



## Russia in the Middle East: Introduction

By Stephen Blank

Today, Moscow is engaged across the entire Middle East in multiple and apparently mutually reinforcing ways. Apart from its military intervention in Syria, it now holds the balance between Israel and Iran as well as between Syria and Jordan. Russia makes energy pacts with Saudi Arabia that eclipse the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). In Iraq, Moscow has leverage with both the Iraqi government and the Iraqi Kurds. Russia has established a robust partnership with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that transcends the Middle East to include Sub-Saharan Africa. And Russia has done all this while simultaneously making economic deals and negotiating arms sales with the Qataris, the UAE and Saudi Arabia's Gulf rival. Russia also now polices the Golan Heights.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it apparently now aspires to play a mediating role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has defied generations of international efforts at conflict resolution and is being called upon on by the Arab League to undertake just such a role.<sup>2</sup> In North Africa, Russia is simultaneously mediating Libya's civil war and being invited to make a decisive move on behalf of the east-based Libyan National Army, led by General Khalifa Haftar, one of the warring parties there.<sup>3</sup> In Morocco, it is now trying to play a part in the diplomatic skirmishing going on around the war in the Western Sahara.<sup>4</sup> Yet, at the same time, the Kremlin has sold Algeria weapons with which it could confront Morocco.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Russia is apparently trying to play a mediating role in Yemen's Civil War as well.

Meanwhile, it is seeking naval and air bases in Cyprus, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Sudan and Yemen.<sup>6</sup> Russia is also selling arms to Egypt, Iran and Turkey, as well as negotiating future sales with Qatar and Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup> And thanks to the impending breakdown of Turkey's relations with the United States, Turkish political figures are not only proclaiming defiance toward Washington but also threatening to evict the US from the Incirlik Air Base and even leave the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Such outcomes would inestimably boost Russia's already high influence in and upon Turkey. Moscow is presumably advocating for both, if not in public then behind closed doors.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Russia is apparently developing plans to counter US economic warfare against it, Iran, and Turkey by creating regional currency blocs or payment unions.<sup>9</sup>

All these manifestations of Russia's presence, therefore, highlight the comprehensive, even multi-dimensional engagement of Russian power in all of its forms—military, diplomatic, informational

and economic—with the entire Middle East. Moreover, this large-scale engagement has developed over several years, so it is process of long duration and will not end anytime soon. If anything, Moscow’s engagement with the Middle East is likely to grow in scope and depth through 2025. Indeed, the scope of Russia’s regional engagement has finally galvanized at least some of the upper echelons of the US military and political leadership to express open concern about Russia’s role across the entire Middle East, from the Maghreb to Iran and from Sudan and Yemen to Turkey.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, these examples (which do not include all of the forms in which Russian power is engaged there) show Moscow’s flexibility where it can provide arms to one or another side in a civil conflict yet also pose as a mediator or valuable interlocutor to both sides in that same conflict. We see this phenomenon in Morocco, as stated above; but since 2012, we have also seen it in Iraq, where Moscow is playing both sides against the middle in its engagement with the government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional government (KRG) in Erbil.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, even now there is still an insufficient appreciation of the extent of Russian activities across this huge expanse, an inadequate awareness of the flexibility Moscow now commands in its approaches to the Middle East. In addition, there is an unwillingness to accept that Moscow is not just being opportunistic but that it may actually have a strategy with relatively crystallized political objectives in mind behind all this activity. Indeed, one recent study by the Rand Corporation manages to contradict itself by saying simultaneously that Moscow has a strategy but that it is astrategic and has no strategy.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, other US analysts find it hard to grasp that Moscow uses force because it has a discernible political objective in mind.<sup>13</sup>

Precisely because too many analysts have been too reluctant or unready to acknowledge the depth and extent of Moscow’s regional engagement, The Jamestown Foundation’s “Russia in the Middle East” project is both timely and necessary. We aim to provide both a synoptic assessment of the multiple dimensions of Moscow’s regional presence with functional analyses of key areas—energy, finance, arms sales, information warfare, etc. (i.e., the instruments that Moscow employs)—to communicate to readers just how deep and deep-rooted Russia’s involvement actually is with Israel, Turkey, Iran, and the Arab world. Indeed, Moscow never really left the Middle East; although in the 1990s, when its power was at its nadir, it could hardly sustain the role it had previously and now presently imagined for itself.

Nevertheless, and especially from the moment Yevgeny Primakov became Russian foreign minister in 1996, Moscow’s undeviating goal has been the restoration of its Cold War status and presence in the area. Indeed, it is arguable, as Stephen Blank suggests, that the visible continuity in Russian policies that we see from the Cold War to the present is Primakov’s legacy; his ideas have, in large measure, outlived him and still form the intellectual basis of Russia’s regional policy here.<sup>14</sup> Primakov long argued that it is essential for both Russia and the Middle East that the United States not be the exclusive the regional hegemon there.<sup>15</sup> Russia must constitute an equal and opposing presence. In 1991, on a mission to the area to save the Soviet Union’s regional position, he said that Middle Eastern leaders “consider it necessary that a united economic and military-strategic area of the USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics] be preserved.” He continued,

They wanted a USSR presence in the Middle East because this would preserve the balance of power. Nobody wants some power to maintain a monopoly position there. These states understand that our country creates an area of stability in this region with its new policy of

non-confrontation with anyone, a policy oriented toward searching for ways of making interests coincide with those of other countries.<sup>16</sup>

That precept naturally comports with the equally long-standing Russian belief, already articulated quite cogently in the 1990s, that Russia cannot be content with anything other than a role equivalent to that of the United States. Sergei Rogov, director of the USA Institute and an advisor to the government and foreign ministry, wrote in 1997 that,

First of all, Moscow should seek to preserve the special character of Russian-American relations. Washington should recognize the exceptional status of the Russian Federation in the formation of a new system of international relations, a role different from that which Germany, Japan, or China or any other center of power plays in the global arena.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, Dmitri Trenin of the Carnegie Endowment observed then that Russian analysts argue that current difficulties are transient but Russia is *entitled* to this “presidium seat” in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and on global issues.<sup>18</sup> And to this day, as many analysts now acknowledge, this drive for equivalency of global status through regional confrontation with Washington drives Moscow’s foreign policy. Essentially Moscow’s ultimate, though not proximate, objectives in intervening so strongly in the Middle East and in other key regions is to create regional bipolarities with the US and its allies that will force Washington (and them) to take Moscow at its own self-valuation and acknowledge a truly multipolar world with Russia as the US’s equal. Thus, today, analysts as disparate as the Israeli scholar and former ambassador to Moscow, Zvi Magen, and Dmitri Trenin both argue that the overriding objective of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East is the achievement of recognition of a restored superpower or great power status.<sup>19</sup>

In pursuing this global objective Moscow also concurrently pursues serious regional objectives by using all the instruments of power that it possesses. While the intellectual foundation of policy arguably lies in the Primakovian legacy, Vladimir Putin, by pursuing this policy in his own way, has added to and deepened it and placed his personal stamp upon it. The deployment of these instruments of power and policy, therefore, represent a kind of *mélange* of Tsarist, Soviet and contemporary Russian attributes united into one. Consequently, the chapters following the depiction of the Primakovian legacy display how and to what ends Moscow has used these attributes of its state and also examine what has been the reaction to them.

As the Russian economy rebounded in 2000–2008, from its nadir in the 1990s, it allowed the state to gain both new capabilities and new standing to play the foreign role its leaders and elites believed they should play. And this trend was observable in the Middle East as well as elsewhere. Already we see substantial advances in Moscow’s ability and willingness to sell arms abroad to Arab states and use those relationships to foster new ties between Russia and regional actors. As Anna Borshchevskaya shows in her paper for this book, Russian leaders have always understood the importance of arms sales as a factor enhancing ties to clients and Russia’s standing in states who buy those weapons and associated services. Nor is this merely a question of heightened Russian capabilities. The internal dynamics of a highly conflict-prone Middle East lead its leaders to come to Russia to buy more and ever newer weapons:

As Sergei Chemezov, chief of the powerful state industrial holding Rostec, said in February 2015, “As for the conflict situation in the Middle East, I do not conceal it, and everyone understands this, the more conflicts there are, the more they [clients] buy weapons from us. Volumes are continuing to grow despite sanctions. Mainly, it is in Latin America and the Middle East.”<sup>20</sup>

But Russia’s capacity to attract Arab interest or simultaneously to engage Middle Eastern states in a positive way are not exclusively restricted to arms sales. As Stephen Blank shows in his paper, Moscow has gone back to employing tactics and strategies for dealing with Muslim peoples at home and abroad that have stood it in good stead throughout the entire checkered history of Russian empire building, imperial collapses, and now an attempted rejuvenation of the empire or at least its great power status.<sup>21</sup>

Consequently, since 2000, a complex process has arisen whereby both Moscow and leading Arab states seek to influence each other’s domestic and Islamic elites for the purpose of enhancing each side’s political-economic-ideological interests. While Moscow has allowed for substantial financial investments by Arab sovereign funds (about which more is stated below), it has also secured opportunities for using the Chechen government under its client, Ramzan Kadyrov, to carry out sensitive missions and spread positive information about Russian policy in the Middle East. Thus, Moscow has updated its long-standing imperial tactic that dates back to its inception as a state: finding elites from among Islamic societies who are willing or even eager to be coopted into Russian state service and using them as the *avant-garde* of its efforts to integrate them into the Russian state. And at least from Soviet times, Moscow has used Muslim scholars to attract Middle Eastern elites to Soviet and now Russian achievements.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, Russia’s Middle Eastern policy has, for some time, expressed the general process in Russian policy of a greater identification with the East in order to resolve or at least tackle pressing political challenges. International relations scholar Andrej Kreutz observed in this context that, for Putin,

The sheer size and ferocity of the Islamic challenge had an impact on the new Russian leader and persuaded him that a new political approach was necessary in order to solve the conflicts with the Muslim population of the country and have a closer link with the Islamic nations.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, political analyst and Russia editor of *Al Monitor*, Maxim Suchkov, commented,

As an external power, Russia needs regional partners to master its own Islamist challenges in the Caucasus, the Volga region, and the Urals, to name a few. Thus Moscow is in constant pursuit of a balance between a pragmatic foreign policy in the Middle East and its own domestic problems in this regard.<sup>24</sup>

Among those Islamist challenges is Russia’s own restive Muslim population, whose numbers are growing while those of the “Slavic cohort” are falling quite rapidly. As Ilan Berman points out in his contribution to this book, the danger of radicalism is an ever-present concern to the Russian government and one of the prime motivations that it has given and that external observers attribute to it for intervening in Syria. But this fear of Islamic terrorism migrating through the Middle East

back to Russia also prompted Russia to intervene in Libya against Islamist forces. But at the same time, as Berman argues, the Kremlin will come under increasing domestic pressure to work with Muslim governments in the Middle East and alleviate the domestic conditions of its Muslim population, whose demands for more enfranchisement are inevitable.<sup>25</sup> Whether Moscow can square that latter circle is a moot point; but the existence of a swelling Muslim population is already a fact of life that affects Moscow's policies. Indeed, in 2003, Putin told the Mufti of Tajikistan that Russia "could be regarded as part of the Islamic world in some sense"; and a year later, it filed a formal application to join the Organization of the Islamic Conference, clearly as a nod to domestic realities. The determination to shelter Russia from Islamic terrorist influence relates to Moscow's sense of the vulnerability of Russia's Muslim population to the siren song of Islamism.<sup>26</sup>

It is not a surprise then that, in 2003, Putin defined Russia as an Islamic country and joined the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) to establish Russia as a bridge between Europe and the Islamic world and to "do everything to promote the idea of the similarity of the Russian and 'Islamic' approaches to many international issues."<sup>27</sup> Everything since then has only reinforced elite opinion that Russia must persevere along this course for its own security against terrorism and due to its particular demographic profile.<sup>28</sup> And as that demographic profile becomes more skewed or weighted toward a large Muslim influence in Russian politics as well as the danger of internal terrorism, Russia will have little choice but to pursue a proactive course in the Middle East—not unlike what it has been doing for several years.

Adding to the continuing utility of arms sales and the tactics of using Muslim elites in Russia and in the Middle East to resolve urgent challengers is Moscow's enhanced economic and informational capabilities, which have grown in magnitude since 2000, notwithstanding long-term structural defects in Russia's economy. Donald Jensen, writing in this book, elucidates the channels by which Russia conducts the same kind of information warfare (IW) in Syria that it has done in Europe and the United States. And it is clear from Jensen's analysis (as well as from other papers) that Moscow has successfully garnered a large audience for its media presentations of its policies and of international relations in the Middle East and elsewhere. The extent to which Middle Eastern audiences trust what Moscow presents is quite unclear, but there can be no denying the extent of Moscow's informational reach and the fact that there are receptive audiences for its message.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, in his paper for this collective work, Shehab Al-Makahleh confirms that Arab youth and other audiences evidently view Moscow's intervention in Syria in a favorable light, especially when juxtaposed against the US interventions in Libya and Iraq. He also points out that that China is apparently abetting Russia's penetration of the Middle East. Given the growing strategic comprehensive partnership, if not alliance, between Beijing and Moscow, that trend could have portentous implications for the region and world politics.<sup>30</sup> China's power potential in the Middle East, to be sure, is primarily economic. But there are signs that it is ready to intervene in some still-unspecified but decisive way to sustain Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria.<sup>31</sup> And the China connection forces us to look as well at the economic instruments that Russia has crafted for sustaining its intervention in Syria and broader regional presence in spite of its visible economic weakness.

Thus, Theodore Karasik, in his contribution, finds that, since 2007 (if not before), Russia has astutely created mechanisms to tie Arab wealth to its politics and create durable financial and energy linkages that create lasting economic-political communities of interest across the Middle East with Russian elites. These instruments of economic power are:

- Creating a “north–south” corridor of economic connections based on a confluence of Russia’s historical and cultural drive to achieve a rightful place in the Middle East;
- Pushing connectivity through soft power instruments such as “Roadshows” but also through the activity of Russian business councils;
- Signing Russia-Arab finance agreements, especially between Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWF) and other Gulf Arab government–owned investment vehicles;
- Printing currency for distribution in Middle East war zones.<sup>32</sup>

The mechanisms thus created not only facilitate lasting commercial and investment ties but also, as Karasik observes, create a basis for Russia’s increasing economic-political penetration into Africa.<sup>33</sup> For example, Russia’s successes in the Middle East have led the UAE’s Crown Prince, Mohammad Bin Zayed, to say that both governments share open communication channels on all issues of international affairs and will form a strategic partnership to promote their relationship.<sup>34</sup> And thanks to their economic and political partnership, the UAE is helping Russia penetrate Africa as well.<sup>35</sup> Presumably, as the UAE visibly increases its capabilities for projecting its influence abroad, it will likely bring Russia into at least some of those arenas, like Africa.<sup>36</sup> This certainly makes for a long-time relation that imparts significant economic and political resources to Russia for the benefit of its quest for great power standing in the Middle East. In this context, the north-south corridor is a strategic reality that allows Russia’s relationship with Arab states to serve as a jumping-off point for Russian economic initiatives in Africa and the global South.

And, of course, these financial and investment relationships are not the only or even primary source of Russian economic presence in the Middle East. That place obviously belongs to the energy relationships that Russia has forged and is forging across the entire area. As we have long known, energy is a primary weapon of Russian foreign policy and seen as such by Moscow. As Russia’s Energy Strategy Through 2035 states explicitly, “Russia as a responsible state considers external energy policy not from the exporter’s narrow point of view, intended to maximize short-term revenues, but as a tool to solve both national and global problems.”<sup>37</sup>

As Rauf Mammadov observes in his paper found in this book, Russia’s goals regarding energy in the Middle East are to:

- Find new markets for its oil and gas.
- Attract investment for an economy whose capital from the West has dried up from sanctions.
- Work with other energy exporters to stabilize international oil prices.
- Undermine Europe’s efforts to diversify its natural gas supplies.
- Help Russia deliver more oil and gas to Asia.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, Russia’s Middle Eastern policies go beyond the Middle East to include Europe and Asia. It is not just a question of energy but also of geopolitical ambition, as reflected in Russia’s

energy policies and the ongoing acquisition of air and naval bases from which to project power and deny NATO access to the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea.<sup>39</sup> But on a daily basis, the most consequential economic relationship between Moscow and Middle Eastern states is the energy tie. Moscow is now building the TurkStream pipeline to Turkey and, from there, throughout the Balkans. The pipeline is meant to ship gas that heretofore has been traversing Ukraine. Moreover, Russia has signed energy deals with both the Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil that have given it enormous leverage between those rival parties as well as Turkey, which has a vital interest in the status of the Iraqi Kurds.<sup>40</sup>

Beyond that, as Mammadov points out, Russia is engaged with Algeria, Libya and Egypt's energy sectors, including nuclear energy. It has also made large-scale energy deals with Saudi Arabia and is cooperating with it in trying to regulate global oil production, essentially supplanting OPEC.<sup>41</sup> At the same time it has made major energy deals with Qatar and has obtained major concessions regarding Syrian energy assets and pipelines.<sup>42</sup> But Russia's energy deals do not end there. It has made major efforts to insert itself into the large-scale deposits found in the Mediterranean by Cyprus, Egypt and Israel. And it has signed several major deals with Iran since 2016.<sup>43</sup> In addition, there are unconfirmed reports of a still larger \$50 billion recent deal with Rosneft.<sup>44</sup>

And yet, flexible diplomacy, the exploitation of elite cleavages that attract Muslim elites to Moscow, information warfare, financial deals and arms sales are not the full extent of Russian initiatives toward the Middle East. Moscow has also displayed an intelligent military strategy to complement or facilitate its larger multi-dimensional strategy to assure itself of regional prominence and demand global equivalence with the US. This strategy, according to the Israeli scholar Dmitry Adamsky, is a "multi-dimensional strategy of coercion to compel audiences to accept the Kremlin's self-valuation and objectives."<sup>45</sup> But within the purely military sphere, Moscow has both innovated creatively and succeeded in Syria beyond most analysts' and maybe even its own expectations.

As Yuri Barmin notes in his paper for this book, it is hard (i.e., military) power that has enabled Russia to achieve what amounts to a battlefield victory and, prospectively, a political resolution of Syria's civil war. Thus military victory is now being translated and expanded into a lasting political presence. Indeed, as he crucially notes, not only has Moscow enhanced its reputation and standing throughout the Middle East, it has created and is now fulfilling Middle Eastern expectations that it will remain a major actor there for a long time to come.<sup>46</sup> Thus as he and Stephen Blank argue, Moscow is now not only consolidating but also expanding its position in the Middle East into one of sustainable influence through 2025 if not beyond.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, they both see clearly that by virtue of its victory in the Middle East, Moscow is now able to generate the multi-dimensional elements of influence and even coercion mentioned above. In particular, they both emphasize the importance of the network of air and naval bases that Russia is now building in the Mediterranean and Red Sea and around the Middle East. This network of military facilities both allow Moscow to project its own power as well as push NATO back from the Levant and the wider Black Sea region, thus obstructing the North Atlantic Alliance's own ability to project power into those regions, if not beyond.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, they both point to the fact that Moscow's enhanced capabilities to project power and impose escalation control upon wars like Syria's—capabilities that had long been complacently dismissed by numerous observers—now allow the Russian Federation to expand its purview into Africa, as it is now doing.<sup>49</sup>

For the future, we should note that Vladimir Putin has already directed the forces at his disposal to increase Russia's presence in Africa by saying that, "Africa cannot be on the periphery of international relations" given its security problems, which affect all of the international community.<sup>50</sup> For that reason we should not be surprised at the expansion of Russian influence into Africa that is now occurring in the wake of its Middle Eastern ascendancy.<sup>51</sup> But the connection between Moscow's military intervention into Syria's civil war and Africa does not end here.

Although it might in some manner be emulating the US use of private contractors during its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Russia has also creatively fashioned its own version of so-called "private military companies" (PMC). These companies are deeply rooted in Russian military history under both Tsarism and Soviet power, as Sergei Sukhankin demonstrates in his chapter to this book; and they also solve domestic as well as foreign policy issues.<sup>52</sup> The use of such forces, most notably the Wagner Group (so named because its founder, Dmitry Utkin, is a fan of German composer Richard Wagner's operas), has occasionally ended in calamity, such as Wagner's deadly defeat when facing US-led forces in Syria in early 2018. Nonetheless, Moscow is clearly committed to the continued employment of these PMCs not only in Syria but also Africa.<sup>53</sup> The murder of three Russian journalists in the Central African Republic (CAR) as they were investigating the Wagner PMC's operations there, casts a potentially lurid light upon such "private" security activities. More importantly, it shows how these PMCs are executing Russian policy in Africa, for example in the CAR and Sudan.<sup>54</sup> Thus, as Sukhankin has written elsewhere,

In this regard, it is worthwhile to take a look at an assessment presented by the French expert Didier François, who expressed confidence that Russian "instructors" will be deployed to the Central African Republic, on the border with Sudan, specifically to the "area containing gold, uranium and diamonds." This will allow the Russians to kill two birds with one stone—"securing Russia's economic interests and expanding its military-political presence in East-Central Africa." Incidentally, a statement presented by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs identified the "exploration of locally based deposits of natural resources" and the "realization of concessions in the mining sector" as key elements that originally enticed Russia to begin cooperating with Sudan.<sup>55</sup>

In other words, Moscow will build on its successes in the Middle East and diffuse them across that region into North and Sub-Saharan Africa. The African continent is notably becoming more important to Russia following Putin's injunction above. As such, Moscow is utilizing its capabilities not only to enhance its influence and leverage there but also to regionally challenge Europe by exploiting energy supply links with African countries as well as exacerbating the flows of northward-bound refugees. By thus creating a tense domestic situation in European countries overwhelmed by migration from the south, Moscow enables its local clients (subsidized political parties) to then exploit those political-social tensions against competing local pro-American forces.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, here again we see the linkages between Middle Eastern and European security (and arguably African security as well). This assessment suggests a critical dimension to Russia's overall security strategy in the Middle East as well as elsewhere. Moscow intends to make its presence felt, forcefully, if necessary, in regional security affairs by means of systematic multi-dimensional coercion and influence campaigns against the Western liberal order in order to force

acceptance of it as a great global power.<sup>57</sup> As former Israeli ambassador to Russia Zvi Magen puts it, “Putin’s long-term goal is not just an empire but global superpower status, at least equal to the US—in promoting this goal, he has to achieve influence in every regional crisis on the international arena.”<sup>58</sup> Or if we say it epigrammatically, Russia intends to force regional bipolarity upon the West in order to compel the acceptance of global multi-polarity. As Vergil wrote in *The Aeneid*, “If I cannot move heaven, I will raise hell.”<sup>59</sup>

Western policymakers and analysts now seem to grasp this aspect of Moscow’s objectives. Assistant Secretary of State A. Wess Mitchell testified that,

Moscow’s primary aims in Syria are not really about the Syrian people or the stability of the region. Moscow wants to retain its presence in Syria as an entry point through which to influence future events in the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean. It also wants to inflict globally visible defeat on the United States: to create a negative “demonstration effect” of thwarting our aims here to dishearten our friends abroad and to drive wedges between us and our allies.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, Mark Katz and Phillipp Casula also have written that Russia cannot relate to the Middle East without relating to the West. “In no other part of the world is Russia’s foreign policy as “influenced by the development and behavior of Western nations.” Thus, the competition with Washington or the broader West is not only in the Middle East but also for the Middle East.<sup>61</sup> They also note that Moscow’s participation here is not directed toward creating or recreating some new order in the Middle East but in merely taking advantage of its travails to ensure Russian presence there and thwart the West. The rivalry in the region, therefore, necessitates a search for a US strategy that can enlist the efforts of local governments, just as Moscow has done.<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, precisely because of the inherent limitations upon Russian power and capability, plus the external sanctions that have been levied upon it since 2014, Moscow requires partners and even enablers in order to achieve its objectives in the Middle East and beyond. We have already cited the case of the UAE. But two other key partners or even enablers of Russian policy are Turkey and Iran. This does not mean these states work with Russia as a cohesive bloc. Rather, Moscow has invested heavily in its relations with them in order to find the basis for a long-term continuous working relationship allowing for the resolution of commonly perceived tasks, challenges and goals.

To be sure, Turkey and Iran are much more difficult partners to work with than the UAE, for example, which, as noted above, facilitating Russian policies in the Middle East and Africa.<sup>63</sup> In Iran’s case, the relationship with Russia is notably marked by mutual distrust, historic suspicions if not enmity, and numerous tensions. And yet, Russian analysts and elites have long believed that Moscow must, nevertheless, find a way to work with Tehran when necessary and possible and to some degree stand in the way of US threats toward the Iranian Republic.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, in his paper, Iranian expert Alex Vatanka finds that Russia needs regional partners or allies (at least on a case by case basis, not a formal alliance); and Iran’s utility, by virtue of its hostility to the US, makes it eminently suited to play that role, despite the divergence in policies between both sides.<sup>65</sup>

Yet, at the same time, it seems clear that if the opportunity to build a strong relationship with Washington is on the table, Moscow will show little hesitation in sacrificing Tehran to that cause. Thus, at the US and Russia's July 2018 Helsinki summit, President Putin evidently agreed with President Donald Trump that Iran should not play a role in postwar Syria but that it was very hard to enforce that outcome.<sup>66</sup> In this fashion, Putin can make a deal with Washington but also play an equivocal role in simultaneously restraining Iran and delaying or softening the blow.

As in so many other cases, Russia tries to be simultaneously Iran's prosecutor and defense counsel. Nevertheless, Iran and Russia signed a military agreement in early 2015 and that remains operative: Moscow even obtained an Iranian base at Hamdan in 2015—until it publicly admitted that fact in 2016, putting Tehran under domestic political pressure to stop that practice.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, for US allies, Moscow's ties to Tehran remain a consistent preoccupation even as they strive to partner with Russia on other issues or find a *modus vivendi* in Syria. Indeed, it is a tribute to Russia's achievements and flexible diplomacy that, in case after case in the Middle East, Moscow has been able to intervene on one side of a dispute and then employ the leverage it has accrued to play a mediating or partner role with both sides.

This characteristic is amply discernible with regard to Turkey, despite centuries of strife and suspicion between it and Russia. For instance, Russia has utilized the Kurdish and Armenian cards against Turkey since 1890, if not before.<sup>68</sup> Yet, by virtue of its ability to be simultaneously a sponsor of Kurdish terrorism and a major provider of energy to Turkey—actions that give Moscow enormous leverage over Kurdish movements in Iraq and Turkey, as well as its intervention in Syria—Moscow has essentially compelled Ankara to cooperate. And since Syria is, in Turkish eyes, a test of Western support for Turkey's domestic political structure as well as its security and foreign standing, and the West has consistently failed Turkey (as it sees it) here, Ankara has had no choice but to gravitate to Moscow. Or at least that is the Turkish narrative, as Mitat Çelikpala demonstrates in his paper.<sup>69</sup> This narrative preceded the recent steep and apparently accelerating decline of US-Turkish relations that is attributable to many factors on both sides beyond Syria. But arguably, even if all the other issues at stake in the Washington-Ankara rift are resolved, until the US fashions a Middle Eastern and Syrian strategy that in some measure answers Turkey's needs, Moscow will have all too easy an opportunity to intensify its efforts to drive Turkey out of the West.

## **Conclusion**

As virtually every observer has now grasped, Russia is in the Middle East to stay.<sup>70</sup> As we have argued, Moscow's intervention in Syria and subsequent enlargement of its Middle Eastern standing are not things that happened out of the blue or a mere brilliant tactical improvisation. Indeed, John Parker's study of Russian policy for the National Defense University (NDU) makes clear that Russia was already escalating its presence in Syria from 2013 on. While other sources point out that planning for the actual intervention began in January 2015, at Iran's request, given al-Assad's visible loss of territory and power.<sup>71</sup> And beyond that linkage, it appears from Parker's analysis that the steady ratcheting upwards of arms transfers to Syria in 2011–2013 through a naval screen prepared the ground for (and was linked in Putin's mind to) the need to prevent another "color revolution" in Ukraine. In other words, the successful and stealthy employment of the navy and other organs to increase arms supplies to Syria helped convince Putin to invade Ukraine as did the

linkages between preventing the triumph of revolutions in areas of importance to Moscow.<sup>72</sup> And before that, as this book's following chapters and other sources make clear, the ideas and programs that have paved the way for the enlargement of Russian capacity were under way and missed by the West. Just as the West "slept through" the Russian buildup—feeling unjustly complacent that Russia could not challenge the West in the Middle East or project power there—it still is reluctant to grasp the scope of Moscow's achievement in this region or the opportunities accruing to it in neighboring Africa. As a result, and as noted above, it is only now that some officials have awoken from their lethargy to grasp that Moscow's activities in the Middle East constitute a challenge to US policies there as well as in Africa and Europe. If the essays here serve to awaken readers to the current challenge and stimulate the search for a viable and strategic response to Russia's challenge, then the collective "Russia in the Middle East" project will have served its purpose.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> "Russian Military Police To Create Eight Outposts Near Syrian-Israeli Border," *TASS*, August 10, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Zach Battat, "Peace In the Middle East: Russia's Role In the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," Russian International Affairs Council, [ww.russiancouncil.ru/en](http://ww.russiancouncil.ru/en), August 13, 2018; "Arab League Expects Russia to Propose Initiatives to Resist US Steps – Envoy," *Sputnik News*, August 16, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201808161067252260-arab-league-russia-us-unilateral-steps/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Libya's East-Based Army Calls For Stronger Russia Ties," *BBC Monitoring*, August 9, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Rousselier, "A Role For Russia In the Western Sahara?" Carnegie Endowment, August 9, 2018, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/sada/76532>.

<sup>5</sup> Casablanca, *Akhbar Al-Youm Al-Maghrebiya Online*, in Arabic, October 30, 2013, *Open Source Center, Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Central Eurasia*, (Henceforth, *FBIS SOV*), October 30, 2013.

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