



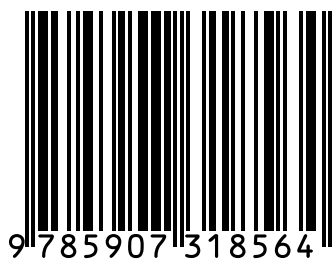
# Russia's New Middle East Strategy: Countries and Focal Points

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Does Russia need a new Middle East strategy? This is the first question that springs to mind. After all, Russia has been quite successful, in some cases even outperforming the Soviet Union. In fact, Russia has succeeded in developing a close relationship with Israel while maintaining its trust-based ties with Palestine, as well as building an alliance with Syria all while strengthening relations with Iran, which used to call the USSR a “Little Satan”. Who could have imagined all that? Could it even have occurred to Soviet leaders to call Saudi Arabia a strategic partner like Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak did recently?

Life moves on, and the Middle East is rapidly changing. Just as importantly, the global balance of power is also shifting. Russia is constantly on the move too, with all the developments in and around it, as well as its regional and global functions.

Russia's main domestic and foreign policy priorities lie outside the Middle East region. With everything changing so quickly, how do you save what you already have while keeping up with the latest developments and trends, but without overexerting oneself on matters that are too far to be worth the effort? The answer to this question lies in the constant effort to improve, fine-tune, and amend Russia's Middle East strategy in its structural and functional components.

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## Pillars for Russia's Middle East policy

Russia's policy stands on three main pillars: the **first** one deals with ensuring security and defence, the **second** one consists of building Greater Eurasia, and the **third** pillar is designed to create a favourable international framework for Russia's technological transition and achieving technological breakthroughs.

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**Russian Middle East policy i s stands on three main pillars –**  
**1) Ensuring security and defence; 2) building Greater Eurasia;**  
**3) Create a favourable international framework for Russia's technological transition and achieving technological breakthroughs**

## Security and defence

The 2015 intervention by Russian troops in Syria marked a major turning point for Russia's policy in general, justified primarily by the need to defeat terrorism in the far reaches by acting in a country which turned into a powerful terrorist enclave of global, rather than regional significance. Strategy-wise, this objective has been achieved, with terrorist activity in Syria and Iraq reduced to isolated incidents. Moving forward, it could even subside almost entirely, making Russian military presence less necessary.

Russia's presence in Syria took on military and political dimensions, as it seeks to accomplish three goals: 1) ensure a lasting reconciliation between Damascus and the Kurds, as well as with other ethnic groups, sub-ethnicities and tribal groups under the nominal control of the Kurds; 2) secure the withdrawal of the United States from Syrian territory; 3) liquidate Turkish occupation zones in Syria. All this is designed to ensure a final resolution to the Syrian conflict, and from the point of view of Russia's defence and security, it means a guarantee that it will not spread beyond Syrian territory.

With regard to terrorism, we will limit our argument here to organisations controlled by or directly linked to al-Qaeda<sup>1</sup> and ISIS<sup>2</sup>. The fight against these structures has entered its final stage in Syria and Iraq, with terrorists still entrenched only in Yemen, although even there they are acting as someone else's tools rather than being fully self-motivated.

The main hotbeds of *organised* terrorism are leaving the Middle East for other regions. There are in fact two other regions: Afghanistan and sub-Saharan Africa along the Senegal-Somali line, which for that reason could be referred to as Africa's Islamist fault line.

The Taliban<sup>3</sup> now rules Afghanistan. Viewed as a terrorist movement under international law, upon their taking power, the Taliban said they did not intend to expand beyond Afghanistan and have stayed true to their word, at least for now. However, ISIS with its expansionist agenda remains active within the country. This means that the Afghanistan threat is not illusory, although members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), in coordination with Iran, can effectively neutralise this threat. In fact, Iran has already been quite effective in preventing terrorists from Afghanistan from infiltrating the Middle East.

The second region, sub-Saharan Africa, is much bigger. It potentially poses an even greater threat than Afghanistan, which is primarily due to blurry borders between its countries. Geographically removed from Russia,

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<sup>1</sup> Banned in Russia.

<sup>2</sup> Banned in Russia.

<sup>3</sup> Taliban is under UN sanctions for engaging in terrorist activity.

this region does not seem to create any immediate threat to its security.

However, this does not mean that Russia has no business contributing to counter-terrorist efforts there. Russia can still carry out timely operations or provide military and technical assistance, as it already does for the Central African Republic and Mali. It can also focus on working with neighbouring countries and other Arab nations such as Egypt and Algeria, as well as with the Persian Gulf states.

All this suggests that terrorism is becoming less of an issue in the Middle East and no longer poses a serious threat to Russia's security. Still, one thing to remember is that while organised terrorism as practiced by al-Qaeda and ISIS may actually be fading into the political landscape, the aimless Islamist fighters remain on hand, making it tempting to use this force as a political tool, an Islamist strike force of sorts. Turkey has tested this scenario quite a few times already in Syria, then in Libya and finally during the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh. What happened in Kazakhstan in January 2022 showed that this tool can even be used in places where an Islamist revolution has no chance of succeeding. Today, it is too early to draw any conclusions from the developments in Kazakhstan before the investigation into these events is finalised, so it remains to be seen who specifically tried to draw Islamist terrorists into the conflict. Still, there is a real threat of various external and domestic forces building this factor into their agendas.

While terrorism may seem to be losing momentum, the threat of state-to-state, sub-regional or regional conflicts remains and is even growing. In fact, the biggest danger comes from challenges that could emerge in the future rather from the existing ones. The paradox with the Middle East is that the main hot conflicts currently unfolding there, except for the one in Libya, may well be waning, but at the same time their conflict potential has been on the rise, primarily affecting neighbouring regions such as the Eastern Mediterranean, the South Caucasus, and the Sahel. Tensions still run high in the Persian Gulf, as well as between Israel and Iran.

Most of the clashes in these regions, except in the South Caucasus, do not directly threaten Russia. Still, Russia must focus its peacekeeping efforts on preventing new conflicts and stopping the old ones from escalating, as well as dealing with their multiple consequences in all their diversity, since they create risks for Russia too.

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**The topic of terrorism has a clear tendency to leave the Middle East, no longer representing the main threat to the defence and security of Russia here, and involvement in actions in neighbouring regions should be minimal**

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**The paradox with the Middle East is that the main hot conflicts currently unfolding there, except for the one in Libya, may well be waning, and the sphere of conflict potential has been on the rise, capturing primarily the border zones with the region, such as the Eastern Mediterranean, the South Caucasus, and the Sahel**

For instance, Russia's military presence in Syria helps alleviate conflict-related risks in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, there is more to it. Russia's military bases, including the naval facility in Tartus and the Aerospace Forces' base in Khmeimim are Russia's only outposts outside its territory. With the weapons they have at their disposal, these two bases can effectively block the Black Sea straits, which could be instrumental in preventing escalation in the Black Sea basin. All of this is becoming increasingly relevant considering the growing tensions between Russia, on the one hand, and the United States and NATO, on the other. It is in this context that Russia's outposts in Syria can make a considerable difference.

## Building Greater Eurasia

Political observers tend to treat Greater Eurasia as a marginal topic, dwarfed by global conflict, or view it as a too narrow a subject, for example in the context of China's Belt and Road initiative. From this perspective Greater Eurasia is sometimes reduced to cooperation between Russia and China, along with several smaller countries, mostly from Central Asia.

At this stage of globalisation, building Greater Eurasia is one of the lead, if not the key process, as evidenced by two objective factors: 1) the vibrant development of industrial clusters in East and South Asia and their need to export their products, from high-technology to consumer goods; 2) the connectivity revolution brought on primarily by the development of railway and road networks.

Shipments from South and East Asia to Europe are increasing every year with most of these goods delivered by sea. However, sea shipping is not keeping pace with growing trade volumes. In addition, even now rail and truck shipping takes half the time of maritime shipments, and the ongoing infrastructure upgrades could cut delivery times by two or even three times.

Most surface shipments transit through Russia. But what has the Middle East to do with all this? Let me explain. While shipments from East Asia do not come into direct contact with the Middle East, the situation changes once you turn to South Asia. The north-south corridor linking



Russia's Baltic coast with Iran's Bandar Abbas port on the Indian Ocean takes on a central role. From there, Mumbai, India, is just a short way off by sea, and on to Karachi of Pakistan and ports of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the ASEAN countries. Today, it takes at least 20 days for goods to travel from south Iran to St Petersburg's suburbs, and another two to five days to reach other South Asian ports. Iran plays a key role in this project as a Middle Eastern power and a Persian Gulf state. Efforts to develop railway and road connectivity produce synergies enabling Iran to comprehensively develop its manufacturing sector. For this reason, Russia's cooperation with Iran, as well as with India, is a major factor.

The Arab Persian Gulf states have been increasingly interested in the Greater Eurasia project with Oman already taking part as an observer. Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait can also possibly join in as investors, shipping operators, or by contributing to infrastructure and other projects. Iraq is also closely following these developments.

All these developments are unfolding against the backdrop of major infrastructure projects in the region, primarily in the railway sector. Of these, many are already underway or are about to be launched. This is the case for example for the railway linking Saudi Arabia's west and east coasts or the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Latakia railway project. This could lead to a new branched transport network in the near future to supplement the already developed network of roads. All of this will transform the region's logistics. In addition, it will connect to the rapidly developing cross-continental network.

Doing everything to coordinate these efforts with the cross-continental corridors passing through Russia, under its control or with its participation, is in Russia's best interest. Otherwise, logistics chains bypassing Russia could develop. Until recently, this threat was largely ephemeral, since bypassing Russia meant transiting through regions suffering from political instability. However, gaining a foothold in the Persian Gulf region and Mashriq, the eastern part of the Arab world, in general has strategic importance.

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**The development of railway and automobile infrastructure gives a synergistic effect, which consists in the integrated development of modern industries in Iran**

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**Israel and the UAE will be able to play an important role in diversifying the channels of cooperation between Russia in the direction of a technological breakthrough**

## Creating a favourable environment for Russia's technological breakthrough

In recent years, Russia's leadership has been quite active in shaping its relations with America and Europe, as well as countries in East and South Asia in a way that would facilitate a technological leap forward. This includes dealing with outside threats, as well as promoting wide-reaching scientific and technological collaborations.

There is potential for working with some countries in the Middle East, especially in the digital economy, the creation of artificial intelligence and its applications in various sectors of the economy, management and social services, as well as in pharmaceuticals and reproductive health, for making new products. In fact, Russia has already started cooperating along these lines with Israel and the UAE.

Having enabled Israel and the UAE to establish diplomatic ties, the Abraham Accords paved the way for the emergence of a bilateral axis on science and technology, which could create new opportunities for Russia. Researchers from the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences<sup>4</sup> demonstrated that Russia has everything it takes to be part of this effort, and even serve as a driver in regional science and technology. Other Persian Gulf monarchies, including Saudi Arabia, will want to join this axis despite the serious obstacles they may face in openly engaging with Israel.

Of course, Middle Eastern countries will hardly be instrumental in enabling Russia to achieve a technological breakthrough. That said, cooperation with Israel and the UAE, both tech-savvy nations, as well as the funding opportunities offered by the Persian Gulf countries and cooperation within the OPEC+ format, coupled with European cooperation, including with Germany, Austria, France and Italy, as well as with Asia's pioneering tech countries like China, South Korea and Singapore, could enable Russia to achieve its objectives. Incidentally, OPEC+ and the resulting close ties with Saudi Arabia to regulate the global oil market has critical importance for the Russian economy, including in terms of accumulating resources for achieving a technological breakthrough.

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<sup>4</sup> Svetlana Babenkova, Dmitry Maryasis. *Palestina I Israil: tsifrovaya ekonomika kak platforma dlya budushchego effektivnogo vzaimodeistviya* [Palestine and Israel: The digital economy as a platform for future effective cooperation]. Moscow, Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2021. 286 p.

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# Country-level and sub-regional priorities in Russia's Middle East policy

Having defined the key vectors of Russia's Middle East policy, we can now look at the priorities at the country-specific and sub-regional levels. This includes Syria for defence, Iran for a cross-continental strategy, the Persian Gulf countries in general for promoting multilateral cooperation, as well as Israel and the UAE for promoting cooperation in science and technology. Does this mean that major regional powers like Turkey and Egypt are out of the picture? Definitely not. That said, relations with them will develop in the context of the priorities as stated above.

## Syria

Syria has a clear-cut role in Russia's defence policy. However, on its own, Russia can hardly satisfy all of Syria's needs in terms of post-war reconstruction. Much will depend on cooperation with Iran and China, although this approach has its limits. That said, working with the Persian Gulf monarchies will also be instrumental, primarily the UAE, followed by Bahrein, Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia.

## Iran and the Persian Gulf

Once the conflict in Syria runs its course, the Persian Gulf will find itself in the centre of the Middle East. It is here that most of the region's resources can be found, important assets in global terms, as well as within Eurasia, especially the eastern and southern regions. At the same time, the Persian Gulf could also emerge as a conflict prone region, inheriting this from the Middle East.

Finding a comprehensive solution to Persian Gulf security challenges is one of the key elements in Russia's Middle East policy. Not long ago, its proposals on building a

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**The key vectors of Russia's Middle East policy are: Syria for defence, Iran for a cross-continental strategy, the Persian Gulf countries in general for promoting multilateral cooperation, Israel and the UAE for promoting cooperation in science and technology**

# MIDDLE EAST: HOTBEDS OF TENSION AND RUSSIA'S PRIORITIES

## Terrorist organizations and conflicts



Terrorism



Conflicts



Danger

"Africa's Islamist fault line"

Sahel

## Country-level and sub-regional priorities in Russia's Middle East policy



Defense



Cooperation in science and technology



Cross-continental strategy



Exclusive relationship



Cooperation



Caution

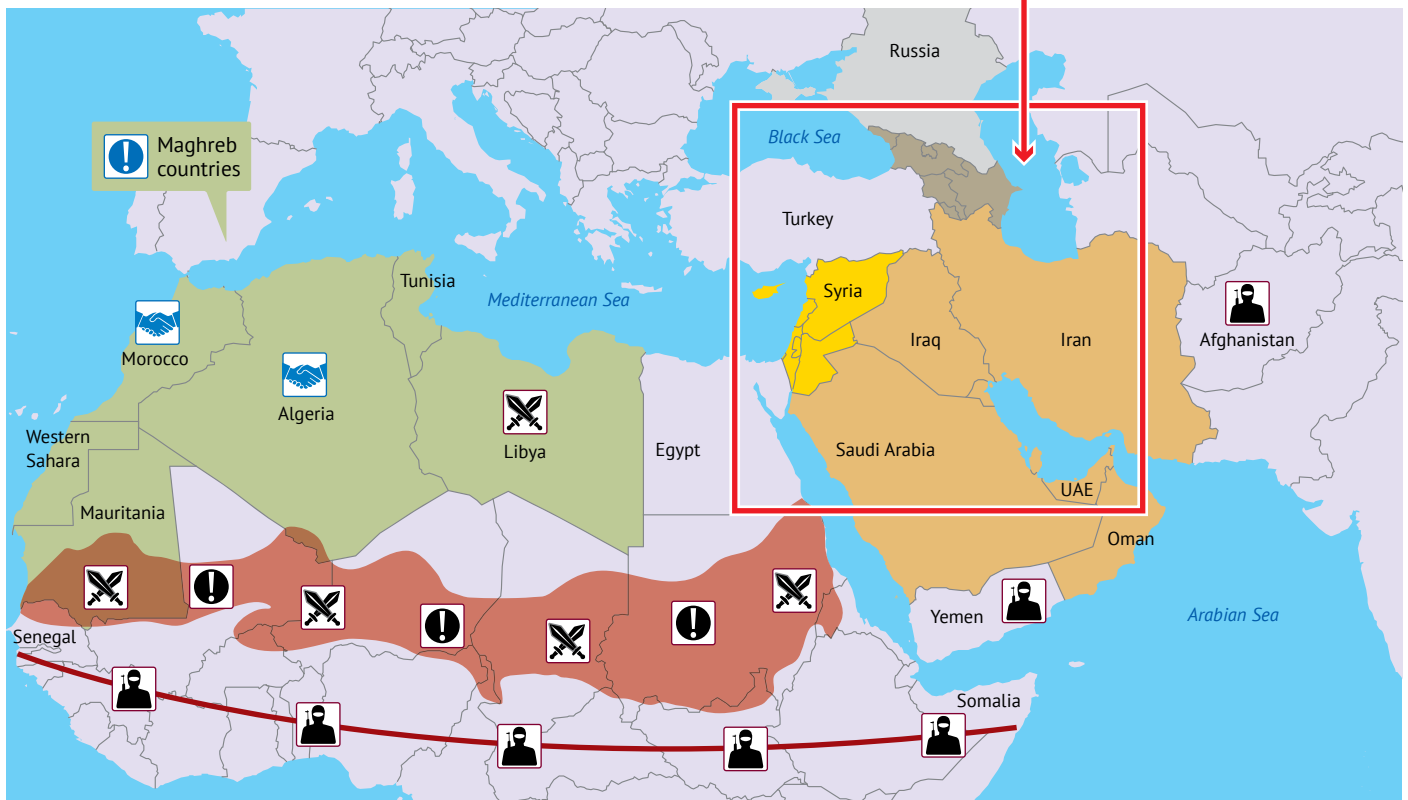
## Preventing escalation in the Black Sea basin



Aerospace Forces' base in Khmeimim



Naval facility in Tartus



collective security framework for this sub-region might have seemed like an utopia, but today they have become relevant with most regional and global actors praising the initiative.

To demonstrate this point, the Institute of Oriental Studies, together with the Russian Foreign Ministry, held an international expert meeting on security in the Persian Gulf in December last year. It brought together representatives from almost all countries belonging to this sub-region, with Qatar and Oman the only exceptions, as well as most other Middle East countries, including Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt, along with representatives of the EU, the United States, India, and China. For many countries, including India, this was the first time they attended this forum.

The participants affirmed their commitment to drafting a common expert document. If adopted at the political level, it could lay the groundwork for turning the Persian Gulf into an international security area paving the way to promising international cooperation.

What indicates that the outcome of this meeting is more than just expert expectations?

**First**, the biggest and potentially the most dangerous regional conflict is between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but this seems to have died down. With a return to the international deal on the Iranian nuclear programme, and with most sensitive bilateral issues resolved, for the first time in many years the two countries launched direct talks in Baghdad. So far, they have not helped restore bilateral relations, but the very fact that the two are talking inspires hope. Many pitfalls remain though, for example the Bahrein issue, but the overall context of an Iranian-Saudi settlement certainly dwarfs those.

**Second**, tensions between Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been easing. Despite the remaining controversies, at least the two countries have restored their political relations.

**Third**, Russia has developed steady and, in most cases, friendly and trust-based relations with almost all countries in the region, primarily with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The recent visit by President Ebrahim Raisi to the Russian Federation demonstrated that in some areas Russia's relations with Iran have been elevated to a strategic partnership. The same applies to the UAE.

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**One of the important directions of today's Russian Middle East policy is a comprehensive solution to the problem of security in the Persian Gulf**

## Saudi Arabia

Until recently, Russia had quite a challenging relationship with Saudi Arabia. However, the two have been so effective at working together within the OPEC+ format since 2020 that Russia went as far as referring, and not without reason, to these relations as a strategic partnership. Russia has been focusing on promoting closer economic and political ties, and the response from its Saudi partners has been quite positive. The opportunity to work with Russia to deliver on the most far-reaching structural economic goals currently pursued by Saudi leadership is a major factor in bilateral relations.

Ending the conflict in Yemen is a delicate and extremely important issue for the kingdom, for which it is a burden that stands in the way of economic reform. Russian diplomacy could help Riyadh withdraw from the Yemeni conflict without losing face.

Considering all these circumstances, Russia could play an important role in shaping an international security area in the Persian Gulf, which is not the same as acting as a mediator in local conflicts. Instead, Russia could operate as a party to a future regional collective security system. There are reasons to expect regional actors to respond to this in a positive way. Apart from Russia, China and India could also aspire to this role. If this framework begins to materialise, the United States and the Western countries would hardly seek to find a pretext not to be part of it.

This scenario may seem excessively optimistic, but it doesn't mean that it cannot guide Russia's policy in this sub-region. The Persian Gulf is the main political development driver for the entire Middle East, which means that Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan could benefit, both economically and politically, from efforts to build a collective security system.

## Israel

Developing relations with Israel is one of Russia's top priorities in the Middle East. This is a very sensitive issue for many Arab countries and Russia's Islamic partners in general, who are unwilling to accept that Israel and Moscow do need to work together in the spirit of mutual understanding.

Ironically, a restored relationship with Israel has resulted in more cooperation with the Arab world. Countries like Egypt and Jordan who have

also established relations with Israel cannot now blame Russia for moving in the same direction and they are willing to promote contacts. The fact that Israel has established relations with several Persian Gulf countries further emphasises the balanced nature of Russia's policy.

Both Russia and Israel benefited from closer ties, which is easy to explain. Prominent members of the Israeli elite, including David Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir, Avigdor Lieberman and Natan Sharansky, all grew up in Russia or in the USSR. There is also the "Russia street" factor: after all, 20 percent of the country's population has Russian or Soviet roots. Those who moved to Israel maintain close ties with the relatives and friends they left behind in Russia and other CIS countries. Cultural and historical ties are also strong. Entrenched in the political subconscious, the Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust bring the two peoples closer together. All this can facilitate cooperation in multiple fields set to play a pivotal role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including IT, the digital economy, artificial intelligence, etc., considering that Israel is one of the most advanced countries in the world, let alone the region.

Of course, it would be misleading to paint an entirely rosy picture of Russia-Israel relations. As known, Israel is the closest regional ally of the United States. This relationship cannot be seen as unilateral dependence, considering the power of the Jewish lobby in the United States and the leverage this gives Israel over US politics. Even if the close alliance between Israel and the United States sets the tone in Israeli politics, including the way the country frames its relations with Russia, it can be argued that to an extent Israel enjoys a free hand in its relations with Russia.

The disagreements between Israel and Russia boil down to three geographic locations: Palestine, the Golan Heights, and Iran.

On the Palestinian issue, three factors explain why Russia and Israel differ so much and have little chance of converging on anything in the near future: the creation of a Palestinian state, its capital in East Jerusalem, and the Jewish settlements on Palestinian territory. The international legal framework sets a clear path for resolving all these three contingencies, and Russia has been consistent in following these tenets, unlike Israel and the United States who, according to Russia, have used various manipulations for undermining efforts to settle these issues. The East Jerusalem and the settlement problems could be resolved easily if Israel had the good will to do it, as it once did by evacuating its settlers from the Gaza strip.

However, formed by wide-reaching party coalitions, governments in Israel become hostage to the political forces who firmly oppose any compromise with the Palestinians. This applies to creating the Palestinian state, further undermined by what currently seems to be a still non-repairable political split among the Palestinians themselves with a Fatah-led coalition controlling the West Bank, and its Islamist nemesis Hamas ruling Gaza while recognised as a terrorist organisation by Israel, the United States and several other Western countries.

Announced by former President of the United States Donald Trump, the Deal of the Century consisted of the US recognising Jerusalem as Israel's outright capital and moving its embassy there. This seriously undermined the position of the Palestinians, for whom the decision by several Persian Gulf states to establish diplomatic relations with Israel was also an act of treason. As a result, the situation on Palestinian territories remains extremely volatile, and even the slightest escalation in Israeli-Palestinian relations results in riots and agitation in the West Bank, accompanied by missile launches from Gaza targeting Israel.

Russia is the only global power with whom both sides can cooperate. The Biden administration has been showing that it can be more flexible on the Palestinian issue compared to its predecessors, but this has not had any meaningful effect on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

All this has much in common with the Golan Heights, in the sense that Russia does not recognise Israel's annexation of this Syrian territory, but this does not change anything because the Syrian government, together with its Russian ally, have been prioritising more urgent matters. Once they focus on Syria's territorial integrity, the Golan Heights issue will be back on the agenda.

As for the Israeli-Iranian standoff in Syria, Russia's position could be described as "this is not our war". It is for this reason that Russia turns a blind eye to Iran's threats toward Israel, or Israel's strikes against Iranian and pro-Iranian forces in Syria when they were believed by Israel as posing a real threat. Moscow has limited its role to trying to separate the conflicting parties. Sometimes it succeeds in its efforts, like during the liberation of the south-western provinces by the Syrian army, when Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Lebanon's Hezbollah were persuaded not to take part in the operation, while Israel agreed to refrain from air and missile strikes. These developments are a matter of concern to Russia, considering the danger to Syrian and Russian installations posed by Israeli incursions.



Of course, Russia and Israel do have an agreement on preventing incidents but have been unable to avert all threats.

## Turkey

Russia sees Turkey as a key country in its regional policy, although their relations lie outside Russia's Middle East policy priorities. Not only because Turkey simply fits badly into Russia's strategic interests from the perspective of east-west or north-south transcontinental communications, but it acts as a territory through which these flows can bypass Russia making them hard for Russia to manage.

Turkey is Russia's largest regional trade and economic partner. With trade at about \$30 billion in 2021, it is far ahead of Egypt, the UAE, Israel, and Iran, and double in fact the trade volume with Saudi Arabia, let alone other countries. As far as gas transit and distribution are concerned (Blue Stream and TurkStream pipelines), Turkey has every right to be called Russia's strategic partner. However, unlike Israel or the UAE, scientific and technical cooperation has been virtually non-existent.

Political relations have been ambivalent. In late 2015, the two countries were on the brink of war, but two years later they were once again working together within the Astana format. Still, even in this framework they faced challenges. Russia worked with Iran and Syria to support Damascus as an ally, while Turkey stayed on the other side of the barricades and maintained contact with radical forces, including Islamists fighting the Assad regime, and sometimes even terrorists. Bringing such a controversial partner to the negotiating table, accompanied by the radical opposition, was no easy task.

Nevertheless, the Astana format has been remarkably effective. It provided for the creation of four de-escalation zones, of which three were completely cleansed from terrorists and other radicals in 2018. This fully removed the threat to Syria's four main cities: Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama, and the government restored its control over three quarters of Syria's territory. Without Turkey's cooperation all this would have been impossible. In fact, Turkey acted as a guarantor for enabling radicals opposing reconciliation to leave the three de-escalation zones with their families for Idlib or to the Turkish occupation zones in Syria.

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**The ambivalence  
of Russian-Turkish  
relations  
is by no means limited  
to the Syrian issue**

The fourth de-escalation zone, Idlib, remains the only blood stain on Syria's territory. Pro-Turkish forces there are neighbouring (not nearly always peacefully) upon terrorist groups formed by al-Qaeda remnants. Russia continues to work with Turkey on Syria, but without Turkey's presence in this terrorist enclave, the Syrian army would have long cleaned it up with the Russia's (and Iran's) support. The only way to explain Turkey's occupation of northern Syria, in violation of international law, is to argue that it suggests an attempted annexation, which Turkey refers to as efforts to "support opposition forces". Russian diplomacy and its military and political assets will have to be as flexible as possible to resolve this issue.

On the Syrian track, relations between Russia and Turkey present a web of contradictions which go far beyond Syria. There is the Turanian vector in Turkey's policy, the bid to support the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>5</sup> in the Arab world and beyond, Turkey's refusal to recognise Crimea as part of Russia and support for revanchist elements among Crimean Tatars, as well as Turkey's ambiguities on the Russia-Ukraine controversy, and the revival of the historical struggles with the Armenians and the Greeks. All this is definitely a matter of concern for Russia, its civil society and political class, especially when dealing with political incidents which can be viewed in Russia as confrontational.

At the same time, the Justice and Development Party is a moderate rather than radical Islamist force, including in its overall foreign policy, albeit with some exceptions. The Ottoman and the pan-Turkic vectors come from Turkey's efforts to move away from Ataturk's pro-European policy since the EU's doors remain closed to Turkey. This does not mean that Russia and its CSTO allies do not face any real danger here, especially regarding the concept of building a Turkic alliance. It was this project that paved the way for Turkey's direct involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 on Azerbaijan's side. However, by leveraging its peacekeeping role and commitment to a political settlement, Russia has been able to level-out Turkey's one-way advance in its tracks on this front.

Turkish experts viewed the CSTO's mission in Kazakhstan in 2022 as a blow to Turkey's pan-Turkic aspirations. It has yet to be proven that Turkey had a role in what happened there, but the fact that Islamist mercenaries were involved is a clear reference to the methods Turkey used in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

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<sup>5</sup> Banned in Russia.

Of course, not everything in Turkey's policy is negative for Russia. In fact, some of the initiatives Turkey has taken undermine unity along NATO's southern flank. This includes the decision to buy the C-400 missile systems. Turkey's actions in the eastern Mediterranean, from Libya to Greece and Cyprus, also undermine North-Atlantic unity in this region.

## Egypt

Relations with Egypt cannot be viewed as a Russian Middle East policy priority. Still, Egypt is a major Arab country. This Middle Eastern nation has more than double the population of its Arab neighbours. This is a country with developed manufacturing and agricultural sectors, and is culturally sophisticated and has considerable brainpower.

Signed by the presidents of Russia and Egypt, the Agreement of Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation came into force in January 2021. It covers a broad range of cooperation initiatives, including those aimed at modernising the Egyptian economy, creating a Russian economic zone near the Suez canal, technology transfers, building El Dabaa, Egypt's first nuclear power station, as well as military-technical facilities. According to the agreement, the relations between Russia and Egypt will take on a regional dimension, which could evolve into a pan-African policy.

All this would seem to make Egypt a priority country in terms of Russia's Middle East policy. However, several restricting factors exist.

**First**, Egypt depends financially on the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. While accepting a trilateral or multilateral cooperation agreement with the latter two could be possible, this is a non-starter for the United States. Egypt is the second largest recipient of US financial aid in the Middle East, which seriously limits its ability to take independent decisions. For example, Egypt had to withdraw from the deal to buy the Russian Su-35 aircraft. Of course, other Russia-Egypt deals could also fall apart due to American sanctions.

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**This includes the decision to buy the C-400 missile systems. Turkey's actions in the eastern Mediterranean, from Libya to Greece and Cyprus, also undermine North-Atlantic unity in this region**

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**Russian-Egyptian cooperation is acquiring a strategic character, having a regional dimension, which could also evolve into a pan-African policy**

**Second**, Egypt lags far behind Israel and the UAE in terms of its scientific and technological development. For this reason, cooperation on high-technology, digital transformation, and artificial intelligence could become a one-way street, which would be unacceptable to Russia in the current environment.

## Maghreb countries

The Libyan conflict acts as a constraining factor in terms of Russia's relations with the Maghreb countries, isolating them from the rest of the Arab world. This is a major obstacle for Russia, since without direct contacts there are heightened economic and political risks standing in the way of priority undertakings. This does not mean however that selective cooperation initiatives, for example with Algeria or Morocco, have to be avoided, but Russia needs to be extremely cautious considering that the two countries are in a state of conflict.

## The collective West in the Middle East

Russia has no doubt been quite successful in the Middle East and can further expand its regional foothold, but it would still be naive to claim that it can push the West out of the region or force the United States to abandon it altogether.

One thing that does seem to be fading away is the notion of a collective West as applied to the Middle East. The West's attempts to channel its regional engagement through NATO have largely failed, while attempts to replace it with its surrogates like Washington-led grand coalitions have also been unsuccessful in both Iraq and Syria. Solutions along these lines do not seem to fit into the current environment.

Thus, there is a better case for discussing the United States and its policy separately from Western Europe, meaning Germany, France, Italy and Britain as its leading countries, rather than the EU as a whole, since

it has so far been unable to come up with a common Middle East policy.

There are two main reasons the Middle East now plays a smaller role in US politics. One is a waning interest in Middle East oil, as well as the fact that geopolitical priorities have shifted to other regions, primarily the Asia Pacific and Europe. This led to the idea of scaling down the military and political exposure in the Middle East, a major burden in both geopolitical and financial terms. It has to be emphasised that, **first**, this decline in interest is relative. **Second**, the withdrawal is limited to locations where America's presence is becoming meaningless, in which cases it is already minimal and boils down to military instructors and people in charge of military and political cooperation with Iraq, or too risky, which applies to Iraq, as well as Syria, where US military strategists are afraid of falling into a geopolitical trap and for that reason are pleading for a gradual withdrawal to save face.

This situation opens new opportunities for Russia's Syria policy. While it can hardly aspire to replacing the United States in Iraq in the current conditions, Russia faces the risk of being drawn against its will and interests into the confrontation between the United States and Iran.

As for other parts of the region, the United States has no plans to leave any of the rest of it. The US is maintaining its bases in Qatar and other Gulf countries, and its strategic cooperation with Israel will carry on. There is an opening for Russia to step up its cooperation with the Gulf countries, Israel and Egypt, but the Russian Federation will not be able to compete with the United States on this front, considering its financial, economic, scientific and technical capabilities.

As for Western Europe, part of its economic elite, most notably in Germany and Italy, as well as the military establishment in France could be interested in engaging in joint projects with Russia on coordinating their Middle East policies, although the increasingly confrontational nature of Russia's relations with the West will stand in the way of any attempts to make these initiatives a reality.

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**The West's attempts to channel its regional engagement through NATO have largely failed, while attempts to replace it with its surrogates like Washington-led grand coalitions have also been unsuccessful in both Iraq and Syria. Solutions along these lines do not seem to fit into the current environment**

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## In lieu of an epilogue

International politics has entered a new phase with the disappearance of a homogeneous world order. A more or less single set of rules has been replaced by multidirectional global processes bringing the promise of reshaping the global economy in the decades to come. This is accompanied by both Russia and China stepping up their game in their relations with the West at the same time, although in slightly different manners. Competition between the major powers is also on the rise. The United States is revisiting its priorities, dropping those that have become less important, while acting more proactively on those that remain. More and more actors now influence the global situation, while those who only recently aspired to a leading role have become less important. These and other processes create a new framework for all international actors and regional relations.

The Middle East has retained a central role throughout human history by taking the lead, subjected to outside influences, or determining the balance of power in other parts of the world. There is no doubt that it will retain its key international role in the future. It is no less obvious that it will be different from what we have grown used to throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Russia is entering this new stage as a major force in the Middle East, and quite a relevant one too. Perhaps, it can be viewed today as the most influential of the outside forces. This opens new opportunities in the region and in the broader international arena. However, it can also create new burdens for Russia's strategy if Moscow fails to stick to its policy of proactive, constructive, but at the same time equidistant, flexible engagement with a touch of creativity for untangling regional issues. The threads forming this node of problems come from far and wide, and are pivotal in the security and stability of all the neighbouring regions.

There may be a plethora of the most complex developments in the Middle East, but fortunately, if the experience of the past decade is any guide, we can rest assured that Russia's leadership, politicians, diplomats, the military, and intelligence services have the experience they need to draw the right conclusions and take the appropriate action.

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