

Russia in the Middle East

From sidelines to centre stage

SUMMARY

In 2011, it looked as if the Arab Spring uprisings would deal a further blow to Russia's declining influence in the Middle East, by toppling Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, one of Moscow's few remaining allies in the region. In 2015, Russia launched a military intervention. Though it came at an enormous humanitarian cost, the campaign succeeded in saving Assad's regime, at the same time as reversing the Middle Eastern fortunes of Russia as Assad's main international backer.

Russia's involvement in Syria has given its relations with neighbouring countries a new momentum. Despite divergent interests, Iran, Turkey and Israel cooperate with Russia and acknowledge its leadership in Syria.

Russia's success in imposing its agenda in Syria has bolstered its influence throughout the wider region. Although Moscow's role is not always a constructive one, it has become a key actor and sometimes a mediator in regional conflicts from Libya to Yemen. Russia's regional clout is also helped by its skilful use of energy cooperation to further economic and geopolitical interests.

Russia's drive to become a major Middle Eastern player should be seen in the wider context of global geopolitical rivalry with the United States. Moscow's growing influence in the region is as much the result of Western policy failures as its own strength.



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Before and after the Arab Spring

Soviet influence in the Middle East reached its peak in the 1950s and 1960s, which saw alliances with countries such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Libya. However, as the Soviet Union was unwilling to risk a confrontation with the US by providing military support for Arab allies in their conflict with Israel, and lacked the resources to compete with the West economically, that influence [declined](#) from then on. Vladimir Putin's attempts to restore his country's status as a Middle Eastern player and to challenge US dominance achieved only limited results: Russia condemned the US invasion of Iraq, with which it had preserved relatively [friendly ties](#), but could do nothing to stop it.

In 2011, when popular uprisings broke out in Tunisia and Egypt, Russia initially showed little [concern](#). However, it soon became clear that the 'Arab Spring' threatened to further erode Russian influence in the region by toppling its few remaining allies. Moscow had concluded arms sales and infrastructure investments worth [billions of dollars](#) with Libya, all of which were lost after Gaddafi's downfall. Russia, which in December 2011 faced political protests of its own over vote-rigging in the country's December 2011 parliamentary election, and had seen allied regimes in Georgia and Ukraine overthrown by what it saw as Western-backed 'colour revolutions', was also worried about the domestic implications of a wave of unrest challenging established governments.

However, it was in Syria that Russia saw the most direct threat to its interests, as rebels attempted to overthrow Moscow's last remaining ally in the region. Russia responded with diplomatic support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad ([vetoing](#) four UN Security Council resolutions on Syria in [2011](#), [2012](#) and [2014](#)) and, in September 2015, a military campaign. The latter proved to be a game-changer, which not only reversed Assad's fortunes, but also helped to establish Moscow as a force to be reckoned with throughout the Middle East.

Russia in Syria

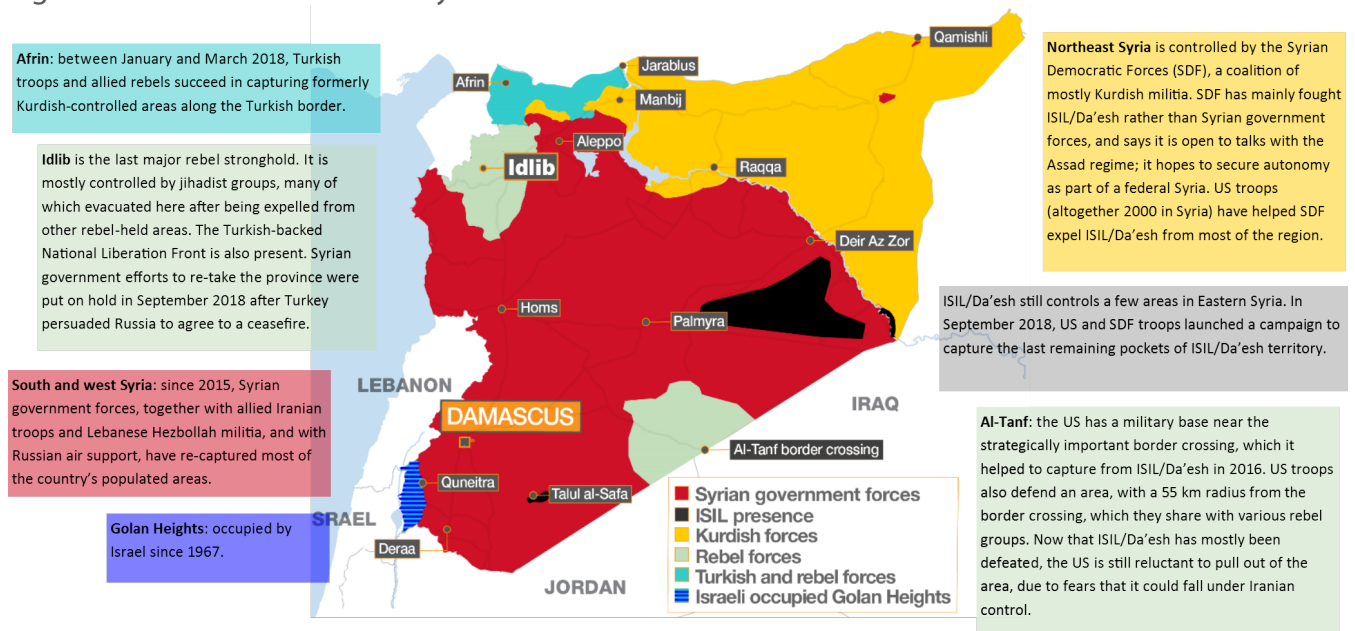
Russia's military intervention has put Bashar al-Assad back in control

According to one [estimate](#), Russian airstrikes have killed 18 000 Syrians, including 7 000 civilians. However, from a military perspective, they have been a success, helping Syrian government troops, fighting alongside Iranian troops and allied Lebanese Hezbollah militia, to recapture large swathes of territory from opposition forces. Since 2015, government control has spread from just one-quarter of the country's territory to over half, including nearly all the main cities (see Figure 1).

With the Syrian regime on track to victory after having captured Aleppo, the country's largest city, in December 2016 Russia, together with Turkey and Iran, [launched](#) a new series of peace talks, mostly held in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. The Astana process has eclipsed a parallel series of peace talks led by the UN in Geneva since 2012, which [collapsed](#) in disarray in December 2017. Nevertheless, the UN special envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura (to be [replaced](#) by Geir Pedersen from December 2018), continues to participate in the Astana talks; he is currently [negotiating](#) the composition of a committee agreed at those talks to draft a new Syrian constitution, which it is [hoped](#) to convene by the end of 2018. The initial proposal was for the Syrian government and opposition each to choose one-third of the committee's members, but the increasingly assertive Syrian government is now [demanding](#) that it, together with Russia, Iran and Turkey, nominate the remainder, rather than the UN as initially proposed.

Largely dominated by Russia, the Astana talks have enabled Assad to continue consolidating military gains. [De-escalation zones](#) agreed at Astana in May 2017 helped to put fighting on hold in four largely opposition-held areas; since then, Syrian troops have picked off one area after another, re-taking three of the four zones with Russian air support. Attacks on the last remaining de-escalation zone in Idlib were put on hold after Turkey and Russia agreed instead to create a demilitarised zone along the front line. At present, the deal is looking [shaky](#), with rebels having only partially complied and low-level fighting with government forces [continuing](#). In any case, the Syrian government regards the arrangement as merely a '[temporary measure](#)' before it reconquers Idlib.

Figure 1: Who controls what in Syria?



Source: [Al Jazeera](#), based on [liveuamap](#).

Timeline of Syrian civil war

March 2011: protestors in Damascus demand political reform. Despite violent repression by security forces, protests spread across the country.

July 2011: officers defect from the Syrian armed forces to form the Free Syrian Army (FSA), marking the beginning of an armed insurrection. The FSA and other rebel groups gain control of large parts of the country.

September 2013: Da'esh/Islamic State enters the conflict, conquering much of eastern Syria.

September 2015: at the request of Damascus, Russia launches a series of airstrikes in support of Syrian government troops. Contrary to Russian [claims](#) to be fighting terrorists, many of its airstrikes are in areas controlled by 'moderate' opposition forces, such as the FSA, with only a [small number](#) of airstrikes directed against Da'esh/Islamic State.

December 2016: after a series of territorial gains, Syrian government troops score a decisive victory by retaking Aleppo with Russian air support after a long and bloody siege.

January 2017: the first round of peace talks between the Syrian government and the opposition begins in Astana, in parallel with the pre-existing UN-led talks in Geneva. Despite peace talks, a December 2016 [ceasefire](#) agreed between the government troops and most of the opposition groups (but not Da'esh/Islamic State and other groups designated by the UN as terrorists), and the four [de-escalation zones](#) agreed at Astana in July 2017, fighting has continued in many parts of the country since then, as Syrian government troops re-take most of the remaining opposition-held areas, with the exception of Idlib province and the Kurdish-controlled eastern part of the country.

December 2017: after declaring victory against Da'esh/Islamic State terrorists in Syria, Vladimir Putin announced that Russian troops would start to withdraw from Syria. However, Russia still retains a significant military presence in Syria and continues to participate in airstrikes against opposition strongholds.

September 2018: Syrian government and Russian planes bomb targets in Idlib, but the campaign to re-take the province is put on hold after a Russian-Turkish deal to create a buffer zone.

Military and diplomatic costs of Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war

Russia and chemical weapons in Syria

Since December 2015, nearly [150 occurrences](#) of chemical weapon use have been reported in Syria. The deadliest attack to date was in August 2013, killing up to [1 500 residents](#) of opposition-held Ghouta, in the eastern suburbs of Damascus. Most Western governments blamed Syrian government forces for the incident. The US withdrew its plan for a military response after Russia proposed a plan to dispose of Syria's chemical weapons. Despite this, chemical weapon attacks continue. Most of these have involved chlorine, which also has civilian uses and was therefore not covered by the disposal plan. However, there is also evidence of sarin, the same toxic gas as was used in Ghouta and stocks of which were theoretically supposed to have been destroyed.

Russia has systematically blocked international efforts to hold Syria to account for its chemical weapons use. In 2017 and 2018 it repeatedly vetoed UN Security Council resolutions that would have extended a joint UN-OPCW (Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons) investigation or launched a robust new UN investigation. In April 2018, Russian state media ran [stories](#) suggesting that chemical weapons attacks had been staged in order to discredit the Syrian regime. In August, Russia [claimed](#) that rebels in Idlib were planning a similar 'provocation' – a claim that the EU's East StratCom Task Force has [cast doubt](#) on. For its part, the US says it has evidence that it is Syrian government forces that are planning to use chemical weapons on the province, and is looking at [options](#) for a – possibly military – response in case that happens.

Russian armed forces personnel are not directly involved in fighting on the ground, but with up to [4 000 troops](#) stationed in Syria at one point, casualties are inevitable — as of February 2018, 44 had been officially [declared](#). Given the sensitivity of Russian public opinion to military casualties, many of the Russians fighting in Syria – and in other theatres of war, such as Ukraine – are mercenaries, officially on their own initiative, but in practice employed by private military companies with alleged Kremlin links, such as [Wagner](#). In February 2018, as many as [100 mercenaries](#) fighting alongside Syrian government armed forces were killed in a battle against US troops.

Russia's military operations in Syria heighten the risk of incidents such as Turkey's December 2015 [shooting down](#) of a Russian warplane triggering a proxy war with the many other external players involved in the conflict. To prevent potential clashes, US military activity in Syria – such as the April 2017 and 2018 strikes on Syrian military and chemical weapons facilities, and the June 2017 shooting down of a Syrian war plane – avoids targeting official Russian military personnel, and the two countries coordinate via a Russia-US [hotline](#). However, such mechanisms are not always effective, as the accidental shooting down of another Russian plane in September 2018 after Israel allegedly failed to give timely warning of

airstrikes via its own hotline with Russia, resulting in major tensions (see below).

Moscow's support for the Assad regime, its complicity in Syrian chemical weapons attacks (see boxed text) and the high humanitarian costs of its airstrikes have further damaged already strained relations with the West, as well as Russia's international reputation. Neither the US nor the EU have imposed wide-ranging Syria-related sanctions on Moscow;¹ however, both have strongly condemned '[war crimes](#)' for which Russia is partly to blame.

Russian domestic repercussions of Syria campaign

Syria also carries domestic risks for Russia's leaders. Although public opinion [surveys](#) suggest that Russians see the country's stronger international position (to which the intervention has arguably contributed) as one of Vladimir Putin's main achievements, they also show that (as of [August 2017](#)) just 30 % were in favour of continuing the military campaign. The lack of public support may reflect fears of a terrorist backlash (shortly after the start of Russian airstrikes in Syria, Da'esh/Islamic State [claimed](#) responsibility for the deaths of over 220 Russian passengers on a charter flight from Egypt). Russians are worried that the conflict might spread – in November 2016, nearly [half](#) felt that there was a real risk of Syria triggering a third world war. Perhaps realising that such concerns might dent

his popularity ahead of the May 2018 election, in December 2017 Putin [announced](#) an end to the campaign – though in practice, Russian airstrikes have continued since then.

Although the Syrian campaign is not especially popular in Russia, initial fears that military action against Sunni Islamist rebels could provoke a backlash among Russia's estimated 20 million (mostly Sunni) Muslims have not been realised. In 2012 and 2013, [protests](#) in the largely Muslim Russian regions of Tatarstan and Dagestan expressing solidarity with Muslim brothers fighting 'Assad's bloody regime' remained sporadic and marginal. A 2016 [survey](#) showed that Russian Muslims were not significantly more likely to oppose the campaign than their non-Muslim peers.

Russia's role in Syria also has security implications, in that it could encourage Russian Muslims to join Islamist terrorist organisations, both at home and abroad. An estimated [4 000-5 000](#) Russians have travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight for Da'esh/Islamic State – some of them apparently [encouraged](#) by security forces to leave the country as part of an effort to clamp down on Islamist terrorism ahead of the 2014 Sochi Olympics. This exodus may have contributed at least partly to a sharp [decline](#) in the level of violence in the North Caucasus since 2010, although the question remains what will happen as militants start returning home.

In Chechnya, regional leader Ramzan Kadyrov is [vocal](#) in his support for the Syrian campaign and appears to view it as an extension of his own fight against Islamic radicalism. At his initiative, several hundred Chechen security personnel have been sent to provide backing for Syrian government troops, and although they are not directly involved in combat, there are reports of fighting between them and Chechens belonging to jihadist rebel groups.

For Russia, benefits of Syria campaign outweigh the risks

The probable survival of the Assad regime in Syria brings Russia, its main international backer, various benefits. In January 2018, Russia signed an energy cooperation [agreement](#) giving it exclusive rights to rebuild the Syrian oil and gas sector, with potential huge profits for the Russian companies involved. From a military perspective, Russia gets to keep its Tartus naval base and the more recently added Latakia airbase, its only military facilities outside the former Soviet Union. Tartus is of strategic importance, as it enables Russian ships to stay in the Mediterranean without having to return to Russia for servicing. Airstrikes and missile strikes have provided Russia's armed forces with valuable combat experience and showcased Russian military prowess.

However, the biggest gains for Russia are geopolitical. Moscow has managed to impose its vision of Syria's future, ignoring Western demands for Assad to step down. The US has been sidelined from the Astana peace talks, which it [pulled out](#) of in May 2018. Around [2 000 American troops](#) remain deployed in eastern Syria, where they have helped Syrian Kurds to defeat Da'esh/Islamic State; however, there are [signs](#) that the Kurds are considering making peace with Damascus, recognising that their US allies have little real power to shape the country's future.

Russia's status as the dominant player in Syria is a huge boost for its influence not only in Syria's neighbourhood, but also in the wider Middle East/North Africa region (see below).

Russia in Syria's neighbourhood

Russia's military intervention in Syria has given a new momentum to relations with neighbouring countries, which are closely involved in the conflict.

Iran

Many areas of common interest between Russia and Iran

Together with Russia, Iran is Assad's second main external backer, and has invested even more heavily in his regime's survival – perhaps as much as [US\\$6 billion](#) a year, while as many as 2 000 Iranian fighters have lost their lives in Syria. Tehran therefore has every reason to welcome Moscow's intervention.

Another factor which brings Russia and Iran together is the two countries' shared animosity towards the US. [Historically](#), tensions with Washington have tended to drive Moscow and Tehran closer together. Those tensions have risen lately, due to harsh American sanctions against both countries and Washington's withdrawal from the May 2018 Iran nuclear deal.

With embargoes banning EU and US weapons sales to Iran, Russia has become Iran's main arms supplier. Over the past ten years, [two-thirds](#) of Iranian defence imports came from Russia (China supplied most of the remainder), mostly accounted for by a [US\\$800](#) million transfer of Russian S-300 air defence missiles.

Despite limited bilateral trade (just [0.3 %](#) of Russia's total international trade in 2017), economic cooperation is of strategic importance. Completed in 2017, the [North South Transport Corridor](#) gives Russian exporters railway access via Iran to the Persian Gulf. The new route is expected to slash transport costs and times for Russian exports (to India in particular), while Iran will benefit from freight transit fees.

Russian investment in Iran is particularly important in the oil and gas sector; in November 2017, the two countries' main oil-producing companies signed a [deal](#) on Iranian oil projects potentially worth US\$30 billion. The deal also [envisaged](#) possible sales of Russian gas to northern Iran (which [lacks](#) an adequate pipeline connection to the country's southern gas-producing regions) and exchanges of Iranian oil for Russian technology. Apart from commercial benefits, Russia gains greater influence over Iran through trade and investment, while for Iran, economic links with Russia help to counteract the isolating effect of crippling US sanctions. Another reason why Russia may favour energy cooperation with Iran is that it could [help](#) to delay or block potential trans-Caspian pipelines bringing Central Asian hydrocarbons (in particular, gas from Turkmenistan) to Europe, where they could compete with Russian exports.

Obstacles to a closer partnership between Russia and Iran

The loss of Persian territory to the Russian Empire and Iranian hostility to Soviet communism are among the historical causes of long-standing mutual suspicions between the two countries. Russian public opinion associates Iran above all with wars and terrorism (34 % of respondents to a June 2018 [survey](#)). In addition, although Russian and Iranian interests are often similar, they are far from identical. In line with its overall strategy of maximising its Middle East influence, Russia is keen to cooperate with countries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, which Iran sees as adversaries. For example, responding to Israeli concerns, Russia has [refrained](#) from selling some of its most sophisticated weapons to Tehran; has put [pressure](#) on Iran to keep out of areas close to Syria's border with Israel; and has not [retaliated](#) against Israeli strikes on Iranian targets in Syria.

Such differences mean that the Russian-Iranian relationship should be seen as a [tactical alliance](#) based on specific issues where interests converge, rather than a longer-term strategic partnership reflecting fundamental similarities in the two countries' world views.

Turkey

A historically difficult relationship, and differences over Syria

Like Iran, Turkey has historically had a difficult relationship with Russia – Ottoman-era wars, Cold War confrontation, 1990s competition for influence in the southern Caucasus and central Asia, as well as Ankara's [support](#) for Chechen rebels. Turkey, which has a large and politically active community of [Crimean Tatars](#), aligned itself with Western criticism of Russian aggression in Ukraine, although it stopped short of adopting sanctions. Russian public opinion is suspicious of Turkey – [asked](#) in March 2017 about their feelings towards the country, only 47 % felt positive, compared to 76 % for China or 36 % for the European Union. Those suspicions are reciprocated in Turkey, where a spring 2017 [survey](#) showed that 74 % mistrust Putin.

Unlike Iran, relations are further complicated by Syria, where Turkey is hostile towards the Assad regime and backs some of the opposition [groups](#) that control Idlib province. In addition, since March 2018, Turkey and allied opposition forces have controlled areas adjacent to the formerly Kurdish-held city of Afrin, which Russia [insists](#) should be returned to Syrian government control. The future status of eastern Syria, currently under Kurdish control with US support, is another likely bone of contention; Kurdish opposition forces have mostly [avoided](#) direct clashes with Syrian government forces, and may now look to [negotiate](#) autonomy with Damascus, something that Ankara strongly opposes.

Economic ties bring the two countries closer together

Despite such differences, Turkish-Russian relations are mostly positive. Underpinning closer ties are substantial bilateral trade and investment. Turkey is Russia's only major trade partner in the Middle East, accounting for [over 4 %](#) of Russia's total international trade in 2017 (Russia's next largest partner is Egypt, with 1.3 %; the combined share of regional heavyweights Iran and Saudi Arabia is a mere 0.5 %). For its part, Russia is Turkey's third-largest trading partner (6 % of total Turkish trade). Substantial tourism also brings the two countries closer together; in 2017, Turkey was visited by [4.5 million](#) Russian tourists, making it the most popular foreign destination in the world for Russian holidaymakers.

Above all, Russia is Turkey's main energy provider, supplying it with 24 % and 53 % respectively of its oil and gas [imports](#) in 2016. In addition, Russian nuclear energy company Rosatom is helping Turkey to build its first nuclear energy [plant](#). For Russia, Turkey is not only a major energy export market, but also a partner in the [TurkStream](#) gas pipeline, which is currently under construction and is intended to supply not only Turkey but also southern Europe. The pipeline fits in with Moscow's commercial and geopolitical interests, as it will enable Russian gas supplies to bypass Ukraine, as well as [consolidating](#) the Russian gas producer Gazprom's dominance over European gas markets.

Turkey moving closer to Russia as relations with West deteriorate

In November 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian military plane which allegedly entered its airspace on its way to Syria, resulting in a tense confrontation between the two countries. Good relations were restored in June 2016 after Turkish President Erdogan expressed regret – or as the Kremlin has it, [apologised](#) – for the incident.

Ankara's desire for reconciliation reflected several factors – crippling economic [losses](#) due to Russian sanctions barring most Turkish imports, and the withdrawal of Russian tourism, a realisation that Russia had become the dominant player in Syria, Turkey's vulnerability to disruption of Russian gas supplies, and also deteriorating [relations](#) with Ankara's traditional Western allies. The pivot towards Moscow has been reinforced since then by US military support for Syrian Kurds, Western criticism of Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian rule, and since August 2018, a [trade war](#) with Washington. In 2017, Turkey, which in the past relied mainly on EU and US weapons imports, announced that it was buying Russian S-400 air-defence missiles. As S-400 is [incompatible](#) with NATO defence systems, the purchase is a blow to Turkey's relations with its military allies.

The benefits for Russia of such developments are two-fold. On the one hand, the United States' influence in Syria and the Middle East is undermined by its strained relations with Turkey, a key regional player. At the same time, Moscow has managed to secure Turkish cooperation on Syria, despite the divergence between its goals and those of Ankara. Turkey has largely accepted Russia's leadership, actively participating in the Astana peace talks and [toning down](#) its criticism of the Assad regime. For its part, Russia has made some concessions, putting on hold a planned campaign to help Syrian government forces re-take Idlib, and [agreeing](#) in September 2018 to Turkey's proposal for a 15-20 kilometre buffer zone between [rebels](#) and Syrian armed forces in the province.

Israel

Despite the US-Israel alliance, friendly relations with Russia

Israel is an even closer US ally than Turkey – and unlike Turkey, its relations with Washington have if anything improved recently, with Donald Trump's strongly pro-Jewish stance in relation to Palestinian issues. However, this has not prevented friendly ties with Moscow, especially since the beginning of the 1990s, when an exodus of over [one million](#) Russian-speaking Jews from former Soviet Union countries began. Although Israeli public sentiment is not particularly warm towards Russia – in 2017, [69 %](#) of Israelis expressed negative views of Putin – the presence of a large and politically influential Russian-speaking minority, which includes the current Defence and former Foreign Minister [Avigdor Lieberman](#), helps to ease tensions.

Israel frequently avoids aligning with Western criticism of Russia. Its ambassador [absented](#) himself from a March 2014 UN vote condemning Russia's annexation of Crimea, and it did not adopt sanctions. In March 2018, Israel [resisted](#) British pressure to issue a strong statement on the poisoning of ex-Russian spy Sergey Skripal. Contacts between Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Putin, who have met [frequently](#), are close. While most Western leaders were reluctant to endorse Putin's 2012 and 2018 victories in elections that were seen as [failing](#) to meet democratic standards, Netanyahu did not hesitate to offer his [congratulations](#) on both occasions.

Although Russia and Israel are not major trade partners, they cooperate in a number of areas, for example energy (Israel imports around [one-eighth](#) of its oil from Russia) and defence (Israeli [drones](#) are among the few foreign weapons purchased by Russia). Ongoing talks on a free trade [agreement](#) between Israel and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union could eventually lead to stronger economic interaction.

Israel and Russia mostly compartmentalise their differences in Syria

Israel is no friend of the Assad regime, and has clashed directly with its armed forces; in [2014](#) and again in [July 2018](#), Israeli air defence shot down Syrian planes, and the Israeli military claims to have struck [200](#) targets inside Syria since 2017. At the same time, Jerusalem has no [interest](#) in seeing Assad toppled by potentially Islamist rebels. Now that Assad has regained control of most of the country, Israel's main concern is the presence in Syria of his Iranian allies; there are an [80 000](#) estimated Iranian-led troops and militia in the country, including Iranian government troops and Lebanese Hezbollah. Therefore, most Israeli air strikes have [targeted](#) Iranian military infrastructure, rather than Syrian government forces; the need to counter Iran's presence was also apparently the main motivation for Israel's alleged [covert backing](#) for rebel groups in areas close to the Syrian border. For its part, Iran has retaliated by firing missiles into the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

For Russia, Iran is an ally in Syria, whereas for Israel it is an adversary. Despite such differences, the two countries made efforts to avoid direct clashes by setting up a [coordination mechanism](#) in September 2015. Israel appears to [understand](#) that its security concerns over Iran's Syria presence can only be addressed with the help of Russia as the dominant player in Syria. Dialogue between Tel Aviv and Moscow has therefore intensified; Netanyahu has held no fewer than [nine meetings](#) with Putin since the beginning of Russia's military campaign.

For its part, Russia has attempted to defuse rising tensions by pressing Iran to withdraw at least partially from Syria. In August 2018, Russia announced that it had [persuaded](#) Iran to pull back to at least 85 kilometres from the Israeli border. Israel continues to insist on a complete withdrawal; observers [doubt](#) whether Russia has the will or sufficient leverage over Iran to make that happen. In the meantime, Israeli attacks on Iranian and Syrian government armed forces [continue](#).

Future of relations in doubt after Russian plane downed in Syria

Relations were hurt by a September 2018 incident in which a Russian plane was shot down by Syrian air defences responding to an Israeli bomber attack, killing 15 Russian troops. Putin downplayed

Israel's role, [referring](#) to an 'accidental tragedy'. However, since then Russia's Defence Ministry has [blamed](#) Israel for indirectly causing the incident by failing to give adequate warning of its airstrike and hiding from Syrian air defences behind the Russian plane. Russia has retaliated by upgrading Syrian air defences – something that it had previously [refrained](#) from doing, in response to Israeli concerns – and announcing that it will jam communications and navigation systems of foreign combat planes approaching Syria from the Mediterranean. As a result, Israeli airstrikes will become significantly more [dangerous](#), and there is a serious risk of further confrontation; it remains to be seen if bilateral relations will eventually recover.

Russia's growing influence in the wider Middle East

Russia's campaign in Syria is a game-changer

In the past, Russia's regional influence was limited by its incapacity to protect allies. As explained above, during the Cold War, Moscow could do little to support Arab countries in their conflict with Israel. In 2003 and 2011, Moscow could only look on from the sidelines as US-led military interventions toppled Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, both leaders of countries with which Russia had entertained friendly relations. However, in Syria Russia showed that it had the military strength and political will to save Assad. Some experts believe that Russia has [overtaken](#) the US to become the [leading player](#) in the Middle East, or at least a force to be reckoned with.

This situation has encouraged Middle Eastern countries from across the region, including traditional US allies, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, to step up their engagement with Moscow. Saudi King Salman's October 2017 state visit to Moscow was the first ever by a reigning Saudi monarch, and brought a series of wide-ranging [agreements](#); among other things, these envisage Saudi purchases worth US\$2 billion of Russia's sophisticated S-400 air defence system, joint investments worth up to a further US\$2 billion, and the construction of a Russian nuclear power plant.

Qatar has been a key weapons [supplier](#) to anti-Assad Syrian rebels, and relations with Russia have often been [strained](#). However, since 2016 Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani has visited Moscow [twice](#); again, arms sales and investments were among the topics discussed. For the time being, most of Russia's deals with Saudi Arabia and Qatar are only preliminary, and past [experience](#) suggests that not all will be finalised. However, increased diplomatic engagement between Gulf countries and Russia is significant as it points to a desire for closer cooperation.

Russia's role as a mediator bridging regional divides

Building on its success in bringing Syrian government and rebels to the negotiating table, since 2017 Russia has worked hard to present itself as a mediator in Middle Eastern conflicts, ranging from [Israel-Palestine](#) to [Libya](#), [Yemen](#), as well as [Qatar](#) versus neighbouring Gulf countries. Russia's aspirations to become a regional power broker are helped by its success in improving relations simultaneously with rivals Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. On the Palestinian question, Russia has consistently backed UN Security Council resolutions criticising Israel, while maintaining close relations with Tel Aviv.

Although there is no doubt that Moscow's regional clout is growing, its effectiveness as a mediator should not be [overestimated](#). Even in Syria, Russia has only had very limited success in its efforts to prevent clashes between Iran and Israel. On most other conflicts, Russia's offers of mediation have yet to be followed through.

Moscow's commitment to playing a constructive role as an 'honest broker' is also questionable. In eastern Europe and the [Western Balkans](#), Russia creates and exploits divisions in order to further its own influence at the expense of the EU and the US. A similar approach applies to the Middle East: Russia's offer to host Israeli-Palestinian talks seems to be more about [supplanting](#) the United States as the leading international actor on the issue than genuinely advancing the peace process.

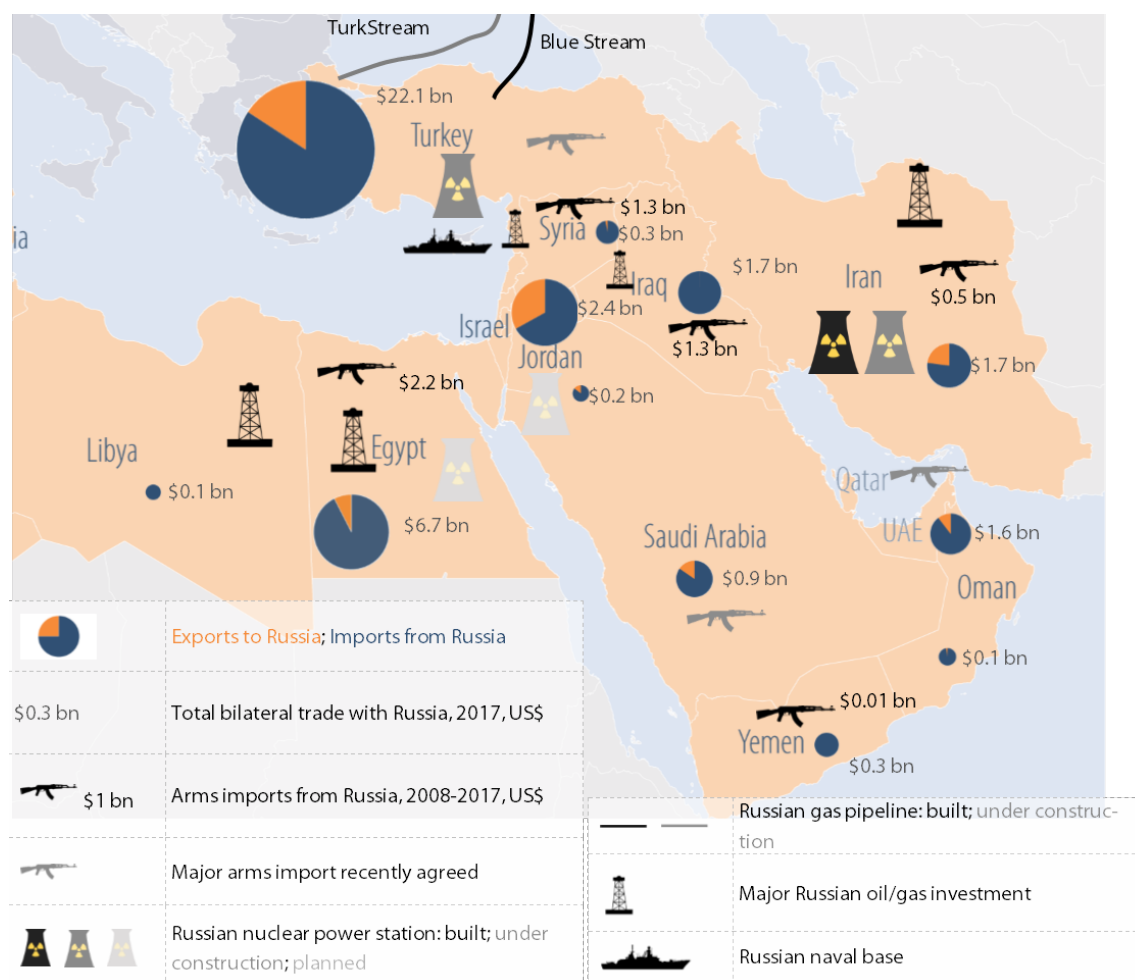
In Syria, insurgents are [sceptical](#) of Moscow's role in their country's peace process, which they see as an effort to legitimise Assad's continued rule, rather than resolving political differences between the government and the opposition.

Russia itself may be partly to blame for the current crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar; in June 2017, Kremlin-linked hackers were [suspected](#) of planting a fake news story on the website of Qatar's state news agency, which led to the rift. Since then, Moscow's plans to sell its S-400 air defence system to both countries are certainly not helping; Riyadh is [threatening](#) to take military action against Doha if its deal to purchase the Russian weapons goes ahead.

Finally, in Iraq Russia's involvement in the country's energy sector could potentially foment tensions between Iraqi Kurdistan and Baghdad. Russia has not overtly backed the region's demands for independence, but it has signed oil and gas agreements with Erbil, [ignoring](#) a ban by Iraq's central government on Kurdistan independently exporting its oil.

Russia's economic presence underpins its geopolitical influence

Figure 2: Russian economic and military influence in the Middle East and North Africa



Source: [Eurasian Economic Commission](#) (trade); [SIPRI](#) (arms trade).

With its much smaller and weaker economy, Russia cannot compete in terms of volume with the region's main trade and investment [partners](#), which include the United States, China and India. However, Russia's status as energy superpower allows it to punch above its weight.

Turkey is Russia's largest Middle Eastern energy export market (oil and gas exports worth [US\\$5.1 billion](#) in 2017), followed by Israel (US\$0.6 billion), Morocco (US\$0.6 billion) and Egypt

(US\$0.4 billion). However, Russia also cooperates closely with producer countries such as Saudi Arabia, playing a key part in [OPEC+ agreements](#) that have helped to regulate global oil oversupply and bring the price per barrel up from a January 2016 low of below US\$30 to over US\$70 in September 2018, a major boost to both countries' oil-dependent economies.

Middle Eastern countries are not major investors in the Russian energy sector, with the exception of Qatar, which now holds a [19 % stake](#) worth €10 billion in Russia's leading oil producer, Rosneft. On the other hand, since 2016 Russia has signed deals worth billions of dollars, which if implemented will give it wide-ranging control of Middle Eastern oil and gas fields.

Several Middle Eastern countries are turning to [nuclear energy](#) as a means of reducing their dependence on fossil fuels, and Russian state company Rosatom has become the region's dominant [provider](#) of nuclear technology. Completed in 2011, Bushehr in Iran is the region's first and as yet only nuclear power plant; it is currently being expanded. In Turkey, Rosatom started construction of the Akkuyu plant in late 2017; completion is planned for 2025. The company is also carrying out feasibility studies in Jordan and is expected to start construction in 2019. It also signed a preliminary [agreement](#) with Egypt in December 2017. Of the two remaining Middle Eastern countries with nuclear power plans, Saudi Arabia is considering Rosatom as one of several potential constructors, while the United Arab Emirates, whose Barakah plant is due to begin production later in 2018, is the only country so far to choose a non-Russian-built plant.

Table 1: Russian oil and gas deals in the Middle East

| Country | Nature of cooperation | Value of deal | Date |
|------------------|---|---|--|
| Egypt | Rosneft to purchase a stake in the Zohr gas field | Over US\$2 billion | November 2017 |
| Iran | Rosneft and National Iranian Oil Company to cooperate on projects in Iran | Up to US\$30 billion (a more recent figure puts the possible total of Russian oil and gas investment at US\$50 billion) | November 2017 |
| Iraq (Kurdistan) | Rosneft acquires Kurdistan's oil export pipeline to Turkey; agrees to help Kurdistan develop its gas sector | US\$1.8 billion (for oil pipeline) | September 2017 (oil pipeline); May 2018 (gas sector development) |
| Libya | Rosneft to help re-develop Libyan oilfields | Not known | February 2017 |
| Saudi Arabia | Possible partnerships between Rosneft and Saudi oil company Aramco; Russia to buy shares in Aramco | Not known | February 2018 |
| Syria | Russia to have exclusive rights to produce oil and gas in Syria, in exchange for rebuilding the country's destroyed energy sector | Not known | January 2018 |

Russia's Middle Eastern energy investments are commercially motivated. In the [oil sector](#), although Russia has plenty of oil of its own, investing in Middle Eastern oil can make economic sense, as production costs there are [lower](#). Furthermore, Russia's development of its own oil reserves is

severely constrained by Western Ukraine-related sanctions. In the [nuclear sector](#), Rosatom makes money not only by building reactors but also by maintaining them and supplying fuel.

However, energy projects are also a channel for Russian political influence. Turkey's dependence on Russian gas was probably a factor in Erdogan's decision in June 2016 to repair his country's relations with Moscow. In Iraqi Kurdistan, Rosneft's acquisition of oil pipelines give it strong [leverage](#) over Baghdad, which depends on the pipelines for earning vital export revenue. Russian-built nuclear power plants also create dependence, as it is not always straightforward to switch to another fuel supplier once the plant is built. Throughout the region, Russian energy investment means closer economic cooperation and therefore also closer political ties.

The Middle East in the context of Russia-US global rivalry

Russia's actions in the Middle East should be seen in the wider context of global geopolitical rivalry with the United States and its Western allies. The construction of a '[multipolar world](#)' in place of the US-dominated unipolar international order, has long been an overarching Russian foreign policy goal. Across the world, in eastern Europe, Africa and even Latin America - the United States' own backyard - Russia is competing for influence, using a range of tools that include conflict mediation, energy investments and arms sales.

Outside the countries of the former Soviet Union, the Middle East is probably the region where Russia has been most successful in consolidating its influence at America's expense. There, Russia does not have the same soft power assets, such as cultural similarities and historical ties that give it an edge in regions such as the Western Balkans and eastern Europe. On the other hand, it has been helped by Middle Eastern disappointment with the results of Western intervention. US credibility in the region is [damaged](#) by the toxic legacy of its 2003 Iraq invasion and its failure to intervene decisively in the Syrian civil war. Donald Trump's [ban](#) on travellers from five Muslim-majority countries, as well as his decisions to [move](#) the US embassy to Jerusalem and [slash funding](#) for Palestinians, have angered Arab countries and undermined American mediation efforts. In addition, a perceived US [retreat](#) from global leadership creates more room for Russia to expand. Russia's growing influence in the region therefore reflects US weakness as much as its own strength.

ENDNOTE

¹ In October 2016, Italy [blocked](#) plans to adopt EU sanctions against Russia over its role in the siege of Aleppo. In April 2018, the US [considered](#) sanctions for Russia's complicity in Syrian chemical weapons use, but in the end only five Russian companies were [targeted](#).

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