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Russia's Eastern Mediterranean Strategy – Implications for the United States and Israel

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Russia is taking advantage of the power vacuum created by America's desire to disengage from the Middle East. President Obama launched the policy of "pivoting" away from the region, and President Trump is carrying that policy forward. As a result, Russia is emerging as a dominant military and political force in the region. It intervened heavily in Syria's civil war and was instrumental in saving the Assad regime. It was instrumental also in the Iran nuclear negotiations, sometimes supporting pressure on Iran and sometimes defending Iran at the United Nations. Russia engineered a new five-nation treaty among Caspian Sea states, assigning them their littoral rights.² And it negotiated an end to Syria's civil war.

For its decisive military support to Assad, Russia has been rewarded with access in Syria and control over upgraded military bases - the Tartus naval base and the Khmeimim air base.³ From those bases it can project power into the Middle East, the Balkans and farther west along



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 450 | December 16, 2019

the Mediterranean. In conflict, Russia is positioned to execute an area-denial strategy against the United States.

In Syria, Russia's military operations decisively affected the civil war and also tested and demonstrated capabilities that showed off Russian boldness, lethality, flexibility and reach.⁴ Russia used manned aircraft to strike targets in Syria beginning in September 2015. Many such attacks were launched from Khmeimim, which it has, since that date, expanded and improved with new radar, drone and other technology.⁵ The attacks included the first combat use of different types of Russian precision-guided munitions.⁶

Russia is also using Syria as testing ground for its emerging, advanced electronic warfare capabilities. In April 2018, U.S. Army General Raymond A. Thomas III, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, commented, "Right now in Syria we are operating in the most aggressive EW [electronic warfare] environment on the planet." Our adversaries, he added, "are testing us every day, knocking our communications down, disabling our EC-130s, et cetera."⁷

Russia attacked Syrian rebel targets from the Caspian Sea. It used Kilo-submarine-launched and surface-ship-launched land-attack cruise missiles.⁸ It struck Raqaa in Syria from a submarine in the Mediterranean. The Russian Defense Minister announced his forces' use of Kalibr cruise missiles fired from the Rostov-on-Don submarine.⁹ Russia sent a private contractor military force - referred to in press reports as "paid Russian mercenaries" or "little green men" - to fight for the Assad regime.¹⁰ Russian manned aircraft bombed Syria from a base in Iran. Though Iran did not publicize the attack, Russia did.¹¹ During the summer of 2018, to support Assad's attack on Syria's last major rebel base, Russia deployed a substantial naval force into the Mediterranean, including the aircraft carrier Kuznetsov.¹²

Through maritime operations, Russia has extended the range of its military influence. The Russian presence creates new "rules of the game" throughout the Middle East, affecting the U.S. and Israel's ability to operate freely.

Russia's basing arrangements in the Levant will allow it to stage, repair and operate autonomous underwater systems. It already has advanced surveillance, reconnaissance and operational capabilities for interdicting undersea communications cables. Its Syria-based submarines in the Mediterranean not only can launch cruise missiles at land targets, but also threaten undersea infrastructure.¹³ U.K. Chief of Defence Air Chief Marshall Sir Stuart Peach warned in December 2017, "There is a new risk to our way of life that is the vulnerability of the cables that crisscross the seabed. Can you imagine a scenario where those cables are cut or disrupted, which would immediately and potentially catastrophically affect both our media and economy, as well as other ways of living?"¹⁴ Soon before he spoke, Russia had deployed to the eastern Mediterranean its oceanographic research vessel *Yantar*, which, according to the



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 450 | December 16, 2019

Russian parliament's official publication, is outfitted for deep sea surveillance and "connecting to top-secret communication cables." *Rossiya*, Russia's state-owned TV network, reported that *Yantar* can connect undersea cables and also "cut and jam underwater sensors."¹⁵

Russia has multiple reasons to intervene in the Eastern Mediterranean – to aid Syrian regime allies of longstanding and to gain leverage against the United States. Among its main regional interests, however – in fact, among Russia's main interests generally – is increasing world energy prices. The Russian economy is largely the business of exporting oil and gas.¹⁶ This has been true for decades. Russia and Putin depend for their existence on high prices for energy. It is surprising how many articles are written about Russia's Middle East or other foreign policies that fail to mention this point.

A key to understanding what Russia is doing in the Eastern Mediterranean region is to recognize that it wants to have the power to influence the energy-related decisions of Saudi Arabia and other important producing states. This helps explain why it is wrong to assume that Russia shares U.S. interests in Middle East stability. On the contrary, Russia often favors instability precisely because it contributes to upward pressure on energy prices.

Russia also has a major interest in arms sales.¹⁷ Because Russia's business interests receive too little attention, they warrant emphasis here, though Russia's policies are not driven solely by such considerations.

President Trump's *National Security Strategy* names Russia as one of the two countries in the world (the other being China) that "challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity" and that "are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence."¹⁸

Russia is now a principal power broker in Syria. When it saved the Assad regime, it ensured the success of Iran's pro-Assad investment and effectively aligned itself with the Shiite axis of the Iranian regime, the Syrian regime and Hezbollah. This gives it leverage both with the axis and with the opponents of that axis: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni-run states, as well as Israel.

In Israel's intensifying clash with Iran in Syria, Russia occupies a strategic position. Iran is trying to create a capability to threaten Israel from Syria. To prevent this, Israel has used its aircraft to destroy Iranian assets in Syria, keeping them away from the Israeli border. Russia, however, is the dominant military power in Syria, so Israel needs its cooperation or at least its acquiescence in the campaign to keep Iran at bay.



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 450 | December 16, 2019

Accordingly, from the head-of-government level on down, Israel has cultivated close communication with Russia regarding Syria. Russia is not actively restraining Iran, but neither is it preventing Israeli strikes against Iranian forces in Syria. Israel's relations with Russia deteriorated following the downing of a Russian IL-20 plane by Syrian anti-aircraft fire during an attack by the Israeli air force near Latakia in September 2018, but Israeli and Russian officials have worked to resolve the incident and prevent reoccurrences. Russia appears to want to avoid any confrontation between its own forces and Israel. Israeli and Russian military commanders have arranged to de-conflict their operations. Russia is improving Syria's air defenses. It has delivered S-300 air defense missile batteries and is training the Syrians to use them. Meanwhile, Russian soldiers are presumably manning these batteries. The S-300 could threaten Israeli aircraft and, if upgraded to the longer-range S-400, the danger would increase. President Putin has said he wants all foreign troops to leave Syria. This seems to apply to Iranian and Turkish but not Russian troops.

U.S. officials worry about Russia's increasing military power in the Eastern Mediterranean, though President Trump has not demanded that Russia remove its forces from Syria. It would serve U.S. interests if Russia were successfully pressured into leaving Syria now that ISIS is largely gone.

Some U.S. officials, though not publicly, have suggested that Israel should apply such pressure. Their implication is that Israel should focus less on cooperating with Russia in Syria and more on making it uncomfortable for Russian forces to entrench there.

Criticism along these lines is not U.S. policy, but it creates an irritant in the U.S.-Israeli relationship. Each country would benefit from a clearer understanding of the other's strategic concerns.

Israeli officials say they are not in a position to treat Russia as an enemy. As militarily capable as Israel is, it is not strong enough to fight it. A major dispute with Russia would make it harder if not impossible for Israel to strike Iranian forces in Syria – and that is Israel's main interest there, an interest that the United States shares (whether or not publicly stated). The Israelis do not want Russia defending Iranian forces in Syria. They do not want Israeli forces fighting Russian forces, nor do they want Russia deploying its most advanced air defenses in Syria.

During the Cold War, when Israel worked with the United States in direct opposition to the Soviets and their clients, the strategic environment was different. Unlike now, the Middle East was a high U.S. priority. The United States maintained a strong military posture there, dominated the Mediterranean Sea and actively worked to contain Soviet influence.

After the Cold War, as noted above, and especially since the George W. Bush administration, U.S. policy toward the region changed. The bywords for U.S. strategy became “pivot” and



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 450 | December 16, 2019

“disengagement.” Early in Syria’s civil war, the U.S. government made clear it would not become entangled. In particular, it refused to impose a no-fly zone. Reasonable people differ as to whether those policies were wise, but it is clear that they allowed Russia to increase its power and influence in the region and to play a decisive military role in Syria’s civil war, to dominate Syria’s skies and establish a relatively strong Russian naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

President Trump shares his predecessor’s desire to disengage from the Middle East and keep American involvement in Syria to a minimum. The deployment in May of U.S. forces to the Persian Gulf to counter Iranian threats seems to be the exception that proves the rule. The goal is to deter, not fight, a war with the Iranians. President Trump is calling on Iran’s leaders to negotiate with him. The United States has no plans to restore its Cold War-era military strength in the Mediterranean. U.S. officials are not pressing Russia to withdraw its forces from Syria. Under the circumstances, it is not realistic to expect Israel do so.

It would be a mistake, however, to fail to recognize that many U.S. officials view Russia with intense and well-grounded concern. That Russia for its own reasons gives Israel a free hand against Iran in Syria should not blind anyone to the disturbing essence of President Putin’s aggressive activities. Examples abound. They include Russia’s seizures of territory in Georgia and Ukraine¹⁹ and brazen assassinations of anti-Putin critics – journalists and politicians – perpetrated at home and abroad.²⁰ Russia directs cyber operations against the United States²¹ and exerts itself to influence U.S. elections.²² President Putin has invested heavily in modernizing Russia’s nuclear forces, strategic and tactical.²³ His government is producing nuclear-capable missiles prohibited by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which is why the U.S. government withdrew from the treaty in August 2019.²⁴ Russia also is conducting explosive nuclear testing in violation of its promise to adhere to the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban.²⁵ Russian military aircraft “buzz” – that is, challenge in close encounters – U.S. ships and aircraft.²⁶ These tactics were commonplace during the Cold War and both sides agreed to formal measures intended to limit the risks of such behavior. Russia has announced that it has successfully tested hypersonic weapons that can defeat current U.S. missile defenses.²⁷ Having invaded Ukraine to seize the Crimean Peninsula, Russian naval forces blocked the Sea of Azov.²⁸

Israeli officials can pursue necessary cooperation with Russia in Syria while still reassuring the United States that they take Russian provocations seriously. And they can reassure their American friends that Israel values its ties to the United States above its other international relationships. Pragmatic, unsentimental Israeli officials may not be accustomed to ritualistic pledges of friendship and loyalty of this kind, but it would be a mistake to underestimate their importance.



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 450 | December 16, 2019

Strategic alliances are not self-perpetuating. It takes conscious effort by alliance supporters to preserve trust between the partners at the official level and, in democratic countries, to preserve crucial popular support. It can be fatal to take these matters for granted. If the alliance is not explained, reaffirmed and put into action over and over again across the years, it will lose support in the government or in the population in general. New officials and legislators come into office continually and have no knowledge of how the alliance proved itself mutually valuable in the past. Senior officials – longtime veterans of close allied cooperation – often assume that the alliance’s premises are so well and widely known that they go without saying. That is a dangerous mistake, however. If its principles and benefits are not continually restated and celebrated, an alliance can easily become vulnerable to domestic attack, with allies disparaged for free riding, weakness or lack of loyalty.

A senior U.S. statesman once likened maintaining a strategic relationship to fighting weeds in a garden – constant attention is required to keep the irritants from taking over. The high value to both parties of the U.S.-Israeli defense partnership amply justifies the garden-tending work.

1. Mr. Feith and Admiral Chorev co-chaired the team that produced the report on “The Eastern Mediterranean in the New Era of Major-Power Competition” (http://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/Feith_The%20Eastern%20Mediterranean%20in%20the%20New%20Era%20of%20Major-Power%20Competition.pdf). The other principal members were Dr. Seth Cropsey, Hudson Institute senior fellow and former Deputy Under Secretary of the U.S. Navy; Vice Admiral Jack Dorsett (USN, ret.), vice president for cyber and C4 at Northrop Grumman, former Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Information Dominance and Director of Naval Intelligence; and Admiral Gary Roughead (USN, ret.), Robert and Marion Oster Distinguished Military Fellow, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and former Chief of Naval Operations.
2. See Andrew E. Kramer, “Russia and 4 Other Nations Settle Decades-long Dispute Over Caspian Sea,” *The New York Times*, August 12, 2018.
3. See Yuliya Talmazan, “Russia establishing permanent presence at its Syrian bases: minister of defense,” *NBC News*, December 26, 2017 (“Putin added ... that while Russia might be drawing down much of its forces, its military presence in Syria was a permanent one and that it would retain enough firepower to destroy any Islamic State comeback.”).
4. Christopher Woody, “Russia’s submarines are showing they can strike deep inside Europe, and they’ve got the US Navy on edge,” *Business Insider*, October 5, 2018 (“There’s no operational or tactical requirement to do it,” NORTHCOM Commander Adm. William Gortney told Congress in early 2016. “They’re messaging us that they have this capability.”).
5. See Patrick J. McDonnell, W.J. Hennigan and Nabih Bulos “[Russia launches airstrikes in Syria amid U.S. concern about targets](#),” *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 2015. See also RT [television network of Russia Today], “Turkish artillery shells Syrian territory – Russian military presents video proof,” February 1, 2018 (“Last week four advanced technology supermaneuverable Sukhoi Su-35S fighter jets assembled in 2015 were deployed to Khmeimim in Latakia and began performing missions along



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 450 | December 16, 2019

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 8. See Richard Johnson, “How Russia fired missiles at Syria from 1,000 miles away,” *The Washington Post*, October 23, 2015; and Kashmira Gander and Olivia Blair, “Russia launches missiles at ‘Isis targets’ in Syria from Caspian Sea – as Turkey claims Moscow is targeting rebels,” *Independent*, October 7, 2015.
 9. See BBC News, “Russia hits targets in Syria from Mediterranean submarine,” December 8, 2015.
 10. See Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2018; and Zachary Fryer-Biggs, “Russia defiant after Syria bombing, warns of ‘consequences,’” *Vox*, April 14, 2018 (“Russia continues to back Syrian President al-Assad, providing military equipment, including air-defense systems, and has sent Russian troops and paid Russian mercenaries to Syria.”).
 11. See BBC News, “Syrian conflict: Russian bombers use Iran base for air strikes,” August 16, 2016 (“Russia’s defence ministry says it has used a base in western Iran to carry out air strikes in Syria. Tupolev-22M3 long-range bombers and Sukhoi-34 strike fighters took off from Hamedan on Tuesday, a statement said.”).
 12. See Raf Sanchez, “Russia amasses warships off Syria ahead of regime’s final assault on Idlib,” *The Telegraph*, August 28, 2018; and RT, “Kuznetsov carrier in Syria is quantum jump in Russian military capabilities,” November 15, 2018 (Former UK ambassador to Syria Peter Ford is quoted on the Kuznetsov deployment: “It is a quantum jump in the Russian military capabilities. I do think the original purpose in sending the aircraft carrier was more to cut off the American option – at one time they were preparing to crater the airfields. Having an aircraft carrier standing by takes away that option. There is no point in cratering the airfields if planes can take off from an aircraft carrier.”). The Kuznetsov had operational problems during its Mediterranean deployment. David Cenciotti, “Russian MiG-29K from Adm. Kuznetsov aircraft carrier has crashed in Mediterranean sea,” *The Aviationist*, November 14, 2016; and David Cenciotti, “Russian Su-33 crashed in the Mediterranean while attempting to land on Kuznetsov aircraft carrier,” *The Aviationist*, December 5, 2016.
 13. See Scott Wyland, “Russian submarines are a growing threat, says Europe’s top Navy commander,” *Star and Stripes*, June 20, 2018 (“Russia is deploying more submarines to the Mediterranean, the Black Sea and North Atlantic than at any time since the Cold War as part of a growing power game . . . the [U.S.] Navy’s top commander in the theater said.” “Russia is upgrading its submarine forces and improving their missile capabilities . . . Adm. James Foggo, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa, said in an interview earlier this month.”) See also Christopher Woody, “Russia has



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 450 | December 16, 2019

- 'stepped on the gas' with its submarine fleet – and NATO is on alert," *Business Insider*, April 28, 2018 ("NATO officials . . . [have warned](#) several times [in recent years](#) that Russian sub activity was becoming more sophisticated and reaching levels not seen since the Cold War. They've also sounded alarm about [Russian activity around undersea cables](#) that support global communications." "In mid-2017, NATO navies shadowed the [Krasnodar](#), a Improved Kilo-class sub, as it sailed around Europe to take up station with Russia's Black Sea fleet. That journey culminated in the eastern Mediterranean, where the Krasnodar launched cruise missiles at targets in Syria.")
14. Air Chief Marshall Sir Stuart Peach, "Annual Chief of Defence Lecture 2017," Royal United Services Institute, December 14, 2017.
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 17. See Pieter D. Wezeman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Nan Tian and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018," Stockholm International Peace Institute, March 2019 ("Russian exports of major arms to the Middle East increased by 19 per cent between 2009–13 and 2014–18.").
 18. The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," December 2017, p. 2.
 19. See John Haltiwanger, "Russia is quietly seizing territory in Georgia as it warns of a 'horrible conflict' if the Eurasian country joins NATO," *Business Insider*, August 7, 2018. See also Michael Schwirtz, Anne Barnard and C. J. Chivers, "Russia and Georgia Clash Over Separatist Region," *New York Times*, August 8, 2008.
 20. For example, the shooting of Boris Nemtsov on a bridge near the Kremlin in 2015, the bludgeoning of Sergei Magnitsky in a Moscow prison in 2009, the shooting of Anna Politkovskaya in her apartment building elevator in 2006, the strangling of Nicolai Glushkov in his home near London in 2018 and the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006. See *BBC News*, "Russian spy poisoning: What we know so far," October 8, 2018; and David Kramer and Lilia Shevtsova, "Boris Nemtsov, Russian Opposition Leader, Murdered," *Brookings Institution*, February 2015; Shaun Walker, "Russia drops inquiry into death of Sergei Magnitsky," *The Independent*, March 19, 2013; Alexandra Odynova, "Russia Leads Europe In Reporter Killings," *The Moscow Times*, June 16, 2009; Luke Harding and Owen Bowcott, "Russian exile Nikolai Glushkov found dead at his London home," *The Guardian*, March 13, 2018; and David Filipov, "Here are 10 critics of Vladimir Putin who died violently or in suspicious ways," *Washington Post*, March 23, 2017.
 21. See Doina Chiacu, "U.S. sanctions Russians over military, intelligence hacking," *Reuters*, June 11, 2018; and United States Computer Emergency Readiness Team, "Russian Government Cyber Activity



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 450 | December 16, 2019

- Targeting Energy and Other Critical Infrastructure Sectors,” Department of Homeland Security, March 16, 2018.
22. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “DNI Coats Statement on the Intelligence Community’s Response to Executive Order 13848 on Imposing Certain Sanctions in the Event of Foreign Interference in a United States Election,” Press Release, December 21, 2018. (“Russia, and other foreign countries, including China and Iran, conducted influence activities and messaging campaigns targeted at the United States to promote their strategic interests.”).
 23. See Brad Lendon, “Russia’s ‘invulnerable’ nuclear missile ready to deploy, Putin says,” *CNN*, December 27, 2018; and Lauren Said-Moorhouse, “Russia may have upgraded nuclear bunker in Kaliningrad, report says,” *CNN*, June 18, 2018; and Gen. John E. Hyten, Statement Before the Senate Committee On Armed Services, February 26, 2019 (“Russia’s diverse and flexible NSNW [non-strategic nuclear weapons] capabilities facilitate a doctrine that envisions the potential coercive use of nuclear weapons. Combined with its large nuclear weapons infrastructure and ready production base, this underscores Moscow’s commitment to having nuclear weapon underpin its security and commitment to maintaining its nuclear forces for the indefinite future.”).
 24. See Sasha Ingber, “Historic Arms Control Treaty Ends With Washington and Moscow Blaming Each Other,” National Public Radio, August 2, 2019. See also Donald Trump, “Statement from the President Regarding the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty,” Whitehouse.gov, February 1, 2019.
 25. See Michael R. Gordon, “U.S. Says Russia Likely Conducting Low-Yield Nuke Tests, Defying Test Ban Treaty,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 2019.
 26. See Ivan Watson and Sebastian Shukla, “Russian fighter jets ‘buzz’ US warship in Black Sea, photos show,” *CNN*, February 16, 2017. See also Mark B. Schneider, “The Renewed Backfire Bomber Threat to the U.S. Navy,” *Proceedings Magazine*, January 2019, Vol. 135/1/1,391 (“The Backfire weapon upgrade is quite impressive, enhancing the bomber’s capabilities against both land targets and surface ships. In addition to the new land-attack missiles (the Kh-101 and Kh-555, according to Russian press), there reportedly will be at least two long-range ultrahigh-speed dual-capable (nuclear and conventional) missiles with land-attack and antiship capability. This is important because the Department of Defense has said the United States currently has no defense against hypersonic missiles.”).
 27. Associated Press, “Nothing matches our new hypersonic weapons and they will safeguard Russia for decades, President Vladimir Putin boasts,” *South China Morning Post*, December 19, 2018.
 28. See BBC News, “Tension escalates after Russia seizes Ukraine naval ships,” November 26, 2018; and U.S. Department of State, “Russia’s Harassment of International Shipping Transiting the Kerch Strait and Sea of Azov,” Press Release, August 30, 2018.

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INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 450 | December 16, 2019

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