



# Moscow's Middle East Balancing Act

November 20, 2019 **Ilan I. Berman** *Al-Hurra Digital*

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Suddenly, Russia has emerged as the Middle East's indispensable nation. Over the last few weeks, via a series of shrewd strategic moves, the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin has managed to exploit new – and unexpected – geopolitical openings in the region, greatly strengthening its regional presence in the process.

Most conspicuously, the Trump administration's surprise decision last month to pull forces out of Syria's north was a boon for the Kremlin, allowing Russia to position itself as a mediator between the Kurds and the Syrian government, to strengthen the regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, and to improve its attractiveness as a dependable strategic partner to other Middle Eastern countries. Unsurprisingly, Russian analysts characterized the U.S. administration's decision as an "unexpected gift for Putin."

Russia's president wasted no time seizing the opportunity. Just days after Turkey's October 9th incursion into Syria, he met in the Black Sea resort town of Sochi with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to discuss the evolving regional picture. The product was a new power-sharing agreement between Moscow and Ankara – one which effectively sidelines the U.S. in the evolving regional strategic picture.

But Russia's regional maneuvering doesn't stop there. In parallel with its strategic advances in Levant, Russia is also attempting to reshape its political relationship with the Persian Gulf. On the heels of his Sochi summit with Erdogan, President Putin made a much-publicized state visit to Saudi Arabia to meet with Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and other top Saudi officials. The trip, the Russian leader's first in over a decade, yielded a slew of contracts reportedly worth billions of dollars on cooperation and investment across multiple sectors, including security, counterterrorism, aerospace technology and oil. At the signing ceremony, Putin remarked that Russia "attaches particular importance to the development of friendly, and mutually beneficial ties with Saudi Arabia."

What drives Russia's growing regional presence? Economically, Moscow clearly sees tremendous opportunities in the greater Middle East. As Anna Borshchevskaya of the Washington Institute has noted, the Middle East and North Africa are now collectively Moscow's second most important arms market – with annual sales of weapons to the MENA region topping \$21 billion.

The Middle East is also a major target of the Kremlin's energy diplomacy. In recent years, the Russian government has engaged regional countries via various joint projects, trade partnerships and via OPEC – all with the goal of improving its global energy position and its leverage over the countries of Europe, which are major consumers of Middle Eastern (and Russian) energy.

But, in keeping with the old adage that "all politics is local," Russia's Mideast policy also has a distinctly domestic dimension. Simply put, Moscow is attempting to broaden its engagement with the region as a way of mollifying its increasingly vocal and powerful Muslim minority.

That's because, for years, Russia has pursued what could be characterized as an "accidentally Shia" policy in the Middle East; while the overwhelming majority of Russia's 21 million-person Muslim population is Sunni, its principal strategic partners in the region have long been the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Assad regime in Syria. This state of affairs has long been a point of resentment among Russia's Muslims. But over the past half-decade, it has turned into a real strategic problem for the Kremlin.

Indeed, Russia's formal decision to intervene in the Syrian civil war in September 2015 prompted calls by dozens of Saudi clerics to broaden the current *jihad* to encompass the "Crusader/Shiite alliance" of Russia and Iran. Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate and the Islamic State both did the same, calling for terrorist attacks within Russia itself as a retaliatory measure in response to Moscow's involvement in Syria.

For Russia, that sort of rhetoric represents a real threat. Russia's Muslims today are a growing percentage of the national population of 146 million. And, marginalized and persecuted by Putin's ultra-nationalist government, they are increasingly radical and mobilized. Before the collapse of the ISIS *caliphate*, Russia ranked as the single largest contributor of foreign fighters to the *jihad* in Syria, and Russian was the third most frequently spoken language among fighters in the Islamic State until its collapse last year.

That activism has continued. Last month, Russian authorities broke up a terrorist financing cell in the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria that had managed in preceding months to send nearly \$100,000 to the Islamic State. The bust, moreover, is part of a larger terror financing network within Russia – one that continues to thrive. ISIS-affiliated cells have found in 17 separate regions of the Russian Federation this year alone, a top official with Russia's main security service, the FSB, revealed earlier this Fall.

Against this backdrop, Russia has begun to rethink its regional engagement in the Middle East, and embraced the need to rebalance toward the region's Sunni states. The best defense, after all, is a good offense. And President Putin is clearly hoping that, in addition to yielding concrete economic benefits for his country, a more nuanced Mideast policy might produce domestic political dividends as well.

