

The Russian Federation in the Middle East

Edina Julianna Haiszky

Nov 2023

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The analysis discusses Russia's Middle East policy, highlighting its recognition of the region's secondary role in national security but emphasizing three key priorities: historical-status, economic opportunities, and the geopolitical-security dimension. Stemming from the Soviet Union's decline, President Putin's era witnessed a more assertive foreign policy, employing diplomacy, economic ties, and military strength. The report also delves into partnerships with Syria and Iran, exploring the evolving alliance with Syria through military intervention, political support, and economic collaboration. Russian-Iranian relations showcase shared positions, economic ties, and military cooperation. Thirdly the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is discussed, noting strains on Russia-Israel relations and strategic efforts amid the Israel-Hamas war. Overall, the analysis provides a comprehensive overview of Russia's Middle East policy, encompassing historical, economic, and geopolitical-security factors, key partnerships, and the impact of regional conflicts on Russian interests.

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The drivers of Russian Policy in the Middle East

In the broader spectrum of Moscow's foreign policy, the Middle East holds a secondary position in the national security strategy. The hierarchical perspective is reinforced by [the Russian Foreign Ministry's doctrines of 2013](#) and [2016](#), where the region occupies the concluding part of the "Regional Priorities" section, emphasizing its relatively diminished importance within Russia's strategic outlook. However [the Kremlin considers the Russian Federation as a global power on the international stage](#), and as such it cannot ignore a region as geographically proximate, resource-rich, socially and politically volatile as the Middle East. The significance of the area from a Russian perspective is developing within the framework of three priorities: historical-status, economic opportunities and geopolitical-security dimension.

From a historical standpoint -the decline of the Soviet Union's superpower status symbolized by Moscow's withdrawal from the Middle East during President Mikhail Gorbachev's era. The onset of the first Gulf War, however, prompted Russia's renewed interest in the region. In terms of history and status, its significance is confirmed by the fact that [in 2005 President Putin called the break-up of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century"](#). Since the political paradigm shift in the early 2000s under President Vladimir Putin, Russia has undertaken a more assertive and militaristic foreign policy in the Middle East: the territory has served as a pivotal arena for Russia to assert itself on the global stage, aiming to reclaim the great power status it once enjoyed. Moscow believes there is going to be a long confrontation with the West, and in this context North Africa and the Middle East have become more strategically important. Under Putin's leadership, Russia utilizes the Middle East not only as a [testing ground for innovative technologies in proxy wars](#) but also as a platform to showcase its capacity to project force beyond the former USSR territory—the very landscape that witnessed the beginning of its dissolution. In a departure from the era when ideology served as a magnet for allies, Russia now employs robust diplomacy, economic incentives, military strength, and other coercive measures. This can also bolster stability and legitimacy at home, especially considering the European and American sanctions Russia has faced in recent years. Close cooperation with the Middle Eastern nations becomes a strategic countermeasure to offset these sanctions. With a substantial Muslim minority within the Federation and Muslim-majority countries in its vicinity, Russian leaders historically perceive Islamic ideology and extremists as significant threats. Therefore, cultivating positive relations with Middle Eastern Muslim nations not only enhances Moscow's image among its Muslim population but also positions Russia to actively contribute to countering extremist groups in the region, exemplifying a somewhat difficult strategic approach to both domestic and international challenges.

Economic considerations also wield significant influence over the foreign policy dynamics of the Russian Federation. Despite relatively modest trade volumes, [Russia has expanded economic ties with regional powers](#), offering diverse exports to the Middle East, including military equipment, machinery, oil, gas, petrochemicals, metallurgical, and agricultural products. Moscow has strategically proposed using national currencies in bilateral trade and suggested the formation of a free trade zone with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to enhance trade relations. Investment collaboration is another key focus, with Russia attracting investments from Middle Eastern countries seeking to diversify their portfolios beyond Western Europe and the United States. Russia and Middle Eastern nations, sharing common ground as major oil and gas producers, have chosen collaboration over confrontation. Major Russian energy companies -Rosneft, Lukoil, Gazprom, Surgutneftegaz, and Tatneft- have invested substantially in the Middle East's oil and gas sector, coordinating production policies with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to stabilize oil prices. Russia, along with several Middle Eastern countries, is a founding member of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), aligning

objectives in the gas sector. Arms deals, historically pivotal in Moscow's Middle East relations, remain economically significant. Despite regional preferences for Western arms, Russia provides an alternative unrestricted by human rights concerns or commitments to maintaining Israel's military edge. Notably, Russia secured a significant arms deal with Turkey, a NATO member, in the late 2010s, [selling the S-400 air defense system against opposition](#) from the United States and subsequent sanctions in December 2020.

In the third place, Russian interests are also motivated by the geopolitical-security dimension as well. The phenomenon known as [the "Arab Spring" since 2011 has presented Russia with a dual scenario of substantial security risks and geopolitical prospects](#). Viewing these uprisings through the lens of "color revolutions," reminiscent of what happened in Eastern Europe in the 1980s, the Kremlin actively works to prevent a recurrence, perceiving it as a "Western plot" against Russia's national interests. Russia has always made it a priority to keep threat factors and influences away from its own border, so one of its interests is to avoid the spillover effect of instability or extremism from the region to the federation. The Russia Federation sought to establish a clear boundary against Western-driven regime changes or the promotion of democracy in the region. , Russian security interests have also developed an additional dimension: the utilization of its presence in Syria, notably through the port of Tartus and the Khmeimim airbase, as a strategic investment primarily aimed at deterring NATO. However a closer examination of Russia's role in regional conflicts indicates that while Moscow may not wield the ability to dictate specific outcomes, it possesses the capability to heighten the cost to the West of pursuing policy options antithetical to its interests.

Key partners: the cases of Syria and Iran

Fundamentally, Moscow aspires to portray itself to nations in the region as a pragmatic, non-western, dependable, astute, and no-nonsense actor, possessing the acumen to influence regional affairs through a combination of diplomatic finesse and military capabilities. Russia's relations with two key regional partners: Syria and Iran are particularly salient.

[Russian-Syrian relations, deeply rooted in history](#), have evolved through various stages, with significant shifts and intensification, particularly amid the complexities of the recent Syrian Civil War. Dating back to the Cold War era, the Soviet Union laid the foundation for a robust alliance with Syria in 1944, encompassing diplomatic, military, and economic dimensions. The Soviet support extended beyond mere symbolism, encompassing economic aid, military assistance, and unwavering political backing. In the contemporary era, under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, [Russia has not only maintained but also solidified its connection with Syria](#), especially during the tenure of Bashar al-Assad. The enduring strategic importance of the Tartus naval base, established during the Soviet era, serves as a testament to Russia's lasting presence in the region.

The military dimension of this relationship took a pivotal turn in September 2015 when Russia intervened militarily in Syria. Framed as supporting anti-terrorism efforts and stabilizing the Syrian government, this intervention has seen the deployment of [over 63,000 Russian military personnel, establishing key bases in Hmeimim and Tartus](#), supported by advanced air missile defense systems. It is a symbol of Russia's commitment to the region and is strategically situated on the Mediterranean coast.

Politically, Russia has been a staunch partner for the Assad government on the international stage, employing its [UN Security Council veto to block critical resolutions and consistently supporting Syria in various international forums](#). This diplomatic backing aligns with Russia's broader Middle East strategy,

where Syria provides strategic advantages, including access to the Mediterranean, a vital naval base, and influence in regional affairs. Besides this, economic collaboration, particularly in post-war reconstruction, has been a key focus, with engagement in the energy sector, including oil and gas exploration. This economic dimension, alongside military and political aspects, has significantly impacted Syria's fortunes, creating a substantial Russian footprint on its economy. Culturally, the influence is palpable, with Russian President Vladimir Putin achieving celebrity status in Syria, as reflected in the presence of his images in towns and markets. Cultural ties are actively promoted through language lessons, workshops, and the establishment of Russian language departments in educational institutions.

As a result of these multifaceted interactions, Russia's involvement faces international criticism, particularly concerning allegations of human rights abuses and civilian casualties. Nevertheless, Russia continues to play a pivotal role in diplomatic initiatives such as the Astana Process, engaging with regional stakeholders like Iran and Turkey to find political solutions. Strategically, Syria offers Russia crucial advantages. [The Tartus naval base provides access to the Mediterranean, enhancing Russia's maritime capabilities.](#) Furthermore, supporting Syria aligns with Russia's broader Middle East strategy, where regional influence is a key objective. However, Russia's involvement in Syria is not without criticism from the international community. Nonetheless, Russia's continued military presence and economic collaboration have significantly influenced Syria's trajectory. As Russian-Syrian relations continue to evolve, the intricate dynamics across military, economic, political, and cultural spheres underscore the complexity of this association. The ongoing developments draw international attention, shaping the region's geopolitical landscape in profound ways.

On the other hand Russian-Iranian relations are characterized by a more nuanced history that spans centuries, marked by periods of alliance, rivalry, and strategic cooperation. In the 16th century, diplomatic ties between the two nations were formalized, setting the stage for a relationship that would endure through geopolitical shifts and regional transformations. During the Soviet era, the Cold War context provided a backdrop for shared interests between Moscow and Tehran. Both nations, at different times, found themselves at odds with Western powers, fostering a sense of solidarity. This historical backdrop laid the foundation for the contemporary phase of their partnership, which has evolved into a multifaceted alliance.

In the realm of politics, [Russia and Iran have consistently aligned their positions on key international issues.](#) Both nations share a commitment to resisting what they perceive as unilateralism and external interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. This alignment is particularly evident in their joint efforts to support regimes facing external pressure, with Syria being a prominent example. The Syrian conflict has seen Russia and Iran working in concert to bolster the government of Bashar al-Assad, reflecting a shared strategic vision. Economically, [the energy sector plays a crucial role in their partnership.](#) Bilateral agreements and joint ventures in oil and gas exploration and production underscore a commitment to mutual economic benefit. These collaborations not only strengthen the economic foundations of both nations but also contribute to their energy security strategies. Military cooperation between Russia and Iran has expanded over the years, encompassing joint military exercises and arms agreements. This collaboration extends beyond mere defense cooperation; it is a strategic alignment that contributes to the overall balance of power in the region. The two nations recognize each other's security concerns and cooperate to address shared challenges. Cultural and people-to-people ties add a further dimension to the relationship. [Educational exchanges, cultural programs,](#) and efforts to promote mutual understanding contribute to a broader framework of collaboration. These initiatives aim to strengthen the ties between the Russian and Iranian people, fostering a sense of connection that goes beyond diplomatic and economic considerations.

Challenges exist in the form of external sanctions imposed on both nations, adding complexity to their relationship. However, the resilience of their partnership is underscored by a commitment to shared interests and a strategic calculus that transcends immediate challenges. As Russia and Iran navigate the intricate dynamics of the global stage, their collaboration continues to shape the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East with a level of detail that reflects the depth of their durable alliance.

The impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the Russian Federation's interests in the region

Russia's involvement in the Israel-Hamas conflict has not only raised concerns, but has also resulted in a noticeable escalation in diplomatic tensions. The once-close friendship between Israel and Russia, has experienced a distinct cooling, particularly since Russia's intervention in Ukraine.

The bilateral dynamics took another unexpected turn when high-ranking members of Hamas engaged with a senior Russian official, drawing swift condemnation from Israel's Foreign Ministry. In defense of its decision to host Hamas members, Russia asserts a commitment to maintaining diplomatic ties with both conflicting parties and emphasizes efforts to facilitate the release of hostages in Gaza. However, the portrayal of these meetings by Hamas differs significantly. The praise from the terrorist organization for the federation's actions, condemning what it perceives as "crimes of Israel supported by the West," has sparked justifiable concern in Israel about a potential recalibration of Russia's foreign policy alignment, leaning closer to Iran's proxy, Hamas. [Amid casualties from Hamas's attacks on the 7th of October, Russia refrains from categorizing these acts as terrorism](#). Instead, Russian officials call for a cessation of hostilities from both sides and express support for a Palestinian state. Critical remarks from President Putin add strain to already tense diplomatic relations.

President Putin's government condemns violence from both Hamas and Israel, placing a significant portion of blame on the United States for the bloodshed. The Russian political leadership expressed concerns about the "catastrophic increase" in Israeli and Palestinian deaths, reiterating Russia's stance that the formation of a Palestinian state is "necessary" and predictably criticizing U.S. policies in the Middle East. [The federation's diplomatic efforts include calls for a "humanitarian ceasefire" presented through a draft resolution to the UN Security Council](#). The resolution strongly condemns violence and terrorism against civilians but faces opposition from key Western nations. Russian officials engage with regional counterparts to address spillover risks, negotiate a ceasefire, and discuss the plight of Palestinian refugees, as well as deepening economic relationships in the Middle East.

Russia's strategic messaging aligns it with the Global South, presenting itself as a champion of the Palestinian cause and intensifying anti-American sentiments in Muslim-majority countries. Moscow emphasizes the necessity of a two-state solution and aims to showcase its diplomatic influence in the Middle East. Concerns arise about the conflict spreading to other Middle Eastern countries, particularly Lebanon and Syria. The potential for an all-out war involving Hezbollah and Israel could pose challenges amid the ongoing Ukraine war. Maintaining a delicate balance between relations with Israel and Iran remains a priority for Moscow. In the broader context, the ongoing crisis in Israel-Palestine raises questions about Russia's role and influence in the Middle East. Despite calls for a ceasefire, the continuing conflict brings uncertainty regarding Moscow's standing in the region, impacting Russia's national interests in unpredictable ways.

Yet the Gaza war also serves Russian interests. [Moscow seeks to leverage the distraction caused by the Israel-Hamas war to shift global attention away from the Ukraine conflict](#). The reduced scrutiny on Russian actions benefits Moscow, especially as some U.S. lawmakers discuss diverting funding and weapons from Ukraine to Israel. Speculations about increased U.S. arms deliveries to Israel impacting military support for Ukraine vary among experts. Following Putin's invasion of Ukraine, Russia's

relations with the Middle East shifted rather than undergoing a deep revision. The war accelerated existing processes, and Moscow strategically pursued diplomatic and economic gains, strengthening ties with countries like Turkey, the UAE, and Iran. Economic engagement circumvented international sanctions, positioning the Middle East as a significant end user for Russian products. [The Middle East became a vital supplier of weapons and military equipment for Russia, furthering Moscow's military-industrial cooperation with the region.](#) Contrary to expectations, Russia continues to fight for arms markets in the Middle East, anticipating increased interest and leveraging its military production capacities.

Various factors, including historical ties, regional pragmatism, and uncertainty about the United States' reliability as an ally, contributed to Russia sustaining a network of relations across the Middle East. While Putin's invasion of Ukraine does not pose a direct threat to Russia's presence in the Middle East, internal political dynamics, Western influence, and Moscow's increased dependence on the region present challenges. Navigating these complexities requires careful coalition-building and diplomatic maneuvers to maintain relations with regional players amid changing power dynamics. Despite potential risks, Russia demonstrates adeptness at navigating complex diplomatic terrain in the Middle East, seeking a delicate balance to secure Arab support without entirely severing ties with Israel. The fluidity of the situation and the future trajectory depend on the evolving dynamics of the conflict and Russia's often conflicting geopolitical calculations.

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