competed against, as the United States and its allies sought to do throughout the Cold War; but not questioned as an aberration. Arguably, even the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea was consistent with Russia's traditional pursuit of unimpeded access to the Mediterranean. The Kremlin justified it to the Russian public in terms of historical continuity with earlier centuries' struggles and victories. One does not need to put much stock in this propaganda to conclude that with Russia's return to the Middle East in 2015, the geopolitics of the region is not entering a new phase, but returning to a status quo ante.

This study offers an overview of Russia's return to the Middle East as a major actor and of the crucial role its intervention in Syria in 2015 has played in that undertaking. The intervention in the Syrian civil war occurred against the backdrop of the United States trying to disengage from the turbulent

region thus greatly reducing the risk of a U.S.-Russian confrontation. U.S. disengagement from the Middle East has also created multiple opportunities for Russia to reach out to U.S. partners seeking reassurance in a time of uncertainty—in the Levant, in the Persian Gulf, and in North Africa. Notwithstanding Moscow's success in building or restoring important ties in these regions, it has neither the means nor the ambition to fill the vacuum resulting from the United States' pullback. The Kremlin appears careful not to overextend itself and content to remain as an indispensable actor—one whose presence is necessary, even if not sufficient, to address the region's many problems. Moreover, the advantage that Russia has enjoyed since returning to Middle Eastern politics—the ability to talk to all parties—is also a key limiting factor in its pursuit of a further enhanced role in the region. To move beyond being everyone's interlocutor and become a true power broker in the Middle East would require taking sides in the major conflict tearing the region apart—between Iran and virtually everyone else. So far, Russia has not been willing or able to take that step and instead appears intent on remaining the party everyone can talk to.

The Retreat in the 1990s

The 1990s were a period of a broad and deep Russian retrenchment from the world stage, and the Middle East was no exception to that phenomenon. The post-Soviet Russian economy was in no position to sustain an active military presence or any real degree of diplomatic, economic, or humanitarian engagement in the Middle East. The lack of resources severely affected its military establishment and restricted its capabilities for power projection.

The Middle East held little attraction for the cash-strapped Russian state. As a major exporter of hydrocarbons, it was a competitor rather than a market for the Russian economy. The predominantly Muslim countries of the region were hardly natural partners to Russia while it conducted a brutal military campaign to suppress the rebellion of Muslims in Chechnya and elsewhere in the Caucasus. The preeminent position of the United States in the Middle East left little room for Russia to expand its influence there with its few remaining resources. Both literally and figuratively speaking, it was outgunned and outresourced. It was in no shape to compete, let alone outcompete.

What was left was a relatively modest level of diplomatic activity centered around the principle, but at the time seemingly abstract, motivation behind Russian foreign policy: a multipolar world. According to an influential policy blueprint pushed by Yevgeniy Primakov, who served as both foreign minister from 1996 to 1998 and prime minister from 1998 to 1999, Russia along with China and India would form a global counterweight to the United States.⁶ In the eyes of Russian policymakers, their Cold War opponent aspired to perpetuate the unipolar model and single-handedly run the world. However, the Middle East was not home to any major power that could

meaningfully join the Russia-China-India coalition. Rather, the region was a uniquely important arena for competition, where U.S. dominance could be challenged once Russia gained the necessary resources to do so.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the most important relationship that Russia was able to sustain in the Middle East was its ties with Iran. That too, however, was at least in part a reflection of Russia's weakness rather than strength. The Russian-Iranian relationship was less a product of active Russian diplomacy than of Iran's international pariah status and need for partners. For Russia, Iran's isolation presented a unique opportunity to sustain its claim as a power with Middle East interests and a major voice in the international community's efforts to limit the Iranian nuclear program.

Beyond the relationship with Iran, Russia managed to sustain its relationship with Syria, including the naval facility in Tartus, arms sales, and Soviet-era debt forgiveness. The Syrian foothold also served as a useful platform for intelligence collection on U.S. and Israeli activities. That relationship generally was perceived as Russia's last outpost in the Middle East, more a sign of its regional insignificance than a springboard for projecting its power and influence.

Elsewhere, the Russian presence in the region during that period manifested itself mostly in the pursuit of market opportunities for its struggling arms industry, as well as a largely inconsequential diplomatic engagement intended to show that Russia was still interested in maintaining ties to the region. It was not seen as a major actor, not even remotely comparable to the United States. The George W. Bush administration ignored Russian protestations against the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Moscow's former client—and Russia could do little to change that.

Always suspicious of grassroots prodemocracy movements and fearing the West's encouragement of them—especially as the United States embraced democracy promotion as one of its major foreign policy goals—Moscow was quick to blame the 2011 Arab Spring on the United States' reckless subversion of the existing order and the legitimate governments in the Middle East. For Russian officials, the Libya intervention by the United States and its allies, which led to the downfall of the long-lived regime of Muammar Qaddafi, and the West's endorsement of the antiregime protests in Syria were more than enough evidence that turmoil in the Middle East was a product of U.S. geopolitical designs on the region. The fact that the Arab Spring followed the invasion of Iraq, undertaken in the name of democratizing the region; then president Barack Obama's Cairo speech in 2009; and then secretary of state Hillary Clinton's statements in 2012 that the Assad regime had lost its legitimacy and "must go" supplied further proof of Washington's unilateral, unipolar, disruptive agenda in the Middle East.⁷

The Syrian Pivot

The unrest in Syria, which began in 2011 and soon escalated into a full-fledged civil war, was the catalyst for a qualitative change in Russia's involvement in the Middle East. Several major considerations were apparent in the Kremlin's decision to step up its involvement in the Syrian conflict. Syria, as mentioned earlier, was the last remaining foothold in the Middle East that Moscow could count as its client-state—Iran was too big and pursued a far too independent foreign policy to be considered a Russian client. Syria was home to the last remaining Russian military—in this case, naval—facility in the Middle East and Russia's biggest electronic eavesdropping post outside its territory in Latakia.⁸ The Kremlin's relationship with the ruling Assad family extended back to the 1970s.

The new chapter in Moscow's Middle East policy began against the backdrop of a general deterioration of relations between Russia and the West. Disagreements with Washington about the handling of the escalating conflict in Syria intensified as the Obama-era “reset” faded, and tensions between Moscow and Washington rose with Putin's return to the presidency amid U.S. criticism of Putin's crackdown on domestic protests. The crisis in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 swept aside all interest in a cooperative relationship on both sides, with the exception of a handful of vitally important issues. In this context, the increased Russian involvement in Syria acquired a poignant anti-U.S. aspect.

Russian engagement in Syria has evolved over a period of several years. It began with mostly political, diplomatic, and economic support for the Assad regime, and escalated into direct military engagement with boots on the ground and airpower in the sky. This evolution has been a direct product of the changing fortunes of the Assad regime.

Victory from the Jaws of Defeat

Russian involvement in Syria intensified as the civil war inside the country escalated and the conflict increasingly occupied the center stage of international diplomacy. The initial protests and the Assad regime's suppression of them were met with different, but parallel and escalating responses from Washington and Moscow. The Obama administration viewed the protests as a legitimate effort by the nascent Syrian prodemocracy forces and an expression of the Syrian people's desire for a more open, representative government. Accordingly, the administration condemned the Assad regime's actions to suppress the protests. As the conflict escalated into a full-fledged civil war, the United States provided political, diplomatic, and material support for the anti-Assad forces. The Russian

government, for its part, condemned the protests as an illegitimate, foreign-inspired attempt at regime change; branded the opposition as terrorists; endorsed the actions of the Assad regime to suppress them; and also provided material support for Assad to do so.

As the confrontation intensified and U.S. condemnation of the Assad regime grew stronger, so did Russian actions to support Assad. In the United Nations Security Council, Russia stymied U.S. efforts to apply international pressure on Assad to force him to ease his oppression of the opposition and negotiate with it. Joined by China, Russia put up an insurmountable barrier to the United States' push to impose comprehensive sanctions, including a ban on arms deliveries and financial transactions, on the Syrian government.

In the meantime, Iran also emerged as a critical participant in the conflict willing to intervene with boots on the ground.⁹ Tehran's and Moscow's confluence of interests in supporting Bashar al-Assad reinforced their partnership, with Russia providing extensive material and diplomatic assistance, as well as intelligence support, to the embattled Syrian regime, and Iran providing the manpower to fight the regime's opponents.¹⁰

This partnership and division of labor also planted the seeds of future tensions in the Iranian-Russian relationship. As argued below, in the discussion of Russia's relations with Iran, notwithstanding the confluence of their interests in supporting the Assad regime, their longer-term interests diverge. Reconciling them while Russia pursues a more expansive agenda in the Middle East is and will continue to be a complicated diplomatic challenge for Moscow.

With Syria engulfed in a full-scale civil war, Russia justified its support for the Assad regime as a legitimate form of assistance to a friendly government under assault from illegal, foreign-inspired, and foreign-supplied opposition groups and terrorist cells. Russian officials stressed that their actions were being undertaken at the request and with full consent of the legitimate, internationally recognized Syrian government. Russian commentators also noted that the emergence of the so-called Islamic State, which occupied and established its capital in the Syrian city of Raqqa and posed a major threat to the Assad regime, was a direct consequence of the United States' destabilizing invasion of Iraq and premature withdrawal, which left behind a broken country. Thus, Russian support for the Syrian government was portrayed as part of an international campaign against terrorism, as practiced by both the Islamic State and other, less prominent groups that Moscow claimed were a significant part of the anti-Assad forces.

This diplomatic, economic, and military campaign had multiple effects on different audiences. It provided the Assad regime with invaluable support and diplomatic protection, it served as an opening for Russia to insert itself into Middle Eastern politics, and it positioned Russia as a major

power willing and able to stand up to the United States. The last of these was a notable new development, considering that in 2003 the United States had brushed aside Russian objections to the invasion of Iraq, and Russia could do little about it. The unambiguous message that a new major actor had (re)entered the Middle East was heard throughout the region.

The 2013 Russian diplomatic maneuver to engage the United States in a joint effort to remove chemical weapons from Syria was a particularly significant move on Russia's part. It projected the image of Russian diplomacy preventing the United States from launching punishing strikes at the Syrian government out of retribution for the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons against the opposition and civilians. The tactic enhanced Russia's reputation as both a shrewd diplomatic actor and a peer competitor to the United States in the Middle East, where the latter previously had no equals.

The Russian Military Returns to the Middle East

Despite the Russian campaign in support of the Assad regime, the Syrian military was losing on the battlefield. In the summer of 2015, it was in danger of being defeated by a combination of the Islamic State and anti-Assad opposition forces.¹¹ With the status quo unsustainable, the Kremlin faced two fundamentally different choices: to let the Assad regime collapse or to intervene militarily and attempt to save it.

The prospect of military defeat and collapse of the Syrian government presented Russian officials with multiple highly undesirable consequences. The fall of the Assad regime would have been an embarrassment for the Kremlin, which had positioned itself as Assad's protector and as the supporter of legitimate (if unpopular) governments threatened by domestic instability and terrorism. Assad's fall would have been a victory for the United States and a coalition of U.S.-supported Syrian opposition groups. Russian officials charged that their victory could have turned Syria into a hotbed of international terrorism that would then spread its tentacles beyond Syria, including to Russia and Central Asia.

The risks associated with direct Russian military involvement in the Syrian war were also apparent. An unwritten but widespread belief held that the combined trauma of the 1980s Soviet campaign in Afghanistan and the 1990s war in Chechnya would be a powerful psychological and political barrier to another military intervention that could lead to many Russian casualties and an endless entanglement in a conflict similar to those in Iraq and Afghanistan, from which the United States was having difficulty extricating itself. A related belief stated that a protracted military campaign far from the Russian border—a war of choice rather than necessity—would risk a domestic political

backlash. There was the lingering assessment that the Russian military did not have the necessary equipment, armaments, and training to sustain a long-range operation. The precarious state of the Russian economy, which had suffered a major blow as a result of the steep decline of the price of oil, posed an additional barrier. The conflict with Ukraine was still unresolved. Last, but not least, it was possible that the United States would intervene in Syria against the Assad regime, with the resulting risk of an accidental or intentional U.S.-Russian military confrontation.

Given the Kremlin's opaque decisionmaking style, it is impossible to know how the risks of action were weighed against those of inaction. But the logic behind the Kremlin's 2015 direct intervention in the Syrian civil war nonetheless can be deduced with some degree of confidence from the available public record. By 2015, the Obama administration had made it clear that it had no intention of intervening directly in the Syrian civil war beyond a limited effort to counter the Islamic State.¹² By publicly embracing the anti-Islamic State cause, the Kremlin sought to undercut some of the objections to its intervention from the United States or other parties. Furthermore, Russian officials have long insisted that their involvement in Syria is justified by the fact that the Russian military is there at the invitation and with the full consent of the legitimate, internationally recognized government of Syria—unlike U.S. military personnel deployed and operating inside Syria.

The Russian military has demonstrated considerably greater competence in the conduct of military operations in Syria than initially predicted. Russian military planners evidently decided against conducting a large-scale ground campaign to eradicate the Syrian opposition and instead focused on an air campaign. The resulting footprint of the Russian military in Syria turned out to be much smaller than initially predicted. By relying largely on airpower, the Russian military was able to operate virtually unopposed, for the antigovernment forces had few if any air defense capabilities. Russian air strikes were carried out with little, if any regard for civilian casualties.¹³

The military intervention in the Syrian civil war was only the first phase of Russia's more expansive move into the Middle East, one whose consequences would reach well beyond Syria. The initial deployment of Russian aircraft to the Hmeimim Air Base in September 2015 was followed by the deployment of advanced S-300 and S-400 air defense systems later that year, ostensibly prompted by the shoot down of the Russian aircraft by Turkish aircraft in November 2015.¹⁴ Though the air defense systems provided Russian aircraft operating over Syria with an additional edge over potential adversaries, the S-400's 400-kilometer range extended the Russian military's ability to see and shoot at airborne targets over most of Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, parts of Turkey, Israel, and Jordan. With the deployment of these air defense weapons, as well as antiship cruise missiles, the Russian military acquired a potent anti-access/area-denial (A2AD) capability over the Levant and eastern

Mediterranean.¹⁵ Any other military operating there would have to coordinate its actions with Russian commanders. After a long absence, Russia was back as a military power to be reckoned with in the Middle East.

The Game Changer

The 2015 military intervention in Syria fundamentally changed Russia's position in the Middle East. Until that point, it had been more or less a marginal actor in the region's affairs. After its military deployment to Syria, Russia emerged as an indispensable power broker, not just in Syria but more broadly in the Middle East. The Russian military's decisive (and more often than not indiscriminate) application of airpower radically changed the course of the civil war and saved the Assad regime from imminent collapse. Through its involvement in Syria, the Kremlin demonstrated its military capabilities and its resolve to use them, as well as a strong claim to a leadership role in the Middle East whose participation is required to solve the region's many problems. To other governments in the region, the Kremlin sent an important message—that it was a reliable partner willing and able to rescue friends in need. Against the backdrop of the Obama administration's desire to minimize U.S. commitments in the Middle East, Russia's assertive posture projected the image of confidence and reliability.

The Russian presence with boots on the ground and airpower in Syria and its success in reversing the course of the civil war positioned it as a key interlocutor for the many stakeholders in that conflict. The rebel groups, which had been receiving support from Persian Gulf Sunni Arab states, Turkey, and the United States, were dealt a severe blow, from which they were unlikely to recover. Their external backers received a clear message that they would no longer be able to meddle in Syrian affairs at will, and would have to take Russia's position and preferences into account.

Aside from the Syrian opposition, the United States was the biggest loser in this development. Until then, it had been the largest military power in the region, effectively free to operate without looking over its shoulder. The Russian military's deployment to Syria in support of Assad changed that. Moreover, whereas Russia emerged as the reliable patron to its client regime, the U.S. reluctance to intervene and challenge the Russian move created the appearance of U.S. weakness, unreliability, and an overall retreat from the region.

Russia and Israel—Best Friends Forever?

The most important development in Russia's Middle East policy since the end of the Cold War has been the rapprochement between Russia and Israel. The relationship between the two countries has its own complicated historical baggage. For many years, the Jewish state, whose founders included Jews who had fled persecution in the Russian Empire, had a difficult relationship with the Soviet Union. Joseph Stalin's apparent support for the establishment of the state of Israel in 1947—presumably as a step intended to undermine the UK's position in the Middle East—was accompanied by a vicious anti-Semitic campaign inside the Soviet Union. Stalin's successors actively courted Israel's Arab enemies Syria and Egypt and supplied them with weapons. After the 1967 Six-Day War, in solidarity with its Arab partners, the Soviet Union broke off diplomatic relations with Israel, and "Israeli militarism" became a favorite target of Soviet propaganda.

Diplomatic relations between Russia and Israel were restored only in 1991. However, Russia's anemic foreign policy in the 1990s and the Kremlin's preoccupation with a series of domestic crises and the task of managing the post-Soviet divorce left little room in its foreign policy agenda for rebuilding ties with a country that could be neither a source of financial assistance nor a claimant to the status of a major power.

For Israel, the relationship with Russia in the 1990s revolved around a handful of key national priorities.¹⁶ These included the long-standing issue of ensuring that Russian Jews would be free to emigrate to Israel and protecting the rights of those who remained in Russia; preventing Russia from sharing dangerous technologies with Iran, Iraq, and other enemies of Israel; and generally expanding its circle of international contacts, especially with major powers, to hedge against the ever-present threat of its international isolation. However, Russia's diminished circumstances in the 1990s made it a much less influential actor in the Middle East, where the United States was the dominant economic, military, and diplomatic power in the region.

Major improvements in Russian-Israeli relations occurred at the turn of the century owing to a confluence of several important developments. These included the elevation to leadership of Vladimir Putin and Ariel Sharon in 2000 and 2001 respectively, the emergence of Jews from Russian-speaking countries as an important voting bloc in Israeli domestic politics, and Russia's recovery from its decade of troubles and resumption of a more dynamic foreign policy.

The positive personal relationship between Sharon and Putin appears to have played an important role in Russia's rapprochement with Israel. Sharon visited Russia on several occasions, and Putin visited Israel in 2005. Although much in this relationship and its drivers remains nontransparent, one can surmise several factors motivating it. For Russia, still recovering from the setbacks of the

1990s and seeking to regain its influence in the international arena, Israel was one of the key actors in a highly contested part of the world where Russia had long been a major power. Israel's military muscle would have been an additional source of Russian interest, considering the country's long-standing appreciation and reliance on hard power. One can also speculate that Putin's early attempts to build a cooperative relationship with the United States included a deliberate effort to boost Russian-Israeli ties and use Israel and its political clout in the United States to help shape positive U.S. attitudes toward Russia. Finally, Sharon's and other Israeli leaders' tolerant view of Putin's campaign in Chechnya (which was widely criticized elsewhere for its indiscriminate tactics), as well as the Israeli prime minister's own hardline approach to dealing with Palestinian militias, likely made it easy for the two leaders to find a common language.¹⁷

Sharon's successors have sustained and built on the relationship that Sharon jump-started with Putin. The view that "for Israel Putin is definitely the best person who ever sat in the Kremlin," as expressed by former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak, is apparently shared by many in the Israeli leadership, and Israel's ties to Moscow have been steadily improving.¹⁸ The relationship reached its highest point to date during the premiership of Benjamin Netanyahu, who (like his predecessors) took personal ownership of it.

It's Business and It's Personal

On May 9, 2018, Vladimir Putin, newly inaugurated for his fourth term as Russian president after an election written off in the West as neither free nor fair, attended the annual military parade in Red Square to commemorate the seventy-third anniversary of Russian victory in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945. His guest of honor, featured prominently in numerous photographs from the event posted on the Kremlin website, was Netanyahu, the only Western leader in attendance. It was Netanyahu's second visit to Russia in 2018 alone, and his eleventh visit since his reelection in 2013.¹⁹

The two leaders' backgrounds could hardly be more different. One is an Israeli-born, U.S.-educated conservative politician, a twice combat-wounded veteran of an elite special forces unit, who never tires of emphasizing the special bond between the United States and Israel. The other is a KGB veteran proud of his service in the Soviet Union's odious secret police and president of a country with a long history of anti-Semitism, which for decades refused Israel diplomatic recognition and supported its most implacable enemies, and a leader whom the late senator John McCain branded as "an evil man . . . intent on evil deeds, which include the destruction of the liberal world order that the United States has led."²⁰

Putin and Netanyahu might well be expected to disagree on just about every issue of mutual interest. Netanyahu is second to none in his criticism of the nuclear deal with Iran. Putin helped negotiate it,

and Russia is a party to it. Netanyahu refers to Iran as the mortal enemy of the Jewish people and the state of Israel, and talks about the ruling regime in Tehran as the second coming of Hitler's Third Reich. Putin has pursued a "strategic partnership" with Iran.²¹ Putin has partnered with Iran in Syria to save the Assad regime. Netanyahu has warned that Iran's growing presence in Syria poses a grave threat to Israel. Israel is the United States' staunchest ally in the Middle East. Russia is United States' "biggest geopolitical threat," in the words of a 2012 U.S. presidential candidate.²² Yet both Putin and Netanyahu have been targets of international criticism, even ostracism. Both countries have been subjected to international sanctions. Each occupies a unique place in the international system where its influence is disproportionate to the size of its economy or defense budget, and both leaders understand that power and influence are about more than mere economics.

There is indeed more to Russian-Israeli relations, which have steadily improved on Putin's watch. Israeli prime ministers have visited Russia on numerous occasions, and Putin has visited Israel twice, in 2005 and 2012. Russian-Israeli trade grew by 25 percent in 2017, even if it is still a relatively small total amount at about \$2 billion. Israel has been negotiating a free trade agreement with Russia and with the Eurasian Economic Union, an economic bloc widely derided in the West as a tool of Russian neoimperialism. Israel and Russia have had visa-free travel since 2008. When the United States, the United Kingdom, and many other Western countries expelled dozens of Russian diplomats in March 2019 in retaliation for the nerve agent attack on a former Russian spy in Salisbury, England, Israel did not expel any.



Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu observing the Victory Day military parade at Red Square, May 9, 2018 (Photo by Mikhail Svetlov/Getty Images).

In welcoming Netanyahu to Moscow in May 2018, Putin spoke about the special significance of World War II for Russia and for Israel, about the Holocaust, and about his gratitude for Netanyahu's visit to Moscow on May 9, when Russians celebrate their victory over fascism in the Great Patriotic War. (The rest of the world commemorates the end of the war in Europe on May 8.) Netanyahu, for his part, spoke about the Soviet Army's decisive role in the victory over fascism and the great sacrifice of the Russian people. In an especially meaningful gesture, on his lapel he wore a St. George ribbon, which in Russia has become a symbol of both Russian victory in the Great Patriotic War and Russian-backed separatists in war-torn eastern Ukraine.

The legacy of World War II is essential to both leaders' narratives. Putin has positioned himself as the heir to the glorious tradition of Russia's "greatest generation." The World War II victory serves in effect as the foundation of the new Russian state that Putin has built. The Jewish state rose out of the ashes of the war, and Netanyahu has positioned himself as Israel's protector against the threat from Iran, the state that seventy-three years after the Holocaust, he told Putin, wants to destroy Israel.

Russian-Israeli Relations—A Complicated Balancing Act

The Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015 was as much a pivotal moment for Russian-Israeli relations as it was for Syria itself and for the other parties directly and indirectly involved in the conflict. Consequently, the Russian presence in Syrian airspace and on the ground has resulted in a fundamentally new operating environment for the Israeli military. Previously unchallenged in the skies over Syria or Lebanon, and free to strike targets on the ground with little, if any concern about opposing forces, Israel has had to coordinate—or deconflict—its operations with Russia.

The thorniest issue on the coordination, or deconfliction, agenda between Russia and Israel has been the presence in Syria of Iranian forces and Israeli air strikes against Iranian targets. Considering Russia's long-term partnership with Iran and shared objectives in Syria, Israeli strikes against Iranian targets could have become a source of major disagreements with Israel. That appears to have not been the case.

Netanyahu's visit to Moscow on May 9, 2018, was an example of apparent Russian-Israeli coordination and management of this potentially explosive issue. Also on May 9, Israel was hit by twenty Iranian rockets launched from Syria. In the early hours on May 10, the Israeli Air Force struck back. According to Israel's then defense minister Avigdor Lieberman (who happens to be a Russian-speaking native of the former Soviet republic of Moldova), the strike destroyed almost all Iranian military facilities in Syria. Yet a senior Russian foreign ministry official expressed rather perfunctory concerns about the situation and urged all parties to exercise restraint—hardly a vigorous response to a major military strike against a close partner operating on a client-state's territory.

It appears that the combination of personal high-level diplomacy and Israeli insistence on responding to Iranian and Hezbollah strikes with overwhelming force has been met with understanding in the Kremlin. The logic of the Russian position appears quite clear: the Kremlin was not at all disturbed by Israeli strikes against Iranian targets in Syria—as long as there were no Russian casualties. Russian and Israeli interests in this instance were consistent with each other. Israel's interest in securing its border with Syria would be served far better by the Syrian army than by Iranian fighters and

Hezbollah deployed there.²³ That would also serve Russia's interest in enhancing its influence in postconflict Syria and minimizing Iran's influence.

Another long-standing source of friction between Israel and Russia was the prospect of Russia giving Syria a powerful air defense system, the S-300, that would put at risk the Israeli Air Force's ability to operate in Syrian airspace and beyond. The sale of S-300s to Syria had been bound up with the possibility of that system ending up in the hands of the Iranians—something that Israeli officials had long feared. In 2010, then Russian president Dmitry Medvedev canceled the sale of the S-300 to Iran after heavy lobbying by Israel and the United States during the Obama-era “reset” of U.S.-Russian relations. The sale was restored by Putin in 2015 and the missiles were delivered to Iran in 2016.²⁴ However, after the sale was completed, an Iranian government official reportedly complained that Russian officials had shared sensitive technical data about the system with Israel so as to enable Israeli aircraft to avoid it.²⁵

Even after the deal was done, the controversy surrounding the S-300 sale continued. Russian officials continued to raise the topic of the sale and Israeli officials vigorously objected to it. Upon returning from his May 2018 visit to Moscow, Netanyahu announced that he had convinced Putin not to sell the system and its weapons to the Assad regime. This was confirmed by a senior Putin aide in charge of arms exports.²⁶ Yet in September 2018, the S-300 story took another turn, after the Syrian army, using a less advanced system than the S-300, mistakenly shot down a Russian Il-20M reconnaissance aircraft.²⁷ The incident triggered a harsh statement against Israel from the Russian military, with Russian spokesmen accusing the Israeli Air Force of using the Russian aircraft as a decoy while conducting strikes against targets inside Syria. In response for this alleged Israeli violation—which Israeli authorities strenuously denied, and which no independent expert found credible—Russia delivered twenty-four S-300s to Syria in October 2018.²⁸

The Il-20M episode was the worst crisis in Russian-Israeli relations since the two countries restored diplomatic relations. The Russian military relied on harsh rhetoric to describe Israel's alleged offense. However, Putin was considerably more restrained in his statements about the episode. Most important, it appears to have had no lasting effect on Russian-Israeli relations. Official Israeli statements minimized the impact of the S-300 delivery to Syria on Israeli security; indeed, the Israeli Air Force again struck Iranian targets in Syria in January 2019 notwithstanding the S-300 delivery.²⁹

Russia's relationship with Israel remains a complex balancing act. On the one hand, the extent to which Russia is invested in the relationship has been demonstrated by Moscow's muted, perfunctory reaction to Israeli strikes against Iranian and Iran-affiliated targets in Syria and an unprecedented January 2019 statement of concern for Israel's security by a senior Russian diplomat who declared “very strong security of the state of Israel” to be “one of the top concerns of Russia.”³⁰ In a further

sign of Russia's commitment to Israel, according to recent reports, Russia has turned down Iran's request to purchase the S-400 air defense system—a more advanced system than the S-300 that Russia delivered to Iran in 2016—while also reportedly sharing with Israel technical information about the system to ensure that it not pose a threat to Israeli aircraft.³¹

Speaking at the unprecedented June 2019 meeting of U.S., Russian, and Israeli national security advisers, the Secretary of the National Security Council Nikolai Patrushev said: “We pay special attention to ensuring Israel's security,” which he referred to as “a special interest of ours because here in Israel live a little less than about two million of our countrymen. Israel supports us in several channels, including at the UN. The prime minister [Netanyahu] has already said that we share the same views on the issue of the struggle against falsifying the history of World War II.”³²

On the other hand, during the same visit, Patrushev refused to criticize Iran's presence in Syria, which constitutes one of the most urgent Israeli security concerns, and stated unequivocally that “Iran is in Syria at the invitation of the legitimate government and is actively involved in fighting terrorism. Therefore, of course, we will have to take into account the interests of Iran.”³³

The ambivalent nature of the Russian position in the Russia-Iran-Israel triangle was further demonstrated by Putin's meetings in less than a week with both, Netanyahu and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in September 2019.³⁴ The Russian president reaffirmed his commitment to good relations with Israel, while bypassing in his public remarks the issue of Syria and Iran's role there. Meeting five days later with Iran's president, Putin praised the quality of Russian-Iranian relations and expressed his appreciation for Iran's contribution in Syria.

It would be easy in the light of such differences to dismiss the relationship between Russia and Israel as lacking depth or being transactional. But transactional relationships deliver benefits to both sides. Personal ties between leaders also make a difference, but aside from personal factors and regardless of shifts in Israel domestic politics, the geopolitics of the Syrian conflict and the stakes of the two countries in Syria demand that they handle their relationship with care and weigh their choices so as to avoid upsetting it. In the words of one Israeli analyst who follows developments in Syria and Russian operations there, “Russia is our neighbor now.”

Managing Iran

Russian military involvement in Syria has also had a significant impact on its relationship with Iran, its oldest and closest partner in the Middle East during the post-Cold War era. In the past thirty years, Russian-Iranian relations have withstood multiple challenges, including a potential

competition for influence in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Caspian; Russia's brutal campaign against the predominantly Muslim insurgency in the North Caucasus; and repeated threats of sanctions by the United States to deter Russian cooperation with Iran in the development of its nuclear power. The two countries have managed their differences and developed their partnership despite these pressures.

Each side has derived significant benefits from this partnership. For Iran, ostracized by the international community for its rogue posture and pursuit of nuclear weapons, Russia has been an indispensable protector. As a major power and a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, it has been capable of shielding Iran from the threat of devastating international sanctions. Russia also has been an important weapons supplier, and it built the Bushehr nuclear power plant despite strong U.S. pressure to cancel the project.³⁵

For Russia, marginalized on the world stage after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Iran became a major entry point in both Middle Eastern and global politics. At a time when Russia had few resources to project its influence into the Middle East, its special relationship with Iran was uniquely important for sustaining its ambitions in that critical region of the world. Its special relationship with Iran positioned it firmly at the table of major powers dealing with the mounting challenge of Tehran's nuclear pursuits. In other words, the special relationship between Moscow and Tehran was a win-win.

The start of the Syrian civil war added yet another dimension to the relationship between Russia and Iran. Both countries had compelling interests in Syria and incentives in supporting the Assad-led government. Their shared opposition to perceived U.S. hegemony in the Middle East was supplemented by Iran's geopolitical designs to expand its influence in the Levant, support for the Alawite Assad regime, and irreconcilable opposition to the existence of Israel. Russian interest in preventing the fall of the Assad regime, with which it has partnered for half a century, matched Iran's commitment to it.

But success in Syria is only one part of the complicated Russian-Iranian relationship. In 2015, shortly after the start of Russian military deployment to Syria, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Tehran and signed a military cooperation agreement between Russia and Iran.³⁶ In 2016, Russian bombers used a base in Iran to carry out strikes in Syria prompting speculation in Russia that this could lead to long-term Russian access to Iranian military facilities.³⁷ However, Tehran promptly cut off Russian access to the air base, complaining that Moscow had violated the terms of the deal by making it public.³⁸ The Iranian government's move was a signal that not all was proceeding smoothly in that relationship.

Paradoxically, Moscow's and Tehran's joint success in reversing the course of the Syrian civil war revealed significant differences between their interests and agendas. For Russia, the ability to end the conflict in Syria and put the war-torn country on the path of reconciliation and reconstruction would be the ultimate confirmation of its return to the greater Middle East and unprecedented enhancement of its status as a major power. Not only would it have been able to save its client regime, but it would have succeeded where the United States had failed—in ending a major regional conflict. A Russian-brokered peace in Syria would enhance its status in Europe, where the influx of Syrian refugees has emerged as a major political issue, as well as in Turkey.

Russia has no obvious interest in prolonging the agony of Syria, let alone in seeing its civil war morph into a region-wide conflict fueled by sectarian differences and involving other Middle Eastern states—a factor that may be motivating Iranian policy in Syria. In fact, Russia appears to have a strong interest in limiting Iranian influence in Syria. Moscow and Tehran apparently have differing approaches to rebuilding the Syrian army.³⁹ Some Russian business interests have looked at the prospect of Syrian reconstruction as a commercial opportunity, for which an end to the conflict is obviously a precondition.⁴⁰ In that case, too, they may have to compete against Iranian interests also seeking payoff for Iran's role in the war.⁴¹

The desire to protect its special relationship with Israel is a further motivating factor for Russia to limit Iranian influence in Syria and end the conflict.⁴² Russian interests in Syria are quite compatible with those of Israel. When presented with the choice between a Syria ruled with an iron fist by the Assad family, as it was before the outbreak of the civil war, and a war-torn, weakened Syria beholden to Iran and Hezbollah for support, Israel is more than likely to choose the former.

However, this is a hypothetical choice at best for Israel, Russia, and the Assad regime, since the task of consolidating the latter's hold on power in all of Syria and returning it to the status quo ante is likely to prove impossible without a significant Iranian military presence in the country, because the Syrian army has sustained heavy losses in the course of the civil war.⁴³ There appear to be few if any alternatives to a continued Iranian presence, and none of the parties involved—Israel, Russia, or the Assad regime—is in a position to break out of this impasse.

Thus, from Moscow's perspective, Iran's presence in Syria is a mixed blessing—key to the survival of the Assad regime and the defeat of the opposition, but also an obstacle to Russia's ambitions to establish itself as the decider of Syria's future.

In other words, their joint victory in Syria has put Iran and Russia on different courses. For the former, it is an opportunity to expand its influence in Syria (for which an Iranian military presence is essential) and in the broader Levant, and to use Syria as a platform in its rivalry with and a pressure

point against Israel fraught with the possibility of yet another conflict. For the latter, it is an opportunity to consolidate its position as the key power broker and peacemaker in the Middle East.

There appears to be no feasible (let alone easy) way for Russia to break through this impasse. The problem illustrates the limits of its reach and influence even in the Syrian situation, where Russia has played a uniquely consequential role. The Kremlin is apparently short of the diplomatic leverage with regard to Iran, and possibly even Assad, that would be necessary to persuade one or both to limit Iranian influence in Syria. The military option—getting Iran out by force and substituting Russian forces for it—is out of the question. But the option of letting Iran have a free hand at pursuing its objectives in Syria risks jeopardizing the Kremlin’s accomplishments in Syria and in the broader Middle East.

The only option left to the Kremlin in pursuit of its Syria ambitions is in effect to tread water—engage in diplomatic activity that has little if any prospect of achieving its desired objectives and waiting patiently for the situation to change somehow, some time.⁴⁴ But diplomatic activity, even if undertaken for its own sake, has its merits. It demonstrates Russia’s regained status in the Middle East, it bolsters Russia’s claim to a central role in any future settlement, and it casts the spotlight on Putin as a global leader. In the absence of a comparable U.S. role in the region it appears especially worthwhile.

Russia and Turkey—It’s Complicated

Russia’s delivery of the S-400 air defense system to Turkey in July 2019 was a pivotal moment in Russian-Turkish relations.⁴⁵ Ankara bought the Russian air defense system, disregarding multiple explicit, dire warnings from Washington about the consequences for U.S.-Turkish relations, the threat of sanctions, and the withholding of access to advanced U.S. weaponry.⁴⁶ The unambiguous nature of the warnings and the Turkish leadership’s disregard magnified the impression of its break with the United States, and the West in general, in its geopolitical pivot toward Russia.

Ankara’s S-400 decision was all the more striking considering the scale and scope of the break between Russia and the West since 2014 and the onset of what often has been described as a new Cold War. However, Turkey’s pivot toward Russia has deeper causes and has been longer in the making than the S-400 episode or the reemergence of Russia as a major regional actor through its military intervention in Syria. The change in Russian-Turkish relations has been under way for more than two decades, and even a brief look at its dynamics provides an important corrective to the impression that the change was sudden and unforeseeable.

The end of the Cold War and the opening of the Russian economy had a profound impact on Russian-Turkish relations. The legacy of the historical rivalry between Russia and Turkey—which had given rise to numerous wars between the imperial Russian rulers and the Ottoman Empire, and an uneasy standoff during most of the twentieth century—faded, and in its place a thriving commercial relationship emerged between the two countries.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the economic relationship between Russia and Turkey blossomed. Turkish construction companies entered the lucrative Moscow real estate market, Russian tourists discovered Turkey’s Mediterranean beaches, and Russian and Turkish energy companies engaged in ambitious pipeline projects.⁴⁷ From less than \$2 billion in 1992, annual trade volume between them has grown to \$25 billion in 2018, when Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced their ambition of growing that number to \$100 billion.⁴⁸

The commercial relationship thrived despite the legacy of geopolitical rivalry between St. Petersburg/Moscow and Istanbul/Ankara, as well as more recent sources of friction between the two countries. In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Turkey aligned itself with the former, while Russia assumed the role of the latter’s historic protector against the Ottomans (while simultaneously supplying weapons to both countries). The Turkish government apparently turned a blind eye to the support provided by the Turkish Chechen diaspora to Chechen fighters waging an insurgency against Russia in the 1990s.⁴⁹ That did not stop Russia from signing a major gas pipeline agreement with Turkey in 1998.⁵⁰ Turkey, for its part, while refusing to recognize the annexation of Crimea by Russia, did not approve of and has not participated in European Union (EU) sanctions against Russia.⁵¹

But there is more. Russia and Turkey have followed similar domestic political trajectories. In the 1990s and early 2000s, both countries implemented major domestic reforms, each pursuing its own path toward closer relations with Europe. In Turkey’s case, this approach included attempted membership in the EU. However, following a period of ultimately unsuccessful attempts at rapprochement with Europe, both countries experienced major shifts in their domestic politics with the emergence of strong and increasingly authoritarian leaders. As a result, their relations with the EU suffered, in large measure due to Europe’s dim view and



Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Moscow, August 27, 2019 (Photo by Mikhail Svetlov/Getty Images).

criticism of their domestic political developments.⁵² Russia and Turkey, each following the vision of its leader, morphed into Europe's outcasts with similar, though not identical, grievances against their European would-be partners.

Equally important to the development of the relationship between Russia and Turkey has been the personal relationship between Putin and Erdoğan. Both leaders found themselves the targets of European criticism for their backsliding on human rights and corruption, and both rejected such criticism as interference in their domestic affairs.⁵³ Both maintained an uneasy relationship with Washington and in particular a difficult personal relationship with Obama.⁵⁴ This combination of positives and negatives predisposed the two leaders toward a sense of solidarity with each other and declarations of friendly personal relations.⁵⁵ However, with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the relationship between the two countries and the two leaders was put to the test in several crises in quick succession.

The record of Turkish-Syrian relations is complicated, and often tumultuous.⁵⁶ It includes the legacy of an uneasy relationship between a former empire and its colony, which share a 500-mile border and have competing territorial claims; the legacy of the Cold War, when Syria was aligned with the Soviet Union, and Turkey was the pillar of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) Southern flank; and the harboring in Syria of the Kurdish separatist leader Abdullah Öcalan, whom the Turkish government has accused of masterminding a terrorist campaign inside Turkey.⁵⁷ Turkey's leaders welcomed the Arab Spring for their own set of geopolitical, religious, philosophical, and internal political reasons, but they initially urged Assad to exercise restraint in his efforts to quell the civil unrest in Syria.⁵⁸ Assad's uncompromising and increasing brutality in dealing with the opposition left little doubt about his unconditional rejection of that advice, and Turkey moved to the column of Assad's adversaries and supporters of his opposition, while Russia remained a staunch ally and supporter of his regime.

As in other relationships between Russia and various parties to the Syrian conflict, both those directly and indirectly involved in it, the pivotal moment came with the deployment of Russian air and ground forces to Syria in the fall of 2015. The Russian military positioned itself in close proximity to former Cold War adversary Turkey, with the two operating in the increasingly congested Syrian airspace.

On November 24, 2015, a Turkish F-16 plane shot down a Russian Su-24 aircraft in what Ankara claimed (and Moscow vehemently denied) was Turkish airspace.⁵⁹ The Russians insisted that their plane had been shot down over Syria. The incident triggered a furious reaction from Russia, including a set of punishing economic sanctions and demands for an apology from Erdoğan, which he delivered in June 2016 in an effort to gain relief from sanctions and political pressure from Russia.⁶⁰

Barely a month later, the lukewarm Russian-Turkish relationship received a major boost from an unexpected turn of events in Turkey. The July 2016 attempted coup against Erdoğan was a pivotal moment for Turkish domestic politics, triggering a massive purge of the country's civil society, military, government employees, and media.⁶¹ The coup and the sweeping purge of Erdoğan's opponents that followed prompted a mix of puzzlement, hesitation, and criticism directed at Erdoğan from Turkey's European allies and the United States.⁶² The one notable exception to this reaction was Putin. He embraced his Turkish counterpart and seized the moment to drive a wedge between Turkey and its European allies at a time of their already strained relations over the handling of the Syrian refugee crisis.⁶³ In a phone call on the night of the coup, Putin reportedly offered Erdoğan military assistance from Russian special forces.⁶⁴

The failed July 2016 coup and Putin's response to it were the turning point in the relationship that had not yet recovered from the 2015 crisis over Syria. In August 2016, Erdoğan traveled to Russia—his first foreign trip after the coup—and publicly thanked Putin for his support, referring to him as a “dear friend.”⁶⁵ The Turkish president traveled to Russia again in May 2017, at which point Putin declared that the relationship had fully recovered from the 2015 crisis and that the economic relationship had recovered.⁶⁶ This blossoming relationship unfolded against the backdrop of steadily deteriorating relations between Turkey and its Western allies. Erdoğan's clearing of military ranks even included a purge of Turkish officers serving at the NATO headquarters and various NATO commands.⁶⁷

Another high point in the two countries' rapid postcoup rapprochement and Turkey's pivot toward Russia occurred in December 2017, when the two countries signed a \$2.5 billion deal for Turkey to purchase the S-400 air defense system from Russia.⁶⁸ After nearly two years and countless warnings from both sides of the Atlantic about the negative impact on Turkey's relations with the United States and NATO, the S-400 was delivered to Turkey.⁶⁹

The S-400 delivery to Turkey in July 2019 was a much bigger victory for Putin in his standoff with the United States and NATO than a sign of a truly strategic rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara. Its symbolism was by far the most important prize for Putin. After years of acrimony in Moscow, Washington, and Brussels, and multiple sanctions imposed on Russia for its violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity and multiple other transgressions—sanctions imposed specifically on Rosoboronexport, the Russian state entity that sold the S-400 system to Turkey—Putin gained the upper hand and prevailed on Erdoğan to go ahead with the purchase.⁷⁰

The S-400 deal also was a symbolic victory for Erdoğan, at least in the near term. It was a snub to Washington and Brussels, where his reputation had suffered badly in recent years. It also was an opportunity to demonstrate Turkey's strategic importance to and independence from the West.

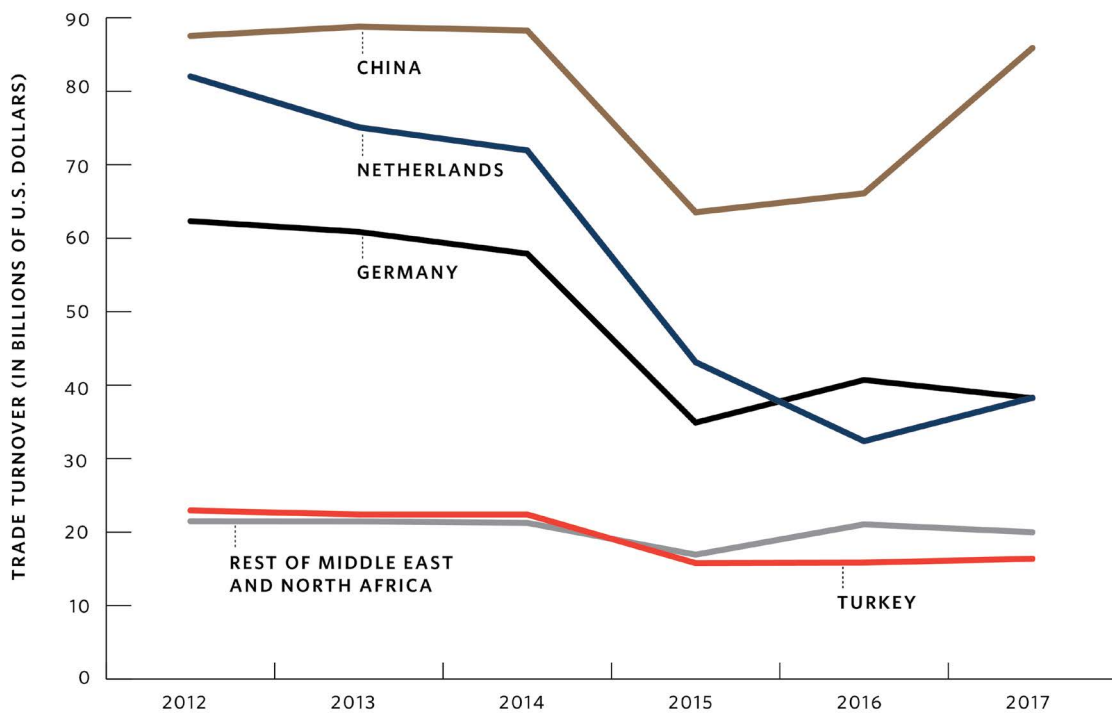
Despite repeated threats to impose sanctions on Turkey for the S-400 deal, the Trump administration struggled to come up with an adequate response, and its reaction to the delivery of the system to Turkey has been muted—a sign of the U.S. equities at stake in Turkey, including U.S. access to the Incirlik Air Base, and desire to avoid further damage to NATO cohesion or aggravate the split with Turkey.⁷¹

That said, this new high point in the relationship between Moscow and Ankara should not be understood as a truly strategic shift in what promises to be at best a complicated relationship for the foreseeable future. There are multiple reasons for caution. On the positive side, the Turkish-Russian trade and economic relationship serves as an important foundation for the two countries' ties and provides both with powerful incentives to sustain that relationship. The leaders of both countries share a grudge against Europe and the United States. Both Erdoğan and Putin have similar authoritarian domestic political agendas at home and reject other leaders' criticism as interference in their domestic affairs.

But they have their differences as well. Russia's military support for the Assad regime, which turned the tide of the conflict and saved it from what appeared to be imminent defeat, left the Turkish government with few options other than to contain its hostility toward the Assad regime and accept the fact that it will remain in power in Syria. However, that initial setback for Turkey turned into an unexpected opportunity after Trump made clear in December 2018 that he wanted a “full” and “rapid” withdrawal of all U.S. forces. Even though that decision was reversed under pressure from the Pentagon and supporters of the counter-Islamic State campaign, Erdoğan steadily kept the pressure on. In October 2019, Trump once again announced a decision to withdraw U.S. troops and in effect paved the way for Turkey to attack the Kurdish-led militias that until then had operated in close partnership with U.S. forces.⁷² But that opportunity was in turn tempered by the swift deployment of Russian troops to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of U.S. troops, which left the Turkish government no choice but to accept Russian and Syrian Army presence in areas previously controlled by Kurdish-led militias with U.S. support and protection.⁷³ Russian moves in the aftermath of the Trump administration's decision to withdraw troops from northern Syria sent a powerful signal to Erdoğan that in pursuing his objectives in Syria, he would have to pay close attention to Russian preferences and priorities.

Moreover, economic ties between Russia and Turkey are important, but not important enough to overlook some of the competitive aspects of the relationship. Russia is not even among Turkey's top ten biggest export markets—China, Germany, the UK, and the United States are, along with several other major European economies (see figure 1).⁷⁴ Closer to home, Romania, Bulgaria, and Israel buy more than Russia from Turkey. Although trade with Russia is an important component of its relationship with Turkey, Russia has demonstrated that it is not above using trade as a weapon against it.

FIGURE 1
Russia's Leading Trading Partners (2012–2017)



Source: World Bank

Whereas Ankara has stated its resolve to secure its border from what it maintains is a major threat to its domestic security from the Kurdish militias, Russia, for its part, has not been above exploiting the Kurdish issue in dealing with Turkey and reminding the Turkish government of its vulnerabilities.⁷⁵ Russia has supplied weapons to Kurdish forces in Iraq and reportedly supported Kurdish groups fighting the Turkish army in Syria.⁷⁶ The October 2019 move by the Russian military to the Turkish border into territories previously held by Kurdish-led militias and U.S. troops positions Russia to apply pressure on Turkey and, if circumstances call for it, exploit the Kurdish issue again.⁷⁷

On balance, the Russian-Turkish relationship looks much more like a transactional relationship than an alliance or strategic partnership. With the exception of economic ties, where there exists a great deal of complementarity and which have the potential of serving as a stabilizing factor, their relationship's foundations—historical, political, geopolitical, strategic, and personal ties between the two leaders—lack the strength, durability, and trust called for in a true partnership, let alone alliance.

Russia in the Persian Gulf

For most of the post–Cold War years, Russian policy in the Persian Gulf focused on relations with the region’s two outcasts: Iran and Iraq. Diplomatic ties between Russia and Persian Gulf Arab states were established as the Cold War ended. The Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia established diplomatic relations in 1990, and Saudi Arabia provided \$2.5 billion in aid to the Soviet Union in its final months.⁷⁸ Russia in the 1990s had little to offer to wealthy Gulf monarchies except for an occasional weapons deal, in which it was more interested than they were. Moreover, the relationship between the Gulf Arab monarchies and Russia bore the legacy of their Cold War–era alliance with the United States; the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s and Saudi and other Gulf-origin support for the mujahideen insurgency there; and the brutal Russian counterinsurgency campaign in Chechnya in the 1990s and early 2000s and (as Russian officials charged) Saudi-originating support for the insurgency.⁷⁹

Iran and Iraq, both ostracized by the international community and subjected to an array of sanctions, were the only relatively easy targets of opportunity for Russia to secure a foothold in the Persian Gulf. However, even those relationships proved complicated. Russia’s pursuit of a partnership with Iran became a significant stumbling block to better ties between Moscow and the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The 1991 defeat of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq by a U.S.-led coalition disrupted the long-standing Russian relationship with Iraq. Russia’s willingness to skirt and even violate sanctions helped it sustain some of its trade with Iraq, but that was halted by the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and did not begin to recover until almost a decade later.⁸⁰

Russian trade and economic relations with the Persian Gulf followed a pattern similar to Russian diplomacy in the region. For most of the post–Cold War era, Iran and Iraq have been by far the biggest trading partners for Russia, while trade with the GCC lagged far behind.⁸¹

Arms trade is the one area outside the oil and gas sector where Russia has been successful in many countries around the world. However, with the exception of Iraq and Iran, where a combination of sanctions and legacy systems favored Russia, it has not been successful selling its arms to Persian Gulf customers, which have long enjoyed privileged arms trade relationships with the United States.

Considering the disproportionate role that energy plays in both Russian and GCC foreign trade, Russia and the GCC countries have little to offer to each other and are competitors striving to secure a larger share of the global oil and gas marketplace. However, the generally unwelcoming investment climate in Russia apparently has also acted as a brake on GCC investment.

Saudi Arabia

Despite periodic high-level visits, throughout much of the post–Cold War era relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia, the leading GCC state, were lukewarm.⁸² There were several key reasons for this tepid relationship. One long-standing irritant was Russia's ties to Iran, Saudi Arabia's major rival for influence in the Persian Gulf and beyond. A recent sore point related to Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Iran was Russia's support for Syria's Bashar al-Assad and the assistance Russia was providing (alongside Iran) to his government in the Syrian civil war, in which Saudi Arabia had emerged as a major backer of the opposition.⁸³ Last, but not least, the relationship between Moscow and Riyadh apparently had suffered from their repeated failures to coordinate their production strategies prior to 2015.⁸⁴

Decisionmaking in both Moscow and Riyadh is opaque, but two developments with far-reaching consequences likely propelled Russia and Saudi Arabia toward a rapprochement. The first of these, longer in the making than the other, was the effect of the shale revolution, which saw the emergence of the United States as a major oil exporter and a resulting oversupply of oil and gas that threatened the economic well-being of major producers and required coordinated efforts to deal with this challenge.⁸⁵

The second major development was Russia's active military engagement in the Syrian civil war. The reversal of Assad's fortunes with help from Russia and Iran made it more urgent for Saudi Arabia to rebuild ties to Russia apparently in the hope that Russian battlefield success and influence with Assad could be used to counterbalance Iran's influence in Syria and possibly even drive a wedge between Russia and Iran.⁸⁶

The urgency of engaging with Russia was apparently further underscored for Saudi Arabia by the United States' posture in the Syrian conflict and the broader Middle East. The refusal of the Obama administration to follow through on the threat to strike Assad's targets in Syria to punish the regime for chemical attacks in 2013 and the decision to limit U.S. military involvement in Syria to a campaign against the Islamic State sent a powerful message to all concerned that the United States was intent on limiting its exposure in the Middle East. The U.S. pivot to Asia, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, and the signing of a nuclear deal with Iran further made clear that the United States was trying to reduce its commitments in the Middle East. Unofficial but influential U.S. voices reinforced that message by arguing that the United States' newfound energy bounty would free it from dependence on Persian Gulf oil and present it with a range of previously unavailable geopolitical options.⁸⁷

The impact of these developments did not take long to manifest in a major improvement in Russia-Saudi relations. The relationship that had been warming gradually for some time took a big step forward when Saudi Arabia's King Salman visited Russia in October 2017—a historic first by a Saudi monarch.⁸⁸ The visit resulted in billions of dollars' worth of agreements, including a commitment by Saudi Arabia to purchase the S-400 air defense system. However, the symbolic value of the visit was arguably its biggest deliverable for Russia. The leader of the most powerful and wealthiest Persian Gulf state, a staunch ally of the United States, arrived in Moscow in the midst of the worst relationship between Washington and Moscow in decades, when the United States was actively trying to isolate Russia. In an important concession for Russia and its Syrian ally, the king did not call for Assad to be removed from power. Overall, it was a major diplomatic coup for Russia.

The Saudi king's visit was a milestone in another area critically important for both countries: coordination of their activities in the world oil market.⁸⁹ Because previous attempts by the two oil giants to coordinate their activities had failed, the agreement initially reached in 2016 was first met with skepticism.⁹⁰ The agreement was reaffirmed during King Salman's visit to Moscow and, despite repeated doubts about its prospects, subsequently extended on several occasions with plans under way to establish a long-term OPEC+ alliance notwithstanding the fact that Russia has not reduced its oil output except for a brief period in 2019—a cut that was due to temporary technical problems.⁹¹ Despite that, the appearance of cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Russia in the oil market prompted criticism from Iran, whose OPEC representative complained in 2018 that the two were holding the oil market hostage and taking advantage of Iran when it was being pressured by the United States.⁹²



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Putin at the G20 Summit, November 30, 2018 (Photo by Alejandro Pagnii/AFP/Getty Images).

Since the king's visit, the Moscow-Riyadh relationship has continued on an upward trajectory. Putin warmly greeted, sat next to, and appeared to be building personal rapport with Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman at the G20 conference of leading economies, hosted by Argentina in November 2018.⁹³ Russia sent a large delegation to Saudi Arabia to attend the crown prince's investment conference in October 2018.⁹⁴ In both instances, Russia's embrace of its Saudi counterparts was noteworthy because of the international criticism and partial boycott of the Saudi leadership after the murder of dissident

journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The two countries' energy ministers have announced plans for boosting trade and investment ties.⁹⁵ Putin's October 2019 visit to Saudi Arabia reaffirmed the desire to maintain cordial relations. It produced multiple agreements, but the extent to which they are likely to be implemented remains uncertain.⁹⁶

Regardless of its tangible payoffs, the relationship is a win-win for both sides. For Russia, it represents an unprecedented opening to expand its web of relationships and influence in the Middle East and secure ties with a major regional power that previously had been in a nearly exclusive partnership with the United States. For Saudi Arabia, outreach to Russia is a chance to diversify its networks beyond the long-standing alliance with the United States at a time when the latter is wavering in its commitments in the Middle East and behaving erratically on the world stage, questioning the value of alliances, and exhibiting signs of isolationism and reordering of its domestic and foreign policy priorities. Moreover, the current outreach to Russia is a Saudi attempt to hedge against two strategic vulnerabilities facing the kingdom: volatility in the oil market and competition with Iran. Russia can be a key partner to Saudi Arabia in dealing with both. Moscow and Riyadh have also found mutual interests in other areas, such as in Libya, where both have supported General Khalifa Haftar, as well as in Sudan, where they have backed the Transitional Military Council.⁹⁷

The Gulf Cooperation Council

Russia's relations with other GCC states have improved as well, although none has had the same symbolic and strategic value as the upgrade of the relationship between Russia and Saudi Arabia. These smaller Persian Gulf monarchies and Russia have maintained active diplomatic engagement in recent years evidently prompted by the same factors that have energized Saudi engagement with Russia (see table 1)—their shared interests in the energy sector, increased Russian activity in the Middle East, the challenge from Iran, and the uncertainty surrounding the role the United States would be willing and able to play in the region.⁹⁸

TABLE 1
Russian-GCC Official State Visits (2015-2019)

Visit	Date	Visit	Date
GCC		Saudi Arabia	
Sergey Lavrov	August/September 2017	Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud	June 2015
Sergey Lavrov	March 2019	Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud	October 2015
Qatar		Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud	May 2017
Sergey Lavrov	August 2015	King Salman	October 2017
Khalid bin Mohammad al-Attiyah	December 2015	Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud	June 2018
Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani	January 2016	Vladimir Putin	October 2019
Abdullah bin Mohammed bin Saud Al Thani	January 2017	Kuwait	
Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani	March 2018	Emir Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah	November 2015
UAE		Bahrain	
Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohammed Al Nahyan	August 2015	King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa	February 2016
Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohammed Al Nahyan	October 2015	Oman	
Sergey Lavrov	February 2016	Sergey Lavrov	August 2015
Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohammed Al Nahyan	March 2016	Sergey Lavrov	February 2016
Sergey Lavrov	February 2017		
Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohammed Al Nahyan	April 2017		
Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohammed Al Nahyan	June 2018		
Vladimir Putin	October 2019		

SOURCE: Review of the Kremlin's press service digest (kremlin.ru) for the period between January 2015 and August 2019

In addition to diplomatic engagement, Russia has courted the smaller GCC countries as potential investors. Notwithstanding expressions of interest on the part of prospective investors from the Gulf and reports of actual investments, the lack of transparency on both sides makes it difficult to gauge the scale of these activities.

In 2016, a widely reported and heralded investment project by Qatar to buy a 19.5 percent stake in the Russian state-controlled oil company Rosneft, in partnership with extractive industries giant Glencore, suffered from a general lack of transparency, the lack of information about parties involved, and reportedly murky backroom deals involving Qatar and Russian banks in arranging financing for it.⁹⁹ Instead of a successful privatization deal, the sale of Rosneft shares to Qatar and Glencore became a prime example of the nontransparent nature of Russian deal-making and the difficulty associated with investing in Russia.

Despite Russia's diplomatic engagement and attempts to energize economic ties with its newfound partners in the Persian Gulf, their relationships are best described as having considerable breadth but little depth. In terms of its economic and financial impact on the world stage, diplomatic importance and geopolitical sway, and military capabilities, Russia falls short of the ideal partner the Gulf states apparently desire. Yet at a time when the region is facing continued turmoil, and the principal outside power that acted as the regional hegemon is at best unreliable and at worst looking to disengage from the Middle East altogether, good relations with Russia are no doubt welcome and important for GCC countries. It is a major actor on the world stage, has played a critical part in the Syrian civil war, and is intent on expanding its presence and influence in the Middle East.

However, it is a competitor rather than an ally to Persian Gulf oil and gas producers; it is badly in need of investment and has little to offer to them in terms of new technologies or opportunities to diversify their economies; it has very limited capabilities for long-range projection and sustainment of military power; and—perhaps most important for the Gulf's Arab Sunni monarchies—it is unwilling to take a decisive stand against its long-time partner Iran.

Russia Returns to North Africa

No part of the greater Middle East has been left untouched by Russian diplomatic activity in the past decade. Like the Levant and the Persian Gulf, North Africa has seen Russian efforts to rebuild ties with some of its former clients, capitalizing on legacy relationships, the turmoil that swept the region in the wake of the Arab Spring, and the power vacuum resulting from disengagement or the lack of interest by the United States and its allies.

Russian diplomacy in North Africa has focused on three countries: Egypt, Libya, and Algeria. Despite their obvious differences, Russian engagement with them has been mostly a matter of opportunity rather than deliberate, targeted Russian actions or strategy. In other words, unlike the case of Russian intervention in Syria, where a great deal was at stake for Russia and which to some exaggerated degree could be considered a war of necessity, Russian engagement with Egypt, Libya, and Algeria has been a matter of choice, or opportunity, rather than necessity, guided by opportunities as they presented themselves. This is not to say, however, that Russian involvement in North Africa cannot have strategic consequences—it very well may.

Egypt

Egypt was a major object of Soviet diplomatic, economic, and military activity from the 1950s to the early 1970s and was considered a loyal partner of the Soviet Union. However, under the leadership of then president Anwar Sadat, Egypt pivoted toward partnership with the United States. In 1972, he ordered the expulsion of thousands of Soviet military and civilian advisors and launched a dialogue with the United States that ultimately led to the Camp David Accords with Israel, paving the way for nearly half a century of U.S. dominance in the Middle East.¹⁰⁰

Sadat's turn toward the United States was a major strategic setback for the Soviet Union.

With Egypt firmly in the column of U.S. allies and receiving billions of dollars in U.S. assistance, the Soviet Union had little chance of convincing the Egyptian leadership to return to anything resembling the pre-1972 relationship. And as Russia retreated from the Middle East in the 1990s to deal with its own domestic challenges, it held little appeal for prospective partners, especially those like Egypt's leaders, who otherwise would be able to count on generous flows of U.S. assistance and friendly reception in Washington.

As with many other aspects of developments in the Middle East, the 2011 Arab Spring marked a major inflection point in relations between Russia and Egypt. The downfall of then president Hosni Mubarak in the face of massive popular protests in 2011 and the United States' endorsement of the popular uprising added to long-standing Russian concerns about U.S. efforts to promote democracy abroad, which Russian leaders saw as a subversive, destabilizing tactic. The fact that the United States was willing to jettison Mubarak, a loyal U.S. ally of some three decades, in the name of democratic change must have been especially unsettling for Russian elites.

However unsettled they may have been by the imagery of the Arab Spring and the fall of Mubarak, Russian leaders took a pragmatic stance with regard to his successor Mohamed Morsi, even though

the Russian government had designated Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization and had banned it in Russia since 2003.¹⁰¹ Morsi traveled to Russia and met with Putin in April 2013, but the visit was apparently largely symbolic, with little practical effect for bilateral relations.¹⁰²

Russian-Egyptian relations underwent a major improvement after Morsi was overthrown in a 2013 coup and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi became the new leader of Egypt. The two kindred spirits—former intelligence officer Putin returned to the presidency after large-scale protests and a flawed election, and former military intelligence chief Sisi rose to the leadership of his country following a military coup—evidently saw the vast potential benefit of improving bilateral ties between Russia and Egypt.



Putin and Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Sochi, October 17, 2018 (Photo by Alexei Druzhinin/AFP/Getty Images).

Ostracized by the United States and other Western democracies, the two leaders did not take long to move ahead with that agenda. In multiple exchanges of visits by Russian and Egyptian leaders and top officials since 2013, the two governments reached multiple agreements for cooperation.¹⁰³ While the exact dollar amount of Russian arms sales to Egypt is not known, the two countries have concluded several multi-billion-dollar deals for the sale of dozens of fighter jets, helicopters, and other weapons system.¹⁰⁴ Other agreements included energy projects, nuclear power plant construction, and a broad statement on comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation.¹⁰⁵

However, despite the impressive number of agreements signed, few apparently have moved to the implementation stage. For example, the high-profile deal to build a nuclear power plant was signed in 2015, but according to a July 2018 news report, construction would begin “in the next two-and-a-half years.”¹⁰⁶ With Egypt cash-strapped and Russia seeking to profit from this relationship—in addition to its geopolitical designs on Egypt—these agreements are likely to proceed slowly toward implementation, if at all. Russian weapons sales and deliveries to Egypt appear to be the exception to this pattern.¹⁰⁷

The commercial relationship between Russia and Egypt has yet to recover from the 2015 downing of a Russian jet over the Sinai Peninsula, killing over 200 Russian tourists. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the downing of the jet, and Egyptian authorities subsequently confirmed the group's role.¹⁰⁸ Prior to the terrorist attack, Egypt's Red Sea resorts were a popular destination for

millions of Russian tourists and an important source of revenue for Egypt's economy.¹⁰⁹ In the aftermath of the tragedy, Russian flights to the Sinai were suspended and have yet to be resumed.

In 2017, reports appeared that Moscow and Cairo were engaged in talks about an agreement that would allow Russia access to Egypt's air bases.¹¹⁰ However, it seems highly unlikely that Egypt would sign such an agreement barring a major break in relations with the United States. Egypt remains heavily dependent on U.S. military assistance—to the tune of \$1.3 billion annually—and the U.S. government would certainly strongly disapprove of any agreement to allow Russia access to Egypt's air bases.¹¹¹ Still, some Russian military personnel and equipment reportedly have deployed to military facilities in eastern Egypt in support of a Russian-backed Libyan faction since early 2017, and the two countries' militaries have conducted several joint military exercises.¹¹²

The proverbial glass remains half-full at best. Despite the appearance of partnership and friendly declarations, the Russian-Egyptian relationship has yet to produce benefits for both sides. Neither side can deliver what the other wants. Russia lacks the resources that Egypt needs, while Egypt lacks the cash to pay for what Russia has to offer. Egypt's dependence on the United States prevents it from offering Russia the strategic access and geopolitical influence it seeks. As a result, there is less to the Moscow-Cairo partnership than good-natured declarations could lead one to believe.

Libya

Besides their shared support for Assad, Russia and Egypt have sided with the Libyan National Army (LNA) and its leader General Khalifa Haftar. Instability in Libya in the wake of the anti-Qaddafi uprising and the military intervention by the United States and its allies in 2011 remains a major security concern for the Sisi government. With the United States and its allies either having largely pulled back from efforts to put an end to the conflict or pursuing their own interests in the war-torn country, in a way Russia has been given a free hand to back Haftar and the LNA.¹¹³

However, Russian support for Haftar and the LNA appears to have been quite limited in scope. There is no evidence of Russian ambitions to intervene in the Libyan conflict on the scale resembling the military intervention in Syria. Reports of Russian arms supplies to the LNA and a large arms deal allegedly signed by Haftar with Russia in 2017 have not been confirmed.¹¹⁴ The most visible and only reliably reported evidence of Russian involvement in the Libyan conflict has been the presence there of fighters from the ostensibly "private" security company Wagner (which, in fact, is controlled by the Russian government).¹¹⁵ This points to the Kremlin's desire to stay engaged but maintain its distance from the LNA and Haftar, and avoid direct involvement in the Libyan civil war.¹¹⁶

For Russia, the relationship with the LNA and Haftar is a potential opportunity to enhance its position in the Middle East in more ways than one. Russian cooperation with Egypt in support of Haftar is an important contributing factor in the bilateral relationship with Egypt. Beyond that, the United States and its allies' 2011 military intervention in Libya, which resulted in the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime, deprived Russia of a chance to build its relationship with a former Soviet-era client it had been courting, albeit with limited success at best, since Putin's visit there in 2008.¹¹⁷

Gaining a foothold in Libya and ultimately a say in any future settlement in that country could serve as a springboard to build up Russian influence in North Africa and the Mediterranean and position Russia as even more of a thorn in the side of the United States and its post-Cold War near-monopoly on naval activities in the Mediterranean. Presently, the Russian Mediterranean Squadron, established on a permanent basis in 2013, is made up of ships that deploy from the Black Sea, and is supported by ships and submarines from the Northern and Baltic fleets.¹¹⁸ In the long run, once the situation in Libya is stabilized, access to port facilities in Libya, or even a permanent naval base, which, if some reports are to be believed, Qaddafi offered to Putin in 2008, could significantly enhance the ability of the Squadron to operate in the Mediterranean.¹¹⁹

Libya's hydrocarbon reserves are an attractive target for Russian energy companies, or the revenue from those reserves could pay for future purchases of Russian arms by the country's military. Currently prohibited from supplying arms to Libyan factions by the UN arms embargo, Russia could be well positioned to do so once the embargo is lifted.¹²⁰

Evidently reluctant to bet exclusively on Haftar and the LNA, Russian diplomats have maintained ties with the Government of National Accord, thus seeking to hedge against all possible contingencies, keep all options open, and maintain Russian leverage in a future settlement.¹²¹ In the absence of any internal or outside actor capable of imposing its solution on the Libyan conflict, Russia has positioned itself as a party whose endorsement will be necessary for any future settlement.

Algeria

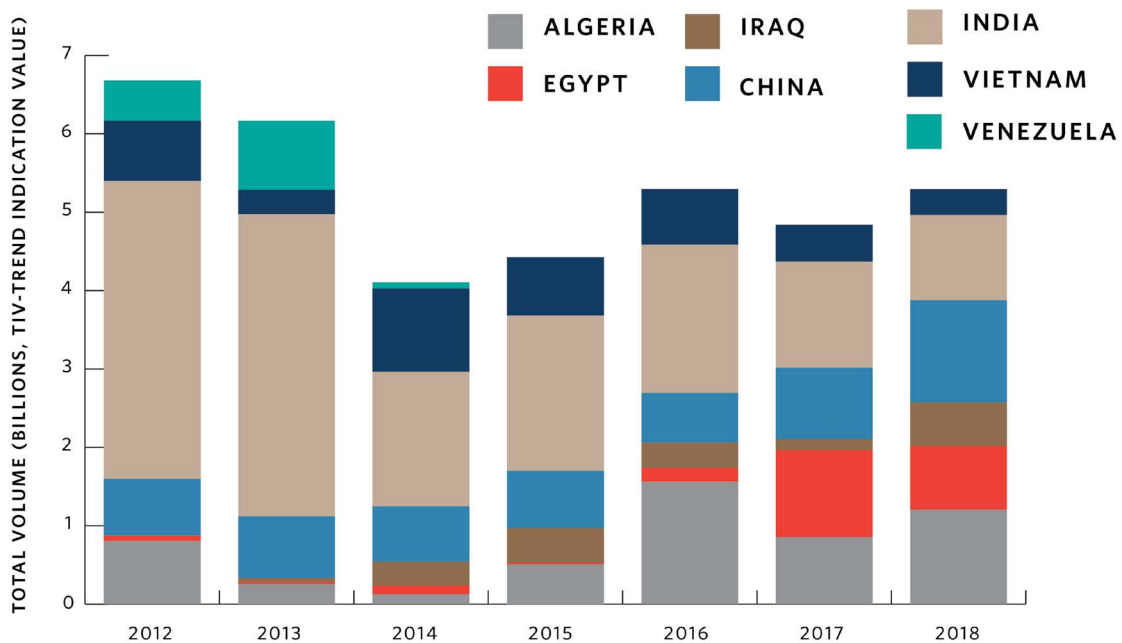
Arguably the most stable Russian relationship in North Africa has been with Libya's western neighbor Algeria. The relationship owes its stability and sustainability to the legacy of their Cold War postcolonial ties, as well as the two countries' unique trajectories since the Cold War. Soviet-Algerian relations began with Soviet support for Algeria during its War of Independence from France in the 1950s and early 1960s.¹²² Soviet weapons deliveries and security assistance after the end of the War of Independence continued and helped solidify the relationship that lasted throughout the Cold War,

even though Algeria was never fully a Soviet satellite.¹²³ By one estimate, from 1962 to 1989 Algeria acquired \$11 billion worth of Soviet arms, of which a large share was presumably financed by Soviet loans or other favorable arrangements.¹²⁴

One of the peculiarities of the relationship between Russia and Algeria was that both countries experienced major upheavals in the 1990s. Algeria was immersed in a bloody civil war against a militant Islamist movement while Russia struggled to overcome the trauma of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and waged a long counterinsurgency campaign in Chechnya.¹²⁵ Thus, preoccupied with their internal challenges, the two countries had few shared interests to sustain their bilateral ties and few areas where their interests would come into conflict.

The relationship resumed as both Algeria and Russia emerged from their times of troubles in the early 2000s. Both had a stake in rebuilding the relationship. Both countries, having been the targets of international criticism for their armed forces' inhumane practices during their internal wars, maintained that they were early victims of terrorism that the West came to recognize after the September 11 attacks. They were approaching each other withholding judgment and on the basis of pragmatism. For Algeria, strengthening relations with Russia, a major power seeking to reassert itself

FIGURE 2
Russia's Major Arms Export Destinations (2012-2018)



Source: SIPRI

in the international arena independent of the United States and opposed to its moralizing foreign policy, was an attractive proposition. For Russia, expanding its foreign policy horizons by rebuilding its relationship with an important North African country with a major role to play in the Middle East and strong ties to Europe was also a logical move.

The obvious intersection of Russian and Algerian interests was arms sales and energy, in particular gas, of which both have been leading suppliers to and competitors in the European market.¹²⁶ A series of high-level visits in the early 2000s resulted in a strategic partnership agreement signed in 2001—albeit something of a misnomer, since the two countries maintained a mostly transactional relationship—and the resumption of Russian arms sales to Algeria.¹²⁷ Considering the prevalence of Soviet legacy systems in the Algerian arsenal, it was a natural place for the two countries from which to rebuild their relations. Putin paid a visit to Algeria in 2006, which resulted in a deal to settle the outstanding Algerian debt to Russia inherited from the Soviet Union and an agreement by Algeria to purchase \$7.5 billion in Russian arms.¹²⁸ Notwithstanding some disagreements about the quality of Russian armaments, Algeria has emerged as a major buyer of Russian weapons—\$11 billion between 2000 and 2018 (see figure 2).¹²⁹

The relationship appears to be much less advanced and partnership-like in the energy sphere, where the two countries are competitors, each supplying gas to Europe, each seeking to carve out a larger share in the increasingly congested European gas market. Major Russian companies like Lukoil and Gazprom have participated in oil and gas exploration projects, but progress toward actual deals appears to be slow.¹³⁰ Cooperation between Russian energy companies and Algeria's Sonatrach apparently is confined to areas where it would not interfere with their competing export interests.

With Russia's recent involvement in the Libyan internal conflict, Algeria and Russia have a shared interest in developments in that country. In this instance, too, the two have strong incentives to manage their relations constructively and avoid possible tensions. Russia's support for the LNA and Haftar in combination with sustained outreach to the Libyan government designed to ensure a major Russian role in any future Libyan settlement appears to be acceptable to Algeria, whose approach to the conflict in Libya has been largely noninterventionist. Russian weapons deliveries to Algeria presumably help the latter secure its long border with Libya, which satisfies both Moscow and Algiers. Moreover, Algeria's own precarious domestic political situation provides an added incentive for its government struggling with the challenge of an orderly transition to a new president (following the resignation of long-serving president Abdelaziz Bouteflika) to maintain a restrained, cautious posture with regard to the Libyan conflict.

Russia's careful, nonjudgmental approach to Algeria's domestic difficulties in the wake of Bouteflika's failed attempt to remain in power is indicative of Moscow's desire to sustain the mutually beneficial

relationship with any Algerian government interested in same.¹³¹ Russian insistence that outside parties should not interfere in Algeria's internal affairs reflects the Kremlin's own aversion to foreign criticism of its domestic practices. Moscow's indifferent stance toward Algerian domestic developments may seem lacking true commitment to partnership and may have disappointed Bouteflika's supporters. However, its actions signaled to Algeria's current and future leaders that Russia has little inclination to criticize their internal politics and is committed to the relationship—and, if necessary, to shielding them from international criticism of their domestic practices as long as its equities are protected.

Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war was a matter of both necessity and opportunity. It needed to protect its last remaining client in the Middle East, and it wanted to use that involvement as a springboard to greater prominence in regional affairs at a time when other major powers were either reluctant to intervene or seeking to reduce their commitment there. By contrast, Russian involvement in North Africa has been a matter of sheer opportunity—to restore or boost old relationships, building on the success of the military intervention in Syria, and to take advantage of the same power vacuum in the region that made possible Russian advances in the Levant and the Persian Gulf.

Russia has committed few resources to North Africa and has even profited from its restored relationships there. These are significant accomplishments. However, the question of whether they can lead to a longer-term, larger-scale, more strategic Russian role in the region remains open. Considering the transactional nature of Russia's key relationships in North Africa, its limited resources, reluctance (to date) to take on significant risks, and inability to offer its regional partners what they need, its current efforts may not be sufficient. To truly secure a foothold in North Africa, it will need to commit resources for ensuring stability and security, as well as for development at a time when the region is experiencing not only the effects of the United States pulling back, but also the entry of China with its vast financial and technological resources, as well as ambitions to carve out a larger role beyond the Asia Pacific region.

Conclusion and Implications for U.S. Interests and Policy

Russia has returned to the Middle East. In the Levant, in North Africa, and in the Persian Gulf, the Kremlin has succeeded in rebuilding some of the old relationships that it abandoned during its troubled 1990s. Thanks to a successful military intervention in Syria, Moscow has emerged as an important power broker positioned at the intersection of multiple interests that the Syrian civil war brought into conflict.

With skill, persistence, and willingness to accept some risk, Moscow may not be “the indispensable nation” that the United States once claimed to be, but the very capable representatives of the Russian state are carrying themselves in ways that leave little doubt Russia is back in the top tier of Middle East power politics.¹³² Still, there are major differences between the post-1990 role of the United States and the role Russia aspires to play now. The United States of the 1990s was both the rule-maker and the enforcer, uniquely able and willing to play that part. That was the reason all other parties wanted to talk to the United States.

By contrast, Russia does not appear to be indispensable. In multiple situations, it has inserted itself and become a party whose consent is necessary, even if Moscow is hardly in a position to provide the right solutions to serious problems. The countries of the Middle East may want to talk to Russia, but they are under no illusion that Moscow can produce the results they are seeking.

Russia’s success in reestablishing itself as an important actor in the Middle East should not conceal the fact that its toolkit—military, diplomatic, and economic—for projecting and sustaining its power and influence in the region is quite modest. High-profile diplomacy has been useful for Russia’s image as a major power at a time when the Obama and Trump administrations were looking for opportunities to reduce U.S. involvement in the region. Even when combined with arms sales, a key instrument in the Russian toolkit, the Kremlin can do little to address the region’s pressing security, economic, or societal challenges.

Moreover, aside from Syria, Russia’s most important relationships in the Middle East happen to be with non-Arab states—Israel, Turkey, and Iran. Yet, the Middle East’s most pressing problems are within Arab societies. There is little that Russia can offer them to address those problems, which is likely to limit its reach and staying power in the region.

The ability to talk to all parties is the capital that Russian leaders appear to value the most and frequently try to play up. But the Kremlin’s unwillingness to spend any of this capital has placed a powerful constraint on Russian diplomacy in the Middle East. In Syria, for example, Russian interests are somewhat at odds with those of Iran after their shared success in propping up the Assad regime. Russia is apparently unwilling and unable to prevail on a key partner in the region to desist from disruptive policies threatening Israel, with which Russia wants to maintain good relations. In the Persian Gulf, where the relationship with Saudi Arabia has reached historic highs, Moscow appears similarly unwilling and unable to take sides between Riyadh and Tehran let alone moderate escalating tensions.

Notwithstanding the skill and persistence displayed by Russian diplomats and leadership in pursuing their goal of restoring Russia to a prominent position in the Middle East, and the risk inherent in any use of military force in the region, Russia's return to the region has been facilitated in large measure by the perception that the United States is trying to disengage from the region. In Syria, ahead of Russian military moves in autumn 2015, the Obama administration had made it abundantly clear that it was not going to intervene directly on the side of the opposition and that the U.S. military role would be limited to the campaign against the Islamic State—thus leaving Russia free to support the Assad regime and pound regime opponents supported by the United States and its allies.

In the Persian Gulf, Russia capitalized on fears stemming from the widely advertised U.S. pivot toward the Asia Pacific region and desire for a new *modus vivendi* with Iran. Likewise, Turkey's rapprochement with Russia has been driven by the decline of its relationship with the United States and Europe. And Russia's return to North Africa is occurring against the backdrop of the U.S. absence from the region since the failed 2011 Libya campaign.

Despite early predictions that Russia was overextending itself in Syria and could face dire diplomatic, military, and economic consequences, the Kremlin has been generally quite conservative in its actions and has skillfully avoided undue risks in its Middle Eastern pursuits. The Syria intervention was carried out once it became clear that the United States would not stand in the way of the Russian military. The Russian military has operated in Syria in a way that is clearly intended to minimize the risk of losses on the ground and in the air. Elsewhere, Russian engagements have been carried out so as to minimize their costs and maximize their profits. In other words, contrary to its reputation for daring and recklessness, the Kremlin has been risk-averse.

In the policy community in the United States, Russia's return to the Middle East has been met mostly with dismay and fears of its resurgence as a malign actor hostile to U.S. interests, in other words, as a spoiler. This attitude manifested itself particularly following Trump's October 2019 decision to withdraw U.S. troops from northern Syria and in effect pave the way for Turkey's incursion into the region, which endangered U.S.-aligned Kurdish-led militias. That turn of events led to Russian troops moving into the region and an agreement between the militias and the Assad government to return the territory held by militias to the government's control as the price for halting the Turkish onslaught.

A great deal of the commentary in the United States lamented the gains that Russia would presumably realize as a result of Trump's decision. The striking feature of that commentary has been that hardly any of it offered a realistic view of U.S. interests at stake and the likely impact of the decision on U.S. interests. It would be a mistake and a blow to U.S. interests if this one-sided view of

the situation solidified into a consensus in the policy community and indeed became the rationale for U.S. policy toward Syria, Russia, and the Middle East.

It is a fact that the United States has been trying—unsuccessfully—to reduce its commitments in the Middle East since the turn of the century. The rise of China created a powerful requirement for U.S. policymakers to refocus their energies and resources on the Asia Pacific theater. The changing nature of global energy markets driven by the shale revolution and the imperative to address climate change have been gradually but significantly reducing the importance of the Middle East for the health of the global economy. This process is only likely to accelerate in the foreseeable future.

In the light of these developments, U.S. core interests in the Middle East can be distilled into the following four categories: preventing terrorist attacks on the United States; preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons; ensuring the security of the state of Israel; and the flow of oil from the Middle East, as long as it remains an important factor of the health of the global economy. Russia's return to the Middle East as a major power broker does not put at risk any of these interest, With skill and diplomatic creativity, one can imagine that Russia's increased presence can be harnessed to advance them.

Russia has as much of a stake in defeating the Islamic State and other terrorist movements as the United States. Partnership with Russia in combating terrorism has long been a major objective of several U.S. administrations and should be continued, or attempted again. Moreover, the United States continues to maintain a robust sea, air, and land military presence in the Middle East that enables it to strike terrorist targets, which is not impeded by Russian military presence in Syria.

The Obama administration's nuclear deal—Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—with Iran remains the best option for dealing with Iran's nuclear program short of war. The plan did not solve the problem of Iran's nuclear ambitions, but it helped contain and manage them for a long time. Importantly, Russia was a partner in those negotiations and still remains party to the deal.

Russian-Israeli relations have undergone a major transformation since the Cold War and are at an all-time high. Russian officials have mostly turned a blind eye to Israeli strikes against Iranian targets in Syria and expressed their commitment to the security of the state of Israel. Moscow and Tel Aviv share an interest in restoring a degree of stability to Syria and containing Iranian influence there. Both are likely to prefer a stable Russia-backed, Assad-led government to chaos or an Iran-backed, Assad-led government with Hezbollah having a free hand to attack Israel.

Russian diplomacy in the Persian Gulf does not pose a threat to the flow of oil from the region. Russia has no military presence in the region where U.S. presence is still robust. The Kremlin is busy

courting key Gulf oil-producing states, as demonstrated by Putin's recent visit to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. While Russia's leverage vis-à-vis Iran is limited at best, its ability to engage with Tehran could prove useful in a future crisis situation.

The diminished U.S. stake in the Middle East should translate into a different set of pursuits for U.S. diplomacy in the region. After two unsuccessful wars with transformational goals—in Iraq and Afghanistan—and with U.S. focus increasingly on the Asia Pacific theater, the goal of transforming the Middle East and solving its many problems is unlikely to guide U.S. policy in the region. The more likely and realistic goal for U.S. policy is to help U.S. partners in the Middle East manage the region's problems and prevent them from escalating.

Russia's combination of limited resources and considerable ambitions make it at first glance an unlikely, but upon further consideration a plausible partner to the United States. Russian interests will not be well served by an escalation of tensions in various parts of the region. They are much more likely to be served better by a shared understanding with the United States aimed at managing instability and preventing tensions from escalating. This confluence of interests could serve as the basis for creative diplomacy and for engaging Russia and exploring how its return to the Middle East can serve U.S. interests.

This new diplomatic effort would require a different approach to Russia and to the Middle East on the part of the United States. Despite the current U.S. preoccupation with competition among great powers, much if not most of the national security community in the United States does not consider Russia a true great power.¹³³ It is viewed at best as a has-been great power, which is in a state of long-term, irreversible decline. This view of Russia can lead to a risky under-estimation of Russian ambitions, capabilities, and the resources available to Russian policymakers, as well as a tendency to misperceive how other powers and leaders see Russia. Such misperceptions can lead to hubris and miscalculation fraught with negative consequences for U.S. interests. Notwithstanding all of Russia's many problems and shortcomings, it is bound to remain an important actor in the Middle East whose interests will at times be incompatible with those of the United States, but will not always be inimical to them either. The challenge for U.S. diplomacy will be to manage the former and maximize the latter.

For the United States, long accustomed to Russia's absence from the Middle East, these new realities are hardly a reason to panic. Instead, it is essential to recognize that much, if not most of what Russia has been able to accomplish in the region has been a function of the United States redefining its own interests in the Middle East and repositioning itself there. Taken together, these two developments should be seen as opening for a major course correction for U.S. policy guided by a more modest, but ultimately more realistic and productive set of objectives.

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