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Russia in the Middle East: Managed Decline or Repositioning?

Emil Avdaliani
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Following the precipitous fall of the Assad dynasty, Russia, as Syria's major ally, has grappled with a dilemma over how to retain its two major military bases on Syria's Mediterranean seashore. So far, the signals coming from the new leadership in Damascus, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, on the future of relations between Syria and Russia, have been telling. For instance, Damascus recently [canceled](#) its operating lease with a Russian company, Stroytransgaz--an agreement that was initially reached in 2019. By abolishing it, the new Syrian leadership has essentially indicated that it wants to pursue a new, more balanced type of relationship with Russia.

But the issue at stake is much larger in scope than just what the future of Russian influence in Syria will be. Rather, the question is to what extent will Moscow's position in the wider Middle East be impacted and whether or not it is safe to assume that with Assad now out of the picture, Russia has already started to lose its influence in this vital part of the world. So far, available evidence suggests that although it has been negatively impacted by Assad's departure, rather than experiencing a chaotic collapse of its influence, Russia is repositioning itself in the new dynamic of the region. Thus, it may be wise not to underestimate its ability to adjust to new circumstances.

Ascent of Russian Influence

When Russia entered the fray in Syria in 2015 the rule of the Assad dynasty was in critical danger. The rebels were close to capturing the rest of the country and cutting Damascus from the Mediterranean shore where Assads' power base was located. Russia's superior airpower helped to reverse the dynamic and allowed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to regain most of the territory. The military intervention in Syria also enabled Russia to strengthen its influence throughout the Middle East. Since 2015, Russia's position in the Gulf region has steadily improved, reflected in an increasing number of bilateral meetings and consultations between the Gulf Cooperation Council and Russia. Additionally, Russia's involvement in Syria impacted Turkey, which had been involved in the conflict on the opposing side. This dynamic deepened the complexity of relations between Ankara and Moscow, with both countries coming to recognize and respect each other's geopolitical boundaries.

Yet it was the ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran that saw exponential growth. The two countries have never been true allies and in fact, their relations prior to 2015 were constrained by a number of factors. Moscow was apprehensive about Tehran's nuclear ambitions and alongside the West and China, helped to forge a full-scale sanctions regime against Iran. Moreover, differences in the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea further contributed to the mistrust that lingered between the two powers. Russia was also unwilling to provide Iran with advanced military technologies lest it fall into the hands of non-state actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas, or others.

The war in Syria, however, changed this dynamic. Iran and Russia began to align more closely, both in military coordination as well as overall political discourse on the global stage. Moreover, the victory enabled Russia to position itself as somewhat of a buffer between Israel and Iran, particularly as the Jewish state intermittently targeted Iranian sites within Syria, while Russia prevented Iranian forces from moving closer to the Israeli border. This collaboration laid the groundwork for a deeper partnership between Iran and Russia, evolving into a near full-scale



alliance following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. With its accelerated pivot to Asia as a result of Western sanctions, Russia pushed for more extensive relations with the Islamic Republic, culminating in a major interstate agreement signed by both countries on January 17 of this year.

For Russia, the military victory in Syria and the two military bases on the Syrian coastline offered coveted access to warm waters. Russia's geography has long been a major obstacle to maintaining overseas bases. Constrained by narrow passages from the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea, Russian rulers always sought unhindered access to the Mediterranean by aspiring to control the Bosphorus Strait. Western powers, however, have always obstructed this ambition. Thus, when the Soviet Union established its first base in Syria during the Cold War, it was regarded as a major achievement. Putin built upon this success, but ultimately faced the same geographical constraints—vast distances and limited naval capabilities.

Given Moscow's growing interests across Africa, the military bases in Syria served as a connecting point from Russia to the African continent. With Russian efforts underway to relocate its military presence to Libya, the Kremlin aspires to retain its influence in the Mediterranean basin. However, this transition may not go according to plan. The commander of the Libyan National Army and the de facto ruler of much of Libya, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, has been avoiding the official deployment of a Russian military base in Libya for years. He wavers between the interests of the West and the Arab countries and, despite Moscow's support, still considers the presence of a Russian military base on Libyan territory to be a risky geopolitical move. As a result, a reduction in Russian military and geopolitical influence in Syria and the broader Eastern Mediterranean is inevitable. In addition, Russia's war in Ukraine remains its top priority, highlighting the limitations of Moscow's ability to engage simultaneously on multiple fronts.

Constrained but Pragmatic Russia

In 2017 Russian President Vladimir Putin announced victory over the rebels during his visit to Syria. Yet, not all Syrian territory returned to Assad's rule back then. Some pockets of lands remained eschewed from Damascus' control. For instance, in the north-eastern part of Syria, the Kurds transformed into a veritable quasi-state, and Idlib, in the north-western part of the country, turned into the last major rebel outpost.

For years the situation remained stable and the status quo seemed unshakeable. But a combination of major geopolitical developments created a geopolitical vacuum in and around Syria. First is the prolonged war in Ukraine that distracted Russia from the Middle East and secondly the weakening of Iran's Axis of Resistance – a network of militarized non-state groups focused on defeating Israel. Once the lightning rebel offensive began in early December 2024, neither Russia nor Iran were able to provide adequate support to their ally.

Initially, the Russian side portrayed the rebels as terrorists willing to regain ground. "We strongly condemn this attack ... There is no doubt that they would not have dared to commit such an audacious act without the instigation and comprehensive support of external forces that seek to provoke a new round of armed confrontation in Syria, unfurl a spiral of violence," [announced](#) Russian Foreign Ministry on December 4, 2024. But as their offensive moved forward and it



seemed that little could stop them before reaching Damascus, Moscow's rhetoric began to shift and the terrorists turned into rebels with whom cooperation became vital. By December 12, Moscow [established](#) direct contact with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

Despite Russia's diminishing influence in Syria and a certain degree of antagonism between the new rulers in Damascus and the Russian leadership, along with the latter's enmity toward an Islamist type of governance, Moscow is likely to pursue a more pragmatic approach in its relations with Syria, regardless of what happens to its military bases. Indeed, Russia has shown similar pragmatism toward the Taliban, despite having tense relations following the failed Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Moscow's pragmatic stance toward Hayat Tahrir al-Sham could involve efforts to boost bilateral trade and include Russian companies in the long-awaited reconstruction of Syria's infrastructure.

Moscow's adjustment to the new reality was also seen in late January when the first Russian official delegation visited Syria since the toppling of Assad. Led by Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia and Special Presidential Envoy for the Middle East Mikhail Bogdanov, the delegation also included officials from the Foreign and Defense Ministries. Though the primary goal of the trip was to secure the operation of a naval base in Tartus and the Khmeimim Air Base, the visit was also likely about establishing direct political contact with the new Syrian leadership. Indeed, given the growing pace of legitimization al-Sharaa has been receiving from the Arab World and the West, Russia does not want to lag behind. These efforts were followed by the February 13 call between the Russian president and the Syrian leadership where trade, education, and military issues were discussed. Indeed, as per available information, Russia and Syria are now reportedly close to [reaching](#) an agreement on military bases and Moscow is likely to retain a limited presence in the country.

Moreover, Russia could also bank on the genuine interests of the Syrian government. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, though deeply beholden to Turkey and eager to court the Western governments for lifting the heavy sanctions, or the wealthy Arab states to attract funds for reconstruction, could nevertheless also seek greater engagement with Russia as a counterbalance against over-dependence on other powers. Syria also seeks to offset the military preponderance of various external actors. One such actor is Israel which since December 2024 has expanded its military presence on Syrian soil because of the unstable security situation. Tel-Aviv and Moscow, despite complications in relations in recent years, maintain a very special relationship and Damascus might well hope that Moscow could serve as a channel that could temper Israel's military ambitions.

As far as Russia's other goals when it comes to Syria, Russian analysts have [argued](#) that they are more general, such as the interest in preserving Syria from disintegration into several pieces. Though Russia is often ready to dismantle the territorial integrity of its immediate neighbors, Moscow is nevertheless careful not to do so in distant places as it could trigger a chain reaction of border revisions in the Middle East. Russia is also keen to avoid a scenario where Syria turns into a center for political extremism and terrorism. Given the lingering threat of terrorism in Russia and a flow of Russian nationals into the Islamic State which was created in parts of Syria and Iraq, Moscow is in favor of a more stable Syria. Moscow is likewise interested in preventing Syria from obtaining or preserving whatever remains of the chemical weapons potential that the Assad dynasty was once in control of. For instance, the Russian delegation to Damascus [confirmed](#) its support for



the unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria. It also promised support for the "post-crisis recovery of the country." The Syrian side announced that "during the dialogue, Russia's role in restoring trust with the Syrian people through specific measures in the form of compensation, reconstruction and restoration was emphasized".

Eventually, Syria too will try to seek a more balanced foreign policy and given Russia's influence in the United Nations and its close ties with the Gulf states, Damascus is unlikely to completely shut the door to Moscow. This is the sentiment that was echoed in a late December 2024 interview of al-Sharaa where he argued that Syria is interested in maintaining relations with what he called the "second most powerful country in the world." Indeed, the Syrian leadership has demonstrated the same level of pragmatism toward the Islamic Republic. For instance, just after taking Damascus, al-Sharaa addressed the Iranian leadership to seek cooperation based on mutual interests. The Islamic Republic too has shown signs of pragmatism by shifting the rhetoric around al-Sharaa and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. What were initially referred to as terrorists and radicals, by mid-December turned into opposition groups. Moreover, Tehran has continuously called for the establishment of an inclusive government. This is hardly a radical approach to foreign relations and is rather rooted in Syria's immediate geopolitical needs. Antagonism toward Iran and Russia would be of no benefit to Syria as Moscow and Tehran, despite setbacks, remain influential in the Middle East.

Looking ahead, Moscow's posture in the Middle East is undeniably under pressure. Turkey and Israel have now upstaged Russia to become central players in the Eastern Mediterranean, including in Syria. Indeed, reports on Turkey planning to sign a major defense pact with Syria to station airbases across the country signals a major shift in the power balance in the region. Then there are the wealthy Arab states that jumped at the chance to fill the emerging vacuum by traveling to Damascus, pledging support for the Syrian government, and advocating in the Western capitals for the quick lifting of sanctions imposed on Syria. Still, Russia remains an important actor in the region and Israel, Turkey, and the GCC states will have to factor in basic Russian interests when it comes to remodeling Syria and parts of the Middle East. Moreover, given the ongoing negotiations between Russia and the US and the likely understanding on Ukraine and the Middle East, this overall dynamic might strengthen Russia's position in Syria. The latter could potentially be part of future US-Russia deal where Russian military bases in Syria would remain intact. Therefore the notion that Moscow is in decline should be replaced with the idea that Russia is repositioning itself according to new regional dynamics.

**Emil Avdaliani is a professor of international relations at the European University in Tbilisi, Georgia, a scholar of Silk Roads, and a non-resident fellow with the Gulf Research Center.*

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المعرفة للجميع



Gulf Research Center Jeddah (Main office)

19 Rayat Alitihad Street
P.O. Box 2134
Jeddah 21451
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 12 6511999
Fax: +966 12 6531375
Email: info@grc.net



Gulf Research Center Riyadh

Unit FN11A
King Faisal Foundation
North Tower
King Fahd Branch Rd
Al Olaya Riyadh 12212
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 112112567
Email: info@grc.net



Gulf Research Center Foundation Geneva

Avenue de France 23
1202 Geneva
Switzerland
Tel: +41227162730
Email: info@grc.net



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge

University of Cambridge
Sidgwick Avenue,
Cambridge CB3 9DA
United Kingdom
Tel: +44-1223-760758
Fax: +44-1223-335110



Gulf Research Center Foundation Brussels

Avenue de
Cortenbergh 89
4th floor, 1000
Brussels
Belgium



@Gulf_Research Gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter

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