

Russia in the Middle East:

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

Executive Summary

- The United States is no longer the undisputed hegemon in the Middle East. A diminution of the American

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

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

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

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

- ▶ For the United States, a Russian presence in the Middle East is not intolerable at current levels. It does not necessarily run counter to core U.S. interests in the region; but it does complicate the realization of these interests and is detrimental to the degree that Russian policy is motivated by the goal of limiting U.S. influence and damaging U.S. prestige.
- ▶ For Israel, Russia is a high-priority national security challenge. Russia imposes a set of operational and strategic concerns stemming from the potential impediment to Israel's freedom of operations in Syria and Moscow's strategic relations and cooperation with Iran. Engagement with Russia allows Israel achievements in degrading Iranian military capabilities and entrenchment in Syria, with limited Russian disruption of its operations. Israel needs to maintain its engagement with Russia in order to secure these paramount objectives.

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- **Susceptibility of failed states:** Special attention should be devoted to failed states, such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen. These are the places where the continued involvement of Russia and other outside powers is most probable and could, in the future, cause the most headaches for Washington and Jerusalem.
- **Israel's messaging to Washington about Russia:** Israel must show the United States it is aware of Russia's

U.S.-Israeli Group on Russia

Background

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

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

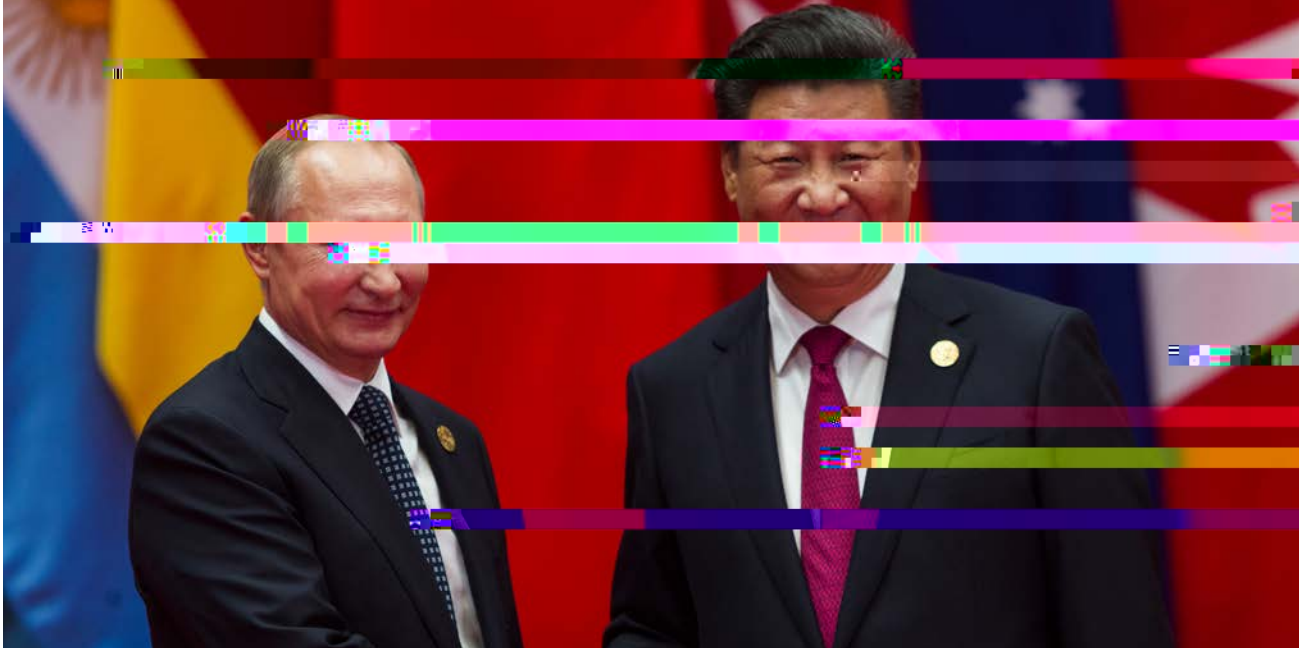
Russia has reestablished itself as a power in the Middle East. When relations between Russia and the West soured ov

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

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

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

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



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The International Setting: Shades of Great Power Competition

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

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

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

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

Russia's Role in the Middle East

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

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

A transactional style of diplomacy prevails in the Middle East. This suits Putin and helps him with crisis management and with maximizing opportunities when they appear. Putin is more than comfortable working with opposing sides in a given conflict, as Russia does in Afghanistan, Iran, Rrean, IrnNc1 .019 Tc10 63dfA | 1 4bs3 BDC -0.019 Tc 9.842 0 0 10 63.168 6416676 511.76 [R

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Russian-Israeli Relationship

Over the past five years, Israeli-Russian relations have

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





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Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

Dealing with Russia and China in the Middle East:

China has been integrating parts of the Middle East, from Afghanistan to Iran to the Horn of Africa, into its Belt and Road Initiative. It has the potential to provide an alternative to the regional influence and power of the United States. But China is content for the time being to keep its distance. Beijing and Moscow surely consult one another about their policies on Syria and other countries in the Middle East, though they have different interests where oil prices are concerned. Even so, they are not working at cross purposes. China

Key Takeaways

Russia's role in the Middle East: Up to now, Russia has been neither powerful enough nor revisionist enough in the Middle East to disrupt the U.S.-Israel alliance.

Russia will have long-term stakes in the Middle East, a telling indicator of the kind of influence Russia wields. Putin also faces mounting problems at home, but he will not withdraw from the Middle East. Russia lacks the long-term geopolitical options there that China has, but it is much more involved in the region and constantly seeking ways to expand its presence and maximize its leverage. Moscow seeks a seat at the table when major regional problems are considered, and might be willing to reciprocate with more responsible policy.

U.S.-Israeli differences in perception on Russia:

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