

# Is Russia an Outside Power in the Gulf?

**Samuel Charap**

When Russia is invoked in analysis of outside powers' role in the Middle East, it is often thought of in two related ways: either as a shrunken Soviet Union or as a potential regional security guarantor should the United States abdicate that role. Following the 2013 IISS Manama Dialogue, a Gulf leader was quoted as saying: 'the Russians have proved they are reliable friends ... As a result, some states in the region have already started to look at developing more multilateral relations, rather than just relying on Washington.'<sup>1</sup> This particular statement was alleged to have been fabricated, but the sentiment contained therein is broadly reflective of regional elite opinion about Russia.<sup>2</sup> The implication is that Russia seeks clients, as the Soviet Union did; is active in the region largely to compete with the US; and could, if asked, step in to displace or supplement the US regional role. Despite all of the headlines generated by the Ukraine crisis, however, Russia is not a shrunken Soviet Union, nor is it in a position to replace the US in the region.

While the Soviet Union had global ambitions and reach, Russia has neither. The Soviet Union was engaged in a global ideological competition with the US that created imperatives to seek influence and connections everywhere. That ideology also gave it a presence in many regions via communist parties, workers' movements, or governments with anti-Western policies. In contrast, post-Soviet Russia lacks both the ideological impetus and the geopolitical imperative to compete with the US in every region.

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Moreover, despite the country's economic recovery during the Putin era, it lacks the resources to project power – be it hard power, economic power or soft power – in the way that the Soviet Union did.

Post-Soviet Russia is a qualitatively different kind of outside power for the Middle East than the US. Firstly, it does not value what could be called 'regional public goods' enough to sacrifice for and provide them on its own – beyond its immediate neighbourhood, that is. Russia has not created military alliances, nor even offered security guarantees, beyond its neighbourhood. Moreover, it has no interest in doing so. This means that Russia does not have to balance its national interests in the region against broader objectives, a dilemma the US faces regularly due to its focus on regional public goods and its commitment to allies' security. For the US, goals such as maintaining stability in energy markets and countering Iran often trump worries about extremism or human-rights concerns. For Russia, however, there are no similar balancing factors that prevent it from pursuing its more narrow national priorities. While extremism is arguably an equal threat to both the US and Russia, the two countries focus on this problem in completely different ways.

Unlike the US, Russia is opportunistic and practical, rather than principled or ideological in its regional engagement. It does not use domestic politics or regime type as a criterion for judging how to engage with regional states: it will work with governments ranging from new democracies to old monarchies. Nor do Russian officials ask questions about what governments do to their domestic opposition. Part of the reason, of course, is that they do not like being asked the same questions about their own government's monopolisation of the political space at home.

Indeed, Moscow will speak to any country or entity that it does not consider a direct threat to Russia, even if some of those countries and entities are threats to one another. While its relationship with Israel is better than ever, it also has strong ties to Iran, and talks to Hamas. In other words, unlike the US, it will not adopt the threat perceptions of its regional partners, nor will it cater to them. Russia will not take sides in what it sees as the disputes of others.

This refusal to meddle arises in part from another aspect of Russian opportunism: the country's readiness to take advantage of regional displeasure with the US to make a buck, particularly in the military-industrial sphere. The military-industrial sector is a large employer at home, with a shrinking customer base worldwide. So, for example, if Egypt wants to demonstrate its displeasure with Washington by buying Russian kit, Moscow will be happy to sell. But this readiness stems from the weakness of Russia's market position globally, not its strength.

### **Countering extremism at home**

Russia's own Muslim citizens, who constitute 10–15% of the country's population, are a major factor in its engagement with the Gulf states.<sup>3</sup> Moscow demonstrates its credentials to that community by engaging with majority-Muslim countries and international groupings, such as by becoming an observer in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Mostly, however, Moscow's regional engagement on this issue is defined by its 20-year struggle with Islamist extremism and terrorism at home, Russia's most significant domestic-security challenge. What began as a separatist conflict in Chechnya in the early 1990s evolved into a brutal Islamist insurgency, spreading violence to other republics in the North Caucasus and leading to spectacular acts of terror in Moscow and other large cities. The killing of Chechen rebel leader Aslan Maskhadov in 2005 was a watershed in the conflict, marking the shift away from nationalist separatism to an effort to establish what Dmitry Gorenburg has called a 'pan-regional Islamic state'.<sup>4</sup> In 2007, Doku Umarov, Maskhadov's successor, announced the creation of the 'Caucasus Emirate', a militant jihadist group aiming to establish an independent Islamic state in the greater Caucasus region.

Although violence in the Chechen republic itself has greatly decreased in recent years under the Kremlin-backed leadership of Akhmad Kadyrov, and later his son Ramzan, the Caucasus Emirate has found fertile ground in other regions of Russia's North Caucasus. Indeed, the epicentre of violence is now in Dagestan, the republic to Chechnya's east. Meanwhile, the reach of the organisation has extended all the way to Russia's core. In November 2009, the Caucasus Emirate took responsibility for a bombing on

the Moscow–St Petersburg express train, which killed 27 people and injured 130. In 2010 the group carried out a subway bombing in Moscow that killed 40, and in 2011 a suicide attack at Domodedovo Airport that killed 37. The group carried out two suicide bombings in Volgograd in December 2013, weeks before the start of the Sochi Winter Olympic Games, killing 34.

The Russian government has long alleged that extremists in the North Caucasus have been funded and aided from abroad, particularly from entities in the Gulf. Specifically, Moscow has alleged that Gulf-based Islamic charity organisations both inject radical Islam into the region and bankroll extremist groups. Officials have fingered a range of Gulf-based groups, including the International Islamic Relief Organization, Al-Haramayn (The Two Holy Places), El-Hairiya (Charity), Jamiat Ihia Al-Turath Al-Islamiya (Revival of Islamic Heritage Society) and the Benevolence International Foundation.<sup>5</sup>

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the North Caucasus, along with other Russian regions populated by Muslims (such as Tatarstan on the Volga river), experienced an Islamic revival. The Gulf-based charities were seen as the driving force behind that revival, financing the sudden boom in the construction of mosques in the North Caucasus and Volga regions – 300 such buildings in 1991 had grown to over 4,000 by 2001.<sup>6</sup> Some of the foundations sent Salafist clerics to oversee these institutions, with a mandate to bring traditionally moderate local practices into conformity with the Salafist tradition. Most of these clerics were expelled from Russia by the end of the 1990s, as the government came to equate those who practiced Salafism with Islamist extremists.<sup>7</sup>

In the early 2000s, Russian security officials reported that Gulf states were sending as much as \$1.5–3 million per month in support of the foundations' activities.<sup>8</sup> Despite a crackdown on terrorist financing, Russian intelligence reported that, in 2003, charity organisations were delivering \$500,000–1m a month to Chechnya.<sup>9</sup>

This linkage between extremism in Russia and the Gulf has coloured Russia's relations with the region. For example, the relationship with Kuwait came under strain in February 2003 when Moscow accused two NGOs tied to the Kuwaiti government, the Social Reform Society and the Society of the Revival of Islamic Heritage, of sponsoring terrorism. Moscow put both on a

federal list of terrorist organisations and banned their operations in Russian territory.<sup>10</sup> Kuwait insisted that the two groups supported only charitable activities and were not involved in sponsoring terrorism.<sup>11</sup>

Regional states have also provided shelter to insurgents from the North Caucasus. On 13 February 2004, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, the former president of the self-proclaimed Chechen separatist government – the so-called ‘Republic of Ichkeria’ – was killed when a bomb ripped through his car in Doha, Qatar. Yandarbiyev had been accused by the Russian government of financing Chechen separatists and organising high-profile terrorist attacks in Moscow. Russia had repeatedly requested Yandarbiyev’s extradition, but the Qatari government granted him asylum three years prior to his death. Two Russian intelligence officers were arrested for the bombing, convicted by a Qatari court and sentenced to life in prison. They were eventually extradited to Russia, where they were released from custody.

In short, Russia has come to see the Gulf countries as contributors to its most significant domestic security problem. This has not only created tensions between Russia and regional governments, particularly when Moscow has decided to act on its own to counter perceived threats, but also served to limit the extent to which Russia is willing to engage with the region on other issues.

Russian Islamist extremists have also participated in Middle Eastern conflicts in recent years. The presence of these insurgents compounds Russia’s problems at home in two ways. Firstly, these jihadists are likely to return to Russia at some point, bringing all of their battlefield experience with them. Secondly, they have attempted to mobilise the global jihadist movement against the Russian government.

In 2012 reports surfaced that Russian Muslims had appeared in Syria and were fighting on behalf of various Syrian rebel groups. Estimates of the exact number of fighters from the North Caucasus have varied from as few as 150 to as many as 1,700.<sup>12</sup> Syrian opposition sources have indicated that Chechens (it should be noted that, in the Syrian conflict, the term ‘Chechen’, or ‘*Shishani*’ in Arabic, has been applied to any jihadist from the

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*Insurgents  
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North Caucasus region) comprise the second-largest force of foreign fighters in Syria, coming after Libyans.<sup>13</sup>

Militants from the Caucasus region have even assumed top leadership positions in groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). For instance, Abu Umar al-Shishani, an ethnic Chechen from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge who fought against Russia in the Second Chechen War and the 2008 Russia–Georgia War, began his career in Syria as the emir of the al-Qaeda-inspired Jaish al-Muhajirin wal-Ansar (The Army of the Emigrants and Helpers). He subsequently swore the group's allegiance to ISIS. Since then, he has established himself as a tactical mastermind, reportedly rising in rank to become one of ISIS's top military commanders.<sup>14</sup>

ISIS has turned its sights on Russia as a future target, though its ability to carry out attacks on Russian soil seems limited. In a video released in early September 2014, an ISIS fighter sitting in a seized Russian military jet in Raqqa, the group's seat of power, said:

This message is for you, Vladimir Putin! These are the aircraft you sent to Bashar [al-Assad], and we're going to send them to you. Remember that! We will with the consent of Allah free Chechnya and all of the Caucasus! The Islamic State is here and will stay here, and it will spread with the grace of Allah! ... Your throne has already been shaken, it is under threat and will fall with our arrival ... We're already on our way with the will of Allah!<sup>15</sup>

Although these threats may amount to little more than propaganda for recruitment, or mere bluster, Russian security services blocked the video in Russia and launched a criminal investigation.<sup>16</sup> Ramzan Kadyrov took to Instagram to voice his disgust, posting: 'these bastards have no relation to Islam. They are outspoken enemies of Muslims around the world. Naive people chose to threaten Chechnya and all of Russia with two planes. They can send two thousand planes, but they will not reach Russia.'<sup>17</sup> Shishani has since placed a \$5m bounty on Kadyrov's head.<sup>18</sup> He has also threatened to directly attack Russia. In a recording of an alleged phone call with his father, who still lives in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, he said: 'don't worry Dad,

I'll come home and show the Russians. I have many thousands following me now and I'll get more. We'll have our revenge against Russia.<sup>19</sup>

It is unclear whether ISIS has the operational capacity to make good on these threats. Still, Russia now faces a declared threat from an organisation with demonstrated military capabilities, voiced by an Islamist leader from its insecure periphery who has vowed to bring his followers home to fight Russia.

### **Making a buck**

Moscow has made efforts to bolster economic engagement with the Middle East over the past decade, although overall the region still represents a relatively small portion of Russia's global trade and investment flows. Russia is also a marginal participant in the Gulf states' economies. In 2013 the value of total Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) trade with the world was \$1.47 trillion. The same year, Russia–GCC trade was valued at \$3.74 billion, or 0.25% of GCC total trade and 0.45% of Russia's total trade. For comparison, China accounted for \$165bn, or 11.24%, of total GCC trade that year.<sup>20</sup>

Growth in economic ties has centred on three areas: arms sales, upstream energy projects and mutual investment. In the period 2005–12, the Middle East as a whole accounted for 14.3% of Russia's arms-export contracts, or \$8.2bn. As such, the region is the second-largest arms-export market for Russia, behind the Asia-Pacific.<sup>21</sup>

Following the British and French governments' decisions to revoke security-equipment export licenses to Bahrain after the monarchy's 2011 crackdown on protesters, Russia stepped in to fill the void. A source told Bloomberg that Rosoboronexport, Russia's arms-export monopoly, signed a multimillion-dollar contract to sell modernised Kalashnikovs with grenade launchers and ammunition to Bahrain. A Bahraini government spokesman said: 'the relationship between Russia and Bahrain has been increasingly getting stronger. We are looking to cooperate with Russia in trade and technical services. One of the fields is in the area of light arms.'<sup>22</sup>

Although ostensibly competitors, Russia and the Gulf states have developed some joint energy projects in the Middle East. In December 2010, Stroytransgaz completed the construction of the Taweelah–Fujairah gas

pipeline in the United Arab Emirates, worth \$417m.<sup>23</sup> In May 2014, Reuters reported that Russia's Lukoil would start drilling for unconventional gas in Saudi Arabia's 'Empty Quarter' desert region in 2015.<sup>24</sup>

While investment numbers are harder to find, that is clearly where the most significant engagement is currently occurring. Funds from the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain have made investments in Russia, ranging in size from hundreds of millions to billions of dollars, including in infrastructure projects and power companies, and in the Russia Direct Investment Fund, a government-managed fund targeting high-growth sectors of the economy. Inward foreign direct investment in Russia from Gulf states nearly quintupled during 2007–13.<sup>25</sup>

### **Global imperatives**

Despite all this, Russia is not a wholly pragmatic actor in the region, limiting itself to the pursuit of regional interests and conducting *realpolitik*. In fact, what can be called the primary global imperative of Russian foreign policy – the neutralisation of threats to 'regime stability' at home – will always trump Russia's regional interests in the Middle East (or any other region, for that matter) when the two conflict. At times, however, these two sets of interests can be mutually reinforcing. Much depends on the particular circumstances, and the attitudes of regional states towards those circumstances.

Russia's prioritisation of its own regime stability is manifest in its resistance to US-led regime-change efforts in the Middle East, whether real or imagined. Moscow has consistently argued that US military intervention is a major source of instability and extremism in the region; recently, for example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs blamed US intervention for the rise of ISIS: 'the surge in terrorist threats in Iraq and the Middle East as a whole are largely the result of external unlawful military intervention in the internal affairs of states in order to address selfish geopolitical objectives.'<sup>26</sup> Moscow has also come to the conclusion that the West's allegedly irrepressible urge to topple inconvenient governments has at times trumped its efforts to counter extremism. At the International Conference on Peace and Security in Iraq, held in Paris on 15 September 2014, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said:



The core of international efforts to combat terrorism has always been a willingness to address all of its forms and manifestations, not dividing terrorists into 'bad' and 'good' ones. Unfortunately, in the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] region, this fundamental principle began to falter. It has repeatedly been sacrificed to the aspirations for overthrowing a regime in a given country.<sup>27</sup>

He went on to cite Western actions in Libya and Iraq as examples.

But Moscow's justification of its opposition to Western-led regime change on regional grounds, while an accurate reflection of Russian thinking, is mostly convenient, rhetorical window dressing for a much more parochial concern. Many in the Russian foreign-policy establishment believe that the string of US-led interventions that have resulted in regime change since the end of the Cold War – Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya – set extremely dangerous precedents that could be used against Russia itself and its autocratic allies in its neighbourhood. Russia has wielded its veto to prevent the UN Security Council from giving its imprimatur to any intervention it suspected of being motivated by a stated or unstated intention to remove a sitting government. Above all else, Moscow wants to avoid legitimising US-led regime change or attempts to pick winners in internal conflicts.<sup>28</sup>

By prioritising this resistance to forcible regime change, Russia often appears to 'support' regimes in US cross hairs. But analysts should not confuse a by-product for a directed policy. Unfortunately, many have done just that when it comes to Russia's approach to the crisis in Syria. In the initial years of the conflict, journalists and policymakers alike focused on the ties (including military, military-industrial and intelligence-sharing) that allegedly bound Russia to the Assad regime. Western newspapers regularly published stories on Russian arms sales to Syria and its naval facility at Tartus. When it became clear that Moscow was still intent on resisting attempts to overthrow Assad even after these ties were literally destroyed by the civil war, observers settled on the more generic 'support' label: Russia supports Assad, so the argument goes, and therefore will do whatever it takes to keep him in office for as long as possible.

If Russia were indeed driven to keep Assad in power at all costs, its behaviour thus far would have been quite different. Like Iran, it would have supplied the regime with boatloads of mortars, artillery and tanks, and sent uniformed military advisers. Instead, its arms sales are largely confined to sophisticated air-defence systems, which are useless against the rebels. The terms of these deals are commercial – cash on delivery – without any below-market-rate state-bank loans to support the purchases (as per Russian practice elsewhere), let alone, as with Russia’s allies, via an assistance package. Russia would have vetoed UN Security Council Resolutions 2042 and 2118, both of which called for a ‘political transition’ in Syria, instead of voting in favour of both. It would not have sponsored the Geneva

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### *Russia headed off military action*

communiqué, which requires that the opposition sign off on the composition of a future Syrian leadership, an implicit endorsement of a transition that does not include Assad himself. Senior officials would have explicitly stated their support for Assad, rather than repeatedly saying that they do not care about his fate.<sup>29</sup> For an example of what Russian support for a repressive regime really looks like, see how Russia backs Alexander Lukashenko’s government in Belarus.

The September 2013 US–Russia deal to remove Syria’s chemical weapons proves the point about the drivers of Russia’s Syria policy. At the time, it was a major concession, considering that Moscow had, just weeks before, rejected far less ambitious proposals. Why the major policy reversal? The Russian leadership was convinced that the US was on the verge of military strikes, and recognised that the chemical-weapons agreement could prevent these from proceeding. By putting forth the proposal, Russia succeeded in heading off US military action, but forced the Assad regime to give up its most potent weapon in its fight for survival.

Russia has paid a price, in terms of its regional interests, for its policy on the Syria crisis. Its stance has created friction in its relationships with all regional governments, with the exception of Iran. Yet this regional backlash has done little to sway Moscow. During a February 2012 meeting at the United Nations, the Qatari ambassador reportedly told his Russian counter-

part, Vitaly Churkin, that Russia would lose the support of all Arab countries for its stance on Syria. Churkin allegedly retorted, 'If you talk to me in this tone Qatar will cease to exist as early as tomorrow.'<sup>30</sup> The next month, tensions between Russia and Saudi Arabia broke out into the open with a series of disparaging tit-for-tat statements. On 4 March the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement accusing the Saudis of supporting terrorism in Syria, calling Riyadh's behaviour 'dangerous and irresponsible'.<sup>31</sup> The Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded by accusing Russia of giving the Assad regime 'license to commit more crimes' against the Syrian people 'in a way that is contrary to human morality and all international laws and norms'.<sup>32</sup> At the 2013 IISS Manama Dialogue, Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud, the former director of Saudi Arabia's intelligence service, said that Russia's 'manoeuvring' was tainted by 'the blood of the Syrian people'.<sup>33</sup> He went on to question whether Russia even had the right to attend the Geneva II conference on Syria.

A March 2014 decision by the Saudi government to supply MANPAD systems to Syrian rebels proved another occasion for a public airing of differences. Moscow said it was 'deeply concerned' by the move, which prompted the Saudi government to lash out: '[Russian] support is the principal reason for the barbarity of the Syrian regime and for the conflict dragging on for three years without hope of a settlement or of an end anytime soon to one of the most serious humanitarian crises of our time.'<sup>34</sup> In itself, such a 'dialogue' means little in terms of policy. However, it speaks volumes about the current tenor of Russia's relations with the Gulf states.

Russia's economic interests in the Gulf have also suffered as a result of its Syria policy. In June 2012, Saudi trade bodies twice refused a visit from Russian delegations in protest at Russia's support for Assad. According to Abdul Rahman Al Jaraisi, the head of the chamber of commerce in Riyadh, 'we refused to meet because we wanted to convey the message from the Saudi business community and from Saudi Arabia that we have reservations about the unfair and unjust way they have been dealing with Syria'.<sup>35</sup> In July 2012, Saudi tycoon Mubarak Swaiqat responded to Russia's policies in Syria by cancelling large contracts with more than 20 Russian oil and gas companies. 'This is the least that I can do to support our brothers in Syria', he said.<sup>36</sup>

Arab populations, many of which were traditionally sympathetic to Russia due to the Soviet Union's support for Arab states, have reacted to Russia's Syria policy just as poorly as their governments. Following Russia's UN Security Council veto of a draft resolution on Syria in February 2012, hundreds of protesters gathered in front of Russian embassies in Tripoli, Amman and Doha.<sup>37</sup> Protesters in Tripoli were so incensed that a number of them climbed onto the roof of the Embassy and tore down the Russian flag.<sup>38</sup> There were also calls for boycotts of Russian goods in Arab countries. Beginning as grassroots movements on social media, these calls received support from the heads of the International Union of Muslim Scholars and the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. The Saudi press ran a number of articles supporting the calls for a boycott.<sup>39</sup>

According to the Pew Global Attitudes Project, Russia's reputation in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon (the only Middle Eastern countries regularly polled) has steadily declined since the Syria crisis began. From 2010 to 2012, Russia's unfavourable ratings increased from 58%, 58% and 40% in those three countries to 65%, 70% and 48% respectively.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, the Syria case demonstrates that Russia's regional interests have suffered due to Moscow's adherence to the global imperative of resisting Western-led regime-change efforts. Russia's position on Syria undermined its position in the region and damaged its material stake there. Clearly, those regional ties have been given lower priority in the hierarchy of Russian foreign-policy decision-making.

### **Libya: lessons learned**

Developments since the fall of Muammar Gadhafi in Libya have taught Moscow that there is no upside to playing nice with the West on the intervention question. Although Russia did not foresee a regime-change effort when it abstained on UN Security Resolution 1973, and complained bitterly when it materialised, it did nothing to stop the NATO operation. Nevertheless, after Gadhafi's ouster, it lost lucrative contracts, and its interests in Libya have been largely ignored both by the West and the new government.

Russia held \$8bn worth of contracts with Gadhafi's Libya, most of which have not been honoured.<sup>41</sup> A representative of the Libyan oil firm

AGOCO told reporters in August 2011 that 'we don't have a problem with Western countries like the Italians, French and UK companies. But we may have some political issues with Russia, China and Brazil.'<sup>42</sup> This attitude seems to have been widespread among the new authorities. In addition, the Russian Embassy in Libya was attacked by armed gunmen in the evening of 2 October 2013, provoked by a Libyan citizen's alleged murder by a Russian citizen. The following day, the Embassy was completely evacuated, and it has remained closed ever since.<sup>43</sup>

In short, if there were any doubts left in Moscow that US intervention in the region can only cause problems for Russia, developments in Libya have put an end to them.

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The crisis in and around Ukraine that began in February 2014 demonstrates the limits of Russia's 'outside power' status in the Gulf. For Moscow, not all regions are created equal. The Ukraine crisis is an all-consuming issue for Russian foreign policy because Ukraine and, more broadly, Russia's immediate neighbourhood, is the region in which Russia most commonly behaves like an outside power, in the sense that this term is often used in the Gulf. In its neighbourhood, Russia does seek to balance US influence, and it can provide such a counterweight. Moreover, doing so is a security imperative that trumps almost all other priorities. For example, Deputy Defence Minister Anatoly Antonov, when given an opportunity to address a plenary session at the May 2014 IISS Shangri-La Dialogue on Asia-Pacific security, spoke almost exclusively about the Ukraine crisis and the security threat that such 'coloured revolutions' pose to all regions, including the Asia-Pacific. His audience, after two days of focusing on the myriad challenges to regional security, was somewhat mystified by the choice of subject matter. By contrast, the US can 'multitask', dealing, for example, with the Ukraine crisis while simultaneously ramping up its anti-ISIS campaign.

The bottom line is that Russia has neither the means nor the desire to displace the United States in the Middle East, or to replicate the Soviet Union's role in the region. Both its material stake in the Middle East and its ability

to influence events there are limited. Moreover, in the same way that the invasion of Afghanistan eroded the gains the Soviet Union had made in the region from the 1950s to the 1970s, Moscow's support for the Assad regime in Syria has threatened to spoil the steps Putin took to engage with the Middle East from 2000 onward.

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## Notes

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