

Spoils of Someone Else's War:

Acting as a Mediator in Syria Would Improve Putin's International Standing

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Articles & Testimony

Despite Russia's uncertain response to the Assad regime's latest embarrassing military setback, Moscow still sees Syria as a critical hotspot on the global stage and will seek to steer events there in its favor.

Earlier this month, Israel suggested that Russia could help prevent Hezbollah from rearming. For Israel, curbing the terrorist group's ability to bring weapons from Syria into Lebanon is a key security objective. Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar [said \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-sees-progress-lebanon-ceasefire-talks-says-russia-can-help-2024-11-11/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-sees-progress-lebanon-ceasefire-talks-says-russia-can-help-2024-11-11/), "If they [the Russians] are in agreement with this principle, I think they can contribute effectively to this objective."

Reining in Hezbollah is critical if Israel is to restore peace after more than a year of fighting the multifront war that followed the horrific Hamas attack of Oct. 7, 2023. From that date up until Nov. 27, Lebanese militants had used the edge of a UN-monitored buffer zone as a staging ground for their own attacks on Israel. Last week, however, the two sides signed a ceasefire agreement, though Israel reportedly said Hezbollah had [violated \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-tank-fires-3-south-lebanese-towns-lebanese-security-sources-media-say-2024-11-28/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-tank-fires-3-south-lebanese-towns-lebanese-security-sources-media-say-2024-11-28/) it only hours after the ink was dry. Israel's suggestion to involve Russia in preventing Hezbollah from rearming via Syria had evolved in parallel with the latest ceasefire talks. As [reported \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/11/13/israel-trump-netanyahu-lebanon-ceasefire-kushner/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/11/13/israel-trump-netanyahu-lebanon-ceasefire-kushner/) by the *Washington Post*, Israel is [preparing \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/11/13/israel-trump-netanyahu-lebanon-ceasefire-kushner/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/11/13/israel-trump-netanyahu-lebanon-ceasefire-kushner/) to secure another agreement in January, when Donald Trump will be inaugurated as U.S. president for the second time.

Russia may appear to have the necessary leverage to play a positive role in this regard. Syria provides a key channel for Iranian arms transfers to Hezbollah, and Russia's strategic partnership with Iran has only deepened since Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Despite setbacks on the battlefield there, Russia remains present and active in Syria.

But Israel would be making a mistake if it chose to rely on the Kremlin, even in part. Moscow has neither the ability nor desire to be a genuine mediator in the Middle East, even if the Kremlin would relish the opportunity to advance its own anti-Western agenda by promoting the pretense that it is attempting to act as a peacemaker. Moreover, Moscow may also encourage the idea within the incoming Trump administration that it can serve as a mediator in the region—much as it had done with previous U.S. administrations.

State of Russia-Israel Relations

Prior to Oct. 7, 2023, Putin consistently cultivated the image of a peacemaker who could talk to all players in the Middle East—no matter what conflicts and rivalries might have existed between the parties in question. Since first moving into the Kremlin in 2000, Putin has personally cultivated good ties with Israel. In practice, however, he always leaned in closer to anti-American forces in the region: Iran, Tehran's various proxies, and the Assad regime.

Russian-Israeli relations were not helped by Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, and they were only strained further after Putin sided with Hamas following the attack of Oct. 7. His response, which included a refusal to directly blame Hamas for the atrocity, represented a cardinal break from his approach of ostensibly cultivating favor from all sides. To be sure, Putin continued to suggest Russia could play a mediating role between Israel and Hamas—and **later** (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/russia-says-ready-to-assist-in-settlement-of-mideast-conflicts/3381686>) between Israel and Iran—but in the aftermath of Israel's darkest day in living memory, Putin showed his true colors: he was no friend of Israel.

Putin likely chose this response because he prioritized his relationship with Iran and calculated that Israel could not afford a crisis in relations with Russia. Thus, from his perspective, the benefits of weakening Moscow's standing with Israel outweighed the costs. Adding fuel to the growing chaos in the Middle East was worth it.

Over the course of the past year, Moscow repeatedly criticized Israel for its approach to Gaza, Lebanon, and other issues. For instance, as early as Oct. 13, 2023, Putin **compared** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-says-israel-suffered-cruel-attack-its-response-is-cruel-too-2023-10-13/>) Israel's campaign in Gaza to the Nazi siege of Leningrad. Later, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs **strongly condemned** (https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1973196/) Israel's incursion into Lebanon as “a move that will lead to further escalation” in the Middle East, and it condemned the killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah along the same lines. Moscow's contacts with Iranian proxies increased. For example, Moscow **hosted** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/senior-hamas-official-arrives-russia-ria-reports-2024-10-23/>) Hamas in October of this year. At the same time, Russia's disinformation machine, along with Putin himself, continued spreading anti-U.S. and anti-Israel sentiment amid the Arab street, using the opportunity to **promote** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-asks-iran-avoid-civilian-casualties-israel-response-sources-say-2024-08-06/>) Russia's narratives on Ukraine, the Middle East, and the wider West. Moscow simultaneously continued playing the same double game of pretending to be a neutral arbiter. For instance, after Iran launched its drone strike on Israel this past April, Putin **called** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-asks-iran-avoid-civilian-casualties-israel-response-sources-say-2024-08-06/>) on both Israel and Iran to show restraint. But as usual, Putin was not neutral.

As Israel increased its effort to target Hezbollah in Lebanon, it also stepped up its airstrikes in Syria. In November, Israel reportedly struck particularly close to Russia's Khmeimim airbase while targeting an Iranian weapons depot, a

move Moscow [said \(https://thedefensepost.com/2024/11/13/russia-israel-avoid-syrian-base/\)](https://thedefensepost.com/2024/11/13/russia-israel-avoid-syrian-base/) it hoped “will not be repeated.” This episode shows that despite the precarious situation on the ground, neither side wants a bilateral crisis—even if Russia still refuses to relent in its rhetorical treatment of Israel.

Russia and Israel in Syria

Once Russia began providing direct military assistance to the regime of Bashar al-Assad in September 2015, Israel became dependent on Russia’s good will to carry out its airstrikes in Syria to target and dismantle Iranian supply lines to Hezbollah and other proxies. Russia set up an anti-access/area-denial (A2AD) network, which included S-300 and S-400 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), tactical ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, advanced anti-ship missiles, and electronic warfare equipment. Russia and Israel also established a deconfliction channel. Moscow’s official reason for intervening in Syria was to fight terrorism. In practice, Moscow did no such thing with any consistency—and arguably, its joint strikes with the Assad regime only encouraged terrorism.

Over the past nine years, Moscow presided over a string of broken ceasefires in Syria. American officials involved in past discussions on cessation of hostilities observed that the Russians were both unwilling and unable to make Assad comply. The Assad regime used these ceasefires as opportunities to rest, regroup, and resume its attacks. The limited areas where Moscow [succeeded \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/triangular-diplomacy-unpacking-russias-syria-strategy\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/triangular-diplomacy-unpacking-russias-syria-strategy) were in making all sides of the conflict believe that Russia could deliver something of value, and in saving the Assad regime from what many in 2015 believed was an imminent collapse.

Moscow also succeeded in selling its role as a mediator in Syria to both the Obama and Trump administrations. These efforts began in 2013, after Obama’s infamous “red line” on Syria’s use of chemical weapons went unenforced by America. Putin got involved by offering to dismantle Assad’s chemical weapons arsenal instead—even if smaller-scale chemical attacks continued in Syria over the years. Rather than genuinely disarm Assad, Putin succeeded in getting the U.S. to go back on its word, thereby creating an image of Russia as a country that, in contrast to the U.S., does what its president says it is going to do. Over the ensuing years, Western officials often seem to have viewed Russia as part of a potential solution in Syria, rather than part of the problem—hence Moscow’s role as a guarantor of various ceasefires, all of which broke down.

After Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow redeployed some troops and weaponry—such as the S-300—from Syria back to European territory. But by and large, Russia’s presence in Syria was always limited. Its presence there allows Moscow a low-cost platform for projecting power in multiple directions: towards the Middle East itself, but also against NATO’s southern flank. This is Russia’s true aim in Syria. Indeed, in the summer of 2023, Russia used its presence there to horizontally [escalate \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/detering-russias-horizontal-escalation-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/detering-russias-horizontal-escalation-syria) its conflict with the U.S., demonstrating Putin’s priorities and revealing just how advantageous its position in Syria is for promoting them. While more recent reports [suggested \(https://www.asasmedia.com/79785\)](https://www.asasmedia.com/79785) that Moscow demanded Assad stop the transfer of Iranian weapons to Hezbollah through Syria, it remains to be seen how genuine these demands were, and what leverage Russia really has over Assad to ensure that the dictator in Damascus complies.

Russia’s Potential as Mediator

Moscow, for its part, reacted with caution to Israel’s latest suggestion of Russian mediation. The Kremlin’s envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, [claimed \(https://ria.ru/20241113/livan-1983443426.html\)](https://ria.ru/20241113/livan-1983443426.html) Russia is “making efforts to stop the violence directly in Lebanon,” but that it “cannot give guarantees.” He further explained that Israel’s request would require setting up a series of new checkpoints along the border, which falls outside of Russia’s mandate in Syria. Russia cannot set up checkpoints on “sovereign Syrian territory,” he said.

Moscow's presence in Syria is indeed limited—by Russia's own design. Still, the fallback talk of an absent mandate could either be an excuse or a negotiating tactic. Lavrentiev's initial cautious response is important, but it does not necessarily signal a lack of Russian interest in deeper involvement. Moscow is unlikely to pass up an opportunity to take on a mediating role in the Middle East that would grant it prestige on the world stage.

Indeed, in another comment, Lavrentiev said that Russia is open to working with the incoming Trump administration on a settlement in Syria—provided that Russia is invited to participate. He also highlighted the importance of Syria in the Middle East: “It is practically impossible to establish peace in Syria only, without taking into account what is going on in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, as well as in relations between Israel and Iran,” he **said** (<https://tass.com/politics/1872043>). And in another statement earlier this month, Lavrentiev **commented** (<https://www.newsweek.com/us-backed-syria-fighters-hope-trump-wont-repeat-painful-experience-1987791>) on possible changes in U.S. Middle East policy under Trump, particularly where Syria is concerned: “Naturally, we think that we will see such changes. We know Mr. Trump, but, of course, we will see whether there will be any changes in the position on the Middle East,” adding that, “we hope that some agreements, including on Syria, will be reached.”

Lavrentiev did not mention Russia directly, but he didn't have to. Russia's presence in Syria is well known, and by simply talking about Syria he can imply the potential for Russia's role in a settlement—especially under the new Trump administration, when the future of U.S. assistance to Ukraine is uncertain and many wonder about the possibility of a shift in U.S.-Russia relations in Moscow's favor. In the coming months, Putin may very well try to sell Trump on his willingness and ability to play the role of a mediator in Syria.

The Latest Offensive in Syria, and Russia's Role: What Could Be Next?

Giving Russia a peacemaking role in Syria now would provide Moscow an opportunity to advance its own interests at the expense of the West and its allies. Rather than genuine peace, such a concession portends further instability.

Israel, for its part, has been in a difficult position vis-à-vis Russia for years. In 2015, President Obama's naiveté—his ill-advised belief that Russia would bog itself down in a military quagmire in Syria—allowed Russia to come to Israel's doorstep in Syria, and at that point, Israel became reliant on Russia's good will to carry out its airstrikes. After Russia invaded Ukraine, Israel had to take into account Russia's deepening relationship with Iran and its proxies. But Israel can maintain a cordial relationship with Moscow without advancing Moscow's role as a peacemaker, especially as neither side seeks a full-blown bilateral crisis.

The most recent opposition **offensive** (<https://www.ft.com/content/b32bb0ab-539f-4b29-8330-c76683b0c9e6>) in northwest Syria, carried out by the military group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham against the forces of Assad and his Russian and Iranian supporters, represents the largest flare-up in Syria in years. Syria had turned into a frozen conflict, but recent events are a reminder that no conflict is truly frozen. The Assad regime **reportedly** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/syrian-russian-jets-bomb-rebel-held-northwest-syria-2024-11-28/>) said it is cooperating with Russia and unspecified “friendly forces” in its efforts to carry out a counteroffensive.

Asked about these events, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov **said** (<https://t.me/youlistenedmayak/34434>) Russia hopes Assad will quickly “restore order.” He declined to comment on unconfirmed reports that Assad may have traveled to Moscow after the HTS offensive. Russia waited around two days before conducting airstrikes to support Assad. This initial pause exposed how reliant Assad is on external forces. The absence of his backers allowed the rebels to make stunning gains—most notably to quickly recapture Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city, which Damascus had held since 2016 after taking it with the help of heavy Russian airstrikes. Its recent fall is a

reversal of these events.

But the war is far from over. The anti-Assad opposition remains divided, and Russia still sees Syria as a critical hotspot on the global stage. Moscow wants to retain influence in the Middle East—both in its own right and in terms of what leverage it can gain vis-à-vis the West, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine. In 2015, Putin saved Assad from an imminent fall, and the region came to see the Russian dictator as a key player it had to contend with. If Putin cannot save Assad now, he will lose prestige in the so-called Global South, where his narratives about the supposed evils of the U.S.-led global order resonate—and, most crucially, where he finds the resources to fund his war on Ukraine.

It may sound counter-intuitive, but the ongoing chaos in Syria could offer Putin a common cause with Trump. Putin could argue that the U.S. ought to work with Russia to fight radical Islamists, thereby giving Putin an opening to use the Middle East as a front to get U.S. concessions on Ukraine—up to and including Washington’s abandonment of its support for Kyiv. In this context, it is especially important to recall that Russia’s record of duplicity is well-established. No one should be fooled.

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