
Irrelevant Intrigues and Diminished Power Projection

RUSSIA IN RETREAT FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

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Ambitions rather than interests have shaped Russian policy in the Middle East in the last decade, and the overlapping crises in this turbulent region have indeed presented many useful opportunities for proving that Russia can play a greater role in global affairs than its economic performance warrants. Moscow can draw on the rich Soviet tradition of exploiting regional armed conflicts to advance its own beyond-regional agendas, but this track record is also informative about failures of arrogance and overreach.

The onset of the Ukraine war has weakened Russia's positions in the Middle East more profoundly than it may seem from the flow of current news on the constantly shifting but generally unperturbed regional interactions. Most parties to the intricate Middle Eastern power-plays prefer to keep a useful distance from the escalating confrontation between Russia and the West, which provides some comfort for Moscow but implicitly disproves President Vladimir Putin's [claim](#) about a breakdown of the U.S.-designed world order. President Joe Biden's visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia in July 2022 may not have signified the beginning of U.S. strategic re-engagement with the Middle East, but it definitely demonstrated the undiminished demand in the region for U.S. attention. Russia has excelled at exploiting disappointments and anxieties about the U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East, but presently even the actors most interested in such a presumed power vacuum [recognize](#) that Russia's feeble punch is on par with its diminished weight.

Oil Matters Only That Much

In Russian geopolitical imagination, oil is always the central theme in all Middle Eastern contestations, and it is indeed a material and political issue of crucial importance for Russia's international influence and domestic stability. Since the aggression against Ukraine started, Moscow has experienced a sequence of painful blows to its energy-industrial complex; yet, its cartel arrangement with other oil producers (known as the

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OPEC+ format) has [continued](#) undamaged. Saudi Arabia plays the key role in recalibrating this mechanism, and it has [opted](#) to grant a modicum of support for Russia (which is increasingly unable to make its production quote), defying Biden's warning against attempts to exploit artificial shortages in energy markets.

It is plainly obvious for the Middle Eastern petro-states that Moscow is set to produce a severe energy crisis in Europe in the coming winter with the goal of splitting Western unity in support of Ukraine. This weaponization of gas export is a desperate measure, and the stakeholders in the energy supply business need to carefully assess the consequences of both the [self-inflicted](#) damage to Russian production assets and the acceleration of the EU energy transition. The time horizon for these developments has shortened, so already during 2023, Russia's ability for meaningful collaboration with the OPEC+ partners will be much reduced. They also have to acknowledge that the shared goal of stabilizing the balance of oil supply-demand (indirectly supported by both the United States and China) does not address Moscow's intentions of stimulating volatility and triggering a recession among the hostile Western coalition.

Syria Becomes Mission Impossible

The military intervention in Syria was never fully compatible with Russia's oil interests, even if, in the rich imagination of geopolitical experts in Moscow, hypothetical pipelines and oil fields to the east of the Euphrates River figured like high-value assets. Ironically, as Saudi Arabia [indicated](#) readiness to acknowledge the survivability of the al-Assad regime and other Arab neighbors started to open communications, Moscow's capacity for supporting its key ally took a dive. Seven months into the Ukraine war, the Russian army faces severe manpower shortages, so the Wagner group is busy [recruiting](#) mercenaries in overpopulated prisons – and has scant funding for sustaining its work in Syria, or indeed Libya. Turkey's closure of the Bosphorus for the Russian Navy in March 2022 has left the Syrian grouping of forces seriously under-supplied and forced the al-Assad army and militia to [seek](#) more funding and weapons from Iran.

Moscow is trying its best to show that its capacity for dominating Syrian airspace is undiminished and executed airstrikes not only on the rebel-held [Idlib province](#) but also in the vicinity of America's [al-Tanf base](#) in Eastern Syria. It is clear, nevertheless, that the Russian Navy, which [conducted](#) large-scale exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean at the start of 2022, will not be able to maintain a serious presence in this area due to the interruption of the crucial sea line of communications to the Black Sea. Moscow still issues protestations against Israeli airstrikes in Syria but makes no attempts to interfere, even when missiles [hit](#) Iranian assets near the Russian naval facility in Tartus. As Russian losses of combat planes in the Ukraine war keep mounting and the performance of its air defense systems remains unsatisfactory, Moscow's ability to project power even in the low-intensity war in Syria becomes compromised and curtailed.

The diplomatic maneuvering is affected by this military enfeeblement. Moscow made it a matter of principle to [veto](#) the U.S.-backed resolution in the UN Security Council on sustaining the humanitarian aid to Syria, including via the Bab al-Hawa crossing to Idlib. This aid, however, is badly needed for the al-Assad regime, so Russia rushed to introduce its own resolution, essentially on the same terms, but with the timeframe reduced to six months, which was duly [approved](#). Talks in the so-called “[Astana format](#)” still continue, but it has long become obvious that they cannot yield any tangible results for advancing the peace process. The initiative in manipulating the Syrian conflict has passed to Turkey, and Russia has few reasons to believe that its interests are taken into due account.

Cultivating Partnership with Troublesome Turkey

The Ukraine war has transformed the always ambiguous Russian-Turkish partnership far deeper than it might appear at a superficial glance at the ongoing high-level dialogue. If, in the mid-2016, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had to make an awkward apology for the shootdown of a Russian Su-24 bomber for entering Turkish airspace briefly from Syria on November 24, 2015, he presently feels much more confident in the transactional bargaining. The delicate question of the TB2 *Bayraktar* strike drones supplied to Ukraine was not even [mentioned](#) at the August 4, 2022, Sochi summit, but the Syrian conundrum certainly was. Erdoğan has announced his intentions loud and clear – another military operation aimed at expanding the “security zone” along the Syrian border – but Putin persists with opposition, worried that this intervention would expose Russia’s military weakness. Erdoğan tries to outflank him by [signaling](#) readiness to normalize relations with the al-Assad regime, providing it would cut ties with the Kurdish militia (People’s Protection Units or YPG) while simultaneously [executing](#) airstrikes at Syrian army posts near the border. Erdoğan needs to boost his popularity before the general elections in Turkey in June 2023, so the forceful operation is set to happen sooner rather than later, and Putin is in no position to block it.

Ankara has also launched a series of initiatives aimed at improving acrimonious relations with [Saudi Arabia](#) and Egypt, as well as restoring curtailed ties with [Israel](#). This soft power-building course adds to the general trend of de-escalating tensions in the Middle East and objectively narrows the space for Russia’s maneuvering between various antagonists. Moscow’s main lever for influencing Turkish politics is the export of gas, undiminished by the Western sanctions, but the fast progress in [developing](#) the newly-discovered off-shore fields in the Black Sea ensures a significant reduction of this dependency in a matter of a few years.

Iran as the Default Option

Despite close military interactions in Syria, Moscow moved carefully in developing a partnership with Iran, as Putin was wary of Islamic radicalism and used to be attentive to warnings from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Presently, however, this

personal connection with Israel is lost, and Putin's style of leadership (as one perceptive Russian analyst argues) increasingly [resembles](#) the ideological drive of an "ayatollah." No major breakthrough was registered at the Tehran summit in July 2022, but Moscow clearly [indicated](#) its readiness to upgrade relations beyond the traditional limits. The exporting of Iranian [drones](#) to Russia has made little difference on the battlegrounds, but Putin was hardly left in doubt regarding the main priority in Iranian policy – the nuclear deal.

Russian stance on the renewal of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), broken by President Donald Trump in 2018, is ambivalent and hesitant (at least at the moment of this writing in mid-autumn). Its contribution to the making of the original JCPOA was substantial, but it has remained out of the loop of talks on the EU proposal for reshaping it, [expressing](#) only general support. Restoring proper international control over the Iranian nuclear program answers Russia's fundamental interests, but even a partial and gradual lifting of U.S. sanctions would inevitably reduce Iran's incentives in expanding ties with Russia. An inflow of investments in the Iranian oil and gas industry would have an immediate depressing impact on the oil price and undercut Russia's ability to use energy exports as an instrument of policy already in the near term.

Conclusions

Russia may try to renew the offensive push in the Donbas battle, but it is clearly in political retreat in the Middle East, a region of central importance for its global ambitions. Most regional actors abstain from condemning the Russian aggression and have no intention of joining the sanctions regime, but they are hardly in doubt regarding the big picture of the balance of forces in Russia's confrontation with the West. This political environment creates multiple opportunities for transactional maneuvering, and Turkey is leading the way in reaping these profits. However, the short-term benefits of new non-alignment cannot alter the assessments of the sharp contraction of Russia's capacity for projecting power and ability to provide resources for its foreign policy aims in the mid-term.

In a rather paradoxical way, the Ukraine war has strengthened the trend of stabilization in the Middle East, visible in the de-escalation of several conflicts, from Yemen to Libya. This trend remains very fragile, and the new spasm of violence around Gaza shows that it can break because many sources of conflict remain active, and new ones, like, for instance, the recent spike in wheat prices, can add to the critical mass of tensions. Russia, which excels in conflict manipulation, presently finds its options much reduced, as post-conflict reconstruction has never been its forte, and the continuing desolation in Syria makes a perfect illustration of this shortcoming.

Cultivating partnership with Turkey, Moscow cannot count on it to uphold its influence in the Middle East, as Ankara pursues its own interests and often seeks to take advantage of the weakening of Russia's positions, Syria being the main focus of contestation. Russian high command is too busy with the plan-ruining war to worry about Iran's dominance in

Syria, but the interest in upgrading the partnership may remain unanswered as Tehran sets its aims primarily on restoring the JCPOA. The U.S. Middle Eastern course may lack strategic coherence, but it builds on stronger cooperation with allies and commands sufficient authority among the regional actors to counter any possible moves by Russia aimed at propagating instability.