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Syria as Russian Proxy State: Countering US Interests in the Middle East

Introduction

Involvement in the Middle East was a long-standing component of Soviet foreign policy until the 1980s, when General Secretary of the Communist Party Mikhail Gorbachev began to “retreat from regional conflicts around the world.” After the collapse of the USSR, Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, continued this process, “focusing […] on relations with […] immediate neighbors.” Since his election in 1999, Russian president Vladimir Putin has reversed that trend and leveraged Russian influence in the Middle East to challenge the power of the United States.

Putin has created close ties in the Middle East over the two decades he has been in power, as the alliance between Russia and Syria demonstrates. Putin and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad began their joint military cooperation in 2005, when the two struck a deal which involved canceling most of Syria’s debts to Russia in return for harbor access for larger Russian ships in the Syrian port city of Tartus. In 2015, Russia sent troops to aid Assad, who faced a rebellion aimed at toppling his government. This was “the first time the Russians […] put boots on the ground to support an ongoing conflict in the region since their support for Syria during the 1973 war with Israel.” In addition to this and other significant military aid, Russia has deepened its relationship

1 Nizameddin, “Squaring the Middle East Triangle in Lebanon,” 476.
2 Ibid.
3 Katz, 160.
4 Ibid.
5 Goldenberg and Smith.
6 Ibid.
with Syria by international diplomacy, particularly by exercising its veto power in the UN Security Council to benefit its ally.\(^7\)

From this foothold in the Middle East, Putin has strengthened ties with Iran and established himself as a broker in regional diplomacy, intervening in both the Iran nuclear deal and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Using his influence in Syria, Putin can also bolster his position in the Middle East and undermine US relationships with some of its closest allies in the region, including Turkey, Israel, and Egypt. This paper examines the conditions that led to Russian military intervention in Syria against the larger geopolitical strategies that the Russian Federation has pursued under Putin's leadership. It argues that Russia has attempted to reclaim the power that Gorbachev and Yeltsin ceded in the 1990s and to upset the “unipolar” US-led world political system by leveraging its influence in Syria.\(^8\) This reexamination of Putin’s intervention in Syria demonstrates his success in countering US interests in the Middle East, all with the aim of creating a new, multipolar system.

**Development of the Russia-Syria Relationship**

*Soviet-Syrian Relations During the Cold War*

Syria and Russia have a special economic and military relationship that dates back to the Cold War (1947–1991).\(^9\) During this era, the US and the USSR were the main global powers in a “bipolar” structure. The US and the USSR used proxy states to fight against one another: the US aligned itself with traditional kingdoms in the region, including Saudi Arabia, and Jordan; the USSR allied itself with the revolutionary states of Egypt and Syria.\(^10\) In 1964, Kenneth N. Waltz described this bipolar system as one in which “each of two states or two blocs overshadows all

\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) Nizameddin, “Squaring the Middle East Triangle in Lebanon,” 476, 498.

\(^9\) Borshchevskaya, 6.

\(^10\) Unnikrishnan and Purushothaman, 252; Nizameddin, “Squaring the Middle East Triangle in Lebanon,” 479.
others.”¹¹ But even at the height of the Cold War “the influence and control of the two great powers […] stopped short of domination in most places […].”¹² While neither the US nor the USSR approached total domination in the region, the two “great powers” leveraged the fractious politics of the Middle East against each other. Russia’s involvement in the Middle East increased during the Cold War when “Moscow sought to take advantage of existing regional fractures to pursue its own aims in the Middle East—especially in Syria.”¹³

The USSR supported anti-Western coalitions in Syria beginning in the 1950s. The country became a Soviet “client” state in 1966 when the Arab Socialist Baath party “overthrew the relatively moderate Aflaqites and established a far more brutal regime influenced heavily by Marxism-Leninism.”¹⁴ After Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser died in 1970, Egypt defected “from the Soviet orbit,” and Syrian president Hafez al-Assad became the Soviet Union’s closest ally in the Middle East.¹⁵ Hafez al-Assad, the father of current president Bashar al-Assad, was a member of the Alawite minority group once “favored by the European colonial powers,” but, as David Katz writes, “Moscow did not support what became an increasingly Alawite-dominated regime in Syria because it was Alawite. Moscow supported it instead because it was secular, anti-Western, and pro-Soviet.”¹⁶

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¹¹ Waltz, 887.
¹² Ibid., 888.
¹³ Katz, 153.
¹⁴ Ibid., 157; Totten, 5–6.
¹⁵ Katz, 157; Borshchevskaya, 6.
Yeltsin’s Retreat from the Middle East

In the 1990s, the Russian Federation “largely (but not completely)” retreated from the Middle East due to economic and military exhaustion in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.\(^{17}\) According to Robert O. Freedman, “even before the collapse of the ruble in August 1998, the Russian economy had been in sharp decline. In 1997, before the crisis, Russian gross domestic product was only 58 percent of the 1989 figure.”\(^{18}\) The Russian military was in a similarly weak state, demonstrated by its “disastrous performance [...] in the first Chechen war and its problematic performance in the second [...]”.\(^{19}\)

The price of this retreat from Middle Eastern politics was ceding power in the region to the US. In Russia, Yeltsin’s pro-Western policies were unpopular, perceived, as they were, “as potentially leaving the country internationally weak and isolated.”\(^{20}\) Yeltsin was criticized for “appearing to be too obsequious to the West,” and “Russian public opinion, still accustomed to the image of their country as a great world power, demanded a more dignified role in its nation’s international standing.”\(^{21}\) In the 1990s, popular opinion in Russia indicated a belief that the country was too weak to pursue foreign policy initiatives in the Middle East. A commentary in Izvestiia, a prominent newspaper circulated in Russia at the time, provides insight into this mentality:

Pressure can be used effectively only by those who have strength, economic, political, and military strength [...] Trying to exert pressure without having strength makes one look ridiculous. An individual can afford to do this. But a state, never.\(^{22}\)

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 157.
\(^{18}\) Freedman, 64.
\(^{19}\) Ibid.
\(^{20}\) Nizameddin, “Squaring the Middle East Triangle in Lebanon,” 477.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 485.
\(^{22}\) Quoted in Freedman, 65.
In response to this criticism, Yeltsin made a number of concessions, including the appointment of Evgenii Primakov as Minister of Foreign Affairs. In this role, Primakov resisted the “inevitability of US dominance in the world system” and proposed a new strategy for Russian foreign policy:

[F]irst, that pragmatism should dictate policy making rather than any ideological commitment, be it Communism or liberalism; and secondly, that Russia's international position could and should be strengthened in the world vis-a-vis the West by forming and nurturing strategic alliances with other poles, or regional powers, such as China, India and Iran. This school of thought appealed to the vision of Russia as a Eurasian power […].

Talal Nizameddin highlights Primakov as an important transitional figure between the Yeltsin and Putin eras and argues that Putin's initial popularity was related to his adoption of Primakov's strong foreign policy agenda in the first years of his presidency.

_Putin Strengthens Russia's Position in the Middle East_

Since he was elected in 1999, Putin has viewed the conflict in the Middle East, and Syria in particular, as an opportunity to “maintain [Russian influence] in the former Soviet Union”—particularly in the newly independent Former Soviet Republics that surround the country, six of which have a majority Muslim population—and restore Russian influence on the international stage. Putin has revived the country's ability to exert such international influence with a surge of Russian activity in the Middle East.

The Kremlin’s pivot back to the Middle East has manifested in several different ways. This includes increased Russian military presence, including its port lease in Tartus, which expanded from a small foothold in 2005 to an extensive, fifty-year lease in 2017. It also includes diplomatic

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24 Ibid., 477.
25 Ibid., 478.
27 Katz, 160.
endeavors: Putin has continued the tradition of supporting regimes that are unfriendly, and even hostile, to the US, including Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Muammar Qaddafi’s Libya, Assad’s Syria, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s Iran. The Russian Federation has also developed close ties to Hezbollah and Hamas, despite its stated efforts to combat Islamic extremist terrorism in its own border republic, Chechnya. Then, in order to gain the support of small states, Putin pitched Russian intervention as supporting the local status quo, a direct counter to US interventions.

**Russian Interventions in Syria**

*Antiterrorism and Unstable Allies*

After Putin sent troops to assist Assad in 2015, the Kremlin explained that this military intervention in the Syrian civil war was ordered in an effort to fight Islamic extremism and eradicate the presence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) in Syria. However, Russia has used the guise of antiterrorism to pursue its own foreign policy goals in the past, particularly after 9/11 galvanized “most governments throughout the world” to support “US-led intervention in Afghanistan” and focused the world's attention on terrorism. As a result, Putin “elicited a much greater degree of Western 'understanding' for Russian intervention in Chechnya” by claiming to be fighting “basically the same enemy as the West was fighting in Afghanistan.” For example, the Kremlin explained crackdowns on Chechen rebels during the insurgency phase of the Second Chechen War as a response to terrorist attacks in Moscow, Stavropol, and Beslan from 2002 to 2004.

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 161.
30 Goldenberg and Smith, 1; “Putin: zadacha Rossii v Sirii—stabilizatsiia zakonnoi vlasti.”
31 Katz, 161.
32 Ibid.
33 Nizameddin, *Putin’s New Order in the Middle East*, 69; Katz, 161.
Antiterrorism is one of several aims that Russia’s involvement in Syria fulfills, including territorial expansion, securing warm water ports, and buffering neighbor states that are shifting closer to the West.\textsuperscript{34} Perhaps the most fundamental reason for interventionist foreign policy is an internal one, a perceived fear of state collapse, as Fiona Hill wrote in 2013:

Pyutin is really motivated to support the Assad regime by his fear of state collapse—a fear he confronted most directly during the secession of Russia’s North Caucasus republic of Chechnya, which he brutally suppressed in a bloody civil war and counterinsurgency operation fought between 1999 and 2009.\textsuperscript{35}

Despite these fears, Putin has aligned the Russian Federation with extremist political movements that were previously deemed unstable partners in the Levant, including Hamas and Hezbollah.\textsuperscript{36}

Hamas is a Palestinian Sunni-Islamist fundamentalist organization that operates out of Gaza and is the de facto government for Palestinians living in Gaza. After Hamas decisively won the 2006 elections in Gaza, Putin extended a public invitation to leaders of Hamas to meet in Russia, which “highlighted the gulf that had emerged between Moscow and the Western world”.\textsuperscript{37}

Hezbollah is both a political movement and a Shi’a Islamist military group and is considered by the US to be a terrorist organization.\textsuperscript{38} Hezbollah is particularly pertinent to the Russia-Syria relationship because it is embedded in southern Lebanon; since the 1970s, “the relationship between Lebanon and Syria has been so intertwined […] that until 2005 Russia, much like the United States, viewed Lebanon only through the Syrian prism.”\textsuperscript{39} Hezbollah is also connected to a long-time Russian ally in the region, Iran. The relationship between Hezbollah and

\textsuperscript{34} Borshchevskaya, 4.
\textsuperscript{35} Hill.
\textsuperscript{36} Katz, 160.
\textsuperscript{37} Nizameddin, \textit{Putin’s New Order in the Middle East}, 219; Nizameddin, “Squaring the Middle East Triangle in Lebanon,” 489.
\textsuperscript{38} US Department of State.
\textsuperscript{39} Nizameddin, \textit{Putin’s New Order in the Middle East}, 153.
Russia is natural in some respects, as Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah all support the Assad regime.\textsuperscript{40} By supporting Hezbollah, Putin has strengthened his position in the Middle East and deepened his foothold in Syria while furthering his relationship with Iran, eventually integrating into the “Iran-Syria-Hezbollah triumvirate” that “formed a stalwart buffer against US influence and provided Moscow with the opportunity of a firm presence in the region.”\textsuperscript{41}

2010–2012: The Arab Spring Destabilizes Russian Allies

In late 2010, uprisings that came to be known as the Arab Spring broke out across the Middle East. The Arab Spring consisted of several anti-government revolutions that erupted across the Arab world in response to social, political, and economic problems.\textsuperscript{42} The spark for the revolutions originated in Tunisia, where a university-educated man lit himself on fire out of desperation after local police confiscated his vegetable cart for failing to meet bureaucratic requirements.\textsuperscript{43} In response to this incident, “hundreds of youths in Tunisia took to the streets, smashing shop windows and vandalizing cars.”\textsuperscript{44} The result of the uprisings was the ouster of leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. For Russia these uprisings were a cause for concern, particularly as they related to Libya and Syria.\textsuperscript{45}

Following the Arab Spring, the Obama administration called on the Assad regime to step down.\textsuperscript{46} This position was in line with that of American allies in the region and consistent with US commitment to stand against human rights violations like those committed by Assad.\textsuperscript{47} The

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Martini} Martini et al., 2.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid., 154.
\bibitem{Gause} Gause, “Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring,” 81.
\bibitem{Nizameddin} Nizameddin, \textit{Putin’s New Order in the Middle East}, 294.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid.
\bibitem{Katz} Katz, 162.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid., 163.
\bibitem{O’Hanlon} O’Hanlon, 3.
\end{thebibliography}
transgressions of the Assad regime, including chemical attacks against Syrian rebels and civilians alike, were widely known.\textsuperscript{48} However, supporting anti-Assad forces also meant taking the risk of potentially empowering radical groups like the Islamic State within Syria.

American policy toward Syria has gone through several stages since the outbreak of the civil war.\textsuperscript{49} In the beginning of the conflict, the Obama administration was hesitant to act on its own rhetoric condemning the Assad regime.\textsuperscript{50} Aware of what had happened after regime overthrow in Iraq, the president was reluctant to make the overthrow of Assad the central goal of his policy, since it did not answer the question of what would happen after.\textsuperscript{51} The Obama administration also hoped that dwindling financial assets, as well as defecting soldiers, would force the Assad regime to accept some kind of new power-sharing arrangement that would include the president's departure. Even as military momentum stalled and the regime pushed back against the opposition, the Obama administration placed its hopes in diplomacy.\textsuperscript{52} During Obama’s second term, the administration financed opposition groups more seriously.\textsuperscript{53} However, these efforts were to no avail, since the Assad regime’s success in recapturing lost land was undeniable.

The pro-Russian regimes in Libya and Syria resisted the initial outburst of the Arab Spring, but Putin regarded the movement as dangerous in its potential to install pro-American regimes in place of regimes that were more friendly to Russia.\textsuperscript{54} Moreover, Putin feared that the revolutions

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{49} O’Hanlon, 4.  
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{54} Katz, 163.}
could spread to Moscow and directly challenge his own power.\textsuperscript{55} The Arab Spring motivated him to deepen his involvement in the region.

2013: Obama Backs Down from a Standoff over Chemical Weapons

In 2012, Secretary of State John Kerry outlined the White House’s intentions of responding to any chemical attack: “We have been very clear to the Assad regime… that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation.”\textsuperscript{56} Secretary of State Kerry’s words created a “red-line” that bound the US to respond to a chemical attack.

In August 2013, Assad’s regime was accused of using chemical weapons to kill over one thousand Syrian civilians in Ghouta, drawing the ire of the Obama administration and the international community.\textsuperscript{57} In response to that attack, the Obama administration lined four destroyers along the Syrian coast.\textsuperscript{58} Russia stepped in to protect its quasi-client (and its significant investments in Syria) by sending Russian ships armed with “modern rocket systems and nuclear torpedoes.”\textsuperscript{59} A standoff ensued between the two great powers, with Russian ships stationed directly in the path of the American destroyers.

Tensions between the US and Russia have spilled over into the international diplomatic arena. As US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley noted, “In effect Russia accepts the use of chemical weapons in Syria. How then can we trust Russia’s support for supposed peace in Syria?”\textsuperscript{60} However, before any real direct confrontation could take place, Obama backed down

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Goldberg.
\textsuperscript{57} Valenta and Friedman, 9.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
his “red-line.” His decision to forgo enforcing the red line was controversial among foreign policy experts; the administration chose an alternate course of action, pursuing a diplomatic solution while simultaneously seeking approval for military action from Congress. Obama's decision to back down from enforcing his stated policy in Syria handed Putin a political win. Once again, Russia flexed its political strength in the region at the expense of the US.

Hostility between the US and Russia as a result of the Russian-Syrian relationship is evident in the international diplomatic arena, particularly the UN, which has served as a space where the US and Russia have confronted one another over their involvement in the region. Russia has sought to support Syria and shield it from repercussions at the hands of the UN, angering the US and its allies. After Putin’s second term as president, he “brazenly aligned himself with Iran, Syria and Hezbollah by sending weapons and defending them in forums of international diplomacy, including the UN Security Council.” By mid-2017, Russia had used its veto power ten times to shield Syria from international pressure at the UN.

2015: Military Intervention in Syria

Russia has had notable success in countering the US’s goals in the Middle East as they relate to supporting rebels and toppling the Assad regime. However, until 2015, despite escalating Russian diplomatic and monetary interventions in the region, US foreign policy experts expected Putin to avoid military intervention in Syria. In 2013 Fiona Hill, then the director of the Brookings Institution’s Center on the United States & Europe, wrote that “Putin is still not ready to sanction an intervention that could lead to the dismantling of the Syrian state […].” However, intervention

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61 McLeary.
62 Nichols.
63 Nizameddin, *Putin’s New Order in the Middle East*, 293.
64 Nichols.
65 Hill.
in the Middle East has long been a part of Putin's effort to shift influence away from the US in the region and globally.\textsuperscript{66} Russia’s political and strategic intervention in Syria came to a head in 2015, when Assad formally requested military aid from Russia.\textsuperscript{67} In response, Putin deployed Russian troops in Syria.

Russia’s intervention in the Syrian Civil War had tangible results. Russia led the path in negotiating peace talks in January 2017 with the Astana Process, which directly bypassed the process that the US was part of.\textsuperscript{68}

\textit{2017: A Fifty-Year Lease in Tartus}

In 2017, the Russian navy’s long-term port lease in Sevastopol, Ukraine, came to an end, compromising Russian access to ports on the Black Sea. Putin had to find another port to secure access for military and commercial purposes.\textsuperscript{69} The opportunity to secure access to the Mediterranean presented itself in early 2017, when Putin and Assad agreed to “confer [the ] territorial sovereignty” of Tartus to Russia.\textsuperscript{70} Since then, Russia has invested heavily in renovating the port and signed a fifty-year lease.\textsuperscript{71} The deal allows Putin to harbor eleven ships, expand the on-site Russian naval facility, and invest in infrastructure and technology to improve the port.\textsuperscript{72} Tartus is especially important to Russia because it is currently the country’s only access to the Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{73} Through this deal, Putin has solidified access to the port for the future, eliminating the problem of access to warm-water ports in the region.

\textsuperscript{66} Nizameddin, 497.  
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{68} Frantzman.  
\textsuperscript{69} Valenta and Friedman, 9; 5.  
\textsuperscript{70} Gordon.  
\textsuperscript{71} Valenta and Friedman, 9.  
\textsuperscript{72} McLeary.  
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
2018: *Stepping into Trump’s Vacuum in Syria*

The Trump administration, like that of Obama, initially took a hard line against the Assad regime, as seen by the administration’s decision to fire Tomahawk cruise missiles in response to Assad’s use of his deadly chemical weapons program.\(^\text{74}\) Trump’s approach notwithstanding, the Assad regime was able to regain significant control over Syria. Testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee, foreign policy expert Mona Yacoubian spoke of Assad’s seemingly impending victory, noting that

> the conflict in Syria is at a perilous inflection point. The Syrian Civil War is entering a messy and protracted endgame. Unfortunately, the regime of Bashar al-Assad, backed by the critical support of Russia and Iran, is likely to prevail. Meanwhile, counter-ISIS military operations are moving toward a final stage, with an estimated 98% of ISIS-occupied territory now liberated.\(^\text{75}\)

In December 2018, President Trump announced that the US was withdrawing its troops from Syria.\(^\text{76}\) This unilateral decision from the executive office came as a surprise to American foreign policy experts and allies in the region, since it left US allies, including the British, Kurds, and Israelis, without aid.\(^\text{77}\) President Trump explained this decision by saying, “we have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency.”\(^\text{78}\) Although ISIS has not been totally eradicated as of December 2018, the number of fighters and the territory of their caliphate have both been dramatically diminished.\(^\text{79}\)

In response to the US withdrawal, Putin expressed his agreement with Trump’s assertion that ISIS has been defeated in Syria.\(^\text{80}\) He remarked, “We have made significant changes in the

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\(^{74}\) Yacoubian.

\(^{75}\) Ibid.

\(^{76}\) Landler, Cooper, and Schmitt.

\(^{77}\) Ibid.

\(^{78}\) Trump.

\(^{79}\) Gause, “Donald Trump and the Middle East,” 273.

\(^{80}\) “Putin soglasen s Trampom v Otsyenkye Togo, Chto v Tsyelom IGIL Pobyezhdyan v Sirii.”
fight against terrorism […] and dealt a serious blow to ISIS in Syria." In many ways, Trump’s unilateral decision expanded Putin’s power in the region. The US-backed rebel groups lost in the Syrian civil war, while the Russian-backed Assad government regained control of the country.

In December 2018, Russian leaders gathered with leader from Iran and Turkey in Geneva to discuss the Syrian constitution, sending a clear signal to the US that Russia would determine the future of Syria. Russia and the US have been at odds with their desired outcome in the Syrian Civil War. With the end of the conflict in sight, it is apparent that Russia, under Putin’s leadership, was successful in achieving its vision for Syria, thereby directly countering US goals and undermining US foreign policy objectives in the Syrian civil war.

**Leveraging Russian Influence in the Middle East**

*Increased Ties with Iran*

By supporting Syria, Putin was also currying favor with Iran, a valuable partner state for Putin because of its influence in the Middle East. Iran has long been a sponsor of anti-Western terrorism, and its current regime is highly supportive of the Assad government in Syria. Moreover, US foreign policy actively seeks to counter the current Iranian regime. As such, partnering with Iran strengthens Russia in its resolve to undermine the US.

Because of his close partnership with Syria, Putin has strengthened his relationship with Iran. Syria and Iran have a long history of allyship dating back to the 1980s. This was mostly because “Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy militant group […] was a powerful and often decisive player

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81 Мы добились существенных изменений в борьбе с терроризмом […] и нанесли серьезные удары по ИГИЛ в Сирии. Ibid. (All translations by author unless otherwise noted.)
82 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
85 Nizameddin, *Putin’s New Order in the Middle East*, 153.
in Lebanese politics.”86 Both the US and Russia viewed them as intimately linked during this time.87 The trilateral relationship among Russia, Syria, and Iran strengthened after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which all three states viewed as a common threat.88 After the 2005 Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, Putin narrowed his foreign policy objectives in the region to Syria and Iran. Faced with “the uncomfortable choice between building relations with an independent Lebanese state or openly pursuing Russia’s broader agenda of aligning with Iran and Syria,” Putin deserted Lebanon.89

After 2005, the nascent relationship between Iran and Russia has developed into a loose alliance. Iran, “[l]ike Syria, […] has [bought] Russian weapons systems, engag[ed] in cooperative pipeline projects, and [bought] nuclear power plants.”90 Russia has been crucial in Iran’s progress toward nuclear capabilities, contributing 800 million dollars toward the construction of the Bushehr nuclear plant in Iran.91 Amid criticism for this act, Putin reassured the international community that “Iran indeed does not intend to produce nuclear weapons and we will continue to develop relations in all sectors, including peaceful atomic energy.”92

Putin has also defended Iran over the collapse of the US-Iran nuclear deal signed on July 14, 2015 in Vienna.93 Putin initially helped former US president Barack Obama broker the deal.94 Then, after the US left the deal under President Donald Trump, Putin asserted that “the Americans left, the deal is ruined […]. But as soon as Iran takes the first steps towards responding […]

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86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 160.
89 Ibid.
90 Valenta and Friedman, 12.
91 Nizameddin, “Squaring the Middle East Triangle in Lebanon,” 489.
92 Nizameddin, Putin’s New Order in the Middle East, 264.
93 Valenta and Friedman, 12.
94 Ibid.
everyone will forget that the United States initiated derailing the deal, and all the blame will be placed on Iran.”

Moreover, the two countries cooperate militarily in Syria because “both countries are longtime allies of [Assad]. By rescuing him with Russian airpower and Iranian manpower, they have embedded themselves even further.” Iran has actively recruited thousands of fighters and deployed them in Syria to assist Assad’s forces. Both Iran and Russia have deepened their cooperation in order to further their shared goals in Syria, including countering American interests.

A Broker in Israel/Palestine

Since directly intervening in Syria, Putin has become a more pronounced actor in one of the central issues in the region, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He has become more vocal about the conflict and more willing to assert himself as broker. Putin has also “attempt[ed] a minor foray into the Israeli-Palestinian peace process” by “trying to organize a summit between [Israeli President Benjamin] Netanyahu and […] [Palestinian President Mahmoud] Abbas.” After Abbas rose to power in January of 2005, Putin was the first foreign dignitary to visit him (in April of that year). Putin’s overtures to Palestine have not signaled his abandonment of the Israeli cause. He has carefully created the appearance of supporting both sides to act as a broker in the conflict. By balancing support for both parties and through his position in Syria, he has established credibility in the region as an intermediary.

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95 Вот американцы вышли, договор разрушается […] Но как только Иран сделает первые шаги в ответ назавтра все забудут, что инициатором разрушения были Соединенные Штаты, и вина на все будет возложена на Иран. “Putin: Esli Iran vyidet iz SVPD, vse zabudut, chto SShA vyshli pervymi.”
96 Yee.
97 Frantzman.
98 Goldenberg and Smith.
99 Nizameddin, Putin’s New Order in the Middle East, 219.
Russia has strengthened its geopolitical position in the Middle East through its relationship with Syria so much that Israel is forced to negotiate with the Kremlin about its own security concerns, namely, regarding Hezbollah’s position in Syria. Foreign policy experts have noted that “since the Russian intervention in Syria, the Israelis and Russians appear to have negotiated an understanding that allows the Israelis to continue to take limited air strikes in Syria if they detect the movement of advanced weaponry from Damascus into Hezbollah in Lebanon.” Russia has even increased its sway over Israel; for example, “at Russia’s request, Israel skipped a vote at the U.N. General Assembly on enabling investigations into allegations of war crimes in Syria.”

Russia’s new role is a surprising deviation from the status quo, as traditionally the US has addressed Israel’s security concerns, negotiating with partners in the region to do so. Historically, the US has played that role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis began with the Oslo process in the nineties. By asserting himself as broker, Putin is directly challenging the US for the role. As former Ambassador to Israel Dennis Ross writes:

> Putin aims to demonstrate that Russia, and not America, is the main power broker in the region and increasingly elsewhere. And he is leaving no doubt that his priority is to use the Syrian conflict for his purposes—not to pave the way for an end of the war.

In fact, Russia has continuously broken its commitments to work toward peace in Syria. In 2015, the international community came together in Vienna to discuss finding a resolution to the ongoing

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100 Goldenberg and Smith.  
101 Ibid.  
102 Ibid.  
103 Ibid.  
104 Ross.
conflict in Syria. Although Russia agreed to the Vienna principles, it soon became clear that it did so without the intention of implementing them.

Conclusion

Since Vladimir Putin rose to power, Russia has made significant geopolitical gains in the Middle East. As a result of Putin’s partnership with Syria, specifically through his intervention in the Syrian civil war, Russia has gained greater access to the politics of the Middle East and increased its power in the region. Although Russia has seen considerable success in countering the US in the Middle East through Syria, the US can still implement policies to counterbalance Russia’s presence in the region. First and foremost, the US should focus on strengthening its allies and alliances with countries in the region, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, and Israel. The Trump administration has had considerable success with this tactic in Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The US should also seek to support native minority populations like the Assyrians and Kurds in their effort to establish homelands. In doing so, the US would increase the number of allies it has in the region, thereby creating a network of support to serve as a bulwark against Russia and its allies. The long-term power struggle between the US and Russia is far from over, and it will continue to play out in the Middle East.

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105 Ibid.


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