

Russia in the Middle East: Is There an Endgame?

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Moscow's Syria intervention has entered its fourth year. Prior to the intervention that began in September 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin had labored for at least fifteen years to bring Russia back to the Middle East. Yet the intervention officially restored Russia to its position as a critical player in the Middle East and made Putin a regional powerbroker.

Few in the West expected Russia, with its declining economy and pre-existing involvement in a war in Ukraine, to intrude militarily in Syria and save Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad from an imminent fall. The intervention itself also differed from typical Kremlin behavior. A limited military engagement closely tied to coercive diplomacy and work with regional partners, it has been an air campaign with a naval component, rather than a traditional battle waged by ground forces. It has therefore raised myriad questions for Western analysts and policymakers, perhaps the most persistent one of which is: what is Russia's endgame in the Middle East?

From the Kremlin's perspective, however, the game is ongoing; it has no defined end. The Kremlin is primarily concerned with its own survival, which it views as intrinsically connected to its relationship with the West—Moscow blurs the line between domestic and foreign policy in its search for great power status. Putin has multiple goals in the Middle East, but fundamentally, his Syria intervention was about upending the U.S.-led global order. Kremlin activities across the region share the same aim: to undermine the US and bolster Moscow's position in the region by deterring the West and maintaining low-level conflict. This is the lens through which policymakers should view Moscow's activities. Rather than look for a static endgame, policymakers should focus on countering the Kremlin's negative influence. Despite Moscow's many difficulties, it has staying power in the region and its influence will not wither away on its own any time soon.

Why the Middle East Matters to Moscow

The Middle East and North African region has always mattered to Russian rulers. This context frames the Kremlin's current activities. The Eastern Mediterranean mattered to the Kyivan Rus, which the Russian state at its inception claimed as a progenitor, as the state envisioned itself as the heir to Constantinople, the "Third Rome," with the divine mission of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Religious interests persisted in Imperial Russia, which also used the Middle East as an arena of competition with the West and for securing naval access in the Black Sea and in the Mediterranean in pursuit of great power status. Putin's Syria intervention is unique in many ways, but it is Russia's second major incursion into the Levant since 1772.¹ The Soviet Union played a major role in the Middle East during the Cold War, attempting to stymie U.S. energy and trade interests in the region. Russia retreated briefly from the Middle East under Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, but even then it never completely left.

In the post-Soviet period, great power status and desire for equal treatment by the U.S. in the Middle East continued to go hand in hand. An April 1996 meeting between Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin is illustrative. Yeltsin, according to recently declassified archives, came in angry because he believed the US was trying to marginalize Russia in the region. Clinton used the term "equal partnership," which appeared to pacify Yeltsin, and said Russia could play an important role through its influence over Syria and Hezbollah.²

Putin's Approach to the Region

Once Putin succeeded Yeltsin, he worked steadily and consistently to bring Russia back to the Middle East. Putin's approach to the region became the extension of Primakov's vision of a "multipolar" world. Indeed, it was Primakov who led Yeltsin to believe, prior to his April 1996 meeting with Bill Clinton, that the US was trying to marginalize Russia in the Middle East.

Putin's interests in the region were primarily political, but also economic. Russia's January 2000 Foreign Policy Concept defined Moscow's priorities in the Middle East as being "to restore and strengthen positions, particularly economic ones," and noted the importance of continuing to develop ties with Iran. The same document highlighted "attempts to create an international relations structure based on domination by developed Western countries in the international community, under U.S. leadership." The most recent version of this document, from November 2016, also highlights the importance of the Middle East in Russian foreign policy and names "external interference" (a euphemism for the US) as a major cause of regional instability.³ Together, these documents show continuity in the Kremlin's thinking about the respective roles of Russia and the West in the region.

Unlike the Soviet Union, Putin's regime has been unencumbered by ideology, working instead to build and maintain ties with virtually every major actor in the region. Through Putin's efforts, Russia has regained political, diplomatic, and economic influence, showing his pragmatic approach to be more successful than the Soviet Union's ideology-focused one.⁴ Thus, Putin balances good relations with Sunni and Shia powers, as well as Israel, even as he favors the anti-American Shia forces in the region.

¹ Simon Sebag Montefiore, "Putin's Imperial Adventure in Syria," *The New York Times*, October 9, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/09/opinion/putins-imperial-adventure-in-syria.html>.

² "Declassified Documents Concerning Russian President Boris Yeltsin," Clinton Presidential Library, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569>; James Goldgeier, "Bill and Boris: A Window into a Most Important Post-Cold War Relationship," *Texas National Security Review* (August 2018), <https://tnsr.org/2018/08/bill-and-boris-a-window-into-a-most-important-post-cold-war-relationship/>.

³ "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248.

⁴ Robert O. Freedman, "From Khrushchev and Brezhnev to Putin: Has Moscow's Policy in the Middle East Come Full Circle?" *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 5 (2018).

A2AD Strategy

To date, Moscow has achieved significant influence in the region. Politically, diplomatically, and militarily, the US now has to contend with Russia in the Middle East to a degree it has not had to for decades. From the very beginning of Moscow's intervention, Russian operations suggested a strategy to deter the West and protect Assad and Russian assets, rather than consistently fighting ISIS. Thus, Moscow deployed advanced weaponry such as the Pantsyr short-range air defense system and the Almaz-Antey S-400 high-altitude Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) system to the Khmeimim airbase and later to the northwestern city of Masyaf, along with the KRET Krasukha-S4 ground-based electronic warfare system. It has also deployed the K-300P Bastion P coastal defense missile and the 9K720 Iskander ballistic missile system. Moreover, as Russian military expert Roger McDermott writes, the Krasukha-S4 deployment also mattered with regard to field testing the system in operational conditions.⁵ Indeed, McDermott writes that since 2009 Moscow has consistently invested in modernizing its electronic warfare capabilities, with the overall aim of asymmetrically challenging NATO on Russia's periphery "and maximiz[ing] its chances of success in any operation against NATO's eastern members."

Moscow's most recent and controversial transfer—of the S300 to the Syrian Arab Army, after the same army ostensibly downed a Russian reconnaissance IL-20 plane, for which Moscow blamed Israel—continues to raise many questions.⁶ Yet beyond the details, the transfer sent a political message—it was an assertion of Russia's regional dominance. The S300 also fits within the overall A2AD strategy and potentially gives Moscow more leverage over the West and its allies.

To date, Moscow has achieved partial success with its overall A2AD layout, as the US and its allies are still able to operate. It has also boosted Russia's arms sales by using Syria as a testing and advertising arena for its weaponry. More to the point, Moscow's activities demonstrate consistent commitment and intent to deter the West and project influence across the Mediterranean. At the same time, Moscow is increasingly deploying indirect methods, such as using private contractors like the Wager group, to give itself plausible deniability.

Search for Port Access

After the Arab Spring, Moscow stepped up its overall maritime efforts. On July 26, 2015, Russian Navy Day, Putin announced Russia's maritime doctrine until 2020. He also set the goal of expanding Russian naval capacities from "regional" to "global blue-water." Two years later, Putin announced Russia's new naval doctrine, which echoed these ideas.⁷ At best, Moscow's blue-water ambitions are years away from becoming a reality. Shipbuilding has historically been among the most corrupt

⁵ Roger N. McDermott, *Russia's Electronic Warfare Capabilities to 2025: Challenging NATO in the Electromagnetic Spectrum* (Estonia: International Center for Defense and Security, 2017), https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2018/ICDS_Report_Russias_Electronic_Warfare_to_2025.pdf; Roger McDermott, "Russia's Network-Centric Warfare Capability: Tried and Tested in Syria," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 154 (October 30, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-network-centric-warfare-capability-tried-and-tested-in-syria/>.

⁶ Roger McDermott "Moscow's S-300 Double Bluff in Syria," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 142 (October 10, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/moscows-s-300-double-bluff-in-syria/>.

⁷ Order of the President of the Russian Federation of July 20, 2017 No. 327 "Ob utverzhdenii Osnov gosudarstvennoi politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii v oblasti voenno-morskoj deiatel'nosti na period do 2030 goda," <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201707200015?index=0&rangeSize=1>.

sectors of Russia's military-industrial complex. Multiple other problems, such as outdated facilities, also plague the Russian navy, and Western sanctions have added to these difficulties.⁸

But the Russian navy should not be dismissed. One way that Moscow can overcome these difficulties is by securing port access that allow for the use of smaller ships—or at least gaining access to them. Indeed, Moscow continues its long quest for port access in the region. In December 2017, Putin signed a law to expand Tartus and Khmeimim in order to cement Russia's "permanent" presence.⁹ Beyond Syria's ports, Moscow looks to Egypt and Libya, as well as to North Africa more broadly. Securing port access—rather than investing in building ports—is a pragmatic, cost-effective approach.

Despite its multiple problems, the Russian navy has made improvements since 2008. Moscow's efforts to control the Black Sea are paying off, and from there it can project its influence in the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and beyond. Indeed, Moscow can now deploy a permanent force on the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, sometimes mere presence is relevance, as was the case with the Russian aircraft carrier Kuznetsov in Syria.¹⁰ Moscow aims to exert naval superiority in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean, and in recent years Russian officials have increasingly spoken of the Russian navy in the context of non-nuclear deterrence.¹¹ Perhaps more to the point, Moscow's steps show its persistent perception of threat from NATO and desire to deter the West. This intent continues to color Moscow's Middle East activities as it works methodically to deny the West sea access.¹²

US Allies Hedging Their Bets

Assad remains in power, confident of Moscow's and Tehran's support. Putin has ensured Russia's permanent military presence in Syria for at least the next 49 years and boosted Russia's regional arms sales. Moscow's partnership with Iran shows no signs of abating, as their joint interest in opposition to the US continues to override the differences between them. Indeed, Moscow's entire Syria strategy is predicated on a partnership with the Islamic Republic, which bears the bulk of the costs in Syria.

America's regional allies continue to feel uncertain about U.S. commitment to the region and hedge their bets. For Putin, engaging traditional U.S. allies holds multiple benefits. It is part of his friends-with-everyone, ultimate-arbiter policy, which straddles his political and economic interests. In this context, Egypt and Turkey have moved closer to Moscow.

⁸ Paul Goble, "Any Russian Naval Expansion Is Many Years Away," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 7 (January 18, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-naval-expansion-many-years-away/>; Ihor Kabanenko, "Russia's Shipbuilding Program: Postponed Blue-Water Ambitions," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 59 (April 18, 2018),

<https://jamestown.org/program/russias-shipbuilding-program-postponed-blue-water-ambitions/>.

⁹ "Putin Signs Law Allowing Expansion of Russian Naval Facility in Syria," *RFE/RL*, December 19, 2017 <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-signs-law-syria-tartus-naval-facility/28946167.html>.

¹⁰ Anna Borshchevskaya and Jeremy Vaughan, "How the Russian Military Reestablished Itself in the Middle East," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 17, 2016,

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-the-russian-military-reestablished-itself-in-the-middle-east>.

¹¹ Igor Delanoë, "Russia Has a Deadly Plan to Defend the Black Sea," *The National Interest (blog)*, February 27, 2018,

<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russia-has-deadly-plan-defend-the-black-sea-24678?page=0%2C1>; "Russian Navy to Focus on Strategic Non-Nuclear Deterrence—Commander-in-Chief," *TASS*, January 1, 2018, <http://tass.com/defense/983872>.

¹² Stephen Blank, "Russia's Middle Eastern Position in 2025," *Jamestown Foundation*, November 20, 2018, https://jamestown.org/program/russias-middle-eastern-position-in-2025/#_ednref82.

Turkey has long since come around to Putin's position on Assad, due in part to Erdogan's fear of Kurdish nationalism, a fear stoked by Moscow's long-standing ties to the Kurds, and in part to Erdogan's own anti-Westernism. It is no coincidence that the PYD opened an office in Moscow in February 2016, during a temporary standoff in Russian-Turkish relations after the Turkish government downed a Russian jet in late 2015. Moreover, Erdogan knows that Putin can turn on and off the flow of Russian tourists, so important to Turkey's economy. Erdogan's ongoing discussion of the purchase of an S-400 from Moscow, regardless of whether it leads to an actual transfer, demonstrates Turkey's shift towards Putin, who has more leverage over him than vice versa.

Egypt has been the cornerstone of American regional security policy for decades, but Putin has managed to pull Cairo closer to its orbit through arms, nuclear energy, and economic deals, while Russian tourists make a significant contribution to the Egyptian economy. In September 2016, Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu described Egypt as Russia's most important partner in North Africa,¹³ and policymakers should not rule out the possibility of Russia flipping Egypt.¹⁴

Saudi Arabian King Salman's historic visit to Moscow in October 2017 is further evidence of Putin's growing sway in the region. Moscow's recent agreements with Morocco, including on nuclear energy,¹⁵ are another example. They also highlight the broad geostrategic scope of Putin's goals in the region. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu made more trips to Moscow than to Washington during Obama's presidency, while the Gulf countries have added incentive to cooperate with Moscow on global oil prices now that the US has emerged as the world's top crude oil producer. Moscow's success in the region has contributed to Moscow's recent push into the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa.

What's Next in Syria?

Now that Putin has helped ensure Assad's victory, he is turning to stabilizing Syria on its terms. Russia has no resources to contribute to Syria's reconstruction and is actively lobbying other potential donors, primarily Europe, to do so, attempting to use the refugee issue as leverage. As a whole, the West is not eager to contribute to Syrian reconstruction, which leaves non-Western options. To get funds, Moscow will need to set a broader agenda in the region and engage partners to demonstrate its long-term commitment to the region.

The Kremlin remains committed to Assad whom it enabled for years. Yet with Assad in power, a war criminal who is responsible for the vast majority of civilian deaths in Syria and the rise of terrorism there in the first place, the possibility of violence will always lurk just beneath the surface. Nor would the majority of Syrian refugees want to return to Syria as long as Assad remains in power, largely due to safety concerns. There is a real possibility of war between Israel and Iran in Syria in the near future. US policy vacillated from a decision to remain in Syria and continue working with Syrian Democratic Forces, who control the vast majority of Syria's oil and gas reserves and critical infrastructure, to a snap decision by President Trump to withdraw.

¹³ "Defense Ministers of Russia and Egypt Held the III Session of the Joint Russian-Egyptian Military Cooperation Commission," September 5, 2016,

http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12094751@egNews.

¹⁴ Anna Borshchevskaya, "Could Russia Flip Egypt?" *National Interest*, June 21, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/could-russia-flip-egypt-26367>.

¹⁵ "Russia and Morocco Sign Agreements to Inaugurate Military and Security Cooperation," *Middle East Monitor*, October 12, 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20171012-russia-and-morocco-sign-agreements-to-inaugurate-military-and-security-cooperation/>.

"Morocco and Russia to Sign Nuclear Deal," *The North Africa Post*, October 5, 2018 <http://northafricapost.com/25700-morocco-russia-to-sign-nuclear-deal.html>.

Moscow could hardly contain its glee at Trump's announcement and quickly expressed concern that the US may not leave after all.¹⁶ This reaction shows how much US policy matters in the region and how much Moscow wants to see the US leave. The decision to withdraw only elevates Moscow's position as a critical power broker in Syria. As one senior Egyptian official told me, "Syria is a battle for credibility," and many in the region perceive Russia as winning. In this context, Libya is another crucial area of growing Kremlin influence that has the potential to emerge as a focal point if Moscow gains enough credibility in Syria.

Conclusion

Paradoxically, Russia has been a relatively weak great power throughout much of its history. Expansion brought poverty to its people and continual insecurity to the state. War victories often came at costs far greater than those to Western European countries. Authoritarianism prevented economic and political liberalization that could have led to improvements. But Russia's sheer size and ability to mobilize an impressive military force made it a political player to be reckoned with. In times of greater state weakness, the Kremlin has often become more aggressive abroad to help shore up domestic legitimacy, while the search for superpower status has colored Moscow's activities since Russia's inception as a state. This perspective should give pause to analysts who dismiss Russia as merely weak.

In the Middle East, Putin had a plan from the very beginning but also remained flexible and adapted to circumstances. On balance, he has achieved many key objectives, largely due to the West's limited engagement and his own commitment. Putin's Syria adventure has yet to play itself out. But to date, Putin has managed to largely outmaneuver the United States.

Many point out that Putin's Russia cannot deliver development—the mark of a truly great power, at least in the Western sense of the word. But from the Kremlin's perspective, the game is primarily about staying in power and outflanking the US. In this context, a permanent state of low-level, managed conflict in the Middle East is to Moscow's benefit because it necessitates Moscow's presence, giving the latter a way to create dependence on the Kremlin by keeping conflicts unresolved. Moscow appeals to the self-interest of the region's leaders, who feel comfortable dealing with Putin, covet Russian weaponry, and hedge their bets in the face of uncertain U.S. policy. And unlike in their dealings with the US, there is no Foreign Corrupt Practices Act to regulate Middle East officials' engagement with Moscow. Thus, even if not all of its plans pan out, Moscow will continue to wield influence in the region, to the detriment of regional stability and U.S. interests there. The only antidote to Putin's influence in the Middle East is robust and consistent U.S. commitment to the region, backed by the credible use of force when necessary. Indeed, when talking of Moscow's endgame, analysts too often forget that for years the US has had little game of its own. Until that changes, Putin's Russia will remain the one-eyed king in the valley of the blind.

¹⁶ Neil MacFarquhar and Andrew E. Kramer, "Putin Welcomes U.S. Withdrawal From Syria as 'Correct,'" *The New York Times*, December 20, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/20/world/europe/putin-trump-syria.html>