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Institute for Policy and Strategy

## Russia in the Middle East – The Sunni Connection

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August 2018

### Abstract

*Russian leaders are aware that the all-out support to the Alawite regime in Syria and its present alliance with Iran, Hezbollah and the Shiite militias should be balanced by a parallel effort to improve and strengthen relations with the Sunni Arab states, which represent the majority of the Middle East in demographics, economy and geopolitical stature.*

*The bold and clever strategy President Putin has followed since the 2015 Russian intervention in Syria, on the backdrop of the Obama and Trump administrations' retreat from the region, has given Russia, after years of failures on the global arena, the necessary successes to expand its interests and influence much beyond the Eastern Mediterranean: to the Gulf, Northern Africa, the Red Sea.*

*Russia is now in a position of force to be a peace broker in some areas or an efficient conflict mediator in others, engaged in keeping "the stability" of the Middle East, a stability that mainly serves its major interests and goals.*

Present-day Russian activism in the Middle East builds upon historical experience. For over two centuries, Russian foreign policy was focused on displacing the Ottoman Empire from the Black Sea region and the Balkans. St. Petersburg's designs on Constantinople and the Turkish Straits were a main reason Russia joined World War I.<sup>1</sup>

Russian dreams of establishing a presence in the Middle East were first guided by ideological and only later by pragmatic concerns. Russo-Turkish conflicts centuries continued to be motivated by Russia's attempt to protect and establish its own authority over Orthodox Christians under Ottoman rule.

The Soviet Union's active involvement in the Middle East began in the mid-1950s, and soon resulted in an intense rivalry with the United States. A number of Arab countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, South Yemen, and Syria, were, for a period of time, Soviet clients and quasi-allies in supporting Israel's Arab foes and the Palestine Liberation Organization.

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<sup>1</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers," *Task Force White Paper*, Carnegie Moscow Center, April 05, 2016. URL: <http://carnegie.ru/2016/04/05/russia-in-middle-east-moscow-s-objectives-priorities-and-policy-drivers-pub-63244>

Moscow's withdrawal from the Middle East under then president Mikhail Gorbachev at the start of the first Gulf War marked the decline of the Soviet Union's superpower status. Russia's reappearance as a player in the Middle East under President Vladimir Putin has the aim of restoring the country's position as a great power outside of the former USSR.<sup>2</sup>

Moscow's current priorities include engineering a Syrian peace deal; expanding ties with Iran to benefit from the lifting of sanctions; furthering relations with Egypt, Iraq, the Kurds (in both Syria and Iraq), the Gulf states and other Arab Sunni states; and staying in close touch with Israel. Thus, the principal drivers of the Kremlin's policies in the Middle East are geopolitical.<sup>3</sup>

## The need to balance between the Shia Axis and the Sunni Alliance

Russia's interest in Syria goes beyond simply saving the Assad regime. The Kremlin's actions are driven by the desire to reinstate its Middle Eastern presence and influence after an absence of three decades, and its great power status.

Therefore, Russian leaders are aware that the all-out support to the Alawite regime in Syria and its present alliance with Iran, Hezbollah and the Shiite militias should be balanced by a parallel effort to improve and strengthen relations with the Sunni Arab states, which represent the majority of the Middle East in demographics, economy and geopolitical stature. Putin's approach to rivalries between third parties has been to cooperate with both sides simultaneously.

From 2005 to 2007, Putin visited Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Russia gained observer status in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Russia's Middle East ambitions grew with Syria battlefield successes. According to Nikolai Kozhanov, a Middle East expert at the European University at St Petersburg, Moscow uses conflict to expand its role as regional powerbroker. Moscow's "appetite is growing according to their achievements on the ground". "Syria is now considered as a kind of means [to further regional influence] rather than a goal in itself."<sup>4</sup>

**Egypt.** Already in November 2013, when General Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi was still Minister of Defense in the government formed after the overthrowing of Muslim Brotherhood regime of President Morsi, a joint visit by Russia's foreign and defense ministers in Cairo discussed cooperation in industrial development, science and intelligence matters. President Putin decided to send this rare high-level delegation after the visit of the head of Egyptian intelligence in Moscow, who "offered serious assurances that [Egyptians] are talking business" on cooperation on mutually targeted militant Islamists. El-Sisi was willing to open the door to diversifying the armament options of the army, partly due to the US decision to suspend a part of US military aid over political differences between Cairo and Washington. But in fact, according to an Egyptian official, "this is something that has been on his mind and on the mind of others in and out of the military for a few years now". Interestingly, according to a Russian diplomat, Cairo reiterated its categorical rejection of any attack on Iran, or for that matter Syria.<sup>5</sup>

Russia offered to sell Egypt modern helicopters and air defense systems in a landmark deal reportedly worth \$2 billion that would mark a revival of large-scale military cooperation between the two countries. Another area of possible large-scale long-term cooperation was Egypt's planned nuclear reactor.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Kathrin Hille, Erika Solomon. Heba Saleh and John Reed, "Russia's Middle East ambitions grow with Syria battlefield success," *Financial Times*, January 18, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Dina Ezzat, "Cairo and Moscow inch closer together," *English Al-Ahram*, November 14, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> "Russia offering Egypt helicopters, air defence systems," *AFP*, November 15, 2013.

Indeed, in November 2015 Moscow and Cairo signed an agreement for Rosatom to build a “peaceful nuclear power plant” in Egypt, at Dabaa, in the north of the country, to be completed by 2022. Russia provided a loan to Egypt to cover the cost of construction, to be paid off over 35 years.<sup>7</sup>

An agreement was reached for acquisition of an air base in Egypt and the concurrent discussions with Sudan for a naval base on the Red Sea coast, which allows Russia to expand its anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities from the Arctic, Baltic, and Black Seas, the Caucasus and Central Asia regions into the Middle East. Moscow undoubtedly intends to use its Egyptian air base to strike at anti-Russian factions backed by the West in Libya. It also now has for the first-time direct reconnaissance over Israeli air space and increasing leverage through its Egyptian and Syrian air bases upon Israel, something Israel has sought to reject since its inception as a state. Moscow would be able to contest the entire Eastern Mediterranean and will place NATO land, air, and/or naval forces at risk.<sup>8</sup>

In December 2017, President Putin made his second visit to Egypt since 2015, for talks with President el-Sisi on the two countries’ rapidly expanding ties and regional issues. After taking office, el-Sisi has bought billions of dollars’ worth of Russian weapons, including fighter jets and assault helicopters. In what would have been unthinkable during the Cold War, Egypt has under el-Sisi been able to maintain close ties with both Russia and the United States.<sup>9</sup> Russia and Egypt held joint military exercises for the first time in October 2017.

Timur Akhmetov, a Middle East researcher at the Russian International Affairs Council, explained that Moscow would value an Egyptian launchpad to carry out air operations in war-torn Libya.<sup>10</sup>

**Libya.** Already in spring 2017, Russia appears to have deployed special forces to an airbase in western Egypt near the border with Libya, part of a bid to support Libyan military commander Gen. Khalifa Haftar. Egyptian sources claimed that a 22-member Russian special forces unit was involved and Russia also used another Egyptian base farther east in Marsa Matrouh in early February 2017. These moves would add to U.S. concerns about Moscow’s deepening role in Libya.<sup>11</sup>

Moscow has deepened ties with Haftar, a renegade general whose forces, the Libyan National Army, control most of the eastern half of the country, including crucial oil installations. He visited Russia twice in 2016 seeking help in his campaign against Islamist groups.<sup>12</sup>

Russian private military forces, like the mercenaries RSB Group, operating in eastern Libya since March 2017, recently engaged in advance work, scouting locations for a Russian military base in Tobruk or Benghazi. The notorious Wagner Group of Russian mercenaries also is operating in eastern Libya, reportedly to service Haftar’s Russian-supplied weaponry and helping set up an intelligence network for the general’s forces.<sup>13</sup>

**Saudi Arabia.** The Saudi–Iranian rivalry has actually been useful to Russia in the sense that it has motivated both Riyadh and Tehran to court it more actively than may have been the case otherwise.<sup>14</sup> In June 2015, then-Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman attended the annual St. Petersburg Economic Forum where he met with Putin. The following month, Saudi Arabia’s sovereign wealth fund committed to invest \$10 billion in Russia over five years, the largest-ever foreign direct investment in the country. On October 5, 2017, King

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<sup>7</sup> “Egypt, Russia sign deal to build a nuclear power plant,” *Reuters*, November 19, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Blank, “Russia and the Middle East: Building Out Bases and Presence,” *SLDInfo.com*, December 4, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Hamza Hendawi, “Putin lands in Egypt in sign of growing ties,” *Times of Israel*, December 11, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Iddon, “Russia expanding Middle East footprint with Egypt bases,” *The New Arab*, December 15, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, Lin Noueihed, “Exclusive - Russia appears to deploy forces in Egypt, eyes on Libya role: sources,” *Reuters*, March 14, 2017

<sup>12</sup> Kathrin Hille, Erika Solomon. Heba Saleh and John Reed, *Russia’s Middle East ambitions grow with Syria battlefield success*.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Gertz, Russia moving into Libya, *The Washington Times*, July 11, 2018

<sup>14</sup> Mark N. Katz, “Balancing Act: Russia between Iran and Saudi Arabia,” *London School of Economics and Political Science*, May 2018.

Salman became the first ever Saudi monarch to visit Russia. President Putin hailed the visit as a “landmark event.” After the summit, Salman and Putin signed a packet of documents on energy, trade, and defense, and agreed to several billion dollars’ worth of joint investment.<sup>15</sup>

The best example of the transactional relationship between Russia and Saudi Arabia is the cooperation in the field of energy as Moscow has come to value cooperating with Riyadh against the common “threat” from increased American shale oil – especially as prices have risen since this cooperation began.<sup>16</sup> In Riyadh meetings in February 2018 between Saudi and Russian officials, major energy deals were sealed, changing the regional constellation dramatically. Russia has directly offered to invest in the upcoming Aramco IPO, supporting the efforts of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) to diversify the economy of the kingdom.<sup>17</sup> There are rumors that Russia and Saudi Arabia are even discussing the possibility of establishing a new international organization to regulate the production of oil to replace OPEC or be adjunct to OPEC, with a more powerful central control by Saudi Arabia and Russia.<sup>18</sup> The partnership with OPEC, led by Saudi Arabia, allows Russia to strengthen its hand in the Middle East and at the same time diminish the U.S..<sup>19</sup>

Saudi Arabia is the second U.S. ally to buy the S-400 system after Turkey agreed to purchase the system from Russia in September 2017. The countries also signed a memorandum of understanding to help the kingdom in its efforts to develop its own military industries, in the context of contracts signed to procure the S-400, the Kornet-EM system, the TOS-1A, the AGS-30 and the Kalashnikov AK-103. the procurement was “based on the assurance of the Russian party to transfer the technology and localize the manufacturing and sustainment of these armament systems in the Kingdom,” but provided no timeframe.<sup>20</sup>

Recently, Assistant US Secretary of State for Near East Affairs nominee David Schenker said during a confirmation hearing that Saudi Arabia and other US allies should not buy Russian military equipment, including S-400 air defense systems, as such purchases can be punishable by sanctions.<sup>21</sup>

**Qatar.** Russia and Qatar have been in discussions about a possible sale of S-400 missile systems to Doha and signed a deal on supplying Qatar with small arms, such as Kalashnikov assault rifles, and anti-tank weapons.  
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Saudi Arabia has threatened “military action” against Qatar should its neighbor acquire Russian S-400 missile defense systems. In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt, among other Gulf states, cut off diplomatic relations with Qatar, accusing it of supporting and funding terrorism, “meddling” in the internal affairs of its neighbors and of expressing support for Iran. Now Riyadh is reportedly worried that Doha’s planned acquisition of Russia’s S-400 surface-to-air missile units will jeopardize the “national security” of its Persian Gulf neighbors.<sup>23</sup>

**Lebanon.** In February 2018, Russian Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev, instructed the Russian Defense Ministry to begin talks with its Lebanese counterpart to sign a military cooperation agreement between the two countries, including the opening of Lebanese ports in front of Russian military vessels and fleets, in

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<sup>15</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya, “Will Russian-Saudi Relations Continue to Improve?” *Foreign Affairs*, October 10, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Mark N. Katz, *Balancing Act: Russia between Iran and Saudi Arabia*.

<sup>17</sup> Cyril Widdershoven, “Russia and Saudi Arabia have signed 3 huge oil deals,” *OilPrice.com*, February, 15, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> “Russia and Saudi Arabia to Form an Alternative to OPEC?” *The Real News Network*, July 11, 2018

<sup>19</sup> Patti Domm, “Putin’s power play: Saudi-Russia oil deal leads to bigger Russia role in Middle East,” *CNBC Ceraweek by IHS Markit*, March 5, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> “Saudi Arabia to Buy S-400 Air Defense System from Russia,” *Reuters*, October 05, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> “Saudis Should Not Buy Russia’s S-400 - Assistant US Secretary of State Nominee,” *Sputnik Military & Intelligence*, June 14, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> “Qatar buys range of arms from Russia, discusses purchase of S-400 missiles,” *RT News*, July 22, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Gypteau, “Saudi Arabia threatens ‘military action’ if Qatar purchases Russian S-400 systems – report,” *AFP*, June 2, 2018

addition to making Lebanese airports a transit station for Russian aircrafts and fighters, and the dispatch of Russian military experts to train and strengthen the capabilities of members of the Lebanese army, exchange of information on defense issues and the promotion of training in various areas related to military service, medicine, engineering, geography and others.<sup>24</sup>

Russia has offered Lebanon a \$1 billion favorable line of credit to purchase armament for the Lebanese Army in a push by Moscow to expand its influence from neighboring Syria into Lebanon at the expense of the United States. However, it is unclear whether the Lebanese government will accept the Russian offer, given the potential ramifications. "If we go with the Russians, the United States and the United Kingdom will walk away from Lebanon and that will leave us with few friends in the West and open to punitive sanctions," said a Lebanese parliamentarian. "Why should we pay for Russian equipment when we have been receiving American weaponry for free for more than 10 years?"<sup>25</sup>

It was reported that Sunni Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri has been showing more interest lately in developing relations with Russia because he believes that Russia is the only party that can moderate Iran and Hezbollah's behavior. His basic premise is that he is not going to be the spearhead of American opposition to Iran. After warnings from the U.S. and Britain that their respective military assistance programs to Lebanon could be jeopardized if Beirut accepted the deal it appears the arms package is off the table for now.<sup>26</sup> According to Lebanese journalist Joseph Haboush, the United States has pushed back a military agreement between Beirut and Moscow, but the forthcoming Lebanese government may try to bring the deal back to life.<sup>27</sup>

**Turkey.** Turkey is a special case, as the biggest non-Arab Sunni country in the region, important member of NATO and not long ago a fiercely secular regime. However, since President Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, Turkey is becoming a more Islamist regime under the leadership of an authoritarian charismatic personality which would like to be the leader of the Sunni world and the founder of a neo-Ottoman state.

Erdogan is one of the fiercest adversary of the Assad regime in Damascus and almost from the beginning of the popular uprising in Syria has supported the Syrian opposition: the Syrian Free Army, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood which controlled much of the Syrian political opposition abroad, and later the Salafist and jihadist groups which gradually took control of the internal rebel movement.

Therefore, it was natural that Turkey saw the Russian intervention in Syria as a negative happening, impacting on its strategic goals in the war-torn country and in the region. Moscow had been on good terms with Syrian Kurds and even hosted representatives of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party discussing the prospects of setting up a permanent PYD mission in Russia. The move was met with criticism in Ankara with Turkish officials warning Moscow that it could permanently damage the Turkey-Russia relationship.

Then, Turkish fighters downed a Russian Su-24 over Syrian skies on November 24, 2015, after Russian air force deployed to the Khmeimim airbase in coastal Latakia had been pounding homes and villages of Turkmens, Syrian citizens of Turkish ethnicity, according to Ankara. Following the downing of the Russian fighter jet Moscow made a swift decision to deploy its newest S-400 air defense system to the base in Latakia.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "Russian fleets control ports of Lebanon," *Middle East Monitor*, February 8, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Blanford, "As Western influence recedes, Russia looks to fill Lebanon's power vacuum," *The Arab Weekly*, March 18, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Blanford, "How US stance on Iran could raise price of peace in Lebanon," *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 16, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Haboush, "Washington pushes back Lebanon-Russia military deal," *The Daily Star*, July 5, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Yuri Barmin, "Following the Downing of its Su-24 Russia Changes the Rules of the Game in Syria," *Russian International Affairs Council*, November 30, 2015.

Russian-Turkish relations recovered surprisingly quickly from their 2015–2016 low point after the downed Russian plane incident.

While Washington has criticized Ankara for rising authoritarian tendencies and the closure of space for civil society under Erdogan and supports Syrian Kurdish fighters and minorities, Russia has tried to court Turkey with calls to enter the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Russia apparently hopes to use Turkey to cause dissent within NATO as Moscow and Ankara are growing closer. The two governments lifted almost all trade restrictions in late spring 2017. Russian investment in a Turkish nuclear power plant and the Turkstream gas project, if fully implemented, would increase Russia's role in Turkish energy markets.

During his December 2017 visit in Turkey, Putin discussed with Erdogan developments in Syria and the Middle East, as well as bilateral relations. It was their eighth meeting that year and Erdogan kept calling Putin, "My dear friend," in his statement. Putin also addressed Erdogan as a friend, emphasizing his role in helping negotiate peace settlement in Syria.<sup>29</sup>

Ankara's recent decision to buy Russia's S-400 air defense system is a coup for the Kremlin, stoking dissent within NATO and highlighting Turkey's status as a problematic ally for the West.<sup>30</sup>

Turkey and Russia have agreed to bring forward to July 2019 the delivery of S-400 air defense missile systems. This announcement came after Russian President Putin held several hours of meeting with Erdogan in Ankara, which marked the start of the Russian-built Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant expected to produce 10 percent of the country's electricity needs. In a sign of the importance of the partnership, Putin's April 2018 visit to Turkey is his first trip abroad since he won a historic fourth presidential mandate in March 18, 2018.<sup>31</sup>

Putin's greatest success has been to coopt Erdogan to a *Pax Russia* solution for Syria.

On November 22, 2017, Putin met with the leaders of Turkey and Iran, Presidents Erdogan and Hassan Rouhani. The three heads of state produced a document supporting the convocation, in Sochi, of a "National Dialogue Congress" for post-war Syria. Although all three men emphasized they were acting in accordance with the guidelines set by the United Nations for reconstructing a viable Syrian political order, in fact the three powers are pursuing their own separate agenda. Thus, the United States and the West have been "unceremoniously demoted from the Middle East."<sup>32</sup>

Turkey has gained from its close relations with Russia green light for its military incursions into Afrin, northwest Syria, in January 2018, to fight the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and expel them out of the region. It was vital to secure Moscow's assent before triggering the operation as Russian troops had been stationed around Afrin as observers but were withdrawn at Turkey's request. As Turkey is determined to extend the operation to wipe YPG forces out further along the Syrian-Turkish border and even into northern Iraq, this dynamic is unlikely to change, according to scholar Güney Yıldız. "When it comes to the Kurdish question within Turkey or in Syria, Russia holds more carrots and sticks against Turkey than any Western countries," wrote Yıldız. "In this context the carrot was Afrin, and if the relations with Turkey changes, the stick could be open or behind the scenes military support to the Kurds in Syria or Turkey."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hamza Hendawi and Vladimir Isachenkov, "A confident and upbeat Putin goes on Mideast 'victory' tour," *Chicago Tribune*, December 11, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Stronski, Richard Sokolsky, "The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 14, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Russian brings forward delivery of S-400 missiles to Turkey to July 2019, *AFP*, April 4, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Blank, "From Sochi to the Sahel: Russia's Expanding Footprint," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 14 Issue: 154, The Jamestown Foundation, November 29, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> "Afrin brought Turkey, Russia relations 'closer than ever' – analyst," *Ahval*, April 2, 2018, URL: <https://ahvalnews.com/russia-turkey/afrin-brought-turkey-russia-relations-closer-ever-analyst>

Although Turkey is a Sunni country and wants to be the leader of the Sunni world, Russia's present close relations with Turkey do not advance its grand design to balance between the Shia Axis and the moderate Sunni Alliance.

Turkey never agreed to challenge Iran and join the Saudi coalition in Yemen, supports Qatar against the other Gulf states, supports the Muslim Brotherhood against Egypt's el-Sisi regime, prefers Hamas upon the Palestinian Authority and opposes United States' and Israel' interests, which today are aligned with the moderate Sunnis.

## Conclusion

During the November 2017 trilateral [Putin, Rouhani and Erdogan] meeting in Sochi, an anonymous Russian Ministry of Defense source stated: "The Russian military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean is necessary for keeping the balance of power and the interests that we lost after the USSR's [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics] disintegration 25 years ago"<sup>34</sup>

The bold and clever strategy President Putin has followed since the 2015 Russian intervention in Syria, on the backdrop of the Obama and Trump administrations' retreat from the region, has given Russia, after years of failures on the global arena, the necessary successes to expand its interests and influence much beyond the Eastern Mediterranean: to the Gulf, Northern Africa, the Red Sea.

Russia is now in a position of force to be a peace broker in some areas or an efficient conflict mediator in others, engaged in keeping "the stability" of the Middle East, a stability that mainly serves its major interests and goals.

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<sup>34</sup> Stephen Blank, *From Sochi to the Sahel: Russia's Expanding Footprint*.