

# Why Middle Eastern Leaders Are Talking to Putin, Not Obama

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



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## Russia is less dominant militarily but more willing to act, and that has changed the dynamics in the region.

**T**he United States has significantly more military capability in the Middle East today than Russia -- America has 35,000 troops and hundreds of aircraft; the Russians roughly 2,000 troops and, perhaps, 50 aircraft -- and yet Middle Eastern leaders are making pilgrimages to Moscow to see Vladimir Putin these days, not rushing to Washington. Two weeks ago, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu traveled to see the Russian president, his second trip to Russia since last fall, and King Salman of Saudi Arabia is planning a trip soon. Egypt's president and other Middle Eastern leaders have also made the trek to see Putin.

Why is this happening, and why on my trips to the region am I hearing that Arabs and Israelis have pretty much given up on President Barack Obama? Because perceptions matter more than mere power: The Russians are seen as willing to use power to affect the balance of power in the region, and we are not.

Putin's decision to intervene militarily in Syria has secured President Bashar Assad's position and dramatically reduced the isolation imposed on Russia after the seizure of Crimea and its continuing manipulation of the fighting in Ukraine. And Putin's worldview is completely at odds with Obama's. Obama believes in the use of force only in circumstances where our security and homeland might be directly threatened. His mindset justifies pre-emptive action against terrorists and doing more to fight the Islamic State. But it frames U.S. interests and the use of force to support them in very narrow terms. It reflects the president's reading of the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan, and helps to explain why he has been so reluctant to do more in Syria at a time when the war has produced a humanitarian catastrophe, a refugee crisis that threatens the underpinnings of the European Union, and helped to give rise to the Islamic State. And, it also explains why he thinks that Putin cannot gain -- and is losing -- as a result of

his military intervention in Syria.

But in the Middle East it is Putin's views on the uses of coercion, including force to achieve political objectives, that appears to be the norm, not the exception -- and that is true for our friends as well as adversaries. The Saudis acted in Yemen in no small part because they feared the United States would impose no limits on Iranian expansion in the area, and they felt the need to draw their own lines. In the aftermath of the nuclear deal, Iran's behavior in the region has been more aggressive, not less so, with regular Iranian forces joining the Revolutionary Guard now deployed to Syria, wider use of Shiite militias, arms smuggling into Bahrain and the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, and ballistic missile tests.

Russia's presence has not helped. The Russian military intervention turned the tide in Syria and, contrary to Obama's view, has put the Russians in a stronger position without imposing any meaningful costs on them. Not only are they not being penalized for their Syrian intervention, but the president himself is now calling Vladimir Putin and seeking his help to pressure Assad -- effectively recognizing who has leverage. Middle Eastern leaders recognize it as well and realize they need to be talking to the Russians if they are to safeguard their interests. No doubt, it would be better if the rest of the world defined the nature of power the way Obama does. It would be better if, internationally, Putin were seen to be losing. But he is not.

This does not mean that we are weak and Russia is strong. Objectively, Russia is declining economically and low oil prices spell increasing financial troubles -- a fact that may explain, at least in part, Putin's desire to play up Russia's role on the world stage and his exercise of power in the Middle East. But Obama's recent trip to Saudi Arabia did not alter the perception of American weakness and our reluctance to affect the balance of power in the region. The Arab Gulf states fear growing Iranian strength more than they fear the Islamic State -- and they are convinced that the administration is ready to acquiesce in Iran's pursuit of regional hegemony. Immediately after the president's meeting at the Gulf Cooperation Council summit, Abdulrahman al-Rashed, a journalist very well connected to Saudi leaders, wrote: "Washington cannot open up doors to Iran allowing it to threaten regional countries...while asking the afflicted countries to settle silently."

As I hear on my visits to the region, Arabs and Israelis alike are looking to the next administration. They know the Russians are not a force for stability; they count on the United States to play that role. Ironically, because Obama has conveyed a reluctance to exercise American power in the region, many of our traditional partners in the area realize they may have to do more themselves. That's not necessarily a bad thing unless it drives them to act in ways that might be counterproductive. For example, had the Saudis been more confident about our readiness to counter the Iranian-backed threats in the region, would they have chosen to go to war in Yemen -- a costly war that not surprisingly is very difficult to win and that has imposed a terrible price? Obama has been right to believe that the regional parties must play a larger role in fighting the Islamic State. He has, unfortunately, been wrong to believe they would do so if they thought we failed to see the bigger threat they saw and they doubted our credibility.

Indeed, so long as they question American reliability, there will be limits to how much they will expose themselves -- whether in fighting the Islamic State, not responding to Russian entreaties, or even thinking about assuming a role of greater responsibility for Palestinian compromises on making peace with Israel. To take advantage of their recognition that they may need to run more risks and assume more responsibility in the region, they will want to know that America's word is good and there will be no more "red lines" declared but unfulfilled; that we see the same threats they do; and that U.S. leaders understand that power affects the landscape in the region and will not hesitate to reassert it.

Several steps would help convey such an impression:

- Toughen our declaratory policy toward Iran about the consequences of cheating on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of

Action to include blunt, explicit language on employing force, not sanctions, should the Iranians violate their commitment not to pursue or acquire a nuclear weapon;

- Launch contingency planning with GCC states and Israel -- who themselves are now talking -- to generate specific options for countering Iran's growing use of Shiite militias to undermine regimes in the region. (A readiness to host quiet three-way discussions with Arab and Israeli military planners would signal we recognize the shared threat perceptions, the new strategic realities, and the potentially new means to counter both radical Shiite and Sunni threats.)
- Be prepared to arm the Sunni tribes in Iraq if Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi continues to be blocked from doing so by the Iranians and the leading militias;
- In Syria, make clear that if the Russians continue to back Assad and do not force him to accept the Vienna principles (a cease-fire, opening humanitarian corridors, negotiations and a political transition), they will leave us no choice but to work with our partners to develop safe havens with no-fly zones.

Putin and Middle Eastern leaders understand the logic of coercion. It is time for us to reapply it.

*Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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