

**Bar-Ilan University**  
**Begin – Sadat Center for Strategic Studies**

**Middle East Security Studies No. 120**

# **The Return of the Russian Bear to the Middle East**

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## Executive Summary

On September 30, 2015, the nature of Russia's involvement in the Syrian crisis underwent a sea change, as the Russian air force attacked rebel and Islamic State targets. This was the first time since the Soviet-Afghan War that Russian forces had been in action beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union. This military engagement highlighted the change that has occurred in Russian foreign policy in the international arena in general, and the Middle East in particular, since Putin's return to the presidency in May 2012. The new policy is marked by a forceful stance aimed at advancing Russia's national and security interests, even at the price of confrontation with the West, as evident in the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula.

This study examines Russia's activity in the Middle East, from the provision to the Syrian regime of a diplomatic umbrella and military support unprecedented in its scope and power; through increased military and security cooperation with Iran; to attempts to broaden ties with the region's Sunni states, alongside growing hostility to Turkey. It will include an examination of President Putin's outlook on Russia's place and role in the global system, and a close analysis of the various considerations and interests, both domestic and foreign, which drive Russia's actions. Finally, the study also looks at the direct and indirect implications for Israel.

The study's main conclusion is that, despite its economic difficulties and the decision to withdraw a large part of its forces from Syria, Russia under Putin is once again becoming a significant and influential actor in the Middle East, with Syria serving as an opportunity to demonstrate its status and potential impact, while exploiting America's reduced involvement in the region. For Israel, this development creates a mixed balance of dangers and opportunities. On the one hand, Russia is providing direct aid to the radical axis led by Iran, which might lead to the latter strengthening its regional position and upgrading its military capabilities, and might limit Israel's freedom of action. On the other hand, this new reality might offer Israel opportunities to demonstrate its value to Western states, to form coalitions with Sunni states, and restore its relations with Turkey.

In any case, Israel needs to display sensitivity and caution so as not to harm Russian interests and goals in the region. In parallel, it needs to make use of the relations between the two states, and of those between President Putin and Prime Minister Netanyahu, in order to prevent misunderstandings in military affairs, and as a channel for delivering messages to the radical side, particularly during crises.

# The Return of the Russian Bear to the Middle East

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## Introduction: Russian Foreign Policy

Since Putin's return for a third term as president, in May 2012, Russia has clearly adopted a more forceful approach in advancing its interests and goals in the international arena. At the heart of this shift has been Russia's ambition to reclaim a central role on the global stage, and to be recognized again as an international superpower. Russia has thus taken an aggressive stance on a series of issues, relying on its military power (including its nuclear capabilities), the vast energy sources at its disposal, and its status as permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, where it wields a veto.<sup>1</sup> This policy is fundamentally different from the period of the Medvedev presidency (2008-2012), which was largely characterized by a softer stance toward the West, as expressed by the "reset" of relations with the United States.

Over a series of speeches, interviews, and articles, Putin has laid out his worldview on the current international system and on the policy required of Russia.<sup>2</sup> In his view, the international system is in the midst of an extended ongoing crisis, largely the fault of the United States, marked by a poor economic situation, internal instability in many countries, and the threat of extremist Sunni Islamist terror. Moreover, the United States is working methodically to weaken Russia, acts unfairly toward it (by enacting a double standard), and threatens to undermine its influence even within the area of the former Soviet Union, seen as the most important region in the circle of influence of Russian foreign policy. This American approach is expressed, among other ways, in its support for internal revolutionary processes aimed at regime change and at advancing pro-Western interests, under the cover of humanitarian aid; in its attempts to extend NATO and the European Union toward Russia's borders; and in its missile defense program in Eastern Europe.

In order to respond to these threats, according to Putin, Russia must act to balance America's dominance by taking a more proactive approach in the international arena, and promoting a bi-polar global situation. This involves strengthening various international institutions in which US power is constrained (such as the UN Security Council, the G20 group of major economies, and so on), and forging cooperation with other sources of power, headed by the BRICS states (Brazil, India, China, and South Africa).<sup>3</sup>

In Putin's view, Russia has special interests throughout large parts of the former Soviet Union,<sup>4</sup> stemming from historical legacy, from the vital importance of the region for national security, and from the fact that some 25 million Russians live in these areas. Thus any attempt by one of these countries to join NATO or the European Union, or to allow Western forces to take up positions in its territory, represents a red line for Moscow, which would force it to take preventative steps.

Putin believes that Russia must avoid a situation in which it is **led down the garden path** by the West, as for example happened under **President** Medvedev (seemingly in opposition to Putin's wishes, then serving as Prime Minister) when Russia refrained from using its veto to block the Security Council resolution on Libya in March 2011, which allowed the west to use force against the Gaddafi regime.<sup>5</sup> Putin emphasizes his willingness to cooperate with the West, but as long as the latter continues to display condescension and hostility toward Russia, this will not be possible. It is significant that he tends to compare the current situation with the period immediately following the Second World War, when new agreements had to be reached among the powers on the division of their areas of influence, as was done at Yalta in 1945.<sup>6</sup>

For Putin, the differences between Russia and the West are also evident in their respective understandings of democracy and international law. Thus Putin entirely rejects claims about human rights infringements in Russia and accusations that he is corrupt, and instead asserts that Russian democracy is not the same as that of Western states. He believes that Western states use international law in a manipulative fashion, adopting elements of it when these tally with their interests and objectives (as seen in the wars pursued by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq), while not hesitating to bypass the Security Council when they disagree with its decisions.<sup>7</sup>

Russia's conduct in the Ukrainian crisis, following the internal protests that erupted at the end of 2013, and which led to overthrow of the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, reflected the shift in Russia's foreign policy after Putin's return to the presidency. From the Russian perspective, the crisis embodied all of its concerns about Western encroachment toward its borders, and about the harm inflicted on its vital interests, and also marked a nadir in its bilateral relations with United States, which were already strained.<sup>8</sup> Russia even accused the United States of aiding opposition forces in Ukraine, and of in effect being behind Yanukovich's removal from power.<sup>9</sup>

Russia's response comprised a series of steps, foremost among them the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (following a referendum held in Crimea, in which annexation garnered the support of around 96 percent of voters), with no overt use of force (although seemingly with covert provision of military aid); further steps to actualize annexation (such as imposition of **a single, Russian currency**); and the demonstrative deployment of military forces on the border with Ukraine. In parallel, Russia advanced steps to destabilize Eastern and Southern Ukraine, home to many Russian speakers. In these areas, separatist groups (with covert Russian support) organized protests and disturbances, and succeeded in gaining control over a number of regions.<sup>10</sup>

Russia gaining control over another country's territory—a contravention of the December 1994 Budapest Memorandum, in which Russia and the United States gave assurances to respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine—represented a direct challenge from Moscow to the international norms that have taken shape in recent decades, under the leadership of the West. In response, the United States and the European Union imposed a range of economic sanctions on tens of Russian companies and individuals, some of them close to Putin.<sup>11</sup> In any case, more than two years after the crisis began there is still no diplomatic solution on the horizon, despite a series of ceasefire agreements reached between the opposing sides, and thousands of casualties. Russia is continuing with its annexation of Crimea, and continues to provide economic and military aid to separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine, while the West is determined to maintain the imposition of sanctions until Russia is prepared to return to the status quo ante.<sup>12</sup>

Developments in the Middle East over the last five years have caused Russia to lose important assets in the region, and from its perspective have led to a real threat not only to its status in the region, but also to its own national security. At the same time, alongside these challenges, the new reality also offers an opportunity for Russia to demonstrate its military might and diplomatic strength, and to identify new relations and sources of influence. This being the case, certain changes are evident in Russia's Middle East policy and actions. These can be seen in its willingness, for the first time since the Soviet-Afghan War, to use military force beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union; in its growing cooperation with Iran; and concurrently in its attempts to increase its presence among the states which until recently were considered allies of the United States (Egypt foremost among them). These developments may have far-reaching consequences not just for the civil war in Syria, but for the region as a whole, for the dynamic between international powers, for international involvement in the region, for Israel's relations with Russia, and for Israel's freedom of action.

This paper offers an in-depth description of the characteristics of Russia's involvement in Syria, with a focus on the military aid and diplomatic-security umbrella it provides for the Assad regime. It also describes and analyzes the developing relations between Russia and Iran, and Russia's actions aimed at strengthening its foothold among other states in the region, which form another central plank

in Moscow's new Middle East policy. Finally, the paper examines the balance of challenges and opportunities faced by Israel in light of the dramatic changes in Russia's conduct in the region.

## A Security Umbrella for the Syrian Regime

Since the outbreak of riots in Syria in March 2011, Russia has sided with the Assad regime, providing it with military and diplomatic aid which has in effect served as its lifeline. This chapter will describe the various aspects of Russia's support for the Syrian regime, from aerial attacks and the supply of weapons systems to the decision to withdraw most of its military forces; via the halting of the planned American attack in autumn 2013 after the use of chemical weapons against the rebels; and finally, to the blocking of developments at the Security Council, and attempts to foster direct talks between the warring sides.

### Military Aid to the Regime

From the summer of 2015 onwards, there has been a notable increase in the extent of Russian involvement in the civil war in Syria, which peaked with the launch of an aerial bombing campaign on September 30.<sup>13</sup> This rise was most prominently seen in the establishment of the Hmeimim military base adjacent to the port city of Latakia, and in the deployment of advanced weapons systems in Syria.<sup>14</sup> At its strongest, the Russian military presence in Syria included around 70 warplanes (of types Su-24, Su-25, Su-30, Su-34, and Su-35); dozens of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs); combat and transport helicopters (types Mi-17, Mi-24, Mi-35, and Ka-52); advanced air defense systems (SA-22 and S-400); electronic warfare systems; artillery; T-90 battle tanks; warships and submarines; and around 4,000 troops.<sup>15</sup>

In August 2015 the two countries signed an agreement (unusually, published by the Russian government) which permitted Russia to maintain an unlimited military presence in Syria for an unlimited period. This agreement paved the way for the launch of Russia's military campaign about a month later, and underlined the total dependence of the Syrian regime on Russia.<sup>16</sup>

In mid-March 2016, Russia began withdrawing a large part of its military forces from Syria, but left in place its military bases at Tartus and Hmeimim (the significance of the decision to withdraw will be discussed later in this chapter), as well as its air defense systems, chief among them the S-400. Announcing the decision, Putin declared his belief that "our security forces' mission has been fully completed, and has transformed the regime's struggle against world terror," creating the conditions to begin a reconciliation process within the country.<sup>17</sup> Despite the decision to withdraw, Russia continues to supply significant military aid to the Syrian army. According to published accounts, in recent weeks Russia has delivered combat helicopters meant to replace the warplanes that have been withdrawn, and which are better suited for supporting the Syrian army's ground campaign against Islamic State and the Nusra Front. In addition, in mid-April Russia transferred artillery units to northern Syria, around Aleppo, in a move that seems to be the first step in expanded military support for the Syrian army's attempts to retake the city.<sup>18</sup> In response, US Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes has made clear that Washington is worried by reports of continued Russian military aid to the Assad regime, and the secretary-general of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, has stated that Russia still maintains a significant military presence in Syria.<sup>19</sup>

It should be noted that both the escalation of Russian activity in Syria and its decision to withdraw forces took the United States and its allies by surprise.<sup>20</sup> The fact that the West was once again surprised by aggressive steps taken by Russia (after failing to anticipate the takeover of Crimea just 18 months

earlier)<sup>21</sup> demonstrates Washington's underestimation of Putin's determination to use all means at his disposal to further Russia's strategic and defense goals.

Some seven months after the beginning of the campaign, it seems that the aerial attacks can be divided into three main phases. In the first phase, which lasted from the beginning of the campaign to the middle of November 2015, Russia carried out around 50 aerial attacks daily, on average.<sup>22</sup> On October 7, Russia even carried out, for the first time, an attack using cruise missiles (26 of them), which were launched from the Caspian Sea—a distance of some 1,500 kilometers.<sup>23</sup> Symbolically, this attack took place on Putin's 63rd birthday; Russia sought to send a message not only about its military power and the seriousness of its intentions in Syria, but also about Putin's image as a leader who will not hesitate to use force to execute his policy (unlike Obama).

Additionally, the use of cruise missiles seems to have been an expression of the Russian army's greatly-improved technological and operational capabilities since the campaign in Georgia in August 2008. And Syria also seems to have been used as a testing ground for new systems and weaponry, previously untried in combat (for example, Su-34 and Su-35 warplanes, cruise missiles, the S-400 air defense system, and the Krasukha-4 electronic warfare system); and also as a practice ground for combat tactics and logistics, which seem to have been planned for months (for example, the coordination of the aerial attacks with the Syrian army's ground operations).<sup>24</sup>

The second phase lasted around three and a half months, from mid-November through the end of February, when a ceasefire was agreed that led to a dramatic reduction in the scale of Russian attacks. Russia's belief that Islamic State was behind the bombing that brought down the Russian civilian airliner over Sinai on October 31, killing all 224 passengers and crew members,<sup>25</sup> led to a change in the scope and especially in the targets of the Russian attacks, which became far more focused on Islamic State. Thus, on November 17-18, Russia carried out 253 offensive sorties (in contrast with a daily average of 50 previously). Some of these attacks were carried out by strategic bombers (types Tu-95MS, Tu-160, and Tu-22M3), and Russia also launched tens of cruise missiles.<sup>26</sup>

The scale of attacks may have dropped subsequently, but it appears that there continued to be a greater focus on Islamic State targets, in particular oil fields and tankers, than in the first phase of the campaign. Thus, for example, around two months after the launch of the campaign, Russia announced that its attacks against Islamic State oil smuggling had succeeded in halving the organization's income, from \$3 million a day to \$1.5 million, in addition to the damage caused to dozens of refineries and oil fields. Russian military sources have claimed that, by mid-March 2016, Russia had succeeded in destroying around 3,000 oil tankers and 209 oil production facilities, and had killed around 2,000 terrorists and 17 field commanders.<sup>27</sup>

In parallel, Russia acted quickly to leverage the Paris terror attacks in order to increase cooperation with France in the fight against Islamic State. President Putin instructed Russian naval units stationed in the Mediterranean to act in concert with the French navy "like allies." The Kremlin even announced that, following a phone conversation between Putin and Hollande, it was agreed that the two countries would upgrade relations and coordination between their armed forces and security agencies in actions against terror groups in Syria.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond the military aspects, it seems that, from Russia's perspective, partnering with France in the campaign against Islamic State (as with other Western states, headed by Germany and Britain) carries

great foreign policy importance. This cooperation has the potential to erode the sanctions imposed against Moscow by the European Union following the Ukrainian crisis, which even led Paris to cancel the sale of Mistral assault ships to Russia.<sup>29</sup>

Alongside the military campaign, over the last five years Russia has continued to supply arms to the regime in order to help the Syrian army maintain its capability to fight the rebels, as the lengthy conflict has **depleted** Syria's weapon and ammunition supplies. It has been reported that Russia has supplied the regime with armored vehicles, air defense systems, UAVs, electronic warfare systems, spare parts, air force ordinance, anti-tank missiles, ammunition, and more. According to these reports, Russian military and intelligence experts have conducted reconnaissance using UAVs, to help Syrian forces locate rebel troops and target them precisely.<sup>30</sup>

In an interview with Russian media, President Assad claimed that military purchase agreements signed between Russia and Syria prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 2011 were only fulfilled afterwards. According to Assad, the countries subsequently signed new agreements on military cooperation and arms purchases, in accordance with the campaign being waged by the Syrian army against the rebels.<sup>31</sup>

For its part, Russia rejects outright the claim that its military aid to the Assad regime is an infraction of sanctions imposed by the West. For Moscow, these are illegal sanctions which were not authorized by the Security Council; and in any case, it supplies only defensive weaponry. In Putin's words, "Russia is supplying arms to a lawful regime, and thus is not in contravention of international law."<sup>32</sup> However, Russia did refrain from supplying Syria with its advanced S-300 air defense system, despite reports that the two countries had signed a deal for the system in 2010 to the tune of \$900 million.<sup>33</sup> Only following Turkey's downing of the Russian warplane did Russia change its policy, and deployed S-400 advanced air defense systems in Syria.<sup>34</sup> However, Russia did not sell the system to Syria and it is under the responsibility of the Russian units deployed in the country. It would seem that, in addition to operational concerns, deploying these systems was intended to demonstrate that Russia would not abide threats to its aircraft from any state. In the future, they may enable it to declare parts of Syrian airspace as no-fly zones, and thereby limit the operational freedom of coalition aircraft.

In sum, despite the doldrums at the beginning of the campaign, it now appears, some nine months on—during which Russian aircraft conducted more than 9,000 sorties, and around 100 cruise missiles were launched against Islamic State and opposition targets—that Russia's military actions have begun to bear fruit. According to Russian military sources, the Syrian army has succeeded in retaking more than 400 towns and villages in the north and south of the country. At the end of January, it conquered the strategic city of Sheikh Maskin, close to the border with Jordan, after several days of Russian air attacks. It managed to surround almost completely the key city of Aleppo (in the country's north-west), and to cut off most of the opposition forces' supply lines. And at the end of March 2016, it regained control of Palmyra, saving some of the city's antiquities from destruction by Islamic State.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, Joseph Dunford, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, gave an indication of the achievements of the Syrian army when he stated that the Russian air attacks against the rebels had successfully stabilized the Assad regime, which had retaken "a small part of the territory," and that the regime, "which had previously been in a bad way, is now much better off."<sup>36</sup>

For now, the effect of the decision to withdraw forces on the scope of Russian military and operational aid, as well as on the Syrian army's ability to maintain its momentum on the battlefield, remains unclear.

In any case, it appears that the decision was driven by both strategic and operational-tactical considerations. On a strategic level, the decision to withdraw forces was taken after Russia had successfully positioned itself as an important partner in the international struggle against Islamic State, and as the dominant voice in deciding Syria's future. Additionally, Russia hopes that this decision will improve its image on the international stage (and perhaps help ease sanctions against it), and improve its relations with the Arab world.

Tactically, the withdrawal of forces conveyed to all sides in the conflict that Moscow is interested in reaching an agreement to end the civil war. Russia is signaling to Assad that, despite the improvement in his situation and the stabilization of his regime, he must display flexibility in talks with the opposition, and must not play for time in the hope of making more gains on the ground. Russia has no interest, at least for now, in helping him continue fighting with no clear end in sight and becoming entangled in a bloody struggle lasting years, like the wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan (both those of the Soviet Union during the 1980s, and of the United States more recently). It seems that Moscow is convinced that no significant change can be made to the existing situation without dispatching large numbers of ground troops, in addition to continued air attacks.

It is possible that Russia is hinting that, in light of the reality created in Syria in recent years, the best option currently available is a division of the country into provinces under some form of federal rule, in which Assad will rule the coastal areas and the main Aleppo-Homs-Damascus metropolitan-economic axis.<sup>37</sup> However, by maintaining its military bases in Tartus and Hmeimim, keeping at least hundreds of soldiers in Syria, and continuing to supply the Syrian army, Russia is also making clear that it has not abandoned Assad, and that it can easily resume military action against the opposition forces should the ceasefire and the conciliation talks fail. In this way, it hopes to deter the opposition from trying to exploit the withdrawal in order to renew the fighting. Putin has clearly stated that, should the need arise, Russia could redeploy its forces to the same extent as previously within hours.<sup>38</sup>

### Diplomatic Support—The Security Council and the Agreement on Chemical Weapons

The gulf between Russia and the United States regarding Assad has been viscerally expressed in Security Council debates, which have become a proxy battleground for the two. While the United States has tried to advance resolutions that would allow the use of force and the imposition of sanctions against the Assad regime, Russia has repeatedly blocked these attempts, lest they also lend international legitimacy to measures against Russia itself. In tandem with China, Russia has vetoed Western proposals on four occasions: October 4, 2011; February 4, 2012; July 19, 2012; and May 22, 2014.<sup>39</sup>

It's worth noting that, since the turn of the century, Russia has used its veto 11 times, as opposed to only twice throughout the 1990s.<sup>40</sup> This fact indicates the shift in Russian foreign policy since Putin became president, and shows how Russia uses international institutions, especially the United Nations, to limit American dominance.

Russia's explanation for its use of the veto is that no country has the right to interfere with the internal affairs of another, and only the Syrian people have the right to decide who rules them.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Putin has argued, events in Libya since the overthrow of Gaddafi, which led to the disintegration of state institutions and to a flow of weapons to terror organizations, demonstrate the West's tragic fallacy in this regard, and its shortsightedness.<sup>42</sup> No less importantly, the lack of a formal Security Council

resolution against the Assad regime affords Russia the moral and legal legitimacy to continue supporting him, and to refuse to abide by Western sanctions.

The United States was scathingly critical of Russia's vetoes, claiming that its stance allows Assad to continue slaughtering his own people. The harshest response came from Susan Rice, former US ambassador to the United Nations, after Russia's second veto: "The United States is disgusted that two Council members are preventing us from doing the only job we have to do here... The blood that will be spilled will be on their hands."<sup>43</sup>

One concrete expression of Russia's support for the Assad regime came during the chemical weapons crisis in Syria in August-September 2013, which took place at the height of increased tensions between Russia and the United States after Edward Snowden was given refuge in Russia.<sup>44</sup> On August 21, more than 1,400 Syrian rebels were killed in a chemical attack on a Damascus suburb. The United States held the regime responsible, and threatened it with military action. On August 31, Obama announced that he had decided to take limited military action in Syria, for which he would seek approval from Congress.<sup>45</sup>

As expected, Russia rejected these accusations entirely, fiercely opposed any possibility of a military attack on the regime, and blocked any action at the Security Council. Putin called the American accusations "nonsense"; claimed that it was the rebels who carried out the chemical attack in order to provoke an external military intervention, because of recent successes of government forces; and stated that any attack without Security Council authorization would be a contravention of international law. He declared that, should America attack, Russia would stand by Syria, to which it was already providing arms, economic and humanitarian aid.<sup>46</sup>

As it turned out, the hiatus that ensued as Obama sought Congress's approval, along with the lack of broad international support for an attack,<sup>47</sup> and the short meeting between Obama and Putin at the G20 summit in St. Petersburg (on September 6), all served to facilitate a compromise between the powers. Thus on September 14, after three days of talks in Geneva between the foreign ministers Lavrov and Kerry, Russia and the United States signed an agreed framework for the destruction of Syria's chemical arsenal, which was approved unanimously by the Security Council three weeks later.<sup>48</sup>

Although the deal forced Assad to give up his strategic chemical weapons, it also demonstrated Russia's determined support for his regime. It was seen as a success for Russia in halting the proposed US attack, which would have altered the dynamics of the civil war, and in maintaining the Assad regime, while Russia also bolstered its position as a partner in the international community, responsible for implementing the resolution. On a personal level, too, Putin gained political capital from his involvement in the crisis. While Obama was once again portrayed in the media as hesitant and easily-deterred, Putin appeared to be the big winner. On social networks in Syria, comments appeared along the lines of "Putin took care of Obama" and "Russian knockout."<sup>49</sup>

## Mediation Efforts

In addition to **scuppering** Security Council resolutions and preventing an American attack, Russia also invested diplomatic efforts in reaching agreement with the United States on a solution to the crisis, and in promoting talks between the warring sides in Syria. Its aim was to demonstrate to all the relevant actors Russia's importance and centrality for any potential arrangement, as well as to reaffirm its view

that the Assad regime is the only relevant entity with which discussions should be held, and that there can be no viable arrangement without it.

So far, there have been a great number of meetings and conferences attended by the international powers, the United Nations, Turkey, regional states, and representatives of the Syrian regime and opposition. The first meeting was held in June 2012, and the second in January 2014, both in Geneva. After a gap of another year, in January 2015 a third round of talks was held in Moscow between representatives of the regime and the opposition.<sup>50</sup>

Further mediation efforts took place in Vienna in October-November 2015, incorporating several rounds of talks. The first, on October 23, involved the foreign ministers of Russia, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. The second and third meetings, on October 30 and November 14, were attended by representatives of a wider group of states, foremost among them Iran.<sup>51</sup> As Russia's chief ally in the fight against the rebels and support for the regime, the involvement of Iran was an important achievement for Russia, and strengthened its hand at the talks. It should be noted that Assad made a brief surprise visit to Moscow just before the first meeting, seemingly to discuss with Putin the conditions for a political solution and for the continuation of the military campaign.<sup>52</sup>

Talks between the powers paved the way for the groundbreaking resolution adopted by the Security Council in December 2015 to adopt a roadmap for ending the civil war in Syria. The main points of the resolution, which was unanimous (including support from Russia and China), are as follows: a ceasefire should be enacted, and talks on political change launched in January 2016; Islamic State and the Nusra Front are defined as terror organizations, barred from participating in the process, and against whom the military campaign should be continued; a temporary government should be established within six months; and free elections, under United Nations supervision, should be held within 18 months.<sup>53</sup>

The resolution was a symbolic achievement for the United States, as this was the first time it successfully garnered formal, unanimous support for its diplomatic efforts. However, the wording signifies a significant gain for Russia, as the resolution makes no mention of the main bone of contention with Washington—the future of Assad himself, and his participation in the transitional process and the elections. Foreign Minister Lavrov declared after the resolution that “only the Syrian people can decide its future, including the fate of President Assad.”<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, not all the opposition groups in Syria were party to the agreement (and certainly not Islamic State and the Nusra Front), and so there are many question marks over its practical implementation and enforcement among all the rebel parties.

At the end of January 2016, attempts were made to hold another round of talks between the warring parties, which would have been the first step on the Security Council roadmap. These meetings showed once again the extent of the disagreement and distrust between the international powers and between the sides in Syria, with the gap seemingly insurmountable at present. One of the main differences concerns the representation of the various opposition groups (some supported by the United States and Saudi Arabia, others by Russia) and of the Kurdish minority in Syria (whose participation in the talks is strongly opposed by Turkey); another, the format of the talks themselves (the delegations sat in separate rooms). As a result, the talks were halted after just a few days.<sup>55</sup>

A breakthrough came at the end of February, when Russia and the United States reached agreement for a ceasefire between regime forces and the opposition, which went into effect on February 27, and which received backing from a Security Council resolution. It was also agreed that the military campaign

would continue against Islamic State, the Nusra Front, and other jihadist organizations, and the two powers would coordinate their military actions in this regard.<sup>56</sup> Russia also delivered a public warning to Assad not to violate the ceasefire, and by mid-March it began withdrawing most of its forces from Syria, as already described.<sup>57</sup>

However, as of the end of April, the ceasefire appears on the verge of collapse, due to growing infractions on the ground and renewed outbreaks of fighting (albeit on a relatively small scale) between the Syrian army and the rebels (mainly around Aleppo), and to the threats from opposition representatives that they would no longer take part in reconciliation talks being held in Switzerland. As a result, the international powers reached another agreement for a short ceasefire in the suburbs of Damascus and Latakia; but Aleppo was not included, seemingly due to Russian opposition, in light of the Syrian army's efforts to retake the city.<sup>58</sup>

In any case, it appears that the ceasefire agreements represent an achievement for Russian policy in Syria in recent months, effectively demonstrating Moscow's political and military dominance in the country, as well as its influence over the Syrian regime. Despite this, the road to a political solution in Syria looks to be long and strewn with hurdles, to a large extent because of the question over Assad's future, and the disunity among rebel groups. For now, Russia maintains its support for Assad's continued personal rule, mainly as the "least bad" available option. In Russia's view, there is no other figure or group on the horizon who might bring about an end to the civil war and reunite Syria (or at least, large parts of it), while at the same time ensuring Russia's special status and influence in the country.

## Increased Cooperation with Iran—A Marriage of Convenience

Putin's visit to Iran in November 2015 (his first since 2007), to participate in a conference of natural gas exporters and meet with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, symbolized the new relations between the two countries, which have been through ups and downs in recent years. During the visit, in a dig(sting) at Obama, Putin emphasized that "unlike others, we would never stab our allies in the back."<sup>59</sup> At the same time, given the countries' past and very different outlooks, there is a question as to whether this is a temporary, isolated confluence of interests, or the birth of a new alliance that will change the balance of power in the Middle East over the next few years.

Russian-Iranian relations have been marked by mutual suspicion over the last five years, largely because of Russia's support for the 2010 Security Council resolution to impose additional sanctions on Iran, and its unilateral decision to halt the sale of the S-300 system.<sup>60</sup> These steps drew fierce Iranian criticism, and Iran even submitted a damages claim for \$4 billion against Russia in the Court of Arbitration in Geneva (despite the deal itself being valued at around just \$800 million).

Regional developments, in particular concerns over the possible collapse of the Syrian regime, and associated consequences for the anti-Western axis in the Middle East, alongside the decline in the United States' status and image in the region and the nuclear deal, created a confluence of interests which led to a flowering in Russian-Iranian relations over the last year.<sup>61</sup> This florescence is evident in several domains:

- **Security**—In January 2015, during a visit to Iran by Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu, the two countries signed a military cooperation agreement, which apparently paved the way for security ties between the two countries to be ramped up throughout the year.<sup>62</sup> Shortly afterwards, in April 2015, Putin signed a decree permitting the sale of S-300 systems to Iran. According to Foreign Minister Lavrov, given the progress made in talks over the nuclear deal with Iran, the restriction on selling these systems was no longer needed, particularly in light of the large financial losses incurred by Russia's military industries, and the threats facing Iran.<sup>63</sup> During the first quarter of 2016, Russia began supplying components of the system to Iran, and Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin declared that the deal would be completed by the year's end. He added that Iran had agreed to withdraw its legal claim.<sup>64</sup>

The two countries are in talks over the sale of other weapons systems, including warplanes and T-90 tanks. Putin's aide for military-technological cooperation, Kuzin, has expressed Russia's hopes to expand military ties, stating that "when all the sanctions and limitations are removed, there will be significant progress in our military-industrial cooperation."<sup>65</sup> The upgrade in military cooperation and coordination was also evident in the two visits made by the Iranian defense minister to Moscow, in February and April 2016.<sup>66</sup>

- **Operational**—In recent months, the two countries have raised the level of their operational and intelligence coordination in Syria and Iraq. It seems that the foundations for this were laid during the visit to Russia apparently made by the commander of the Al-Quds Brigade, Qassem Suleimani, in July 2015, in contravention of a Security Council ban on him leaving Iran.<sup>67</sup> These upgraded relations are evident in the establishment of a joint intelligence center in Iraq (for

Syria, Iraq, and Hezbollah), and close coordination of military operations against Islamic State and other opposition forces in Syria. Russia has provided air strikes and artillery bombardments to soften opposition, while Iran (with help from Hezbollah) has provided the necessary ground support to the Syrian army.<sup>68</sup> In mid-April, Suleimani apparently made another secret visit to Russia, to discuss the continuation of the campaign in Syria after Russia's announcement of its withdrawal of forces.<sup>69</sup>

- **Economic**—In recent months, Russia has made notable efforts to expand its economic ties with Iran, in an attempt to create facts on the ground following the removal of sanctions. Putin announced that Russia would extend a loan of \$5 billion to Iran to promote business between the two countries.<sup>70</sup> In parallel, the Russian energy minister, who heads the Russian-Iranian joint governmental commission, declared a goal of expanding bilateral trade from its 2015 level of \$1.6 billion to \$10 billion a year (in 2012, the sum was \$3.5 billion).<sup>71</sup> Russia's effort bore fruit during Putin's visit to Iran, as the two countries signed a clutch of economic agreements, including one for the construction of electricity generating stations, and one for electrifying some 500 kilometers of rail track in Iran.<sup>72</sup>

Overall, it appears that the expansion of relations between Russia and Iran is the result of a meeting of interests and opportunities, rather than an ideological partnership based on a common worldview. For both countries, in the current Syrian reality, cooperation between them is seemingly the only way to prevent the collapse of the Assad regime, to help it maintain control of the coastal strip, and to halt the spread of Islamic State. Iran also sees Russia as a ready source for the rapid procurement of military equipment and nuclear technology.

However, there do seem to be limitations on Russian-Iranian cooperation. First and foremost is the historical suspicion between the two of possible betrayal, going back decades, if not centuries. For many Iranians, since the time of the Tsars Russia has been a threat to their country's territorial integrity, as evident in the wars fought between the two.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, Iran fears that greater Russian involvement in Syria will make it a central actor in deciding the future of the regime, enabling it to pursue a compromise with the West, even if that means sacrificing Assad and harming Iranian interests in the region.

In Russia, the fear is of the possible consequences that the removal of sanctions might have for economic cooperation between the countries, and for the global energy market. The expected penetration by Western and Asian companies (particularly Chinese companies) into the Iranian market, and the expected increase in Iranian exports of oil and natural gas, will likely reduce the dependence of European states on oil and gas supplies from Russia. Furthermore, the two countries have for years competed with each other, openly and clandestinely, for geopolitical and economic dominance and influence over Central Asian states.<sup>74</sup> Russia also has to balance its desire for more extensive relations with Iran against its desire to increase its foothold among Sunni states in the region, who all seek a reduced Iranian influence over Middle Eastern affairs.

In conclusion, it seems that Russia and Iran both reached the conclusion that, in the current climate, cooperation with each other is essential for safeguarding their respective interests in the Middle East and the international arena. It is therefore reasonable to expect an even greater level of strategic and

security cooperation between them in the near future.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, given their history, it is still too early to say whether this is the birth of a new alliance that will continue for many years.

## A Stronger Foothold Among Sunni States

In parallel with its ties with the radical axis states, Russia is working to gain a stronger foothold among Sunni states, especially Egypt. For Moscow, the deterioration in the relationship between Cairo and Washington, alongside widespread disappointment with America's conduct on the Syrian civil war, the fight against Islamic State, and the nuclear agreement with Iran, have all served to create an opportunity to improve relations with these countries. Furthermore, while in recent years Russia has made use of its existing military and nuclear assets, over the last few months it has exploited the fight against Islamic State in order to promote defense and intelligence cooperation with the Sunni states.

### Egypt—Upgrading Security and Economic Ties

The last two years have seen a significant upgrading of cooperation between Russia and Egypt. Examples include a series of senior-level meetings, including three visits made by President el-Sisi to Russia;<sup>76</sup> the conclusion of agreements for the sale of advanced weapons systems; joint military exercises; and steps toward economic and nuclear cooperation. During Putin's visit to Egypt in February 2015, a memorandum of understanding was signed on Russian involvement in building a nuclear reactor, as were a number of economic and trade agreements.<sup>77</sup>

The cherry on the cake was the agreement for Egypt to purchase the Antey-2500 air defense system, an upgraded version of the S-300. According to reports in the Russian media, this deal is valued at around \$1 billion, and includes three divisions and a command center. The delivery of the system is expected to be completed in 2016, while components of it have seemingly already been delivered to Egypt.<sup>78</sup> In March 2015, the two countries also signed a military cooperation agreement, and in June 2015 held joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean. Last November, the Russian defense minister stated that they might also conduct joint anti-terror exercises. In addition, talks are ongoing for the supply of other weapons systems, including MiG-35 aircraft, Ka-52 helicopters, aircraft and helicopter defense systems, communications equipment, and more.<sup>79</sup>

The increased level of cooperation serves both country's interests. In addition to economic outcomes, Russia hopes that stronger ties with this key Middle Eastern state will improve its international and regional standing, reinforcing its status as a major player in regional developments, and possibly also enabling it to serve as a bridge between the radical and moderate axes. Egypt is interested in diversifying its international relations, and in reducing its dependence on US aid. In part, this is a reaction to the United States' stance on the overthrow of Mubarak, and its criticism of the Egyptian military establishment for removing Morsi and taking power via non-democratic means, a response that led to a partial suspension of US military aid, and to the cancelation of joint military exercises.

Overall, it would seem that the continued strengthening of this cooperation depends largely on Egypt, although there is a glass ceiling to the extent of relations between the two countries, at least for the next few years. This is mainly due to Egypt's dependence on American aid, and to the widespread use of Western armaments throughout the Egyptian armed forces.

## Saudi Arabia—Respect and Wariness

Relations between Moscow and Riyadh in recent years have been tense, due to differences between the two on a range of regional issues, chief among them Russia's support for Assad and its ties with Iran, Saudi Arabia's great regional rival. This tension has been exacerbated by Russia's attitude towards Sunni (not Shia) Islam as being an insurrectionist force in the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union and in the Caucasus, and as a threat to its own internal stability; by the competition between Russia and Saudi Arabia over the global oil market; and by the strained relations between Russia and the United States, Saudi Arabia's main arms supplier.<sup>80</sup>

Despite this, the latter half of 2015 saw signs of change in the bilateral relationship. It seems that a visit made to Russia in June 2015 by the Saudi crown prince and defense minister, Mohammed bin Salman, paved the way for new forms of cooperation between the two countries. According to media reports, during this visit six agreements were signed, in the areas of energy, defense, and nuclear power, among others.<sup>81</sup> Subsequently, it was agreed that Saudi Arabia would invest \$10 billion in projects in Russia, and in November 2015, the two signed a series of agreements on increased economic cooperation.<sup>82</sup>

There has also been an increased level of coordination between the leadership of the two countries. Putin met for the first time with King Salman bin Abdulaziz in mid-November, during the G20 summit, and the two also held several prior phone conversations.<sup>83</sup> The Saudi foreign minister expressed this trend in an interview with *Al-Hayat*, in which he said that despite differences regarding the Syrian issue and the supply of arms to Iran, the two countries need to expand their cooperation because of their common interests, which include oil, among other things.<sup>84</sup> The visits made to Russia by the Emir of Qatar and the King of Bahrain in early 2016, offer further testimony to the warming relations between Moscow and Riyadh.

It seems that, for Russia and Saudi Arabia, despite traditional tensions, the current realities of the Middle East provide opportunities for cooperation, given the growing threat to regional stability from Islamic State, and the implications for the global oil market of the lifting of sanctions on Iran and the likely rise in supply. Furthermore, closer relations serve both countries' political interests vis-à-vis the United States, although their motivations are different. For Russia, this is an entry into another state seen as being pro-American, with the potential for eroding Washington's influence in the region (the "zero-sum game"). For Saudi Arabia, this is a way for it to signal to the American administration its displeasure with the United States' conduct on the Syrian issue and in the nuclear negotiations with Iran, and that it has an alternative to being dependent on America.

In any case, the failure of previous attempts to improve cooperation in return for a change in Russia's policy toward Syria and Iran indicate the size of the gap between the two countries. Thus, in the medium to long term, it would seem that their different worldviews and conflicts of interests will prove too much of an obstacle to the development of a broad defense and economic relationship between Russia and Saudi Arabia.

## Jordan—Steps Toward Cooperation Against Islamic State

Russia's active role in the region in recent months has also brought increased cooperation with Jordan, one of the United States' closest Middle Eastern allies. Putin has held a number of meetings and

conversations with King Abdullah (who has made two visits to Russia, in August and November 2015), focusing, naturally, on the Syrian issue.<sup>85</sup> A more tangible expression of Russian-Jordanian cooperation came with the announcement from Foreign Minister Lavrov, on October 23, that the countries had agreed to coordinate their military activities in Syria, including air operations.<sup>86</sup> Subsequently, Russian presidential aide Yuri Ushakov proposed that military cooperation with Jordan be coordinated via the information and coordination center established in Baghdad.<sup>87</sup>

Prior to this, in March 2015 Russia and Jordan signed a deal estimated at around \$10 billion for the construction of a nuclear power plant in Jordan, including two units producing 1,000 megawatts each, by 2022. According to the terms of the deal, the Jordanian government will own 51 percent of the reactor, with the remaining 49 percent to be held by Rosatom, the Russian state atomic energy corporation. The terms also included a Jordanian commitment to buy fuel for the reactor from Russia for ten years.<sup>88</sup> However there are some question marks regarding Jordan's ability to pay without external aid.

Jordan's willingness to develop operational cooperation with Russia demonstrates the change in Russia's status and role in the region. Russia has become no less a significant actor than the United States in the fight against Islamic State, and any political solution to the Syrian crisis will require Moscow's agreement. However, as with Saudi Arabia, Jordan's dependence on American economic and military aid would indicate that the extent of its cooperation with Russia will remain limited, focusing mainly on operational coordination, and perhaps also on target intelligence activity against Islamic State.

## Hostility and Competition with Turkey

In recent months, relations between Russia and Turkey have been marked by mutual hostility and an exchange of accusations and threats, following the downing of the Russian Su-24 warplane by a Turkish air force F-16 on November 24, 2015. Although this was an isolated incident, which might have ended with the expression of regret issued by the Turkish leadership, it is indicative of the complex and charged relationship between the two countries, and even more so between their presidents, Putin and Erdogan. Not only are they both forceful leaders who have ruled their respective countries unchallenged since the early 2000s; for both of them, issues of personal and national pride play a vital role in their worldview and their decision making.

Russian-Turkish relations have been characterized in recent years by economic cooperation combined with tension and rivalry. On the one hand, there are large-scale economic ties in the fields of energy, food, tourism, construction, and more. Russia is Turkey's main energy supplier, providing 56 percent of its natural gas imports (another 19 percent come from Iran). In 2014, Turkey's energy imports from Russia, including oil and gas, were estimated at \$16.5 billion, representing 30 percent of all Turkey's energy imports, 65 percent of all imports from Russia, and 2.1 percent of its GNP.<sup>89</sup>

On the other hand, there are severe differences between the two countries regarding the Syrian regime and the Kurdish minority in Syria. While Erdogan has since 2011 called for the removal of Assad and for the use of force against his regime, Russia provides Assad with a defense umbrella and supports the inclusion of the Kurds in the reconciliation talks. Russia is suspicious of Turkey's actions in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and of its burgeoning economic ties with these countries. Other factors include the historic rivalry going back to Tsarist and Ottoman imperial times (which led to wars over control of the Black Sea and the Balkans), and Turkey's membership of NATO (it joined in 1952, during the Cold War). The violent conflicts that broke out at the beginning of April between Armenia and Azerbaijan—the former one of Russia's closest allies in the former Soviet Union, the latter supported by Turkey—surrounding the historic struggle for control of Nagorno-Karabakh are another source of friction between Moscow and Ankara.

This friction has been evident in exchanges of accusations between the two; in Turkish criticism of Russia's treatment of the Tatar minority in Crimea; and in Putin's response of publicly recognizing the Armenian holocaust.<sup>90</sup> Russia's military actions in Syria fanned the flames even further; in Turkey's view, Russia's main goal was to preserve the regime and damage the opposition. Moreover, Russian attacks against the Turkish minority in Syria were seen in Ankara as a direct blow against the Turkish state, which sees itself as responsible for their welfare.<sup>91</sup>

The shooting down of the Russian plane was not the first aerial incident between the two countries during this campaign. On November 3 and November 4, 2015, there were two incidents of Russian warplanes violating Turkish airspace. Russia claimed these were navigational errors, while the Turkish prime minister warned that the next violation would trigger open-fire protocols, and that "even if it's a bird, it will be shot down."<sup>92</sup>

The downing of the Su-24 led to mutual recriminations and to punitive steps by Russia. Turkey claimed that the airplane entered its airspace for 17 seconds, and did not respond to warnings. Erdogan expressed remorse over the incident, and said: "Had we known it was a Russian plane, we might have

warned it differently.” But he refrained from apologizing, and warned that Turkey would respond vigorously if its own aircraft were target by Russia in response.<sup>93</sup>

Russia, meanwhile, accused Turkey of a “stab in the back,” claiming that this was a pre-planned ambush and a “hostile” action. It was the Turkish plane that entered Syrian airspace, according to Russia, violating Syrian sovereignty and shooting down a Russian plane that was not even carrying air-to-air missiles.<sup>94</sup> Russia’s response was not just verbal: within a few days, it had deployed the S-400 air defense system in Syria.<sup>95</sup>

It also embarked on a series of punitive measures against Turkey: suspending military, cultural, and legal ties between the two countries, and imposing a number of economic sanctions. These included a ban on certain imports, including fruit and vegetables; limitations imposed on a number of Turkish organizations active in Russia; cancelation of charter flights between the two countries, and a recommendation to Russian tourism companies not to sell holidays in Turkey to Russian citizens; cancelation of the visa waiver given to Turkish citizens; and suspension of talks over construction of a natural gas pipeline from Russia to Europe via Turkey.<sup>96</sup>

Russia also accused Turkey of buying oil from Islamic State. It claimed there are three main routes for transferring oil from areas under Islamic State control in Syria and Iraq to Turkey. Russia also took the unusual step of naming members of Erdogan’s family allegedly involved in these deals for their own personal gain.<sup>97</sup> It is worth noting that Russia is careful to differentiate between the Turkish leadership and the Turkish people in such a way as to accentuate its desire to exact retribution from Erdogan personally. On a number of occasions Putin has stated that Russia has no problem with the Turkish people, just with its current leadership.<sup>98</sup> Meanwhile, the Russian media publishes articles denouncing Turkey on an almost daily basis. One such article reported on the financial support Turkey provides for the Tatar minority in Crimea, in order to undermine Russia’s standing in the Peninsula; another claimed that Turkish hackers had attacked a Russian minister’s Instagram page, portraying Ankara as a hostile threat to Moscow.<sup>99</sup>

In addition to its bilateral actions, Russia is also working to strengthen relations with Cyprus and Armenia, long-established rivals of Turkey, as well as deepening its bilateral ties with Greece under Tsipras. In early December 2015, Foreign Minister Lavrov visited Cyprus to discuss possibilities for greater cooperation, including with regard to the air campaign in Syria. In this context, it should be noted that the two countries had already signed an agreement, in February 2015, allowing Russian ships engaged in the fight against terror and against piracy to use Cypriot ports.<sup>100</sup>

Shortly afterwards, on December 23, Russia and Armenia signed an agreement to establish a unified air defense zone in the Caucasus, further to agreements signed with Kazakhstan and Belarus, and to talks being held by Moscow on this issue with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In the same month, Russia transferred 13 attack and transport helicopters to the Erebuni airbase in Armenia, which serves Russia’s aerial forces stationed in that country.<sup>101</sup>

In conclusion, it seems that despite the announcement that President Erdogan apologized, the relations between the two states will continue to be tense mainly because of the gaps regarding Syria and other regional issues in the Middle East and Central Asia. , Furthermore, it seems that, in Putin’s view, this course of action that he adopted against Turkey can strengthen his own image even further, at home

and abroad, as a strong leader who does not hesitate to use force measures to defend Russia's honor and interests, even if it hurts Russia economically (as with the Ukrainian crisis).

## Russia's Interests—Superpower Status, Security, and Stability

At the UN General Assembly in September 2015, Putin defined the main goals of Russia's military involvement in Syria: striking at Islamic terror in general, and Islamic State in particular; and aiding the Assad regime, which according to Putin is the only one capable of fighting Islamic extremists.<sup>102</sup> Despite these words, it appears that Russia has a much broader set of considerations, and that its support for the Syrian regime and its actions throughout the Middle East are driven by a range of strategic, political, defense, and economic interests.

From a broad perspective, this is another struggle within the superpower chess game for regional hegemony, notwithstanding the Russian foreign policy doctrine that the Middle East, in spite of its importance, is not within Russia's first circle of interests.<sup>103</sup> From Putin's perspective, the collapse of the Assad regime might seriously damage the region's anti-American axis, of which Syria is a key member, and create a situation in which most of the region's states, from Turkey to the Gulf (with the exception of Iran and, to a certain extent, Iraq), would be under the sway of the United States or its allies in the region.

Looking more narrowly at Syria, the Kremlin has come to the conclusion that Russian interests in the country can only be protected by maintaining the existing regime. These interests include the naval stronghold at Tartus, which serves as the Russian navy's only harbor outside the former Soviet Union. For Russia, this is a strategic imperative, both diplomatically and militarily, since the loss of Syria would leave it with no other footholds in Middle East (after losing Iraq and Libya). Moreover, for Russia it seems there is a direct connection between keeping Assad in place and protecting its own interests in the country. This is because it believes that, even if Assad were replaced by another member of the regime, this would not bring the civil war to an end, and might even cast Russia as betraying its allies. It may well be that Russia also believes that Assad has a personal commitment to its interests, which may not necessarily be true of anyone who replaces him.

In addition, the military campaign is intended to weaken the jihadist forces active in Syria, in particular Islamic State. This is due to perennial Russian fears of fundamentalist Sunni (but not Shia) Islam, to a large extent based on the fact that 12-13 percent of Russian residents today (around 20 million people) are Muslim; and also to historical instability in the Russian Caucasus.<sup>104</sup> The threats made by Islamic State against Russia, its propaganda efforts in the Caucasus, its announcement of a new official district of the organization established in the Northern Caucasus, and the affiliation of the "Caucasus Emirs" into its ranks—all have magnified the threat perceived by Moscow to its internal stability.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, in common with European countries, Russia is fears the return to its territory of large number of Islamic State fighters with Russian citizenship. Russian sources have repeatedly stated that more than 2,000 fighters from Russia and former Soviet states are in Syria, representing a real threat that they may return to their countries to commit terror attacks.<sup>106</sup>

At first, Russia downplayed the threat posed by Islamic State; but this threat grew ever larger as Islamic State gained momentum.<sup>107</sup> At the end of 2014, then, Russia decided to outlaw Islamic State (as well as the Nusra Front) and declare it to be a terror organization.<sup>108</sup> This is the context for Putin's comments regarding Russian Islamic State fighters in Syria, that "instead of waiting for them to return, it's better

that we help Assad fight them in Syria.”<sup>109</sup> Accordingly, even after withdrawing most of its forces from Syria, Russia continues to attack Islamic State targets, as well as other terror groups.

Competition with other powers, and economic considerations, also inform Russia’s interest in establishing a stronger foothold throughout the Middle East, including in states considered pro-American, headed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. It seems that Russia well understands that it cannot serve as a defense and economic backer to these countries to the extent that the United States was for many years. However, Russia views the perceived American weakness as a zero-sum game, and an opportunity for it to erode its rival’s status in the region.

Thus, Obama is seen as a hesitant leader who cannot be relied upon in a crisis, one who places the rights of people and the masses above his support for regimes.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, Obama’s ambition to shift the focus of American foreign policy to other arenas, in particular the pivot to Asia, arouses doubts among Middle Eastern rulers as to their ability to rely on the American defense umbrella as they used to. By contrast, Putin is portrayed as a determined and strong leader, interested in expanding Russia’s presence and actions in the region, who does not hesitate to use Russia’s military capabilities in order to protect his country’s interests, and who does not abandon his allies.

In addition to all this, it seems that Russian policy is also driven by internal political considerations. The financial crisis experienced by the Russian markets in recent years, as a result of the plummeting price of oil and Western sanctions, represents a growing internal challenge for Putin. However, it does not seem to be enough to truly threaten the stability of his rule, given his absolute control over Russia’s state institutions, security apparatus, and media. In any case, despite Putin’s promises that the crisis is temporary, the economic data indicate that it is deep and long-lasting, as evidenced by negative growth for the last two years, with forecasts for 2016 predicting that this will continue; by a continuing drop in real-term wages and in private consumption; and more.<sup>111</sup>

Against this backdrop, Putin hopes that his forceful foreign policies, as expressed in the Ukrainian crisis and the military campaign in Syria, will help bolster his position at home and defuse public criticism. This approach also invokes the Russian people’s patriotism and deep-seated antagonism toward the United States.<sup>112</sup> Thus, since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, Putin has enjoyed unprecedented public support in Russia (around 80 percent), and an October 2015 poll produced an 89.9 percent public approval rating (up slightly from 89.1 percent in July). These data represent a dramatic increase in public support for Putin, compared to the period preceding the presidential elections—in January 2012, two months before the elections, Putin (then prime minister) received an approval rating of just 58.8 percent.<sup>113</sup>

These numbers demonstrate that the attitude of Russian citizens toward Putin and his performance is largely influenced by a sense of pride in the international status Russia enjoys, in contrast to the nadir of the 1990s, while economic considerations are secondary. In any case, the polling data, and the Russian public’s ingrained nationalism, only serve to reinforce Putin’s natural tendency to pursue a forceful foreign policy on behalf of Russian interests in the international arena.

## Conclusion—Threats and Opportunities for Israel

Russia's heightened activity in the Middle East during the last two years, particularly its military action in Syria, did not emerge from thin air; it reflects changes in Russian foreign policy under Putin's leadership, since he returned to the presidency in May 2012. Putin's worldview is founded on the belief that Russia is a world power that should play an influential role in the global system, despite the West's hostility and systematic efforts to undermine it.<sup>114</sup>

Recent developments in the Middle East have created many threats to Russia, foremost among them the loss of strongholds in the region, and the fear of pro-American regimes gaining sway throughout the Middle East. But they also provided opportunities for Russia to increase its influence in the region and to display its superpower capabilities at the expense of the United States (a "zero-sum game"). As was the case during the 1950s and 1960s, when political changes in the Arab world led to changes in the system of relations between Middle Eastern states and the superpowers, and in particular to the increased involvement of the Soviet Union in the area, so too the modern era heralds the opportunity for new changes to occur, and for the Russian bear to return to the Middle East.

In practice, Russia is acting along two seemingly contradictory tracks that reflect its superpower outlook. On the one hand, it seeks to solidify an alliance with the anti-American axis of powers; on the other, it looks to strengthen its foothold among Sunni states. And all the while, it is clearly willing—unlike the United States under Obama—to make use of all the means and capabilities at its disposal, from military might, via its civilian nuclear capabilities, to its veto at the Security Council.

In this context, the withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria does not indicate a change in the extent of Russia's involvement in the Middle East in general, or Syria in particular, but rather an adjustment in light of military and political developments in the country. My assessment is that, in Moscow's view, the military campaign it conducted at high intensity for around five months, and its continued attacks on Islamic State and the Nusra Front targets following the withdrawal of forces, achieved both its strategic goals (recognition of Russia's unique status in the arena, and its role as significant partner in the international fight against Islamic State) and its operational goals (stabilizing the Assad regime) for the campaign. In fact, to a large extent, Russia's conduct in Syria is similar to its campaigns in recent years in Georgia and Ukraine: creating facts on the ground and establishing its dominance, while being unwilling to be dragged directly into a drawn-out ground campaign which might exact a heavy price.

Naturally, Russia's activism in the Middle East, especially in Syria, has direct and indirect consequences for Israel. Russia's attitude toward Israel since Putin first became president in 2000 has largely been positive, and it is clear that Putin attaches special importance to relations with Israel and the Jewish people.<sup>115</sup> In his view, Israel is a key state in the region and a partner in the struggle against radical Islam. It is also a target for developing economic ties in the fields of energy, technology, and agriculture. Additionally, Israel's large Russian-speaking population plays a significant role in Moscow's positive attitude to Israel, in light of the importance that Putin places on maintaining relations with Russian communities around the world.<sup>116</sup> It would also appear that Israel's cautious stance on the Ukrainian issue (unlike that of other Western states) is seen by Moscow as a sign of the good relations between the two countries.<sup>117</sup>

An expression of Putin's special attitude to Israel can be seen in his relations with Prime Minister Netanyahu. It seems that there is a budding relationship between the two, based on mutual admiration and respect.<sup>118</sup> This is evident in the series of meetings they have held with each other over the last year (the most recent being on April 21, 2016), and in the meetings held between senior military figures on both sides over the last six months or so. These meetings were intended to formalize operational coordination between Russia and Israel, and to prevent miscalculations and friction between their armed forces.<sup>119</sup> At the end of December 2015 it was even announced that Putin's special envoy on Syrian affairs, Alexander Lavrentiev, had secretly visited Israel to coordinate the countries' positions on the Syrian issue.<sup>120</sup>

Despite these ties, Russia's behavior in the Middle East in recent years, and especially the developments in its relations with the radical axis of countries during the second half of 2015, alongside its willingness to sell advanced weaponry to countries in the region, present Israel with a mixed balance of threats and opportunities.<sup>121</sup>

At the strategic level, should the Russian-Iranian campaign to save the Syrian regime prove successful, this may lead to increased Iranian influence and involvement in the Middle East in general, and in Syria in particular. Moreover, this scenario would also lead to Hezbollah's position in Lebanon being strengthened, and to its military position being improved.

At the operational level, it is reasonable to assume that Hezbollah will attempt to exploit Iran's extensive involvement in Syria, and perhaps even the Russian defense umbrella, in order to acquire advanced weapons systems. Hezbollah sources have even claimed that the organization is receiving weaponry directly from Russia, including surface-to-surface missiles, laser-guided rockets, and anti-tank missiles, and that Russia and Hezbollah are now "strategic allies." In this context, it's worth noting that, from the Russian perspective, Hezbollah is a legitimate organization. Thus the Russian deputy foreign minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, made clear in November 2015 that Russia maintains relations with Hezbollah because it does not consider it to be a terrorist organization.<sup>122</sup> Additionally, Russia's operational cooperation with Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah may lead to the axis gaining improved capabilities in directing military operations and deploying forces, and to the sharing of military intelligence among them, including by means of the intelligence center set up in Baghdad, to include possibly intelligence about Israel.

On the other hand, Russia's activity in Syria, and its closer ties with Iran, offer Israel the opportunity to demonstrate its strategic importance to the United States, as the latter's main ally in the region. In parallel, Israel can exploit the increased tension between Moscow and Ankara over the last few months (as well as the wave of terror attacks on Turkey during the same period) in order to rebuild its bilateral ties with Turkey after five years of strained relations—diplomatically (reinstating ambassadors), economically (natural gas agreements), and on defense (cooperating in the fight against terror). Additionally, Israel can also exploit the Sunni states' fear of increased Iranian influence throughout the region in order to increase cooperation and form coalitions with them.

Bilaterally, Israel can utilize Moscow's relations with the radical axis in order to transmit messages, especially during periods of tension, in order to prevent escalation and miscalculation. Russia's presence in Syria, even at its currently reduced levels, may serve to restrain Iran and Hezbollah from escalatory action against Israel which might undermine regional stability. In addition, Russian economic sanctions

on the import of fruit and vegetables from Turkey offer an opportunity for Israel to extend agricultural cooperation with Russia.

In any case, Russia's response to Turkey shooting down one of its warplanes showed that it is liable to adopt a forceful and vengeful approach in retaliation for any damage to its national assets and pride. Israel should therefore tread carefully: as far as is possible, Israel should reach clear understandings with Russia regarding courses of action and communication when military frictions occur (such as Russian jets entering Israeli airspace); and in particular, it should avoid being seen as acting against Russian interests and/or assets, or eroding Russia's regional influence. Israel must be careful not to undermine the complex relations with Russia; this is not a struggle between equals, and Moscow's ability to inflict damage on Israel's strategic and defense interests (whether directly or indirectly) is very great.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Putin's view of Russia's place in the international system was already evident nine years ago, in his famous speech in Munich in February 2007, in which he harshly criticized the United States for trying to create a unipolar world, and declared that Russia would act determinedly to advance its own policy in the global arena, as befitting a world power. Putin has repeatedly stated that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest tragedy of the 20th century."

<sup>2</sup> "Russia and the Changing World," one of a series of articles published by Putin presenting his worldview on a wide range of subjects, ahead of the presidential elections in Russia (*RT*, February 27, 2012); Russian foreign policy doctrine, published in February 2013. An English version of the doctrine can be found on the official website of the Russian foreign office, [www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru); Speech on March 18, 2014, *Website of the President of Russia*, [www.en.kremlin.ru](http://www.en.kremlin.ru); Interview on "60 Minutes," Charlie Rose, "All Eyes on Putin," *CBS News*, September 27, 2015; Speech at the UN General Assembly, *Washington Post*, September 28, 2015; Speech to the nation, December 2, 2015, *Website of the President of Russia*, [www.en.kremlin.ru](http://www.en.kremlin.ru); "The National Security Strategy Concept," *RT*, January 1, 2016; Interview with *Bild*, January 12, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> In March 2013, Russia published a unique concept paper for its participation in BRICS (*Website of the President of Russia*, [www.en.kremlin.ru](http://www.en.kremlin.ru)).

<sup>4</sup> The Baltic states are exceptional in having joined NATO in 2004, which provides them with a defense umbrella against foreign aggression. Thus Putin, while he would like to extend Russian dominance over them too, is forced to act more cautiously toward them.

<sup>5</sup> Resolution 1973 was intended to impose a no-fly zone on the Libyan air force; according to Putin, it was instead exploited by the West to carry out air attacks against the Gaddafi regime, which eventually led to his being deposed. Putin called the resolution a "Crusader call to arms," and argued that it was "flawed and faulty" (*New York Times*, March 21, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> "The main decisions on the principles guiding cooperation between countries, and on the establishment of the United Nations, were taken in our country, in Yalta." With these words, Putin seeks to fix in the global consciousness the idea that Crimea is a historical part of Russia, and also attempts to access the prestige of the Soviet Union's involvement in forming the United Nations (Speech to the UN General Assembly, *Washington Post*, September 28, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> The Ukrainian crisis demonstrates the different use made of international law by the superpowers. Russia claims that Crimea's declaration of separation from Ukraine and its decision to be annexed to Russia, in the wake of a referendum held in March 2014 in which most Crimea residents voted in favour, are a realization of those residents' right to self-definition. Ukraine and Western countries, on the other hand, argue that these acts contravene the principle of states' territorial integrity, which override the right to self-definition, and that this is a forceful annexation carried out by Russia (Zvi Magen, Prina

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Shervit Baruch, Olema Bagno-Muldasky, "The Annexation of Crimea: International Ramifications," *INSS*, March 24, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Ukraine has special importance for Russia—historically, economically, ethnically, and for defense. Around 20 percent of Ukrainian residents, mainly in the east, are of Russian origin; some of Russia's natural gas pipelines to Europe pass through Ukraine; there is extensive cooperation between the two country's military industries; the Sebastopol port in Crimea is the base of the Black Sea Fleet; and more. Without Ukraine, Russia's ambitions to return to its role as superpower are doomed to failure. Russia also sees the Crimean Peninsula as belonging to it historically, since it was transferred to Ukraine in 1954 by the Soviet leadership.

<sup>9</sup> "Our partners in the United States supported those who ousted Yanukovich... I know this for a fact." (Charlie Rose, "All Eyes On Putin," *CBS News*, September 27, 2015.)

<sup>10</sup> "Ukraine Crisis in Maps," *BBC*, February 18, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> *BBC*, September 15 and December 19, 2014; *TASS*, March 12, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, claimed in his speech during a Security Council debate on the Ukrainian issue that "Ukraine is not prepared, with the silent agreement of the United States, to implement the Minsk Agreements, or even to hold talks with representatives of the rebel regions" (*RT*, December 12, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Putin also arranged for domestic legal and political legitimacy, as the upper house of the Russian Parliament unanimously approved his request to allow the Russian air force to operate in Syria (*Sputnik*, September 30, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Russia was forced to fly its planes carrying the weapons systems via Iran and Iraq, after Bulgaria refused to allow them to use its airspace, in response to an American request (*New York Times*, September 14 and 17, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> In a briefing given by the Russian defense minister on November 20, he claimed that the number of Russian planes taking part in the campaign had been doubled, to 69 (*Website of the Russian Defense Ministry*, [www.eng.mil.ru](http://www.eng.mil.ru); *New York Times*, September 14, 2015; *Washington Post*, September 30, 2015; *Jane's*, October 1, 2015; *Guardian*, October 11, 2015; *RT*, October 11, 2015).

Michael Kofman, "Russia's Arsenal in Syria: What Do We Know?," *War On the Rocks*, October 18, 2015.

*Reuters*, November 4, 2015; *The Aviationist*, February 1, 2016. It's also worth noting that, as part of its public awareness campaign, the Russian Ministry of Defense published regular briefings on the air campaign (including scope of attacks, targets, and successful strikes) and on Russian humanitarian aid to Syrian civilians. Over the last four years, Russia has significantly increased its naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, sometimes encompassing more than ten ships. IT has also held a number of large-scale naval exercises, some in cooperation with the Chinese navy. Recently it was reported that Russia has significantly expanded the activities of its attack submarines along the coasts of Scandinavia and Scotland, the Mediterranean, and the North Atlantic, in an attempt to redress the West's undersea dominance. *New York Times*, April 20, 2016. Russia's increased naval presence around the world, including the Mediterranean, reflects its new naval doctrine, published in July 2015, which is based on

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expansion of Russia's naval activities globally, in part as a response to the activities of NATO and the United States (Elizabeth Zolotukhina, "Can Russia Implement its New Naval Doctrine?", *CGSRS*, August 3, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> *Washington Post*, January 15, 2016. In addition, a joint information center was set up in Iraq in September 2015, by Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Russia, to coordinate their actions against Islamic State. The center is to be headed by an officer from one of these countries, rotating among them every three months (*RT*, September 27, 2015; *New York Times*, September 27, 2015). In the media, the center was called the 4+1 Joint Operations Center, referring to Hezbollah as well (*CNN*, October 15, 2015). Ibrahim al-Amin, editor-in-chief of the Hezbollah-affiliated *Al Akhbar* newspaper, claimed that Hezbollah is a member of an alliance with Russia, Iran, Syria, and Iraq (*Daily Beast*, September 22, 2015). Several months later, the four countries reached another agreement on economic warfare against Islamic State's funding sources (*TASS*, February 4, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> *TASS*, March 14, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> A Reuters report claimed that, following Putin's declaration, Russia sent a number of cargo ships to Syria loaded with unspecified equipment (*Reuters*, March 30, 2016; *Defense News*, March 28, 2016; *Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> *New York Times*, April 21 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Michael R. Gordan, "Russia Surprises U.S. With Accord on Battling ISIS," *New York Times*, September 27, 2015; Kevin Baron, "NATO Caught Surprised by Russia's Move into Syria," *Defense One*, September 10, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Burgess Everett and Josh Gerstein, "Why Didn't the U.S. Know Sooner?," *Politico*, May 3, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Thus, for example, around a month after the air campaign began, the Russian Defense Ministry announced that the air force had conducted 1,631 sorties and destroyed 2,084 targets of terror groups, including 287 command centers, 155 ammunition and fuel dumps, 52 training camps, and 40 factories for producing missiles and mines (*Sputnik*, November 3, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> *RT*, October 8, 2015. At the beginning of December, Russia fired cruise missiles from a submarine for the first time, another high-profile step intended to demonstrate its superpower capabilities (*TASS*, December 9, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Steven Lee Myers and Eric Schmitt, "Russian Military Uses Syria as Proving Ground," *New York Times*, October 14, 2015; David Stupples, "How Syria is becoming a test zone for electronic warfare," *CNN*, October 9, 2015.

Putin also announced that the campaign in Syria cost 33 billion rubles (around half a billion dollars), most of it financed by Defense Ministry funds which had been marked for training and exercises. He said that Russia's weapons systems had been successfully tested in Syria, and could now be improved in the future (*TASS*, March 17, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> The head of Russia's FSB security services, Alexander Bortnikov, announced on November 17 that "this was definitely a terror attack," carried out by a homemade bomb equivalent in force to around a kilogram of TNT (*RT*, November 17, 2015).

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<sup>26</sup> *The Aviationist* website reported that two Tu-160 bombers which attacked on the night between November 19 and 20 had taken off from the Olenya air base in the Kula Peninsula, Northern Russia, but instead of taking a direct route over the Caspian Sea and Iran, had flown close to British and Norwegian airspace, over the North Atlantic, and then via Gibraltar to the Mediterranean and Syria. This unusual flight path may have been intended as a show of strength and a provocation to European countries (*The Aviationist*, November 20, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> *Russian Defense Ministry briefing*, December 2 and 25, 2015; *RT*, December 25, 2015 and March 15, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> *RT*, November 17, 2015. A few days later the chiefs of general staff of the two countries spoke by telephone, and Russia stressed that the call was a French initiative (*Website of the Russian Defense Ministry*, December 2, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> *RT*, November 13, 2014. In the summer of 2015 the deal was canceled, and France promised to return the advance paid by Russia (*Defense News*, August 9, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> *BBC*, January 10, 2012; *Israel Channel 2*, June 17, 2013; *Reuters*, January 17, 2014; *Moscow Times*, September 10, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Assad interview with the Russian media on March 29 2015. The Syrian foreign minister, Walid Muallem, announced several days before the beginning of the air campaign that Russia had accelerated the delivery of arms and ammunition to the regime. *Reuters*, September 18, 2015. In a similar vein, Vladimir Khozin, Putin's aide on military-technological cooperation, said that the Syrian regime would receive whatever military assistance it needed (*TASS*, September 30, 2015).

<sup>32</sup> *RT*, April 8, 2013. Similarly, the director-general of the state arms corporation Rosoboronexport, Anatoly Isaikin, claimed that "Russia continues to fulfill its arms supply commitments, but these are not offensive weapons" (*RT News*, February 13, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> According to the report, the deal was for four divisions, containing six launchers and 144 missiles, for which Syria has already begun to pay (*Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> For more on the system's technical capabilities, see *Sputnik*, November 28, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> *New York Times*, February 5, 2016; *Sputnik*, January 28, 2016; *TASS*, January 11 and 15, 2016; *Russian Defense Ministry briefing*, February 1, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> *New York Times*, January 26, 2016. American and Western figures claimed from the beginning of the campaign that it was focused against opposition forces, and its main goal was to help Assad remain in power. Thus, according to Secretary of State Kerry, 80 percent of the Russian attacks were directed against rebel targets rather than Islamic State (*New York Times*, December 19, 2015).

<sup>37</sup> Russian Foreign Minister Ryabkov has already hinted that the best option for all the sides in Syria would be a federation-model regime (*Reuters*, February 29, 2016).

<sup>38</sup> *RT*, April 17, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> [www.research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick](http://www.research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick).

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<sup>40</sup> Russia also used its veto twice on the Ukrainian issue (in March 2014 and July 2015), and once each on the situations in Bosnia-Herzegovina (July 2015), Georgia (June 2009), Zimbabwe (July 2008), Myanmar (January 2007), and Cyprus (April 2004) ([www.research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick](http://www.research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick)).

<sup>41</sup> *New York Times*, October 2011, and December 5, 2013.

<sup>42</sup> "I can't help asking those who caused this situation: Do you now understand what you've done? But I'm afraid no one will answer ... The vacuum created in some Middle Eastern and North African countries has begun to be filled immediately by extremists and terrorists." Putin's speech to the UN General Assembly, *Washington Post*, September 28, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> *New York Times*, February 5 and April 5, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> In Summer 2013, Russia decided to afford refuge to the whistleblower Edward Snowden, which put further strain on the already tense relations with the United States, and led the latter to cancel the planned meeting between Obama and Putin at the G20 summit in St. Petersburg on September 5-6 (although in the end the two held a short 20-minute meeting).

<sup>45</sup> *New York Times*, August 31, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> *RT*, August 31, 2015 and September 8, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> On August 29, the British Parliament decided not to approve Britain's participation in the attack (*BBC*, August 20, 2013).

<sup>48</sup> *TASS*, September 9, 2013; *New York Times*, September 14, 2013. Although the process of removing chemical weapons was completed, Western bodies continue to accuse Assad of concealing chemical weapons in the country, and of using them against the rebels (*BBC*, September 10, 2015; *New York Times*, May 12-13, 2015; *Yisrael Hayom*, October 1, 2014; *Reuters*, September 18, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> Shlomi Eldar, "The Big Winner in the Syrian Crisis: Putin," *Al-Monitor*, September 11, 2013; Udi Dekel and Orit Perlov, "A Change in the Balance of Power in Syria: The 'Bad' Against the 'Bad,'" *INSS*, October 13, 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Benedetta Berti, "Between Paralysis and Helplessness: The 'Geneva 2' Negotiations on the Syrian Civil War," *INSS*, January 2014; *Reuters*, January 26, 2015; *RT News*, February 6, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Benedetta Berti, Zvi Magen, and Sarah Fainberg, "International Activity and the Syria Crisis," *INSS*, November 2015; *Haaretz*, November 1, 2015; *RT*, November 14, 2015.

<sup>52</sup> *Moscow Times*, October 21, 2015.

<sup>53</sup> [www.un.org](http://www.un.org), December 18, 2015.

<sup>54</sup> *RT*, December 18, 2015. Secretary of State Kerry himself has recently hinted on several occasions that the United States is not currently focusing on regime change but on attaining stability in the country, and on the fight against Islamic State. Straight after his meeting with Putin in Moscow, just before the resolution was passed by the Security Council, he said that "the United States and its partners are not seeking a change of regime" (*Wall Street Journal*, December 15, 2015). Notably, the headline in the *Wall Street Journal* was "Kerry Softens Position on Syrian President Assad."

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<sup>55</sup> *RT*, January 29, 2016; *Haaretz*, January 29, 2016; *TASS*, February 3, 2016.

<sup>56</sup> As part of their agreed cooperation, Russia and the United States exchanged maps in which they marked the positions of “legitimate militias,” and of fire zones controlled by Islamic State and the Nusra Front (*Sputnik*, February 24, 2016; *Russian Defense Ministry briefing*, February 27, 2016; *Haaretz*, March 4, 2016).

<sup>57</sup> In response to Assad’s claim that he intended to reconquer all of Syria, Russia’s ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, stated that Assad must fulfill the agreements reached, because Russia has invested a great deal in efforts to resolve the crisis (*Reuters*, February 18, 2016). In its regular briefings, the Russian military also emphasizes the humanitarian aid being delivered to Syrian residents; for example, in its March 7 briefing, it reported that Russia had delivered 620 tons of humanitarian aid.

<sup>58</sup> *TASS*, April 30, 2016.

<sup>59</sup> *RT*, November 24, 2015.

<sup>60</sup> The deal for the sale of S-300 systems was signed in 2007, and was set to be fulfilled in 2010, before Russia decided to suspend it. In Russia’s view, this is defensive weaponry, and therefore supplying it does not contravene Security Council sanctions. However, the decision to suspend the deal was taken at the height of the “restart” period in the relations between Russia and the United States, and seemingly involved various incentives proffered by Washington.

<sup>61</sup> Yaakov Amidror, “The Russian-Iranian Gambit in Syria,” *BESA Perspective*, October 6, 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Among other points, the agreement included cooperation in the fight against terror, joint training, exchange of delegations, and expanded use of the two countries’ ports (*RT*, January 20, 2015).

<sup>63</sup> It should be noted that, according to Russian media reports, as early as February 2015 Russia proposed that Iran buy the Antey-2500 air defense system, which it also sold to Egypt, apparently because the Almaz-Antey corporation that produces it had ceased to manufacture the S-300, and had begun manufacturing the more advanced S-400 system (*RT*, April 14, 2015).

<sup>64</sup> *TASS*, April 12, 2016.

<sup>65</sup> *RT*, December 7, 2015.

<sup>66</sup> *TASS*, February 16, 2016; *RT*, April 26, 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, “How Iranian General Plotted Out Syrian Assault in Moscow,” *Reuters*, October 6, 2015. On the other hand, Russian Deputy Defense Minister Ryabkov stated that Suleimani did not visit Russia, that reports of the visit “were surprising,” and that Russia had updated the United States on the matter.

<sup>68</sup> Hezbollah sources claimed, regarding the Russian air campaign, that “without their air force we could not have advanced, and without our ground intelligence they could not have provided air support” (*Daily Beast*, January 11, 2016).

<sup>69</sup> *Fox News*, April 14, 2016.

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<sup>70</sup> Russian Minister of Industry and Commerce, Dennis Manturov expressed hope that, should the two countries work out the formalities between them, it would be possible to extend the loan in 2016 (*TASS*, December 22, 2015).

<sup>71</sup> *Sputnik*, November 12, 2015.

<sup>72</sup> *RT*, November 24, 2015.

<sup>73</sup> For example, the Turkmenchay Agreement of 1828, signed between the Russian Empire and the Persian Empire to end the war between them, imposed on the latter the loss of important territories, and fixed the border between the countries for many years. This agreement was considered one of the most humiliating of modern Persian history.

<sup>74</sup> For Russia, the Central Asian states are hugely important for a number of reasons: geopolitically, for ensuring its influence throughout the former Soviet Union, and demonstrating its superpower ambitions; for defense, because they form a buffer against the expansionist aims of the West and NATO, and against extremist Islam from Afghanistan, particularly important because of the large Muslim population in Russia itself; and economically, mainly due to the large oil and natural gas reserves in the region. One concrete example, among many, of Russia's policy toward the Central Asian states came during the summit held in Kazakhstan in October 2015, when the leaders of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus signed an agreement for greater military cooperation among them through to 2020. Putin declared: "There is a growing threat from terror organizations and extremist groups of incursions from Afghanistan ... We must be prepared to act together" (*TASS*, October 16, 2015).

<sup>75</sup> The commander of US Central Command, General Lloyd Austin, testified to the Senate that "Russia and Iran are working to extend their cooperation beyond the Syrian theater, and that this is becoming a strategic partnership" (*Jane's*, March 10, 2016).

<sup>76</sup> In November 2013, for the first time since the 1970s, the Russian foreign and defense ministers visited Egypt together; in February 2014, el-Sisi (then defense minister) visited Moscow, together with the Egyptian foreign minister and a large military delegation; in August 2014, el-Sisi visited Russia again, this time as president; in February 2015, Putin made a reciprocal visit to Egypt; and in August 2015, el-Sisi traveled to Russia again.

<sup>77</sup> *RT*, February 12, 2015. In November, the two countries signed an agreement for the construction of a nuclear power reactor over the next 12 years, to include four units with an output of 1,200 megawatts each (*Sputnik*, November 19, 2015). There have also been developments in economic ties, with talks ongoing over a free trade agreement and over the establishment of a Russian industrial zone adjacent to the Suez Canal (*RT*, January 25 and February 1, 2016).

<sup>78</sup> The system is also known as the S-300VM, with a range of 200 kilometers, and with an extended interceptor range of up to 300 kilometers (Zvi Magen and Yiftah Shapir, "Egypt's Reported Acquisition of the S-300VM Air Defense System," *INSS*, December 2, 2014; *TASS*, March 6, 2015).

<sup>79</sup> *TASS*, March 3, 2015; *TASS*, June 11, 2015; *Sputnik*, November 2, 2015; *TASS*, November 24, 2015; *Sputnik*, December 25, 2015.

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<sup>80</sup> An expression of the complex relations between the two countries was seen during Putin's meeting with Prince Bandar in Moscow in August 2013. According to reports, in an attempt to persuade Putin to agree to cooperate on the Syrian issue and on the fight against terror, Bandar noted Saudi Arabia's willingness to advance economic and military ties with Russia, and promised to keep the peace during the Winter Olympic Games, due to take place in Sochi at the beginning of 2014. He explained that Saudi Arabia controlled the Chechen groups who were threatening security at the Olympics, and that the Saudi regime used them against the Syrian regime. In response, Putin surprised Bandar by saying, "We know you have supported the Chechen terror groups for a decade; that support is not compatible with the shared aims of the fight against global terror that you mentioned." Putin also made clear to Bandar in no uncertain terms that Russia's position on the Assad regime was unchangeable, and that Russia and Iran have longstanding ties and common interests (*Al-Monitor*, August 22, 2013).

<sup>81</sup> *RT*, June 18, 2015.

<sup>82</sup> *TASS*, July 7 and November 26, 2015; *Arab News*, November 28, 2015.

<sup>83</sup> *TASS*, October 26 and November 16, 2015. Putin met one more time with Mohammad bin Salman in mid-October, at the Formula 1 race at Sochi (*RT*, October 12, 2015).

<sup>84</sup> *Al-Monitor*, October 5, 2015.

<sup>85</sup> *Jordan Times*, August 25 and October 2, 2015; *Sputnik*, November 24, 2015.

<sup>86</sup> A Jordanian government spokesperson explained that the coordination with Russia "is aimed at protecting the northern border and stability in southern Syria," while emphasizing that Jordan remains a member of the international coalition against terror (*Jordan Times*, October 23, 2015).

<sup>87</sup> *TASS*, November 20, 2015. According to a report in *Middle East Eye* on March 25, 2016, King Abdallah claimed in a Washington meeting with US members of Congress on January 11 that—following an air incident involving Russian, Jordanian, and Israeli planes—the three countries were working on reaching understandings and coordination so as to prevent miscalculations.

<sup>88</sup> *TASS*, March 24, 2015; March 25, 2015.

<sup>89</sup> In addition to energy, Turkey also imports steel and wheat from Russia in considerable quantities. Russia is the seventh largest market for Turkish exports (3.8 percent of its total exports), mainly foodstuffs, textiles, and automobiles. Turkey is also a major Russian tourist destination. Of the 37 million tourists to Turkey in 2014, 12.2 percent were from Russia, spending around \$3 billion. Many Turkish construction companies operate in Russia, employing tens of thousands of Turkish workers, and between 2013 and 2015 construction contracts were signed totaling \$10–12 billion. Russia is the fourth-largest investor in the Turkish economy, its investments totaling some \$730 million in 2014. This does not include property investments belonging to private Russian citizens, estimated at around \$400 million annually. In addition, there are some banking ties between the two countries; for example, the eighth-largest bank in Turkey, Denizbank, is owned by the Russian Sberbank (Idil Bilgic-Alpaslan, Bojan Markovic, Peter Tabak, and Emir Zildzovic, "Economic Implications of Russia's Sanctions Against Turkey," *EBRD (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development)*, December 7, 2015; Holly Ellyatt, "This is How Russia Could Hurt Turkey's Economy," *CNBC*, November 26, 2015).

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<sup>90</sup> *Hurriyet Daily News*, April 2, 2015; *TASS*, April 24, 2015; *Al-Monitor*, June 19, 2015. An indication of Putin's strained relations with Erdogan came in their meeting in Baku on June 13, which according to reports was held in an unpleasant atmosphere, among other reasons because Putin arrived late (*Hurriyet Daily News*, June 15, 2015).

<sup>91</sup> Brandon Friedman and Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, "The Sultan Versus the Tsar and the Syrian War," *Moshe Dayan Center*, December 10, 2015. The Sukhoi plane shot down was seemingly engaged in operations against Turkmeni rebels, who later claimed that they shot and killed the pilot who ejected (*RT*, November 24, 2015).

<sup>92</sup> *BBC*, October 5, 2015; "Russia Has Long History of Air-Space Violations, Experts Say," *Turkish Weekly*, October 8, 2015. It should be noted that, in 2012, Turkey changed its rules of engagement following the downing of a spy plane in Syrian airspace, and announced that it would "respond disproportionately to any incursion" of its airspace. However, an article published in *Hurriyet* was harshly critical of the lack of response to incursions by Russian planes, and claimed that Turkey had two sets of rules: one, a disproportionate response to Syrian incursions; and the second, no response to Russian incursions ("Turkey's Rules of (Dis)Engagement," *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 9, 2015).

<sup>93</sup> *TASS*, November 27, 2015; *BBC*, November 28, 2015. It should be noted that, on January 29, Turkey claimed that another Su-34 warplane had entered its airspace, and submitted a formal complaint to the Russian ambassador (*TASS*, January 30, 2016).

<sup>94</sup> Putin also hinted that it might have been the United States that gave Turkey information about the Russian air force's operations in Syria: "We informed our American partners when and where our planes would be active. The Turkish air force had precise knowledge of this information" (*Reuters*, November 28, 2015). He claimed that the downing of the plane may have been part of a Turkish-American deal, in which the United States would, in response, turn a blind eye to the Turkish army entering Iraq, although he made clear that Russia did not know for sure whether such a deal had been made between Ankara and Washington (*TASS*, December 17, 2015). A Russian Defense Ministry spokesperson claimed that the announcement made by Turkish officials, that the Turkish air force knew the number of operational flights made Russian planes in Syria, amounted to an acknowledgement that the shooting down of the Sukhoi was planned (*RT*, December 23, 2015).

<sup>95</sup> After the S-400 system was deployed, Putin announced: "We have increased our presence in Syria, and increased our air power. There were no air defense systems in Syria before (the downing of the plane), and now there is the S-400 system ... Turkey regularly crossed into Syrian airspace before; let's see them do so now" (Presidential press conference, December 17, 2015, *Website of the President of Russia*, [www.en.kremlin.ru](http://www.en.kremlin.ru)).

<sup>96</sup> *RT*, November 28, 2015.

<sup>97</sup> *RT*, December 2, 2015. It should be noted that this is a highly sensitive and personally insulting issue for Erdogan, as over the last year opposition figures have made several accusations of corruption against him and members of his family (*Guardian*, February 25, 2015).

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<sup>98</sup> “The Turkish people and Turkish speakers were our partners and friends, and will remain so, and we will continue relations with them ... [but] it will be impossible to reach agreement with the current Turkish leadership” (*TASS*, December 17, 2015).

<sup>99</sup> *RT*, December 27, 2015; *RT*, January 3, 2016. Turkey, for its part, blocked access to the Russian news site *Sputnik* in mid-April, and also barred the director of its Turkish office from entering the country (*RT*, April 20, 2016).

<sup>100</sup> *TASS*, December 2, 2015; *TASS*, February 25, 2015. In the mid-1990s, Cyprus bought the advanced S-300 air defense system from Russia, which was subsequently transferred to the Greek island of Crete (*Sputnik*, December 14, 2013).

<sup>101</sup> *RT*, December 23, 2015; *Sputnik*, December 23, 2015.

<sup>102</sup> In his speech, Putin harshly criticized the aid given by the West to the rebels in Syria, and its shortsightedness, in that this aid effectively helps strengthen radical Islam. He claimed that any attempt at external intervention would lead to the collapse of governing institutions, as happened elsewhere, such as in Libya (*Washington Post*, September 28, 2015; Charlie Rose, “All Eyes on Putin,” *CBS News*, September 27, 2015).

<sup>103</sup> Russia’s first priority is its relations with former Soviet Union states, followed by its relations with the United States, China, India, and European states.

<sup>104</sup> According to Giora Eiland, during his time as head of Israel’s National Security Council in the early 2000s he hosted a senior Russian official who predicted that a Sunni-Islamic caliphate would arise that would attempt to take over the Middle East, and from there would try to move north toward Russia and the Muslim states of the former Soviet Union, and west toward Europe (*Yediot Aharonot*, November 27, 2015).

According to Alexei Malashenko, the proportion of Muslims in Russia has risen from 7.9 percent in 1989 to 9 percent in 1994, and to 11 percent today (around 16 million). To these should be added Muslim immigrants from Central Asia and Azerbaijan, bringing the total number of Muslims in Russia to around 20 million (Alexei Malashenko, “Islamic Challenges to Russia, From the Caucasus to the Volga and the Urals,” *American Enterprise Institute*, May 13, 2015).

<sup>105</sup> *BBC*, July 24, 2015; *Moscow Times*, September 3, 2014.

<sup>106</sup> *Moscow Times*, July 9, 2015. The premier of the Republic of Dagestan in the Northern Caucasus revealed that 640 Dagestani citizens had joined Islamic State and fought in its ranks (*TASS*, December 24, 2015).

<sup>107</sup> Zvi Magen and Yoram Schweitzer, “The Islamic State, the Caucasus, and the Russian Response,” *INSS*, July 29, 2015.

<sup>108</sup> *RT*, December 30, 2015.

<sup>109</sup> Charlie Rose, “All Eyes on Putin,” *CBS News*, September 27, 2015.

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<sup>110</sup> Thus, for example, the United States' conduct during the Egyptian revolution in 2011 was widely seen as an abandonment of President Mubarak, who had been one of its most loyal allies in the region. Similarly, the fierce criticism issued by the American administration of the way in which President el-Sisi took power caused great resentment in Egypt.

<sup>111</sup> Paul Roderick Gregory, "Russia's Economic Stagnation," *National Review*, November 23, 2015.

<sup>112</sup> Anna Geifman and Yuri Teper, "Russia's New National Identity Under Putin's Regime," *BESA*, December 29, 2014.

<sup>113</sup> *Reuters*, October 22, 2015; *Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM)*, [www.wciom.com](http://www.wciom.com). In a poll conducted by the Center on December 19-20, support for Russian military action was found to have risen from 75 percent at the beginning of 2015 to 83 percent, while the figure for 2012 was just 32 percent. Similarly, 88 percent of those polled agreed that Russia needs a strong army, and 89 percent believed that the army could protect Russia in the event of a real threat to the country (*TASS*, December 24, 2015). It should be noted that, in a poll conducted in January 2016 by the Russian polling institute *Levada*, there was a slight drop in public support for Putin, although he still enjoyed a high approval rating of 82 percent.

<sup>114</sup> The series of incidents during April in which Russian warplanes approached to within just tens of meters of American planes, demonstrate Russia's superpower orientation and its attitude to the use of force (*Haaretz*, April 30, 2016).

<sup>115</sup> Putin occasionally makes warm mention of the special relations he had as a young man with Jewish teachers and neighbors, and especially with his judo instructor. See, for example: *NRG*, August 11, 2013; *YNet*, March 21, 2014; *TASS*, January 27, 2015; *Jerusalem Post*, November 1, 2015.

<sup>116</sup> The section on human rights in Russia's foreign policy doctrine of February 2013 mentions resistance to any expression of anti-Semitism, racial discrimination, or Nazism (*Russian Foreign Ministry website*, [www.en.mid.ru](http://www.en.mid.ru)).

<sup>117</sup> Barak Ravid, "U.S. Officials Angry: Israel Doesn't Back Stance on Russia," *Haaretz*, April 13, 2014. The backdrop for the American displeasure was Israel's absence from the UN General Assembly vote on the resolution condemning Russia's invasion of the Crimean Peninsula and expressing support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

<sup>118</sup> During the second half of 2015, Netanyahu met and spoke with Putin at least four times. The two met in Moscow on September 21, and on the sidelines of the Paris Climate Conference on November 30; and they spoke on November 18 and December 22 (*TASS*, September 21, November 18, November 30, and December 22, 2015). They also held additional phone conversations following the ceasefire agreement in Syria (*Haaretz*, February 24, 2016).

<sup>119</sup> Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon also reported that there was a minor incursion by a Russian plane, which was immediately addressed via the communications channel set up between the two countries, and the plane quickly returned to Syrian airspace (*Haaretz*, September 21, October 1, October 16, and November 29, 2015). According to reports, in recent weeks there was an additional incident between

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Russian and Israeli warplanes, with problems arising in the security coordination between the two countries; these issues were discussed during Netanyahu's visit to Moscow (*Haaretz*, April 21, 2016).

<sup>120</sup> According to reports, Lavrentiev made a regional visit, in which he visited not only Israel, but also Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, and Abu Dhabi, although not Saudi Arabia (*Sputnik*, December 26, 2015; *Haaretz*, December 27, 2015). Additionally, President Rivlin's visit to Russia on March 16 (symbolically, and coincidentally, the first leader to meet with Putin after his announcement of the withdrawal of forces from Syria) is a sign of the relationship between the two countries. According to reports, during their meeting Rivlin presented to Putin Israel's red lines regarding Syria, foremost among them preventing Iran and Hezbollah from gaining a foothold in the Golan (*Haaretz*, March 16, 2016).

<sup>121</sup> Eran Lerman, "Russian Ambitions and Israeli Opportunities in the Partition of Syria," *BESA*, October 22, 2015.

<sup>122</sup> *Daily Beast*, January 11, 2016; *Reuters*, November 15, 2015. *Haaretz* reported that, at a meeting of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Israel's ambassador to Russia, Zvi Heifetz, claimed that the Russian government had conducted an internal investigation which found that no weaponry had been transferred to Hezbollah. According to Heifetz, Russia had given guarantees to Israel that it had not and would not transfer arms to Hezbollah (*Haaretz*, February 1, 2016).