

Russia and Turkey in Syria: The Geopolitical Nexus

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(Kremlin Press Office / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

Over the last decade, Russia has emerged as a significant power broker and military actor in the Middle East. Russia's involvement in Syria has given its relations with neighbouring countries a new momentum. This increase in Russian activity gives rise to a series of questions on the assertive Russian policy in the region. Moscow was wholly engaged in great-power competition for influence in the contested region, where all major powers had interests and sought to project power and influence. This paper provides an overview of Russia's broad strategy; its capabilities within the contours of Russian- Turkish relationship.

Russian Foreign Policy and the Middle East

Over the last decade, Russia's diplomatic, economic and military policies towards the Middle East have taken several critical turns, shaping regional and global affairs. While during the Soviet Era, Moscow's Middle East policy aimed to ensure stability and to minimise the United States' influence in the global arena, in this current calculus Russia is aiming at more than just stability. This paper suggests that understanding Russia's broad strategy and capabilities is of critical importance for regional stability. This policy outlook is divided into three parts. The first section details Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East, with its global interests and objectives. The second section evaluates the characteristics of Russia's strategy in the Middle East. The third section sheds light on up-to-date engagement with Turkey in terms of regional diplomatic, business, and economic relationships and shows the characteristics of Russia's role in the Operation Peace Spring in the contours of Russia's regional and short-term strategy.

Over the last decade, Russia has emerged as a significant power broker and military actor in the Middle East. Beginning in [2004](#), under President Vladimir Putin, the country's foreign policy has taken critical turns, noticeably increasing its engagement in the Middle East. The country's initial motive was to rejuvenate ties with Moscow's traditional partners as part of a broader strategy to detach itself from the Soviet Union's troubled economic legacy. In [December](#) 2004, Putin made a state visit to Turkey, quickly followed by visits to Egypt, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority in 2005. In 2006–2008, he toured Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and Libya. These visits marked a momentous shift from previous Russian foreign policy, with increased expansion of its political, economic and military realm and involvement in regional negotiations. Russia gained the status of an observer in the Saudi-led Organization of Islamic Cooperation in 2005. Trade relations between Russia and the MENA countries made considerable progress and increased from [\\$4.1 billion](#) in 1995 to \$6.2 billion in 2000 and to \$10.2 billion in 2004.



Russian President Vladimir Putin (2 L) accompanied by President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad (2 R) visits the Hmeymim base in Syria's Latakia on December 11, 2017. (Kremlin Press Office / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

Arms exports to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region went from less than [\\$1.5 billion in 2000 to \\$9 billion in 2009](#). Several Middle Eastern states have also expressed their interest in investing in the Russian economy, especially in oil and gas companies.

Even though Russia began rebuilding its regional reputation and influence in the mid-2000s, its efforts only began bearing fruit in the wake of the Arab Spring. The year [2015](#) was a pivotal moment for Moscow's Middle East policy. Russia's reawakening in the Middle East became visible when the first significant combat [deployment](#) of the Russian armed forces, air forces and a limited number of ground troops to Syria occurred. Such intervention shifted the direction of the Syrian civil war and the geopolitical dynamics, transforming Russia's old relationships throughout the region and forging new ones.

Using the uncertainty surrounding the future role of the US in the region and Russia's self-perceived success in Syria, Putin has raised its profile among the Gulf Arab states, posing a threat to the traditional US partnerships. Thus the geopolitical shifts and insecurity caused by the civil wars in [Libya](#) and Syria have opened opportunities for Russia to rebuild relationships with the Gulf States, Iran and Israel. By raising its profile in the arms industry, Moscow succeeded in deepening military cooperation with Iran and maintaining stronger relations with Israel. Since then, Russia and Israel bolstered military dimension and maintained a mutual interest in avoiding confrontation.

Russia's further expansion in the MENA region was dictated first by economic and diplomatic imperatives. As one of the world's top producers of [hydrocarbons](#), Russia occupies a key position in the future development of the global oil and gas marketplace. Thus, the activities of Middle Eastern oil and gas producers have a direct bearing on Russian economic well-being and political stability. Examples include Russia's business with Syria's Assad family and its military intervention in the country; its growing role in Libya; intensive [energy](#) diplomacy with Gulf monarchies, growing [grain](#) exports to MENA; its sale of air-defence systems to [Turkey](#) and burgeoning nuclear energy and arms sales in the region. Energy is critical for Russia's economy. It is with its dividends that the political establishment can finance foreign policy and military ventures. As a result, Moscow has knitted an intertwined web of strategies in the Middle East and North Africa, ranging from military cooperation and arms sales to energy and economic cooperation.

The contours of Russia's Middle East Strategy

Russia was wholly engaged in great-power competition for influence in the contested region, where all major powers had interests and sought to project power and influence. It is only after the Syrian intervention that the several critical strategic directions and priorities were drawn in Russia's

foreign policy. This increase in Russian activity gives rise to a series of questions. It is imperative to interrogate the drivers of assertive Russian policy in the Middle East, and accordingly question how sustainable Russia's 'comeback' in this part of the world is. What are the main characteristics of Russia's strategy in the Middle East?

Russian foreign policy in the Middle East is within the contours of political prestige, economic growth and regional stability. Thus, the Russian strategy combines a broader effort to leverage all available instruments of power designed to reconstruct the international system to work in its favour. Specifically, Russia's Strategy in the Middle East targets three elements:

1. To be recognised as a power with its distinct sphere of influence.
2. Desire to see US global influence restrained, and if possible, scaled back.
3. Portray itself a key regional power-broker, and a successful mediator in order to access new markets for funding and exports, gain economic influence over nations in the Middle East.

Origins of Russia's Strategic Worldview

Today, Russia's relations with the West are characterised by political and economic isolation and confrontation. Considering that Russia still sees the global system as a balance of power system with discrete spheres of influence for each high power, Moscow has been increasing relations with China and other global powers. Russia's strategy amounts to mitigating potential longer-term limitations.

Russia's perception of "strategy", its core objectives and national interest, is that the global international system is supposed to be a balance of powers where differing powers exist, where one power does not force its ideologies on the other. Moscow [framed](#) this as an alternative to "reckless Western interventionism".

This deep-seated sense of geopolitical insecurity drives Russia to pursue strategic objectives to establish a sphere of influence within the Middle East, protect Russia's image as a great power among others on the table, and stifle and [constrain America's](#) unilateral and multilateral interests. Indeed, the Kremlin, with its reputation as a global player with global influence and territorial "security" as the core national interest sits at the foundation of Russia's strategy.

A) Russia's "Great Power" Strategy

The relative US disengagement from the region during the Obama administration (2009-2017) and Putin's seemingly successful intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the support of the Assad regime in Syria beginning in 2015, have led many to see Moscow's

endeavour to return to the global geopolitical chessboard as a prominent power. Russia has set geopolitical goals for itself to explain its prevailing condition. Through re-asserting influence and projecting power in the new areas, Moscow seeks to shape the foreign policies of regional authorities and influence their governing coalitions. In summer 2015, the Assad regime was losing ground and was close to being defeated by the opposition forces. With unstable status quo, Moscow faced two fundamentally [different](#) choices of strategic policies: first, to allow the Assad regime to collapse or second, to conduct the military intervention and attempt to save the regime's interests which benefit Russia.

Russia labelled the potential fall of the regime as a "victory" for the United States and an "embarrassment" for Russia. Even though the US had an incentive to challenge Moscow in Syria, it preferred the losing hand. On May 2019 the former senior Pentagon official under the Obama administration, Andrew Exum presented [testimony](#) on how the Obama administration effectively cooperated with the Kremlin in order to avoid the total collapse of the Assad regime in Syria. Washington's strategic action was to negotiate a withdrawal of its forces, which would leave Russia to handle the costs of a [seven-year-old civil war](#). Granting the Kremlin this short-term win, however, Washington should be opposing Russia by pursuing a policy of ["dual containment"](#).

The Kremlin is moved by a particular policy vision for the Middle East, in order to become a global power, have its position in the region and have a voice at the table for critical negotiations and decisions. Even though Vladimir Putin may be reacting to international developments as they unfold, he is merely taking advantage of opportunities for his "great power" strategy as they are presented to him by the international system. Thus, it is important to note that Russia's strategy is carefully crafted and fits a coherent global policy agenda that seeks to reposition Russia as a great power in the emerging world order.

From Moscow's perspective, the Syrian war was a victory and success in the global arena. The "victory" was perceived by Russia when Putin announced success at [Khmeimim](#) in a military campaign, confirming Assad's regime as the primary winner, rather than a result that was supposed to be ushered in peace in the war-ravaged land. This led to the Russian initiatives of a "peace congress" in [Sochi](#), within the so-called Astana process as the diplomatic platform for political negotiations between the Syrian government and the armed opposition. The intervention brought Russia to a position of influence in the Middle East as a reliable partner with newly recovered prowess, weapons and concepts. Within this context, the Kremlin is promoting its interests and endorsing that a more assertive Russia can reach beyond its periphery.

B) Russia's Desire to Scale Back US Influence

One cannot understand how the Russian administration thinks about strategic issues without comprehending the fact that the Kremlin sees itself as being in a rivalry contest with the West, specifically with the US. This war is not cumulative but fundamental for Russian authorities. In the late 1980s, militarily, economically and politically, the Soviet Union fell on hard times, barely registering a presence in the Middle East. The US grew accustomed to acting as the region's hegemon—conducting wars, managing its political vision, and dictating governments its interests. In the mid-2010s, Russia has become one of the two leading extra-regional actors in the Syrian war, along with the United States. However, in 2015, Putin's coercive military action quickly changed the course of events, demonstrating that the Middle East without Russia was an anomaly, not the norm. This sudden military action was related to Russia's troubled relations with the West. They included pushing Russia back to the forefront of international politics, despite the Western sanctions: compelling the West, in particular, the US, to talk to Russia "as an equal," and thus moving the Ukraine/Crimea issues, relatively speaking, into the background.

After two decades under Vladimir Putin, Russia has come to represent a political and military challenge to the West. Russia's strategic calculus was to avoid any situation similar to Libya, in which the NATO intervention destabilised and exacerbated the political situation of the country. Compared to the US's problematic interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, Russia has aimed to create a "successful" military intervention in Syria since 2015 and serve to burnish Russia's image as a rising great power. Moscow now views the US and Russian positions as being converted while the US, specifically under the Trump administration, remains confused and divided over Washington's imminent withdrawal from Syria. However, Russia has been bolstering its image as a resurgent superpower. In doing so, the Kremlin has been aiming to convince other Middle Eastern actors that Moscow is in a far better position than Washington to bring about conflict resolution.

Moscow's intervention in Syria and its actions in the Middle East strategically serve to avoid encirclement from organisations such as NATO. Building Russian bases in the region provides access to major transit routes and help to feel more secure from the constraints it feels with NATO countries, positioned along its Western periphery. Under its strategy, Russia became a significant player posing a threat to the [US's](#) political settlement.

C) Russia as a Key Regional Power-broker and Economic Influencer

Vital interests of Russia's global role and unilateral involvement in regions beyond Eurasia have been a profound alternative for Moscow as a "regional hegemon." Beyond military and political influence, Russia's strategy includes

interests and objectives within the economic and, to some extent, cultural spheres. The US's decision to withdraw its troops from Syria made it accessible for Putin to step in and assert himself as a critical regional power-broker, more reliable than the US. Russia's hard power consequently led to the soft-power strategy and economic objectives with regional powers, including strategic access to energy [markets](#) and natural resources. Thus, Putin regards the Middle East as a place not just to advance the economic interests of Russia as a whole, but of sectors of the economy that are vital to him and his key sponsors such as Russia's oil, arms, nuclear power, and agricultural industries. Considering Russia's fundamental situation of deep economic crisis, financial/economic interests dragged into a systematic expansion of its role and economic involvement.

The Russian military's investment in Syria and the Kremlin's warming relations with Saudi Arabia cannot cover the fact that Moscow's economy is struggling and in desperate need of investment. In Moscow, the wealthy Gulf States are seen as a strategic fundraising opportunity. Thus, Russia's energy strategy is considered as the primary strengthening positions of the government's key priorities. Energy diplomacy typically refers to different activities conducted by a consumer country to provide access to markets and security of supply. The growing rapprochement between Russia and countries in the MENA encompasses oil, gas and nuclear energy diplomacy. Russia and the MENA hold [60% and 63%](#) of the world's verified oil and gas reserves, sequentially, and provide half of the world's oil and nearly [40% of its gas](#). Therefore, any mutual assistance between these two giant players will have enormous implications for global oil and gas markets.

In 2015, during the visit of the then-Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman to Moscow, Saudi Arabia announced that it would invest [\\$10 billion](#) in the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), a state-owned investment vehicle designed to attract foreign funds into the country. The RDIF has attracted [\\$30 billion](#) of foreign capital into the local economy and established partnerships with several MENA investments such as Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Abu Dhabi's Mubadala, Bahrain's Mumtalakat, the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), Qatar Holding, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), and DP World (United Arab Emirates - UAE). Rosneft and other Russian energy companies are also proceeding commercial openings across the region. They have invested directly in oil and gas projects, from Algeria to Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq and Oman, further building closer ties with various governments and local entities.

Russia now sells a considerable number of arms to the Middle East. Several MENA countries such as Algeria, Egypt, and Iraq have been historically significant customers of Russian weapons. The military-industrial complex is an influential interest group in Russia, and arms exports were crucial to sustaining the industry. Between 2009 and 2018 Russia was [the second-largest arms supplier](#) to the MENA region. Russian military delivery to the region increased by [125% between 1999-2008](#) and 2009-2018.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (R), Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (L) and Russian President Vladimir Putin (C) hold a joint press conference following the 4th trilateral summit on Syria on February 14, 2019 in Sochi, Russia. (Turkish Presidency / Murat Cetinmuhurdar / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

However, in 2014-2018 Russia's arms exports to the MENA region increased by [16% compared to 2009-2013](#). Within two decades, arms exports became a tool in the framework of Russia's broader economic and foreign policy. Russia is struggling to overcome the double obstacles of the US and the EU sanctions and its weak investment environment internally. Hence, the prospect of receiving substantial investments by some of the most prominent sovereign wealth funds in the MENA region is a godsend, which not only breaks its international isolation but brings considerable economic revenues.

Russia-Turkey relationship in the light of Russian Strategy

1- Geopolitical Cooperation

So where does the Russia-Turkey relationship policy fit in the framework of the Russian strategy? The short answer is that the policy has elements of all the trends outlined above; the willingness to engage in its diplomacy by scaling back US influence and become a key regional power-broker through its political and economic influence.

For the last ten years, Turkey's relations with the US and Russia have seen ebbs and flows. Russian-Turkish relations recovered quickly from their 2015-2016 low point [after a Turkish fighter jet downed a Russian plane](#) near the Turkish-Syrian border. Russia's most substantial gain from the Syrian conflict is arguably Turkey's political shift in 2016, which has since transformed into a rapid expansion of Russian-Turkish relations. This political volte-face was

provoked by US support for PKK-linked Syrian Kurdish militants, PYD, which Turkey has been battling for more than 30 years, and a general disenchantment with the United States. US policies in the Middle East have drawn Turkey closer to Russia in the region. Several vital drivers have shaped the rapprochement: [economic](#) ties, Turkey's geopolitical posture and domestic development, and Russia's growing ambitions in the Middle East.

Since the beginning of the Syrian War, Iran and Turkey became the Middle East's leading players. Therefore, Russia needed to keep close cooperative relations and partnerships with them. The Turkey-Russia-Iran axis has managed to accommodate their various aims and to lead cooperation in the Syrian conflict, each holding to its divergent interests. Moreover, the meetings between the three powers in 2017 and 2018 – in Sochi, Astana, and Tehran – have all played a part in this. Through Syria, each country exercises some degree of support and leverage over the other. It appears that Putin's primary strategy since 2017 has been the continuation of this accommodation. Equally crucial to the development of the relationship between Russia and Turkey has been the personal relationship between Putin and the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Turkey and Russia are more prudent in dealing with issues that are critical to the other side. Russia, for example, did not pose obstacles to a series of Turkish military operations in northwest Syria, which were initiated to clear terrorist organisations from the region (PKK/PYD/YPG and Daesh). Thus operations, such as [Operation Olive Branch](#) and [Operation Euphrates Shield](#), were conducted smoothly. However, it is imperative to note that Russian officials do [not recognise PKK and YPG](#) as terrorist organisations. Thus the

Turkish side has repeatedly expressed their [concern](#) about the Russian side building relations with YPG terrorists.

Within these sequences of events, the US adopted a new policy in Syria, supporting PYD/YPG. The decision was officially announced in 2014 in which the US assisted the PYD/YPG forces fighting against Daesh with airstrikes. Turkish authorities criticised this support saying that PYD/YPG is the equivalent of the PKK, which is enlisted as a terror organisation by many countries and international actors, including Turkey, the EU and the US. Hence, Turkey's turnaround was in large part provoked by US support for PKK linked Syrian Kurdish militants and a general disappointment with the United States' dual policy.

Simultaneously, ahead of Turkey's Operation Olive Branch, Russia started [withdrawing](#) its military assets from Afrin. Considering that Moscow has had a [military presence](#) in Afrin along the YPG, Russia thus allowed Turkish jets to manage airstrikes over the airspace controlled by Moscow and the Assad regime. Russia has shifted its position, issuing of how to deal with the YPG in the process and helping Turkey drive out Kurdish militias from a "safe zone" in north-eastern Syria. For Russians, this would highlight Moscow's flourishing ties with a NATO member and a rebalance of power in war-torn Syria as US troops leave. Therefore it is imperative to ask what has made it possible for Russia to find a [diplomatic solution](#) with Turkey on Syria? Contrary to the [US' deliberate ignorance](#), Russia provided flexible arrangements to the fact that the YPG is indistinguishable from the PKK. Considering [Turkey's influence](#) over many opposition groups in Syria, Russia is aware that working with Turkey is a powerful formula for success.

Recently in October 2019, [Erdogan](#) and Putin have accepted the parameters of a proposed Turkish "safe zone" in Syria, which was followed by Turkey's [Operation](#) Peace Spring on October 22, 2019. This development aimed to clear northern Syria, bordering Turkey's southeast from YPG/PKK terrorists. Such a deal tilted the dynamics of the Syrian crisis and brought some relief to millions of displaced Syrian refugees. Turkey's counter-terrorism operation in northern Syria involves the Russian military police and Syrian border guards entering the Syrian territory of the Turkish-Syrian border in order to help facilitate the deportation of YPG/PKK terrorists and their weaponry in Syria within a 30 km distance of the border.

2- The Economic Interdependence of Turkey and Russia

The improvements in bilateral ties between Turkey and Russia do not mean that the relations are fully stabilised. There are still significant divergences between the two countries in important issue areas. However, growing trade between Russia and Turkey aimed to recover from the sanctions imposed on Turkish officials and Russia by Western countries. Today, Russia represents Turkey's third-largest trade partner. The overall trade volume between the two countries was estimated at around [\\$21 billion in 2010 and \\$25.7](#)

[billion in 2018](#). Imports from Russia account for about [13% of overall imports](#), while the total value of projects undertaken by Turkish contractors in Russia surpassed [\\$26 billion](#). Over the past two decades, foreign economic and political relations between Russia and Turkey have developed along an upward trajectory. This includes the ever-growing production; an increased volume of mutual investments; a continuous stream of Russian tourists; expanded energy cooperation and enhanced cultural ties. The two countries have continuous growing trade volume, which is expected to triple in the coming years.

The Turkey-Russia-EU energy trade is a relationship of undeniable interdependence and geopolitical significance. There has been rising attentiveness given to the role and importance of energy transit states. In the market, the demand for natural gas has been proliferating in comparison with the demand for other primary energy sources, and it is anticipated that Europe's dependence on natural gas will gradually grow. Therefore, the gas supply security policy of securing a smooth supply of gas has become more critical lately on the European political agenda. Turkey, in this context, is to be considered as one of the essential transit hubs to reach the new sources available in the Azerbaijan and Central Asia region as well as in the Middle East. Turkey managed to enhance the [bilateral relationship](#) with Russia, boosting its relevance and position in a strategic energy relationship within this axis.

Russia's delivery of the [S-400 air defence](#) system to Turkey in July 2019 was a significant moment in Russian-Turkish relations as well. The US' and NATO's opposition on Turkey's decision to buy non-Western military equipment made the relationship of two countries more stabilising. According to the Turkish officials; however, the US attitude reflected a double standard as Turkey was not the first NATO member to use Russian systems.

Conclusion

Turkey matters much to Russia not just as a neighbour, a trading partner, and a significant member of NATO, but also as a potential node in the "multipolar world order" that remains the stated goal of Russian foreign policy. Russia has invested much of its resources into Syrian intervention not because it perceives the Assad regime as an essential ally but because it found there an opportunity to turn a local conflict into a geopolitical game. Turkey plays a significant role in this geopolitical transformation and shaping the rapprochement with Russia. Likewise, Turkey's rapprochement with Russia has deep causes which have given rise to numerous fields of cooperation. Considering the mutual economic, military and geopolitical interests they have established, both countries have always been keen to engage with each other and minimise the risk of conflict. Within Russia's strategic calculus, Ankara is critical to the Kremlin's bid to leverage military gains in Syria and a bridge to various units of the armed opposition. Thus Turkey- Russia relationship has come to be a pillar of Moscow's Strategy in the Middle East as well as on the global stage.