



# Five Wars and a Funeral:

How the conflicts in Ukraine, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Iran broke Russia's Middle East Policy

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## Executive Summary

Since the initially successful intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia's fortunes in the Middle East have waxed and waned.<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine led Russia to hitch its wagon to Iran, undermining its post-Cold War balancing between rival actors. Western mishandling of the 2023 Gaza War gave Moscow an opportunity to harness regional anger, but as conflict spiraled across the region Russian interests suffered. In 2024, Israel bombed Iran's allies in Lebanon, which was followed by the collapse of the Moscow-backed regime in Syria. In 2025, Israel and the United States struck Iran itself, routing Russia's chief regional partner—and there was nothing Moscow could do about it.

As it struggles to find new footing, Russia is now faced with a choice: will it dig its heels down alongside Iran or adjust its Middle East posture?

To be sure, some pillars of Moscow's Middle East policy still stand. Russia's hydrocarbon wealth undergirds relations with key Persian Gulf states, and Israel's Gaza campaign helps Moscow discredit Western advocacy for Ukraine. Middle Eastern rulers also tend to care less about Russia's regional presence than about its role on the global stage.

Even so, as 2025 drew to an end, Russia's position in the Middle East looked badly degraded. In addition to the loss of its main foothold in Syria, Moscow's credibility as a power broker is at a nadir after two years of flailing on the sidelines of regional crises. Unexpected opportunities may still arise, and a ceasefire in Ukraine could free up Russian resources. But as things stand, Moscow must recalibrate its policy if it wants to recover lost influence.

In Syria, it is doing just that. Although Damascus has slid out of Moscow's orbit, Russia has not been idle. Since 2024, Russian officials have used carrot and stick to influence Syria's new Islamist ruler, Ahmed al-Sharaa, culminating in a cordial sitdown with Putin last October. By the looks of it, Russia has successfully secured a minority stake in Syria's post-Assad order, seemingly including the preservation, in some form, of its two military bases. But a larger question looms: Is Iran an indispensable ally in Russia's confrontation with the West, or was it the wrong horse to bet on in a polarized region? Amid continued tensions over Tehran's nuclear program, Russian policymakers must now decide whether to double down in support of a weakened partner or rebalance their approach.

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<sup>1</sup> This UI and SCEEU report builds on two 2019 UI Papers on Russia's Middle East policy and Russia-Syria relations, offering an update on Russia's regional position and its rapidly evolving relationship with Syria. See Aron Lund, "Russia in the Middle East," UI Paper No. 2/2019, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui-se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2019/ui-paper-no.-2-2019.pdf>; Aron Lund, "From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations," UI Paper No. 7/2019, <https://www.ui.se/butiken/uis-publikationer/ui-paper/2019/from-cold-war-to-civil-war-75-years-of-russian-syrian-relations>.

## Timeline of Events, 2022–2025

- Feb. 2022 Russia invades Ukraine, Turkey shuts Black Sea straits
- Sep. 2022 Russia starts using Iranian drones in Ukraine
- Oct. 2023 Hamas attacks Israel and the Gaza War begins
- Oct. 2023 Hezbollah and Iran-allied groups start striking Israel
- Apr. 2024 For the first time, Iran and Israel exchange direct strikes
- Fall 2024 Israel routs Hezbollah in Lebanon, ceasefire on Nov. 27
- Oct. 2024 Another round of Iranian-Israeli direct conflict
- Dec. 2024 Islamists conquer Syria and Assad flees to Moscow
- Jan. 2025 Trump returns as president of the United States
- Jan. 2025 Ceasefire in Gaza, ended by Israel in March
- April 2025 The United States and Iran begin new nuclear talks
- May 2025 Trump meets Syria's new leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa
- June 2025 Israel attacks Iran and the United States joins in
- Sep. 2025 Russia and China call UN sanctions on Iran illegitimate
- Oct. 2025 The United States brokers a new ceasefire in Gaza
- Oct. 2025 First meeting between Putin and Sharaa in Moscow
- Nov. 2025 Russia votes to remove Sharaa from UN terror lists

## Russia's Regional Rollercoaster

Ever since it intervened alongside Iran to shore up Bashar al-Assad's embattled Syrian regime in 2015, Russia had portrayed its activities in the Middle East as a success story. While Moscow held limited sway in a region dominated by U.S.-allied regimes, the successful hard-power display in Syria did, indeed, revive Russian fortunes.<sup>1</sup> In nations like Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, post-Soviet nostalgia meshed with appreciation of President Vladimir Putin's dedication to the authoritarian status quo. After a rocky start, Russian-Turkish relations also improved significantly.<sup>2</sup> Russia's collaboration with Iran in Syria put some strain on its relationship with Israel, but did little to dissuade the oil kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula from seeking closer ties with Moscow.<sup>3</sup>

The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine received a muted response in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> With few exceptions, Middle Eastern publics viewed the conflict as someone else's war, mistrusted Western narratives, and preferred to remain neutral.<sup>5</sup> Regional governments walked a fine line between U.S. pressure to support Ukraine and their own desire to protect relations with Russia. Although most voted for Ukraine at the UN General Assembly and a few forcefully criticized the invasion, not even U.S. allies like Turkey, Israel, or the Gulf Arabs were willing to put their own interests at stake by sanctioning Russia. And although Turkey promptly closed the Black Sea straits to Russian warships, it did so in deference to wartime legal obligations rather than out of pro-Ukraine sentiment.<sup>6</sup>

If criticism of Russia was rare, support for Putin's war was even rarer—and Russia's fumbling of the initial invasion raised eyebrows among Middle Eastern leaders. Apart from Assad's Syria, only Iran actively sided with Russia and sent arms to help subjugate Ukraine. The Russian-Iranian entente that had emerged after the 2015 intervention thus grew stronger, threatening to upset Moscow's post-Cold War balancing between Iran, on the one hand, and Israel and the Gulf kingdoms, on the other.<sup>7</sup>

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1 Aron Lund, "Russia in the Middle East," UI Paper No. 2/2019, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2019/ui-paper-no.-2-2019.pdf> (accessed Nov. 22, 2025).

2 Selim Kuru, "The Resiliency of Turkey-Russia Relations," Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/bssp2-kuru.pdf> (accessed Nov. 23, 2025).

3 Aron Lund, "Russia in the Middle East," UI Paper No. 2/2019, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2019/ui-paper-no.-2-2019.pdf> (accessed Nov. 22, 2025), pp. 26–30.

4 The legal and moral arguments advanced by Ukraine's supporters fell flat in a region where Western nations are themselves closely associated with war and occupation—for example, U.S. condemnations of territorial annexations by Russia were undermined by Washington's support for equally illegal Israeli policies. See, e.g., Trump White House, "Proclamation on Recognizing the Golan Heights as Part of the State of Israel," March 25, 2019, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-recognizing-golan-heights-part-state-israel> (accessed Dec. 31, 2025).

5 For public views of the 2022 invasion, see, e.g., BIA Net, "Poll: Nearly 80 percent of public in Turkey think it should remain neutral in Russia-Ukraine war," March 4, 2022, <https://bianet.org/haber/poll-nearly-80-percent-of-public-in-turkey-think-it-should-remain-neutral-in-russia-ukraine-war-258576> (accessed Nov. 5, 2024); Jerusalem Post, "A majority of Israelis support Ukraine in the war with Russia - survey," March 5, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/article-699374> (Nov. 5, 2024); Tamar Hermann, Or Anabi, Yaron Kaplan, and Inna Orly Sapozhnikova, "60% of Israelis Back the Government's Policy on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict - Special Survey," Israel Democracy Institute, March 25, 2022, <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/38624> (accessed Nov. 8, 2024); Merve Tahiroğlu, "Why Turkish Citizens Blame the United States for Ukraine War," Middle East Democracy Center, May 10, 2022, <https://mideastdc.org/publication/why-turkish-citizens-blame-the-united-states-for-ukraine-war> (accessed Nov. 5, 2024); Arab News, "Russia-Ukraine: Where do Arabs stand?," n/d, <https://www.arabnews.com/UkrainePoll> (accessed Nov. 6, 2024); Nancy Gallagher, Ebrahim Mohseni, and Clay Ramsay, "Iranian Public Opinion on the War in Ukraine and Nuclear Options: A Public Opinion Interim Report," Aug. 2022, [https://cisssm.umd.edu/sites/default/files/2022-08/Final-Iranian Public Opinion\\_August 2022.pdf](https://cisssm.umd.edu/sites/default/files/2022-08/Final-Iranian%20Public%20Opinion_August%202022.pdf) (accessed Nov. 5, 2024), pp. 11–14.

6 Aron Lund, "The Montreux Paradox: How a Ukraine Ceasefire Could Set the Stage for Escalation in the Black Sea," War on the Rocks, May 16, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/05/the-montreux-paradox-how-a-ukraine-ceasefire-could-set-the-stage-for-escalation-in-the-black-sea> (accessed Nov. 22, 2025).

7 Hanna Notte and Jim Lamson, "Iran-Russia Defense Cooperation: Current Realities and Future Horizons" (CNS Occasional Paper 61), James Martin Center for Non-proliferation, Aug. 6, 2024, <https://nonproliferation.org/op61-iran-russia-defense-cooperation-current-realities->

The Gaza War set off by Hamas's October 7, 2023 killings in Israel offered Russia new room for maneuver. Even before the war, the Kremlin had habitually exploited U.S. and European support for Israel to counter criticism of its Ukraine policy and expose Western hypocrisy on issues of international law. In September 2023, for example, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov read a statement at the UN that appeared to be a defense of Russia's annexation of eastern Ukraine, only to gleefully reveal that he was quoting U.S. remarks in support of Israel's annexation of Syrian territory.<sup>8</sup> Western support for Israel's destruction of Gaza appalled Middle Easterners and much of the Global South, undermining U.S. and European diplomatic efforts for Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Russia leaned into the moment by increasing rhetorical attacks on Israel, at the cost of further eroding that relationship and moving even closer to the Iranian camp.

As it turned out, however, the Israel-Palestine conflagration also set in motion a series of events that would prove disastrous for Russian Middle East policy. As a result of the conflict, regional tensions grew between Israel and the United States, on the one hand, and the Iran-led network known as the Axis of Resistance, on the other. In addition to Iran, the Axis included Assad's Syria and non-state actors like Hamas, Lebanese Hezbollah, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, and Ansar-Allah ("the Houthis") of Yemen.<sup>10</sup> The Axis groups somewhat successfully used asymmetric tactics to pressure both Israel and the United States in support of Gaza through 2023 and part of 2024, but then the wind turned.

Hezbollah had fired rockets and drones against Israel ever since October 2023, insisting that it would not stop until Israel held fire in Gaza.<sup>11</sup> In autumn 2024, Israel called Hezbollah's bluff.<sup>12</sup> In a skillfully executed two month war, most Hezbollah leaders were killed and the group's once-fearsome missile arsenal decimated.<sup>13</sup> Hezbollah's loss was unfortunate for Russia, but it was a disaster for Iran, which had relied on the group to deter Israel and the United States from striking its controversial nuclear program.

Just as the ceasefire came into effect in Lebanon in late November 2024, Turkey-backed Islamist rebels launched an offensive in Syria. Government lines unexpectedly collapsed at Aleppo, prompting a cascading series of retreats and surrenders. On December 8 the rebels marched unopposed into Damascus, sending the Assad family fleeing to Moscow. Events moved at such speed that Russia seemed unable to mobilize in Assad's defense, reducing it to a bystander as Syria's pro-Russian order unraveled. It was a devastating blow: Syria had been

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and-future-horizons (accessed Oct. 14, 2025).

8 Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions during a news conference following the High-Level Week of the 78th session of the UN General Assembly, New York, September 23, 2023," Sep. 23, 2023, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1905984](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1905984) (accessed Aug. 23, 2024).

9 For example, Western nations felt compelled to abandon their practice of organizing UN General Assembly votes in support of Ukraine after October 2023, in part because Global South support no longer seemed to be forthcoming. Richard, Gowan, Devika Manish Kumar, and Maya Nicholson, "The U.N. Is No Longer a Center of Gravity in Ukraine's Diplomatic War," *World Politics Review*, Febr. 22, 2024, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/ukraine-war-russia-united-nations> (accessed Feb. 26, 2024).

10 On Iranian strategy and the Axis of Resistance, see Hamidreza Azizi, "The Concept of 'Forward Defence': How Has the Syrian Crisis Shaped the Evolution of Iran's Military Strategy?," *Geneva Centre for Security Policy*, Febr. 2021, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/iran-forward-defence-strategy-en> (accessed Oct. 6, 2025).

11 This policy was unveiled by Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah in a Nov. 3, 2023, speech. Other Axis of Resistance factions made similar pledges. See al-Manar, "سددولاً قيرطى لى اوقتيرا نيدلا اءءشلى لى ميريكتل لافتح ال لال خ طلل ارضن ديسلا فلك صن," Nov. 3, 2023, <https://archive.almanar.com.lb/11185165> (accessed Oct. 6, 2025).

12 Aron Lund, "Hezbollahs bruk av raketer, robotar och drönare mot Israel" (FOI Memo 8780), Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), Jan. 24, 2025, <https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI%20Memo%208780> (accessed Oct. 6, 2025).

13 For the ceasefire deal, see Times of Israel, "Full text: The Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire deal," Nov. 27, 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-the-israel-hezbollah-ceasefire-deal> (accessed Oct. 6, 2025).

at the heart of Russian Middle East policy since the 1970s and Putin's regional strongman status rested on the success of the 2015 intervention.

It didn't end there. Iran was already vulnerable after losing its allies in Lebanon and Syria. It now anxiously awaited the return of Donald Trump, the most pro-Israeli president in U.S. history. Wary of continued escalation, Russia gave full-throated support to the U.S.-Iranian nuclear talks that began on April 12 and offered to facilitate an agreement.<sup>14</sup> But it was to no avail: Israel struck Iran on June 13 and was joined toward the end of the war by the United States.<sup>15</sup> Russia protested on its partner's behalf, but as with Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria it could do nothing to influence events in Iran.

After the war, Russian diplomats have continued to bat for Iran, including by rejecting, along with China, the legitimacy of the reimposed UN sanctions on Iran.<sup>16</sup> (Among other things, the sanctions ban Russian-Iranian arms transfers.) In November, claims emerged about previously unprecedented Russian assistance to the Iranian nuclear program, prompting some experts to argue that Moscow now seemed to be overstepping its old red lines by sharing technology applicable in a weapons program.<sup>17</sup> If so, that would indicate that Moscow is doubling down on the relationship.

It remains possible, however, that Russia will eventually decide to rebalance its regional posture. Even as Russia has moved closer to Teheran, the relationship remains fundamentally transactional and rooted in interest-based calculations.<sup>18</sup> After the events in 2024 and 2025, Iran needs more support and can give less, reducing its appeal as a security partner even as grows more dependent on Russia.<sup>19</sup> The Iranian regime's future also appears uncertain, as it faces a looming leadership transition, a cratering economy, and recurrent bouts of social and political protest.<sup>20</sup> A less one-sided policy could help insulate Russia from Iran's mounting troubles, reduce harmful friction with Israel, and facilitate relations with the Gulf Arab states. Russia will nonetheless be wary of alienating Iran, considering the strategic nature of their

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14 TASS, "Putin tells Trump he is ready to help resolve Iranian issue — spokesman," June 5, 2025, <https://tass.com/politics/1969119> (accessed Nov. 9, 2025); Guy Faulconbridge and Parisa Hafezi, "Russia says it's ready to remove highly enriched uranium from Iran," Reuters, June 11, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-it-is-ready-remove-excess-nuclear-materials-iran-2025-06-11> (accessed Nov. 9, 2025).

15 Aron Lund, "Tolvdagarskriget: den israelisk-amerikanska konflikten med Iran i juni 2025" (FOI Memo 8996), Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), Nov. 17, 2025, <https://www.foi.se/rapporter/rapportsammanfattning.html?reportNo=FOI%20Memo%208996> (accessed Nov. 22, 2025).

16 Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, "Explanation of vote by First Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy on the Russian-Chinese Draft Resolution on Sanctions against Iran," September 26, 2025, <https://russiaun.ru/en/news/26092025> (accessed October 6, 2025); Hanna Notte and Jim Lamson, "Iran-Russia Defense Cooperation: Current Realities and Future Horizons" (CNS Occasional Paper 61), James Martin Center for Non-proliferation, Aug. 6, 2024, <https://nonproliferation.org/op61-iran-russia-defense-cooperation-current-realities-and-future-horizons> (accessed Oct. 14, 2025).

17 Miles Johnson and Max Seddon, "Iranian nuclear experts held second covert meeting with Russian weapons institute," Financial Times, Nov. 19, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/1312a12a-5404-4cb2-adc0-b11db118b079> (accessed Nov. 23, 2025).

18 The January 2025 signing of a long-anticipated strategic partnership agreement showcased the newfound closeness between Russia and Iran, but also demonstrated the limits of their relationship by clearly excluding, e.g., mutual defense commitments. Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, "Full text of Iran-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement," Jan. 17, 2025, <https://irangov.ir/detail/456479> (accessed Dec. 31, 2025); Nikita Smagin, "New Russia-Iran Treaty Reveals the Limits of Their Partnership," Politika, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Jan. 21, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/01/russia-iran-strategic-agreement?lang=en> (accessed Dec. 31, 2025).

19 Nikita Smagin, "Iran's Twelve-Day War Has Only Boosted Its Cooperation With Russia," Politika, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Nov. 21, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/11/russia-iran-deterrence-plans?lang=en> (accessed Dec. 31, 2025).

20 Karim Sadjadpour, "The Autumn of the Ayatollahs What Kind of Change Is Coming to Iran?," Foreign Affairs, Oct. 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/iran/autumn-ayatollahs> (accessed Dec. 31, 2025); Parham Ghobadi, "Protests spread across Iran for third day after currency hits record low," BBC, Dec. 30, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cqj2llkqv8vo> (accessed Dec. 31, 2025).

partnership, Tehran's importance as a military-industrial partner, and the dearth of likeminded and reliably anti-American actors in the region.

There are many ways in which the Kremlin might proceed toward a recalibration of its regional policy. Russia could, for example, propose constructive arrangements with Israel in Syria or offer concessions on the Palestinian issue, perhaps accompanied by state outreach to Russian Jews. It could be more vocal about opposing an Iranian nuclear weapon, even while defending Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology. Moscow might also try to incite manageable friction with Tehran, such as by reemphasizing its support for Emirati claims to the disputed Tunb and Abu Moussa Islands, or, on a more consensual note, promote its services as a broker of Arab-Iranian or Israeli-Iranian détente.<sup>21</sup>

## Pragmatism in Post-Assad Syria

As the Syrian regime crumbled in December 2024, Russia unceremoniously switched gears and began to seek an understanding with the country's new strongman, Ahmed al-Sharaa, who turned out to be receptive to the idea.<sup>22</sup> A non-aggression pact that secured the immediate survival of Russia's bases was agreed even before Assad had fled the country.<sup>23</sup> In the following weeks, both sides discreetly recommitted themselves to the relationship through secret contacts. Some sources point to a role for Sharaa's brother Maher, a Russian speaker and longtime Voronezh resident who now serves as secretary-general of the Syrian presidency.<sup>24</sup> Whatever the diplomatic mechanics at play, the process of Syrian-Russian rapprochement was remarkably quick. Sharaa met with Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov in January 2025, mere weeks after being on the receiving end of Russian air raids.<sup>25</sup> More high level visits followed. In October, Sharaa embarked on a state visit to Moscow, where Putin declared himself "delighted" to meet him and extolled decades of Syrian-Russian friendship during which "the interests of the Syrian people have remained our sole guiding principle."<sup>26</sup>

As cynical as the diplomatic pleasantries seemed, the fact is that both sides had strong incentives to bury the hatchet.

After Assad's ouster, Russian leaders had feared a total loss of their investment in Syria, a country that had partnered with Moscow for decades and served as a key prop for Russia's relations with Israel, Turkey, and the wider Middle East. Worse, Russian leaders feared that

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21 Associated Press, "Iran summons Russian envoy over statement on Persian Gulf disputed islands," Dec. 24, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-russia-diplomatic-spat-uae-islands-persian-gulf-8a5c0a577811c37869d79ce7b30ee62a> (accessed Nov. 12, 2025). Reports emerged in late 2025 about indirect Iran-Israel contacts via Russia, although they did not appear to be very extensive. See Amwaj Media, "Exclusive: Russia opens path for Iran-Israel de-escalation," Dec. 29, 2025, <https://amwaj.media/en/article/exclusive-russia-opens-path-for-iran-israel-de-escalation> (accessed Dec. 31, 2025).

22 Hanna Notte, "Russia Isn't Done With Syria," *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 3, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/russia-isnt-done-syria> (accessed Oct. 6, 2025).

23 al-Ikhbariah, "الملاحه لود لك عم تاقال عل يف مائل اودمل ن ع تحب ايروس: عرشل سيزل," Sept. 12, 2025, <https://alikhbariah.com/?p=26533> (accessed Nov. 9, 2025).

24 The Moscow Times, "Syria's New President Has Russian Family Ties – Reports," April 8, 2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/04/08/syrias-new-president-has-russian-family-ties-reports-a88649> (accessed Oct. 6, 2025).

25 al-Arabiya, "عضول اقبعو عص كفر دن ان نكل عرشل عم ذئاب تاشداحم ان ايرج ايسور," Jan. 29, 2025, <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/syria/2025/01/29/عضول-اقبعو-عص-كفر-دن-ان-نكل-عرشل-عم-ذئاب-تاشداحم-ان-ايرج-ايسور> (accessed Oct. 6, 2025).

26 Russian Presidency, "Russia-Syria talks," Oct. 15, 2025, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78213> (accessed Nov. 9, 2025).



Syria would become a springboard for militancy in the Caucasus and Central Asia, either by disintegrating completely or under a hostile Islamist regime. These were not idle concerns: Sharaa is a former al-Qaeda commander whose ex-rebel security forces include Chechen, Uzbek and other émigré extremists with a decidedly dim view of Russia.<sup>27</sup>

Russia also worried about its two bases, which Assad had leased to Russia until 2066 but whose future now seemed uncertain.<sup>28</sup> Both the Hmeymim Air Base and the Tartous Naval Base were idle since December 2024, but Russian troops remained present. Although Hmeymim's original function had been to help Assad quash the Syrian insurgency, it had more recently been used to facilitate Wagner Group operations in Africa and for intelligence collection and naval aviation.<sup>29</sup> Tartous, which dates to the Cold War, is a linchpin of Russia's naval presence in the Mediterranean. Though currently complicated by Turkey's closure of the Straits, as well as by events in Syria, Russia's determination to always keep warships on station in the Mediterranean has deep strategic and political roots—it would not be abandoned willingly.<sup>30</sup> (Russia anticipates a reopening of the Turkish Straits sooner or later, but must seek alternatives to Tartous unless it is fully reactivated. Its best option might then be Tobruk or Benghazi in eastern Libya, controlled by the Russia-friendly strongman Khalifa Hefatar.<sup>31</sup>)

Syria, for its part, needed many things from Russia. As explained by the Syrian writer Serkis Qassarjian, eight decades of state and military cooperation had left deep structural dependencies:

*Syrian infrastructure was largely built by Soviet and later Russian companies. From dams to silos and from power stations to oil refineries, and from heavy industrial facilities to research centers, the 'Made in Russia' label is so clearly visible that it cannot be replaced in the short or medium term, considering Syria's economic breakdown and the ongoing U.S. and European sanctions on its financial system.<sup>32</sup>*

27 See for example: Kathleen Collins, “Uzbek Foreign Fighter Groups in the Syrian Jihad: The Evolution of KIB and KTJ from 2011 through 2025,” CTC Sentinel, Vol. 18, Issue 9, Sept. 2025, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/uzbek-foreign-fighter-groups-in-the-syrian-jihad-the-evolution-of-kib-and-ktj-from-2011-through-2025> (accessed Nov. 23, 2025), pp. 32–40. After seizing power, Sharaa promoted several foreign jihadis to senior ranks within the Syrian Armed Forces, including Tajik citizens. See e.g., Mohammed Amin, “نييروسون نيلتاقملا عيغفر ٲيركسكس بحتر: ”امشال ريرت ٲب بئاجاج“،” *al-Araby al-Jadeed*, Dec. 31, 2024, [alaraby.co.uk/politics/نييروسون-نيلتاقملا-عيغفر-ٲيركسكس-بحتر](http://alaraby.co.uk/politics/نييروسون-نيلتاقملا-عيغفر-ٲيركسكس-بحتر) (accessed Nov. 23, 2025).

28 Aron Lund, "From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations," UI Paper No. 7/2019, <https://www.ui.se/butiken/uipublikationer/ui-paper/2019/from-cold-war-to-civil-war-75-years-of-russian-syrian-relations/>, p. 38–9. Russian troops have also remained stationed at the northeastern Qamishli Airport. al-Hadath, "جيش فوسفور يرحل من ادّام," *حضور رداصم*. Aug. 11, 2025, [alhadath.net/2025/08/11/جيش-فوسفور-يرحل-من-ادّام-جيش-فوسفور-يرحل-من-ادّام-جيش-فوسفور-يرحل-من-ادّام/](https://alhadath.net/2025/08/11/جيش-فوسفور-يرحل-من-ادّام-جيش-فوسفور-يرحل-من-ادّام-جيش-فوسفور-يرحل-من-ادّام/) (accessed Oct. 6, 2025).

29 Anton Mardasov, "How Russia made Hemeimeem air base its African hub," Middle East Institute, May 28, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-russia-made-hemeimeem-air-base-its-african-hub> (accessed Nov. 22, 2025); Thomas Newdick, "Russian Tu-22M3 Backfire Bombers Based In Syria Are Going To Patrol The Mediterranean," The War Zone, May 25, 2021, <https://www.twz.com/40777/russian-tu-22m3-backfire-bombers-based-in-syria-are-going-to-patrol-the-mediterranean> (accessed Nov. 22, 2025).

30 Jonas Kjellén and Aron Lund, *From Tartous to Tobruk: The Return of Russian Sea Power in the Eastern Mediterranean* (FOI-R--5239--SE), Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2022, <https://www.foi.se/en/foi/reports/report-summary.html?reportNo=FOI-R--5239--SE> (accessed Nov. 9, 2025); Igor Delanoë, "Quid de la marine russe en Méditerranée ?", *Le Rubicon*, 12 nov. 2025, <https://lerubicon.org/quid-de-la-marine-russe-en-mediterranee> (accessed 23 nov. 2025).

31 Other possibilities include Port Sudan in the Red Sea, as an out-of-area option, or more modestly expanded naval access to ports in, for example, Algeria. Aron Lund, "The Montreux Paradox: How a Ukraine Ceasefire Could Set the Stage for Escalation in the Black Sea," *War on the Rocks*, May 16, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/05/the-montreux-paradox-how-a-ukraine-ceasefire-could-set-the-stage-for-escalation-in-the-black-sea> (accessed Nov. 22, 2025); Igor Delanoë, "Quid de la marine russe en Méditerranée ?", *Le Rubicon*, 12 nov. 2025, <https://lerubicon.org/quid-de-la-marine-russe-en-mediterranee> (accessed 23 nov. 2025).

32 Serkis Qassarjian, "عرش للقبس نلاب ارايخ ال ضرورض ايسور عم براقثل ذعي اذامل", *al-Nahar*, Oct. 16, 2025, <https://www.annahar.com/Arab-World/250941>; عرش للقبس نلاب ارايخ ال ضرورض ايسور عم براقثل اربعت عي اذامل (accessed Nov. 9, 2025). Most U.S. and European sanctions on Syria's financial sector have in fact been removed or suspended since Assad's ouster, but many Western banks and companies still refuse to deal with Syria.



Amid dwindling international aid, Russia stepped in to provide resources critical to state stability. Russian wheat shipments to Syria resumed in spring 2025, helping Syria cope with a very severe and untimely drought.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, Russian oil has filled the gap after Iran cut off supplies, permitting Syria to maintain a bare minimum of power production.<sup>34</sup>

On the political level, Syria's new rulers were understandably wary of antagonizing a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Syria has plenty of business with the UN, and the council has final say over UN counterterrorism sanctions—highly relevant for jihadi militants attempting to establish a respectable government.<sup>35</sup>

Security issues, too, set Sharaa on the path to Moscow. Syria's new leadership wanted to dissuade Russia from backing former regime elements or encouraging Alawite, Druze, and Kurdish separatism. On the first point Russia has plenty of leverage, including Assad himself, who lives discreetly in Moscow since 2024, apparently under orders to stay quiet.<sup>36</sup> Other ex-regime figures also live in Moscow or travel there, and some seem to be involved with anti-Sharaa militancy in Syria.<sup>37</sup> Calls for their extradition may not be heeded, since Russia cares about its credibility as a safe haven for allied leaders, but the Kremlin could offer to put a leash on the ex-regime diaspora—perhaps in return for similar reassurance about the activities of anti-Russian jihadi exiles in Syria.

Last but not least, the Damascus government seems to want to use Russia's presence to balance other foreign powers, several of which exert influence in post-Assad Syria. Trump's baffling bromance with Sharaa has served Syria well, but it might not last forever. Relations with Turkey are excellent but maybe too excellent, and keeping a counterweight around could be prudent. The biggest problem by far is Israel, which has used the time since Assad's ouster to bomb Syria and gobble up territory, attempting to impose a new order in southern Syria.<sup>38</sup> Given that Israel won't accept Turkish troops near its borders, Sharaa seems to hope that

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33 TASS, "Russia delivers batch of wheat to Syria first time under new power — source," April 26, 2025, <https://tass.com/economy/1949745> (Nov. 22, 2025); Food and Agriculture Organization, "Syrian Arab Republic: Drought and widespread crop failure — Urgent call for assistance," 2025, <https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/769ca490-1004-4df7-a348-2790846f4d00> (accessed Nov. 22, 2025).

34 Reuters, "Russia ships its Arctic oil to Syria for first time as sanctions limit buyers," March 21, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russia-ships-its-arctic-oil-syria-first-time-sanctions-limit-buyers-2025-03-21> (accessed Nov. 22, 2025).

35 Jérôme Drévon, Maya Ungar, and Delaney Simon, "Rethinking UN Sanctions on Syria's Interim Leaders," International Crisis Group, Feb. 28, 2025, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/rethinking-un-sanctions-syrias-interim> (accessed Sep. 4, 2025).

36 Erika Solomon, Christiaan Triebert, Haley Willis, and Ahmad Mhidi, "For Fallen Syrian Dictator Assad and Family, an Exile of Luxury and Impunity," New York Times, Dec. 22, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/22/world/middleeast/assad-syria-exile-luxury.html> (accessed Dec. 23, 2025). In December 2016, the official Telegram channel of the Assad-era Syrian Presidency released a statement from Assad in Arabic and English, originally on <https://t.me/SyrianPresidency/4385> and <https://t.me/SyrianPresidency/4386>. The statement was quickly deleted, but backup copies can be found on <https://bsky.app/profile/aronlund.bsky.social/post/3ldghu7prec2r> (accessed Nov. 9, 2025). In February 2025, video and text statements were published by Bashar al-Assad's eldest son, Hafez, on Twitter/X and a personal Telegram channel, collected at <https://bsky.app/profile/aronlund.bsky.social/post/3li2gff7p3k2s> (accessed Nov. 9, 2025). These appear to be the only post-downfall public communications of the former Syrian presidential family.

37 Samer M. Haddadin, "يُفنى الجيف تاع ارض: قبائل الماظنل اء انبأ | لاصفنأ غي راشم ول حاسلأ قماعز ل ع سفانأ," *al-Akhbar*, Oct. 15, 2025, <https://www.al-akhbar.com/syria/863801/قبائل-الماظنل-اء-انبا-ل-اصفنا-غ-راشم-ول-حاسل-ق-ماعز-ل-ع-سفانأ> (accessed Nov. 9, 2025); Haley Willis, Christiaan Triebert, Neil Collier, Devon Lum, and Erika Solomon, "Abandoned Mansions and Facebook Photos: Reporting on the Top Officials Who Fled Syria," New York Times, Oct. 16, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/16/world/middleeast/assad-regime-officials-reporting.html> (accessed Nov. 9, 2025); Erika Solomon, Christiaan Triebert, Haley Willis, and Ahmad Mhidi, "Ousted and in Exile, Generals Secretly Plot Insurgency in Syria," New York Times, Dec. 24, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/24/world/middleeast/assad-henchmen-retake-syria-plots.html> (accessed Dec. 31, 2025).

38 James Mackenzie and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Israel says its air strikes destroyed most of Syria's strategic weapons stockpiles," Reuters, Dec. 10, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-incursion-into-syria-reaches-25-km-southwest-damascus-security-sources-2024-12-10> (accessed Nov. 23, 2025); Emanuel Fabian, Lazar Berman, and AFP, "IDF presence in Syria of 'immense importance,' Netanyahu tells troops during visit," Times of Israel, Nov. 19, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-presence-in-syria-of-immense-importance-netanyahu-tells-troops-during-visit> (accessed Nov. 23, 2025).

Russia could reactivate its Assad-era outposts in the area, showing the flag and facilitating deconfliction.<sup>39</sup>

In late 2025, signs of Russia-Syria cooperation suddenly multiplied, indicating a behind-the-scenes deal. During his October visit to Moscow, Sharaa said Syria remains committed to existing agreements, implicitly suggesting that the Russian bases can remain—although that might not rule out renegotiated terms.<sup>40</sup> Russian sources told the Lebanese daily al-Akhbar that Sharaa had green-lit the bases in return for more oil and wheat, also soliciting military equipment and help with Israel.<sup>41</sup> In the following weeks, reports emerged of new oil shipments to Syria and transport flights visiting Hmeymim.<sup>42</sup> In what was surely a quid pro quo of some sort, Russia then voted at the UN to end Sharaa's terrorism designation.<sup>43</sup> In mid-November, Putin spoke to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about "stability in Syria," while Russian and Syrian officers toured Russia's old outposts in southern Syria.<sup>44</sup>

There have been no formal announcements, however, and both Syrian and Russian authorities remain tight-lipped about their understandings.

## Oil Politics, Gas Pipelines, and the Persian Gulf

Energy was always a major Russian interest in the Middle East, and its salience has increased since 2022 due to the cost of war and sanctions. Three items stand out on Moscow's to-do list: using the OPEC+ oil cartel to keep prices high, shielding its Gulf partnerships against fallout from the relation with Iran, and finding new outlets for Russian gas via Turkey and Iran.

OPEC+ was formed in 2016, when Russia led lesser oil producers into a pact with the Arab-dominated Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).<sup>45</sup> The expanded cartel has helped Russia keep prices up and grease relations with the oil kingdoms, but operations have not always been smooth.<sup>46</sup> Among other sources of tension, Saudi Arabia has reportedly voiced

39 Enab Baladi, "ايدروس بونج فيسور تايروود ريست قداغ حرتقت وكسوم," Nov. 18, 2025, [enabbaladi.net/784412/](https://enabbaladi.net/784412/) (accessed Nov. 23, 2025).

40 Raed Jaber, "قديدلجلا فيروسلا ققالغلل حمالم عرشلالو نييوتوب نيي قائل لوا ميسر فيك," al-Sharq al-Awsat, <https://aawsat.com/node/5198059> (accessed Nov. 10, 2025).

41 Firas al-Shoufi, "أحالسو أحمق ديرن: وكسومل عرشلال | يبرغلل ايمرملال فيسور فده," al-Akhbar, Oct. 17, 2025, <https://www.al-akhbar.com/syria/864089/> (accessed Nov. 9, 2025).

42 Reuters, "Russia to deliver oil and condensate cargo to Syria, according to LSEG and traders," Oct. 22, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russia-deliver-oil-condensate-cargo-syria-according-lseg-traders-2025-10-22> (Nov. 22, 2025); al-Mayadeen, "ايسور," Oct. 30, 2025, <https://mdn.tv/8k52> (accessed Nov. 9, 2025).

43 Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, "Explanation of Vote by Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia after the Vote on a UNSC Draft Resolution to Delist the Leadership of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham from the ISIL and Al-Qaida Sanctions List," Nov. 6, 2025, <https://russiaun.ru/en/news/206112025> (accessed Nov. 6, 2025).

44 Rusiya al-Yawm, "يوونللا ناريا چانربو يروسلا فلجلالو قزغ عاطق في عضولال وهاي نيتن عم شقاناي نييوتوب," Nov. 15, 2025, <https://r.rtarabic.com/113fh> (accessed Nov. 23, 2025); Ahmed al-Akleh, "بونجلال في يرلغلل دهلجلال ميسر ناديعت وكسومو قشمد," Aljazeera, Nov. 20, 2025, <https://aja.ws/y2ld7k> (accessed Nov. 22, 2025).

45 Sean Hill and Owen Comstock, "What is OPEC+ and how is it different from OPEC?," U.S. Energy Information Agency, May 9, 2023, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=56420> (accessed Oct. 31, 2024).

46 In spring 2020, a Russian-Saudi disagreements over how to handle market reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic triggered a brief but dramatic conflict in which Saudi Arabia opened the taps wide, seeking to collapse the oil price. The crisis was resolved and the OPEC+ arrangement rescued only after the United States stepped in to shield U.S. hydrocarbon companies from the fallout, even threatening to end security cooperation with Riyadh unless the Saudis agreed to a deal with Russia. Two years later, the kingdom spurned U.S. pressure to again bring oil prices down as a way of reducing Russian state income after the invasion of Ukraine. To the dismay of U.S. and European leaders, OPEC+ instead decided to slash output and push prices upward, demonstrating the coalition's value to Moscow. Sergey Vakulenko, "Russia's Great Energy Game in the Middle East," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Nov. 12, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/russias-great-energy-game-in-the-middle-east> (accessed Oct. 6, 2025); Timothy Gardner, Steve Holland, and Dmitry Zhdannikov, "Special Report: Trump told Saudi: Cut oil supply or lose U.S. military support - sources," Reuters, April 30, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN22C1V3> (accessed Oct. 6, 2025); Jackie Northam, "The White House accuses Saudi Arabia of aiding Russia

frustration with Russia's failure to abide by production quotas.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, since oil exports were reoriented away from Europe in 2022, Russia increasingly competes for the same Asian market shares as the Gulf Arabs and Iran.<sup>48</sup>

Russia has also put significant effort into expanding its non-energy trade ties with the Persian Gulf states. Gulf markets offer attractive economic opportunities and can facilitate sanctions evasion, which has, for example, been a notable feature of Russian-Emirati relations since 2022.<sup>49</sup> However, Russia's economic stake in the Gulf monarchies sits uneasily with its security relationship to Iran. Traditionally, Russia has managed this tension through a policy of neutrality and by promoting Persian Gulf de-escalation.<sup>50</sup> As it happens, Arab-Iranian conflict has been at a low ebb since 2020 and Russia's Arab ties remain in good health despite the post-2022 tilt toward Iran. Moscow will nevertheless need to keep a wary eye on the politics of the Persian Gulf, especially in light of Iran's eroding security posture.

Iran also factors into another Russian concern: finding new means to export natural gas. Russian gas historically flowed by pipeline to Europe, but European imports have dwindled since 2022.<sup>51</sup> To recoup lost income, Russia is building new pipelines to China and increasing its share of liquefied natural gas (LNG), which can be sold flexibly by ship.<sup>52</sup> In the Middle East, Russia also hopes to tap into the gas trading ambitions of Iran and Turkey.

In June 2024, Gazprom and the National Iranian Gas Company agreed on the daily delivery of 300 million cubic meters of gas to Iran, contingent on Russia's construction of a Caspian Sea pipeline.<sup>53</sup> Iran has huge gas reserves, but importing Russian gas could raise the amount available for export—unless U.S. sanctions get in the way.<sup>54</sup>

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and coercing OPEC oil producers," NPR, Oct. 13, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/13/1128523146/saudi-arabia-russia-opec-oil-cut-biden-congress-washington> (accessed Oct. 6, 2025).

47 Gabriel Gavin, Eva Hartog, and Geoffrey Smith, "Putin's war economy faces pain if Saudis sink global oil prices," Politico Europe, Oct. 3, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-war-economy-pain-saudi-arabia-sink-global-oil-prices-energy-russia-opec> (accessed Nov. 2, 2024).

48 On Russian oil exports, see Conall Heussaff, Lionel Guetta-Jeanrenaud, Ben McWilliams, and Georg Zachmann, "Russian crude oil tracker," Bruegel, Feb. 12, 2024, <https://www.bruegel.org/dataset/russian-crude-oil-tracker> (accessed Nov. 2, 2024).

49 Nikita Smagin, "Is the Blossoming Relationship Between Russia and the UAE Doomed?," Carnegie Politika, April 13, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia- Eurasia/politika/2023/04/is-the-blossoming-relationship-between-russia-and-the-uae-doomed?lang=en> (accessed Nov. 8, 2024); Melissa Lawford, "The Mediterranean bolthole offering a safe haven for Putin's oligarchs," Daily Telegraph, May 9, 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2023/05/09/turkey-erdogan-putin-oligarchs-abramovich> (accessed Nov. 8, 2024); Eleonora Ardemagni, "Oil, Gold and 'Dual-use': Why the Russian Elite Relocates in Dubai," Italian Institute for International Affairs (ISPI), Nov. 6, 2023, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/oil-gold-and-dual-use-why-the-russian-elite-relocates-in-dubai-151380> (accessed Nov. 8, 2024).

50 One of Moscow's signature Middle East projects is the Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region, a 1990s initiative revived in 2019 and further revised in 2021. The Concept seeks to reduce Iran-Arab tensions while also promoting a subregional security architecture decoupled from the United States, in which Russia could play some role. For the latest iteration of the Concept, see Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Russia's Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf," Aug. 24, 2021, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/1466420](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1466420) (accessed Nov. 3, 2024). For an analysis of the project, see Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russia and the Issue of a New Security Architecture for the Persian Gulf," Middle East Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, Aug. 4, 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2021/08/04/russia-and-the-issue-of-a-new-security-architecture-for-the-persian-gulf> (accessed Nov. 5, 2024).

51 Max Seddon, Anastasia Stognei, and Chris Cook, "Gazprom badly hurt by Ukraine war, says company-commissioned report," Financial Times, June 4, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/21f8f63f-80d6-455f-abf8-fce269d70319> (accessed Nov. 1, 2024); On Russia's gas export to the EU, see Emil Wannheden, "The EU's Continued Dependencies on Russian Energy. A Clean Break?" (FOI-R--5621--SE), Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), June 14, 2024, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5621--SE> (accessed Dec. 31, 2025), pp. 24–29; and László Szerencsés, "The Turkish Energy Hub and the Hungary Connection: Challenging EU Gas Diversification Efforts," Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies, March 2025, [https://www.su.se/polopoly\\_fs/1.807069.1741778620!menu/standard/file/Szerencses%20Policy%20Brief.pdf](https://www.su.se/polopoly_fs/1.807069.1741778620!menu/standard/file/Szerencses%20Policy%20Brief.pdf) (accessed Oct. 6, 2025).

52 Max Seddon, Anastasia Stognei, and Chris Cook, "Gazprom badly hurt by Ukraine war, says company-commissioned report," Financial Times, June 4, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/21f8f63f-80d6-455f-abf8-fce269d70319> (accessed Nov. 1, 2024); Kelly Cloonan, "China is set to be Russia's biggest pipeline gas customer this year as flows to Europe dwindle," Business Insider, Oct. 21, 2024, <https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/commodities/china-russia-gas-europe-sanctions-ukraine-war-gazprom-2024-10> (accessed Nov. 1, 2024); Sergey Vakulenko, "Why Can't Russia and China Agree on the Power of Siberia 2 Gas Pipeline?," Politika, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Sept. 22, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia- Eurasia/politika/2025/09/russia-china-gas-deals?lang=en> (accessed Dec. 31, 2025).

53 Interfax, "Russian gas supplies to Iran could total 300 mln cubic meters per day, including for re-export - Iranian oil minister," July 17, 2024, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/104344> (accessed Nov. 1, 2024).

54 In addition to an old and ill-fated project for a pipeline to Pakistan, Iran recently resumed work on its first LNG plant, which, if ever

Turkey already imports gas from Russia through two Black Sea pipelines.<sup>55</sup> To improve its energy security, the country has long wanted to fashion itself into a gas hub linking European consumers with suppliers in Central Asia, the Black Sea, the Middle East, and North Africa.<sup>56</sup> The EU long encouraged the expansion of Turkish pipeline infrastructure, to reduce Europe's own dependence on Russia, but in 2022 Putin, too, began to voice support for Turkey's gas hub ambitions.<sup>57</sup> The idea appears to be that if Gazprom can't sell directly to the EU, it should instead increase the amount of gas piped to Turkey, where it could be resold—odorless and invisible—as Turkish gas to the same EU nations that refuse to buy it from Russia.<sup>58</sup>

## Takeaways: Russian Middle East Policy Going Forward

- Since 2022, Russia has lost ground in the Middle East due to its preoccupation with Ukraine and because of the regional fallout of the Gaza War. The Assad regime is gone, Iran is weakened at home and abroad, and Moscow's credibility as a security provider has been eroded by its inability to influence regional crises. After 2015, Russia gained a reputation for bold action, but it now appears defensive and reactive—and the region has noticed.
- However, the Middle East cares about more than the Middle East. For nations like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, or Iran, Russia's reduced stature in their home region is of secondary importance. Their main interest is in Russia as a global actor, an energy market giant, a wielder of UN vetoes, and a counterweight to the United States—and that interest has not diminished.
- Energy diplomacy remains a top Russian concern, manifested in the attention lavished by Moscow on Persian Gulf nations. As the world's second-largest oil exporter and a driving force in the OPEC+ cartel, Moscow has a strong hand to play but must guard against the risk of Iranian-Arab escalation.
- Russia will continue to benefit from the unforced errors of its adversaries. In particular, Western complicity in Israel's scorched-earth campaign in Gaza continues to fuel regional outrage and hand easy propaganda wins to the Kremlin.
- Assad's ouster was a massive blow to Russia's regional posture. Since then, however, Russia has pragmatically leveraged a variety of political and economic assets to build ties to Syria's new leadership. A year later, the relationship appears almost amicable and Russia now seems likely to retain its bases in Syria, if probably in a reduced form. By the looks of it, Russia will continue to play a role in Syria's future, albeit without hope of reclaiming its former preeminence.

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completed, could enable flexible maritime export. Charles Kennedy, "Iran: Revived LNG Project Is Almost 50% Complete," Oil Price, Sep. 12, 2023, <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Iran-Revived-LNG-Project-Is-Almost-50-Complete.html> (accessed Nov. 1, 2024); Sajid Aziz, "Revival of Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline: How Far Will It Go?," ISDP Voices No. 40, Institute for Security & Development Policy, June 27, 2024 <https://www.isdp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Blog-40-Sajid-new.pdf> (accessed Nov. 1, 2024).

55 See map in Emil Wannheden, "The EU's Continued Dependencies on Russian Energy. A Clean Break?" (FOI-R--5621--SE), Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), June 14, 2024, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5621--SE> (accessed Dec. 31, 2025), p. 13.

56 Emre Er en and Mitat Çelikpala, "Turkey and the changing energy geopolitics of Eurasia," Energy Policy, Vol. 128, May 2019, pp. 584–92.

57 David Ljunggren, "Putin says Turkish gas hub can easily be set up, reveals pipeline damage details," Reuters, Oct. 31, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/putin-says-gas-hub-can-be-set-up-turkey-quite-easily-2022-10-31> (accessed Nov. 2, 2024).

58 Aura Sabadus and Benjamin Schmitt, Russian Gas by Any Other Name, Centre for European Policy Analysis, June 26, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/russian-gas-by-any-other-name> (accessed Nov. 1, 2024).



- If Syrian authorities allow full use of the Tartous Naval Base and a Ukraine deal induces Turkey to reopen the Black Sea straits, Russia could, over time, fully restore its Mediterranean naval presence. Should Tartous's full functioning not be restored, Russia will be under pressure to find alternative basing locations, with eastern Libya as its most promising option.
- The Assad regime's destruction means that Russia now has fewer direct interests at stake in the Levant than previously. If Russia were to ultimately fail to preserve its bases in Syria, that could encourage a strategic refocusing on the Persian Gulf region.
- Russia is now more closely tied to Iran than at any other point in modern history. But in light of the recent Iranian losses, that cost-benefit calculus could be shifting. Russia is not likely to abandon strategic collaboration with Iran, which continues to hold strong appeal due to sunk costs, shared interests, and the absence of credible alternatives—but it may opt for policy adjustments to allow for rapprochement with Israel and to lean closer to the Gulf Arab states. Both Israelis and Gulf Arabs would likely respond positively to any such signals, in the interest of coaxing Russia away from Iran, even to a limited degree.
- It remains possible that Russia will instead adopt a hardline stance, doubling down on Iran to demonstrate resolve or in the expectation of longer-term benefits. If so, any evolution in Russia's handling of the Iranian nuclear program would merit close monitoring.
- Last but not least, it bears recalling that events in the Middle East are contingent on global developments, making it difficult to predict the conditions and constraints under which Russia's future Middle East policy will operate. If, for example, U.S. diplomatic efforts were to produce a ceasefire deal in Ukraine that frees up Russian forces and lightens Moscow's sanctions load, Russia may again be able to devote more resources to the Middle East.

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