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Russia in the Middle East:

National Security Challenges for the United States and Israel in the Biden Era

As a new administration takes shape, with heightened U.S.-Russian tensions on a global level and conflict as a distinct possibility, Russia's role in the Middle East is a strategic challenge and an urgent concern both to Israel and the United States in such sensitive arenas as Syria and Iran and in the cyber and technological domains.



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Russia in the Middle East: National Security Challenges for the United States and Israel in the Biden Era

Executive Summary

- The United States is no longer the undisputed hegemon in the Middle East. A diminution of the American role has invited regional power projection by Russia, Iran, and Turkey and long-term economic statecraft moves by China. The United States aims to preserve such core interests as regional stability, counterterrorism, nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, energy security, and Israel's security. China, Russia, and the United States bring dissimilar capabilities and goals to their respective policies in the Middle East, a region that is undergoing a profound transformation.
- Russia is once again a military and diplomatic actor in the Middle East. Since well before 2015, when it intervened in the Syrian civil war, Russia has been seeking additional outlets for its military and economic influence in the Middle East. Russia is now a prominent factor in Syria and Libya, a partner of Iran, a partner with ambitions in Egypt, and an interlocutor with the Gulf states (especially the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia), Israel, the Afghan government, the Taliban, and the Palestinians, among many other political entities. Russia is a factor in Yemen, and it has an expanding set of interests in North Africa. Russia plays multiple sides against each other within countries experiencing internal conflict, using these conflicts as a wedge to deepen its regional influence. The Middle East offers Russia many such opportunities for controlled strife. Yet Moscow is far from being able to establish a regional order of its own design.

- U.S.-Israeli cooperation in the Middle East is enduring. So far, Russia has not fundamentally challenged U.S. and Israeli cooperation in the region, although the widening scope of Russia's activities certainly affects the interests of Israel and the United States. The presence of Russia, with China playing a background role, does much to complicate the situation in the Middle East. With a change of administration in Washington and with heightened U.S.-Russian tensions on the global level and conflict as a distinct possibility, Russia's role in the Middle East could turn into a strategic challenge and urgent concern to both Israel and the United States in sensitive arenas such as Syria and Iran and in the cyber and technological domains.

U.S.-Israel Relations and Specific Areas for Cooperation

Given the geopolitics of a changing Middle East, the United States and Israel must reaffirm the importance of the bilateral relationship, maintain the close coordination to which they both are accustomed, and work through their potential differences concerning the roles of Russia, Turkey, and China in the Middle East. To this list they could add multilateral consultation and coordination with the Gulf Cooperation Council states.

Different place of Russia in U.S. and in Israeli strategy:

- ▶ For the United States, a Russian presence in the Middle East is not intolerable at current levels. It does not necessarily run counter to core U.S. interests in the region; but it does complicate the realization of these interests and is detrimental to the degree that Russian policy is motivated by the goal of limiting U.S. influence and damaging U.S. prestige.
- ▶ For Israel, Russia is a high-priority national security challenge. Russia imposes a set of operational and strategic concerns stemming from the potential impediment to Israel's freedom of operations in Syria and Moscow's strategic relations and cooperation with Iran. Engagement with Russia allows Israel achievements in degrading Iranian military capabilities and entrenchment in Syria, with limited Russian disruption of its operations. Israel needs to maintain its engagement with Russia in order to secure these paramount objectives.
- **Limits to Russia's interventional capabilities:** Russia will not drive a wedge between the United States and Israel, nor will it supplant the still dominant position of the United States as an outside power. Nevertheless, the likelihood of great power competition in the Middle East going forward will require creativity and enhanced consultation on the broader Middle East from Israel and the United States.
- **Priorities for a joint U.S.-Israeli strategic approach:** A joint U.S.-Israeli approach should link the situation in the Middle East with the growing role of Russia and China globally. The United States and Israel should elevate Russia to a strategic priority in their bilateral relationship and increase official consultation and coordination on containing Russian challenges to both countries, in the Middle East and in the cyber and technological domains. Although China is in the background in the Middle East, it should be acknowledged as a relevant factor in any joint U.S.-Israeli strategy.

- **Susceptibility of failed states:** Special attention should be devoted to failed states, such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen. These are the places where the continued involvement of Russia and other outside powers is most probable and could, in the future, cause the most headaches for Washington and Jerusalem.
- **Israel's messaging to Washington about Russia:** Israel must show the United States it is aware of Russia's intent to reduce U.S. influence in the Middle East, which runs counter to basic Israeli interests. Israel should also continue practicing complete transparency with Washington concerning its relationship with Russia, which is focused on deconfliction, supporting safety measures, and ensuring freedom of operation in Syria and is limited in the technological and intelligence realms.
- **Posture of Israeli prime minister:** The Israeli prime minister must be sensitive to the image of his or her engagements with President Putin while building confidence vis-à-vis the United States.
- **Shows of support by the United States:** Maintaining the U.S. presence in the Middle East is a vested Israeli interest. The United States could consider having its officials appear in locations that indicate U.S. support for Israel and its operations to push back against Iran in the region.

Specific areas of U.S.-Israel cooperation:

- ▶ **Incentivizing Russia in Syria:** The United States and Israel could consider a special role for Russia in Syria as a means of working with Moscow to limit Iran's presence in the country.
- ▶ **Leveraging funding to achieve a political settlement in Syria:** The United States, the EU, and Arab countries could play a role in a future reconstruction of Syria, using financial resources as leverage to produce preferred outcomes, such as a reduced Iranian presence and influence in Syria. (Limitations related to the Caesar Syria Protection Act of 2019, through which sanctions on the Syrian government have been levied, will have to be taken into consideration in this regard.)
- ▶ **Consulting with Russia on Iranian nuclear file:** Consultation could strengthen the provisions on which the two sides agree, particularly the International Atomic Energy Agency–related measures for inspecting and monitoring activities.
- ▶ **Disincentivizing Russian sales of advanced weapon systems to the Middle East:** Pressure could be put on Russia to make it costly to sell advanced weapon systems to various entities, which could upset the balance of power in the Middle East. Selling air defense systems and anti-ship missiles to Iran or the Sukhoi SU-35 air defense fighter to Egypt, could invite sanctions.



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U.S.-Israeli Group on Russia

Background

This report builds on an earlier report, published on June 3, 2019, and titled “Coping with the Russian Challenge in the Middle East: U.S.-Israeli Perspectives and Opportunities for Cooperation.” The present report adds three new dimensions. First, it includes China’s evolving role in the Middle East, which is not significantly altered the region but is becoming an important long-term factor. Second, since 2019, Russia has deepened its military, diplomatic, and economic engagement with the Middle East, from Afghanistan to North Africa; it will clearly continue to do so in the future. Third, two notable developments have taken place since the earlier report appeared: the Abraham Accords of late 2020, an agreement among Israel, the UAE, and the United States recognizing the importance of strengthening peace in the Middle East, and the U.S. presidential election in November 2020, which led to a change of admin-

istration. Although there will be some continuity in the U.S. Middle East policy post-Trump, there will also be new priorities and new strategic emphases. This report reflects all these changes, both in its analysis and in its key takeaway points.

Russia has reestablished itself as a power in the Middle East. When relations between Russia and the West soured over Ukraine in 2014, it removed many inhibitions in Moscow on confrontation with the West. Russia might have intervened regardless in Syria in 2015, the moment Moscow demonstrably widened its military commitment to Bashar al-Assad’s regime. But prior to 2014 a confrontation with the West in Syria might have been less palatable to the Kremlin. After 2014, such confrontation fit into a larger pattern. After entering Syria, Russia expanded its diplomatic outreach across

the Middle East and put its thumb on the scale in Libya. Russia's ubiquity in the region, its managed competition with Turkey, and its developing ties with China make it a factor in the Middle East that cannot be ignored.

Jerusalem must reckon with Moscow because of Russia's role in Syria, which has added new variables to an already difficult situation for Israel. Russia has the potential to restrict Israeli freedom of operation and access to Syrian airspace. Both are essential to prevent Iranian military entrenchment in Syria and arms transfers to proxies in Lebanon, which are vital Israeli interests. Russia's opportunistic connections to Iran and the expansionary logic of Russia's foreign policy also matter to Israel, as does Russia's overall strategy to erode the U.S.-led international system. Since 2015, Israel has engaged repeatedly with top Russian leadership, which, in light of rising tensions between Moscow and Washington, may factor into the U.S.-Israeli relationship. U.S. efforts to limit Russia's influence in the Middle East are a mixed bag. Not in the position to block Russia, Israel is trying to deal with Russia's regional presence, whatever it may be or become. At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the need for close cooperation between Israel and the United States.

A new administration in Washington is setting the terms of its Middle East policy. In its high-level national security documents, the Trump administration viewed Russia through the lens of great power competition. This perspective provided some clarity on the West's tensions with Russia in Europe but less so in the Middle East, where Russia's activities touch on U.S. policy in Syria, Iraq, Iran, Libya, and Egypt but are not themselves the dominant factor in these countries. Whichever the administration in Washington, Russia's

long-term posture in the Middle East will affect the competition between the United States and China. The United States regularly consults its strategic European allies on Russia. Dialogue on Russia with Israel, one of the United States' main allies in the Middle East, is high-level and intensive on Syria. It needs to be expanded to cover the entire region, something all the more essential in the first year of a new administration in Washington.

Recalibrating this dialogue has been the goal of a multiyear group project spearheaded by the Woodrow Wilson Center and the Institute for Policy and Strategy of the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzliya, Israel. It is a platform dedicated to U.S.-Israeli dialogue on Russia in the Middle East. Experts have gathered for discussions and for public events in Herzliya, Israel, in February 2018 and February 2019; and in Washington, D.C., in June 2018 and January 2020. (Biographies of the participants are provided in the Appendix.)

This group has formulated key takeaways and analysis for the U.S. and Israeli governments and for decision-makers. Based on a close review of Russian strategy and diplomacy, it addresses the challenge Russia presents to the respective national interests of the United States and Israel in the Middle East. These discussions have covered Russian activities and aspirations in Syria and Iran and have ranged geographically from Afghanistan to North Africa. The joint IDC/Wilson Center project has examined Russia through the lens of great power competition, among other paradigms, relating such competition to regional strife and to broader international trends, such as the fallout from the COVID-19 crisis. This report summarizes the main analytical and policy points that have emerged from these discussions.



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The International Setting: Shades of Great Power Competition

The international order increasingly bears the imprint of the U.S.-China-Russia triad. The unique ambitions of these three countries encompass Europe and Asia and, somewhat less directly, the Middle East, where China, Russia, and the United States are not yet engaged in the “great game” of classic great power competition. Instead, they are redefining their roles in the region in light of larger global priorities. In a poly-centric order, Russia and China are pushing back against American power and trying to carve out bigger roles for themselves, without getting overextended. Though China and Russia do not form a united front, and are not expected to, each for its own reasons aims to replace American ideas of international order with an order rooted more in raw power projection and in economic statecraft. Beijing and Moscow would like to sideline democracy promotion and any multilateralism of American vintage. The Middle East allows Russia to project an image of a near peer superpower equal to the United States,

and outperforming China, through a mixture of military assistance, arms sales, energy deals, more centralized and agile whole-of-government decision-making, and counter-U.S. diplomacy. This projection of near superpower strength can compensate for Russia’s relative economic and political weakness.

Tectonic shifts in the international order are generating friction. The United States and China regularly clash over the balance of power in Asia, over trade, and over information technology. U.S.-Russian relations are worsening amid acute disagreements over the European security order. Since 2014, the United States has been imposing economic sanctions on Russia and attempting to enhance NATO’s capabilities to contain or potentially to repel Russia. Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election poisoned the U.S.-Russian relationship, while Russia and China make no secret of their attempts to chip away at American power and influence globally.

In the Middle East, as in many other parts of the world, China focuses on economic statecraft, playing the long game. China wants to ensure the flow of cheap energy and to build up markets for Chinese goods in the Middle East. China is now a major source of foreign direct investment in Iran and elsewhere. Beijing is glad to let Russia and the United States incur military costs and thus to contend with the Middle East's day-to-day instability. Over time, China hopes to translate economic into overtly geopolitical influence when and where it wishes. It already has a base in Djibouti and is deepening relations with Morocco and Algeria, as well as in the Gulf. China is generally indifferent to forms of government outside China, caring mostly about how individual governments aid or impede Chinese interests. This gives Beijing great flexibility.

A wild card in the Middle East, Turkey is a middle power and NATO member trying to ensure its independence from the United States, Russia, and China. Ankara has been moving away from the United States over the past few years. In pursuit of spheres of influence in the Middle East, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Caucasus, Turkey is precariously balanced against Russia in Syria and Libya. It has recently been assertive (and perhaps even provocative) in its military support for Azerbaijan. Thus Ankara has tilted the power balance in the region and is challenging Moscow to maintain its official policy of equidistance from Azerbaijan and Armenia. Because of its military and economic leverage, Russia has been trying to pull Turkey into its orbit. Turkey's strategic vacillation and its growing involvement in conflict zones in Libya and Syria have the potential to dovetail with great power conflict in the Middle East—with tensions, that is, between Russia and the United States. Ankara does not try to mediate between the United States and Russia. It has too much to gain from being between them.

The recent normalization of relations with Israel mirrors a range of motivations for the Gulf states. The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain are trying to reposition themselves in the Middle East, to hedge against an American retreat from the region, and to partner with Israel in the face of geopolitical threats. Israel has substantial military and economic resources, overlapping interests on Iran and radical Islam, access to Washington, and access to state-of-the-art U.S. weapons systems, such as the F-35 stealth combat aircraft. With the COVID-19 crisis driving down oil prices, the UAE and Bahrain would like to bolster their images as regional business hubs. This they can do by linking up with the strong economy in Israel and building up ties to Israel's financial markets. The UAE and Bahrain are hoping for a new dynamic in the Middle East.

The United States, still the region's preeminent power, occupies a singular position in the Middle East. Its military resources are unparalleled. Though the Middle East is not what it once was economically for the United States, commerce and trade still tie the United States to the region, as do the region's salience to Asia's economies and the U.S. commitment to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. As demonstrated by the normalization of relations among Israel, Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco, and the UAE and by the U.S.-brokered negotiations between Israel and Lebanon on the maritime border, the United States has more diplomatic authority in the region than either Russia or China can exercise. That said, the strategic posture of the United States has been in flux from the Obama administration to the Trump administration and from the Trump administration to the Biden administration.



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Russia's Role in the Middle East

The Middle East has historical and strategic importance for Russia. Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union were both active external powers in the Middle East, enmeshed in rivalries with the Ottoman Empire, the Persian Empires, and the British and the French Empires. During the Cold War, the Soviet rival in the Middle East was, of course, the United States. The collapse of the USSR led to an uncontested *pax americana* in the region, with Moscow unable to reassert itself during the Second Gulf War, the Arab Spring, and the NATO bombing campaign in Libya. Russia was frustrated by its inability to stop the United States through its bilateral relationship, through the UN Security Council, or on the ground. The collapse in Western-Russian relations provoked by the Ukraine crisis of 2014 led Putin to rethink Russian foreign policy, to take greater initiative in multiple theaters, and to act in the expectation of conflict with the West.

Within this reconsideration, and prodded by events on the ground, intervention in Syria emerged as the crucial next step for Russia, Russia's gateway for a return to the Middle East in 2015. Moscow was motivated by the desire to prevent U.S.-backed regime change, demonstrate Russia's great power status (to the world and to the Russian people), deepen its military foothold in the region, widen the options for Russian diplomacy, and forestall the spread of Islamist terrorism near and within Russia.

Putin's domestic and international challenges are hardly insurmountable, and Russia will not draw back from the Middle East in the short or medium term. Russia's investment in the Middle East is not especially costly for the Kremlin in purely economic terms or in terms of casualties: the campaign in Syria is sustainable and offers training and weapon systems testing opportunities. Many of

Russia's casualties there have been mercenaries rather than uniformed soldiers. Playing a role in the Middle East brings some practical and ideological gains to Putin, whose prestige at home is linked to the ambitious foreign policy he has been advancing since 2014. Putin would not want—and might not be able to survive politically—a Russian withdrawal from the Middle East or from Ukraine.

A transactional style of diplomacy prevails in the Middle East. This suits Putin and helps him with crisis management and with maximizing opportunities when they appear. Putin is more than comfortable working with opposing sides in a given conflict, as Russia does in Afghanistan, Iran, Palestine, Libya, and to a lesser extent in Yemen. So far, Russia has experienced a modest setback in Libya, while it struggles to deal with Turkey in the Middle East, including in the South Caucasus, where Turkey has just increased its military influence and diplomatic sway. Nevertheless, Russia probably assesses its decision to intervene in Syria in 2015 a strategic success and a prelude to further successes elsewhere in the region.

Russia has succeeded in preserving Bashar al-Assad's rule and in obtaining bases in Syria. Moscow has so far managed a mosaic of ad hoc partnerships in Syria, from Iran to Turkey to the Syrian Kurds. It is an exceptionally complicated juggling act, to which there is no end in sight. With some difficulty, Moscow is able to work out its problems with Turkey and to partner with Iran while maintaining a working relationship with Israel that is concentrated on Syria, on deconfliction, and on related regional challenges, while both de-conflicting and competing there with the United States. In the past five years, Russia has steadily expanded its military, diplomatic, and economic influence in the Middle East.

Russia and Iran act on a convergence of discrete interests. Russia uses its relations with Iran to increase its influence in the Middle East in general and the Gulf area—currently under U.S. dominance—in particular.

Moscow believes its support for Iran strengthens its hand on the international stage as well. Moscow and Teheran endeavored to undermine the goals of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" strategy, as well as Israel's efforts to contain Iranian power and influence in the region. Russia is likely to sell advanced weapon systems to Iran eventually now that the UN embargo has expired (at least according to Russian and European interpretations). This could embolden Iran in Syria and elsewhere, including on the nuclear front. Iran and Russia share an interest in reducing the U.S. role regionally. Differences and disagreements exist between Iran and Russia, including Iran's support of terrorism and its threat to nuclear nonproliferation. Yet the United States and Israel recognize that driving Russia and Iran apart completely in Syria may not be possible.

Putin cannot entirely isolate his Middle East policy from the considerable and enduring challenges he faces at home. A declining economy, the fallout from the COVID-19 crisis, and frustration with Kremlin misrule all have led to protests in Russia. This has occurred amid uncertainty in Belarus, where President Lukashenko faces a possible revolution, and in the course of Russia's drifting away from Europe in general and from Germany in particular, though the upcoming election in Germany could alter this dynamic somewhat. Tensions with the United States show no sign of abating. The long-unresolved Ukraine crisis and mounting troubles in Belarus reveal a Putin who seems better at manipulating rather than resolving conflicts. Putin is trying to shift the international order toward Russian interests, something he believes he can achieve only through hard-nosed and at times aggressive action. His goal is to push Russia's problems as far from Moscow as he can—both in Europe and in the Middle East.

Putin must operate within Russia's many limits. Russia is less affluent and less dynamic than the United States and China. Russia is gaining in regional leverage while

struggling to translate military interventions into diplomatic gains. Russia has made its biggest advances in the region's failed states, a mixed blessing (to put it mildly). Among the non-failed states, Russia is not a trusted ally, nor does it seek to play the role of a trusted ally. Pragmatism describes Russia's relations with China, Iran, Israel, and the Gulf states, with which Russia has signed a handful of energy and arms-sales deals (some of which have not gone beyond signatures). Compared to China and the United States, Russia has little to offer economically. It pursues a transactional and opportunistic diplomacy in tune with Russia's view of the international order. Most recently, Russia and Sudan have agreed to a Russian supply facility in Port Sudan, Russia's first post-Soviet base in the Red Sea.

The recent normalization of relations among Israel, the UAE, Sudan, Morocco, and Bahrain has bypassed Russia, which watched the development from the sidelines. Moscow has sought more advantageous relations with the Gulf states and has close ties to the Palestinians. As a Quartet member, it supports a two-state solution. Consistent with Russian efforts to undermine American influence in the region, Russia has tried to make use of ruptured ties between the United States and the Palestinian Authority, although Russia has not played a role in multilateral fora on Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a first-order issue for Moscow, which in any event lacks the resources to do much for the Palestinians. While criticizing the U.S. "deal of the century" plan, Russia did not exploit it to pressure Israel.

In Libya, Moscow has supplied the Haftar forces mercenaries with MIG-29s and SU-24s. At its most ambitious, Russia would like to establish a long-term military bridgehead in Libya, ideally with anti-access and area denial (A2AD) capabilities. At the moment, though, Russia is doing what it can to preserve its options and to acquire bargaining chips in a very messy situation. Oil-rich Libya figures in Russia's desire for a long-term

influence on oil and gas production in the eastern Mediterranean. A larger Russian military presence in Libya, if workable, would be of strategic value to Moscow in southern Europe and Africa.

Appreciative of Egypt's connections to Libya, Putin has a solid working relationship with Egypt's president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Like Turkey, Egypt can derive benefit from being between the United States and Russia. Moscow knows, however, that Cairo will not forgo its strong ties to the United States for Russia's sake. Russia has signed several deals for the sale of advanced weapons to Egypt. Moscow hopes to include in them the advanced aircraft SU-35, a deal that might expose Egypt to American sanctions. The two countries conduct joint military drills, while Egyptian military personnel are being trained in Russian military academies. In the (possibly distant) future, Russia would be delighted to have an air base in western Egypt. Russia is also Egypt's largest supplier of wheat and is building four atomic reactors at El Dabaa Nuclear Plant, northwest of Cairo. Egypt shares Russia's "counterrevolutionary" or pro-authoritarian posture on developments throughout the Middle East. The two countries have converging interests on the African continent.

China helps Russia reduce the U.S. role in the Middle East in relative terms. China wants lower energy prices, Russia wants higher energy prices. But both countries want a world not dominated by the United States. In the Middle East, China's financial clout is a counterweight to that of the United States, and China is more likely to invest in the Middle East than is the United States, which could give Beijing long-term leverage. China could, if it chose, contribute financially to the political order Russia wishes to establish for Syria, Libya, and other Middle Eastern crisis zones. China shows no signs of wanting to do so, however, and Moscow is very far from seeing through any of its larger plans for Syria (whatever those plans might be). U.S. sanctions remain a serious concern in Beijing.

U.S. Strategy in the Middle East from the Trump to the Biden Administration

The Trump administration continued a policy, inherited from the Obama administration, of minimizing Middle Eastern military commitments. President Trump's October 2019 decision to withdraw most U.S. forces from Syria strengthened the hands of Russia, Iran, and Turkey in Syria.

The Trump administration's Middle East policy diverged from that of the Obama administration in three respects. First, President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA and initiated a strategy of "maximum pressure" against Iran, aimed at reducing Iran's regional influence through economic sanctions. In January 2020, the United States struck Qasem Soleimani's entourage in Iraq, killing Soleimani. These steps have pushed Russia and Iran closer together, reinforcing Russia's narrative that, unlike the United States, it "talks to all parties" in the Middle East. Second, the Trump administration drew closer to the Arab countries, particularly the Gulf states. It did so in part by eschewing criticism of their internal behavior. The Trump administration encouraged a coalition between Israel and the Gulf states, downplaying human rights concerns, and signed high-publicity arms deals with the Gulf states. Third, Trump developed a close working relationship with Benjamin Netanyahu. The Trump administration related its confrontations with Iran and its relations with the Gulf states to a "deal of the century" peace process for Israel. This project was never started, but revisions in U.S. policy enabled the normalization of relations among Israel, Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the UAE.

With the exception of the Abraham Accords as a foreign policy concept, the new administration will diverge significantly from Trump's foreign policy. It will seek a return to the JCPOA and is sure to be more critical of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Turkey, and Egypt and their respective policies in the region, as well as their human rights issues, putting greater pressure on Israel to avoid unilateral actions

(especially settlement expansion) that could undermine a two-state solution and the resumption of negotiations in the future. President Biden might struggle to cooperate with Netanyahu, given skepticism about Israel in the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. Earlier tensions between Netanyahu and the Obama administration will not have been forgotten. At the same time, Biden may not need to worry about annexation, which might help him get off on the right foot with Israel. The Biden administration's focus on negotiating with Iran on the nuclear issue, coupled with greater criticism of Israel, Turkey, and the Arab countries, may create an opening for Russia to provide greater service as Iran's regional partner.

For the new administration in Washington, a push to improve the U.S. position vis-à-vis China and a pledge to deepen cooperation with fellow democracies suggest a tough road ahead for U.S. relations with China, Russia, and Turkey alike. In particular, Biden has indicated that he would impose costs on Russia for any interference in the U.S. elections. Following the large-scale cyberattacks against U.S. networks reported in 2020, Washington will sharpen its response to the Russian threat in this domain. At the same time, the new administration will do what it can to bolster NATO, of which Turkey is an increasingly problematic member. How this will play out in the Middle East is unclear. On the campaign trail, Biden criticized "endless wars" and indicated that he would maintain only a limited troop presence in Iraq and Syria, one that was focused on counterterrorism.

The United States and Russia will have a rocky relationship in the short to medium term, though not one that is destined to be focused on the Middle East. The United States could try to impose further sanctions on Russia, enhance the U.S. military commitment to Ukraine, and

return U.S. policy to democracy promotion in Eastern and Central Europe. Putin will do what he can not to yield to this pressure, and he may well look for ways to take the initiative and put pressure on the United States in

Europe, Asia, or the Middle East. Neither country wants to see military or other kinds of confrontation between the United States and Russia in the Middle East; both will try to manage tension.

The Russian-Israeli Relationship

Over the past five years, Israeli-Russian relations have been deepening. President Putin was the first Russian (or Soviet) leader to visit Israel, which he did in 2005, 2012, and 2020. Putin has since referred to Israel as a “special state,” one that shares certain commonalities with Russia. Some one million Soviet-born Jews live in Israel, including politicians and officials dealing with bilateral relations. This fact speaks to the deep historical, cultural, and social ties between the two countries. Israel and Russia both commemorate the history and consequences of World War II, which matter greatly in their respective national narratives. In addition, Putin and Netanyahu have a strong personal relationship.

Israeli and Russian interests diverge more than they converge. Israel’s closest ally is the United States, and Israel sees U.S. involvement in the Middle East as a vested interest, which Russia most certainly does not. Israel views Teheran as a paramount threat and wages a military-political campaign against it. Israel’s hopes that Russia might counterbalance Iranian influence in Syria have so far not borne fruit. Russia cooperates with Iran in Syria, and does not oppose Tehran’s efforts to establish a robust military presence in the country. Moscow supplies Iran with weapons and disrupts U.S. efforts at curtailing the Iranian nuclear program. Yet Russia does not see positive relations with Israel and Iran as antithetical. To the contrary: Russia’s regional strategy is premised on fostering ties with all regional players. Hence it does little to hamper Israeli Air Force operations against Iran in Syria. Moscow and Jerusalem agree to disagree about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

For Israel, a permanent Russian military presence and long-range capabilities on its northern border constrain Israel’s freedom of action in Syria while increasing the potential for Iranian entrenchment in the country—under a Russian umbrella. For Russia, Israel could disrupt Moscow’s planning and strategy in the Middle East through its autonomous military activity, its influence in Washington, or by accident. At times, Russia has benefited from Israeli strikes against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria. At the same time, the September 2018 incident during which Syrian air defense shot down a Russian reconnaissance plane (after an Israeli attack in Syria) showed Israel how quickly a severe crisis with the Kremlin could arise. Nevertheless, this crisis was handled, an indication of Russia’s desire to avoid any kind of protracted conflict with Israel.

Israel and Russia have been able to compartmentalize their interests. To do so, they have had to prevent their strategic differences from encroaching on their management of bilateral interests, which is focused on deconfliction in Syria. Israel’s political and military establishments engage with their Russian counterparts. Shared interests include avoiding incidents between Russian and Israeli armed forces in Syria and managing a similar approach to dealing with radical Islamist groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates. Like Russia, Israel was dismayed by the U.S. approach to Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated leaders and by the collapse of stable, if undemocratic, regimes throughout the Middle East during the Arab Spring, exacerbating the upheaval and the uncertainty in the region.



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Specific Areas of U.S.-Israel Cooperation

The joint U.S.-Israeli Group on Russia recognizes that the balance of power has shifted in the Middle East since Russia's "return" to the region in 2015 and with China's gradually increasing role globally. Russia will not drive a wedge between the United States and Israel. Nor will it supplant the still dominant position of the United States as an outside power. Nevertheless, the likelihood of great power competition in the Middle East, going forward, will require creativity and enhanced consultation on the broader Middle East from Israel and the United States.

- **Joint strategic approach:** A joint strategic approach would elevate Russia to a strategic priority within the U.S.-Israeli relationship and increase coordination on containing Russian challenges to both countries – in the Middle East and in cyber and technological domains. Although China is in the background in the Middle East, it should be

acknowledged as a relevant factor in any joint U.S.-Israeli strategy.

- **Israel's messaging to Washington:** Israel's messaging to Washington about Russia is crucial. Israel must show the United States that that Israel practices complete transparency with Washington concerning its relationship with Russia. In this spirit, it should demonstrate:
 - ▶ That its relations with Russia are focused solely on deconfliction, safety measures, and ensuring freedom of operation in Syria, and that the Israeli dialogue with Russia, especially in the technological and intelligence realms, is limited.
 - ▶ That Israel is aware of Russia's intent to reduce U.S. influence in the Middle East, which runs counter to basic Israeli interests, and that

Jerusalem sees the connection between its relations with Russia and its relations with the United States.

- **Posture of Israeli prime minister:** The Israeli prime minister must be sensitive to the image of his or her engagements with President Putin while building confidence vis-à-vis Washington.
- **Increased official consultation on great power competition:** There is a need for increased official consultation on great power competition and its implications for the Middle East and U.S.-Israeli relations. The United States and Israel cannot confine their dialogue to opportunities and crises in the Middle East. They must be sure to link the situation in the Middle East with the growing role of Russia and China globally.
- **Shows of support by the United States:** Maintaining the U.S. presence in the Middle East is a vested Israeli interest. The United States could consider having its officials appear in locations that indicate U.S. support for Israel and its operations to push back against Iran in the region, as U.S. officials often do in Europe vis-à-vis Russia. U.S. officials in Israel should bear Russia in mind as an audience for their speeches, meetings, and photo ops.
- **Strategic messaging on Russia:** Both Israel and the United States must remain aware of Russia as an audience for and observer to the U.S.-Israeli relationship, and coordination to avoid sending mixed messages in public speeches and appearances.
- **Leveraging potential funding to achieve a political settlement in Syria:** In the long-term scenario in which the military situation in Syria winds down, the United States and the EU and Arab countries could play a role in the political reconstruction of Syria, using financial resources as leverage to help produce preferred outcomes, such as a reduced Iranian presence and influence in Syria. (Limitations related to the Caesar Law will have to be taken into consideration in this regard.) Economic leverage can serve as a carrot or a stick, or as both a carrot and a stick.
- **Consulting with Russia on the Iranian nuclear file:** this could strengthen provisions upon which the two sides agree, particularly the IAEA-related measures for inspecting and monitoring activities as well as permissible civilian use.
- **Pressuring Russia to avoid selling advanced weapon systems:** Russia's sales of advanced weapons systems to Middle Eastern countries, such as the sale of air defense systems and anti-ship missiles to Iran or the sale of the Sukhoi SU-35 air defense fighter to Egypt, could upset the balance of power in the Middle East. A united posture from Israel and the United States to put pressure on Russia could reduce the likelihood of such sales.
- **Coordinating with Sunni Arab states to limit Russian influence in the Middle East:** Such coordination should aim at preventing or reducing Russian sales of advanced weapon systems to Iran, which might proliferate among Iran's proxies and could potentially stimulate Iran's technological development.
- **Establishing a working group:** The U.S. and Israeli governments should consider setting up a bilateral U.S.-Israeli working group on Russia, designed to steer conversations on this topic in public and private settings and to facilitate working relationships between the two governments, for the sake of maximizing the opportunities and minimizing the threats that Russia poses. The Wilson Center and the IDC would gladly facilitate and contribute to such a working group.



Image source: Amit Agronov / IDF Spokesperson's Unit / CC BY-SA 3.0

Conclusions

Russia's advantages in the Middle East: So far, Russia's expanded military presence in the Middle East (since 2015) has been both sustainable and effective. Russia now has meaningful diplomatic relations across the region and on the opposing sides of many conflicts. Through diplomacy, military ties, and economic statecraft, Russia is making its influence felt from Afghanistan and the South Caucasus to North Africa. Russia's partnership with China does not yet amount to a potent axis in the Middle East, but Moscow and Beijing might be pressured to cooperate by the dynamics of great power competition. Putin's fluid, transactional, and authoritarian-friendly style of diplomacy works well in a context of political turbulence and in the political culture of the broader Middle East.

Russian liabilities in the Middle East: Russia has numerous liabilities in the Middle East. Economic decline at home makes a dramatic expansion of Russian military

activity in the Middle East improbable. Russia has made its best inroads in the region's failed states—Syria and Libya. Militarily and diplomatically, it has struggled to deal with Turkey's initiatives, from Azerbaijan to Syria to Libya. Russia cannot compete with the United States in overall diplomatic-military-economic clout. Should China decide to move more vigorously into the Middle East, it too would bring a range of resources and capabilities to bear that Russia does not have at its disposal.

Russia's lack of some attributes of a great power: Russia's military forces (including cyber and intelligence capabilities) make Russia a large and sophisticated foreign power in the Middle East. Its economic clout is limited, however, and it has no ideology on par with communism to offer in the Middle East. It arranges its actions around short-term and often opportunistic interests rather than a carefully crafted grand strategy. Russia faces some unrest amid the COVID-

19 crisis and a potentially destabilizing situation should the government of its neighbor and close ally Belarus change hands. None of this will cause Russia to retreat from the region, but it may inhibit Russia from increasing its presence. For this reason, Beijing and Moscow were heartened by official Trump administration decisions about troop withdrawals and reducing the American footprint in the Middle East. In Washington, by contrast, debates about the American military presence in the Middle East (for recent administrations) occur in the context of regional reprioritization and maintaining competitiveness.

Dealing with Russia and China in the Middle East:

China has been integrating parts of the Middle East, from Afghanistan to Iran to the Horn of Africa, into its Belt and Road Initiative. It has the potential to provide an alternative to the regional influence and power of the United States. But China is content for the time being to keep its distance. Beijing and Moscow surely consult one another about their policies on Syria and other countries in the Middle East, though they have different interests where oil prices are concerned. Even so, they are not working at cross purposes. China and Russia excel at a transactional diplomacy lightly balanced by ideology. China and especially Russia have a preference for authoritarian regimes. Russia positions itself as a conservative force in the region and paints the United States as irresponsibly revisionist. Through its news and propaganda networks, Moscow tries to use regional chaos to encourage or simply to portray a decline in American acumen and power in the Middle East. In line with its economic interests, China prefers order to chaos, but the message of “American decline” is as congenial to the makers of Chinese foreign policy as it is to the practitioners of its propaganda and cultural diplomacy.

Different place of Russia in U.S. and Israeli strategy:

For the United States, a Russian presence in the Middle

East is not intolerable at current levels. It does not necessarily run counter to core U.S. interests in the region; but it does complicate the realization of these interests and is detrimental to the degree that Russian policy is motivated by the goal of limiting U.S. influence and damaging U.S. prestige. The United States is likely to consider Russia’s actions in the Middle East through the prism of great power competition, factoring China into the equation where relevant. Israel faces the paradox of wanting to limit the diminution of U.S. military (though not necessarily of diplomatic) engagement in the Middle East while at the same time needing a degree of engagement with Russia, if only to prevent Russia from curtailing Israel’s freedom of operation in Syria and elsewhere. Israeli strategy does not stem from great power competition. Israel’s Russia strategy is grounded in the imperatives of crisis management.

Israel’s relationship to Russia and to the United States:

Israel draws a sharp distinction between its pragmatic engagement with Russia, with which it has serious strategic differences, and its strategic alliance with the United States. In Washington, this distinction can be less clear, and at times it has been misunderstood as Israel helping Russia project its power into the Middle East—at the expense of the United States. Preventing misunderstandings on this situation is crucial to the U.S.-Israeli relationship, and especially so with a new administration in the White House.

Need for coordination on Russia: The United States and Israel should use their close relationship to complement their respective assets in communicating with each other about Russia’s role in the Middle East and in coordinating their policies. Coordination and communication, possibly through a joint U.S.-Israeli working group on Russia in the Middle East, are crucial precisely because Russia occupies one place in U.S. strategy and another in Israeli strategy.

Key Takeaways

Russia's role in the Middle East: Up to now, Russia has been neither powerful enough nor revisionist enough in the Middle East to disrupt the U.S.-Israel alliance. Russia has made its presence felt mostly in the region's failed states, a telling indicator of the kind of influence Russia wields. Putin also faces mounting problems at home, but he will not withdraw from the Middle East. Russia lacks the long-term geopolitical options there that China has, but it is much more involved in the region and constantly seeking ways to expand its presence and maximize its leverage. Moscow seeks a seat at the table when major regional problems are considered, and might be willing to reciprocate with more responsible policy.

U.S.-Israeli differences in perception on Russia: Russia is a high-priority challenge in Israel's national security. Russia imposes a set of operational and strategic concerns on Israel stemming from the potential impediment to Israel's freedom of operations in Syria and Moscow's strategic relations and cooperation with Iran. Engagement with Russia allowed Israel achievements in degrading Iranian military capabilities and entrenchment in Syria, with limited Russian disruption to its operations. Israel needs to maintain its engagement with Russia to secure these objectives.

U.S. concerns about Russia: The United States has both domestic and global concerns about Russia, rooted in Russia's interference in and attacks on U.S. domestic

politics, its cyber intrusions, its continuing destabilizing actions in Europe, and aggression against its neighbors. Washington increasingly regards Russia as a competitor globally, including in the greater Middle East, and with respect to the post-Cold War international order that has been of great benefit to U.S. national interests.

China's presence in the Middle East: China operates with a light touch in the Middle East, but the Chinese presence is a factor, and potentially a decisive one in the long term. Because of a growing partnership between China and Russia and the continuing large-scale U.S. presence in the region, the Middle East needs to be understood as a place of intense regional contestation and of great power competition. A U.S.-Israeli dialogue on the Middle East cannot be confined to the Middle East. It must focus on the global agendas of both Russia and China.

U.S.-Israel discussions on Russia: The United States and Israel would benefit from formalizing their discussions on Russia in the Middle East. They could do so through a dedicated working group that looks not just at day-to-day crisis management but also at the core strategic questions, which are simultaneously regional and global in nature.

Contributors

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Note: The report is a summary of discussions. Not all participants in the Working Group agree with every point made in the report. Other individuals not included below have contributed to the Working Group, and the participants are grateful to them for their expertise and insight.



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