

When the Friend of My Friends Is Not My Friend: The United States, US Allies, and Russia In the Middle East

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ISSUE BRIEF

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The United States, US Allies, and Russia
In the Middle East

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INTRODUCTION

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union posed a challenge to the United States throughout the entire world, including in the Middle East. Soviet activity in the Middle East, though, was also a challenge for many US allies in the region, and beyond. Soviet influence in the Middle East expanded during the 1950s and 1960s, in particular, as many in the Arab world became angry about US support for Israel, and as several pro-Western Arab governments were overthrown and replaced by anti-Western ones that actively sought Soviet support. Due to several factors, however, many of the gains made by the Soviets in the Middle East ended up being lost. These included: the defection of Gamal Abdel Nasser's successor in Egypt, Anwar Sadat, from the Soviet to the US camp; Washington's successful 1970s-era diplomacy in bringing about an Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement; genuine fear of the Soviet threat on the part of Saudi Arabia and other Arab monarchies; the 1979 Iranian Revolution, in which the downfall of a pro-Western regime did not lead to the rise of a pro-Soviet one, but to the rise of one that was both anti-American and anti-Soviet; and, finally, the collapse of both communism and the Soviet Union itself from 1989 to 1991.¹

After the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the USSR, Moscow played a much less active role in the Middle East. It did not seem to pose a significant challenge there for either the United States or its allies during the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. In the 1990s, certain Russian officials—most notably, Yevgeny Primakov, the Soviet Middle East specialist who served successively

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¹ On Soviet foreign policy toward the Middle East during the Cold War, see Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Yevgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present*, Paul Gould, trans. (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

as Boris Yeltsin's intelligence chief, foreign minister, and then prime minister—made clear that Moscow sought to regain the influence that it had lost in the Middle East.² It would not be until the 2010s, though, that Russia became dramatically more active and influential in the Middle East, especially as a result of Moscow's intervention alongside Iran, Hezbollah, and other Shia militias in support of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria.

The image of Russia becoming more active and influential in the Middle East has been magnified by the partial US disengagement from the region that has occurred during both the Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations, through the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq—albeit, this was followed by their partial reintroduction for the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)—the drawdown of US forces from Afghanistan, and the limited US willingness to become militarily involved in Syria. Indeed, part of the reason why Washington has been deemphasizing the Middle East and the war on terrorism is that great powers elsewhere—namely China and Russia—have become a greater concern. But, as the United States has become more concerned about the security implications of Russian activity in general, it stands to reason that it should also be concerned about Russian activity in the Middle East. In addition, Washington remains concerned about many of the same interests in the region that it has had since the Cold War era: access to the region's energy resources; the freedom of navigation in the region needed for the export of energy, and as a key link between Europe and Asia; and the security of Israel (which remains an important priority for US domestic politics) and other allies in the region.

What makes the US response to Russian activity in the Middle East especially challenging now, though, is that—unlike during the Cold War—US allies in the region all have good relations with Russia, despite the concerns that many of them also have about Russian activity in Syria and/or Russia's close relations with Iran. In addition, some US allies outside the region are more worried about what Russia is doing closer to them than in the Middle East, while others do not see Moscow as much of a threat to them anywhere.

For Washington to deal effectively with whatever challenges Russia poses for the United States in the Middle East, it is necessary for US foreign policymakers to understand how other governments—both inside and outside the region—view Russia's role in the region, as well as those governments' strategies for dealing with Russia. Special attention must be paid to how US foreign and military policies—especially the announced withdrawals from Syria and Afghanistan—affect the response of US allies to Russian activity in the Middle East, and their willingness to cooperate with the United States regarding it. First, though, something needs to be said about Vladimir Putin's aims in the Middle East.

Putin's Policies Toward the Middle East

While Russia appears to be gaining strength, and its field of activity is increasingly broad, it must be remembered that when Putin first became president at the turn of the century, Russia was struggling to suppress Muslim opposition in Chechnya and elsewhere—and Russian officials and commentators repeatedly claimed this opposition was supported by Saudi Arabia.³ Concerned that Chechnya not become a cause to rally the Muslim world against Moscow the way Afghanistan had in the 1980s, Putin set about seeking improved relations with all Middle Eastern governments and “national” opposition movements such as Fatah, Hamas, and Hezbollah. It may have seemed counterintuitive in the West that Russia tried to build good relations with opposing sides simultaneously in the Middle East. However, these Middle Eastern actors (including Saudi Arabia after 2003, when it became the target of al-Qaeda bombings), like Russia, regarded supra-national Sunni jihadis such as al-Qaeda as their enemy. Putin portrayed Chechen and other Muslim rebels inside Russia as Sunni jihadis just like those operating in the Middle East, arguing they should be regarded as the common enemy of Russia, the West, and all governments in the Middle East.

Since he first came to power, Putin has also sought to expand Russia's economic relations with the region. While Putin first attempted to get Moscow's Soviet-era allies to repay their large debts from the Cold War days, he soon realized that this was a fruitless effort. Instead, he

2 Talal Nizameddin, *Russia and the Middle East: Towards a New Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 99-103.

3 Mark N. Katz, “Saudi-Russian Relations in the Putin Era,” *Middle East Journal* (2001), 612-617.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov meets with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif in Moscow, Russia May 8, 2019. Source: REUTERS/Evgenia Novozhenina

focused on expanding trade and investment relations between the Middle East and the key Russian economic sectors on whose revenue he relies: oil, gas, arms, and atomic energy. It quickly became clear that Putin was at least as anxious to pursue economic ties with pro-US governments as with anti-US ones; indeed, the former often provided more lucrative opportunities than the latter. Between 2000 and 2018, Russian arms exports to Iran and Syria amounted to \$2.06 billion and \$2.12 billion, respectively. By contrast, during the same period, Russian arms exports to Egypt (a US ally), were worth \$3.6 billion, and those to the post-Saddam-Hussein Iraqi government were worth \$2.15 billion.⁴ Turkey is set to buy the S-400 air-defense missile system, worth about \$2.5 billion, from Russia, and Saudi Arabia signed a 2017 memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the purchase of \$2.5 billion worth of Russian arms. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), which has already bought \$796 million worth of Russian arms, is negotiating with Moscow to

buy Su-35 Russian fighter jets, while its rival Qatar is negotiating to buy Su-35 fighters and the S-400. But, the biggest Middle Eastern buyer of Russian arms (and third-largest worldwide, after India and China) is Algeria, which bought a whopping \$11.421 billion worth of Russian weapons between 2000 and 2018.

Russian-Middle Eastern cooperation in the energy sphere has also grown in importance recently. After years of resisting Saudi calls for Moscow to cooperate with the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to limit oil exports in order to support oil prices, Russia began doing so in 2016 through the OPEC+ format. In 2016, Qatar bought a 19.5-percent share in Rosneft—Russia's state-controlled oil giant.⁵ Other Gulf Arab states have allowed Russian firms to become involved in their petroleum spheres, and/or have invested in Russia's. Saudi ARAMCO is reportedly in negotiations with Russia's largest privately owned natural-gas firm,

4 Data generated from "Importer/Exporter TIV [total trend indicator value] Tables," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), accessed March 21, 2019, <http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php>.

5 Dmitri Trenin, *What Is Russia Up to in the Middle East?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 125-129.

Novatek, for a stake in its new Arctic liquefied natural gas (LNG) project.⁶ In addition, Middle Eastern customers have bought more than \$61 billion worth of Russian nuclear reactors—with more deals expected.⁷ Russia also sells large quantities of wheat to Egypt, and is actively seeking to expand wheat exports to other markets, including Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria—at the expense of US and European suppliers.⁸ Despite the region's turmoil, millions of Russian tourists visit the Middle East every year, with Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Tunisia, and the UAE especially popular as destinations.⁹

Since 2014, economic relations with the Middle East have become even more important to Moscow, as a means of enabling Russia to avoid the consequences of Western economic sanctions related to Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and Europe. In addition, Russia's economic relations with the Middle East could help Moscow mitigate its increasing economic dependence on China, which has resulted from Western sanctions.

Further, Putin is famous for being neuralgic about democratic “color revolutions” overthrowing regimes friendly to Russia and replacing them—either with ones friendly to the United States, or with internal chaos that threatens other countries. He was especially exercised about the 2011 intervention in Libya by the United States and some of its European and Arab allies, which led to the downfall of the Muammar al-Qaddafi regime, the death of Qaddafi himself, and the rise of jihadi forces in Libya and elsewhere. Putin was determined not to let a similar fate befall the Assad regime in Syria. While Russia's acting to preserve the Assad regime complicated relations with those governments in the region that wanted it to fall (most notably, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar), it also had the welcome (to Putin) effect of enhancing Russia's reputation for stoutly defending its allies while the United States did not (as many regarded the Obama administration's “abandonment” of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak during the 2011 Arab Spring uprising). This also helps burnish the image Putin wishes to transmit, that Russia is a defender of the status quo in the Middle East, while the United States has been a disrupter. Further, the Russian intervention in Syria enhances Putin's ability to



Iran's President Hassan Rouhani, Russia's Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Tayyip Erdogan meet in Sochi, Russia November 22, 2017. Source: Sputnik/Mikhail Metzel/Kremlin via REUTERS

claim that Russia is not just a regional power confined to the former Soviet Union, but a truly global great power.

In addition, Putin sees Russia's good relations with all parties in the Middle East (except the jihadis) as an opportunity for Russian diplomacy to take charge of resolving conflicts among them. Moscow long ago came to see the USSR's breaking off diplomatic relations with Israel in 1967 as having allowed the United States to work with all sides in Arab-Israeli conflict-resolution efforts while the USSR could not. Moscow now sees the US and Russian positions as reversed. Putin argues that Russia's ability to talk to all sides, while the United States cannot or will not talk with certain parties (such as Iran, the Assad regime, and Hezbollah), puts Russia in a better position to resolve conflicts. Russian diplomacy has not yet succeeded in resolving any of the Middle East's many conflicts, but has succeeded in engaging many US allies in conflict-resolution efforts that often compete with

6 Malte Humbert, “Saudi Arabia Looks to Enter Arctic LNG with Large Investment,” High North News, March 19, 2019, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/saudi-arabia-looks-enter-arctic-lng-large-investment>.

7 Trenin, What Is Russia Up to in the Middle East? 129–130.

8 “From Russia with Wheat: Exports by Global Grain Superpower Soar 80%,” RT, September 7, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/business/437886-russian-wheat-exports-increase/>.

9 Trenin, What Is Russia Up to in the Middle East? 131–32.

Washington's.¹⁰ During his two stints as president, Putin has paid visits to several US allies in the region, including once each to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Morocco, twice each to Israel and Jordan, three times to Egypt, and a remarkable twelve times to Turkey. In addition, the leaders of several US allies in the Middle East—including Saudi King Salman and influential Crown Princes Abdallah bin Abdulaziz and Mohamed bin Salman; reigning Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed of the UAE; Qatar's Emir Tamim bin Hamad; Egyptian Presidents Mubarak, Mohamed Morsi, and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi; and, most notably, both Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan (first as prime minister, then as president) and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—have visited Russia numerous times to meet with Putin.

US Interests Regarding Russia and the Middle East

At a time when US and Russian interests are increasingly at odds over many issues, it stands to reason that the rise of Russian influence in the Middle East should concern Washington. Yet, the United States and Russia actually appear to have certain common interests in the region. Both are opposed to Sunni jihadis such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. And, unlike during the Cold War—when Moscow was eager to see pro-Western regimes overthrown and replaced with pro-Soviet ones—Putin emphasizes how Russia supports all existing governments, including pro-US ones.

Still, there are important reasons why Washington should be concerned about Russian policy toward the Middle East. While Russia claims to be combatting jihadism there, observers have noted that in Syria, Russian forces targeted the moderate opposition to the Assad regime, and not ISIS. (For their part, the Russians claim there is no moderate opposition to Assad, but only a jihadist one that the United States and some of its Middle Eastern allies have supported).¹¹ Further, Putin has sought to take advantage of instances when the United States and its Middle Eastern allies are at odds, in order to advance Russian influence. When the Obama administration announced that it would cut back on arms sales to Egypt

after its elected president was ousted by the military leadership in 2013, Putin quickly declared his willingness to sell Russian weapons to Cairo. Russia's success at improving relations with Turkey in the wake of Ankara's strained ties with both the United States and Europe—despite serious differences between Russia in Turkey in 2015–16—is especially disturbing. Finally, Washington is concerned about Russian support for Iran, whose activities in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere are considered highly threatening by some of the United States' closest Middle Eastern allies, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. However, the US response to Russian collaboration with Iran has been complicated by the fact that these and other US allies in the Middle East are actively cultivating good relations with Moscow, even though it is supporting Tehran.¹²

Indeed, for the United States to formulate effective policies to whatever challenges Russia poses, Washington must understand how its allies and others—both inside and outside the region—view Russian policies there, as well as how they have chosen to engage with Moscow. A US policy intended to limit, or even reduce, Russian influence in the Middle East is unlikely to be successful if it does not take account of why US allies have chosen to engage with Russia despite concerns about Moscow's actions. The factors motivating the policies of the United States' allies will be explored next.

US Middle Eastern Allies and Russia

Middle Eastern actors have long turned to external powers for support against their local and regional opponents. European colonial powers gained and held their positions in the Middle East not just through brute force, but by partnering with local rulers seeking protection against their neighbors and rivals. During the Cold War, Middle Eastern governments allied with either the United States or the USSR less on the basis of shared ideologies (indeed, most US allies in the region were antidemocratic, while Moscow's Arab Nationalist ones were also anticommunist) than on the superpowers' willingness to support them against their regional adversaries. Despite

10 Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia and Conflicts in the Middle East: Regionalism and Implications for the West," *International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs* (2018), 4, 35–57.

11 Florence Gaub, "Russia's Non-War on Daesh" in Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru, eds., *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?* European Union Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Paper 146, July 2018, 57–64.

12 Philipp Casula and Mark N. Katz, "The Middle East" in Andrei P. Tsygankov, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2018), 301–309.

their near-universal fear and loathing of Saddam Hussein, most of the United States' Middle East allies opposed the George W. Bush administration's intervention to overthrow his regime—and to democratize not just Iraq, but the greater Middle East—fearing this would disrupt the region and undermine their rule. The desire to disengage from the Middle East expressed by Presidents Obama and Trump has resulted in some regional allies looking for other external patrons.

However, there are not many others available, at least at present. Neither Europe's most powerful countries (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) nor the European Union as a whole are willing to defend Middle Eastern governments without Washington playing the leading role in doing so. Europe simply does not have the military capacity for such a mission without US leadership and support. China and India are rising powers that are playing an increasing role in the Middle East, but neither is yet willing to take on the role of security provider for any Middle Eastern state against another. Also, neither has the ability to replace the United States as protector of the sea routes they rely on for their energy imports from the region. This leaves only Russia; its successful intervention in Syria and clear interest in increasing its role in the region make it a viable potential external patron.

Why would US allies turn to Russia when it is aiding regional adversaries such as Iran and Hezbollah? There appear to be three basic motives. The first is that, at a time when US presidents have expressed the desire to pull back from the Middle East but have not made clear whether the United States will actually do so, reaching out to Russia may be intended to persuade Washington that it needs to “do more” for its Middle Eastern allies, lest it lose them to Moscow.

Yet, whether the United States stays or goes, a second reason for US allies in the Middle East to cooperate with Russia is related to the opportunistic nature of Putin's foreign policy. While they do not like how Moscow is aiding Iran and the Assad regime, they know that Putin is eager to sell Russian weapons and other goods, to any and all who can afford to buy them—which several of the

United States' Middle East allies are well able to do. The more their cooperation with Moscow grows, the more that powerful Russian groups connected to Putin acquire an interest in “balancing” between that country and its adversary, instead of just supporting the latter. Middle Eastern governments, though, can grow frustrated that their interactions with Russia do not result in much (if any) reduction in Russian support for their adversaries in the region. Moscow, though, always seems to hold out the prospect that the more US Middle East allies cooperate with Russia economically and militarily, the more fully Russia will take their interests into account.

A third reason for US allies in the region to cooperate with Moscow is that—even if they are unhappy that their cooperation does not reduce or end Moscow's cooperation with their adversaries, and they have no illusions that this will change—their doing so is still useful for undercutting their adversaries' relationship with Russia. For example, just as Israel and Saudi Arabia are unhappy that Moscow cooperates with Iran, Tehran is often unhappy that Russia cooperates with Israel and Saudi Arabia.¹³ For Israel and Saudi Arabia, this has the advantage of casting doubt about whether Russia will support or oppose Iranian actions against them, and so (they hope) serves to restrain Iran.

US Middle East allies also cooperate with Russia for reasons unrelated to concerns about their regional adversaries. One is that both Russia and the United States' Gulf Arab allies depend on petroleum exports for much of their revenue, and so prefer higher oil prices. Thus, they both see increased US shale-oil production, which tends to limit oil prices, as a serious competitive threat. While Russia defied Saudi Arabia's calls to do so for many years, since December 2016 it has cooperated with Riyadh to limit oil exports and support oil prices through the OPEC+ format.¹⁴

Another reason they are drawn to cooperating with Moscow is that none of the United States' Middle East allies (including Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinians) has appreciated Washington's expressions of support for democratization and human rights in the region. While the Trump

13 For recent Iranian analyses of Russia's ties to both Saudi Arabia and Israel, see Mahmoud Shoori, “Between Iran and Saudi Arabia; Russia's Tough Path for Neutrality,” Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies, November 8, 2018, <http://www.iras.ir/en/doc/article/3765/between-iran-and-saudi-arabia-russia-s-tough-path-for-neutrality>; Hamidreza Azizi, “Israel Role in Iran-Russia Partnership in Syria,” Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies, February 11, 2019, <http://www.iras.ir/www.iras.iren/doc/note/3813/israel-role-in-iran-russia-partnership-syria>.

14 Carole Nakhle, “Russia's Energy Diplomacy in the Middle East” in Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru, eds., *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?* European Union Institute for Security Studies, Chaillot Paper 146, July 2018, 32.



Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) shakes hands with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during a meeting at the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia, October 20, 2015. Picture taken October 20, 2015. Source: REUTERS/Alexei Druzhinin/RIA Novosti/Kremlin

administration has pulled back from this, some US allies in the region are unhappy about congressional and press criticism of their policies. The Saudi government, for example, is indignant over congressional and press scrutiny of its role in the killing of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi and of its military campaign in Yemen, which has contributed to a humanitarian catastrophe there. By contrast, US Middle East allies very much appreciate that Russia does not make such demands (while Moscow ostensibly supports Palestinian aspirations, it has not done anything to impede Israel's policies thwarting them).

Finally, these allies now exhibit a degree of comfort in dealing with Russia that they did not have in dealing with the USSR. While the Putin regime is perceived as increasingly hostile and aggressive in the United States and elsewhere in the West, the United States' Middle East allies appear to see Russia more as a corrupt, and, thus, pliable authoritarian regime with which they can do business.¹⁵

Other US Allies and Russia

US allies outside the Middle East can be divided into two groups: those that feel seriously threatened by Russia, and those that do not. Ironically, neither group is focused on Russian behavior in the Middle East. Those US allies outside the Middle East that fear Russia are focused on Moscow's threat to them and their immediate neighborhood, in Europe or elsewhere, rather than on the Middle East. Those that do not fear a Russian threat to themselves or their immediate neighborhood also do not fear Russia's actions in the Middle East. Therefore, both sets of allies are unlikely to strongly participate in any US effort to counter Russian influence in the Middle East—especially if it is not supported by the United States' Middle Eastern allies.

In addition, there is one issue on which allies outside the Middle East are more aligned with Russia than with the

15 Mark N. Katz, "What Do They See in Him? How the Middle East Views Putin and Russia," *Russian Analytical Digest* 219, May 3, 2018, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD219.pdf>.

United States: the Iranian nuclear accord. While Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE opposed the Obama administration's pursuit of the Iranian nuclear accord and applauded the Trump administration's withdrawal from it, most other US allies—especially the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, which were signatories to the agreement—supported the agreement, as did Russia. The differences between the Trump administration and its non-Middle Eastern allies over the Iranian nuclear accord do not serve to promote cooperation between them regarding the Russian challenge, either in the Middle East or anywhere else.¹⁶

The Trump administration has criticized certain US allies, especially Germany, for buying so much oil and gas from Russia. But, even if these countries wanted to reduce their petroleum imports from Russia, they would need to replace them with supplies from other sources. Although it would take a massive effort to develop, Iranian gas could reduce European dependence on (and, hence, increase Europe's leverage over the terms for buying) Russian gas.¹⁷ The Trump administration, though, has been threatening sanctions against countries that do not reduce or end their imports of petroleum from Iran. In addition to irritating allies outside the Middle East, this Trump administration policy does not advance its own goal of getting allies to reduce their energy dependence on Russia.

Another issue that bothers the United States' European allies, in particular, is that while Washington insists that they comply with US-backed sanctions against Iran, neither the Obama nor the Trump administration pushed as hard on US Middle East allies to comply with US-backed sanctions against Russia over its annexation of Crimea and subsequent issues. Indeed, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have reportedly urged the Trump administration to lift Ukraine-related sanctions against Russia.¹⁸ This shows the United States' European allies that US allies in the Middle East do not prioritize their concerns about Russian policy toward Ukraine or Europe.

What Is to Be Done?

There are four possible policy approaches that the United States could adopt to address what it sees as the problem of expanding Russian influence in the Middle East. Each of them acknowledges that there is a sharp difference between how the United States' allies in the Middle East and those elsewhere regard Iran and how to deal with the Russian-Iranian relationship.

Middle-East-Allied-Centric Approach: Because its allies in the Middle East tend to see Iran as more of a threat and Russia as more of a partner, Washington should not call upon them to reduce their cooperation with Russia. Rather, it should join them in increasing efforts to pressure Iran into changing its behavior. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE want the United States to do this. Despite Iran's friendly relations with Russia, increasing US pressure may have the effect of forcing Russia to choose between more actively defending Iran (which will alienate the United States' Middle Eastern allies) or not doing so, and seeing Tehran become weaker (which will infuriate Tehran, but please US allies). Either way, US influence with its own Middle Eastern allies may be enhanced. Allies elsewhere may not approve of Washington's focus on Iran, but either Washington will succeed in persuading them to also adopt this approach, or they will neither do so nor strongly oppose it.

Other-Allied-Centric Approach: Should the current or future US administration view Russia as a far greater threat than Iran to the United States and most of its allies (especially its traditional ones in Europe), Washington should make the case that containing Russia is a higher priority than containing Iran. It should also make clear that Middle East allies more concerned about Iran cannot expect much help from the United States, unless and until they cease what Washington considers problematic cooperation with Moscow. US Middle Eastern allies will not like this, but, sooner or later, they may come to realize that this is the price they will have to pay if they want US and other Western support against Iran.

16 Yasmeen Serhan, "Is the U.S. Bringing Europe and Russia Closer Together?" *Atlantic*, May 25, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/05/is-the-us-bringing-europe-and-russia-closer-together/561008/>.

17 Lukáš Tichý and Nikita Odintsov, "Can Iran Reduce EU Dependence on Russian Gas?" *Middle East Policy*, Spring 2016, <https://www.mepc.org/journal/can-iran-reduce-eu-dependence-russian-gas>.

18 Adam Entous, "Israeli, Saudi, and Emirati Officials Privately Pushed for Trump to Strike a 'Grand Bargain' with Putin," *New Yorker*, July 9, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/israeli-saudi-and-emirati-officials-privately-pushed-for-trump-to-strike-a-grand-bargain-with-putin>.

Strategic-Patience Approach: If US allies in the Middle East do not see Russian policy as threatening enough to seek help from Washington, and US allies elsewhere are not concerned about Russian activity in this particular region, there may be little that the United States can—or should—do. If the allies do not regard Russia as a threat in the Middle East, then perhaps it is not one. Or, perhaps it is, but the United States’ Middle East allies can manage Moscow well enough on their own. If so, then Washington should not allow dealing with Russia to become a point of friction with its Middle Eastern allies. If and when they come to see that Russia is more of a problem than they can address on their own, then Washington can step in to help. There is, of course, the danger that if the United States steps back from the Middle East to such an extent, Russia will be able to become the principal external great power in the region. But, as noted earlier, Middle Eastern actors have long sought support from external powers against their regional rivals. Unless Russia can actually resolve the conflicts between them, its practice of endlessly supporting opposing sides simultaneously is likely to result in some Middle Eastern actors (especially those that the United States has long supported against their regional adversaries) retaining, or even increasing, their dependence on Washington.

Coalition-Building Approach: Because some US allies differ as to whether Iran or Russia is more of a threat, Washington should try to convince them all that Russian-Iranian cooperation is harmful, and that US allies need to cooperate against both. In particular, Washington needs to make clear to its Middle Eastern allies that, if they want other US allies to support the sanctions regime that they want to see enforced against Iran, they need to observe Western sanctions against Russia. So long as Russia and Iran continue to collaborate, the United States and all its allies need to work together against both.

None of the four foreign policy approaches outlined here is ideal, and each has risks. Prioritizing Iran in conjunction with US Middle East allies risks alienating other allies more concerned about Russia, as well as not dealing effectively with growing Russian influence in the Middle East. Prioritizing Russia risks US Middle Eastern allies simply not going along with this approach and continuing, or even increasing, their cooperation with it in the hope (however unrealistic) that Moscow will ultimately side with them over Iran. The strategic-patience approach, in which the United States trusts that its Middle Eastern allies will either deal with Russia effectively

on their own or turn to Washington for support if they realize that they cannot run the risk of allowing Russian influence to grow even stronger in the region. The coalition-building approach, in which Washington convinces its allies that Russian-Iranian cooperation is a threat to all of them and they should work together, is the best policy option. The fact that this fairly obvious solution has not already been adopted, though, indicates that it will be difficult to implement, for the simple reason that different US allies have contrasting threat perceptions about Russia and Iran. But, a foreign policy approach coordinated with US allies both inside and outside the Middle East would seem to have a better chance of success than one supported only by some allies but not others.

FURTHER RESEARCH

- There is a gap in understanding of the full scope of both Russian activities in the Middle East and how different US allies view and interact with Russia. While much information is available from press accounts, obtaining a more complete picture requires dedicated discussions with policymakers, academics, and journalists on the ground, to obtain a fuller and more nuanced image of Russia’s diplomatic, military, and economic relations with the different countries of the Middle East, as well as how each of them views Russia.
- Research on the views of different Middle Eastern governments toward Russia could help indicate how their expectations of Moscow compare to one another’s, as well as whether they have similar or different concerns about Russian policies. This will require intense discussions with policymakers and key advisers in the region’s different countries.
- Especially at a time when the US government is not focused on how to deal with the challenge of Russian activity in the Middle East, a structured Track II dialogue with US allies inside and outside the region may facilitate the development and articulation of a consistent, long-term approach to this issue. This will likely be more effective if it is undertaken in cooperation with US allies, instead of at odds with them.

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