



Russia's Strategy Toward Post-Assad Syria

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Chairman Lawler, Ranking Member Cherfilus-McCormick, honorable members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. With the fall of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, the United States has a once in a generation opportunity to reshape the balance of power in the Middle East. His fall opens a window, but it will not stay open for long.

Syria is an integral part of great power competition. It is in the best interests of the United States to ensure Russia does not reestablish a foothold in Syria, because what happens in Syria historically does not stay in Syria.

The East Mediterranean is vital to Russia. That's why the goal of control there is a consistent and centuries-old goal for Russia. It will long outlast Vladimir Putin.

My testimony focuses on three key issues of vital importance to the United States: First, Russia's longstanding commitment to control of Syria is a crucial part of Moscow's strategic positioning with the West. Second, Syria's importance to Russia is key to these objectives across the Middle East, and to that end I highlight Russia's economic interests and potential. Third, Russia is strengthening its hand in Syria and future ability to threaten NATO's South by positioning itself as a false protector of minorities. This is why the United States must act now to prevent Russia from reestablishing a strong foothold in Syria, as Moscow continues to strengthen its partnerships with Iran, China, and North Korea.

Longstanding Competition for Syria

So how did we get here? For over half a century, Syria has been a thorn in our side. Damascus, allied with Moscow, has stood as the crucible of regional conflict that draws in great powers. During the Cold War, it emerged as the Soviet Union's most loyal Middle Eastern client state. The East Mediterranean theater has been and remains central to Moscow's global confrontation with the United States.

Syria was key to Soviet positioning and influence in the Middle East. It enabled regional turmoil and conflict that repeatedly drew the United States into the region. A U.S.-designated state sponsor of terrorism since 1979, Syria emerged as the pillar of the Tehran-led, anti-Western, anti-Israel “axis of resistance.” Iran’s tentacles deeply entrenched into Syria’s political, cultural, and economic spheres. Even with the end of the Cold War, Damascus gave strength to terrorists—not only Shia but also Sunni groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin began Russia’s return to the Middle East soon after taking over as president in May 2000. It culminated with Moscow’s military intervention in Syria in 2015 to save Assad from imminent collapse, at a time when the Syrian civil war reverberated across the Middle East and Europe.

That intervention solidified Russia’s influence in the region and brought the Russia-Iran partnership to new heights. Even traditional U.S. partners and allies came to accept Russia’s presence as a reality they had to deal with. The Kremlin used its position in Syria to undermine U.S. interests. It has fanned the flames of regional conflict across NATO’s southern flank and Europe and expanded into the Middle East and Africa. Russian diplomats cried crocodile tears about humanitarian suffering in Syria even as Moscow helped Assad commit war crimes against his own civilians. Prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Syria was the largest global displacement crisis, and Moscow used it to its own ends.

For Putin and other former KGB officers that came to dominate the Russian state, Syria isn’t really about Assad or even the future of Syria itself. It is about using Russia’s position in the country to achieve larger, strategic objectives—mainly, to undermine U.S. influence.

Putin’s Russia had been waging a proxy war with the United States. A case in point is Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Before using Ukraine to force a realignment of the international order, Putin used Syria to achieve this end. And Syria remains a primary theater for this confrontation with the West.

Even as Russia continues to wage its war against Ukraine, its military industrial complex remains remarkably resilient. Moscow has no interest in ending the war. Russia’s position and interests across the Middle East and in Syria should be seen for what they are: part of Moscow’s global confrontation with the United States.

Russia Retains Influence Across the Middle East

Last December, the Kremlin made a quick and calculated decision to cut its losses and let Assad flee to Moscow rather than continue trying to keep him in power. Turkey had outmaneuvered Russia in Syria.

Assad nonetheless has always been a difficult partner for the Kremlin. Putin’s behavior over the years suggested he has little respect for him. In December, commentators observing events in Syria focused on whether Moscow had the resources to continue supporting Assad. The more likely reason Moscow let him fall was that the costs of supporting him had simply outweighed the benefits.

With Assad safely in Moscow, Putin claimed Russia had reached all of its goals in Syria and refused

to call Assad's removal a defeat.¹ While that comment seems like a transparent effort to save face, it's not entirely wrong—Russia did achieve a number of its key objectives in Syria. In contrast to Putin's original statements that Moscow went into Syria to prevent Sunni terrorism from reaching Russia, it's clear he did so for Russia's own positioning in the region, since Moscow never targeted terrorists with any consistency and in some cases indirectly helped strengthen them. Russia in 2025 has more influence in the Middle East across the DIME (diplomatic, economic, information, and military spheres) than a decade ago, and that's due in large part to its strategy in Syria.

Overall, the Middle East has been ambivalent at best about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The region did not, for instance, support Western sanctions on Russia. No Middle East state has rescinded any major agreement with Moscow since the invasion. To the contrary, Russia's ties with the region have only grown, both with adversaries to the United States and U.S. partners. Moscow's partnership with Iran and its proxies continues to deepen as Russia wages war on Ukraine. Tehran and Moscow signed a treaty on comprehensive strategic partnership that involves, among other things, the transfer of dual-use military technology. Moscow is also training Houthi forces in Yemen. At the same time, Russia's partnership with China and North Korea is growing.²

Elsewhere, Saudi Arabia has moved somewhat closer to Russia over the course of the war, choosing not to use its leverage to lower global oil prices. In Sudan, recent indications are that Russia's relationship with Abdel Fattah al-Burhan have deepened, allowing Moscow to keep a foothold in the country and move toward securing a long-sought military port on the Red Sea. Libya has grown in importance too—with Russian naval bases in the Mediterranean now held at risk by the new Syrian government, Moscow has been relocating many of its assets to Libya.

Economic Potential

With all eyes on the future of Russia's military bases in Syria, fewer are paying attention to Moscow's economic interests and how they are often used as a tool to achieve state objectives. Russia's commercial enterprises cannot be separated from its geostrategic approach to conflict with the West; such activities are never about commercial interests for their own sake.

After the military intervention in Syria, Russian companies backed by the paramilitary Wagner Group (now rebranded as Africa Corps) gained access to Syria's resources. That includes energy, phosphates, and telecommunications.

More recently, the new Syrian government has inked major trade deals worth billions with Turkish and Qatari firms, while the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia look to bolster ties with Damascus. Russia now has strong relations with all of these countries and has improved its business ties with them in recent years. Even after the invasion of Ukraine, its trade with the UAE and Turkey increased. Trade with the UAE in particular allowed Russia to circumvent sanctions and obtain dual-use goods, enabling it to fight the war in Ukraine more effectively.³ Such activity also provides important context for the recent signing of an \$800 million agreement between the Emirati firm DP World and the new Syrian government for development of Tartus port.

¹ "Putin says Russia has achieved its goals in Syria" [translation from Russian], Interfax, December 19, 2024, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/999556>

² Garrett Campbell, "The Trump Administration's Pursuit of a Sino-Russian Schism," Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 10, 2025, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/04/the-trump-administrations-pursuit-of-a-sino-russian-schism/>

³ "US, allies press UAE over Russia trade, sanctions," *Business Standard*, May 1, 2024, <https://www.tbsnews.net/world/us-allies-press-uae-over-russia-trade-sanctions-840851>

To underscore how Russia is building its commerce in the region, the majority of Russian oligarchs who fled after the invasion now operate in Turkey and the UAE. In fact, the UAE is now Russia's largest Arab trading partner. As these countries bolster business ties with Syria, Russia has increasing opportunities to influence policy through those business ties, which are difficult to trace.

Moreover, Russia's military-industrial complex remains remarkably durable. Pre-war, the defense industry represented a large portion of Russia's exports; today, the entire economy remains geared toward military production. A potential peace deal in Ukraine, sanctions relief, or even a lengthy ceasefire could provide Russia with an opportunity to resume arms sales and security assistance to the Middle East, Africa, and select client states in the Indo-Pacific. Here again we can see that Moscow's interests lie in war, not peace. And Russia has a real opportunity to emerge from the Ukraine war with far more to offer to potential arms buyers in the Middle East than before the war.⁴

Russia Is Still in Syria and Positioning Itself as a Protector of Minorities

Assad has been defeated, but Russia is still in Syria. Russia is part of the UN Security Council and remains a signatory to Resolution 2254, the only international document that outlines a post-Assad transition roadmap for Syria. Unlike the U.S. military withdrawals from Vietnam and Afghanistan, where U.S. embassies ceased operations, the Russian embassy remains open in Damascus. The Kremlin has significantly downgraded its military presence in Tartus and Hmeimim but retains a nominal presence there.

Given its deep ties in the region and decades-long Soviet and Russian support to Syria's military infrastructure, it would be easy for Moscow to restart military support to Damascus should the new government ask for it, since Syria's military equipment remains largely of Russian make. There is a pragmatic inclination for Damascus to retain a relationship with Russia to keep its military functional. Even if the new government may prefer to work with other actors, Russia could end up being the only power willing to provide that support.

Moscow could lay the groundwork for such an outcome through economic influence. Indeed, in March, as Syria's energy crisis continued to grow, Russia reportedly shipped diesel to Syria aboard a U.S.-sanctioned tanker, the Kremlin's first known direct supply of such fuel to a Middle Eastern country in more than ten years.⁵

Russia has much to offer Syria, and even as the new government currently looks for alternatives to Russia for printing currency, the overall relationship has purely pragmatic gains for both sides. Syria's interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa noted "deep strategic" interests between Russia and Syria.⁶

Of course, the Kremlin helped Assad commit war crimes in Syria. But because Russia's actual presence on the ground was limited, few Syrians fully understand the scope of Russian crimes in their country and focus instead on Iran, whose involvement was far more visible and pervasive.

⁴ Anna Borshchevskaya and Matt Tavares, "Russia's Defense Ties in the Middle East Poised to Rebound," *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, June 2025, <https://jstribune.com/borshchevskaya-tavares-russias-defense-ties-in-the-middle-east/>

⁵ Noam Raydan, "Syria's Quest for Oil May Include Russian Shipments," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 5, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrias-quest-oil-may-include-russian-shipments>; "Map Tracks U.S. Sanctioned Russian Oil Tanker to Syria," *Newsweek*, March 7, 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/map-tracks-us-sanctioned-russian-oil-tanker-syria-2041122>

⁶ "First interview with an Arab satellite channel: Al-Sharaa reveals the features of the new Syria" [translation from Arabic], YouTube, December 29, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNEMrMCroBk>

For its part, Israel has already expressed that it sees Russia's presence as a counter-balance to Turkey in Syria. Saudi Arabia may do the same.

In early March, former Assad regime insurgents ambushed the transitional government's security forces on the west coast; in response, government forces killed hundreds of civilians, the majority of whom were Alawites, the minority from which the Assad family originates. During these events, Moscow acted immediately. It condemned the violence, and according to Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, it reportedly provided shelter to over 8,000 people in Hmeimim. Thus, Moscow used these events to position itself as a protector of minorities. This is a role Russia fashioned for itself in the Middle East during the Arab Spring in 2011. In Syria, Russia spent years fashioning itself as the only actor who could talk to all sides of the conflict.⁷ Russia is again defaulting to its narrative as a protector of minorities and potential mediator—and Russian narratives that are left uncontested by the West tend to take hold. In reality, rather than provide genuine protection or mediation, Moscow will likely use its relationship with Syria's minorities as part of an effort to keep Syria weak and divided, making the country easier to manipulate.

Policy Recommendations

The United States must ensure that Russia does not reestablish control in Syria. To that end, Washington could utilize its influence, through a carrot and stick approach, to block Russia's ability to leverage its power. U.S. officials can achieve this by:

- Tapping into the strength of Ukrainians in Syria and further empowering them all across the MENA region
- Continually engaging with the Syrian government
- Limiting Russia's resources through additional sanctions
- Tackling Russia's so-called "ghost fleet"

Here is what each of these recommendations entails:

In Syria, the United States could help empower Ukrainians in economic and diplomatic spheres. Ukrainian and Syrian leaders have already expressed an interest in a strategic partnership, and the United States can help facilitate these ties. Until recently, Russia was the largest provider of wheat to Syria—grain that Russia largely stole from Ukraine. With Assad's fall, Russia's supplies have been suspended. To be sure, with the recent easing of European sanctions, wheat from Europe has just begun to arrive in Syria from Europe. Still, the United States could help make sure that Ukrainian wheat reaches Syria and work with European partners to do this as well, so that Ukraine could expand other commercial interests in Syria (e.g., telecommunications), shutting out Russia. If Ukraine expands both its commercial and diplomatic influence in Syria, it can also build cultural ties to further strengthen its position in the country and help counter Russian narratives.

The United States can also facilitate a push for Ukrainian technology, arms trade, and information/narrative projection elsewhere in the MENA region. Over the course of Russia's war in the past three years, the Ukrainian military has integrated Western and post-Soviet military systems, made impressive innovations in the arms industry, and bolstered its expertise in modernizing and maintaining Russian equipment. There is now significant opportunity to partner with

⁷ Anna Borshchevskaya and Andrew J. Tabler, "Triangular Diplomacy: Unpacking Russia's Syria Strategy," Policy Notes 107, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 7, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/triangular-diplomacy-unpacking-russias-syria-strategy>

Ukraine to help transform and modernize Middle Eastern states that have been traditional Russian client states. The United States can help facilitate a push for Ukrainian technology and other advantages in the Middle East to prevent further Russian encroachment on traditional Western partners there. Such an effort would also prevent further Russian profit-making for its arms industry. Furthermore, the United States can help Ukrainians better project their narrative across the Middle East to counter Russia in the information space. The region needs to hear and understand Ukraine's side of the story.

Increasing engagement with the Syrian government and limiting Russia's resources. As the United States and Europe ease or suspend economic sanctions against Syria, they must balance the need to help Syria recover with the need to block Russia's ability to profit from this recovery and use its economic tools to gain control. This should include continual engagement with the Syrian government, demonstrating that if it meets certain guideposts, it will be able to unlock aspects of a normalized relationship, which the new authorities desire. This could also include additional sanctions against Russia and entities that work with Russia. The United States should also see how it can work constructively with Turkey to block Russia's influence, such as tackling the so-called "ghost fleet" of illicit oil tankers by cracking down on their legal violations and ecological threats, especially given the massive oil spill in the Sea of Azov in December 2024.