

# Russia's Strategic Objectives in the Middle East and North Africa

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Jun 15, 2017

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



Articles & Testimony

**The Institute's leading Russia expert outlines the best means of tempering Moscow's influence in the region, recommending a more active U.S. military and diplomatic role while explaining why Putin will never be a reliable partner there.**

**T**he following is an excerpt from Ms. Borshchevskaya's prepared remarks before the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa. To read her full testimony, download the PDF.

If Washington wants to limit Moscow's influence and improve the U.S. strategic position vis-a-vis Russia in the Middle East and North Africa, it should embrace a strategy that includes the following:

- **Recognize Putin is no partner to fight terrorism.** While fighting terrorism is in Russia's interest, Putin's actions show that he is more interested in undermining and dividing the West than working with it. This includes empowering forces in Tehran and Damascus that are responsible for terrorism. Furthermore, Putin needs the West as a foil upon whom he can blame his own domestic failings. Therefore, U.S. officials should limit contact with Putin to military deconfliction. Conciliation will backfire. Putin responds productively only when American officials act from a position of strength.
- **Engage actively in the Middle East.** Russia need not be America's military or economic equal to pose a challenge to Western interests. For example, Russia has only one aircraft carrier, *Admiral Kuznetsov*; it is rusty, leaky, and prone to fire. The United States meanwhile has ten far more advanced carriers. Yet by simply being present when the United States was absent, Putin has complicated the operating environment in the Middle East and Mediterranean and augmented Russia's influence.
- **Improve security cooperation.** The U.S. Navy could increase port visits in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East to reinforce the notion within the region that America supports and defends allies and is not in retreat. The military

could also augment exercises beyond those it conducts annually with Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan, emphasizing interoperability among pro-Western Arab states.

- **Engage militarily in Syria.** For years Putin perceived weakness from the West, asserting himself in Syria because he believed the West would do nothing in response. Policymakers deterred themselves into inaction in Syria because they worried about a military confrontation with Russia. Yet Putin understands his limitations, and a direct confrontation is not something he seeks. Indeed, as the April 7 U.S. cruise missile strikes showed, for all of the Kremlin's bluster, in the end it could do nothing but complain. Rather than provoking conflict with Russia, for the first time in years Putin received a message that the United States had redlines he and his proxies could not cross. Therefore, instead, of enticing Putin with incentives, Washington should demonstrate that his embrace of Assad brings tremendous costs to Russia.
- **Target diplomacy.** Military strategy alone will not deliver. It is essential not only to resource U.S. diplomacy, but also to direct diplomats to actively counter Russian moves in the region. Funding itself is not a metric for effectiveness absent a broader strategy.
- **Invest more resources in countering the Kremlin's propaganda efforts.** Russian propaganda seeks to confuse, sow doubt, and ultimately create paralysis. Lies don't need to last in order to do lasting damage. In the Middle East, Russian propaganda fuels conspiracy thinking, feeding on the region's existing proclivities. Rather than always being on the defensive, the United States should work harder at creating first impressions. As a recent RAND study indicates, according to psychologists, first impressions remain highly resilient, and because Russian propaganda is not concerned with the truth, it often holds the monopoly on them. Here the United States can work with regional partners to establish outlets that provide alternative sources of information and counter Moscow's negative influence.
- **Recognize there is no easy fix and settle in for the long haul.** We often talk about Putin being a short-term thinker. But he has been in power now for seventeen years and does not have to constrain himself to the limited political timelines under which democratic leaders operate. Putin's Achilles heel is exposed when U.S. policymakers reclaim leadership with moral clarity.



*House Foreign Affairs Committee*

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