

The Geopolitical Chessboard in the Mediterranean: Ten Years After the Arab Spring

## Russia in the Mediterranean and the Middle East

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Thirty years ago, when the Cold War was still going strong, news that Moscow's forces had intervened militarily in both Syria and Libya would have spread panic throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East, as well as the United States. The assumption would have been that whatever Moscow said it was doing in these countries, its success there would be followed by Soviet moves aimed at threatening or even overthrowing other governments in the region. Now, however, Russia's ongoing military involvement in Syria since 2015 and that of Russian private military forces in Libya since 2018 are seen quite differently. While many governments do not welcome it, in neither Syria nor Libya is Russia's military presence seen as a direct threat to neighbouring governments. Indeed, there are some American allies in the region – including Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – which would prefer Russian forces to remain in Syria, since they do not want Iran and its allies to be the dominant external forces there. And in Libya, some of America's allies – including Egypt, the UAE and even France at times – have joined Russia in supporting General Khalifa Haftar.

Compared to Russia's image as being, at best, a regional power operating in the former Soviet space, which prevailed under Yeltsin in the 1990s and even under Putin before the beginning of Moscow's intervention in Syria in 2015, Moscow's relative success with supporting its allies in both Syria and Libya since then has helped restore Russia's image as a great power in the Mediterranean and

the Middle East, as well as globally. But far beyond this, Putin has succeeded in establishing good working relations with virtually every government in the Mediterranean and the Middle East – something that the Soviet leaders before Gorbachev did not accomplish (although, admittedly, this was something that they were not always attempting to accomplish).

### Moscow's Successes

Russia's diplomatic success in the region has been due, at least in part, to Putin's willingness to work with all governments in the Mediterranean and Middle East. It is hardly surprising, of course, that Putin has good relations with the region's most anti-American governments, Syria and Iran – though Moscow's having good relations with Tehran is something of an achievement, considering that the Soviets had very poor relations with the Islamic Republic for a decade after the 1979 revolution. While there are important irritants in the Russian-Iranian relationship, Moscow and Tehran are united in their perception of both the United States and Sunni jihadist groups, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, as common adversaries, and in their support of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria (which they see as important for thwarting both American and Sunni jihadist ambitions). The al-Assad regime's dependence on Russian military support for its very survival, of course, underlies the Russian-Syrian relationship.

Especially remarkable, though, has been the development of close ties between Russia and Turkey. Building on the increasing Russian-Turkish economic ties that had developed before he came into power, Putin took advantage of Turkish resentment toward the West on various issues (including the lack

of progress toward Turkey's long-awaited EU accession; American support for the Kurds, first in Iraq and later in Syria; America's refusal to extradite Erdogan's rival, Fethullah Gulen, from the US to Turkey; and Erdogan's belief that the US and other Western governments supported the unsuccessful 2016 coup attempt against him). The recent Russian sale of S-400 air defence missile systems to Turkey has upset Washington so much that it has decided not to sell the new F-35 fighter aircraft to Turkey, and has even imposed economic sanctions on Ankara – which responded by doubling down and signing an agreement to purchase additional Russian S-400s in August 2020. Moreover, the Russian-Turkish (or more accurately, the Putin-Erdogan) relationship has survived not only the severe downturn that occurred after Turkish forces shot down a Russian military aircraft in the vicinity of the Syrian-Turkish border in 2015, but also their support for opposing sides in the conflicts in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Putin began work on improving Russia's ties with the Mubarak regime in Egypt in the early 2000s and was discomfited by its downfall. Even so, Moscow maintained good relations with Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, who was elected to power in 2012, but welcomed his overthrow and replacement by General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi in 2013. When the Obama Administration cut back on US arms sales to Egypt as a way of expressing its disapproval of al-Sisi's overthrow of a democratically elected government, Putin stepped in with an offer to sell Russian arms to Cairo. Russian-Egyptian ties have been close ever since.

Russia's relations with Israel have grown remarkably friendly, especially between Putin and Netanyahu, who have spoken both face to face and over the phone on numerous occasions. In addition to intelligence cooperation between them, Israel became an important source of military technology for Moscow. Although no agreement was publicly announced, an understanding appears to have been reached at the time of the 2008 Russian-Georgian War, whereby Israel ended its military cooperation with Georgia in exchange for an unspecified degree of Russian restraint in arming Syria and Iran with weaponry that could threaten Israel. Indeed, while Moscow has sold S-400 air defence missiles to Turkey and discussed the possibility of selling them

to Saudi Arabia and Qatar, so far it has only sold the less advanced S-300 system to Iran – and only then after a lengthy delay between 2010, when then President Medvedev suspended the sale at the behest of the US and Israel, and 2015 when President Putin lifted the suspension after Iran agreed to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Furthermore, after the Russian military intervention in Syria began in 2015, Russia and Israel reportedly came to an understanding about deconfliction, whereby Moscow does not interfere in Israeli attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria, and Israel does not attack Russian or other targets there that are of particular concern to Moscow.

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Similarly, Moscow now has good relations with all the Arab Gulf states, including those most anxious about Iran: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain. The richest Arab Gulf states – Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar – have also become important sources of investment for Russia. In addition, the UAE has been a large-scale buyer of Russian weaponry. Through the OPEC+ format, Moscow and Riyadh have become important partners in the oil market. While their collaboration broke down spectacularly in March 2020 when Riyadh responded to Moscow's unwillingness to abide by OPEC+ production limits by flooding the market with Saudi oil, they were able to restore cooperation shortly thereafter.

In Iraq, Moscow maintains good relations both with the Baghdad government and with the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil. Russian petroleum firms operate in both areas. Moscow and Khartoum recently signed an agreement allowing Russia to have naval facilities at Port Sudan on the Red Sea. Moscow has especially good relations with Algeria (which is one of the largest buyers of Russian weap-

onry), but also has good relations with its rival, Morocco, and with Tunisia.

Russian businesses and other figures close to the Kremlin reportedly maintain large financial interests in Cyprus, where Russian naval vessels have been making regular port calls since 2015. Although Moscow has given support to influential anti-NATO and anti-EU political parties in several countries on the European side of the Mediterranean (including Italy, Greece, France and Spain), Moscow also has relatively good relations with all these governments – which are notably less enthusiastic about maintaining economic sanctions on Ukraine as both the US and certain other European governments have been. Indeed, Greece, Italy and France are large-scale importers of Russian natural gas.

### Why Putin Is Seen as a Partner

As a result of all this activity, Russian influence in the Mediterranean and Middle East has grown strong under Putin. This state of affairs, it must be noted, has not just come about because Putin has pursued it, but because governments and other actors in the region all find Russia to be a desirable partner. There are several reasons for this.

Putin's willingness to work with all governments provides an incentive – and in some cases, an imperative – for all governments to work with him. While many do not like the al-Assad regime in Syria, Putin's dogged support for it compared to America's reputation for not protecting its allies from being ousted (including the Shah of Iran in 1979 and Mubarak in Egypt in 2011) has earned the respect of Washington's authoritarian allies in the region, who fear that the US will not support them either in a crisis. Indeed, their fears that American and European criticism of their human rights records will provoke or exacerbate internal crises for them make Putin – with his “understanding” of their need to limit democracy and human rights in order to prevent chaos from erupting – an attractive partner for the region's authoritarian and illiberal democratic regimes. Some of them – including Turkey's Erdogan, Egypt's al-Sisi, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the UAE's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Zayed – may also value the ability to “move closer” to Moscow as either a deterrent or a

response to criticism by Western democracies of their democratic deficits.

But just as cooperation with Moscow is a useful way for America's allies to limit what some authoritarian governments in the region consider too much interest in their internal affairs on the part of America and the EU, it is also a useful tactic for all those who fear too little interest in the region on the part of the US in particular. Middle Eastern oil producers, fearing that the US is no longer as interested in them due to its own increased petroleum production, understand that Washington's hostile relations with Moscow motivates the US to try to limit Russian influence generally, and especially in the Mediterranean and Middle East. Cooperating with Russia, then, may be seen by America's allies in the region as a way to get Washington's attention, which they fear they might not get otherwise.

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Signalling what they either want or do not want from Washington and Brussels, though, are not the only reasons why governments in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern region cooperate with Russia. Some countries, dependent on natural gas imports, buy large quantities from Russia partly to avoid total dependence on Middle Eastern suppliers, whose reliability has been cause for their concern in the past. For those interested in building their atomic energy capacity, Russia is far more willing and able to supply reactors than Western sources. And, as indicated earlier, Russia does not tie arms sales to human rights concerns, as Western governments sometimes do.

Russian willingness to work with all parties in the region creates a strong incentive even for US allies to work with Russia when Moscow supports one or more of their adversaries. No state likes it when an external great power supports a nearby rival, but

Russia's willingness to work with everyone allows the negative impact of this to be lessened to some degree. For example, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE – which both fear Iranian intentions toward them – have sought to compensate for Russian support of Tehran through trading with and investing in Russia to a greater degree than Iran, with all the limits imposed by various Western-backed economic sanctions. Similarly, Israel's engagement in security and economic cooperation with Moscow, despite its support for the Jewish State's nemesis, Iran, has resulted in the Russian-Israeli deconfliction agreement, under which Moscow does not prevent Israeli attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah targets. Iran, of course, is not pleased that Russia is cooperating with its regional rivals. But, as Moscow is well aware, Tehran does not have an alternative external power to replace Russia with, since it is strongly at odds with the US, and neither Europe nor China will back Iran in its rivalries with its neighbours. Tehran, then, has had to accept Moscow's cooperation with Iran's rivals in order to continue receiving what support Moscow is willing to offer the Islamic Republic.

Moscow's willingness to work with opposing sides, however, is not limited to the rivalries between Iran and its adversaries. In the dispute between Qatar, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, on the other, Moscow has allowed itself to be courted by both sides (thus garnering investment funds from Qatar and the UAE in particular). While Moscow works closely with Israel, it also has good relations with the two main Palestinian movements, Fatah and Hamas (but does not support either of them in ways that threaten the Jewish State). Despite Moscow's encouragement of Turkish animosity toward America and Europe, Moscow and Ankara have supported opposing sides in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. Indeed, the more strained Turkey's relations with the West have become, the less Moscow has to fear that Russian support for Turkey's rivals will result in Ankara resuming close ties with the West. While Moscow has intervened in support of the Assad regime in Syria and General Haftar in Libya, Russia has also cooperated to some extent with at least some of their respective rivals – the Syrian Kurds and the Government of National Accord. In the ongoing conflict in Yemen, Moscow has good rela-

tions with the Iranian-backed Houthis in the north, the Saudi-backed Yemeni government in the centre, and the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council in the south.

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Moscow even touts its ability to work with all sides as not only putting it in a strong position to help resolve conflicts, but to do so more effectively than the US, which cannot or will not talk to certain parties, such as Iran, the Assad regime, Hezbollah and Hamas. To the extent that parties in the region take up Moscow's offer, this could further Russian diplomatic influence.

### **Moscow's Limits**

Yet, despite the many reasons why countries in the Mediterranean and Middle East have cooperated with Russia, there are also several factors at work that limit Moscow's influence in the region. First and foremost is that despite all expressions of either fear or hope that the US is withdrawing from the region, it has remained present. Middle Eastern actors fearing Iran may see cooperation with Russia as an important way of keeping Moscow's collaboration with Tehran at bay, but they are not going to give up their security cooperation with the US, as long as it is willing to help defend them against Iran. Similarly, just because several European countries in the Mediterranean buy large quantities of Russian gas and are less concerned by what Russia does in Ukraine than some other European countries, does not mean that they wish to give up their close security and economic ties with Washington either. Furthermore, for all Moscow's claims that it is in a better position to mediate between the many op-

posing parties, it has not actually done much more than arrange tactical ceasefires in Syria, where surrounded Assad regime opponents were allowed to leave for Idlib. Moscow has not even been able to get Assad to make any concessions that might possibly result in some opposition groups being co-opted into supporting his regime. And for all Donald Trump's counterproductive statements and actions that alienated many in the region, his administration was able to broker the Abraham Accords (normalization agreements between Israel on the one hand and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco on the other). The revelations by Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif in a leaked audiotape that Moscow sought to work with his rival, Islamic Revolutionary Guards General Soleimani, to block the implementation of the Iranian nuclear accord in 2015, indicates that the Kremlin is fearful that any progress toward an Iranian-American rapprochement would limit Russia's influence in Tehran.

### Despite their differences and disagreements with Washington and with Brussels, none – not even Syria and Iran – wishes to rely solely on Russia

In addition, Chinese influence in the Mediterranean and Middle East has also been growing. Indeed, Beijing's economic influence has already grown much stronger than Russia's influence there. While Russia seeks to make money from the region, mainly by exporting to and obtaining investments from rich countries there, China can afford both to import much more from the region and to invest in it. In other words, Beijing has the capacity to exercise far greater economic influence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East than Moscow does. But as China's establishment of a naval base in Djibouti shows, Beijing's interest in the region may not just be limited to the economic realm. In addition, even if (as some argue) the US is less focused on Europe, the Middle East and even Russia, due to Washington's increased focus on China, increased Chinese involvement in the Mediterranean and the Middle

East is likely to result in continued or even increased American interest in the region, as well as regional interest in US protection.

It should also be noted that Russian behaviour in the region can be self-limiting. Moscow's close ties to Tehran may make it imperative for Iran's rivals to engage with Moscow in order to limit Russian support for Iran, but the continued strength of the Russian-Iranian relationship also means Iran's rivals cannot trust Moscow enough to rely solely on Russia, and not on Washington as well. Although Moscow denied any involvement, the Russian-backed coup attempt in Montenegro in 2016 was a warning to all that Russian interference in other countries' internal affairs might not always be limited to propaganda campaigns (the continuation of which does not bode well for continued good relations with Russia either). Finally, Moscow's ability to maintain good relations with Turkey's anti-Western leader, Erdogan, while having sharp differences with him over regional conflicts might be subject to breakdown. While Putin has been indulgent in the face of Turkish support for groups fighting Russian-backed forces in Syria and Libya, his tolerance for Turkish involvement in the Armenian-Azerbaijan dispute and support for Ukraine may be more limited.

### Conclusion

Thus, while Russian influence in the Mediterranean and Middle East has expanded greatly under Putin, Moscow may find it difficult not only to further its influence there, but also even to hold onto what influence it has. Ultimately, Putin's success has depended not just on his own actions, but also on the willingness of governments and other actors in the region to cooperate with Moscow. Mediterranean and Middle Eastern governments have all shown that they want to cooperate with Russia for their own individual reasons, despite US concerns. But those that cooperate with Russia have also sought cooperation with the economically more powerful China too. And, despite their differences and disagreements with Washington and (especially in the case of certain southern European governments) with Brussels, none – not even Syria and Iran – wishes to rely solely on Russia. Russia under Putin,

then, has once again become a great power in the Mediterranean and Middle East, but is unlikely to become the predominant one there.

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