

WHAT IS
RUSSIA

UP TO



IN THE

MIDDLE
EAST?

DMITRI TRENIN

"A timely narrative of Moscow's noisy, though deftly executed and clearly efficient, re-insertion in the Middle East. Trenin is deeply familiar with the Kremlin's decision-making, though cognizant of Russia's limited resources. He convincingly demonstrates the large impact of regional politics on the shifting relations between global powers."

—**GHASSAN SALAMÉ**, Professor Emeritus (International Relations), Sciences Po, Paris

"Trenin offers an indispensable and authoritative account of Moscow's motivation in the Middle East. Rooted in history and lucidly told, this is a compelling portrait of Russia as a power 'with no permanent friends and no eternal enemies,' prepared to kick over a few geopolitical tables to achieve its global comeback."

—**DAVID GARDNER**, International Affairs Editor, *Financial Times*

THE EYES OF THE WORLD ARE ON THE MIDDLE EAST.

Today more than ever, this deeply troubled region is the center of power games between major global players vying for international influence. Absent from this scene for the past quarter century, Russia is now back with gusto. Yet its motivations, decision-making processes, and strategic objectives remain hard to pin down.

So just what is Russia up to in the Middle East? In this hard-hitting essay, leading analyst of Russian affairs Dmitri Trenin cuts through the hyperbole to offer a clear and nuanced analysis of Russia's involvement in the Middle East and its regional and global ramifications. Russia, he argues, cannot and will not supplant the United States as the leading external power in the region, but its actions are accelerating changes that will fundamentally reshape the international system in the next two decades.

Dmitri Trenin is the Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center.


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TRAINING WHAT RUSSIA UP TO THE MIDDLE EAST?

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Dmitri Trenin

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What is Russia Up To
in the Middle East?

To Vera, for making my life fun and worth living

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The Syrian civil war is a defining moment in the contemporary history of the Middle East as much as the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Like Iraq, Syria also has global consequences. The U.S. capture of Baghdad and the removal of Saddam Hussein from power was the high-water mark of U.S. post-Cold War global dominance. It became a symbol of Washington's capacity to take and execute, single-handedly, virtually any decision affecting anyone in the world—even, if needed, against the opinion of all other members of the international community. America was truly unbound as a foreign policy actor, unlike any other country in history. Then, a series of recent developments, from the 2008 global financial crisis to the Arab Spring to the Ukrainian crisis to the Syrian war, marked the end of that unique position and ushered in a more familiar

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pattern of several large countries of unequal size and power vying for influence and for their preferred concept of world order.

The Middle East is a microcosm of these developments, and is as good a model as any for twenty-first-century power games changing the global balance. The “usual suspects”—those who for the past hundred years repeatedly intervened in the region, divided it into spheres of influence or sought to manipulate sociopolitical processes there—above all, the United States and its Western European allies—have grown weary, disillusioned, and progressively disinterested. In the process, they lost both the strategic initiative and the sense of direction. Curiously, the country that has been on the ascendance, economically, for the past four decades, China, is not yet eager to plunge into the waters of global geopolitics, and is only testing those waters. Another emerging great power, India, is even farther behind. Most strikingly, one major player, which had been virtually absent from the region—and the world—for the past quarter-century, Russia, is unexpectedly back in the game, and with gusto.

Moscow, of course, has not supplanted Washington as the principal actor or main security provider in the Middle East. It has no interest, no

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resources, and no intention to claim that role. What it has done instead is to have broken out of its post-Soviet condition of being essentially preoccupied with the former imperial borderlands and largely absent from the rest of the world. Thus, Russia has signaled that it is returning to the global stage as a major independent geopolitical player. If sustained, this move will affect the balance of power in a number of regions.

After it had disrupted the U.S.-dominated post-Cold War order during the 2014 Ukraine conflict, Russia did away with the *de facto* U.S. monopoly on the use of force globally. In 2015, it intervened militarily in the Syrian civil war to support the embattled government in Damascus. Many pundits scoffed at this intervention, as did the Obama administration in Washington, which confidently predicted “a quagmire” for Russia in Syria. Yet by the end of 2016, Russia and its allies on the ground managed not only to stabilize the situation for Bashar al-Assad’s regime and prevent the complete collapse of the Syrian state, but also put enough pressure on the Syrian opposition and its backers to initiate a ceasefire and a political dialogue about the future of the country. The odds are against it, but if successful, the combined deployment of Russia’s military power and its diplomatic resourcefulness

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could not only achieve a lasting result in the Middle East, but have a global impact as well.

Moscow's direct involvement has changed the geopolitical alignment in the region. Russia formed a military coalition with Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, and Iraq, a country the United States *de facto* controlled for a decade following its invasion and occupation in 2003. The ongoing intra-Syrian political talks are being sponsored by the diplomatic trio of Russia, Iran, and Turkey—a NATO member state that is now *de facto* allied with Moscow. The venue chosen for the talks is Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, Russia's main economic and security partner in Central Asia and an active member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which brings Central Asian countries together with Russia and China and, starting in 2017, also includes India and Pakistan. Beijing itself has been consistently supporting Moscow on Syria at the United Nations Security Council.

Russia's alignment with the Shia regimes in the Syrian war did not push Moscow into the anti-Sunni camp in the Middle East. Remarkably, Russia has managed to strengthen its ties with Egypt, the largest Arab Sunni country by far, and a former key Soviet ally in the region: the relationship is now being revived. Almost from scratch, Russia

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has built relations with the Gulf Arab countries, which had rarely remembered its existence before. In 2016, a Qatari national wealth fund bought a stake in Rosneft, Russia's main state-run oil company, despite the U.S.-imposed sanctions. After a dramatic break of seven months in 2015–2016, Moscow maneuvered Ankara toward an even closer cooperation with Russia than before.

Russian diplomacy has also managed to negotiate a number of other seemingly unbridgeable divides in the Middle East. Russia has been able to keep reasonably close and cooperative relations with Israel and the Palestinians; Israel and Iran; Iran and Saudi Arabia (and even helped negotiate an oil production cut between them); Turkey and the Kurds; similarly, the rival governments in Tripoli and Tobruk in Libya and the various politico-sectarian factions in Lebanon. There is virtually no major player in the Middle East, Hamas and Hezbollah included, with which Moscow does not have an open line and a lively dialogue. This is stunning for a country that in its Soviet past used to take very strict ideological positions and had to retreat from the region in humiliation after the lost Afghan war and the ensuing breakup of the Soviet Union itself, leading, in short order, to the bloody conflict in Chechnya.

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Having virtually left the Middle Eastern scene at the time of the first Gulf War, Russia only reappeared there two-plus decades later. The Arab Spring, cheered by Americans and Europeans as an advent of democracy, was viewed in Moscow as a major destabilization with potentially negative consequences for Russia itself. What triggered the Russian activism was the 2011 experience in Libya. There, Russia was willing in the name of partnership with the West not to block the UN Security Council's imposition of a no-fly zone to protect civilians. The UN mandate was immediately used by NATO countries to destroy the regime of Muammar Qaddafi alongside its leader, with the Libyan state itself being destroyed in the process. It was then that Russia stepped forward and prevented a similar fate for the Assad regime and Syria. This decision became a turning point for the Middle East.

Present-day Russia is too often compared with the Soviet Union. However, the country that reappeared on the Middle Eastern landscape after a long pause acts remarkably differently from its previous historical iteration. Today's Russia is essentially anti-revolutionary. A conservative power, it promotes no social and political change from the outside; in fact, it advocates just the opposite: stability of the existing regimes within the exist-