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# The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East

**R**ussia's 2015 intervention in Syria appeared to signal Russia's post-Soviet return as a key player in the Middle East. Many analysts viewed the Syrian intervention as part of a new Russian strategy to resume the level of regional influence once enjoyed by the Soviet Union and as a step toward reclaiming great global power status. But Moscow had been quietly edging its way back into the region for years.<sup>1</sup> Both the unrest in Syria and the Arab Spring presented Russia with an opportunity to increase its engagement in the region and were accompanied by a rapid uptick in Russian economic and political activities across the region.

Since the mid-2000s, a new Russian approach to the Middle East has emerged, emphasizing transactional economic gains and nonideological geopolitical engagements with a wide array of partners. Russia is seemingly everywhere in the region—North Africa, the Levant, and the Gulf—engaging states in economic deals ranging from investments in Russian industry to arms sales to stabilizing oil prices. Moscow has been able to deepen partnerships in the region while simultaneously balancing relationships with regional rivals. For example, Russia collaborates with Iran in Syria at the same time that it cooperates with Saudi Arabia to negotiate oil prices. Russia also has developed close coordination with both Israel and Iran in the Syrian theater and is playing an important role in determining the region's future as party

to the numerous talks and negotiations over Syria, Yemen, and the Israeli-Arab peace process. Through all these activities and more, Russia has become an appealing partner to Middle Eastern states—ostensibly stepping in to fill a perceived power vacuum left by retrenched U.S. leadership and offering cooperation without political strings attached, thus presenting a contrast to the approach favored by the United States.

Our previous research described contemporary Russian strategy in the region as a resource- and opportunity-dependent approach that seeks short-term economic, political, and security advantages while reducing those of its prospective competitors, particularly the United States.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Russia's approach is short term and transactional. Moscow's strategy has appeared to be successful: Several regional states have viewed Russia as increasingly influential and have sought its support, Russian trade with the region

is on the rise, and Moscow's seat at the table for critical multilateral negotiations on regional issues is reserved. Even Russia's riskier gambles, such as its military intervention in Syria, appear to be paying off, as Moscow has seemingly become an indispensable player in the Middle East.

Russia's approach to the Middle East may appear to be a winning strategy that is presently reaping dividends. However, the approach is not without significant challenges and risks. Russia's decision to engage multiple players in the region, including those in opposition to each other, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, creates a situation in which Russia must walk a tightrope between balancing both Tehran's and Riyadh's interests and objectives and avoiding becoming embroiled in regional disputes. Russia's economy, struggling under U.S. and European sanctions and beholden to fluctuating oil prices, can accommodate only a finite number of external activities because Russia has various domestic economic imperatives that trump external initiatives. This is particularly true of activities in the Middle East, which is a region of secondary interest in comparison to Russian interests in Europe and its near abroad.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Russia's approach is largely dependent on economic and political opportunities created by other forces in the region—in particular, by Middle Eastern states, which largely drive demand for Russian engagement—making it difficult for Russia to create its own openings.<sup>4</sup> For all its renewed clout, Russia will have difficulties sustaining its present level of engagement and meeting its geopolitical ambitions in the region. Given that Russia's present strategy focuses on the short term, its long-term success remains an open question.<sup>5</sup>

This Perspective seeks to identify the limits of Russia's strategy in the Middle East and is divided into three parts.

### Abbreviations

GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
LSE	London School of Economics
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
RDIF	Russian Direct Investment Fund
SWF	sovereign wealth fund
UAE	United Arab Emirates

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The first section draws on Russian doctrine and the key findings from earlier RAND research, *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, to explain the contours of Russia's regional strategy and the activities that make up its approach.<sup>6</sup> The second section identifies the limits of Russia's approach, including the inherent challenges stemming from Russia's own political and economic systems, the limitations created by the regional states, and the limitations created by the United States. The Perspective concludes by considering the implications for Russia's continued involvement in the Middle East and its impact on U.S. policy in an era of strategic competition.<sup>7</sup>

The analysis presented here builds on previous RAND research and was developed through a structured literature review and a subject-matter expert workshop. The literature review included Russian doctrine and government statements, papers presented at the workshop, and the broader academic and policy literature on Russian strategy in the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> The workshop was convened in March 2018 by the RAND Corporation and the London School of Economics (LSE) Middle East Centre in London and brought together participants from Russia, the Middle East, Europe, and the United States with expertise in Russian and Middle Eastern economics, politics, and security. It was the third in a series of workshops focused on analyzing Russian strategy in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup>

## **Russian Strategy in the Middle East**

Russia's approach to the Middle East is driven by several foreign policy principles and priorities, some of which can be discerned through Russian doctrine and government statements. The Middle East is a feature of *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, but the region is not presented in the document as a priority for Moscow.<sup>10</sup> Earlier versions of the Russian policy concept emphasize the importance of stabilizing the Middle East, largely in reference to the Arab-Israeli peace process. However, the 2013 Russian policy concept takes into account the 2011 Arab Spring and resulting instability.<sup>11</sup> The subsequent iterations of the Russian policy concept cite the expansion of bilateral relations with Middle Eastern states as an aim, and both Iran and Syria are specifically highlighted as priorities within the region.<sup>12</sup> More broadly, Russia's 2015 national security strategy seeks to increase energy security, and Russia's military doctrine (last updated in 2014) notes the desire to expand "military-political" and "military-technical" cooperation with foreign states as it has for many years.<sup>13</sup> Both of these priorities can be seen in Russia's regional approach, which highlights energy, defense cooperation, and trade and investment activities.<sup>14</sup>

Moscow's interest in the Middle East can largely be attributed to three principal aims. First, Russian activity is driven by international prestige and a desire to have

a seat at the table for key negotiations and decisions.<sup>15</sup> Second, Russia views the Middle East as an opportunity to strengthen its economy through trade and investment.<sup>16</sup> This partly reflects Moscow's long-term interest in global oil prices, which are critical to the health of the Russian economy.<sup>17</sup> Lastly, Russia seeks to maintain regional stability, in part to preserve current regimes to avoid failed states, and to prevent spillover of terrorism to Russia and its neighbors. The spread of international terrorism deeply concerns Moscow, given Russia's long-standing concerns over Islamic extremism and terrorism—concerns that have been exacerbated by Russian foreign fighter returnees and by further terrorism and instability engendered by regime change and “outside interference.”<sup>18</sup> This desire for stability, in part, drove the rise in Russian engagement in the region—including Syria—following the Arab Spring, because Russia viewed Western interventions in Iraq and Libya as undermining regional stability.<sup>19</sup> Additional interests, such as securing access to Russia's air and naval bases in Syria, have also driven Russian activity but should not be viewed as an indicator of broader regional military expansion because Russia has not sought to replicate its military involvement and architecture in Syria elsewhere, such as in Libya.<sup>20</sup>

A 2017 RAND report contends that Russian strategy in the region is a resource- and opportunity-dependent approach that seeks to maximize short-term economic, political, and security advantages while reducing those of

its prospective competitors for influence, particularly the United States.<sup>21</sup> Where possible, Russia presents itself to Middle Eastern states as an alternative, specifically to the United States. For Moscow, the perception by Middle East rulers of a gap in Western leadership and Western “political incoherence” across the region provides ample opportunities to gain influence in the Middle East.<sup>22</sup> Russia's approach stands in contrast to the United States in that it is flexible, short term, and transactional while Washington aspires to build long-term relationships with regional partners, predicated on the U.S. security guarantee and the promotion of Western values, such as the protection of human rights and the rule of law.

Russia's activity is also closely tied to available resources in two ways: First, Moscow is more active when its own economic stresses do not curb activities outside its borders. Indeed, Russia's economic investment and arms sales in the Middle East help fund its activities, including those in the region itself. Second, Russia is more active in the Middle East when regional actors have sufficient resources to invest—and therefore underwrite Russian activities—and when instability or missteps by other actors, such as the United States, increase the demand for Russian weapon systems, steady oil prices, and power-brokering.<sup>23</sup> For example, Gulf leaders' displeasure over the Obama administration's response to the Arab Spring and their resulting loss of faith in the U.S. security commitment were a boon for Moscow, because these states sought

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to engage Russia as an alternative. Washington's withholding of arms sales to Egypt and Bahrain over human rights concerns led to Cairo and Manama reaching arms sale agreements with Moscow.<sup>24</sup> As a result, Russia's regional engagement is reactive because of its constraints and is tied to the availability of resources and opportunity.

Russia presents its foreign policy as secular, transactional, and nonideological, which allows Russian government and business leaders to engage with all state actors in the region, including those (such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel) that have directly competing agendas.<sup>25</sup> Moscow's presentation of ideological neutrality increases the number of available opportunities for influence, economic investment, diplomatic mediation, and, in some cases, disruption. Russia's flexible approach allows it to exploit opportunities while simultaneously limiting commitments and costs, given its short-term focus.<sup>26</sup>

## Challenges to Russia's Regional Approach

Although Russia's regional strategy appears to be paying off for the time being, it is fraught with constraints, and several challenges loom over a longer time horizon. The current focus on Russia's geopolitical gains in the region—chiefly, its ability to prevent the collapse of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime and maximize its influence and status throughout the Middle East—obscures its present and future challenges in the Middle East. The workshops and literature review shed light on the longer-term limitations of Moscow's regional strategy—from limitations stemming from domestic constraints, to those posed by regional entities, to those posed by the United States.

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## Russia's Flagging Economy and Lack of Soft Power in the Middle East Reduce Its Ability to Expand Its Success

Russia's economy continues to struggle under U.S. and European sanctions.<sup>27</sup> Capital flight and reduced foreign investment following the imposition of sanctions have led to a significant slowdown in the growth of the Russian gross domestic product, creating domestic stress because Moscow has imposed austerity measures.<sup>28</sup> Resultingly, the Russian economy has become more energy-dependent, which, in turn, has increased Moscow's exposure to volatile energy prices.<sup>29</sup> Russia's energy reliance requires Moscow to maintain access to markets and continue cooperation with Saudi Arabia to negotiate oil prices and production in Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries

(OPEC).<sup>30</sup> Moscow's neutral stance toward the Kurdish independence referendum, in which Russia was one of the few major powers not to call on the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), was driven by Russia owning rights to several oil and gas fields in both Iraq and Kurdistan.<sup>31</sup> Its frenzied energy diplomacy between Baghdad and Erbil in the run-up to the Kurdish independence referendum is representative of the critical role that energy plays in Russia's diplomacy.

Russia does not have a strong economic presence in the Middle East, apart from the energy sector and a few niche trade areas. However, Moscow has skillfully leveraged its diplomatic and military activities in the region to have an outsized presence in comparison with its flagging economic power.<sup>32</sup> But Russia's long-term economic outlook remains unfavorable, creating doubts about the availability of resources that may be used to underwrite Russian activities at home and abroad.<sup>33</sup>

The costs of sustaining long-term Russian military presence and involvement in Syria and the likely price tag of reconstruction—estimated by the United Nations to be at least \$250 billion<sup>34</sup>—look daunting, although Russia has made clear that it does not intend to foot the reconstruction bill in its entirety.<sup>35</sup> Although Russia has struck several energy and infrastructure deals with Damascus in a bid to reap the spoils of Syria's reconstruction, the financial benefits of these endeavors are unlikely to materialize in the immediate future.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, an expansion of Russia's regional activities—including reconstruction, which would require additional funding for more military and diplomatic presence—is unlikely to occur, given the economic constraints.

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The Gulf States have identified Russia's current economic need as a weakness that they can exploit for their own political gain: Russia wants domestic investment, which gives leverage to the resource-rich Gulf States.<sup>37</sup> The Gulf States have wielded such investments to induce Moscow to fall in line with their political priorities in the region, although the success of this tactic is arguable. For its part, Russia has increasingly pursued investment deals with the Gulf state sovereign wealth funds (SWFs) as a means to circumvent sanctions and infuse much-needed capital into Russian industry and infrastructure.<sup>38</sup> Russia's vulnerability to future trade and financial sanctions makes this workaround important to Moscow's ability to underwrite its activities—both at home and in the Middle East. However, much of the promised capital has failed to materialize, while some investments have not resulted in the expected impact on the Russian economy.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, these states recognize the risk involved in investing in Russia.<sup>40</sup> Should the Gulf States fail to see an economic

or political return on investment, they may forgo future economic partnerships with Russia, reducing much-needed investment in the Russian economy and further curtailing Russia's ability to fund and expand its regional activities.

Without internal economic reform, the Russian economy is likely to continue to stagnate and Moscow may be unable to expand or even sustain its present levels of political and military engagement in the Middle East.<sup>41</sup> These activities provide Russia with presence in the Middle East, a region where presence and personal relationships matter immensely, especially if Moscow continues to seek investment from the Middle East. If Moscow lacks sufficient resources to fund external engagement because these resources are required to fund domestic priorities, Russia is likely to reduce its activities in the Middle East or at least sustain these activities at their present levels rather than expanding to achieve increased influence in pursuit of great power status.<sup>42</sup> If this retrenchment should occur, Russia's strategy of pursuing transactional relationships based on short-term alignments of interests will be placed in jeopardy, especially because Middle Eastern leaders strongly value presence and commitment.

Russia could seek to maximize a reduced presence in the Middle East by amplifying its soft-power efforts to increase its influence in the region, through cultural and media initiatives, without using coercive measures.

However, limited soft-power influence is currently a central weakness in Russia's regional approach. As a workshop participant noted, "Russia needs to learn soft power so it can consolidate its gains in places like Syria."<sup>43</sup> Although Russia has increased its Arabic-language media and programming, it has only made incremental gains in altering narratives in the region.<sup>44</sup> That said, Russian narratives have resonated with certain segments of the population, with 20 percent of Arab youth citing Russia as an ally.<sup>45</sup> However, these gains fall short because Russia's regional Arabic-language media initiatives have failed to expand this base and replicate the success of Russian-owned media outlets in parts of Europe and Russia's more-coercive information operations in the United States and Europe. Improving Russia's soft power projection in the Middle East would require Moscow to make this area a priority, which would mean a diversion of already scarce resources. It is unclear whether Russia is willing to make such a trade-off given the short-term focus of its strategy, because strengthening its soft power abilities to expand its influence in the Middle East is a long-term endeavor.

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### **Russia's Multiple Partnerships Provide Short-Term Benefits but Long-Term Risks**

Part of Russia's regional strategy is to build and maintain relations with many state and nonstate actors. Moscow has demonstrated success at engaging states at odds with each other—such as Israel and Iran—and managing to deepen relations with both sides. Russia's balancing of multiple actors provides flexibility, not tying Moscow to any particular country, camp, or stance. Syria remains the exception to this approach, as Moscow and Damascus have a long-standing relationship and Russia has demonstrated a willingness to intervene militarily on behalf of the al-Assad regime.

Russia's multipartner approach increases the number of possible economic and diplomatic dividends that Moscow could reap. Because these partners are states and political entities with their own interests and objectives, Russia has found itself walking a tightrope to ensure it does not anger or become too indebted to one side over another. This can be seen through Moscow's offsetting of regional state rivalries, such as Qatar versus Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Russia also navigates complex domestic political systems, such as in Iraq, where Russia engages numerous competing political actors, including

Iraqi government and parliamentary leaders, KRG officials, and Iranian-backed politicians.<sup>46</sup> Engaging without bias with nearly all regional actors has limited the depth of those engagements, keeping Moscow from becoming more than a secondary partner. As one workshop participant noted, "Russia may stick with its partners, but it seems to have an awful lot of partners."<sup>47</sup>

Russia's desire to maintain nonideological, transactional relationships with all parties in the Middle East has imbued many of Russia's relationships in the Middle East with mistrust.<sup>48</sup> For example, Iran's current leadership has a historical mistrust of Russia stemming from the Soviet Union's military support to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>49</sup> Moscow's more-recent engagements with states frequently in opposition to Iran, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, have fueled the Iranian leadership's continued suspicion of Moscow's long-term objectives.<sup>50</sup> Although the two largely compartmentalize their differences and remain in cooperation in Syria to bolster the al-Assad regime, this mistrust limits the depth of their relationship. Operational and policy misalignments between the two in Syria—such as the disagreement over Russia's use of Iranian air bases<sup>51</sup> or differing objectives over Hezbollah's long-term presence in Syria<sup>52</sup>—have become greater points for friction.



Moreover, actions undertaken by Russia's partners, such as Iran, might undermine Russia's interests in the Middle East. Although Russia might partner with Iran in Syria, malign Iranian activity in the Gulf—such as a cyber-attack similar to the one purportedly carried out by Iran against Saudi Aramco (the Saudi Arabian Oil Company)<sup>53</sup> or more-recent maritime provocations against commercial oil tankers<sup>54</sup>—could threaten Russian economic interests with the Gulf States. More so, the Gulf States and other targets of Iranian subversion could seek to require Russia to constrain Iranian activities as a prerequisite for further or continued cooperation. This is particularly true in the economic domain, because the Gulf States hold significant leverage over Moscow because Russia stands to gain more from joint investment deals than do the Gulf States. It is unclear whether Russia has the leverage to do more than merely influence Iran to change its behavior without deepening their partnership, a move that runs the risk of turning the partnership into an alliance. However, Moscow making a full commitment to Iran would create an imbalance in its current strategy, which would likely result in closed doors elsewhere and constraints on the number of opportunities available to Russia.

Although Russia has thus far managed to keep from becoming embroiled in regional escalation, this might not remain the case as rivalries become further entrenched and states become emboldened by new capabilities. A potential conflict between two of Russia's partners, such as Israel and Iran or Iran and Saudi Arabia, could force Moscow to choose sides.<sup>55</sup> This situation highlights how it could be difficult for Russia to commit to the kinds of policies that would cement more-lasting relationships while still maximizing available opportunities with various partners.

In the best-case scenario, Russia would attempt to arbitrate such a conflict, because it has positioned itself as a mediator of disputes, having been involved in numerous negotiations over the Arab-Israeli peace process and, more recently, offering to mediate the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, as well as the 2017 Gulf rift.<sup>56</sup> Russia is driven to have a seat at the table of key negotiations and decisions in the region as part of its quest for great power status.<sup>57</sup> For example, in recent years, Russia has played a critical role in the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program and a potential political settlement in Syria.<sup>58</sup> However, this approach is not without risks, because it might further complicate Russia's balancing act over the long term. Such multilateral engagement puts the onus on Moscow to help

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mediate disputes it would rather avoid, dragging it into the intraregional disputes likely to degrade its economic and political opportunities.

These risks are further exacerbated when actors embroiled in these disputes believe they have a lever of influence over Russia that they can exploit to force Moscow to take their side. For example, the 2017 Gulf rift—in which Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE severed diplomatic relations with Qatar and enforced an air, land, and sea blockade—has resulted in Russia being caught in the middle of an influence game.<sup>59</sup> Moscow has thus far refused to publicly voice a position on the rift, and it has engaged both sides to maintain access to multiple economic benefactors and to maximize its short-term opportunities.<sup>60</sup> Although this impartiality has benefited Russia in the short term, because all parties have sought to engage Moscow to keep it from falling into the other camp, this

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impartiality does limit the depth of Russia's bilateral relations with each of the GCC states.

Russia may not be able to ward off attempts by its partners to constrain its behavior in the long term. Middle Eastern states (in particular, the Gulf States) have attempted to wield their economic influence over Moscow to produce outcomes more in line with their interests than those of their adversaries. Syria has been an instructive example of the two-level game that characterizes Gulf engagement with Russia, where in which the Gulf States used economic incentives in the form of investment in an attempt to hold some degree of influence over Russian decisionmaking, while simultaneously sending Washington a message of displeasure about its Syria policy.<sup>61</sup> Although Russia is happy to figure into the Gulf States' hedging strategy and has readily accepted these economic inducements, these actions have demonstrated little impact on Russia's Syria policy or its relationship with al-Assad. More recently, some of the Gulf States have seemingly warmed to the idea of al-Assad and reopened their embassies in Damascus.<sup>62</sup> Although this may appear to be in Russia's favor, it may in fact prove to dampen Russia's influence over al-Assad and ability to shape the post-conflict environment in Syria, and may provide another venue for the Gulf States to pressure Moscow over its relationship with Tehran.

Russia rightly remains fearful of becoming too beholden to a single actor in the Middle East, but it could be forced into choosing sides as its relationships mature. This highlights how Russia's flexible, multipartner approach requires Moscow to avoid deep commitments, despite the limitations this places on what Russia can

accomplish, as the avoidance of commitment arguably obviates the kind of great power influence Moscow seeks.

### Russia Is Likely to Remain Reliant on Opportunities Created by Regional States and Western Missteps

Our earlier research contends that Russia's regional strategy is dependent on the availability of resources and opportunities.<sup>63</sup> When these are flush, Russian activity increases; when these are scarce, Russian engagement decreases. Thus far, Russia's regional engagement has been predicated on openings on which it has capitalized to amplify its role in the Middle East. For example, the Arab Spring provided an opportunity for Russia to forcibly reinsert itself as an external heavyweight in the region. Even its intervention in Syria was not manufactured entirely by Russia—it was, in some way, engendered by preexisting social, economic, and political vulnerabilities that undermined the ruling al-Assad regime and led to Russia's sole regional military intervention to buttress a longstanding partner.<sup>64</sup> Russia's intervention in Syria, in turn, has provided Moscow with the opportunity to become a key vote in the negotiations over Syria's future,<sup>65</sup> increase its military presence in the Levant,<sup>66</sup> and strengthen its tactical cooperation with Iran and the Syrian regime.<sup>67</sup>

Workshop participants suggested that Russia sees opportunities in preexisting vulnerabilities of the Middle Eastern states. In Iraq, for example, fragmentation of political elites and decentralized decisionmaking have provided openings for Russia to amplify its influence by increasing the number of actors it can engage and play off each other for its own gain. However, these actions illustrate Russia's

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dependence on regional actors to create opportunities. Although Russia may have reaped dividends in the short term, it is reliant on a continued alignment of interests with regional states to continue to benefit.

Economic investment in Russian industry by the Gulf States and involvement in OPEC negotiations on oil production have afforded Russia with funding for its domestic and global activities.<sup>68</sup> But Moscow's regional economic activities are for more than mere economic gain: They give Russia additional levers of engagement and influence, and increased presence throughout the Middle East.<sup>69</sup> For example, Russia's state-affiliated energy companies, such as Rosatom, now have permanent offices in the Middle East, and Russian business leaders routinely do business throughout the region.<sup>70</sup> However, the presence that Russia achieves through its business deals is underwritten by the

Middle Eastern leaders and SWFs that Russia wishes to court for more investment. Unsurprisingly, these states use Russia to their own benefit, placing Moscow in the delicate position of being somewhat beholden to the priorities, interests, and actions of the Middle Eastern states.

Russia also capitalized on openings provided inadvertently by the United States. As a workshop participant noted, “Russia makes mischief in the vacuum of U.S. incoherence.”<sup>71</sup> The perception of U.S. retrenchment from the region following the announcement of the U.S. pivot to Asia,<sup>72</sup> in addition to Washington’s decision to side with protesters in Egypt and Tunisia, and views of U.S. inaction in Syria, resulted in Middle Eastern leaders losing faith in the U.S. security commitment.<sup>73</sup> This provided Russia with an opening to present itself as a foil to the United States, in support of existing regimes and against Western intervention. Its subsequent intervention in Syria reinforced a view of Russia as a reliable military power, willing to intervene on behalf of its partners, even to states that opposed the al-Assad regime.<sup>74</sup> Although Russia’s increased involvement in Syria has translated into renewed economic and diplomatic engagement in the Middle East, this is driven, in part, by the Middle Eastern states’ desire to play Russia off the United States.<sup>75</sup> As a result, Russia remains beholden to Western missteps and the machinations of the Middle Eastern states to create opportunities, and it is unlikely or unable to create its own openings.

## Russia Will Continue to Be a Second-Choice Partner for Middle Eastern States

Given Russia’s drive for great power status and prestige, it would benefit from becoming the primary security guarantor

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of choice for Egypt or Iraq, former Soviet client states, if not both. Although Russia has arguably achieved this status in Syria, Damascus was never fully under the U.S. sphere of influence, while Baghdad and Cairo also boast significant security relationships with the United States.<sup>76</sup> Despite deepening military cooperation with both capitals, Russia has thus far been unable to flip either of these states into its orbit. This suggests that the Russian model remains less attractive to these states than the U.S. security guarantee. As one workshop participant stated, “Russia is ‘Plan B’ if they [Middle Eastern states] cannot work with the United States.”<sup>77</sup>

Instead, Middle Eastern governments—particularly the Gulf States—have used Russia as an alternative to the United States and a lever to influence Washington to act in their favor. For example, the UAE and Russia signed a deal in 2017 to co-develop a fifth-generation fighter jet amid Abu Dhabi’s frustrations over Washington’s slow process

to determine whether to sell the UAE the F-35 fighter jet, in hopes that this announcement would spur Washington toward action.<sup>78</sup> Since then, the United States has agreed to enter into preliminary talks with the UAE on the F-35, a step toward acquiring the platform.<sup>79</sup>

These states also use diplomatic and economic engagement with Russia to signal to the United States that they have other options. Arms sales, in particular, have been a useful signal. When the United States delayed arms sales to Egypt over human rights concerns following the military coup in 2013, Russia—less concerned about human rights and driven to support the military leadership, which it viewed as a continuation of the ousted regime of Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak—stepped in to offer arms in what was termed a “no-strings-attached” deal.<sup>80</sup> This allowed Cairo to send a message to Washington that Egypt was not reliant on the United States for arms and that Russia—a great power competitor—could fill Egypt’s needs. Furthermore, Russia’s signing of technical agreements and memorandums of understanding with Qatar and Saudi Arabia on the S-400 weapon system—already a hot-button issue for Washington, given Turkey’s purchase of this system, undermining plans for U.S. and NATO interoperability—is a clear signal to Washington.<sup>81</sup>

In the first example, Russia both filled the space ceded by the United States and fulfilled an Egyptian need. In the second, Russia entered into a prospective agreement; should these sales come to fruition—which they very well may not—their completion is an additional bonus, as their simple announcement was enough to frustrate Washington. Both examples illustrate how engagement with Russia can act as an insurance policy to secure Washington’s continued interest. For its part, Russia may

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remain willing to play this role because it has the secondary benefit of undercutting the United States.<sup>82</sup>

However, such signals only go so far, as Middle Eastern leaders are cautious not to jeopardize their relationships with the United States when seeking to maximize their options. Their desire not to upset the balance with the United States illustrates that despite Russia’s military success in Syria, its security model leaves much to be desired. Russia’s strategy in the Middle East seeks to exploit available opportunities while limiting cost and commitment, differing greatly from Washington’s long-term, committed approach.<sup>83</sup> Although this may create flexibility for Moscow to pursue multiple relationships and business deals in the immediate term, it does not engender commitment and loyalty, both of which are appreciated by regional leaders. The shortcomings of Russia’s approach become more pronounced over the long term and when contrasted with those of the U.S. approach.

### The Growing Role of China in the Middle East

However, it is not merely the United States that is perceived as a more-attractive partner than Russia by the Middle Eastern

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Russia faces significant constraints in what it can achieve and what regional actors will allow it to achieve, and there may be a mismatch between Moscow's ambitions and available resources.

states. China has been making inroads into the Middle East for some time, most recently through its Belt and Road Initiative. China's regional approach is almost entirely economic-oriented and long-term focused, with Beijing investing significantly in infrastructure throughout the region to maximize its eventual economic gain and continued access to oil.<sup>84</sup> Unlike Moscow, Beijing remains aloof from regional politics and does not present itself as a security provider to Middle Eastern states. Although regional leaders have also used China to fill gaps and send a signal to the United States,<sup>85</sup> Beijing has been a useful economic partner in that it is a top consumer of oil and is willing to invest in industry within the region, unlike Russia.<sup>86</sup> Although Middle Eastern states may wield their relationships with China in a similar manner as they do Russia, Beijing, the United States, and other European nations are perceived as more-attractive partners because of

what they can bring to the region while Russia is more limited in its potential contributions.

## Conclusion

Russia's post-Soviet engagement in the Middle East has achieved a great deal, and, in Moscow's view, its strategy is a winning one. Russia has shored up its Syrian partner, cemented its presence in the Levant, developed several economic partnerships, and gained a seat at key negotiating tables. Moscow has successfully leveraged events and opportunities in the Middle East to rebuild its image as a great power. However, Russia's potential role in the Middle East should not be overstated. Russia faces significant constraints in what it can achieve and what regional actors will allow it to achieve, and there may be a mismatch between Moscow's ambitions and available resources.

Syria remains a key example of the limitations of Russia's regional strategy. The Russian intervention in Syria in September 2015 prevented the collapse of al-Assad's regime and the collapse of the Syrian state at a relatively small cost.<sup>87</sup> This intervention represented various Russian foreign policy priorities: support existing regimes and institutions; ensure against regime collapse; and prevent spillover of conflict and violence to neighboring states and Russia. In concert with these guiding principles, Russia has sought to use its intervention in Syria to reinforce its great power status. However, it remains to be seen whether Russia is willing to make a critical policy choice and accept the costs of maintaining influence in a region that is secondary at best to its vital interests.

Although Moscow's military intervention in Syria has prevented regime collapse, Moscow has struggled to



translate its military gains into political successes. Russia would like a political settlement in Syria that maintains its interests, but it has not yet convinced the al-Assad regime to accept such a settlement. Russia's relative lack of nonmilitary influence suggests a limit to its degree of influence over the Syrian regime, promoting the perverse concept that its military success may in fact constrain its leverage. Russia might have saved al-Assad and al-Assad is clearly dependent on Russian military power for survival, but it is unclear how Russia might extract itself from Syria without risking state collapse and a mark on its reputation. Disengagement—once a priority for Moscow—now looks increasingly unlikely.

This demonstrates that, despite its successes, Russia cannot dictate outcomes in the region although it can complicate policies. Moscow's constraints have made its policies reactive, rather than proactive, and make it difficult for Russia to shape events absent a preexisting opportunity. Rather than act as kingmaker in the Middle East, Moscow is instead choosing policies that will ensure it is relegated to play temporary partner or spoiler in the long run. Although Russia is making short-term economic gains, securing multiple partnerships to increase engagement, and springboarding off Western missteps to complicate policies and undermine Western influence in the region, Russia's problems in the Middle East remain unresolved in the long term. Russia has not cemented long-term relationships—let alone alliances—or permanently shifted regional dynamics in its favor, because it has instead elected to maximize flexibility and gain partners, something which is only made possible by avoiding deeper commitment to one party over another. Russia cannot afford to commit to the kinds of policies that would cement more-lasting relationships without undermining its existing approach.

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Disengagement—once a priority for Moscow—now looks increasingly unlikely. This demonstrates that, despite its successes, Russia cannot dictate outcomes in the region although it can complicate policies.

As a result, it is the Middle Eastern states that control the regional agenda, not Russia. The Middle Eastern states hold primacy in their relationships with Russia, determining the depth of relations and whether to constrain or bolster Russia's aims and interests. This, in turn, leaves Russia bound to their interests and actions, rather than Moscow driving the regional agenda as a great power. Absent deeper commitments, Russia is likely to remain beholden to these actors to create opportunities.

Great powers have traditionally been able to sustain engagement with a multitude of actors over a long period of time. Russia, however, is in danger of overreach. Its ability to act consistently in the region and replicate its successes over the long term is in question. Russia has achieved



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The strengths of Russia's strategy in the short term—its transactionalism, balancing of multiple partners, and commitment-free approach—may turn out to be its own undoing in the long term.

success in Syria and will probably remain there indefinitely, but it will need to expand its presence in the region if it seeks greater influence. However, Moscow's reliance on resources and opportunities—driven by the states of the Middle East, not Russia—suggests that its regional approach is unsustainable and expansion is unlikely. This stands in contrast to such states as the United States and China—both of which to some extent are able to create and offer long-term opportunities, shape events in their favor, and sustain their regional engagement—pursuing interests in the region.

Russia's strategy, for the most part, has netted several gains and secured Russia's role as an important player in the region. But the emphasis on Russia's geopolitical victories overstates its success and fails to recognize the inherent constraints of Russia's strategy, instead amplifying a narrative of its rising influence in the Middle East, and ignores the lower expectations of and stakes for Russia from regional actors. The limits of Russia's regional strategy should not be understated and are important for U.S.

policy planners to keep in mind when crafting strategies to counter Russian influence in the region, because the Middle East remains an attractive arena for long-term strategic competition between the United States and Russia.<sup>88</sup> Although Russia can frustrate and undermine U.S. policy in the region, it cannot create openings or replace the United States as the predominant power.

Russia has played a weak hand extremely effectively, but its strategy remains full of inherent tensions and constraints. The strengths of Russia's strategy in the short term—its transactionalism, balancing of multiple partners, and commitment-free approach—may turn out to be its own undoing in the long term.

## Endnotes

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<sup>22</sup> Comments by a Russian workshop participant, London, March 28, 2018.

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## About This Perspective

Russia is seemingly resurgent in the Middle East, using a short-term–focused, transactional approach to develop diplomatic and economic relationships across the region. Russia’s Middle East strategy appears to be reaping dividends, but it is not without significant challenges and risks. It remains to be seen whether Moscow can sustain its present level of engagement and meet its geopolitical ambitions in the region. This Perspective presents the limits of Russia’s strategy in the Middle East, including the challenges stemming from Russia’s own political and economic system, the limitations created by regional actors in the Middle East, and those imposed by the United States. The author presents how the very elements that make Russia’s strategy successful in the short term will ultimately limit the depth of Russia’s regional approach in the long term.

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