



RUSSIA
IN THE
MIDDLE EAST

Anna Borshchevskaya

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Motives, Consequences, Prospects

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Photo: Vladimir Putin oversees large-scale military exercises. (REUTERS/Mikhail Klimentyev/RIA Novosti/Pool).

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INTRODUCTION

IN SEPTEMBER 2015, Russia deployed forces to Syria, shaking the field of international relations and shuffling the cards in two interconnected conflicts—the Syrian war and the war with the Islamic State (IS). To fully understand the impact of Russian president Vladimir Putin’s bold decision—a Russian intervention unprecedented in some three decades—and to better assess both his options and those of parties affected by it, observers would benefit from looking back over the past decade-plus of Russian domestic and foreign policy developments, particularly regarding the country’s Middle East role.

On September 28, 2015, Putin addressed the UN General Assembly for the first time in ten years. The speech did not surprise. Putin covered his traditional themes, such as complaints about post-Cold War U.S. unilateralism and NATO expansion, accused the West of provoking revolutions and protests throughout the world, and suggested Washington is responsible for problems in the Middle East. He then proceeded to propose an idea he had been promoting for weeks prior to the speech: leading an anti-IS coalition in Syria.¹ In those same weeks, amid lost ground by Syrian president Bashar al-Assad’s forces, the Kremlin enacted a significant military buildup in Syria, intensifying its naval presence in the Mediterranean, sending additional deliveries of advanced weaponry to the Assad regime, deploying a military advance team, and delivering prefabricated housing units to an airfield near Latakia.²

Moscow had supported Assad from the very beginning of the Syrian uprising in March 2011 with weapons, advisors, loans, and political cover on the UN Security Council. Indeed, the Kremlin never hid its intentions to protect Assad diplomatically and with weapons. Yet the buildup, especially the presence of troops, suggested a qualitative change in Russia’s involvement.

Two days after the UN speech, on September 30, the Kremlin gave the United States a one-hour warning before launching airstrikes in Syria.³ Although Moscow said it was targeting the Islamic State, numerous reports indicated most of Russia's strikes were outside IS areas. The weaponry the Kremlin deployed in Syria, such as SA-22 (Pantsir 1) anti-aircraft missiles,⁴ further suggested that the Islamic State was not the Kremlin's primary target, since IS does not have an air force. Moscow's actions indicated that it intended to protect Assad, not fight the Islamic State.

Moscow has not been forthcoming with details about its plans, thus creating possibilities for clashes and misunderstandings. The Kremlin violated Turkish airspace several times in October 2015. Of these air incursions, NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg said, "I will not speculate on [Russia's] motives...but this does not look like an accident and we have seen two of them...[They] lasted for a long time."⁵ Separate from the Turkish airspace incidents, Russian fighter jets twice flew in close proximity to U.S. drones; the second incident, according to a U.S. assessment, was also deliberate, as reported by CNN.⁶ Flaunting its newest weapons, Moscow first used in combat the Kalibr-class cruise missile on October 7, mounting a strike on Syria from warships nearly a thousand miles away from the Caspian Sea. Despite Moscow's denials, at least four missiles crashed in Iran before reaching Syria, according to multiple press reports. On November 24, 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24, which, according to the Turkish government, briefly reentered Turkey's territory.

Although Putin has said several times since the buildup that Russia does not plan to have boots on the ground—at least "for now"—Moscow strongly hinted, after reports of its Turkish airspace violations, that its "volunteer" ground forces will soon be fighting in Syria.⁷ Following such intimations, however, Putin restated in an interview with the Kremlin-run Rossiya 1 TV channel that he has no plans to send ground troops to Syria.⁸

Useful context here may be found in Moscow's last Middle East intervention, dating to the Yom Kippur War of 1973, a venture that ended disastrously. When the Kremlin sent troops to Egypt to rescue the embattled Egyptian army, which faced an Israeli onslaught, Washington reacted with strength, launching a worldwide military war

alert and forcing Moscow to back down.⁹ This time, the U.S. response to Russia's Syria intervention has been largely limited to statements and stationing air-to-air fighters at Turkey's Incirlik Air Base, near the Syrian border. This response has only inflated Putin's feeling of self-confidence.

Radical elements of the Syrian insurgency have also been strengthened by Putin's move, with fewer actors perceiving a peaceful solution.¹⁰ In Russia itself, the gesture has invited further radicalization, while raising concerns among the country's own Muslims, the vast majority of whom are peaceful.¹¹ Perhaps most significant, the intervention is exacerbating the worst refugee crisis since World War II, with more Sunnis fleeing Assad's Syria since the Russian intervention.¹² These developments, in turn, strengthen Assad's depopulation strategy—a strategy Putin understands, considering the similar policies pursued by Stalin and the Russian czars.

These recent events have sparked much interest in Russia's involvement in Syria and the Middle East more broadly. This monograph thus provides context for Russia's current activities in the region and explains how affairs reached this point, with a focus on Moscow's Middle East policy since May 2000, when Putin officially came to power and chartered his country's return to the region after a brief absence following the Cold War's end.

Traditionally, then, Russia has been less interested in the Middle East itself than in using the region to seek possible gains against the West, or to improve its own domestic situation. Russia is no longer the same Great Power it was during the Cold War, when it maintained a substantial regional presence. Under Putin, Russia has focused primarily on political and diplomatic support to key allies, arms and energy sales, and trade. Yet the Middle East is fragile, and Russia does not need to do much to assert its influence, particularly in the context of a perceived Western retreat from the region.

Under Putin, Russia has pursued relations with virtually all Middle East countries, whether traditional allies or adversaries. The first three chapters look at Russia's domestic context and the Kremlin's reaction to uprisings in the post-Soviet space, the Arab Spring, and Russia itself. This context is crucial in explaining the Kremlin's thinking on the Middle East. Whereas domestic policy generally influences a country's

foreign policy, the Kremlin is unique for often blurring, if not entirely eliminating, these lines.¹³ Such an assessment applies particularly to Putin as he has grown more anti-American and anti-Western. The remaining chapters cover Russia's relations with four allies and major Middle East actors—Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and Syria—and include discussions of its relations with, Jordan, the GCC, Israel, and Turkey.

PUTIN'S ASCENT

IN THE NINETEENTH century, czarist Russia began asserting its geo-strategic, economic, religious, and cultural interests in the Middle East as framed by its competition with the West. Moscow worked to build diplomatic and cultural ties, especially in Syria and Palestine, to create constituencies on which it could later rely for support. Similarly, competition with the West, primarily the United States, drove the Soviet Union during its strong almost-fifty-year Middle East presence, rooted in encouragement of regional actors pursuing an anti-Western agenda. After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the newly emergent Russia found itself focused on an entirely different set of priorities from those of its predecessor.

YELTSIN'S LEGACY

When Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first democratically elected president, assumed his first term in July 1991, Russia had fallen from the position of world superpower. The country was chaotic and weak politically, militarily, and economically. Yeltsin thus focused his attention on addressing domestic economic and political instability, a weak and disjointed government, and war with the breakaway Chechen Republic. On the foreign policy front, Russia concentrated mainly on relations with the United States, Europe, and the newly independent countries of the former Soviet Union.¹⁴

During Yeltsin's tenure, from 1991 to 1999, Russia reduced its Middle East presence, except in Turkey and Iran.¹⁵ Personally, Yeltsin had little interest in the Middle East¹⁶ and he pursued, broadly speaking, a pro-American, pragmatic approach to the region, driven by Russia's domestic considerations, as opposed to the Soviet Union's ideological approach.¹⁷ Yet domestic problems prevented the Kremlin from formulating a clear Middle East policy. Yeltsin, while ushering in a brief period of political and economic openness, was politically weak and in poor physical health.

Rather than moving toward becoming a true democracy, Russia plunged into deep chaos: hyperinflation, corruption, war with Chechnya, a widening gap between rich and poor, and a revival of personal power politics.¹⁸ As a result, competing or conflicting interests ultimately drove Russia's limited Middle East presence during Yeltsin's two terms.¹⁹ Notably, from 1996 to 1998, the skilled Arabist and former Foreign Intelligence Service director Yevgeny Primakov served as foreign minister. He took a tougher, more anti-Western posture than Yeltsin's supporters. In September 1998, toward the end of his presidency, Yeltsin appointed Primakov as prime minister in response to parliamentary pressure.²⁰

In 2000, Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, inherited a Russia weakened and deeply traumatized by the previous decade's developments. Russian citizens, who had embraced democratic prospects in the early 1990s, were disillusioned and wanted stability above all else.²¹ This is what Putin promised to deliver, along with restoring Russia's status as an influential global power.

THE NORTH CAUCASUS & DOMESTIC TERRORISM

On August 9, 1999, Boris Yeltsin resigned as Russia's president and named his prime minister, an opaque former KGB officer named Vladimir Putin, as acting president, with elections to be held March 26, 2000. By this point, Russia had already fought one separatist war in the North Caucasus with Chechnya, from 1994 to 1996—a war marked by Moscow's gross human rights abuses and effective transformation of Chechnya's struggle, which originated as a secular nationalist movement, “into an Islamist one, with a jihadi component.”²²

In September 1999, the month after Yeltsin named Putin as his successor, a series of apartment bombings shook the cities of Moscow, Volgograd, and Buynaksk, killing or injuring hundreds and spreading fear throughout the country.²³ Putin quickly blamed Chechen Islamist militants for the bombings and declared a second war against Chechnya, which soon spilled over into neighboring Dagestan. Many details about these tragic events, however, including who was responsible for the bombings, remain disputed or unknown because Moscow eventually halted the investigation.²⁴ Meanwhile, Putin officially took over as acting president on December 31, 1999.

In the run-up to the March 2000 elections, Putin participated neither in debates nor election events, but his image dominated the media.²⁵ In sharp focus during the three-month campaign were the war in Chechnya and broader instability within Russia. Putin's campaign advanced an infamous slogan, *mochit v sortire* ("wipe them out in the outhouse"), in reference to terrorists. On Election Day, Putin won by a narrow margin in the first round, with 52.94 percent of the vote, but some analysts suggested that an extra 2.2 million votes, putting Putin over the top, were the product of fraud.²⁶ At the same time, Putin's strong stance against domestic terrorism in light of the continuing North Caucasus war had helped boost his favorability ratings, which rose from 30 percent in August 1999 to 80 percent in November 1999.²⁷ Furthermore, Putin's promise of stability resonated with the shaken and disillusioned Russian population.

Within his first hundred days in office, Putin instituted a "vertical integration of power," amounting to a recentralization of presidential and federal authority, and began curtailing press freedom.²⁸ With regard to the latter, he took small and incremental steps. Consequently, many in the West and Russia were unsure how to interpret these actions, and the West largely ignored early critics of Putin's democratic backslide.²⁹

RETURN TO THE MIDDLE EAST

SHORTLY AFTER HIS FIRST presidential term began in May 2000, Putin outlined Russia's new foreign policy, which immediately signaled a change from the Yeltsin years. Putin distanced himself from the turbulent 1990s, blaming the West for his country's problems during that decade.

On January 10, 2000, while still interim president, Putin approved the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, which highlighted "attempts to create an international relations structure based on domination by developed Western countries in the international community, under U.S. leadership, and designed for unilateral solutions (primarily by the use of military force) to key issues in world politics in circumvention of the foundational rules of international law."³⁰ The document later says, "A number of states are stepping up efforts to weaken Russia politically, economically, militarily, and in other ways" and defines NATO expansion as one among major threats "in the international sphere."³¹

A MULTIVECTOR APPROACH

The National Security Concept also references a "multipolar" world—corresponding to a policy originally advocated and promoted by Yevgeny Primakov in the 1990s and promoted by the Kremlin to this day—and Russia's role as "one of the influential centres" in it. In addition, threats to Russia's national security, according to the National Security Concept, were "manifested in attempts by other states to counteract its strengthening as one of the centers of influence in a multipolar world, to hinder realization of its national interests and to weaken its position in Europe, the Middle East, Transcaucasia, Central Asia and the Asia-Pacific Region." This new approach also entailed demanding recognition of Russia's legitimate privileged interests in its so-called near-abroad, loosely defined as *Russkiy mir* (Russian world) throughout the countries of the former Soviet Union.

These developments are crucial for understanding Russia's approach to foreign policy, and specifically its approach to the Middle East. They highlight that, from the very beginning, the Kremlin under Putin viewed the West with hostility and distrust, especially given perceived Western attempts to change the status quo in any given place. In this context, the Kremlin aimed to position Russia in opposition to the West, and emphasized the importance of respect for state sovereignty. This collection of nineteenth-century Great Power concepts and rejection of an overarching legally based international system beyond the UN Security Council present, to this date, a unique challenge to the post-World War II international order. An integral part of Putin's challenge is to deny any such order beyond what he perceives as camouflage for America's assertions of "unique" privileged interests.

In the Middle East, Putin sought to restore Russia as a Great Power in the context of renewed zero-sum anti-Westernism. In addition to regaining political influence, he sought to raise Russia to the status of a competitor to the United States and its alleged world dominance, through putting a higher emphasis on Russia's business interests: arms and energy (oil and gas) sales, as well as high-tech goods such as nuclear reactors.³² Indeed, the January 2000 Foreign Policy Concept defined Moscow's priorities in the Middle East as "to restore and strengthen [Russia's] positions, particularly economic ones," and highlighted the importance of continuing to develop ties with Iran.³³

Russia's renewed Middle East presence entailed cooperation with both anti- and pro-American actors there. This meant support for Iran's nuclear program, forgiveness of Syria's almost \$13 billion debt, and removal of export controls on chemical and biological technologies, alongside expanded bilateral relations with Turkey, Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.³⁴ On this front, Moscow tied arms sales policy with its foreign policy interests. Indeed, on December 11, 2013, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin said that Russia's arms sales are the most important element of its relations with other countries.³⁵

In sum, since his early years in office, Putin has consistently espoused the following Middle East priorities: protection of sovereignty—seen as synonymous with unity—even when it contradicted Russia's signed obligations under entities such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and United Nations; economic gain, pri-

marily through arms and energy trade; and expansion of Russian influence at the expense of the West.

In December 2002, then Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov said in an interview, “It appears this is the year when we finalized a multi-vector policy, one in which different geographical directions and priorities supplement, rather than contradict, each other.”³⁶ Once again countering a perceived negative picture of Russia in the West, he said, “I think the image of an either impoverished or money-spinning mafia-like Russia, an image spontaneously or sometimes purposely created in the West in the 90s, is gradually receding into the past.”³⁷ In December 2003, Alexander Yakovenko, director of the Foreign Affairs Ministry’s Information and Press Department, wrote in the Kremlin’s official *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*: “Today not one significant international problem is being solved without Russia.”³⁸

RUSSIA AS A UNIQUE CIVILIZATION

An additional point deserves attention in understanding Russia’s approach to the Middle East. On December 30, 1999, the day before Putin officially became acting president, a document attributed to Putin appeared on the government’s website, “Russia at the Turn of the Millennium.”³⁹ Among the document’s central points is that Russia is a country with unique values but in danger of losing its unity.⁴⁰ This view, along with fear of threats to the status quo, still underlies the Kremlin’s policies in the Middle East.

Over the years, Putin has continued to stress, in speeches and remarks, this portrait of Russia as special but at risk, with the country standing in opposition to Western cultural values, described by the Kremlin as morally corrupt, while the Russian Orthodox Church has emphasized Russia’s “special” spiritual path.⁴¹ This vision also promotes a strong centralized state at the expense of individual rights, along with the belief that a Western-style democracy will not work in Russia or, for that matter, in the Middle East, justifying the claim that external democratization efforts are doomed to fail. Indeed, in the Middle East milieu, Putin presented Russia a unique civilization that straddles East and West and can therefore serve as a bridge and mediator.⁴²

Putin also invoked Russia’s “uniqueness” to justify a democratic backslide domestically and support of authoritarian leaders abroad, including in the Middle East.⁴³ “Under Putin,” wrote *Moscow Times* opinion edi-

tor Michael Bohm in September 2013, recognizing the Kremlin's glaring hypocrisy, "it has become Russia's single-handed mission to put Washington in its place by condemning its blatant double standards, violations of human rights and interventionist foreign policy."⁴⁴

In early 2000, discussing Russia's policy in the North Caucasus, Putin explained that the fear of Russia's collapse drove his decisions. "What's the situation in the North Caucasus and in Chechnya today? It's a continuation of the collapse of the USSR," he said. "This is what I thought of the situation in August [1999], when the bandits attacked Dagestan: If we don't put an immediate end to this, Russia will cease to exist. It was a question of preventing the collapse of the country."⁴⁵

He would later lament the Soviet Union's breakup as one of the great geopolitical tragedies of the twentieth century, with the result that "tens of millions of our compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory...Individual savings were depreciated, and old ideals destroyed."⁴⁶ As one prominent Russian expert wrote in October 2013, "To this day, the Kremlin sometimes gives the impression of having not yet realized the fundamental differences between the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation and the impossibility of reversing history."⁴⁷ This is not to say that the Kremlin aims to restore the Soviet Union; rather, it seeks to highlight a perceived connection between Russia's unity and stability in the Soviet days and the direct threat now posed to it by the West.

Putin has reiterated this view many times during his fifteen years in power, including at the June 2015 Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum. After the USSR collapsed, he said, the bipolar international system "went into oblivion," propelling the United States into a state of "euphoria." Perceiving a "vacuum that needed to be filled" in Eastern Europe, according to Putin, the United States promoted an expanded NATO presence eastward to Russia's borders and began exploring "geopolitical spaces," such as in the Middle East and Ukraine.⁴⁸

MORE DOMESTIC TERRORISM & NATO'S LIBYA CAMPAIGN

On October 23, 2002, a group of armed Chechens seized a Moscow theater on Dubrovka Street and demanded Russian withdrawal from Chechnya and the end of the war there. They took nearly a thousand hostages, though they released some (primarily non-Russian) detainees, pregnant

women, and children. This event came to be known as the Nord Ost siege, named for the play being performed at the time, or the Dubrovka theater siege. Most Russians supported the militants' demands, according to polls. Indeed, some were surprised at how moderate these demands were.⁴⁹ After several days, Russian authorities stormed the building and killed all the attackers, who were themselves unconscious from the gas, but approximately 130 hostages also died in the botched rescue, primarily because doctors on hand did not know the type of gas used in the raid and therefore struggled to effectively treat the wounded. Policemen, rather than medics, carried the hostages out. The Russian government had put secrecy above all else, including the lives of Russia's own citizens. Needless to say, the Russian government continues to avoid taking responsibility for these deaths and to claim nothing could have been done to prevent them.⁵⁰ Nor has the Russian authorities' role in the rescue, or in failing to prevent the attack in the first place, ever been investigated. Instead, reflecting Kremlin intransigence, Putin unilaterally awarded Federal Security Service deputy director Vladimir Pronichev, who managed the operation, the title "Hero of Russia."

In December 2011, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg found that the Russian authorities had not prepared the rescue operation properly.⁵¹ In addition, the court fined the Russian government \$1.6 million for violating the right to life of hostages who were killed or hurt during the botched rescue operation, in response to a January 2003 lawsuit filed by sixty-four victims and their relatives. While the court found that the Russian government had the right to use force and gas as part of the rescue operation, it faulted "the inadequate planning and conduct of the rescue operation" and "the authorities' failure to conduct an effective investigation" into these events.⁵² Yet reports, at least as of late 2014, indicate that the siege's victims had received no closure, nor admission of any wrongdoing from the Russian government.⁵³

September 1 marks the first day of school throughout Russia, celebrated with a parade or other festivities led by children for parents, relatives, and teachers; attendance on this day is therefore significantly higher than on other school days. On September 1, 2004, armed gunmen stormed School No. 1 in Beslan, North Ossetia, then took 1,100 hostages, most of them children, and held them in the school's gymnasium for fifty-

two hours under horrific conditions. Russian forces ultimately stormed the gym to end the ordeal, but more than 350 hostages, mostly children, died in the event—with exact numbers varying slightly depending on the report. The gunmen, by many accounts Ingush and Chechen, demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya.

As with the Dubrovka Street hostage affair, many questions about this tragedy remain unanswered. Putin angrily refused to order an inquiry into Beslan's capture and why so many innocent hostages had died. When asked about his rejection of a public inquiry, Putin equated the Beslan events to the terrorism problem faced by the United States. The same month as the attack, speaking to Western reporters and academics outside Moscow, he said, "Why don't you meet Osama bin Laden, invite him to Brussels or to the White House and engage in talks, ask him what he wants and give it to him so he leaves you in peace?" He added, "You find it possible to set some limitations in your dealings with these bastards, so why should we talk to people who are childkillers?"⁵⁴ Putin may have been likening the Russian and U.S. terrorism challenges to each other, but he was omitting a critical distinction: that the U.S. process was transparent, whereas Russia's was opaque.

Three days after the attack, on September 4, Putin gave a speech signaling a tougher foreign policy posture:

We stopped paying the required attention to defense and security issues and we allowed corruption to undermine our judicial and law enforcement system. Furthermore, our country, formerly protected by the most powerful defense system along the length of its external frontiers[,] overnight found itself defenseless both from the east and the west...We showed ourselves [to be] weak. And the weak get beaten. Some would like to tear from us a "juicy piece of pie." Others help them. They help, reasoning that Russia still remains one of the world's major nuclear power[s], and as such still represents a threat to them. And so they reason that this threat should be removed. Terrorism, of course, is an instrument to achieve these aims...I am convinced that in reality we have no choice at all...What we are dealing with are not isolated acts intended to frighten us, not isolated terrorist attacks. What we are facing is direct intervention of international terror directed against Russia.⁵⁵

Putin used these events to consolidate his grip on power and further erode Russian civil society. He also assumed a tougher posture toward the West amid his existing opposition to the war in Iraq. Putin strengthened central control over Russia and over the hiring and dismissal of judges. He made sure regional governors were appointed by the president rather than elected, as they had been since 1996.⁵⁶ He expanded Russia's state-run Gazprom petroleum business and continued a repressive campaign against scholars, academics, and members of the media.⁵⁷ On the last count, independent reporting on the Chechnya conflict had become virtually impossible.⁵⁸ Given deteriorated relations with the West over the Iraq war, Putin increasingly turned to the Middle East (as discussed in subsequent chapters).

Although eventually the Russian government did conduct a limited investigation into Beslan, a commission composed largely of Putin supporters carried out the investigation, mostly in secret. When it finally announced its findings in December 2006, the commission largely absolved the country's security forces of responsibility, and Putin promoted many officials involved in the siege.⁵⁹ Not surprisingly, few in Russia and Beslan have been satisfied with the investigation.

A later turning point came in 2011, when Putin spoke out against NATO intervention in Libya and later accused NATO of killing Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi.⁶⁰ Context here can be found in the March 17, 2011, passage by the UN Security Council of Resolution 1973, authorizing "all necessary measures" to protect civilians in Libya under UN Chapter VII "while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory."⁶¹ Ten countries voted in favor of the resolution and five abstained, Russia among them. The supporters claimed protection of civilians as their "sole objective," on the grounds that Qadhafi had intensified violence against civilians after previous punitive measures such as sanctions and an arms embargo.

"Given this intolerable provocation [of increased violence against civilians], the international community has reacted in near unanimity," said French representative Alain Juppé during the Security Council debate on the draft resolution. The draft resolution provides NATO, he continued, "with the means to protect the civilian populations in Libya, first by establishing a no-fly zone and by authorizing the members of the Arab League and those Member States that so wish to take

the measures necessary to implement its provisions.” He added that the resolution “authorizes these same States to take all measures necessary, over and above the no-fly zone, to protect civilians and territories, including Benghazi, which are under the threat of attack by Colonel al-Qadhafi’s forces.”⁶²

Russia’s UN ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, has said that, among Russia’s chief reasons for abstaining on Resolution 1973 was concern over the prospect of eventual military intervention.⁶³ On March 17, the day of its signing, he explained:

...In essence, a whole range of questions raised by Russia and other members of the Council remained unanswered. Those questions were concrete and legitimate and touched on how the no-fly zone would be enforced, what the rules of engagement would be and what limits on the use of force there would be.

Furthermore, the draft was morphing before our very eyes, transcending the initial concept as stated by the League of Arab States. Provisions were introduced into the text that could potentially open the door to large-scale military intervention. During negotiations on the draft, statements were heard claiming an absence of any such intentions. We take note of these.⁶⁴

Putin and then president Dmitry Medvedev clashed publicly over the resolution in a way they had not done before, with Putin strongly opposing the measure and Medvedev taking a more sympathetic view. Putin framed his stance starkly: “The resolution is defective and flawed. It allows everything...It resembles medieval calls for crusades.”⁶⁵ Medvedev, thereafter, called Putin’s comment “unacceptable,”⁶⁶ claiming that the resolution held no surprises. “It would be wrong for us to start flapping about now and say that we didn’t know what we were doing,” he explained at a March 21 press conference. “This [abstention] was a conscious decision on our part.” He added that he did not consider Resolution 1973 “wrong” and that, in fact, the resolution reflected Russia’s general view of the Libyan situation, but “not in everything.”⁶⁷ A military intervention in Libya, he affirmed, “is something that cannot be allowed to happen.”⁶⁸

According to the *Economist*, after Medvedev’s comments, Putin-controlled Channel 1 switched overnight from portraying an aggressive West overthrowing a legitimate government under the guise of protect-

ing refugees to portraying Qadhafi as a lying villain. Later, however, the channel tried to downplay Libya coverage altogether.⁶⁹ But Putin apparently would have the last word. In January 2013, after he had reassumed the presidency, a movie on Russian television, *The Game of Giveaway*,⁷⁰ propagated the view that Medvedev had unilaterally and “in one hour” sold out Russia’s interests and betrayed Russia’s ally, allowing NATO to destroy sovereign Libya, a country “so similar to Russia,” a country that Qadhafi had transformed into a virtual paradise and with which Putin had significantly improved relations. The movie asks whether, after Iraq and Libya, countries with which the West disagreed, Russia would be next for destruction.⁷¹

Putin used such events to justify Russia’s plans to spend more than \$700 billion through 2020 to modernize Russia’s armed forces, as reported by the *Moscow Times*. “Today’s events, including in Libya, confirmed our decisions on strengthening Russia’s defense capabilities were correct,” Putin said in March 2011.⁷²

LOCAL & REGIONAL INFLUENCES

ANOTHER DOMESTIC issue that drove Russia's renewed interest in the Middle East is its large Muslim population, coupled with a long and complex history of competition and cooperation with neighboring Muslim-majority states—a history that helped shape Russian identity.

RUSSIA'S MUSLIMS

Russia is home to some 21 to 23 million Muslims,⁷³ the largest Muslim population on the European continent.⁷⁴ For a country of approximately 144 million, Muslims make up approximately 16 percent of the total population. In Moscow in particular, out of 12.5 million official residents, 1.5 million are Muslim, according to political analyst Alexey Malashenko, constituting the largest Muslim population for a Muslim-minority European city.⁷⁵ Thus, Veniamin Popov, Russia's former ambassador-at-large to Middle East organizations, including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), said in May 2011 that Russia, as a global power with a large Muslim population, should be more active in the Middle East, which is “directly linked to Russia's strategic interests.”⁷⁶

With the Soviet Union's collapse, not only the Russian Orthodox Church but also Islam experienced a revival, with a dramatic increase in mosques throughout the country. Islamic missionaries from abroad likewise began coming to Russia. Yet Russia's overall population has been in dire decline since the early 1990s, when it dropped from 149 to 144 million, a level at which it has roughly remained. Russia continues to face high mortality, low fertility, and emigration, especially of the well-educated, given overall economic decline. Most recent Kremlin demographics data for the first half of 2015 shows little change in these trends.⁷⁷ Yet against a stagnant overall population trajectory, the Muslim population is growing. Whereas, according to experts, poor health and health care, including alcoholism, constitute reasons for a fall in Christian birthrates, Muslim fami-

lies experience lower alcoholism rates, contributing to better health outcomes, even as Muslims concentrate in poorer areas. They also have more children than Christian Russians.⁷⁸ According to 2014 statistics from the now-defunct Ministry of Regional Development, the North Caucasus is among Russia's regions with the highest population growth. Dagestan is also among the top five regions for life expectancy at birth, at 75.5 years.⁷⁹

Russia's growing Muslim population has had an impact on the country's Middle East policy and holds implications for its security. In 2006, Paul Goble, an expert on Russia's Muslims, commented that "Russia is going through a religious transformation that will be of even greater consequence for the international community than the collapse of the Soviet Union."⁸⁰ The vast majority of Russia's Muslims are peaceful, hardworking citizens, many of whom face routine daily discrimination. The government, for its part, has failed to integrate Muslims into Russian society or the military—in fact, it purposely excluded most North Caucasians from the military draft even though the region presented a large pool of potential recruits. Nevertheless, in 2014, after Putin annexed Crimea, the military announced the lifting of a number of restrictions, possibly highlighting how desperate the Russian army is for soldiers.⁸¹ Even before this restriction was lifted, the number of Muslim conscripts in the Russian military had been growing. In 2013, some experts predicted that Muslims will constitute as much as half of Russia's military conscripts within a matter of years.⁸²

By most socioeconomic measures, Russia's Muslims fare worse than other Russians, according to Russia expert Ilan Berman.⁸³ Meanwhile, Russia continues to fight a losing domestic battle against radical Islam, which has intensified and spread throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia. The Kremlin's own policies are largely responsible for this radicalization, as discussed in this paper's sections on the Chechen conflict. From gross human rights abuses in the first Chechen war to continual reliance on unsophisticated "crushing," rather than a more nuanced approach to radical Islam, the Kremlin has failed to curb growing radicalization.⁸⁴ In addition, hundreds, if not thousands, of Chechens remain in Russian prisons to this day, where they are subjected to torture, only helping fuel radicalism.⁸⁵ Russia's intervention in Syria is likely to exacerbate this radicalization, with the Islamic State increasing recruitment of not only all Muslims but also ethnic Russians (a term

the Kremlin has used quite loosely) and Muslims from Russia. Indeed, Russian is already the third most popular IS language, after Arabic and English. The Islamic State broadcasts in Russian and publishes a Russian magazine.⁸⁶

COLOR REVOLUTIONS

Among the relatively local events influencing Putin's Middle East policy was Ukraine's pro-democracy movement, later known as the Orange Revolution. In late 2004, millions of Ukrainian citizens, wearing orange clothing, staged nationwide peaceful protests against falsified presidential elections. Nonpartisan exit polls had showed pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko in the lead with 52 percent of the vote, rather than the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich—then prime minister and the choice of Ukraine's corrupt elite—who was tallying 43 percent. Yet the official results showed Yanukovich as the winner.⁸⁷ These events sparked the Orange Revolution and demonstrated the freewill, *volya*, and strength of Ukraine's civil society. For Putin, this development hit too close to home. If the Ukrainians could rise up against their authoritarian ruler, what was stopping Russian citizens from doing the same? Putin thus began speaking about Western influence in the Orange Revolution, including through financing of NGOs⁸⁸ and meddling in Russia's "privileged sphere of influence."⁸⁹ Thereafter, the notion that the United States staged the color revolutions became a commonly promoted Kremlin view.

REVOLUTIONS BEYOND UKRAINE

The Orange Revolution was one among a series of color revolutions throughout the post-Soviet space. It was, for example, preceded in 2003 by a revolution in Georgia and followed in 2005 by one in Kyrgyzstan.⁹⁰ The year 2005 also saw Lebanon's Cedar Revolution and Iraq's so-called Purple Revolution, which the Kremlin viewed in much the same vein. Indeed, the Cedar Revolution modeled itself after the revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia.⁹¹ Yet Ukraine in particular, given its complicated history with Russia, mattered far more than any other post-Soviet country.

For Putin and many top Russian officials, events in Ukraine continued to echo events in the Middle East and a perceived unilateral U.S.

interventionism. In his September 11, 2013, *New York Times* op-ed, Putin wrote, “It is alarming that military intervention in internal conflicts in foreign countries has become commonplace for the United States...But force has proved ineffective and pointless. Afghanistan is reeling...Libya is divided into tribes and clans. In Iraq the civil war continues.”⁹² The next year he connected the color revolutions, Western intervention, and events in the Middle East.⁹³

Approximately a decade after the Orange Revolution, on April 1, 2014, Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu argued at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Khujand, Tajikistan, that “a scenario similar to the Arab Spring was used” to oust former president Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine.⁹⁴ The *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, the Kremlin’s official newspaper, tied together “mechanisms of foreign interference” and “models of provocation” in Russia, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria.⁹⁵

To give another example, speaking at a Security Council meeting in November 2014, which reviewed state attempts to counter extremism, Putin equated the color revolutions with “extremism.” He said, “We see to what tragic consequences led the wave of the so-called color revolutions, and we will do everything to ensure that this never happens in Russia.” He went on to express the view that the “extremism” of color revolutions was being used as a geopolitical instrument to reshape spheres of influence.⁹⁶

Similarly, in April 2015, Putin made the following assertion before senior Kremlin officials: “We are against interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, provocation of armed conflict. Such a practice toward a number of countries in North Africa and the Middle East has led to rampant terrorism there, and close to our borders has created a bloody drama for our neighbors in Ukraine.”⁹⁷

PUTIN AND THE ARAB SPRING

By 2010, just as Russia had succeeded in restoring some of its Middle East influence—including “good relations with every government and most major opposition movements,” according to George Mason University professor Mark Katz⁹⁸—widespread uprisings swept the region. These events affected Putin roughly as Ukraine’s Orange Revolution had, on the one hand instilling fear that Russian citizens could be inspired to

oust their own strongman, and on the other fueling a belief that the West had orchestrated the events to reduce Russia's regional influence through eliminating its traditional allies.⁹⁹

Western analysts recognized both the Arab Spring protests' aspiration for freedom and democracy and their grievances arising from lack of accountability and economic stagnation. But these analysts also acknowledged the violent forces these movements unleashed, and debated the implications of backing corrupt and stagnant authoritarian rulers against possibly violent, extremist, or chaotic opposition. Meanwhile, the Kremlin-funded propaganda machine portrayed these events in a generally negative light and quickly began broadcasting messages on the dangers of "regime change" and the "chaos" that the Arab Spring brought to the Middle East through Western intervention. Indeed, one Russian analyst wrote:

Strictly speaking, the Arab Spring was not the first wave of revolution to sweep the world in the 21st century. It was preceded by a chain of events, more spread-out over time, that mainly took place in the post-Soviet space and were labelled the "color revolutions." This term is understood to mean a series of non-violent coups... Let us simply say that their common denominator is the illegal (but legitimized with Western support) replacement of unpopular leaders with regimes that declared the goals of moving towards the European Union as an alternative to cooperation with Russia. At the same time, a commitment was declared to build liberal democratic states on the Western model.¹⁰⁰

To give another example, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said in October 2012, "The Arab Spring was the harvest of seeds sown by [George W.] Bush Jr., with the concept of the 'Greater Middle East' and democratization of that entire space."¹⁰¹ And in December 2013, Mikhail Margelov, then chairman of Russia's Foreign Affairs Committee and a key liaison with African countries, said, "Russia believed that the situation in each country of the region had to be resolved through political means, avoiding violence and civil war. That stance was prompted by the history of attempts to impose democracy on Islamic countries, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, through intervention. The efforts ended in failed states rather than democracy."¹⁰²

Beyond direct statements, the Kremlin has sought to control public perceptions of the Arab Spring on a more subtle level. The Kremlin-funded RIA Novosti has a page dedicated to Arab Spring-related news, titled *Arabskiy Perevorot*,¹⁰³ meaning “Arab coup,” with the latter term usually carrying a negative connotation—possibly translated as “upheaval,” given that it literally means “upside down.” In the same vein, the Kremlin-controlled media typically refers to Crimea’s “return” to Russia, rather than Russia’s annexation of Crimea, to reinforce the idea that Crimea has always been part of Russia and belongs there.

Arguably, the Kremlin’s portrayal of the Arab Spring has resonated well within segments of Russian society. According to Fyodor Lukyanov, who edits the influential journal *Russia in Foreign Affairs*,

Today’s Russian society does not believe in revolutions after its multitude of shocks, dashed hopes, and disappointments. The value of stability is appreciated, for the time being, both by those at the top and at the bottom. An ordinary Russian observer looks at the euphoria of excited crowds with extreme skepticism, knowing how such usually ends...No grounds for optimism are to be found in the outcome of the tumult in the countries of the so-called Arab Spring—not in a single one.¹⁰⁴

On March 18, 2014, speaking before Russia’s Federal Assembly about the situation in Crimea, Putin again tied events in Ukraine with the Middle East. The gist of his remarks was that the West, led by the United States, was continuing a long-running campaign of force against sovereign nations, from the 1999 NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia, to the post-Soviet color revolutions, to “coups” in the Middle East. The legitimate grievances of people tired of “life without prospects...were cynically used,” he said, and onto these countries standards “were forced” that did not fit their traditions and history. As a result, Putin said, instead of democracy and freedom came “chaos, sparks of violence, a series of coups—the Arab Spring has turned into an Arab Winter.”¹⁰⁵

In addition to spreading the message that the West fomented the Arab Spring uprisings, the Kremlin has tagged the West with responsibility for creating the Islamic State. Thus, prominent Russian historian and Middle East expert Georgiy Mirsky wrote in his blog on the liberal

radio station Echo Moskvyy's website, "In particular, it is hammered every day into the [Russian] population that Americans created ISIS and stand behind the jihadists, who simply sometimes get out of control."¹⁰⁶

In addition to lost political influence in light of the Arab Spring, the Kremlin was concerned with the financial losses entailed by the ouster of the Kremlin's traditional Soviet-era allies. Indeed, Putin wrote in a February 2012 article for Russia's annual Valdai Conference website, "It appears that with the Arab Spring countries, as with Iraq, Russian companies are losing their decades-long positions in local commercial markets and are being deprived of large commercial contracts."¹⁰⁷

Libya and Syria in particular have been two of Russia's biggest arms customers. In Libya, Russia lost billions of dollars' worth of arms contracts. While the Russian government and analysts typically quantified this loss at \$4 to \$4.5 billion, "the real lost revenue," according to Mikhail Dmitriyev, who heads Russia's Federal Service on Military and Technical Cooperation, "could top tens of billions of dollars."¹⁰⁸ Lost contracts covered a wide range of military equipment, including Su-35 fighters, Yak-130 combat and training planes, Project 636 submarines, advanced S-300 systems, Mi-17 transport helicopters, and many others. In Syria, Russia stood to lose approximately \$20 billion should Bashar al-Assad fall.¹⁰⁹

Having created an important context, we now turn to Russia's influence in certain individual Middle East countries.

EGYPT

RUSSIA-EGYPT RELATIONS have a long history, particularly those between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Church of Alexandria. Diplomatically, during much of the Cold War, Egypt was among the Soviet Union's closest and most important Middle East allies. Although relations deteriorated after Egyptian president Anwar Sadat expelled Soviet military advisors and air force personnel from the country in summer 1972, they began improving after the Soviet Union's fall, and especially after Putin came to power.

On August 14, 2000, five months after his election as Russia's president, Putin and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak spoke by phone in what was their first "direct contact," according to the Kremlin, discussing "issues of friendly relations."¹¹⁰ In April 2001, Mubarak came to Moscow and signed a "long-term programme of developing trade, economic, industrial, science, and technical cooperation" and a "declaration of principles of friendly relations and cooperation."¹¹¹ Other high-level official exchange visits followed in the coming years.

In September 2004, in Cairo, Sergei Lavrov signed the "Protocol on Strategic Cooperation and Dialogue between Foreign Ministries." On April 26–27, 2005, Putin visited Egypt—the first such visit in forty years—and signed another statement on "deepening friendly relations," which underlined the increasingly "strategic character" of Egypt-Russia ties. That same month, Putin visited the Council of the Arab League—the first-ever visit by a Soviet or Russian leader—and the Council accredited the Russian ambassador in Egypt as a plenipotentiary representative to the Arab League. Other high-level official exchanges over the years included additional visits from heads of state, and the two countries signed documents signaling increased bilateral cooperation on education, science, and energy—including a March 8 agreement on Russia's involvement in Egypt's nuclear power industry—and trade.¹¹²

With the onset of the Arab Spring and Mubarak's ouster, Russia temporarily lost influence in Egypt. Putin was eager to regain it and reached out to the Muslim Brotherhood, even though Russia's Supreme Court had labeled the group a terrorist organization in February 2003 and officially banned it in Russia's territory.¹¹³ Russian officials had also repeatedly accused the Muslim Brotherhood of strengthening the Islamic insurgency in the North Caucasus. Nonetheless, on June 28, 2012, Putin congratulated newly elected president and Muslim Brotherhood member Mohamed Morsi on his victory.¹¹⁴ The next month, on July 23, Putin sent a telegram congratulating Morsi on the sixtieth anniversary of the country's 1952 revolution—a nationalist upheaval that ended British occupation. Putin expressed the “desire to strengthen relations” between Russia and Egypt in “all different areas,” as well as for “constructive partnership” between the two countries to resolve regional issues.¹¹⁵

Putin thus signaled that he welcomed the return of Egypt as leader of the Arab world. Yet a subtle anti-Western message dwelled in this outreach: Putin had chosen to congratulate Morsi on the anniversary of an event viewed by many as the overthrow of Western imperialism. Russian officials also began discussing the possibility of easing restrictions on the Muslim Brotherhood in Russia,¹¹⁶ and in April 2013 Morsi visited Moscow, a gesture described by the Kremlin's official newspaper as “opening doors for cooperation” between the two countries.¹¹⁷

Putin's outreach to the Muslim Brotherhood revealed that although Putin might prefer secularists in Egypt, he would work with the Islamists to secure Russia's influence amid the vacuum created by the Western absence, even if this meant supporting an organization that in the Kremlin's own view encouraged terrorism and instability in Russia.¹¹⁸

After Morsi's ouster in July 2013, Egypt-Russia relations began improving notably just as U.S.-Egypt relations began to decline. Cairo was growing increasingly concerned with what it perceived to be U.S. engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood, and felt abandoned in its fight against terrorists, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula—a hotbed of radicalism and instability going back to Mubarak's time. Washington also delayed weapons deliveries to Egypt, withheld military aid, and later halted the nascent U.S.-Egypt Strategic Dialogue. The decline of

U.S.-Egypt relations thus created an opportunity for Putin to assert his national interests in Egypt.

Unlike President Barack Obama, Putin enthusiastically endorsed Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's bid for the Egyptian presidency. Putin had no interest in criticizing Sisi on his democratic backslide. In the view of some experts, the Kremlin was looking to boost ties with Egypt to ensure the success of the upcoming Geneva peace conference on Syria, while others thought the Kremlin saw in Sisi a new Gamal Abdul Nasser, who spoke out for Arab nationalism and against Western imperialism.¹¹⁹

Economic relations between Egypt and Russia have improved significantly in recent years. In 2014, out of 10 million Russian tourists traveling abroad, more than 3 million have visited Egypt, primarily the Sinai resort of Sharm al-Sheikh. According to Putin, this represented an approximately 50 percent increase as compared to the previous year.¹²⁰

On October 31, 2015, however, the Russian passenger Metrojet Airbus A321 crashed as it took off from Sharm al-Sheikh, killing all 224 passengers. While the Russian government was slow to admit the crash was the result of a terrorist-planted bomb, and in fact claimed the U.S. and British governments had "irresponsibly" rushed to conclusions,¹²¹ by November 6 Putin had suspended all flights to Egypt.¹²² Prime Minister Medvedev soon reportedly said that the Russian government had evacuated approximately 25,000 out of 80,000 Russian tourists from Egypt.¹²³ The suspension of flights will undoubtedly hurt the Egyptian economy, and in late December the Egyptian government expressed the hope that it would soon be lifted.¹²⁴ At the time of this writing, though, the Russian government has expressed no such intentions.

Trade between the two countries also grew by approximately 50 percent over this period, according to Putin, reaching more than \$4.5 billion in 2014. Specifically, Russia provides approximately 40 percent of Egypt's grain. In July 2015, Russia and Egypt held their first-ever joint naval exercises, off the Port of Alexandria.¹²⁵ Indeed, Putin has made Russian naval expansion a priority, including restoring Russia's naval presence on the Mediterranean, and an alliance with Egypt is helping him achieve this goal.¹²⁶

Ultimately, the curtailed U.S. engagement with Egypt failed to elicit the human rights advances sought by Washington. It also hurt Egypt's crucial military efforts against its own jihadists. Putin exploited this vacuum and has gained credibility, as well as financial and strategic benefits, as a result.

IRAN

RUSSIA AND IRAN share a complicated history. For centuries, Russia-Iran relations vacillated between limited cooperation, competition, and outright conflict. Toward the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Union began selling arms to Iran. Between 1989 and 1991, the Soviets signed a number of arms-supply deals with Tehran, worth a total of \$5.1 billion, making Iran one of the Soviet defense industry's biggest clients. In the 1990s, Moscow and Tehran entered a period of strategic cooperation based on mutual interests. Moscow continued to rely primarily on its own weapons industry for economic growth; Iran was interested in benefiting from this policy. Throughout the 1990s, Russia's defense industry continued to supply weaponry to Iran, such as tanks and ammunition. Russia also helped Iran build factories that produced tanks and armored personnel carriers. In addition, oil prices rose in the late 1990s, and the Kremlin began to view Iran as a more attractive recipient of Russian exports than it had previously.

Another significant factor driving cooperation with Iran in the 1990s involved Russia's insecurities about Central Asia and the Caucasus. Moscow believed Tehran was interested in expanding into these regions, and Moscow was unsure what impact increased Iranian influence would have on Russia's sizable Muslim minorities. In 1999, shortly before Putin assumed his first presidential term, Moscow's insecurity about the nation's direction contributed, in part, to the Kremlin's desire to establish clearly defined spheres of influence.¹²⁷ According to the scholar Talal Nizameddin, who authored a recent book on Russia in the Middle East under Putin, "During the 1990s Moscow shifted towards a more geo-strategic Eurasian emphasis and increasingly Iran would become a defense shield in Russia's southern region."¹²⁸ Indeed, this consideration continues to influence Russia's Iran policy.¹²⁹

In October 2000, Moscow increased its efforts to complete the Iranian nuclear reactor in Bushehr, a project Russia had become involved

in a few years earlier but that had been started by Germany's Siemens and abandoned after Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. Though Putin at this stage was cautious in his relations with the United States, in November 2000 he unilaterally revoked the Gore-Chernomyrdin protocol¹³⁰—a secret U.S.-Russia agreement signed by then Russian prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and U.S. vice president Al Gore in June 1995, which required Russia to end all military cooperation with Iran by 1999 in exchange for cooperation with the United States on defense technology.¹³¹

Now that Putin was president, many hardline Russian politicians and generals endorsed improving relations with Iran in anticipation of major arms sales. By 2001, Iran grew to become the third largest buyer of Russian weaponry.¹³² That year, Iran also purchased from Russia “thirty military transport planes and thirty Mi-8 military transport helicopters.”¹³³ The increased arms trade raised Russia-Iran relations and cooperation to a new level. Upon Putin's invitation, Iranian president Mohammad Khatami came to Moscow in March 2001—the first such visit by an Iranian president since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Throughout the coming years, Russia and Iran maintained nuclear-materials trade and the Kremlin shielded Tehran from Western pressure and defended its nuclear program as peaceful, even in the face of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) evidence to the contrary. Meanwhile, Tehran looked the other way on Russia's actions in Chechnya. Still, historical distrust between the two countries remained, and Russia and Iran did not always act in each other's best interest. Illustrating such divergence was a July 2001 incident in which Tehran halted BP's oil exploration efforts off Azerbaijan's Caspian coast, in an area Tehran also claimed. As a result, Azerbaijan turned to the United States and Turkey for support, indirectly undermining Russia's interests.¹³⁴

The 2003 Iraq war gave Russia and Iran another reason for increased cooperation: a shared sense of perceived Western encroachment and aversion to the spread of liberal democracy. In the Iraq context, both also feared the rise of Sunni radical extremism, including in Afghanistan—which is traditionally anti-Shiite and anti-Russian.

In December 2005, Tehran signed a billion-dollar arms deal that included twenty-nine Tor-M1 missile-defense systems to protect the

Bushehr nuclear power plant. According to press reports in early 2006, Russia had also invested \$750 million in energy projects in Iran.¹³⁵ The same year, Moscow strongly endorsed the P5+1 format for negotiating with Tehran on the nuclear issue because of its multilateral approach. This new format gave Russia increased diplomatic leverage over the West, and Russia consistently diluted sanctions against Tehran.

On nuclear proliferation generally, Russia's attitude differs from that of the West. Moscow primarily cares about its own interests and whether or not a country's nuclear program would threaten these interests, rather than international security. In 2002, Russian defense minister Sergei Ivanov outlined Moscow's policy toward nuclear proliferation: "The key criteria of Russian policy in this sphere are our own national security, the strengthening of our country's international positions and the preservation of its great power status."¹³⁶ Moscow does not want another nuclear rival in the region, but sees such a prospect as less threatening than does the West.¹³⁷ For example, Russia's 2015 military doctrine and its earlier 2010 iteration cast NATO as a greater threat to Russia than Iran's nuclear proliferation. Russia's National Security Strategy, most recently updated December 31, 2015, not only names NATO expansion and the color revolutions among top threats to Russia's security but also asserts that NATO's latest buildup on Russia's border violates international law.¹³⁸ Geographically, Russia is closer than Western nations to other nuclear powers, and the Kremlin is used to dealing with these nations and therefore less threatened. Putin has thus often downplayed Iran's nuclear ambitions. In June 2013, for example, he said: "I have no doubt that Iran is adhering to the rules. Because I have no proof of the opposite."¹³⁹ From Moscow's perspective, according to Mark Katz, a nuclear agreement that improved Iran's relations with the United States would be worse for Moscow than a nuclear Iran.¹⁴⁰

In October 2007, visiting Tehran for a summit including Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan, Putin warned, "We should not even think of making use of force in this region." This was the first visit to Tehran by a Kremlin head of state since Stalin's 1943 visit.¹⁴¹ That December, Russia began delivering nuclear fuel for Bushehr, asserting it would be used for peaceful purposes. President George W. Bush framed the situation this way:

One of the interesting tactical decisions that Russia has made—that the United States supports—is the notion that Iran has a sovereign right to have a civilian nuclear power program. What they don't have is our confidence that they should be able to enrich uranium so that those plants would work. Why? Because they had a covert weapons program that they did not declare and have yet to declare.¹⁴²

During his second term, Putin used Russia's association with Tehran as a bargaining chip in his resistance to a missile-defense shield in Eastern Europe oriented toward Iran, Russia's conflict with Georgia, and other points of disagreement with the West, as well as to maintain Russia's increased influence in the Middle East. Moscow's actions show that its interests in Tehran were strictly pragmatic and calculated based on real-politik. Working with Iran fit the Kremlin's broader strategy. "An opinion became prevalent in Moscow," writes Talal Nizameddin, "that persistent U.S. threats to launch a military campaign against Iran belied a greater ambition by Washington and its allies to weaken and isolate Russia."¹⁴³ Furthermore, according to Mark Katz, the Iran sanctions as approved by Moscow increased the demand for Russian oil. They made Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan reliant on export routes through Russia while blocking the construction of pipelines in Iran.¹⁴⁴ Azerbaijan and, to a lesser extent, Kazakhstan export through the Caucasus and Turkey. Turkmenistan, for its part, has a large gas pipeline to China. Thus, for the Kremlin, the advantages of supporting Iran outweighed the disadvantages. From Tehran's perspective, Russia was a similarly useful partner as Iran expanded its ties in the region.

Although the Kremlin agreed to support Western sanctions against Iran in 2010, it convinced the UN to water them down, and also extracted an unprecedented concession: the lifting of U.S. sanctions against the Russian military complex, which would technically allow Moscow to sell anti-aircraft batteries to Tehran.¹⁴⁵ As recalled by Ambassador Eric Edelman, a former assistant to Vice President Dick Cheney, the Russians first appeared to share Western goals during the talks, but then they would quickly turn around and act as Iran's lawyer.¹⁴⁶

The same year, under Israeli and U.S. pressure, Russia agreed to suspend, but not cancel, an \$800 million contract from 2007 with Iran for S-300 anti-aircraft missiles—a system that could help shoot down U.S. or Israeli warplanes in the event of a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities—in

exchange for concessions on missile defense in Europe. In October 2011, shortly after anti-Assad protests broke out in Syria, a Hezbollah delegation paid its first official visit to Moscow.¹⁴⁷ While few details about the visit were made public, its reported purpose was to discuss regional developments, such as Moscow's views on the Arab Spring and support for Assad.¹⁴⁸ The visiting delegation's head, Mohammad Raad, said that "this first visit paved the way for cooperation and follow-up discussions with the Russian officials."¹⁴⁹

Tehran supported Putin's decision to return to the presidency for a third term in May 2012. Mahmoud Reza Sajjadi, Iran's ambassador to Russia, explained, "There is almost no other state such as Russia, which has so many common interests and common views with Iran." Iranian sources such as the hardline daily *Resalat* noted the hope Tehran placed in Putin's ability to resist the West and the proposed U.S. reset. Nikolai Bobkin, chief editor of the Russian magazine *Delovoy Iran* (Business Iran), described the "unusual for official circles candor" with which Iranian diplomats talk about Russia as its closest ally.¹⁵⁰

As already suggested, Russia has never been as threatened by Iran's nuclear program as the West has been. In January 2012, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement declaring Western concerns to be overblown. While expressing "regret" and "concern" about the launch of the new Iranian uranium enrichment plant at Fordow, near Qom, the statement noted that "Iran informed the IAEA of the beginning of the enrichment work at this facility beforehand and that all nuclear material there is under the agency's control."¹⁵¹ While this was technically correct, the IAEA also confirmed that Iran had begun production of uranium enriched at up to 20 percent, which according to analysts was a step toward building a nuclear weapon. Indeed, Western officials quickly condemned the move as a sign of escalation and a violation of Iran's nuclear obligations.¹⁵² Lavrov, meanwhile, has also argued that Iran deserves to be an "equal partner" in resolving Middle East issues, and that sanctions hurt Russia-Iran trade.

In particular, the recent closeness of Iran-Russia government ties has been unprecedented. On the nuclear front, the state-run Russian firm Atomstroy helped the Iranians complete the Bushehr nuclear power plant, officially giving the Iranians control of the facility in September 2013. And in November 2014, Russia's state-run nuclear corporation

Rosatom announced an agreement to build two new reactor units in Iran, possibly to be followed by six more.

In light of Putin's standoff with the West over Russian aggression in Ukraine, bilateral cooperation has intensified and expanded to other sectors. In August 2014, for example, the Russian Ministry of Energy announced an oil-for-goods deal with Iran worth \$1.5 billion per month; under the proposed terms, approximately 500,000 barrels of Iranian oil per day would be provided at a discount in exchange for Russian goods and services. Analysts questioned the accord's logistical feasibility, and its current status is unclear, but the agreement remains on the table.

Similarly, in December 2015, Mehdi Sanaei, Iran's ambassador to Russia, reportedly announced the obviously unrealistic goal of boosting bilateral trade from the current \$3–5 billion to \$70 billion. Previously, in a June 2014 interview with *Russia in Global Affairs*, he had offered advice on how to minimize the effects of Western sanctions and praised Moscow's prominent international role in the matter.

Meanwhile, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani has met with Putin six times in the past year,¹⁵³ and other senior officials from both countries have held multiple meetings as well. Most recently, Putin visited Iran on November 23, 2015, and met with Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei,¹⁵⁴ who thanked Putin for his role in the nuclear negotiations, reportedly describing the Russian leader as “one of the most influential people in the world.”¹⁵⁵ Upon the meeting's conclusion, Putin and Rouhani announced a package of signed agreements, including on trade and easing travel for citizens of both countries. In addition, they announced contracts on construction in Iran of the Garmsar–Inchah Borun railway electrification project, a thermal power plant, and a desalination plant, and an agreement on deep-groundwater reserves in Iran.¹⁵⁶ Putin added that the two countries will continue to cooperate on nuclear energy.

In January 2015, Russian defense minister Shoigu traveled to Tehran, the first such visit by a Russian defense minister in fifteen years. He and his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Dehghan, signed a memorandum of understanding on military cooperation, and while the details remain sparse, the document apparently mentioned joint military drills. The next month, Putin lifted the ban on the S-300 sales after Tehran signed an interim nuclear agreement with the West, and press reports indicated that Russia plans to deliver them by the end of 2015.¹⁵⁷ The Russian press

later reported that according to a December 30, 2015, interview with Russian deputy prime minister Dmitry Rogozin, Russia began delivering S-300s to Iran.¹⁵⁸ The Kremlin was especially supportive of the completed Iran deal, and Putin even took credit for its approach.¹⁵⁹ For Putin, the deal meant that “bilateral relations with Iran will receive a new impetus and will no longer be influenced by external factors.”¹⁶⁰

For all their lofty pronouncements of friendship and cooperation, both Tehran and Moscow ultimately see each other as part of a larger strategic calculus, and hence do not fully trust each other. Analysts argue that Tehran had not forgotten the snub of the S-300 weapons ban and felt similarly disrespected by the Gore–Chernomyrdin protocol. Tehran, of course, would have preferred that Moscow oppose sanctions against it altogether. Ultimately, interests driving Russia’s Iran policy include reducing the West’s influence and raising its own, and possibly fostering a better relationship with Tehran, even at the expense of international security.

Thus in April 2015, Georgiy Mirsky wrote in his blog, “Several years ago, I heard from the lips of one MIA [Ministry of Internal Affairs] employee such reasoning: ‘For us, a pro-American Iran is worse than a nuclear Iran.’” This statement, according to Mirsky, demonstrates that “it doesn’t matter what will happen with Iran and in general with the Middle East—the main thing is that Washington wins nothing.”¹⁶¹ Although Russia’s and Iran’s long-term goals in Syria may differ,¹⁶² in the short term a clear Russia-Iran alliance has emerged. Most recently, in the context of Russia’s Syria intervention, Russian officials announced plans to open a \$5 billion credit line to Iran.¹⁶³

IRAQ

RUSSIA'S RELATIONS with Iraq go back decades and have been complicated, characterized by periods of cooperation and disagreement alike. Upon entering office in 2000, Putin set out to expand Russia's influence in Iraq. He aimed to support development of major Russian business ties, especially through Russian oil companies, and thereby secure political influence. In doing so, he sought to recover the approximately \$8 billion debt Iraq owed Russia, primarily accumulated when Saddam Hussein purchased Soviet weaponry in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War. The commercial component was especially important because Russia's contracts with Iraq were worth more than Russia's contracts with any other Arab states.¹⁶⁴

During Putin's first presidential term, the Kremlin renewed a push to remove UN sanctions against Iraq.¹⁶⁵ During Hussein's rule, according to expert estimates, Russian companies could make as much as \$70 billion on oil concessions, primarily from the massive West Qurna II field.¹⁶⁶ The maintenance of UN sanctions was therefore contrary to Russian business interests.¹⁶⁷ In particular, the UN-approved oil-for-food program had been highly profitable for Russian companies, granting Iraqi oil to Russia in return for various products, from rice to refinery equipment, on preferential terms. More than a third of Russia's tax revenues depended on oil prices, and Hussein's eventual ouster entailed a loss of lucrative contracts, especially given the rise in oil prices.¹⁶⁸

At this stage, U.S.-Russia relations were relatively strong. Indeed, the United States hinted that Russia would be able to restore its interests in Iraq after the war. For example, in a live 2003 interview with *Echo Moskvy*, U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell expressed confidence that a new Iraqi government would repay Iraq's \$8 billion debt to Russia in full, and that the United States would not object to the presence of Russian peacekeepers in Iraq. He also confirmed Washington's intention to

repeal the Jackson-Vanik amendment, a measure initially intended to grant normal trade relations to communist countries in exchange for improving their human rights record, especially on emigration. Indeed, Russia had viewed the amendment as an irritant to bilateral ties since the Soviet Union's fall.¹⁶⁹ Other signs, however, suggested a fraying. By March 2003, Putin had publicly supported France's opposition to the war, calling it "a direct violation of international law, and a major political mistake."¹⁷⁰

In addition, allegations arose that Russia had moved Hussein's weapons into Syria in the weeks before the U.S. invasion. Particularly, John A. Shaw, a deputy undersecretary of defense, claimed that Russian troops, working with Iraqi intelligence, "almost certainly" removed the high-explosive material that went missing from the al-Qaaqaa weapons facility, south of Baghdad.¹⁷¹

Writing about Russia's stance on the Iraq war, Yevgeny Primakov explains, "Our position was that a war in Iraq would further divide the world along religious lines, destabilize many of the Middle East's more moderate regimes, and weaken the international support enjoyed by the United States after September 11." He goes on, "Russia did everything in its power to stop the invasion of Iraq," recalling that Putin sent him to Baghdad in February 2003, where he unsuccessfully urged Hussein to resign.¹⁷²

In the end, the Kremlin abandoned Hussein when it became clear that war was imminent. This shift can be explained in part by Russia's own frustration with Hussein's years of erratic behavior. In addition, Hussein's international image was far too poor for Russia to support him in a military confrontation against the United States.¹⁷³

Yet ultimately, the Kremlin valued its interests in Iraq above all else. Indeed, Putin tried to maintain good ties with all players—the United States, Hussein, and the Iraqi opposition—to ensure access to Iraqi oil no matter who emerged victorious. At the same time, pronouncements of opposition to the war scored Putin domestic points in the run-up to the 2004 election, in which he sought to maintain his image as a strong nationalist in light of the Beslan attack. This opposition also gained him credibility in the Middle East among anti-American actors, such as Syria and Iran, for standing up to perceived U.S. unilateralism, all the while fitting Putin's vision of a "multipolar" world.

In December 2003, Putin told a visiting Iraqi delegation that Russia was ready to forgive more than half of the \$8 billion owed by Baghdad. “We strongly hope that Russia will have good relations with the new leadership of Iraq,” Putin said. Abdulaziz al-Hakim, head of the U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing Council, reportedly said Putin made this “generous promise” in return for granting Russian companies access to opportunities in Iraq. Russian officials reportedly suggested that the amount written off by Moscow would be closely linked to the access given to Russian companies, especially oil companies.¹⁷⁴

After the war, the Kremlin focused on regaining lost and unimplemented contracts in Iraq and achieved some success in recouping influence. This became all the more important because oil prices almost doubled in 2004 as compared to 2003—from \$30 at the end of 2003 to \$56.37 at their peak in October 2004.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, the weakened U.S. regional position and the rise of the Iraqi insurgency created an opportunity for Putin to step in.

In 2005, the Kremlin agreed to write off much of Iraq’s Soviet-era debt, and Russia’s Lukoil provided several million dollars’ worth of humanitarian aid to Iraq.¹⁷⁶ In February 2008, Russia forgave all Iraq’s \$12.9 billion in debt.¹⁷⁷

Since 2009, Lukoil and Gazprom Neft (a Gazprom subsidiary) have won a number of large contracts.¹⁷⁸ One analyst concluded in June 2011 that Russia’s “further involvement in Iraq will generally be well received by the Arabs, who have traditionally viewed Moscow as a counterweight to the U.S.”¹⁷⁹ Indeed, in 2012 the Kremlin signed a \$4 billion arms deal with the Iraqi government—the largest single arms deal of Putin’s tenure. The accord placed Iraq as the second largest buyer of Russian arms after India and equal to China, according to a July 2012 report by Russia’s giant state-run technology and defense industry corporation Rostec.¹⁸⁰ This accord also places Russia as the second largest supplier of arms to Iraq after the United States.¹⁸¹ According to Russian press reports, deliveries began in October 2013,¹⁸² after a delay reportedly caused by internal corruption claims in the Iraqi parliament.

In October 2013, Putin identified Iraq as an important Middle East partner and announced Russia’s readiness, in this context, to help Iraq, including through “military-technical” cooperation.¹⁸³ In an April 2015 interview with Iraq Oil Report, Andrei Kuzyaev, head of Lukoil’s non-

Russian operations, said the company plans to make West Qurna II one of Iraq's largest producers in a year.¹⁸⁴

OUTREACH TO KURDISTAN

Moscow has reached out not only to Baghdad but also to Iraqi Kurdistan, showing once again the Kremlin's determination to work with everyone, even if such a move risked angering and losing contracts with Baghdad. Lukoil, for instance, has played a major role as an energy exporter in Iraqi Kurdistan. And in 2012, Gazprom Neft signed two deals with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), making it the fourth major oil company to enter the region and putting it in the same league as U.S.-based Chevron and ExxonMobil and France-based Total. In February 2013, KRG president Masoud Barzani, whose father, Mustafa Barzani, spent approximately twelve years in exile in the Soviet Union, made an official visit to Moscow to strengthen KRG-Russia ties—the first such visit by the Kurdistan president. Upon its conclusion, Gazprom Neft signed an agreement to enter a Kurdistan oil project, the Halabja block—the third Russian energy project in Kurdistan to date.¹⁸⁵ Baghdad, for its part, tolerates such behavior because of its desire for Russian arms.

CRITICISM OF IRAQ WAR

Since 2003, the Russian government has consistently decried Western intervention in Iraq, especially as sectarian violence escalated after the U.S. troop withdrawal in late 2011 and the Syrian war helped fuel another Iraqi insurgency. According to Russian foreign minister Lavrov, speaking in June 2014 as violence surged, "What is happening in Iraq is an illustration of the complete failure of the adventure, which was started primarily by the United States and Britain and which they let get out of control completely."¹⁸⁶ In the words of Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich, speaking during the same month, "It is necessary to draw proper conclusions about how dangerous and unacceptable it is to flirt with extremists of all stripes, be guided by double standards, and intervene, including by force, in the internal affairs of sovereign states."¹⁸⁷ In June 2015, at the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum, Putin himself asserted that the United States had destroyed Iraq, a country that had previously lacked an al-Qaeda presence, by creating a power vacuum soon filled by the Islamic State.¹⁸⁸

Nonetheless, instability in Iraq has generally helped Russia in various ways, such as by keeping oil prices high and increasing demand for Russian oil. In 2002, for example, “Russia had risen to the first place among Iraq’s main trading partners, leaving behind Egypt and France.”¹⁸⁹

From a geostrategic perspective, U.S. success in Iraq was not in Putin’s interest, given the influence this would entail over the greater Middle East. Even in the early 2000s, the Kremlin perceived NATO’s overall expansion as an encroachment on its sphere of influence. The Caucasus remained unstable, China was gaining influence in Russia’s far east,¹⁹⁰ and the Kremlin had repeatedly expressed its support for Iraq’s unity.¹⁹¹ But as this section has shown, Russia’s behavior demonstrates concern with its self-interest over any ideological concerns. In this sense, the Kremlin has prioritized influence and leverage over both Baghdad and Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. At the same time, Russia’s economic interests have often dovetailed with its foreign policy of resisting the West.

SYRIA

SINCE THE 1960s, Moscow has been Damascus's closest ally. Between 1963 and 1991, approximately 50,000 Syrians studied at top Russian schools, such as Moscow State University and the Peoples' Friendship University, and about a fifth of these Syrians studied specifically at the military academies. Over this period, Moscow also supplied Damascus with some \$26 billion in military equipment.¹⁹² And the Soviet Union helped build Syria's chemical weapons. Correspondingly, many Russians moved to Syria during the Cold War, and intermarriage naturally took place. With respect to the student exchanges, the Soviet leadership sought to groom top students from allied countries on whom it could later rely for support. Because Syria was a key to the Soviet position in the Middle East, Syrians were referred to as "allies" and "friends" in public broadcasts and statements.

Under Yeltsin, Syria moved down the list of Russia's priorities, although it did not disappear entirely. While Syria reportedly began producing its own chemical weapons in the mid-1990s, including the highly toxic nerve agent XV, several reports suggest Moscow's continued involvement in Syria's CW development.¹⁹³ More broadly, relations were reinforced in 1996 when Yevgeny Primakov, as Foreign Intelligence Service director, began his efforts to restore Russia's influence in the Middle East. Moscow was interested in selling weapons to Syria, whose president, Hafiz al-Assad, thought the Russians could help counterbalance Washington and Israel in the region. In May 1999, Russia and Syria signed a ten-year agreement for "peaceful cooperation on nuclear power," and that July, Assad made an official visit to Moscow aimed at boosting ties. The Syrian leader expressed support for the Kremlin's efforts to build a "multipolar" world "without [foreign] diktat."¹⁹⁴

Bashar al-Assad's rise to the presidency, following his father's death in June 2000, occurred three months after Putin's own election as presi-

dent. In the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks, Putin rushed to offer condolences to Washington and support for its fight against terrorism, because in his view, he was fighting the same radical insurgency in the North Caucasus. Similarly, Assad presented himself to the West as a secular leader combating his country's Sunni extremists. Yet Russia and Syria both opposed the Iraq war, given the threat it posed to their national interests and stability as leaders. Putin and Assad alike feared that Saddam's ouster could be followed by similar attempts against their own leadership, along with a push to promote democratization. As the fighting in Iraq continued, Syria allowed Sunni extremist fighters from around the region to cross into Iraq via Syrian territory. While Syria supported the anti-U.S. insurgency, Russia looked the other way, highlighting the Kremlin's double standard toward radical Islam: intolerance at home, but support abroad when it suited Moscow's interests.

A further significant boost to Syria-Russia ties occurred after a Putin-Assad meeting on January 24, 2005, when Moscow announced it would write off most of Syria's debt and sell arms to Damascus in return for Syria's permission to establish permanent Russian naval facilities in Tartus and Latakia. The ultimate tally would be Russian forgiveness of almost \$9.8 billion of Syria's \$13.4 billion debt.¹⁹⁵ In Moscow's calculus, closer ties with Syria provided a response to what it saw as a militarized U.S. foreign policy.

Yet another demonstration of close Russia-Syria ties occurred following the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, a killing in which Syria was strongly suspected. On the UN Security Council, Russia continuously diluted resolutions calling for Syria to fully cooperate with the investigation because, in Moscow's view, the international tribunal violated state sovereignty and "unilaterally imposed a decision on Lebanon." Only in May 2007, after Russia had stalled the process for months, did the Security Council pass Resolution 1757, authorizing the establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.¹⁹⁶ In subsequent statements, Russian officials continued stressing the importance of state sovereignty when referring to the tribunal.¹⁹⁷ A more likely explanation was that, for Putin, the situation echoed calls for an investigation into the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, the former Russian Federal Security Service and KGB officer who had defected

to Britain and probed Putin's personal connections to the Russian mafia before being poisoned in November 2006 with polonium-210.¹⁹⁸

In 2008, Assad was among very few leaders who "completely" supported Russia's invasion of Georgia. According to Russian press reports, he used the opportunity to request Iskander missiles and other weapons from then president Medvedev, because, according to Assad, Israel had provided training and weapons to the Georgians. The Syrian government, for its part, denied that Assad had expressed readiness to host these weapons. Previously, the Kremlin had disallowed Assad from having the weapons over fears they would harm Israel.¹⁹⁹ Upon the conclusion of a 2008 meeting, however, Lavrov told journalists that Russia would supply primarily defensive weapons to Syria, which "will not disturb the strategic balance in the region," although Russia would still review Syria's requests for new weapons.²⁰⁰ Furthermore, several days later, Russia's charge d'affaires, Igor Belyaev, announced to Damascus that Russia would increase its naval presence off Syria's Mediterranean coast.²⁰¹

In the ensuing years, Russia emerged as Syria's primary weapons supplier. From 2007 through 2010, Russian arms sales to Syria reached \$4.7 billion, more than twice the figure for the previous four years, according to the Congressional Research Service.²⁰² According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Russia accounted for 78 percent of Syria's weapons purchases between 2007 and 2012. And press reports indicate that Russian companies have invested \$20 billion in Syria since 2009.²⁰³

Since the Syrian uprising began in March 2011, the Kremlin has supported Assad unequivocally, despite statements to the contrary. It has armed Assad, shielded him at the UN Security Council, agreed to take Syria's crude oil in exchange for refined oil products to sustain the country's military and economy, and provided loans to stave off Syrian bankruptcy. Although the Kremlin has insisted throughout the crisis that Russia opposes the use of chemical weapons, it has blocked UN resolutions broadly condemning their use, even though these resolutions did not assign blame to any particular party.²⁰⁴ In summer 2013, following a sarin attack in a Damascus suburb, the Moscow-brokered deal to put Syria's chemical arsenal under international control helped avoid military strikes against the Syrian regime while reportedly allowing Assad to keep certain weapons as bargaining chips.²⁰⁵ In August 2015, as the UN Security

Council investigated chlorine attacks in Syria, the West believed Assad was responsible. Yet in response, Lavrov said the removal of Assad's CW arsenal had been unequivocally successful. In Lavrov's words: "Sometimes publications come out that there could be undeclared chemical weapons in Syria. This is all being checked, here we must avoid unfounded accusations. We have every basis to consider that Syria will continue cooperating closely." Until September 10, 2015, Russia threatened to wield its veto to resist Security Council efforts to investigate the attacks.²⁰⁶

Russian ships have been involved in several Syria-related incidents in international waters. In summer 2009, even before the Syrian uprising, the cargo ship *Arctic Sea* was carrying timber and reportedly hijacked off the coast of Sweden—the first Baltic Sea piracy incident in hundreds of years.²⁰⁷ Russia deployed its navy to locate the vessel, which was owned by a Finnish company and manned by a Russian crew. In the absence of information, intense speculation ensued, including the claim that the ship was carrying weaponry to Syria or Iran and that the hijackers were working for Israeli authorities.²⁰⁸ According to Tarmo Kouts, an EU rapporteur on piracy, "Only the presence of cruise missiles on board the ship can explain Russia's strange behaviour in this whole story." Kouts noted further that Russia's emergency response was much stronger than its response when it "engaged in a recent Somali piracy crisis."²⁰⁹ A senior Spanish prosecutor described the incident as "a clear example" of arms trafficking.²¹⁰ Other incidents include the following:

- In January 2012, Cyprus customs officials intercepted a Syria-bound Russian ammunition ship.²¹¹
- In June 2012, a cargo ship traveling from Russia to Syria with weaponry, including Mi-25 attack helicopters, was forced to return to port after its British insurers withdrew cover. The Russian Foreign Ministry confirmed that the weapons were indeed Syria-bound.²¹²
- In February 2013, Finnish customs officials investigated weapons-smuggling allegations after discovering tank parts in a container aboard a ship traveling from Russia to Syria in violation of EU sanctions.²¹³
- Other reports claimed that Russia was shipping weapons from its Black Sea naval ports to the port of Tartus.²¹⁴

The Kremlin has also provided Assad with loans. According to flight manifests obtained by ProPublica, Moscow flew more than two hundred tons of “banknotes” to the Syrian regime in summer 2011, during periods when the fighting had escalated and the Syrian economy had begun to decline.²¹⁵ Such shipments helped prevent Assad’s bankruptcy and allowed him to pay his forces even as Syria’s foreign reserves dwindled.

While the arms sales and military factors are important in Putin’s relationship with Syria, the political side is more important: standing up to the West, in fact exposing it as impotent, while Russia reclaims its Great Power status, signaling to small countries in its orbit that the West will not support them should they try to escape Moscow’s influence, as Georgia did. For the Kremlin, protecting Assad is less about the leader and more about projecting and increasing Russia’s ability to influence events in the Middle East, as well as in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Against the color revolutions that swept the post-Soviet space and, to some degree, the Middle East, paired with Russia’s peaceful domestic protests of 2011–2012, Putin has an interest in ensuring that any pro-democracy effort fails. This magnifies the importance of Syria in the Kremlin’s strategic calculus. As Talal Nizameddin concludes in his recent book, “History may well come to show us that Russian policy towards Syria more than any other country exposed the hallmarks of the Putin era and the direction in which it took Russia.”²¹⁶

JORDAN, THE GCC, & ISRAEL

GENERALLY SPEAKING, the Kremlin has sought advantageous ties with Middle East capitals from Amman to Riyadh to Jerusalem and stepped in whenever the West retreated.

JORDAN & THE GCC

In 2004, after the Beslan tragedy, Putin began outreach to traditional Sunni powers and Western allies, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in addition to Egypt (see chapter 4). Such gestures took place amid a weakened U.S. regional posture owing to its Iraq invasion. At the same time, Putin tried to maintain good ties with Israel—a relationship he had cultivated since coming to power, following a cool period under the Arab-oriented Primakov, who was foreign minister in 1998–1999.²¹⁷

After 2000, Putin and Jordan's King Abdullah met multiple times. In addition, the presidents of Chechnya and Ingushetia visited Jordan several times between 2005 and 2007, considering that about 100,000 North Caucasians live in Jordan. The North Caucasian connection mattered to Putin. As a concession toward regional Sunni powers, the Kremlin finally agreed to sanctions, albeit diluted ones, against Iran in December 2006 and again in March 2007.

In February 2007, Putin traveled to Saudi Arabia and Qatar. No Russian—or Soviet—head of state had ever done so before. A number of high-level exchange visits followed over the years. As Putin offered Iran help with nuclear technology, he also sought business for Russia's nuclear industry in Jordan, Egypt, and the Gulf, and because these states were Iran's rivals, they wanted technology to keep pace with the Islamic Republic. Putin thus had reason to push these countries away from the West. Gazprom, Lukoil, and Rosneft, along with other Russian companies, sought deals not only with Iran and Iraq but also with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, where Putin pursued major deals involving

Russia's banking and space industries, weapons sales, and joint projects on oil and gas.²¹⁸

The year 2007 also marked a rapid rise in Russia-Jordan trade and economic cooperation. According to the Russian-Jordanian Business Council, bilateral trade “grew substantially and amounted to 169 million dollars (for the period of 10 months in 2007) in comparison to only 64.8 million dollars in 2006.”²¹⁹ In the Gulf, Russia's diplomatic and commercial presence grew swiftly as well, culminating in a GCC-Russia strategic dialogue, which commenced in November 2011, focusing on issues ranging from security to trade and investment to intercultural exchange.

In November 2013, Amman hosted the first meeting of the Intergovernmental Russian-Jordanian Commission for the Development of Trade and Economic and Scientific-Technical Cooperation, at which King Abdullah hailed the “new frontiers” for bilateral partnership, referring specifically to plans to use Russian technology to build Jordan's first nuclear power plant.²²⁰ Indeed, in March 2015 Amman signed a \$10 billion deal with Moscow to construct this plant.²²¹

In June 2015, Saudi Arabia's Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman met with Putin after the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum²²² and reportedly signed six agreements, including a nuclear cooperation deal enlisting Russia to help build up sixteen atomic power stations in Saudi Arabia. According to Russia's Interfax, this agreement “for the first time in the history of Russian-Saudi relations creates a legal basis for cooperation between the two countries in the field of nuclear energy.”²²³ Other agreements covered space cooperation, infrastructure development, and Russian arms.²²⁴ In July 2015, Riyadh committed to investing \$10 billion in Russia—the largest agreement with the desert kingdom to date.²²⁵

These agreements should not be overstated—traditional Saudi-Russian relations have been largely antagonistic. Specifically, Putin has been resentful of Saudi Arabia's alliance with the United States, and Russian officials for years accused the Saudis of financing Sunni terrorism within Russia. However, these recent events do point to Saudi frustration with U.S. policies in the region, especially on Syria. Andrei Klimov, deputy chair of the Russian Senate's international affairs committee, said in July, “Reality is moving Russia and Saudi Arabia together...The Saudis

are learning that they can't rely on the U.S. for everything, and there's considerable advantage in developing relations with Russia."²²⁶

As for Russia and Jordan, on October 23, 2015, the two countries agreed to coordinate their military actions on Syria. They set up a "special working mechanism" in Amman, suggesting the possibility that Jordan—another traditional Western ally frustrated with its policies—is moving closer to Moscow. Commenting on this arrangement, Russian foreign minister Lavrov said, "We think that other states that participate in the anti-terrorist fight can join this mechanism as well."²²⁷

As Western ambivalence and reluctance to use greater force persist on the Syria issue, Putin has crossed another effective redline. His outreach to traditional Western Sunni allies through a carrot-and-stick approach shows his desire to replace the West as a security provider in the Middle East. As the West continues to waffle and ignore its allies' real security needs, Putin has gained the upper hand, exacerbated the Syrian conflict, and further destabilized the region.

ISRAEL

Putin's Israel policy has been driven by several factors. On one, the struggle with Chechnya, Putin has drawn parallels between Russia's and Israel's respective struggles against terrorism. Over years, he has made this very comparison in meetings with many top Israeli officials. Ariel Sharon, a Russian speaker who formed a close personal bond with Putin, in November 2003 called the Russian leader "a true friend of Israel."²²⁸ Israel was among the few countries that did not criticize Putin over his actions in Chechnya. Another driver in Putin's Israel policy involves his emphasis on developing economic ties in the Middle East, and he has correspondingly pursued high-tech trade with Israel in areas including nanotechnology.²²⁹ Finally, Putin has sought a Russian role in the Middle East peace process, guided by hopes of replacing the West and of simply appearing important. Indeed, under Putin, Russia has grown increasingly assertive, seeking to make his own imprint on the peace process since joining the Quartet more than a decade ago. In June 2012, Putin traveled to Israel, nine months before Obama made his first visit as U.S. president.²³⁰ Meeting with Israeli president Shimon Peres in Jerusalem, Putin said, "It is in Russia's national interest to provide peace and tranquility in the Middle East, peace and tranquility to the Israeli people. It is not by accident that

the Soviet Union was among the initiators and supported the creation of the state of Israel.”²³¹ Putin here conveniently left out Stalin’s quick policy reversal after Israel aligned with the West.

Despite improvements in the bilateral relationship, significant differences remain. In March 2006, Hamas leaders came to Moscow on Putin’s invitation and Putin denied that Hamas was a terrorist organization.²³² Other major difficulties for Israel have included Moscow’s support for Iran’s nuclear program and arms trade with Syria—arms that could fall into the possession of Hezbollah. Putin’s Syria intervention only increases Israel’s concerns on this front. Frustrated with U.S. policies, Israel in recent years had been working on improving relations with Russia and regional Sunni powers. Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s September 21 meeting with Putin appeared to alleviate some Israeli concerns about Russia’s Syria intervention.²³³ Yet recent strikes in southern Syria could signal greater problems for Israel if Hezbollah and Iran intensify the ground campaign there. These events again highlight the need for Western powers to attend to the needs of their regional allies, lest they be driven toward Russia.

TURKEY

WHEN PUTIN ENTERED office, Russia's relations with Turkey were, despite lingering problems, on the rise, and the new Russian president only sought to improve them further.²³⁴ One cause for common feeling with Ankara was the Turkish government's effective silence on Russia's human rights abuses in Chechnya. In December 1999, Putin pushed the Russian parliament to approve \$1.5 billion in tax breaks for construction of the Blue Stream pipeline, which would carry gas directly from Russia into Turkey, bypassing third countries.²³⁵ The same month, Gazprom and Italy's ENI signed a memorandum to jointly implement Blue Stream.²³⁶

In October 2000, Russia's then prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov toured Turkey, where he signed a number of agreements and pledged to increase natural gas supplies to Turkey. During his visit, Kasyanov said, "The impression I will take to my country is that Turkey and Russia will see one another as partners rather than rivals."²³⁷ The Kremlin began expanding other areas of cooperation with Turkey, such as in trade, arms contracts, and terrorism-related issues.²³⁸ In 2001, Igor Ivanov, then Russia's foreign affairs minister, made an official visit to Turkey that, according to the Turkish government, "gave new impetus to the Turkish-Russian relations...Both sides agreed to add a multidimensional feature to their relations by extending bilateral cooperation to the Eurasian region."²³⁹ Blue Stream would become one of several key bases for Russian-Turkish cooperation, and commercial gas supplies began traveling through this pipeline in February 2003.²⁴⁰

The downturn in Turkish-U.S. relations aided Putin in his outreach to Ankara. Erdogan had denounced U.S. actions in Iraq as "state terror" and continued to say nothing about Russia's human rights abuses in Chechnya. An alliance with Turkey helped Putin on a number of fronts: Turkey could help contain the Chechen insurgency, Turkey was a large and

growing market for Russia's oil and gas exports, and Turkey was in a position to support Russia's aim to gain observer status in the OIC.²⁴¹

In late 2004, Putin began his intensified post-Beslan outreach to the Middle East with a December trip to Ankara—the first such visit in thirty-two years for a Russian head of state.²⁴² Upon its conclusion, the two leaders signed a number of agreements.²⁴³ At a joint Russian-Turkish business forum, Putin remarked: “At present, the Russian and Turkish economies are developing dynamically. Their attraction for investors and domestic markets [is] growing. And this circumstance, multiplied by the long history of our joint efforts, is a good basis for promising and productive co-operation.”²⁴⁴

Russian-Turkish trade rose by 60 percent in 2004, as compared to the first half of 2003.²⁴⁵ In 2005, Erdogan made the year's first official visit to Moscow, on January 10—a visit that further signaled improvements in the relationship²⁴⁶ and was followed by many others. That year, Erdogan expressed his desire to raise bilateral trade with Russia from \$10 to \$25 billion a year.²⁴⁷ Overall, Russia has benefited more from this relationship than Turkey, given the associated increase in Turkish dependence on Russian energy.

Between 2004 and 2009, Putin and Erdogan met ten times.²⁴⁸ By 2009, Russia had emerged as Turkey's number-one trading partner, and by 2014 bilateral trade reached approximately \$33 billion,²⁴⁹ with Turkey also becoming a top destination for Russian tourists.²⁵⁰ Disagreements between Russia and Turkey, however, had arisen in the context of the Syrian crisis: while Putin had supported Assad unequivocally since the very beginning, Erdogan believed Assad should go. Even so, the two leaders were able to compartmentalize such issues, and on the economic front, talks in 2014 focused on tripling trade by 2020.²⁵¹

Russia's current intervention in Syria, however, changed the picture dramatically. In response to two Russian violations of Turkish airspace—on October 3, 2015, by an Su-30 warplane, and again on October 4—Erdogan referred to Chapter 5 of the NATO treaty.²⁵² As Ambassador James Jeffrey writes, Hatay province, in southern Turkey, is populated in part by ethnic Arabs of the Alawite sect of Islam, which adds a layer of complexity from Turkey's perspective toward Moscow's Syria intervention and violations of Turkey's airspace.²⁵³ In addition, according to the Turkish military, on October 6 unidentified MiG-29 aircraft put Turkish

F-16 jets on radar lock “for a total of four minutes and thirty seconds” when the F-16s were flying reconnaissance missions over the Turkish-Syrian border.²⁵⁴

At an October 6 press conference in Brussels, Erdogan remarked, “If Russia loses a friend like Turkey, with whom it has been cooperating on many issues, it will lose a lot, and it should know that.”²⁵⁵ Putin may think Erdogan has little choice but to cooperate with Russia because of Turkey’s dependence on Russian gas, but a summer 2015 dispute over gas prices delayed Putin’s plan to build a \$15 billion gas pipeline in Turkey, which would allow Putin to ship gas into Europe, bypassing Ukraine.²⁵⁶ In the current context, it is unlikely Ankara and Moscow will agree on a price. Furthermore, Erdogan warned after Russia violated Turkey’s airspace that Moscow risks losing a \$20 billion contract to build a nuclear power plant in Turkey.²⁵⁷ Turkey has also taken in more than a million Syrian refugees—a number Turkey predicts could reach as high as three or four million after winter 2016, specifically because of Russia’s intervention.²⁵⁸

Following Turkey’s downing of a Russian Su-24 jet on November 24, —Ankara claimed that the plane had briefly violated Turkish airspace and that the Turkish military had issued multiple warnings to the jet prior to the shoot-down—Russian-Turkish relations have declined sharply. Several days before the event, the Turkish foreign minister had reportedly warned Russia’s ambassador to Turkey that Russia’s “intensive” bombing of Syrian Turkmen villages in northern Latakia “could lead to serious consequences.”²⁵⁹

For his part, Putin contended that by shooting down the Russian plane, Turkey had “stabbed Russia in the back”²⁶⁰ and demanded an apology from Erdogan, who refused to comply. Several days after the downing of the plane, Putin announced economic sanctions against Turkey “to ensure national security” and expanded these sanctions in late December 2015.²⁶¹ Tensions between Russia and Turkey continue with the new year.

CONCLUSION

A LOOK AT Vladimir Putin's policy toward the Middle East reveals less of a pure interest in the region itself than in what it represents: economic and political gain, opportunities to reduce Western influence and advance a perception of Russia as a Great Power, and obstruction of efforts toward genuine peace with the aim of profiting from conflict, in what policy expert Stephen Blank has described as a "classic a manifestation of the protection racket familiar to us from the Mafia."²⁶²

Another reason can be found in the Kremlin's most recent Syria buildup: diversion from domestic problems to ensure Putin's maintenance of power and the end of international isolation that resulted from his March 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine.

RUSSIA'S UNCERTAIN FUTURE

In reality, Russia is hardly a Great Power. It is facing a number of critical domestic problems: catastrophic population decline, massive health challenges, economic recession, unsustainable military spending at the expense of much-needed infrastructure improvements, and many other issues. Russia is also losing the domestic battle with radical Islam, a situation that will only likely be worsened by its Syria involvement. By traditional indicators, such as GDP, population, and armed forces, Russia is dwarfed by the West. As Russia expert Edward Lucas writes, "The Kremlin's weapons are at best surprise, bluff and subterfuge, not real muscle."²⁶³ Lucas continues:

From a traditional Western viewpoint, it is the rising powers, not declining ones, that are the worry. Yet with regard to Russia that approach is mistaken. For one thing, the prospect of disintegration—ever growing thanks to the incompetence of the Putin regime—is chilling.²⁶⁴

Therefore, waiting Russia out is the wrong approach—a weak Russia is likely to grow more aggressive and harmful to Western interests in the Middle East, as is the case now with Syria. Pointing to fictional external enemies and pretending to fight global terrorism allow Putin to avoid responsibility for Russia’s domestic problems, and create an illusion of himself as an important world leader. Prior to Putin’s annexation of Crimea, his ratings had dropped to an all-time low.²⁶⁵ Although the annexation boosted his ratings in the short term, Putin will need to continue inventing crises to divert the public’s attention from domestic problems, and his intervention in Syria may not be his last such gambit.

Ultimately, as noted, Putin’s policies are aimed at furthering his own stay in power. Putin appears to be driven by a genuine belief that Western leaders act no differently than he does.²⁶⁶ According to Gleb Pavlovsky, a political consultant to the Putin administration from 1999 to 2011, “Putin doesn’t believe that there is real competition between the political parties in the West. He thinks of it as a game.” George W. Bush reportedly had grown exasperated with Putin in private dealings because Putin did not understand how Western democracy works.²⁶⁷ Regarding international diplomacy, Putin’s approach appears to be guided by Lenin’s *kto-kogo*, or “who-whom” (who will dominate whom) approach. Moreover, Russia analysts have often raised concerns that Putin’s policies in the Middle East could invite greater instability into Russia.²⁶⁸

Although the West generally accepts the notion of Putin’s high approval ratings and his virtually indefinite stay in power, any poll in an authoritarian country should be taken with a grain of salt, given people’s fear of telling the truth. A deeper look reveals a more complex reality.²⁶⁹ For instance, consider a December 2014 poll by Alexei Kudrin’s human rights and civil society NGO, the Committee of Civil Initiatives, which found that “perceptions of President Vladimir Putin are changing—the country’s residents still do not see an alternative to him, but subconsciously trust in him decreases.” This assessment provides insight into what Russian citizens mean by “approval.”

Other polls confirm that many Russians simply don’t see an alternative to Putin,²⁷⁰ a trend also indicated in private conversations that cannot be captured in a poll. Furthermore, many Russian citizens are voting with their feet. Russian emigration rates rose to 40,000 a year in 2011, around the time Putin announced his return for a third presidential term; in 2013,

they rose by 76 percent from the previous year. The year 2014 saw the largest increase in emigration since the 1990s, with more than 200,000 people leaving Russia only a month after Putin annexed Crimea.²⁷¹ The negative trends in the economy have also forced many to search for alternatives to government information sources, such as the Internet and social networks, where they can find views that oppose the Kremlin.²⁷²

While these trends point to greater instability than would meet the eye, it is unclear what the future holds. Notably, Russian society is changing. Although the majority of Russians may be unlikely to engage in public protest, private conversations reveal that beneath the surface, many are growing increasingly dissatisfied with Putin and more interested in politics and civic participation. Russia's liberal opposition and human rights activists have continued to resist the regime after the tragic February 2015 murder of the country's leading liberal opposition politician, the former deputy prime minister Boris Nemtsov, who in previous years had exposed Putin's corruption and shortly before his murder was reportedly preparing to release information that proved Russia's military presence in Ukraine. At the same time, Russia has seen a surge of nationalism and xenophobia, driven by the Kremlin's propaganda machine. Coupled with the emigration of Russia's educated elites, these trends could suggest a rise of far-right forces not entirely dissimilar from Germany in the 1930s.²⁷³

According to a recent poll from the Levada Center, Russia's most independent and respected polling organization, 32 percent of respondents expressed positive sentiments about the prospect of Russian ground operations in Syria. To put this in context, Levada notes that approximately 25 percent in Russia *always* support tough measures.²⁷⁴ According to another recent poll, conducted in November 2015 among 1,600 citizens throughout Russia, two-thirds believe Russia is a Great Power—an increase from 50 percent in 2011²⁷⁵ and 31 percent in 1999.²⁷⁶ According to the *Moscow Times*, “enthusiasm over military campaigns in Ukraine and Syria seems to outweigh worries about a deep economic slump.”²⁷⁷ The same poll, though, showed that 36 percent want to see Russia “as the developed countries of the West.” This remains “the most popular response,” according to Levada.²⁷⁸

As quoted by Levada, the Russian political scientist Dmitry Oreshkin explains:

There is a complex relationship between the historical trajectory of the country and short-term intentions: we traditionally have military and binary thinking—that there is a “we” and there are “enemies.” The authorities use these models to mobilize support, and then act in accordance with these models... This is a problem that leads to cognitive dissonance: [Putin] seems to have proved a strong leader, defender of the Russian people in Ukraine, but... Ukraine went to the West, Crimea is adjusting with great difficulties, Donbass is in trouble. A new-old system of values is introduced, which greatly simplifies the picture of the world: a strong country is one that can bomb neighbors, but not one that creates a model for development.²⁷⁹

In the Middle East, Putin is likely to continue to strengthen alliances with non-Western actors to maintain his grip on power. Putin’s Russia is thus likely to remain an obstacle to peace and stability in the Middle East, and a proliferator of conflict, rather than the partner the West had hoped for.



On October 31, 2015, Metrojet Flight 9268, a Russian carrier, crashed as it departed Sharm al-Sheikh, killing all 224 passengers on board. While the Islamic State immediately claimed responsibility for the crash, the Russian and Egyptian governments initially resisted acknowledging terrorism as the cause. On November 17, however, Putin announced that the terrorism angle had been confirmed and vowed that the perpetrators would pay.²⁸⁰ After attending a meeting about the crash, he asserted: “We are not going to wipe the tears from our hearts and souls. This will remain

with us forever. But that won’t stop us from finding and punishing the criminals... We will look for them in any point on the planet and we will punish them.”²⁸¹

Some were surprised that Putin did not immediately blame terrorists for the downed jet. Indeed, as soon as Putin intervened in Syria, Russia analysts privately wondered if an event like the 1999 apartment bombings would happen, handing Putin an excuse to justify Russia’s involvement in the war. A contrarian explanation would be that the admission of terrorism could be seen to *weaken* Putin’s credentials as a strong leader and protector

of his people, thereby reducing support for his Syrian adventure. According to Maxim Trudolyubov, who edits Russia's influential and respected business daily *Vedomosi*,²⁸² "It looked like Mr. Putin had led his nation into a deadly quagmire, and his innocent countrymen were paying the price."²⁸³ Trudolyubov observes further that Putin's admission came only following two additional IS-sparked tragedies: the November 12 suicide attack in Beirut, which claimed some 43 lives, and the Paris attacks of the next day, which killed 130.²⁸⁴

Putin's emergence from international isolation, with the expressed goal of fighting a common enemy, appeared to pay dividends with Western powers. Less than a month before the Paris attacks, French president Francois Hollande had said, "Putin right now is not our ally in Syria."²⁸⁵ But on November 16—three days after the Paris attacks and the day before the admission that terrorists had downed the Metrojet—Russia and France agreed to coordinate airstrikes against the Islamic State. According to a poll, 91 percent of French citizens supported working with Putin.²⁸⁶

Another challenge, however, awaited Putin. Russia report-

edly had been bombing Turkmen areas on the Turkish-Syrian border. Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, referred to these strikes on Turkic speakers as attacks on "our brothers and sisters." This was the context in which Turkey, on November 24, shot down a Russian warplane that reportedly crossed into Turkey's airspace for some seventeen seconds. Turkish officials claim to have given the plane at least ten warnings over the course of five minutes. Putin henceforth declared that Turkey had stabbed Russia in the back,²⁸⁷ demanded an apology, enacted economic sanctions targeting select Turkish imports, including certain food items, and suggested more sanctions might be forthcoming.²⁸⁸ Putin also managed to blame the West, saying that Russia had given the fighter jet's plan to the United States, a claim U.S. ambassador to NATO Douglas Lute denied. "The U.S. data that I have seen corroborates Turkey's version of events," he said. "The airplane was in Turkey, it was engaged in Turkey, it had been warned repeatedly."²⁸⁹

Russia had violated the airspace of other NATO allies numerous times in recent years, but never had drawn such a response since the end of the Cold War. Putin

may have been surprised by the Turkish response, which—if anything—highlighted Ankara’s growing concern over Russia’s actions in Syria. The situation also suggests further escalation is likely, even if the two sides will try to avoid direct military confrontation. Speaking on December 11 at the Russian Defense Department’s expanded board meeting, Putin used stern words, although without naming Turkey directly:

I’d like to warn those who will try again to organize any kind of provocation against our troops. We have taken additional measures to ensure the security of Russian troops and air bases...I order you to act very tough. Any targets that threaten Russia’s group or our

ground infrastructure are to be destroyed immediately.²⁹⁰

Indeed, on December 13, around the time of this writing, Russia fired a warning shot at a Turkish vessel to “avoid collision” in the Aegean Sea, according to Russian sources, although at this point only the Russian version of events is available.

Meanwhile, upon conclusion of the most recent Putin-Hollande meeting on November 26, the two leaders reportedly agreed to exchange intelligence on the Islamic State and other rebel groups, but they continue to disagree about Assad’s role in Syria.²⁹¹ Separately, press reports indicate that the Russia-Iran alliance is growing, along with ethnic cleansing against Assad’s opponents.²⁹²



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States should take the following steps to limit the many harmful repercussions of Russia’s involvement in the Middle East:

- ➔ ***Intensify actions against the Islamic State and start retaking territory.*** While this policy prescription is valid in its own right given IS’s many threats to regional and global security, it is even more important for blocking Russian encroachment—to a considerable degree in conjunction with Iran—into U.S. security relationships and alliances in the region, on the excuse that Moscow and Tehran are serious about fighting the Islamic State while Washington is not.

- ➔ **Limit cooperation with Russia in the Middle East to areas where it is absolutely necessary.** These areas include mission deconfliction, which is necessary for safety. Western policymakers should abandon the hope that Putin's Russia can be a genuine partner in the near future, and stop providing legitimacy to his regime by treating the Kremlin as an equal.
- ➔ **Reject "diplomacy" that empowers Russia (and Iran) to define the role of regional states in strategic issues such as IS and Syria.** This means working closely and openly with traditional U.S. allies in the region—Saudi Arabia and other GCC states, along with Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Israel, and Egypt. Avoid at any cost "going behind their backs," as in the Iranian nuclear talks, which the United States initially kept largely secret from its allies. This initial secrecy contributed to the perception that U.S. diplomacy was aimed at bolstering Iran, particularly given that the deal, from their perspective, opened the door for Iran to create a nuclear weapon.
- ➔ **Persuade the EU to keep sanctions on Russia.** Putin hopes that his actions in the Middle East will create a justification for Europe to lift the Ukraine-related sanctions. That, in and of itself, reinforces why the sanctions must remain in place. Putin's intervention in Syria is increasing the refugee flow to Europe. Numerous examples indicate that Putin is not interested in following international rules of conduct—from the war with Georgia in 2008, to the Crimea annexation in 2014, to a failure to seek clearance for Iraq overflights. Putin's disregard for international rules and norms is another major reason for keeping the sanctions in place until he changes his behavior.
- ➔ **Take action to prevent Syrian barrel bombing.** A large-scale no-fly zone may be unrealistic given that Russian planes are regularly flying over all of Syria. A more limited approach would be to act against the barrel bombs Assad drops from helicopters on civilians. This could help reduce the flow of refugees and provide safe areas where Syrian rebels could train and from which they could conduct operations against Assad and the Islamic State. Actions against the barrel bombs could range from providing anti-aircraft guns to fire at the slow, high-flying helicopters to the possible, limited transfer of man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADs).

These dual-purpose systems can also be used for ground combat. Likewise, the West should reach an understanding with the Kremlin that a violation of the barrel-bomb ban would result in the bombing of Assad's airfields. In seeking a model, the United States should look to Operation Northern Watch, the no-fly zone maintained over Iraq's Kurdish areas (1991–2003), which employed fewer than a hundred U.S. and British aircraft of all types. Such an approach should work for an area in Syria that is both much closer to Incirlik, also the base for Northern Watch, and considerably smaller than northern Iraq.

- ➔ *Change the balance of forces on the ground in Syria.* As in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the goal should be not to defeat Assad and his Iranian and Russian allies but rather to convince them that their best outcome is an endless stalemate, and thus encourage true compromise and negotiations. This will only occur if low-cost, low-risk actions by the United States and its allies force the Assad alliance to escalate in costly ways. Such actions should include providing weapons to Assad's moderate opponents—including, as noted, MANPADs at some point—to maintain the military balance.
- ➔ *Avoid further weakening of traditional U.S. alliances under Putin's carrot-and-stick pressure.* Such a step means acceding to more of U.S. regional allies' demands—stronger action in Syria to counter Assad and his allies, increased economic aid to Jordan and Iraqi Kurdistan, improved relations with Egypt, much closer diplomatic ties with Israel to match excellent U.S.-Israel military cooperation, and better coordination with Turkey. These countries must feel confident that the United States is more solicitous of their security needs than Putin is, but that the “price” for this U.S. support is keeping the Russians—and Iranians, in some cases—at arm's length.
- ➔ *Don't neglect Iraq.* The most vulnerable of these “traditional” alliances is that with Iraq. If the United States does not better assist Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi in achieving quick victories against the Islamic State, and supporting him and the Najaf religious leadership in their domestic political conflict with Iran's supporters, Abadi will not keep his commitment to the United States to abstain from further cooperation with Russia.

- ➔ *Push Russian military forces to overextend themselves.* Putin's Syria intervention has raised the question of the extent of Russian military capabilities. Regardless of what these capabilities are in reality, Putin counts on Western complacency and does not take costs into account when getting involved in Syria, Ukraine, and elsewhere. In the context of Russia's economic recession, and a number of Russia's existing military commitments in the post-Soviet space and now in Afghanistan, the West can certainly make it more costly for Putin to stay in Syria, such as by arming Ukrainians.
- ➔ *Be prepared to deescalate.* As indicated by much experience with Putin and the recent dangerous Turkish-Russian aerial incident, the international community, beginning with the United States, must be ready to deescalate situations that could drag the region into a wider war.
- ➔ *Increase democracy support in Russia.* Because the future of Russia's behavior in the Middle East is driven largely by the Kremlin's domestic politics, the West should support those in Russia with democratic aspirations. If the West does not support and encourage individuals in Russia who share Western values, these individuals will grow demoralized and, in turn, could become more radicalized. Such a development can only harm U.S. interests.

NOTES

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27. Denis Volkov, "Putin's Ratings: Anomaly or Trend?" Institute for Modern Russia, December 23, 2014, <http://imrussia.org/en/analysis/nation/2135-putins-ratings-anomaly-or-trend>.
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 41. Whereas this advancement of Russia’s exceptionalism—which, at its core, is very different from American exceptionalism—may seem new, it is indeed a product of Russia’s history. According to this Russian perspective, which originates in the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, the progenitor of the Russian state, God endowed Moscow with the sacred mission to preserve and expand the only true Christian faith—Russian Orthodoxy—and stand in opposition to Roman Catholicism and Ottoman Constantinople. For centuries, Moscow officials have used the assertion of cultural uniqueness and civilizational mission as a political, cultural, and social justification for war, imperial expansion, and diversion from economic problems, and as cover for their own illegal activities or sheer incompetence. Putin is simply the latest embodiment of this approach. Anders Åslund and Andrew Kuchins,

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In the Middle East, Putin is likely to continue to strengthen alliances with non-Western actors to maintain his grip on power. Thus, rather than the partner the West had hoped for, Putin's Russia is likely to remain both an obstacle to peace and stability and a proliferator of conflict in the region.

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