

A Friend to All is a Friend to None

Analysis of Russian Strategy in the Middle East

By Jason Hamilton, Rosemarie Wilde, and Jason Wimberly

Since the start of the Arab Spring, Russia has sought increased influence in the Middle East, rekindling relationships and building influence in Syria, Turkey, Libya, Israel, and elsewhere. The return of Russian influence puts pressure on U.S. interests in the region. In the increasingly complex security environment of today's world defined by transregional and multi-functional challenges across all domains, the United States is constrained in the Middle East by both available resources and an American public exhausted by military efforts in the region. America must make difficult choices and prioritize efforts. This article analyzes Russia's strategy in the region, framed by the ways, means, ends, and risk models, to uncover risks to the Russian strategy that the United States could exploit.

In analyzing national or military strategy, military authors tend to refer to the model popularized by Arthur Lykke, who wrote that the component concepts in an equation can equally apply to “the formulation of any type strategy—military, political, economic,” etc.¹ The equation is; “Strategy equals ends (objectives toward which one strives) plus ways (courses of action) plus means (instruments by which some end can be achieved).”² In applying the concept specifically to military strategy, he explained:

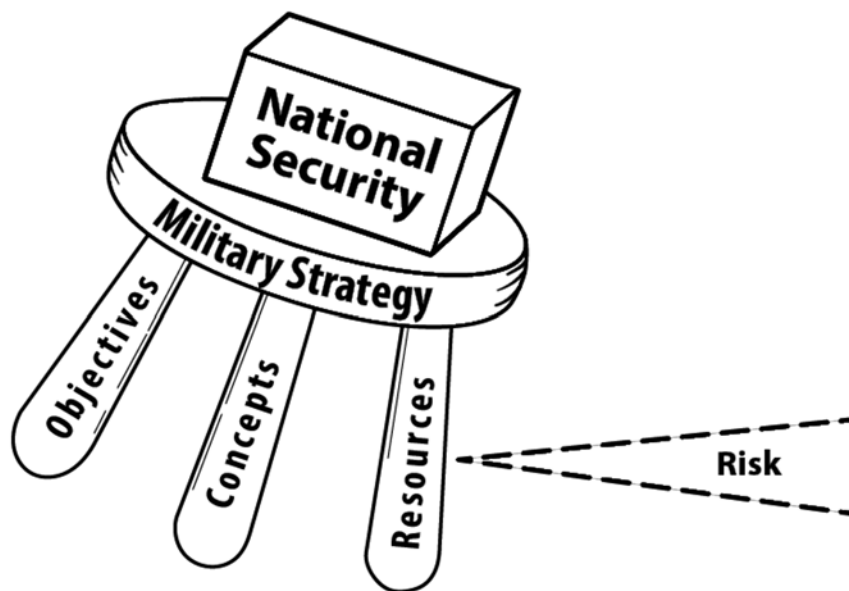
Ends can be expressed as military objectives. Ways are . . . in essence . . . courses of action designed to achieve the military objective . . . termed “military strategic concepts.” Means refers to the military resources (manpower, materiel, money, forces, logistics and so forth) required to accomplish the mission.³

The definitive contribution in Lykke's description of strategy was the addition of an analogy and the concept of risk. He envisioned that national strategy could be safely supported by military strategy—a three-legged stool with the “legs” being the military objectives, concepts, and resources—but only if the three legs remain in balance.

If military resources are not compatible with strategic concepts, or commitments are not matched by military capabilities, we may be in trouble. The angle of tilt represents *risk*, further defined as the possibility of loss, or damage, or of not achieving an objective.⁴

Observers have noted that Russia has been developing a more aggressive form of national security strategy. This includes the use of “hybrid warfare,” in which Russia attempts to “avoid the classification of its actions as armed conflict in its legal and political form” and still “impose its will” on its adversaries through

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Lykke's Original Depiction of Strategy" (Graphic from Arthur Lykke, "Defining Military Strategy = E + W + M," *Military Review* 69, no. 5 [1989])

the combined use of instruments of national power.⁵ Katri Pynnöniemi argues that Russian national security strategy is evolving by combining the concepts of "asymmetric approach" and "strategic deterrence" to enable a more aggressive concept of national defense that aims to "create conditions" for Russia.⁶ However, others note the limitations of Russian power. Freire and Heller assert that "Russian success in producing status via power politics is strongly dependent on a combination of favourable [sic] conditions and the ability to limit the costs . . ." which demonstrates "that the restraints on Russia being able to substantially and independently shape international politics remain tight."⁷ Becca Wasser largely concurs, arguing that Russian strategy in the Middle East relies largely on opportunities created by other actors, rather than creating its own openings, as well as on resource investments by other actors to underwrite its activities.⁸ She also claims that Russian foreign policy is transactional and non-ideological in nature, which allows it to engage with all actors, even those with directly competing agendas.⁹

Russia has been able to achieve its national ends in the Middle East using only modest means and resources, by relying on the ways of targeted diplomatic, economic, and limited military interventions to exploit opportunities to gain influence. Russia's increased influence, particularly from military sales, has stressed America's alliances in the region. Increasing stability and preventing power vacuums would decrease opportunities that Russia could exploit and would force Russia to use more resources to meet its regional ends. Additionally, the protracted Syrian civil war and high cost of reconstruction could require increased resources, causing imbalance in Russia's strategy.

U.S. Interests in the Middle East

The United States seeks a Middle East that is not a safe haven or breeding ground for jihadist terrorists, not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and that contributes to a stable global energy market¹⁰

Vital U.S. interests in the Middle East can be gleaned throughout the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS). Protecting the American people and

homeland and preserving peace through strength includes defeating transnational terrorist organizations.¹¹ The United States promotes Middle East stability as a means to deny Iran, terrorists, and other malign actors access to power vacuums that they could leverage to gain funding, proliferate weapons, or increase their influence.¹² America also seeks to deny Iran all paths to a nuclear weapon and to neutralize Iranian malign influence.¹³

The 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS) further refines America's vital national interests based on a global "security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory."¹⁴ The NDS declares that "the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition" [emphasis in original] by both China and Russia, and that "Russia seeks veto authority over nations on its periphery in terms of their governmental, economic, and diplomatic decisions, to shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and change European and Middle East security and economic structures to its favor."¹⁵ This strategic competition viewpoint and the direction to counter coercion and subversion compel an examination of Russian activity in the Middle East from a position of caution rather than at face value.¹⁶

Russian Interests in the Middle East

Russia's national interests detailed in its 2015 NSS can be encapsulated by the following six items; "strengthening the country's defense, ensuring political and social stability, raising the living standard, preserving and developing culture, improving the economy, and strengthening Russia's status as a leading world power."¹⁷ In the Middle East, the perceived specific Russian national interests include maintaining regime stability and countering extremist terrorism. Extremism is a national interest due to the threat of Islamic terrorism to the Russian homeland

and because of the view that the "poor-quality" foreign cultures of both extremism and the West threaten traditional Russian values.¹⁸ Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept reiterates Russia's desire for regime stability in the region and provides justification for intervention in Syria and Libya under the guise of counterterrorism: "Russia will continue making a meaningful contribution to stabilizing the situation in the Middle East and North Africa, supporting collective efforts aimed at neutralizing threats that emanate from international terrorist groups, consistently promotes political and diplomatic settlement of conflicts in regional States while respecting their sovereignty and territorial integrity and the right to self-determination without outside interference."¹⁹ In addition to its current military presence in Syria, Russia has recently established or rekindled diplomatic and business relationships with governments and various other parties throughout the Middle East,²⁰ realizing economic gain and stability through trade, investment, and oil price stabilization.²¹ Russia's NSS paints the United States and its allies in opposition to independent Russian foreign policy on the grounds of a desire to maintain "dominance in world affairs."²² Russia desires to be seen at home as a prestigious broker among the world powers and desires to do so in the Middle East as well as to reassert its importance in resolving international issues and military conflicts.²³ While consolidating its "status as a leading world power,"²⁴ Russia is working to accumulate influence through as many avenues as possible.²⁵ Russia clearly values the ability to project military power beyond its borders, given its expeditionary deployments into Syria, as well as aircraft carrier deployments and large-scale naval drills in the Eastern Mediterranean. Examining Russian activities in the Middle East illuminates the ways and means it employs to achieve these ends in the region.

Russian Strategy in Syria and Turkey

As the Arab Spring began spreading across the Middle East in late 2010, with civil war slowly unfolding in Syria, several vital and important Russian strategic interests started to converge in Syria, with regional stability topping the list. The regimes in Tunisia and Egypt fell, Iran had recently survived the Green Revolution, and Turkey supported the overthrow of the Assad Regime—with political support from the United States and Europe. Russia could not let its last strong ally in the region be toppled. It also needed to retain access to the Tartus Port and the Khmeimim airbase at Bassel al-Assad Airport, which enable Russian power projection into the Mediterranean and Middle East areas. Russia also had economic interests in Syria, including oil and natural gas, arms sales, and other trade. As the Syrian civil war progressed, Islamic opposition groups, al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) grew stronger, threatening to fortify Islamic violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in the region and in the Russian homeland. Syria also became an opportunity for Russia to advance its great power status, weaken the West's dominant influence in the region, and work toward a multi-polar world order.

As the Syrian civil war unfolded, an opportunity arose for Russia to employ its diplomatic instrument of national power to advance its interests. The Syrian regime's use of sarin gas against the opposition on August 21, 2013, triggered a crisis, in which the United States reluctantly prepared to conduct punitive strikes against the Assad regime, increasing the possibility of Russia's ally falling and of Islamist groups gaining ground in Syria. Seizing on an open-ended comment made by Secretary of State John Kerry on September 9, Russia began moving within hours to negotiate an end to the crisis, securing a framework deal with the United States on September 14 to remove all of Syria's chemical weapons.²⁶ With the expenditure of almost no resources,

Russia secured its partner in Damascus from military strikes and international pressure and stepped onto the world stage as a player with significant political clout in the Middle East.

As the civil war continued, Russia gambled with direct military intervention, beginning airstrikes in Homs and Hama on September 30, 2015. Russia had supplied the Syrian regime with arms to fight the opposition since at least 2012,²⁷ and likely began employing private military companies (PMCs) as early as 2013 to retake oil and gas infrastructure.²⁸ However, in 2015, Russian officials began to see the collapse of the Assad regime as likely due to gains by the opposition, the seizure of Palmyra by ISIS, as well as the failure of UN peace talks in February 2014.²⁹ With the U.S. military fighting ISIS, not the Syrian regime, Russia could enter the conflict without having to confront the United States directly. Moreover, Russia's intervention came during a weak point in the U.S. fight in Syria. The United States established the Combined Joint Task Force Operation *Inherent Resolve* (CJTF-OIR) in October 2014, but on September 16, 2015, the Commander of U.S. Central Command testified before Congress that only four to five of its trained Syrian fighters remained in Syria fighting ISIS. The Pentagon rapidly changed course, going all-in on a Kurdish strategy, supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which formed on October 11. Russia may have seen Washington's weak position as an opportunity to not only enter the conflict with little opposition, but also to form a coalition with the West to fight together against terrorism, as advocated by President Vladimir Putin and Russian officials.³⁰ Russia's military success in annexing Crimea likely gave Russia confidence in its military capabilities, encouraging intervention.

Russia's direct intervention helped turn the tide of the war with only a modest cost in resources. Russia deployed advisors on the ground and conducted airstrikes. While precise numbers are not



Russian soldiers marching on March 5, 2014 in Perevalne, Crimea, Ukraine. On February 28, 2014 Russian military forces invaded Crimea peninsula. (photo.ua from Shutterstock, March 5, 2014)

clear, Russia has maintained a relatively small military footprint in Syria. The RAND Corporation estimates that Russia has maintained fewer than 4,500 military personnel inside Syria throughout the conflict.³¹ However, Russia's employment of PMCs increased its presence on the ground while providing plausible deniability at home and abroad and limiting its military commitment. Direct intervention was risky, as victory was not assured, and Russia risked economic and diplomatic blowback.

Unexpectedly, intervention opened opportunities for Russia, leading to improved relations with several countries, including Turkey. There are a number of Russian strategic interests in Turkey. The Turkish Straits are a strategic chokepoint that could impact Russian power projection, Turkey's growing economy is a potential target for Russian trade and

investment, Turkey is a NATO member, and Russia likely considers President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's support for Islamist groups to both bolster Islamic terrorism and increase instability in the region. Turkey and Russia are on opposing sides in the conflict, with Turkey backing the opposition from the onset. However, tensions also increased between Turkey and its allies, the United States, and Europe during this period as well. U.S. and European (as well as Russian) support to the SDF, which Turkey accuses of being the terrorist Kurdistan Worker's Party rebranded, drove divisions between the allies. Tensions further increased following the failed Turkish coup attempt in July 2016, with President Erdogan accusing the United States of supporting it.³²

Friction between Turkey and the West became an opportunity for Russia. The Turkish shoot

down of a Russian SU-24 on November 24, 2015, increased tensions with Russia, which banned Turkish produce imports and retaliated with other economic means, leading Turkey to realize that it “could not afford to have tense relations with both the U.S. and Russia simultaneously.”³³ Turkey and Russia then unexpectedly started down a path toward rapprochement and accommodation. Diplomatic engagements led to the establishment of communications to avoid future incidents, Turkey’s acceptance that Bashar al-Assad could remain in power in a transitional government and, although still on opposing sides of the conflict, practical compromises on the part of Turkey and Russia.³⁴

One of the most successful achievements in Russia’s relationship with Turkey was negotiating the sale of the S400 air and missile defense system to Turkey, which it began delivering in 2019. Turkey had been trying to purchase air defense systems since at least 1991 from the United States and Europe, as well as Russia and China.³⁵ The U.S. sale of Patriot missiles to Turkey fell through, in part because Turkey wanted access to the underlying technology to improve its domestic defense industry.³⁶ Also, the United States removed its Patriot systems from Turkey in 2015, demonstrating to Turkish officials that they could not rely on the United States to provide air defense for Turkey. Russia’s Rosatom had previously scored a deal in 2010 to produce a nuclear power plant for Turkey,³⁷ so the S400 deal can be seen as a deepening of security ties. Using few resources, Russia used practical accommodation and diplomacy to make a military sale, turn a profit, create a new military customer that can further increase economic and security ties, and drive a wedge between Turkey and its NATO allies.

The United States has now refused to sell the F-35 to Turkey and is considering enacting sanctions against it. For its part, Turkey has signaled to Washington and Europe that it is prepared to work with and expand its security partners beyond NATO. However, Turkey may be reconsidering its

budding relationship with Russia after Syrian forces backed by Russia killed Turkish troops in an air-strike on February 27, 2020.³⁸

Russian Strategy in Israel, Libya, and the Gulf

In addition to Syria and Turkey, Russia is pursuing enhanced relationships with many other nations in the Middle East using diplomatic and economic ways and means along with limited military means in pursuit of its regional ends. In the last few years, Russia has made inroads with nations such as Libya, Israel, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Similar to its intervention in Syria/Turkey, Russia’s ends in the region include promoting its position as a regional power and arbiter alternative to the West. Russia has used diplomatic ways and means in proposing its own solutions to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the Libyan civil war.³⁹ For means, Russia is also employing PMCs as an alternative military instrument of national power. In addition, Russia’s ends include maximizing its control or, at least influence, over energy markets, as a way to provide it with superior leverage over the energy-dependent European and post–Soviet states. In Russia’s case, energy security is an essential tool of national security.

In pursuit of Russia’s end of poising itself as an alternative to Western influence, its improved relations with Israel help to normalize its actions in the Middle East in light of the prevalent negative impression of Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea. Israel is also instrumental in ensuring stability of the Russian-backed regime in Syria. There is a strong Russian interest in preventing Israeli–Iranian tension from escalating further, with Israel expecting Russia to contain Iranian military presence in Syria in exchange for halting air raids on Iranian and Hezbollah positions.⁴⁰ Avoiding another conflict near its sphere of influence is paramount for Russia to prevent diverting its attention from the

pivotal role it is playing in the conflicts in Syria and Libya and maintaining overall stability within the region. Russian-Israeli relations have flourished under Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with multiple high-level bilateral visits; Netanyahu visited Russia in September 2019 and Putin visited Israel in January 2020. There are strong cultural and economic ties between Russia and Israel, with 17 percent of Israelis speaking Russian due to the Russian diaspora⁴¹ and bilateral trade reaching \$5B in both 2018 and 2019,⁴² with ongoing talks on a Russian free trade agreement with Israel and Egypt.⁴³ A Russian-Israeli military cooperation pact was signed in 2015 indicating Israel's realization that Russia will not choose between Iran/Israel but instead remains equally ready to work with both.⁴⁴ This is Russia's modus operandi throughout the Middle East and stands in stark contrast to the U.S. and other Western powers' tendency to pick sides. Russia has also, so far unsuccessfully, looked to act as a powerbroker in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, choosing to work with all relevant parties, counter to the U.S. plan focused on bilateral state-level conciliation between Israel and Palestine.

In contrast to their actions with Israel, the ongoing conflict and power vacuum in Libya have enabled Russia to act more directly to pressure the EU to end sanctions on Russia,⁴⁵ to exploit multiple economic opportunities, and to gain overall increased influence within the region. In addition, the lure of Libya's deep-water ports in Tobruk and Derna is the same as in Syria, providing access to friendly warm-water ports in the East Mediterranean as part of the Russian effort to enhance its great power status.⁴⁶ Russia and Egypt, as well as several of the GCC countries, are backers of Khalifa Haftar's opposition faction. Russia continues to deny any involvement in the conflict, but it's PMCs, such as the Wagner Group, are fighting for Haftar's "Libyan National Army" (LNA).⁴⁷ Most notably, Russia has provided Haftar just enough military (approximately 1,400 PMC mercenaries)⁴⁸

and financial aid (approximately \$3B)⁴⁹ to prolong the conflict, but not to end it.⁵⁰ This legitimizing of LNA control not only grants Russia preferential access to the oil reserves held by Haftar's forces but also allows for just enough military success to justify a Russian-brokered negotiation for peace. Russia has continued to maintain ties across the different factions of the conflict, both within the Government of National Accord (GNA) and with Muammar Qadhafi's former regime. Putin received Haftar's chief political rival, GNA Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, at a summit in Russia in October 2019. Economically, a Joint Libyan-Russian oil and gas venture was awarded in April 2019, and Russia is seeking to secure lucrative nationwide reconstruction contracts such as a billion-dollar deal to supply the GNA with food supplies, a move designed to break into a market dominated by France and Italy, and further limit the EU's influence in Libya.⁵¹ Turkey is also active in Libya, deploying troops and hardware to counter Russian PMCs which, similar to the situation in Syria, risks a significant escalation of the conflict.⁵² Recent events in Russia's intervention in Libya follow this trend and threaten to create another Syria situation for them. Toward the middle and end of May 2020, Haftar's LNA forces suffered a series of setbacks; specifically a withdrawal of Russian mercenary troops led to the loss of a key LNA airbase with abandonment of significant munitions and other military equipment. In response, Russia sent at least eight advanced combat aircraft, repainted in Syria to disguise their Russian origin and most likely piloted and maintained by Russian military or mercenary pilots. Once again, Russia is obfuscating its support of Haftar's forces while providing just enough firepower to deter additional Turkish action without providing the LNA with a decisive advantage. While there is U.S. advantage in allowing Russia to continue to mire itself in Libya, the United States and NATO are both concerned with the possibility of Russia gaining additional access to oil reserves and military basing on NATO's southern flank.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov took part in the 4th meeting of the Russia-GCC strategic dialogue.” (the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs / MFA, May 26, 2016 (Creative Commons))

Looking to the GCC countries, Russia’s ends are shaped by energy security and economic considerations. Russia’s vital interests in the GCC are to prevent regional conflicts from damaging its bilateral relationships, to secure its position as a major player in the energy market, to increase trade and investment, to improve its political influence to counter the United States, and to seek assistance on Syrian reconstruction.⁵³ Russia has primarily achieved increased influence with the GCC via energy price negotiations and arms sales. The United States has no counterpart to offer for Russian specialty systems such as the Pantsir family of self-propelled, medium-range, surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft artillery. With Houthi drone and missile attacks against Saudi and UAE interests, as well as asymmetric threats from Iran, these governments are seeking effective solutions. However, Russia is also interested

in boosting trade across the spectrum, to include tourism, agriculture, and industry, positioning itself as an attractive option for foreign investors⁵⁴ In addition, Russia seeks to maintain balance in the price of oil with Saudi Arabia and Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). In March 2020, Saudi Arabia triggered an oil price war in response to Russia’s refusal to reduce oil production, a move that would have kept oil prices higher even with reduced consumption from COVID-19 lockdown actions. Russia is heavily reliant on oil exports for economic health and likely hoped to sacrifice short-term earnings in support of causing lasting harm to U.S. high-cost petroleum producers and stealing market share from the Saudis. The price of oil sank to historic lows until a trade truce on oil prices was reached between Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States in mid-April. The quick

resolution of the price war may indicate that Russia underestimated the economic costs of this policy. However, the event did reinforce Russia's position as an international player in the energy sector with global consequences to its actions.

Russian Ways, Means, Ends, and Risks and U.S. Opportunities

How successful has Russia's Middle East strategy been? Russia has met or is meeting many of its desired ends. Russia has maintained its power projection capabilities in the region through its presence in the Tartus Port and Syrian airbases, and is aiming to gain port access in Libya. Russia has been largely successful in defeating Islamic VEOs. The ISIS physical caliphate has been destroyed in Syria, partly by CJTF-OIR and allies and partly by the Syrian regime backed by Russia, but other VEOs remain. The Libyan civil war continues, creating space in which terrorist groups can operate. Beyond Syria, where Russian diplomatic and military support have enabled President Bashar al-Assad to remain in power, there is little evidence that Russia's support to Arab governments has increased regime stability and survival. Russia has maintained the status quo with respect to securing energy resources and maintaining price stability, despite its recent price war with OPEC and military intervention in Syria, which was bound to cause friction with GCC countries. Russia is looking to capitalize on its Libyan intervention to increase its access to natural resources. Where Russia has been most successful is through increasing trade and gaining political influence in the Middle East, which have strained America's alliances. Russia's roles in Syria and Libya have placed it on the international stage as a great power and decisionmaker in the Middle East. Russia increased trade with Israel, and its S400 and nuclear reactor deals with Turkey will enable Russia to turn a profit in sensitive security sectors, while simultaneously straining the NATO alliance. Its sales

of Pantsir S1 air defense systems to the UAE has also generated profits, while calling into question America's growing partnership with Abu Dhabi. Russian pressure on America's alliances is most damaging to U.S. strategy. Russia has grown closer to Israel, found common ground with Turkey, and is now working on the same side as Egypt and the UAE in supporting the LNA in Libya.

In examining Russia's ways, Russia has used diplomatic tools to capitalize on opportunities and power vacuums. It seized upon the opening to bail out the Assad regime for its use of weapons of mass destruction in Syria, as well as America's reluctance to fully commit to Syria, and it managed to turn diplomatic confrontation with Turkey into economic and political gains, in part due to friction between Turkey and its Western allies. Looking ahead, there may be opportunities for Russia to take advantage of America's fallout with Iraq from killing Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. Russia has preferred to use indirect military intervention by working with and arming allies and proxies, such as in Syria prior to 2015 and in Libya. It has employed PMCs in both countries, and has kept its military footprint relatively small in Syria. Russia has also sought to increase economic ties, as with Israel and Turkey, and to secure military equipment sales where the United States either has no corresponding capability to offer, or has been unable or unwilling to close a deal.

An analysis of Russia's outlay of means in the Middle East requires looking beyond just military resources to whole-of-government expenditure. Diplomatically, Russia has engaged leader-to-leader (including with previous rivals like Turkey's Erdogan) and appealed to the nationalist leanings of other world leaders for implied support. Informationally, Putin has leveraged press coverage to promote the idea that Russia is coming to the defense of the Syrian people and to demonstrate to Russians that he is improving Russia's economy and

world standing. Militarily, Russia has acclimated a large portion of its forces to expeditionary combat by using short rotations of relatively small forces in Syria as a cost-effective training alternative to shipping manpower and equipment across Russia for large-scale exercises at home.⁵⁵

Economically, Russia has expended few resources in making state-to-state business deals, and in some cases has traded monetary support for political support. In all, Russia has so far been able to pursue its Middle East interests while leveraging relatively modest means.

The final component of Lykke's model is the concept of risk, or the amount of imbalance between the ends, ways, and means of the strategy being employed.⁵⁶ Risks in Russia's balance of ends, ways, and means, present opportunities the United States can exploit to counter Russia's Middle Eastern strategy. Primarily, Russia's role in Syria is still a long-term liability. Although positioned as the main power broker, Russia cannot afford the costs of Syrian reconstruction, thus their search for regional partners. In addition, while the U.S. coalition's empowerment of the SDF in Syria brings tensions with Turkey, the SDF's and other opposition groups' control of territory could drag out the conflict beyond Russia's ability to continue to support either militarily or politically. The most feasible option for the United States to counter the spread of Russia's influence beyond Syria is to continue pushing Turkey toward re-prioritizing its relationships with the United States and NATO.

With Israel, Russia's emphasis on bringing all partners to the peace table runs counter to Israeli interests by legitimizing Palestinian terrorist groups. The United States should stress this to Israel along with Russia's lack of ability and political will to truly constrain Iranian action. While Russia's close ties and influence over Damascus give it influence with Israel, this same relationship enables Israel to hold Russia responsible for some

of the Syrian regime's actions. Russia's actions in regard to Libya amount to supporting the continuation of the civil war to ensure they are favorably positioned to take advantage of either side's push for victory. The United States could publicly attribute the PMC aggression as a veiled Russian attempt to prolong the conflict. Also, by drawing attention to Russia's positioning itself to benefit from reconstruction contracts, the United States could negatively influence regional and EU governments' opinions of Russia, perhaps swaying them to do less business with Russia.

The GCC nations' and Israel's requirements to defend against Iranian asymmetric threats (ballistic and cruise missiles, fast boats, unmanned aerial systems, etc.) present an opportunity which the United States could leverage to support several U.S. NSS pillars. If the United States were to incentivize the defense industrial base to further develop countering technologies and support sales to our partners, it would deny customers to both Russia and China and reinvigorate defense innovation and economic activity in a vital U.S. business sector, while simultaneously maturing technology the U.S. military requires for future combat. The United States should continue to encourage greater cooperation and better relationships amongst Middle East nations. It is too early to foresee the second and third order effects of the recently signed Abraham Accords, but in the long term, they may increase regional stability and in-turn decrease opportunities for Russia to exploit. However, in the near term, Moscow could seek opportunities to expand influence with countries disadvantaged by the accords. Conversely, however, signatories could leverage the agreement to avoid criticism from Washington while pursuing openings with U.S. adversaries. Ultimately, Russia needs the GCC for foreign investment and reconstruction in Syria, while the GCC mainly needs Russia to cooperate on energy pricing.

Conclusion

While there are areas for potential U.S.-Russian cooperation in the Middle East, such as counterterrorism, encouraging an active role for Russia in the Middle East presents opportunities for Russia and brings risks to U.S. interests. Namely, it provides opportunities for Russia to gain economic and political influence with specific countries, enables Russia to become a stronger global power, and could open the door to Russian military sales, which would further stress alliances. Meanwhile, any perceived benefits of cooperation to U.S. interests have yet to materialize. Russia has repeatedly used the guise of countering extremism to punish dissidents, both internal and external to its borders.

Russia's strategy of being a friend of all but ally to none is a double-edged sword. It is a political truism that all nation-states act in their own best interests, the long-term planning of which relies primarily on the stability and predictability of other actors. In this case, Russia's transparency regarding its interests and Putin's positioning of himself as central to all Russian policy allows other nations to better predict Russian actions in any given sector, be it political, military, or economic. However, most nations also seek long-standing partnerships and alliances to achieve their interests as well as stability in international politics. Russia's pursuit of maximizing short-term economic opportunities and countering of Western influences has it often playing multiple sides of a conflict for its own ends, which makes for a less-trusted long-term partner once a conflict resolves. Indeed, Russia's greatest success may not be in creating its own alliances to counter the West, but in disrupting America's enduring alliances. While Russia desires increased government stability in the Middle East for the purpose of its own regional security, ironically, increased stability and peace in the Middle East will reduce opportunities for Russia to promote itself as a great power unless it commits significantly more

resources. This may prove to be the ultimate imbalance for Russia; if the United States and Middle Eastern nations can continue gradually moving the region toward stability, Russia will run out of opportunities and have to expend finite resources in order to achieve its strategic objectives in the Middle East at the expense of more vital interests. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Arthur F. Lykke, "Defining Military Strategy," *Military Review* 77, no. 1 (January–February 1997), 229.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁵ Håkan Gunneriusson and Sascha Dov Bachmann, "Western Denial and Russian Control: How Russia's National Security Strategy Threatens a Western-Based Approach to Global Security, the Rule of Law and Globalization," *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 46, no. 1 (2017), 10.

⁶ Katri Pynnöniemi, "Russia's National Security Strategy: Analysis of Conceptual Evolution," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31, no. 2 (2018), 252–255.

⁷ Maria Raquel Freire and Regina Heller, "Russia's Power Politics in Ukraine and Syria: Status-Seeking between Identity, Opportunity and Costs," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 8 (October 2018), 1207.

⁸ Becca Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), 1–27, available at <<https://doi.org/10.7249/PE340>>.

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¹⁰ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2017), 48, available at <<https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=806478>>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26, 42.

¹² *Ibid.*, 49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22, 38, 49.

¹⁴ Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷ Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017), 16–17, available at <<https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Russia%20Military%20Power%20Report%202017.pdf>>.

¹⁸ Olga Olikier, “Unpacking Russia’s New National Security Strategy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 7, 2016, available at <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/unpacking-russias-new-national-security-strategy>>.

¹⁹ *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 1, 2016), 25, available at <https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248>.

²⁰ Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 3.

²¹ *Russian National Security Strategy* (Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 2015), 3, available at <<http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>>.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, 3.

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