



Russian Strategy in the Middle East

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In September 2015, Russia launched a series of airstrikes in Syria, marking the beginning of a significant and sustained military intervention. Many in the Western policy community were surprised by Russia's actions. Arguably, if the analytical community had more effectively understood Russia's interests, objectives, and approach, Moscow's military intervention in Syria would not have been a surprise. The nature and scale of Russia's actions prompted the authors of this Perspective to ask: What else might be missing in the collective understanding of Russia's wider interests and actions in the Middle East?¹

While the literature on Russia in the Middle East is extensive, recent analysis has understandably focused on Syria, giving less attention to Moscow's relations with other countries in the region. As of late 2016, this lack of focus on Russian activity in the broader Middle East had left the important question of Moscow's regional strategy and longer-term intent all but unaddressed. This Perspective seeks to identify the important elements of Russian interests

in the Middle East beyond Syria, to define the nature of Russian engagement in the region, and to describe the contours of a Russian strategy in the Middle East.

There is good reason to broaden our understanding of Russian strategy in the Middle East. Analyzing Russian strategy can help prevent unwelcome surprises. Knowing where and when Russia is likely to commit economic, military, or diplomatic resources can allow time and space for preemptive or mitigating actions. To many Western observers, Russia's regional engagement and approach may not look like a strategy: It focuses on the short term, and many of its actions appear ruthlessly opportunistic. However, we argue that a form of strategy can be discerned.

The analysis presented here was developed through two subject-matter expert workshops and a structured literature review of Russian relations in the Middle East. The two workshops were convened in London and Washington, D.C., in 2016. We engaged participants from Russia, the Middle East, Europe, and the United

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States; discussions gave primacy to Russian and Middle Eastern participants.² The literature review drew on primary and secondary Russian and Middle Eastern open sources and published RAND research.

This Perspective is divided into three parts. The first section details the principles of Russian foreign policy as they apply to the Middle East, drawing on the perspectives of Russian workshop participants as well as Russian primary and secondary sources. The second section assesses the nature of Russia's contemporary engagement in the Middle East through its regional diplomatic, business, and economic relationships. The third section builds on the characteristics of Russian foreign policy and the nature of its relationships and activities to outline the contours of Russia's regional strategy: a pragmatic, flexible approach that maximizes shorter-term gains and lacks fixed end states.

Russia has goals, but to Western observers they appear to be either transactional or, in the longer term, generalizable to the point that they constitute broad precepts rather than global, regional, or state-specific strategies. This perception is at least partly accurate. We contend that while Russia may not have a clear ends-driven regional strategy, its actions suggest it is applying a generalized, functional strategy: It constantly seeks to improve its short-term

economic, military, and political advantages while reducing the short-term advantages of prospective adversaries. This is a resource- and opportunity-dependent approach. When resources and opportunities to advance Russia's interests are scarce, transactions decrease. When resources and opportunities are flush, they accelerate. The practical logic and consistency of this short-term, transactional approach constitutes one of the clearest long-term strategies of any major actor in the Middle East.

Russian Foreign Policy and the Middle East

Beginning in 2005, Russia noticeably increased its engagement in the Middle East. From 2005 to 2007, President Vladimir Putin visited Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, Turkey, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Russia gained observer status in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. These visits stood in stark contrast to the relative inactivity of Putin's predecessor, President Boris Yeltsin, who made no official visits to the region. Putin's visits to the UAE and Israel were the first by a Russian leader, and his efforts to build relationships with Israel marked a significant change from previous Russian and Soviet policy. These visits came alongside increased Russian involvement in regional negotiations, including the Middle East peace process, P5+1 negotiations with Iran, and the pursuit of Russian economic and business interests. Despite this renewed and active engagement, a 2009 RAND analysis of Russian foreign policy concluded: "None of the measures has translated into real influence. Moreover, Russia has failed to clearly articulate its goals and interests in the region."³

The swift and violent changes of the Arab Spring in 2011 led Moscow to fear that the wave of popular uprisings might lead to profound changes that could affect its interests in the region.⁴

According to Russian analysts, Russia's attitudes and approach evolved over time and in response to events in each country. Russia did not view the Arab Spring as a holistic, region-wide event; rather, Moscow assessed the impact in each country, based largely on how unrest impacted Russian interests.⁵ The pivotal event for then–Prime Minister Putin was Russia's 2011 abstention on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, which allowed an international air campaign to facilitate the toppling of Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi. Eight years after the United States toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, and with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad facing a countrywide rebellion, Russia decided that it would draw a line in Syria, where its interests were clear and longstanding.⁶

Moscow's Foreign Policy Principles

Russian workshop participants and Russian foreign policy literature acknowledge that the Middle East is less important than Europe and Asia to the Kremlin's national security strategy.⁷ This is apparent in the 2013 and 2016 Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Foreign Policy Concept Papers. In both editions, the Middle East is listed near the end of the section on "Regional Priorities," illustrating its relative lower priority in Moscow's worldview.⁸ Russia sees relatively limited opportunities in the Middle East to protect or advance vital national interests. This assessment frames its actions in the region.

A 2009 RAND study concluded that Russian foreign policy in the Middle East was driven by international prestige, trade, and regional stability.⁹ Russia was not motivated by a particular policy vision for the Middle East but rather by a belief that, as a global power, it should play a role in the region and have a seat at the table for key negotiations and decisions.¹⁰ The three drivers remain, but

we have identified additional elements of Russia's foreign policy that shape its approach to the Middle East.

First, Russia views its own foreign policy towards the Middle East as secular and, since the end of the Cold War, non-ideological. Russia believes it can and does speak to any and all parties in the region, except for the Islamic State. "Staying aloof from local problems," as described by Russian professor Irina Zvyagelskaya, "made it possible for Russia to maintain fairly well-balanced relations with a large number of states and nonstate actors, who sometimes used to be in acute confrontation with each other."¹¹ Russia believes this to be an advantage it has over the West, which it characterizes as partisan and because of this, less flexible.¹²

Russian participants at both workshops were clear that Russian foreign policy is guided by near-term pragmatism—others might say opportunism—and not by long-term plans or regional designs. Participants argued that Russia assesses and acts on each opportunity and event in light of its own interests. As one Russian participant stated, Russia pursues pragmatic objectives with few of the West's political constraints, which allows it greater flexibility.¹³ Russia may not have long-term plans or regional designs in the Middle East, but it does have long-term interests—its preferred approach to regional stability and its interest in global oil prices. However, these interests do not conflict with many near-term

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options, as Russia is not so deeply immersed in the region as the United States.

If Russia does have a longstanding security concern in the region, it is the spread of international terrorism to Russia and neighboring states.¹⁴ A reported 3,200 Russian nationals have traveled to Syria or Iraq since 2014, and leaders in Moscow worry about foreign fighter returnees as well as Russians who may have been radicalized by Islamic State propaganda.¹⁵ A 2003 joint RAND and Carnegie Moscow Center workshop, held with both U.S. and Russian participants, highlighted Russia's concern about Islamic extremism and terrorism.¹⁶ In the Russian view, this threat has only grown over time, especially as a consequence of recent conflicts in the Middle East.¹⁷

The final component of Russian policy towards the Middle East, as emphasized by Russian workshop participants and Russian literature, is support for existing state structures and governments against both external intervention and internal insurrection. Change, as one Russian workshop participant argued, should only occur through constitutional means and state apparatuses, not popular uprisings.¹⁸ Russia holds the West responsible for the current situation across the Middle East and maintains that Western interventions in Iraq and Libya have been disastrous.¹⁹ In contrast, Russia maintains that it supports the principle of state sovereignty in accordance with international law and opposes outside intervention and interference. This view aligns with Russian leaders'

concerns about “color revolutions” in former Soviet countries and Moscow's global reluctance to accept any potentially unfavorable changes to the status quo. Russia equates status quo preservation in the Middle East with reduced terrorist threats, increased transactional opportunities with autocratic states, and reduced U.S. socio-cultural influence across the region.

Russia has latched on to turmoil in the Middle East, highlighting what it believes are Western policy failures and unreliability, to present itself as a reliable alternative for traditional Middle Eastern leaders. However, this position is a contradiction. As one workshop participant argued, Russia may present itself as a conservative power in the Middle East, but in its near abroad, Russia is a disruptive power, intervening in Ukraine and seeking to destabilize other parts of Europe. Russia's actions in the wider Middle East also undermine its narrative of state sovereignty and nonintervention; it works with Iran, which intervenes across the region, and Russia is cultivating relations with opposition groups in Libya.²⁰ That said, Russia has identified a rich source of material with which to criticize the West, while cultivating a sympathetic regional audience for an alternative message in the post-Arab Spring environment.

Syria

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control of the major Syrian city of Aleppo, altering the course of the war. This was a considerable and exceptional post–Cold War escalation by Russia. The intervention goes against Russia’s traditional preference to avoid direct engagement; it is now fully entangled in the Syrian conflict. However, the intervention is consistent with Russian support for a long-standing ally and Russia’s stance against regime change. It also reflects Russia’s concern about international terrorism and the defense and expansion of its naval and air bases in Latakia and Tartus. Protecting these assets is paramount to Moscow, as they are the only significant Russian power projection in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. Ostensibly, these bases could enable Russia to challenge the United States and its allies in the region. Even if Moscow is not wedded to the continued rule of Assad, as some Russians claim,²¹ it is committed to the Syrian government under the present regime or a continuity regime.²²

Through its air support to Syrian regime forces—in addition to Iranian and Hezbollah ground forces—Russia has prevented regime collapse in Syria, at least for the present. It has also become instrumental in establishing a tripartite ceasefire arrangement with Turkey and Iran and a separate track for political discussions among the Syrian parties. Yet its participation in the bombing of targets in Aleppo and elsewhere has brought enormous humanitarian costs and further damaged Russia’s international reputation. It is unclear how Russia will extract itself from Syria without risking the collapse of its client regime. Postconflict stabilization efforts are likely to require Russian assistance and may require a Russian presence. It is also worthwhile to consider the long-term price of Russia’s intervention and the impact it will have on Moscow’s preferred foreign policy approach in the Middle East. It is unclear at present if Russian action in Syria will make Russia more or less

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likely to become involved elsewhere, such as Libya. At present, this intervention appears to be an exception.

Russian Diplomatic and Economic Engagement

The current focus on Russia’s actions in Syria can obscure Russia’s wider diplomatic, economic, and business interests across the Middle East. It is necessary to account for these areas to understand the nature, extent, and limitations of Russian engagement in the region. Both the workshops and the literature reviewed explored in detail Russia’s wider diplomatic, economic, and business dealings, reaching several important conclusions.

Relationships Are Transactional

While Russia promotes its ability to interact with many state and nonstate actors in the Middle East, most of Moscow’s relationships there are best characterized as transactional. Russia is classically realist in its dealings and does not engage to the same extent in a broad range of issues, such as democratic reforms and human rights, as Western governments do. However, the transactional nature of these relationships is not all on Russia’s side. With the exception of the Syrian regime and possibly Iran, Middle Eastern states deal with Russia because they can, not because they have to.

When interests converge, Russia is able to make deals, but these are not necessarily long-standing alliances or even partnerships. This contrasts with some Middle Eastern nations' reliance on the United States as the regional security guarantor.

Most notably, these transactional relationships include Russia's relationship with Iran. Although Russia and Iran both support the Syrian government, their broader relations are best characterized by suspicion and mistrust, driven by historical and political differences.²³ Russia backed Saddam Hussein's war against Iran, earning the wrath of the revolutionary regime, and Moscow backed international sanctions on Iran until the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Russia and Iran have also disagreed on Syrian operations, including on the use of Iranian bases.²⁴ While Iran and Russia have benefitted from improved ties in the past few years, the relationship is complex and transactional and should not be construed as reflecting a shared vision of the region.²⁵

Another example of a transactional relationship is Russia and Saudi Arabia's recent agreement on oil production. Moscow and Riyadh struck a deal in December 2016 to lower oil production, despite differing views on the future of Syria and on the threat posed by Tehran.²⁶ This is consistent with Russia's transactional, nonideological, and flexible strategic approach across the region.²⁷

Potential for Alliances Is Limited by “Insurmountable Obstacles”

Workshop participants from across the region argued that Moscow's relationships with Middle Eastern states are not only transactional, but are bounded by “insurmountable obstacles.”²⁸ These obstacles emerge in part from geopolitical realities, but they are

primarily a byproduct of Russia's nonideological, transactional approach to regional relations.

Russia seeks to build and maintain practical relations with nearly all state and nonstate actors in the Middle East.²⁹ Moscow has achieved some success with this approach, as it has managed to bolster relations with the Gulf states and Israel while concurrently deepening military cooperation with Iran. However, this approach has generated an array of policy contradictions that have constrained Russian behavior. For example, Moscow seeks good relations with both Israel and Iran, but reportedly temporarily halted its sale of the S-300 antiaircraft missile system to Iran following intense pressure from the Israeli government.³⁰ Russia's pursuit of a nonideological, pragmatic approach to the Middle East limits the relationships it can build and therefore what it can achieve in the region.³¹

Middle East States Use Russia as an Alternative and a Signal to the West

Middle Eastern governments are wary of Russian intentions, but despite these concerns, they view Russia as a useful alternative to the United States, particularly when regional leaders fail to receive desired outcomes from the United States. While we cannot assess the true intentions of every Middle Eastern leader, both Russian and Middle Eastern workshop participants suggested that Middle Eastern governments use political and economic deals with Russia primarily as a means of signaling to the United States that they have other options; recent events support this view. For example, Cairo signed a \$3.5 billion arms deal with Moscow after U.S. military aid was halted in the wake of President Mohammed Morsi's ousting by the Egyptian military.³² Following this announcement,

Russian and Egyptian paratroopers participated in an October 2016 joint military exercise in Egypt.³³

Many Middle Eastern leaders appear to be conscious of the tightrope they walk with the United States. They seek to maximize their benefits with the widest range of options on any given issue, but do not want to jeopardize their relationship with the United States for the sake of a deal with Russia. Russia is probably well aware of this balance. While it is not necessarily attempting to usurp the United States in the region, Moscow does seek to undermine U.S. power and influence. However, framing discussion in Cold War terms of U.S. and Russian spheres of influence ignores the choice and power of Middle Eastern states. Middle Eastern states are not simply allies or clients of Russia, but rather powerful entities in their own right, maximizing the options and benefits open to them.

Russia–Middle East Trade and Investment

The promotion and protection of Russia’s economic interests in the Middle East is one of the most consistent objectives of Moscow’s policy in the region. However, scale and context are important. The Middle East accounts for a small percentage of total Russian exports and is not a critical market for the Russian economy.³⁴ That said, Moscow’s regional economic activities are intended to achieve more than monetary gain. Economic opportunity provides Russia with regional presence and influence.

Economic interaction between Russia and the Middle Eastern countries is growing, with Russia as the driving force. The Gulf states have the financial largesse (unlike Moscow’s traditional partners, Egypt and Syria) to make the high-cost investments that Russia’s domestic economy craves.³⁵ Russia’s sovereign wealth fund,

the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), has entered into co-investment deals with the sovereign wealth funds of Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to make equity investments in the Russian economy. These investments stretch across a variety of commercial enterprises, agriculture, and infrastructure.³⁶ It is worth noting that three of these deals were announced after Western sanctions on Russia were enacted in 2014, although these sovereign wealth funds did not violate sanctions as secondary sanctions have not been implemented (Kuwait increased its pre-existing investment with RDIF in 2015). The Gulf states—like many countries in the Middle East—have been unwilling to be politically constrained by sanctions against Russia. Middle Eastern investments and other regional economic activity are part of Russia’s efforts to build a “sanction-proof” economy.³⁷

Energy Is an Essential Component of Foreign Policy

Russia has significant economic and business interests in the energy sector in the Middle East, ranging from nuclear energy to oil and gas. Its state-owned companies, such as Gazprom and Rosatom, maintain important energy interests—including key consumer markets, oil and gas fields, and customers for nuclear energy infrastructure—in countries like Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, as well as in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq³⁸ and the eastern Mediterranean.³⁹ Rosatom, in particular, has increased its activity in the Middle East in recent years, constructing reactors in Iran, Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey⁴⁰ and opening a regional office in Dubai in hopes of taking advantage of UAE and Saudi plans to increase nuclear energy capacity.⁴¹ The volatility of the global energy markets, coupled with Russia’s increased reliance on petro-revenues as a result of its eco-

conomic slowdown and Western sanctions, has placed greater pressure on Moscow to seek gains in Middle Eastern energy markets.

Moscow's pragmatic approach to the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, is based on a desire to increase global oil prices. Russia seeks to stabilize, then increase, the price of oil in order to sustain state expenditures. To this end, Russia has tried to coordinate efforts to set production levels and price measures with the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries.⁴² Russia's somewhat volatile relationship with Turkey puts at risk one of its largest energy consumers. The closure of any rifts between Turkey and Russia—such as the normalization of relations after Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 fighter jet in November 2015—can partly be attributed to Moscow's need to maintain its largest regional energy market, declining Turkey-U.S. relations, and a realization that both Turkey and Russian interests may be served by working together in Syria.

Projecting Power Through Arms Trades

Russia is making a concerted effort to reclaim its role as the arms supplier of choice for Arab governments. As one workshop participant put it, arms sales are the “big prize for Russia to grab” from the United States.⁴³ This opportunity arose from a perception of U.S. retreat from the region after the announced “pivot to Asia” and the seeming U.S. inability to influence the events of the Arab Spring. Recent U.S. arms sales to Egypt⁴⁴ and Saudi Arabia⁴⁵ have been delayed due to human rights concerns, and sales to other Gulf states⁴⁶ have been delayed due to concerns over maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge. As a result, U.S. arms sales policies have appeared less than reliable.

In contrast, Russia positions itself as a no-strings-attached provider of weaponry through its state monopoly arms exporter,

Rosoboronexport. Russian arms sales do not suffer from the same bureaucratic oversight and delays as U.S. weapons. Russia is able to deliver much-needed weaponry quickly, as demonstrated through its provision of attack helicopters to Iraq.⁴⁷ Continued aid, in the form of spare parts and maintenance, also is not conditioned by political or human rights concerns. Furthermore, Russia's nonideological approach means that it can maintain relationships with and provide arms to a diverse group of states simultaneously. Moscow is able, for example, to concurrently sell weapons to both Iran and Bahrain, despite the latter's deep concerns about Iranian political and subversive activity within its borders. As a result, there has been a steady rise in Russian arms sales to Middle Eastern countries since 2011, accounting for 36 percent of Russian defense deliveries in 2015.⁴⁸ The preoccupation of the Gulf monarchies with regime survival has led to their rapid acquisition of substantial weaponry, making them the largest consumers of arms in the world and a ripe market for Moscow.

Russia also seeks to capitalize on Middle Eastern rulers' concern about inadequate U.S. and Western support and perceptions of U.S. weakness due to U.S. reluctance to challenge Russian military involvement in Syria. Russia's exploitation of regional dissatisfaction with the United States not only increases Russia's bottom line and political influence, but also has the benefit of undercutting the United States.

Russian Strategy in the Middle East

Given the broad post-Arab Spring economic and diplomatic trends outlined here and the Russian intervention in Syria, the question is: Does Russia have a strategy for the Middle East? On this question, analyses of Russian activity in the Middle East primarily fall into

three schools of thought. The first is that Russia has a Middle East strategy, and it is largely successful.⁴⁹ The second is that Russia has a regional strategy, but it is not working as Moscow had intended.⁵⁰ The third is that Russia lacks a Middle East strategy.⁵¹

Russian participants at both workshops argued that Russia has no overarching long-term strategy for the Middle East. As one Russian participant noted, a strategy for the Middle East could never work, because it would never be able to keep pace with events.⁵² According to this interpretation, Russian pragmatism, motivated by short-term requirements for stability and economic opportunity, drives a series of transactional behaviors rather than a collective, considered movement towards long-term strategic objectives.

The Contours of Russia's Middle East Strategy

At first glance, this answer appears sufficient. However, Andrew Monaghan proposes a more nuanced version of Russia's approach to strategic thinking. In Monaghan's view, Russia's strategy is a dialogue with the current context and the immediate future.⁵³ In this view, Russia's approach amounts to a strategy of ways and means, where broad principles take the place of prescribed ends, enabling action in the shorter term and mitigating Russia's potential longer-term limitations. This may be a strategy, even if it does not conform to Western definitions of strategic design. It also enables us to outline the contours of a Russian Middle East strategy.

Russia's actions in the Middle East since 2000 have been a search for relevance, and the aftermath of the Arab Spring has provided an opening for Russia to forcibly find relevance in the region. Russia is no longer content with playing a nominal role in the region. It wants to assert itself as a power and believes it must have the capacity and political will to exercise influence beyond its

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own neighborhood. Moscow has found a narrative by setting itself up as a force for “traditional values,” standing against unbridled change. Putin's speech to the 70th UN General Assembly played on this narrative, appealing to respect for state sovereignty and nonintervention as a minimal platform on which nations could work together. Putin framed this approach as an alternative to reckless Western interventionism.⁵⁴ To realize this approach, Russia offered unburdened economic and business deals without requiring the kinds of political reforms advocated, or sometimes demanded, by the United States and other Western states.

Moscow perceives Western involvement in the Middle East to have reached a plateau; the West is exhausted by inconclusive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and unwilling to decisively intervene militarily in Syria, despite U.S. calls for Assad to leave power. In this view, the West's risk-averse policies will make little meaningful difference in the Middle East. These policies, coupled with Middle Eastern perception of a less-regionally assertive United States, give Russia a further opening into the Middle East.⁵⁵

Russia seeks to be able to effectively influence and shape outcomes, but a lack of means limits what it can achieve; the Middle Eastern countries have the agency to shape and determine outcomes. For example, Russian sales of sophisticated air defense weapons

systems to Iran and Syria influence and complicate Western policy options but fall short of being able to force particular outcomes. Instead of fully determining events, Moscow can raise the cost to the West of pursuing policy options that conflict with Moscow's wishes.

Russian desires to be more powerful and to preserve the status quo ante do not necessarily constitute a regional long-term vision. Seeking greater power is intrinsic to Russian global strategy, yet wholly dependent on resources and opportunity. While Russia may claim to be a supporter of the status quo ante, there is no indication it would invest its military or even significant political capital to keep any Middle Eastern state other than Syria afloat. We put this question directly to the participants in our second workshop: Outside of Syria, which country is of vital strategic interest to Russia? No participant offered a response.

Russia's seemingly "astrategic" approach to regional policy may, in fact, act as a strategy. When viewed through a Russian lens, a short-term, pragmatic, and transactional approach to the region is brutally logical and potentially effective as long as resources and opportunities are available. Without long-term objectives, Russian diplomats and military leaders can engage all sides without dogmatic or prescriptive constraints. In the views of Russian workshop participants, this flexible, short-term approach—in our view, a strategy—is in keeping with Russia's limited resources and the region's unpredictable dynamics.⁵⁶ It is also in keeping with the Russian nonideological approach.

A 1968 RAND analysis of Soviet policy dilemmas in the Middle East highlighted Soviet awareness of the contradictions and complexities of the region. It stated that as long as events did not force a radical policy choice, the Soviet Union would continue to pursue a "mini-max" strategy, seeking to maximize its opportunities with a minimum

of commitment or potential loss.⁵⁷ Much the same can be said today of Russia, with the notable exception of its actions in Syria. Russia intervention there reflected a decisive policy choice, potentially one it was reluctant to make. It remains unclear how Russia will extract itself from Syria and if it is an exception or the beginning of increased Russian military engagement in the region.

Limitations of Russian Strategy in the Middle East

Even if Russia wanted to pursue a comprehensive longer-term strategy in the Middle East, there are significant limitations to what it could achieve. Russia potentially lacks the economic and military power to sustain a long-term strategy. It is already questionable how long Russia can sustain its current actions. Russia's economic position has only worsened since the start of the Arab Spring.⁵⁸ While Russia has achieved some important short-term goals, mainly in Syria, both Russian and Middle Eastern workshop participants doubted that Russia has the resource depth or capacity to achieve a long-term strategy.⁵⁹

Presence is important in the Middle East, where personal relationships and a willingness to use force are valued. Moscow has the ability to make specific power projections, but lacks the mass and depth for more-demanding expeditionary operations. It makes up for these shortcomings by identifying and exploiting available opportunities brought about by political change while trying to limit costs and commitment. Russia also lacks soft power capabilities in the region compared to the West. While Russia has established an RT Arabic news station, it is unclear whether Russia's broader soft power efforts will resonate in the Middle East in the same way that similar efforts have in parts of Europe and the United States. Russia's opportunistic, pragmatic approach is

also partly an acknowledgement of its own limitations. Russia is making the most of what it has, but it lacks long-term depth and so resorts to pursuing short-term strategic dialogue between the present and immediate future.

In addition to the limitations on what Russia itself can achieve, the Middle East states have the greatest power and agency to determine the viability of any Russian strategy. The agency of the Middle Eastern countries is often lost in discussions of Russian and U.S. involvement in the Middle East, which often default to outdated Cold War clichés. Middle East states determine the depth of their relationship with Russia, either enabling or limiting Russian action. Like Russia, these states also take advantage of the transactional nature of their relationships, using Russia to their benefit.

Conclusion

Almost two years since the beginning of the Russian intervention in Syria, it is clear that Moscow intends to remain more actively and substantively engaged in the Middle East. While the essential drivers of Russian policy—prestige, trade, and stability—remain the same, Moscow’s interests have broadened in diplomatic, economic, and business terms. Understanding the reasons for Russia’s engagement across the region is critical to identifying what it can potentially achieve and to avoiding misreading its actions.

Russia’s potential role in the region should not be overstated. Russia faces constraints in what it can achieve and what local actors will allow. While Moscow has achieved some success in Syria, it may be unable to translate this success into strategic strength, as Syria is likely to suffer long-term insurgency. At some point, Moscow may need to make a critical policy choice: In a region that is not as much of a foreign policy priority as Asia and Europe, how much influence does it want and how much will it cost?

Russia is now using events in the Middle East to rebuild its image as a great power. Benefitting from its military modernization since the 2008 war with Georgia, Russia has made the most of opportunities in Syria against the backdrop of perceived confusion in Western policy. Russia has achieved, in its view, a great deal in a short space of time—far more than it achieved in the previous decade. However, its apparent gains can disappear as rapidly as they materialized. Russia has played a limited hand as effectively as it can, but it still cannot determine outcomes in the Middle East. Instead, Middle Eastern actors have primacy and therefore can either constrain or enable Russia. This primacy means that the most visible elements of Russian strategy—its multifaceted diplomatic relations or its recent interventionist trend—are likely to be superseded by longer-term economic, energy, and arms deals. These have the potential to cement Russian involvement, generate real returns, and shape the relations of both Russia and regional actors.

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Notes

¹ We focus on the countries of the Middle East, including Turkey and Iran, and largely exclude the North African states of Morocco, Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia.

² The London workshop was held in September 2016, just as the United States and Russia were finalizing a new peace plan for Syria. The Washington, D.C., workshop was held in October 2016, after the bombing of a United Nations aid convoy outside of Aleppo. As such, the discussions in the workshops reflected these events.

³ Olga Oliker, Keith Crane, Lowell H. Schwartz, and Catherine Yusupov, *Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-768-AF, 2009, p. 114. As of November 7, 2016: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG768.html>

⁴ Comment by a Russian workshop participant, RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy (CMEPP) Workshop, London, September 2016.

⁵ Irina Zvyagelskaya, “Russia, the New Protagonist in the Middle East,” in Aldo Ferrari, ed., *Putin’s Russia: Really Back?* Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies, July 2016, pp. 73–91. As of July 18, 2017: http://www.ispionline.it/it/EBook/Russia2016/PUTIN%27S.RUSSIA_EBOOK.pdf

⁶ See Ekaterina Stepanova, “Russia in the Middle East: Back to a ‘Grand Strategy’—or Enforcing Multilateralism?” *Politique Étrangère*, No. 2, Summer 2016, pp. 23–35. As of July 18, 2017: http://www.cairn-int.info/article.php?ID_ARTICLE=E_PE_162_0023#anchor_abstract

⁷ Comments by Russian workshop participants, RAND CMEPP Workshop, London, September 2016, and Washington, D.C., October 2016. See also Zvyagelskaya, 2016; and Dmitri Trenin, “Russia in the Middle East: Moscow’s Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, April 2016a.

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, 2013, paragraph 88; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, 2016, paragraph 92.

⁹ Oliker et al., 2009, p. 113.

¹⁰ Oliker et al., 2009, p. 114.

¹¹ Zvyagelskaya, 2016, p. 84.

¹² Comments by Russian workshop participants, RAND CMEPP Workshop, London, September 2016.

¹³ RAND CMEPP Workshop, Washington, D.C., October 2016.

¹⁴ RAND CMEPP Workshops, London, September 2016, and Washington, D.C., October 2016. See also Zvyagelskaya, 2016, p. 73; and Trenin, 2016a.

¹⁵ Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, “How Many Russians Are Fighting for ISIS? A Brief History of the Kremlin’s Arbitrary Numbers,” *The Interpreter*, December 20, 2016. As of July 18, 2017: <http://www.interpretermag.com/how-many-russians-are-fighting-for-isis-a-brief-history-of-the-kremlins-arbitrary-numbers/>

¹⁶ Olga Oliker and Natasha Yefimova, *Carnegie–RAND Workshop on the Future of the Greater Middle East and the Prospects for U.S.–Russian Partnership*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, OP-118-CMEPP/CRE, 2004. As of July 18, 2017: http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP118.html

¹⁷ RAND CMEPP Workshop, London, September 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016, paragraph 14.

¹⁸ RAND CMEPP Workshop, London, September 2016.

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About This Perspective

This Perspective identifies a critical gap in the present understanding of Russian actions and objectives in the Middle East: the question of Russia's strategy in the region. It seeks to identify the important elements of Russian interests beyond Syria in the Middle East, to define the nature of contemporary Russian engagement in the region, and to describe the contours of Russian strategy in the Middle East. This Perspective argues that Russia's strategy is best understood as a dialogue with the current context and the immediate future, in which broad principles take the place of prescribed ends. Russia's strategy is a pragmatic, flexible approach that maximizes shorter-term gains and is marked by an absence of fixed end states. Russia has goals, but these are adaptable to Moscow's interests. The authors contend that while Russia's approach may not look like a strategy in Western terms, Russian actions and interests suggests the contours of an emerging strategy, guided by Moscow's broader foreign policy principles and behavior.

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