

# Moscow and the Middle East After Russia's Election

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

Mar 12, 2018

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/mwskw-walshrq-alawst-bd-alantkhabat-alrwsyt\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



Brief Analysis

---

**Washington and its partners can expect Putin to pursue an increasingly aggressive regional policy that depends on confrontation with the West as the basis for domestic legitimacy.**

**O**n March 18, Russia will hold a presidential "election," and as usual the result is predetermined: Vladimir Putin will win another term while avoiding all debates, facing no real challengers, and periodically staging shirtless campaign photo-ops. Yet even a faux election is important to watch given the consequences it may hold for Russia's growing involvement in the Middle East. While Putin is assured a victory, the Kremlin appears concerned about its longer-term political future, leading it to rely more on military mobilization and anti-Westernism to bolster its domestic legitimacy and slide back to its authoritarian past. This means the Middle East will likely remain an arena for competing with the West and expanding Russian influence.

## LEGITIMACY AND TURNOUT

**P**utin has now been in power longer than Leonid Brezhnev, and an entire generation has grown up knowing only him as their leader. Protest activity—especially outside major cities—continues despite government crackdowns. According to Muscovites, the quickest way to get the authorities to remove snow from the capital's streets this year was to decorate drifts with the name of Alexei Navalny, the anti-corruption figure who could have posed a real challenge to Putin at the ballot box but was barred from running.

The appearance of legitimacy is very important for the Kremlin, and low voter turnout would make the government look bad. In September 2016, less than half of eligible voters participated in the parliamentary elections, in many ways a test run for the presidential vote. Still, Putin's United Russia party gained a legislative supermajority, enough to change the constitution. As a result, Putin may be able to remain in power after his next six-year term by changing the country's charter instead of ruling through a Medvedev-style proxy.

## STALINIST AND SOVIET SYMBOLS

**A**lthough the revival of Stalinism and Soviet imagery has been a feature of Putin's rule since the beginning, the trend has been growing in recent years. In May 2014, two months after annexing Crimea from Ukraine, Putin signed a vaguely worded law that criminalized any criticism of Soviet actions in World War II, which implicitly includes Joseph Stalin's Great Terror and his pact with Adolf Hitler. Likewise, Communist Party presidential candidate Pavel Grudinin has publicly pledged loyalty to Stalin. And in January, the Ministry of Culture banned Armando Iannucci's satirical film *The Death of Stalin*, calling it "extremist" and a "provocation."

## WARTIME MOBILIZATION

**F**or years now, the Kremlin has been emphasizing defense issues and invoking the traditional narrative of Russia as a fortress besieged by enemies, the United States in particular. Similarly, observers increasingly refer to Putin as a "wartime president." In a country with a deteriorating economy, growing poverty, and little government interest in development, the Kremlin does not have much else to offer. Wartime rhetoric also tends to put citizens in a mindset of sacrifice.

Currently, Russia spends about a third of its budget on defense, and the Kremlin has called for more. In November, Putin authorized a \$324 billion state armament program for 2018-2027, noting that "the ability of the economy to rapidly increase the volume of defense products and services at the right time is one of the most important conditions for ensuring the military security of the state." He added that all enterprises, state and private, should be prepared in this regard, prompting a flurry of domestic commentary and concern about the prospect of major war.

Similarly, during his annual state of the nation address on March 1—his last major speech before the election—Putin bragged about the supposedly "invincible" nuclear-powered intercontinental cruise missiles Russia is developing. His previous speeches had never focused on nuclear issues in such detail, nor contained such belligerent and paranoid statements. Fundamentally, however, the address offered nothing new, and some Russian analysts speculated that his aggressive rhetoric toward the West was also a plea for international relevance (i.e., "talk to Russia, or else"). This more than anything else will remain the hallmark of his approach to foreign policy, albeit with extra intensity going forward. Among Putin's chief aims is restoring the image of Russia's greatness, and for that he needs a great enemy.

## SYRIA AND IRAN

**W**here does all this leave the Middle East? The region no longer receives much attention in the Russian press, and Putin mentioned it directly only once in his March 1 address, stating, "The operation in Syria has proved the increased capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces." Notably, he emphasized the campaign's training benefits rather than any supposed efficacy in killing "terrorists" in Syria before they come to Russia—the Kremlin's justification for intervening there in the first place.

Yet while Moscow has been signaling a desire to untangle itself from Syria for some time, its new military presence in the country remains too important to lose from a geostrategic perspective. Moreover, Russia has made significant investments in Syria's energy infrastructure and natural resources during the war—in early 2017, the company Evro Polis reportedly signed an energy agreement with Damascus, while Stroytransgaz inked a deal on phosphate mining.

On the government-to-government level, Russian energy minister Alexander Novak reportedly signed a cooperation agreement with Syria earlier this month. And last September, Damascus pledged to buy three million tons of wheat from Russia over the next three years. The two countries have also reportedly held discussions about rebuilding Syria's telecommunications infrastructure. Therefore, in the absence of other alternatives, Moscow is well positioned to control the direction of Syria's reconstruction even if it lacks the necessary investment funds. At the same time,

Russia was able to institutionalize a Syria consultation mechanism with Turkey and Iran despite the failed peace talks in Astana and Sochi, creating the basis for a regional diplomatic process that excludes the United States.

As for Moscow's partnership with Tehran, it shows no signs of abating in the medium term. Differences and distrust persist, but so far the two governments have managed to put them aside in favor of their common goal: reducing American influence in the region. Some Russian and Iranian analysts privately note that the relationship may focus more on expanding cooperation this year, including in the economic realm. Russian oil companies are reportedly discussing contracts that would allow them to work on Iranian oil fields. It remains to be seen whether wider bilateral economic cooperation will truly grow from such initiatives, but political cooperation remains important in of itself.

By essentially enabling Tehran's activities in the Levant, including hegemonic goals that go beyond Moscow's, Russia risks alienating other regional actors if they attribute Iranian success to Russian support. At the same time, Moscow has been presenting itself as an alternative to Iran in the region, creating the perception that its connections with Tehran give it leverage over the Islamic Republic. Ultimately, the impact of Russian-Iranian cooperation in the Middle East may depend on whether they continue to put their differences aside, or resolve them, in favor of their common anti-Western interests.

## BROADER REGIONAL SWAY

**R**ussia's regional military position is growing beyond Syria and Iraq as well, particularly in the air defense realm. Power projection and arms sales will remain important to Moscow after the election, as both sources of financial gain and a means of wielding influence.

Regional port access is another important aspect to watch. Building new ports is expensive, but Moscow could secure berthing rights in places such as Libya to avoid such costs. Putin might also insert himself as a powerbroker in Libya, gaining the international attention he craves by mediating between Gen. Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army in the east and the internationally recognized Government of National Accord in Tripoli. In December, only a day after Putin declared another "withdrawal" from Syria, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov announced that Moscow sought a role in ending the Libyan conflict. Indeed, Western governments need to keep an eye on Russia's **quiet but steady expansion (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russia-makes-inroads-in-north-africa>)** into all of North Africa.

Moscow's influence in the Persian Gulf and attempts to insert itself in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute bear watching as well. These and other regional plans may not all pan out, but in the absence of a coherent Western strategy toward Russia or the reestablishment of American leadership in the region, there is nothing to curb Putin's efforts and the long-term instability they would bring. Following the election, Moscow will likely treat the Middle East even more as a privileged sphere of influence similar to the post-Soviet space, with an increasingly aggressive, expansionist, and anti-Western posture all but assured.

*Anna Borshchevskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya  
(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson  
(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Ben Fishman  
(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

#### TOPICS

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

#### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-  
analysis/iran)

Syria (/policy-  
analysis/syria)