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Implications of Russia's Activities in the Middle East and North Africa Region for U.S. Strategy and Interests

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2018 National Defense Strategy identified the maintenance of a stable and secure Middle East region characterized by favorable balances of power as a core defense objective.¹ Challenging that goal is Russia's growing clout in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), especially its influence-building *vis-à-vis* U.S. partners (the Arab Gulf states, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Libya, and Turkey) as well as adversaries (Iran and Syria). Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015 laid the foundation for a sustained military presence in the Levant, while Russia also increased arms sales and economic dealings across the region. Russia's growing clout has been sustained by a "low cost, high disruption" approach. Its grey zone activities, in particular, have undermined U.S.-led initiatives and credibility. Russia's strategy has left the U.S. Government concerned that Russia, a great power competitor, is seeking to "change Middle East security and economic structures to its favor," and undermine U.S. strategic interests in the region more generally.²

Russia's ability to project power into the region remains limited today, and the *status quo* seems tolerable. But there are risks to U.S. interests in the future. The United States' military withdrawals from Afghanistan, the Gulf and Iraq have significantly affected both U.S. regional posture and perceptions of U.S. commitment. Against that backdrop, the United States confronts multiple challenges as it seeks to "do more with less" in the region.

Russia's opportunities in the region increase as U.S. involvement decreases. Moscow's "low investment, high disruption" approach works because it leverages the self-interest of actors, stakeholders, and governments in pursuit of limited aims. The U.S. approach of "high investment, low disruption" to preserve favorable regional balances of power is more costly and affords the United States less latitude, since it is rooted in principles and values. Russia is well-positioned (along with China) to undermine U.S. interests incrementally. That is true in MENA itself and, given the impact of Russia's activities in this region for U.S. strategic advantages, in other regions of importance to the U.S., such as Europe and Asia.

Countering Moscow's efforts now should, therefore, be an important element of a revised and more comprehensive, yet also tailored, U.S. approach to the MENA region. What is needed is an adapted approach that leverages the United States' comparative advantages to mitigate Moscow's influence and that includes shifting some of the current U.S. presence to a more agile and unpredictable posture.

Throughout the report, regional countries are categorized into four groups reflecting their anticipated vulnerability to Russian influence-building: (1) "Russia's friends" (Iran and Syria); (2) "Balancers critical to NATO's power projection" (Libya and Turkey); (3) "U.S. friends requiring sustained attention" (Egypt and Iraq); and (4) "U.S. allies seeking limited engagement with Russia" (the GCC and Israel). The U.S. should tailor its efforts to: **contain** Russia's influence in Iran and Syria, **roll back** Russia's influence in Libya and Turkey, **manage** Russia's influence — especially

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge," January 19, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

² Ibid.

on the military and defense sectors—in Egypt and Iraq, and offer reassurance to the GCC and Israel in order to *minimize* Russian influence in those countries.

RUSSIAN INFLUENCE-BUILDING IN MENA

Interests. Russia perceives itself to be in increasingly intense confrontation with the U.S. and its allies. Russia views the world as increasingly multipolar and fears Western “encirclement.” It therefore feels compelled to push back in multiple directions against perceived attempts at containing and isolating it. In this unstable world, Russia’s leadership feels a need to establish an ‘arc of deterrence’ around Russia, comprised of diverse relationships and flexible partnerships. Given its strategic location between Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Caucasus, the MENA region occupies an increasingly important, albeit not yet pivotal, place in Russia’s pursuit of national security interests. Specifically, the interests Russia seeks to advance in the MENA region include:

- (1) **Ensuring the stability of the Putin regime and the security of the Russian homeland:** Russia seeks to contain instability that could affect it or its immediate neighbors. Potential for instability include conflicts between various regional interest groups, ‘color’ revolutions, extremism, terrorism, and weapons proliferation. Russia intends its military presence in MENA to complement the ‘arc of deterrence’ *vis-à-vis* NATO – an arc that runs from Kaliningrad, through the Black Sea, to the Mediterranean.
- (2) **Promoting Russia’s economic interests:** While the MENA region makes up only eight-to-ten percent of Russia’s foreign trade, Moscow is a serious competitor there in arms sales and contracts in the civilian nuclear energy sector. Russia also coordinates and collaborates with Middle Eastern actors in the hydrocarbon sectors.
- (3) **Enhancing Russia’s political status:** Through its diplomatic efforts, Russia offers alternatives to U.S., and more generally Western, approaches to addressing inter- and intra-state conflict. Russia thereby reinforces its narrative of waning U.S. power — a narrative meant to resonate beyond the MENA region.

Tactics. Although Russia lacks an overall MENA strategy, its influence-building tactics are characterized by four distinct features: (1) flexible partnerships and equidistance between antagonists (e.g., Iran and Israel); (2) military assistance, albeit low-level and low-responsibility (e.g., arms sales and military advisors); (3) grey zone activities (e.g., disinformation and electoral meddling), and (4) staying power amid less-than-ideal outcomes, including by sustaining low-level conflict.

Successes and Constraints. Most MENA countries justify their engagement with Russia as necessitated largely by a perceived U.S. failure to meet an important security need: advanced weapons in the case of Egypt and Iraq; adequate protection from regional foes in the case of the GCC, Israel, and Turkey. The U.S. remains their preferred partner of choice, but Russia is an alternative they feel compelled to pursue, while Russia also affords these states leverage *vis-à-vis* the U.S. States with a strong past reliance on Soviet military systems and education (e.g., Egypt and Iraq) are more inclined to return to purchasing Russian weapons today. Vulnerability to Russian grey zone activities is most acute in conflict-prone environments like Libya and Syria, as well as in Turkey. That said, Russia is playing the long game in accruing influence in all countries analyzed.

KEY FINDINGS

The potential for Russia to increase its influence and endanger U.S. interests in the region and beyond is greatest among “balancers critical to NATO power projection” (i.e., Libya and Turkey) and “U.S. friends requiring sustained attention” (i.e., Egypt and Iraq). In Turkey, enhanced Russian influence would contribute to undermining NATO cohesion. In Libya, it would enhance Russia’s capacity to project power into the Mediterranean and Africa. In Egypt and Iraq, heightened Russian influence would erode U.S. credibility as the preferred provider of security assistance in the region, while potentially undermining the stability of two Arab states that underpin broader regional stability. Greater Russian influence in Egypt may also undermine U.S. power projection in the Gulf. Israel and the Arab Gulf states are at present much less susceptible to Russia’s influence, but even they may decide to increase their cooperation with Russia amid mounting perceptions of U.S. disengagement and failure to contain Iran.

Russia’s regional power projection is limited. Russia is set to stay in the MENA region, but its willingness and ability to thwart U.S. strategic interests are currently limited. Going forward, Russia’s attempts at influence-building will likely focus on areas where high disruption to U.S. interests is possible at low cost and with minimal risk. Russia will probably work to preserve existing gains and avoid resource-intensive efforts in direct competition with the U.S. Operationally, Russian low-level security engagements are more likely than another ‘Syria-type’ operation. Russia’s A2AD ‘bubble’ over Syria will remain vulnerable to countermeasures, and Moscow will continue to face constraints in setting up effective A2AD further afield.

Tolerable *status quo* but risks to U.S. interests in the future. Russia’s presence in the MENA region appears tolerable at current levels although it does complicate the realization of core U.S. interests. With little investment, Russia can disrupt and undermine the U.S.’ and NATO’s efforts, credibility, relations, and interests. Russia’s ability is bolstered by its focus on playing the long game, waiting it out, and exploiting opportunities when they present themselves (including when the United States makes mistakes). Thus, Russia builds its influence incrementally and over time. The potential effects of grey zone activities — on societal stability, good governance, and pro-American sentiments — pose a medium-term concern.

The challenge of doing more with less. The U.S. withdrawals from Afghanistan, the Gulf, and Iraq — coupled with the highly publicized objective to prioritize the Indo-Pacific — will affect the United States’ regional posture and perceptions of its commitment. Russian disinformation and influence will likely capitalize on these opportunities and pose an incremental risk to U.S. regional interests. Given the impact of Russia’s activities in MENA for U.S. strategic advantages, it could also undermine U.S. interests in other important regions such as Europe and Asia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To counter Moscow’s low-investment, high disruption approach, the United States needs to craft a comprehensive yet tailored approach to limit Russia to its current scope and scale of engagement with its friends (Iran and Syria) and with those states where its influence poses less risk (the GCC and Israel). It also needs to work on rolling back Russian influence in Libya and Turkey and managing it in Egypt and Iraq, specifically in the security/defense sectors. To implement such an approach, the U.S. should:

- Employ a **holistic, whole-of-government approach** to the MENA region (including the Mediterranean and the Black Sea). This approach should be developed and directed by a central body within DoD, with authority over all relevant commands; planned and coherently integrated by the Combatant Commands. It should be executed in a tailored fashion by, with, and through the U.S. embassies.
- Implement Combatant Command-level **Foreign Internal Defense** per Joint Publication 3-22 to adjust the focus of DoD and U.S. whole-of-government efforts to strengthening regional countries' ability to resist external influence and coercion and foreign-inspired subversion.
- Support the establishment of a **NATO Center of Excellence** in a NATO Mediterranean Dialogue country that will cover grey zone activities, study and counter MENA specific malign and illicit activities, and develop effective defensive and counter measures. Such a center could also cover areas where Russia could exploit regional states' vulnerabilities. Those areas include CBRN training, detection, and border security, infectious disease control and response, WMD counter-proliferation best practices, and critical infrastructure vulnerability assessments (recognizing that Russian grey zone activities benefit from illicit networks).
- Execute an **information campaign** explaining the reduction in U.S. land forces to reassure friends of America's long-term commitment and to counter Russian disinformation.
- Compete on weapons sales, but make **training and maintenance** the centerpiece of U.S. support. In particular:
 - Establish a Combat Arms/Combat Maneuver Training Center in Saudi Arabia (a Graffenwohr-like center) to increase capability, readiness, and interoperability while affording U.S. rotational forces complex high-intensity training. Such a center could include training regional militaries on: (1) the safety, security, and accountability of shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles, small arms, light weapons, and ammunition, and (2) how to characterize, deter, interdict, defeat, prevent, respond to, and defend against CBRNE threats.
 - Establish a Flag Exercise Center—possibly in Jordan—for regional air forces, for conducting red/blue/green flag exercises.
 - Create, maintain, and expand training and exchange programs that build lasting relationships, enhance cooperation, and create mutual commitments. This should include creating a regional maritime surveillance architecture to monitor threats to sea lines of communication and interdict Iranian arms transfers. DTRA could train and build such capacities among regional militaries, law enforcement agencies, and border control entities.

With regard to force posture, the U.S. should:

- **Perforate Russia's Arc of Deterrence** through rotational presence and regional exercises designed to demonstrate the ability of the U.S., NATO, and their partners to project a credible multinational force. Costs should be distributed across the participating and benefitting countries.

- **Burden-Share** with allies and partners to maintain a continuous all-domain presence.
- **Demonstrate Responsiveness** to mitigate risk by prepositioning equipment, conducting shows of force, and responding consistently yet unpredictably to tests by adversaries.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study provides:

(1) An analysis of the **drivers** (interests and objectives) and **characteristics** (strategy and tactics) of Russian influence-building in the MENA region. The analysis of Russian tactics encompasses a particular focus on Russian **grey zone activities**, meaning competitive activities below the level of direct armed conflict, such as the use of private military companies (PMCs) and other proxies, interference in political processes, economic competition, and disinformation.

(2) An analysis of Russian **successes versus constraints** in such influence-building, including an assessment of which Middle Eastern states are most susceptible to Russian tactics. Regional actors are categorized into four groups based on their anticipated susceptibility to Russian influence-building: (1) “Russia’s friends” (Iran and Syria); (2) “balancers critical to NATO’s power projection” (Libya and Turkey); (3) “U.S. friends requiring sustained attention” (Egypt and Iraq); and (4) “U.S. allies seeking limited engagement with Russia” (GCC³ and Israel). The countries analyzed fall under the purview of three different combatant commands—United States Central Command (CENTCOM), United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) and United States European Command (EUCOM)—which complicates the United States’ ability to respond to Russian tactics across MENA in a comprehensive, coherent, and tailored way.

(3) An assessment of the **implications for U.S. strategic interests** in the region of Russia maintaining or expanding its influence, and,

(4) **Actionable recommendations** to improve the United States’ ability to sustain operational advantage in the MENA region through 2025-2030, manage and mitigate the risk of direct conflict with Russia, protect U.S. interests, and assist the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) in organizing, training, and equipping a force and allies capable and willing to withstand Russian power projection. We recommend that the United States adopt a **tailored-yet-comprehensive** approach to addressing Russian influence in the countries analyzed: *tailored* in terms of the different objectives regarding Russian influence (i.e., contain, roll back, manage, or minimize), yet *comprehensive* in applying a cross-combatant command approach to effectively counter Russian tactics, which are consistent across regional countries and increasingly connect different theatres under Russia’s overarching aim at deterring the United States and NATO.

METHODOLOGY

Based on a comprehensive analysis of Russian interests, tactics, and grey zone activities across the MENA region, this study evaluates Russian successes and constraints in building influence (political, military, and economic), offering an assessment of which MENA states are most susceptible to Russian tactics. Regional countries are categorized into four groups reflecting their anticipated vulnerability to Russian influence-building: (1) “Russia’s friends” (Iran and Syria); (2) “balancers critical to NATO’s power projection” (Libya and Turkey); (3) “U.S. friends requiring sustained attention” (Egypt and Iraq); and (4) “U.S. allies seeking limited engagement with Russia”

³ This report covers mainly Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, since those countries have the most extensive relations with Russia.

(the GCC and Israel). The report identifies the strategic implications of Russian influence gains *vis-à-vis* these countries to U.S. interests and provides cross-regional and country-specific recommendations for the U.S. government (USG), the Department of Defense (DoD), the Combatant Commands, and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA).

The research underpinning the findings entailed a review of relevant Russian and regional documents in various languages, expert and academic analyses, polls, and press coverage, among other sources. The authors augmented the analysis with individual interviews and roundtable discussions with Russian interlocutors and regional and USG (former and current) officials and experts.

U.S. STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE REGION

The 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance defines the United States' overarching interests in the Middle East as: 1) maintaining the U.S. commitment to Israel's security, 2) deterring Iranian aggression and threats to others' sovereignty and territorial integrity, 3) disrupting al-Qaeda and related terrorist networks and preventing a resurgence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), 4) addressing humanitarian crises, and 5) resolving the complex armed conflicts that threaten regional stability.⁴ Implicitly, U.S. policy also puts a premium on ensuring the free flow of energy resources, maintaining relationships with key allies, protecting them from external threats, and ensuring access to the region for U.S. military operations.⁵ In pursuing those interests, Washington is increasingly focused on preserving a favorable balance of power in the region *vis-à-vis* its great power competitors and on promoting or maintaining the United States as the preferred partner – morally, diplomatically, economically, and militarily.⁶ While this study shows Russian influence in the region to be tolerable at current levels, it also shows that if that influence is not actively addressed, it will pose a risk to U.S. strategic interests incrementally—not only in the MENA region, but also in other regions that are of strategic importance to the United States. That is because U.S. responses -- in terms of commitment, presence, and posture – to developments in MENA have implications for the United States' strategic advantages and image elsewhere, especially in areas where the United States tries to promote favorable balances of power and lead and sustain a stable and open international system.⁷

⁴ Executive Office of the President, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

⁵ General (Ret.) Joseph Votel, "US Priorities in The Middle East," *The Middle East Institute*, December 2019, Policy Paper 2019-23, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2019-12/US%20Priorities%20in%20the%20Middle%20East.pdf>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The 2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance defined U.S. overarching interests as: "Defend and nurture the underlying sources of American strength, including our people, our economy, our national defense, and our democracy at home; Promote a favorable distribution of power to deter and prevent adversaries from directly threatening the United States and our allies, inhibiting access to the global commons, or dominating key regions; and Lead and sustain a stable and open international system, underwritten by strong democratic alliances, partnerships, multilateral institutions, and rules." See Executive Office of the President, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

DRIVERS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE-BUILDING IN THE MENA REGION

DRIVERS: INTERESTS AND OBJECTIVES

The MENA region occupies an important, but not pivotal, place in Russia's overall national security interests. Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept makes only scant mention of the region and does so mostly in the context of counterterrorism and counter-proliferation.⁸ Similarly, the Russian National Security Strategy (NSS) published in July 2021 mentions the Middle East only once, alongside other conflict-ridden regions. That said, Russia's actual activities in the region have been more significant than is reflected in those official documents.

Russia views the world as defined by an increasingly intense confrontation with the United States and its allies.⁹ It sees an increasingly multipolar world, characterized by the decline of hegemons and the rise of new powers, lacking moral leadership or an ideological basis for future world order. It perceives a world in which Western "encirclement"¹⁰ mandates that Russia protect its sovereignty against Western attempts at containing and isolating it by establishing an "arc of deterrence."¹¹ In this unstable, multipolar world, the Russian leadership believes in the need to diversify relations, engage in network diplomacy, and pursue flexible partnerships to deter threats against the Russian homeland and meet other foreign policy goals. Due to the MENA region's strategic location between Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and the Caucasus, and given the Soviet Union's previous presence in MENA and the perceived success of Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria, the region has occupied an increasingly important place in promoting Russian national security interests and foreign policy objectives. Specifically, the interests that Russia seeks to advance in MENA include:

- (1) Ensuring the stability of the Putin regime and the **security of the Russian homeland**, which entails two separate dimensions:
 - First, Moscow seeks to **prevent the spillover of instability, territorial disintegration, extremism, terrorism, and weapons proliferation** from the region to Russia or adjacent countries. Since the "Arab Spring," and specifically the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011, the specter of "color revolutions"—regime change fueled from outside the region—

⁸ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016)," December 1, 2016, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248.

⁹ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's National Security Strategy: A Manifesto for a New Era," June 7, 2021, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/84893>.

¹⁰ "Belt of instability' being built? Lavrov slams West's bid to strongarm Russia's neighbors," *TASS*, July 23, 2021, <https://tass.com/politics/1316993>.

¹¹ The authors use the term "arc of deterrence" to describe Russia's security approach to counter and deter NATO from the Eastern to the Southern Mediterranean (see Appendix 1 for further discussion). U.S. officials have selectively used the term "arc of steel" in reference to Russia's recent naval strategy from the Arctic to the Mediterranean. See: "US: Russia Building 'Arc of Steel' From Arctic to Med," *Defense News*, October 7, 2015, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2015/10/06/us-russia-building-arc-of-steel-from-arctic-to-med/>). Meanwhile, Russian officials have accused Western states of creating an "arc of instability" around Russia.

became the principal driver of Russian policy in the MENA region. Russia is interested in ensuring societal stability in the region, which is usually understood in Moscow as best achieved by supporting highly centralized systems with strong security apparatus that sustain incumbent regimes. That concern is rooted in Russia's historical understanding of order and stability at home, aimed at preventing any spillover of instability from MENA to the post-Soviet space, yet also intended to draw a red line against Western-fomented efforts at democracy promotion more generally—given the fear that Washington might set precedents in MENA that could affect the *status quo* in what Russia views as its privileged sphere of influence in its own neighborhood.

- Second, Moscow sees its presence in the region as crucial to countering a perceived encirclement by NATO countries and complementing its “arc of deterrence” (using A2AD assets¹²). That arc currently stretches from Kaliningrad through the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, and Russia aims to extend it to the Red Sea. Although Russian official statements do not acknowledge it explicitly, by building up its naval forces and deploying A2AD assets in Syria, Russia has attempted to circumscribe NATO access to the region and protect Russia's southern flank. Russia's security interests in the region have evolved and today do not just relate to mitigating and containing threats emanating from *within* the region, but also entail instrumentalizing a regional presence to counter security threats from *beyond* the region, allowing Russia to push back against the United States and NATO outside the European theatre, if it so chooses (thus Russia's activities in MENA could have a direct impact on U.S. strategic interests elsewhere).

(2) **Promoting Russia's economic interests:** Subordinate to security considerations, Russia seeks commercial gains in the region in the context of its broader diversification of economic ties in the wake of Western sanctions over the annexation of Crimea. Even though Russia has increased trade with most countries in the region, it still conducts only eight-to-ten percent of its foreign trade with the MENA region (with over sixty percent of that trade occurring with Turkey and Israel). That said, the region offers potential and is already quite important for select strategic sectors and actors in the Russian economy.

- Two areas in which Russian exports have been most competitive **are arms sales and civilian nuclear energy**. Over the past five years, Russia has exported at least \$6 billion worth of arms each year to MENA, amounting to nearly fifty percent of its total arms exports. That represents an increase from 2015, when approximately thirty-six percent of Russian arms exports went to MENA. India and China remain Russia's two largest arms customers, but MENA provides a useful diversification avenue for Russian defense companies. Algeria, the third largest recipient of Russian arms over the past two years, has been the most consistent buyer, but Russia has also signed significant arms contracts with Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Syria, and Turkey, among others.
- Russian **arms sales** to the MENA region are primarily driven by commercial interests. The Russian government limits the profit margin that defense industry companies can receive on contracts for the Russian Ministry of Defense typically to three-to-five percent. In contrast,

¹² While Russian defense officials do not use the terms “anti-access area-denial” or “A2AD” to explain how they employ defense assets, it is useful terminology for the purpose of U.S. defense planners.

there is no cap on the profit margin defense companies can charge on export orders, although *Rosoboronexport*, Russia's state-owned arms export intermediary, typically charges a commission. In addition, the drop in the value of the ruble in 2014-2015 has meant that arms export deals are worth nearly twice as much as domestic ones since they are typically concluded in U.S. dollars. Finally, most Russian defense industry factories produce relatively unprofitable or uncompetitive civilian products. That makes arms export contracts critical to remaining profitable and maintaining employment levels.

- The region also accounts for a significant share of Russia's **nuclear energy exports**. Russia's first major regional export occurred when it took over the construction of Iran's Bushehr reactor in 1995. In 2010, Russia signed an agreement with Turkey for construction of four nuclear power plants at the Akkuyu power plant and was awarded a contract to construct Egypt's first nuclear power plant (target: 2030),¹³ while it looks for additional opportunities in Jordan, the Arab Gulf countries, Tunisia, and Algeria.
- Finally, as the largest producer of crude oil and the second-largest producer of natural gas, Russia's economy is highly dependent on resource exports. Since the MENA region itself is one of Russia's biggest competitors in terms of **hydrocarbon exports** to Europe and Asia, Russia has sought to gain a foothold and partner with regional players in exploration, development, and transportation-infrastructure projects. Moscow calculates that this will give Russia a degree of influence over these countries' export decisions to Europe and Asia, which are Russia's traditional delivery markets. Russia is presently involved in hydrocarbon exploration in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Lebanon, and Syria, to name only the most significant projects. Furthermore, pursuing **energy diplomacy** in the OPEC+ format is critical for Russia in seeking alignment on oil production levels and hence market prices. That mandates an ongoing level of accommodation with Saudi Arabia, in particular.
- Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Official Development Assistance (ODA) in the MENA region is essentially non-existent¹⁴ and its financial ties are mostly with the Arab Gulf states—sources of potential sovereign wealth fund investments into the Russian economy (at the Russian federal level and regional levels), especially the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.¹⁵ Although Russia wrote off debt to a number of MENA countries in the early 2000s (mostly because it realized such debt could not be repaid anyway), and while Russia's GOZNAK Joint Stock Company has printed currency for the Syrian

¹³ There have been press rumors in recent months suggesting that Egypt might pause the project for two years amid tensions hanging over the relationship with Russia due to Moscow's recent position on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam crisis and its rapprochement with Ethiopia. See: "Egypt postpones nuclear power plant amid tensions with Russia over Nile dam," *Al Monitor*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/egypt-postpones-nuclear-power-plant-amid-tensions-russia-over-nile-dam#ixzz720EIFSjW>.

¹⁴ "International Assistance to the Middle East and North Africa: Managing Risks," (full report in Russian) *Russian International Affairs Council*, January 20, 2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/infographics/map-of-official-development-assistance-flows-to-the-arab-middle-east-and-north-africa/>.

¹⁵ Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russia-GCC Economic Relations: When Quality Matters More Than Quantity," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 23, Nr. 1, Winter 2020, <https://www.insightturkey.com/article/russia-gcc-economic-relations-when-quality-matters-more-than-quantity>.

government and the Eastern Central Bank of Libya, Russia cannot be considered a financial player—let alone provider of economic aid—in MENA.

- Crucially, Russia’s economic and security objectives are not only achievable in parallel, but also (most of the time) mutually reinforcing. By selling arms, grain, and NPPs to incumbent regimes in the region, Russia pursues commercial gain while also investing in the stability of these regimes. Occasionally, Russia delivers arms for more fundamental strategic reasons, as was the case with the delivery of the S-400 to Turkey. On the rare occasion that Russian security and economic considerations clash, security interests trump commercial gains.

- (3) **Enhancing status and offering an alternative vision to U.S. approaches to regional order:** Russia’s security interests in the MENA region have been accompanied in recent years by an interest in “educating” others about effective and legitimate ways for producing regional order and stability, both inter-state and at the societal level. In advancing efforts to mediate inter-state conflict (such as Russia’s Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf) and intra-state conflict (such as in Syria and Libya), Russia offers an alternative to U.S./Western -led initiatives and approaches, thereby reinforcing its broader narrative about declining U.S. power and changing world order—a narrative that is meant to also resonate beyond the MENA region. Such Russian posturing is also linked to considerations of **status**. Russia’s striving to gain a seat at the table in each and every conflict in the region is not just a means, but rather an end in and of itself, allowing Russia to posit alternative models for conflict resolution and thereby underscore its claim to great power status in an increasingly multipolar, less U.S.-centric world.

In light of these Russian interests in the MENA region, we assess those opportunities for *cooperation* with the United States in the region will remain scarce, for three reasons:

- (1) **No bargains:** The Russian leadership no longer believes (unlike five years ago) that cooperation with the United States on MENA issues can be leveraged to achieve accommodation on more important issues in the broader U.S.-Russia relationship.¹⁶
- (2) **Institutional momentum:** Building on its successes in Syria, and against the backdrop of continuously worsening Russia-West ties, Russian actors involved across the region now have their own parochial interests that are increasingly independent of Russia’s broader approach to the West.
- (3) **Self-confidence and defiance:** Moscow sees no real need to adjust its position on core regional files based on its current cost-benefit calculations. It judges its MENA policy to be successful and sustainable, and it anticipates that the region will *not* be a foreign policy priority for the current and future U.S. administrations (which further reduces the perceived necessity for Russian course corrections).

¹⁶ In the assessment of the authors, this applies to Russian thinking even regarding the recent cooperation in passing UNSC Resolution 2585 on cross-border humanitarian aid into Syria. Russian officials might well have calculated that a willingness to compromise could constitute an important gesture in the wake of the Biden-Putin Geneva summit in June 2021, as the two sides embark on strategic stability talks, but it is unlikely Moscow expects U.S. accommodation on core Russian security interests in response to a gesture over Syria.

Moreover, the U.S. presence in Northeast Syria (NES)—considered by Moscow to violate Syrian sovereignty—is rejected on principle given Russia’s broader anti-regime change position, while it is also perceived to hinder normalization between Arab Gulf states and Damascus, as well as the Syrian government’s access to its own resources. Confidence in its ability to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIL, jointly with Tehran and the Syrian government and without U.S. assistance, further fuels Russia’s desire to see U.S. forces depart NES. The sentiment about Iraq is more equivocal. There, Russia pursues mostly economic gains and does not see the United States’ presence as hindering those pursuits. In fact, a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq might jeopardize those economic interests, should greater instability result.

CHARACTERISTICS: RUSSIAN STRATEGY AND TACTICS

In pursuing the above-outlined objectives, Russia does not follow an overarching regional strategy.¹⁷ Any supposedly “strategic” concepts or initiatives that Russia puts forward for the region – for instance its Concept for Collective Security in the Persian Gulf – are mostly *ad-hoc*, declaratory and lacking in substantive depth. That said, Russian efforts at influence-building are characterized by distinct features that can be outlined as follows:

Flexible partnerships and equidistance: Russia goes out of its way to build and maintain relationships with all actors (both state and non-state actors) across the region, especially those that have leverage on the ground, and it routinely offers itself as a broker or “go-between” in conflicts. Unlike the United States, Russia does not label regional interlocutors, based on the level of relationship or ideology, as “allies,” “partners,” or “adversaries.” Instead, it engages pragmatically and opportunistically with whomever is perceived to further its interests, including to promote its economic and international status. For example, characterizing Russian engagement with Iran over Syria, or with Turkey over Libya, Russian interviewees routinely noted that these actors simply “have to be worked with,” even though there is a lack of full trust. Russia’s pursuit of flexible, goal-oriented partnerships – also reflected in the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept – can adapt quickly, as and when required. Meeting routinely with Turkey and Iran in the “Astana Troika” to discuss Syria, for instance, Moscow modified the format to a (so-far-one-off) Russian-Turkish-Qatari meeting in early 2021, in order to bolster its agenda of eliciting Arab states’ normalization with Damascus.¹⁸ Meanwhile, given its pursuit of economic gains, Moscow takes care to appear equidistant between actors involved in various regional conflicts and to maintain working relations with all.

Providing security (at a low level and with low responsibility): Pursuing its preferred vision of stability and (intra-state) security in the region, Russia usually supports incumbent regimes that sustain strong centralized security apparatuses, especially through arms sales, military-defense

¹⁷ While Russia does not have an overarching strategy for the MENA region, there is a debate among practitioners and scholars as to whether Russia has an overarching foreign policy strategy, akin to a “grand strategy.” See, e.g., Samuel Charap et. al, “Russian Grand Strategy: Rhetoric and Reality,” *RAND*, 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4238.html and Michael Kofman, “Drivers of Russian Grand Strategy,” *Frivard*, 2019, <https://frivard.se/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Drivers-of-Russian-Grand-Strategy.pdf>.

¹⁸ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, Republic of Turkey, and Russian Federation,” Doha, March 11, 2021, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4616331?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw&_101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_languageId=en_GB.

cooperation, and the deployment of military advisors. Russia's direct military deployment and extensive involvement in Syria represents a unique case, which required a particular set of circumstances and will not be easily replicated elsewhere in the region. Multiple Russian interviewees suggested that the Russian government probably does not have the appetite for another military intervention in the region on the scale and of the nature of the Syria intervention. Instead, Russia routinely acts as a "low-level security provider." That entails engagement in grey zone activities (see below) and enables Russia to further its vision of stability/security, while allowing various Russian sub-state actors to accrue material benefits. Further, the flexible rotation and deployment of military assets from Hmeymim into other theatres, as and when required, facilitates Russian low-level security provision elsewhere, while also affording plausible deniability. It is conceivable that Russia will, over the medium-term, explore opportunities to seek additional military assets and bases in Libya, Sudan and beyond in order to enhance its "arc of deterrence," provided that such opportunities meet Russian cost-benefit calculations. Regarding Russia's planned naval base in *Sudan*, for instance, which would augment Russian power projection into the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, the latest indication is that both states intend to move forward with the project.¹⁹ Moscow, despite its "non-strategy," is looking to gain influence beyond the area covered in this study. This shows that defense planners take more than a limited theatre-specific focus to look geo-strategically at Russian opportunistic behavior, particularly where such initiatives complicate U.S. posture *vis-à-vis* both Russia and China, as in Sudan.

Grey-zone activities: Russia deploys various grey zone activities to preserve a degree of deniability via proxy action or covert/unacknowledged activities, while avoiding decisive engagement of the enemy.²⁰ In the MENA region, grey zone activities have included the deployment of Russian PMCs for low-level security provision, electoral meddling, political influence-campaigns, currency printing, and disinformation, and propaganda campaigns. The effectiveness of such tactics is often enhanced by economic or diplomatic efforts outside the grey zone. Discrediting Western actors and their regional efforts is usually an explicit aim of these activities, especially the disinformation campaigns.

Having staying power amid less-than-ideal outcomes (including in low-level conflicts): Russia does not necessarily prioritize long-term resolutions of the regional conflicts it involves itself in (although Moscow wants to *appear* to work toward such resolution for international status reasons). It considers low-level or frozen conflicts on its wider periphery as acceptable, and in some instances even desirable in its pursuit of staying relevant and "tying down" U.S./Western attention—as long as the conflicts do not "heat up" to the point of threatening to spill over into Russia's immediate neighborhood. Russian sources contended, for instance, that Russia can stay in Syria *indefinitely* if the current *status quo*—usually judged as less-than-ideal for Russia by Western analysts—prevails.

¹⁹ In early July 2021, President Putin referred the naval base agreement to the Russian State Duma for ratification. A week later, Foreign Minister Lavrov met his Sudanese counterpart and both professed a desire to move ahead with the project under mutually beneficial conditions. For background, see Marianna Belenkaya's coverage in *Kommersant* newspaper (in Russian): <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4898887>.

²⁰ Michael Eisenstadt, "Beyond Forever Wars and Great Power Competition, Rethinking the U.S. Military Role in the Middle East," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4591>.

Enactment of tactics: Implementation of Russian tactics in the region is enacted by a range of Russian actors, best understood as a network with the Kremlin and the President—the final arbiter on Russian foreign policy—at its center. Relevant stakeholders with an interest in Russia’s MENA policies include the foreign, defense, and energy ministries, businesses (both state and private), *Rossotrudnichestvo* (under the MFA’s jurisdiction), religious communities, and Russian regions. The different Russian stakeholders’ “lobbying” and their semi-independence in pursuing their agendas on specific dossiers are doubly beneficial to the Kremlin. Acting through semi-state or private actors affords the Russian state plausible deniability in certain areas and is also considered more efficient in the more “personalized, non-institutional politics of the Middle East.”²¹

Russian interlocutors routinely caution that competition and differences among different Russian actors—especially the supposed MFA-MoD competition of the Syria dossier—should not be exaggerated. Instead, the Kremlin may run its policy according to several different parochial agendas or may seek to reconcile them in one holistic approach, depending on the issue and the overall game-plan (or the lack of thereof).²² It appears that the less central a MENA file is to the Kremlin, the more leeway different Russian actors are given to pursue their parochial interests within set parameters. But ultimately, in keeping with the hierarchical spokes-and-hub model, “whoever plays the role of Middle Eastern lobbyists in Russia ... still has to act in accordance with national interests and the top-down agenda.” The Kremlin thus “limits their influence a priori.”²³ And as stated above, on the rare occasion when Russian security considerations clash with commercial interests pursued by Russian private or state actors, security interests trump economic gain.

PROSPECTS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE-BUILDING: OPPORTUNITIES, CONSTRAINTS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Although Russia applies the cited tactics to some degree across the MENA region, those tactics do not resonate equally in all target states. Russia’s success in influence-building in MENA varies and will likely continue to vary over the coming five-to-ten years. The variance results from a mixture of factors: individual states’ legacy relationships with the United States and the Soviet Union, these states’ needs *vis-à-vis* Russia (and Russia’s ability and willingness to meet those needs), and vulnerability to Russian grey zone activities.

Based on our analysis, we grouped regional states into four categories, reflecting their relations with the United States and anticipated susceptibility to Russian influence-building: (1) “Russia’s friends” (Iran and Syria); (2) “balancers critical to NATO’s power projection” (Libya and Turkey); (3) “U.S. friends requiring sustained attention” (Egypt and Iraq); and (4) “U.S. allies seeking limited engagement with Russia” (GCC and Israel). These groups of countries differ in terms of what they want from Russia, how susceptible they are to Russian influence-building (especially grey-zone activities), and the extent to which the United States has leverage to counter Russian tactics.

²¹ Marianna Belenkaya and Polina Vasilenko, “The Czars of Russian Middle East Policies,” in: Aldo Ferrari (et al.), *Russia’s Foreign Policy: The International Link*, ISPI, 2021.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

(1) “RUSSIA’S FRIENDS” – IRAN AND SYRIA

Russia will likely be able to consolidate, if not further expand, its influence in Iran and Syria. Under these circumstances, the United States should concentrate on containing Russian influence.

Iran does not view Russia as a natural ally, but it cooperates with Moscow, seeing no other options for strategic partners in the region. The two states also increasingly share concerns about the prevailing rules of the international system. Russia is lauded for pursuing a regional security system that is not undergirded by the United States and is appreciated for refraining from criticizing Iran’s “offensive defense” strategy, including its use of proxies. Tehran also needs Russia as a diplomatic shield in the dispute over its nuclear program and, in light of Western sanctions, as a supplier of military assets, nuclear infrastructure, and technological hardware. Russian weapon systems are viewed positively, though military-technical cooperation is limited given Russia’s refusal to provide more sophisticated systems like new generation fighter jets. Such strategic caution is rooted in Russia’s desire to remain equidistant between different regional countries, and to a lesser degree, in concerns about Iran’s ability to pay. Our Iranian interlocutors uniformly expect Russian influence over Iran to grow further under the new conservative government led by Ebrahim Raisi.

Implications: Russia will probably increase its arms exports to Iran, most likely providing air defense systems, which are more politically palatable because Russia can argue they are defensive weapons. Following the lifting of the JCPOA sanctions on conventional arms exports in October 2020, and if the sanctions on exporting missiles to Iran were to expire in 2023, Russia may also feel less constrained to sell or expand its export to Iran of combat and transport aircraft, short- and long-range air defense systems, short-range ballistic and cruise missiles systems, and electronic warfare systems.²⁴ Those could pose a threat to U.S. and U.S. allies’ navy, aircraft, and commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and the Caspian Sea, depending on where they are deployed. Yet, delivery of the more dangerous and destabilizing systems, such as cruise missiles, would likely only occur as a response to actions taken by the United States or NATO that are perceived as destabilizing to Russia.

To conclude, we assess that Russia will likely be able to consolidate, if not further expand, its influence over Iran and Syria. Unless the United States decides to alter fundamentally its policies toward the Syrian and Iranian governments—dropping its demands for a “change in behavior”—those two governments will continue to turn to Russia for support. Under these circumstances, the United States should concentrate on containing Russian influence, since rolling it back will be challenging given the increasingly robust convergence of these actors in defying U.S./Western pressure. The United States should also not expect to be able to drive a wedge between Russia and Iran in Syria, notwithstanding some competition between Moscow and Tehran for influence on the ground. That said, the United States’ limited presence in Northeast Syria and Al-Tanf plays an important role in limiting the Syrian government, Iran, and Russia, while also reassuring U.S. allies with a small and relatively non-costly footprint. It thus should be maintained. Finally, since Iran’s nuclear program and its appetite for (and ability to engage in) destabilizing regional activities (through proxies and its missile program) are *not* a function of Russian support, the United States’

²⁴ Russia’s incentive to consider providing offensive platforms is largely economic. For instance, Moscow might consider selling the new Sukhoi single-engine stealth fighter, called the Checkmate, to Iran because it needs large export contracts to get the program off the ground. Still, Russia will likely weigh carefully the decision to provide such systems against the anticipated pushback by Israel and Arab Gulf states.

strategy for countering Iran’s nuclear program and its malign activities should not focus principally on disrupting Iranian-Russian cooperation.

Syria: Having intervened militarily to support the Syrian government in 2015, there is little prospect of Russia’s influence receding there in coming years. Although it has also received backing from Iran and Iran-backed militias, Syria needs Russian support on multiple levels: militarily, given continued unrest or lack of control in the Southwest, Northwest and Northeast of the country; diplomatically, at the UN Security Council and other international fora to avert sanctions for the use of chemical weapons and other war crimes; and politically, since only Russia (not Iran) can advance efforts toward rehabilitation of the regime, reconstruction, reconciliation with other Arab states, and refugee return. Given Russia’s investment in the conflict and in expanding its military infrastructure at Hmeymim Air Base and the naval base at Tartus, which enables Moscow to project power into the Mediterranean, the MENA region and Europe, it will not give up its accumulated influence easily. Moreover, our interviewees suggest that Russia can maintain a “less-than-ideal” situation in Syria over the medium- to long-term. Maintaining the *status quo* will justify Russia’s continued presence and requires generating just enough economic support (including from Iran and China) to keep the regime afloat while suppressing any renewed unrest and extremist activities. Yet, beyond narrow loyalist constituencies, Russia is viewed among Syrians as incapable of introducing an attractive governance model for Syria and as insufficiently understanding of, or interested in Syrian realities. Its soft power reach and development aid remain extremely limited.²⁵

Implications: In *Syria*, due in part to the entrenched presence of Russia and other external actors, instability will likely prevail and spillover risks to Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel could increase in the future. Although Russia maintains deconfliction channels with both the United States and Israel, the potential for inadvertent escalation remains high, especially if Russia demonstrates a reduced ability or willingness to reign in the presence of Iran-affiliated actors in Southern Syria.²⁶

(2) “BALANCERS CRITICAL TO NATO’S POWER PROJECTION” – LIBYA AND TURKEY

Russia will likely be able to consolidate its position with Libya and Turkey—with potentially significant implications for NATO’s posture and ability to project power in the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean—unless the United States acts to roll back that influence. These countries constitute distinct challenges as “balancers.” Turkey is and will continue to be a NATO ally but has actively decided to balance its relations between the United States and Russia given dissatisfaction with Washington over specific policies. Libyan actors’ ongoing efforts at balancing between the United States, Russia, and other external actors, meanwhile, are rooted in perceptions of limited U.S. attentiveness to the ongoing conflict. This produces a situation in which Russian military

²⁵ This applies to the opposition-leaning Syrians we interviewed for the project, who argued that the current stage of the conflict poses huge risks to Russia, given the dire state of the Syrian economy, and that Russia might eventually be forced to push the regime toward concessions *vis-à-vis* the West and that the United States’ “maximum pressure” strategy will prove successful. Loyalist and less opposition-leaning Syrians admittedly hold a different view. In the absence of reliable opinion polls and surveys from Syria, any assessment of Syrian public opinion remains somewhat speculative and largely based on anecdotal accounts.

²⁶ Brendan Cole, “Russia Tells U.S. Only Their Troops Are Welcome in Syria,” *Newsweek*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/syria-russia-assaad-pentagon-1589111>; Raed Jabr, “Russia Steps Up Rhetoric In Response to Israeli Raids in Syria,” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, July 24, 2021, <https://english.aaawsat.com/home/article/3095376/russia-steps-rhetoric-response-israeli-raids-syria>.

entrenchment, including with A2AD assets, could intensify and complicate NATO power projection into the Southern Mediterranean.

Turkey's tilt toward Russia under President Erdogan has been sustained not just by robust economic interaction—such as on the Turk Stream pipeline, the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), construction, textiles, and tourism—but also the need for diplomatic engagement on conflicts such as those in Syria and Libya. Furthermore, Ankara sees the world as increasingly multipolar and less Western-centric, leading Turkish officials to conclude that Turkey can attain its interests more effectively by balancing between the United States, other NATO allies, and Russia. That is not to say that Turkey will abandon NATO, but it will likely continue to work with Russia in areas where it will serve its interests, and it is willing to incur limited damage to the alliance and its bilateral relations with the United States in return. Nevertheless, there is also an understanding in Ankara that this balancing strategy is highly dependent on U.S. reactions. Turkey's decision to go forward with the S-400 deal was based on the Turkish leader's personal considerations—underscoring alignment with Russia and a desire to protect himself and his regime in the wake of the 2016 failed coup attempt—rather than a defense logic (given the dubious ability of the S-400 to be integrated with Turkey's military assets) or the “no-strings-attached” appeal that has driven procurement of Russian weapons by other regional actors (see Egypt and Iraq below).

That said, Turkish sources hold that Moscow's objectives are to keep Turkey under control, render its policies hostage to Russian interests, limit its room to maneuver regionally and in relation to the West, and use Turkey as a Trojan horse to drive a wedge within NATO. Russia's long-term presence in a theater that Turkey considers critical for its security and domestic stability, and its ability to drive millions of Syrian refugees into Turkey or enable the Syrian Kurds militarily and politically, afford Russia leverage over Turkey. Notwithstanding this clear-eyed awareness of Russian objectives among Turkish elites, Russian grey zone activities and soft power do resonate among the Turkish public, benefiting from long-standing anti-American sentiments dating back to 2003 and reinforcing Russian influence at more subtle levels. While the Turkish public's lack of trust in the United States dates back to 2003, views held of Russia have improved (albeit from relatively low levels). That can partially be attributed to Russia's neatly managed, pre-calculated information campaigns.²⁷ Yet, Ankara holds cards on Russia in Libya, the Black Sea and Ukraine, where Turkey's positions are more aligned with the United States than with Russia.

Implications: Russia's influence over Turkey has both military and political dimensions. Turkey is considering further procurement of Russian weapons, notwithstanding the imposition of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions.²⁸ Additional weapon systems would serve to consolidate the cooperation between the two countries and create certain path dependencies, though Turkish sources we consulted were divided on whether Turkey will likely procure advanced systems like additional S-400s or fifth generation fighter jets. Under a worst-case scenario of consolidating Turkish-Russian relations, trust in Turkey to decisively side

²⁷ For example, when Russian aircraft killed thirty-four Turkish troops in February 2020, the Turkish public was outraged but was made to believe in Syrian government culpability for the strikes by a well-coordinated chorus of commentators. Interview with a Turkish source.

²⁸ The 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) requires the U.S. government to impose at least five out of twelve possible sanctions against any country that makes military purchases from Russia, among other provisions. See <https://www.state.gov/countering-americas-adversaries-through-sanctions-act-of-2017/sections-231-and-235/>.

with the United States and NATO in a crisis could be eroded. In trying to prevent such a scenario, the United States will have to balance its concerns over deepening Russia-Turkey relations and the need to deter other states from following Turkey's example of procuring sensitive systems from Russia with the danger of pushing Turkey further away from NATO. On the political level, if Russia-Turkey relations further improve, they have the potential to deepen divisions between Turkey and NATO. While Ankara calculated that there was not much cost in cooperating with Russia during the Trump administration, our interviews suggest that Turkey is currently reassessing its strategy toward the United States and that further Russian-Turkish military-defense cooperation will be entirely a function of the trajectory of U.S.-Turkey relations. Our Turkish interlocutors warned that while Turkey's balancing between Russia, the United States, and NATO, which has entailed an unprecedented rapprochement with Russia, has been largely driven by the personal proclivities of President Erdogan, such rapprochement might put down institutional roots over the coming decade, if it is not rolled back.

In **Libya**, our analysis suggests that Russia looks to maintain a dichotomy between Eastern and Western Libya and low-level conflict among local actors, in order to maintain its influence (a united Libyan government might ask Russian and Turkish forces to leave). Notwithstanding U.S. calls, United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) efforts and two Berlin Conferences, Russia and Turkey show no intentions of withdrawing their military assets, forces, and proxies. Each state also uses the other's presence to justify its own meddling, leading to a convergence of interest in preserving the *status quo*. Meanwhile, Russian influence in Libya goes beyond the military realm and use of PMCs. Although routinely considered a backer of General Haftar, Moscow has supported ties with a range of actors, keen to ensure that regardless of which players prevail in the drawn-out political transition process, Russian influence over Libya's future is ensured. Libya has been a very fertile ground for Russian grey zone activities deployed toward that objective. Those have included (1) a heavy Russian PMC presence in the oil crescent and South (including to build leverage over Libya's energy sector) and the transfer of military equipment to those PMCs from other theatres, such as Syria; (2) disinformation (on social media and in conjunction with UAE²⁹ traditional media) to discredit the UN-led political process and different Libyan political actors; (3) political influence-building and attempted meddling in the electoral process; and (4) past currency printing for the Eastern government.

Implications: In Libya, there is a risk of increased Russian influence unless the United States becomes more visibly engaged. Russian policy is feeding the ongoing intra-state conflict in Libya, while also contributing to its regionalization, with the UAE (at least until recently³⁰) funding the Wagner group and Russia's presence fueling Turkish involvement. Although across Eastern and Western Libya, there is no affinity with Russia at the communal level, and while Russian PMCs are feared, elites and political actors across the country will continue to welcome Russia as security provider "on the ground" (even if only informally), in the absence of increased engagement by the United States and Europe. Moreover, Libyans will remain vulnerable to Russian disinformation and electoral meddling since they "live on Facebook," according to one source interviewed. Further, it

²⁹ For UAE objectives and activities in Libya, see for example, Eleonora Ardemagni and Federica Saini Fasanotti, "The UAE in Libya and Yemen: Different Tactics, One Goal," 31 July 2020, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/uae-libya-and-yemen-different-tactics-one-goal-27138>

³⁰ Pentagon Says UAE Possibly Funding Russia's Shadowy Mercenaries in Libya," *Foreign Policy*, 3 November 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/30/pentagon-trump-russia-libya-uae/>

is not inconceivable—according to both Russian and Libyan sources—that Russia could look to convert its PMC presence into an official military presence in the future, should the Kremlin judge it expedient for power projection and should a Libyan government welcome it. Such a presence might include a deployment of Russian A2AD assets in Libya and a naval port to complement assets at Tartus. Increasing its military assets in Libya would enhance Russia’s access to the Suez Canal and allow Russia to stretch control of sea lines of communication beyond the Black Sea. A military presence would enable Russia to threaten U.S./NATO access to the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, limit NATO freedom to maneuver and increase the likelihood of electronic jamming. Such a presence could also keep Turkey’s air and naval advantage in check, block other countries from accessing Libya’s energy resources, and interrupt U.S. efforts to conduct counterterrorism operations there.³¹

Russia’s plans for a naval base in Sudan have the potential to augment Russian power projection into the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Those plans appear to be proceeding despite occasional hiccups on the Sudanese side. They offer the latest indication that Moscow is looking for diverse inroads, and hence mandate that the United States adopts a strategy beyond one country or one theater and looks geo-strategically at Russia’s opportunistic behavior.

(3) “U.S. FRIENDS REQUIRING SUSTAINED ATTENTION” – EGYPT AND IRAQ

Egypt and Iraq have thus far refrained from expanding military-defense cooperation with Russia to a point unacceptable to Washington. That said, both have in past years procured substantial Russian military systems, notwithstanding U.S. concerns. Egypt is now eyeing the procurement of the Su-35, something that might trigger CAATSA sanctions. Russia has also attempted to expand its influence in both countries beyond the military-defense arena, but with limited success. With some sustained attention, the United States should be able to manage Russian influence-building in these countries.

Most Egyptian and Iraqi interviewees we consulted suggest that their countries turn to Russia for weapons sales as a last resort, when their request for U.S. weapons is denied, downgraded, or significantly delayed. Some also consider Russian weapons cheaper, easier to use, delivered more quickly, and without the onerous procurement rules (and human rights restrictions) that can delay or altogether hinder delivery of U.S. systems, all while affording these countries some negotiating leverage over the United States. Both countries’ continued partial reliance on legacy Soviet systems also makes them highly dependent on Russian spare parts and technicians.³² Yet, our interviews suggest that Russian influence over Egypt’s military and MoD is less pronounced than in the case of Iraq.³³

³¹ Anna Borshchevskaya, “Russia’s Military Activity in the East Mediterranean Echoes Its Approach to Syria,” Policy Watch 3334, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-military-activity-east-mediterranean-echoes-its-approach-syria>.

³² Most Egyptian air defense systems, along with the main assault rifle of the Egyptian army, second-line tanks, Egyptian Air Force helicopter transport vehicles, etc., have been supplied by Russia.

³³ That said, Egyptian military personnel are still being trained in Russian military academies. See “Russia in the Middle East: National Security Challenges for the United States and Israel in the Biden Era,” May 2021, *The Wilson Center*, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Russia%20Challenge%20in%20the%20Middle%20East%20FINAL.pdf>.

Egypt's relations with Russia have expanded in recent years beyond arms sales to include a Russia-Egypt strategic partnership agreement, increased economic ties, a contract to construct Egypt's NPP in El-Dabaa, and joint military exercises. Also, Egypt views Russia's presence in Libya as essential to securing its Western border and slowing the flow of ammunition and spare parts to the Sinai. Historical nostalgia over Egyptian-Soviet relations during the Nasser era, the personal connection between Presidents Putin and Sisi, the Egyptian public's perception of Putin as a strongman, and remnants of anti-American sentiment nurtured by the 2003 Iraq invasion, all serve to boost Russian influence in Egypt.

That said, Egyptian interlocutors express a certain uneasiness about Russian long-term objectives and disagreements with Moscow over the Nile dam and gas exports to Europe. They begrudgingly acknowledge that Russia holds more leverage over Egypt than vice versa, considering Moscow's supply of weapons, Egyptian dependence on Russian tourism, and loans for the El Dabaa NPP. Egypt will continue to rely on Russian weapons systems but will be reluctant to grant Russia an official military presence in the country. Meanwhile, Russian grey zone activities in Egypt are less effective, according to our interviewees, and there is a clear preference for the United States as security partner. At the same time, Egyptians hold a grudge toward Washington as they see themselves treated as a "third-tier ally" when it comes to the supply of military hardware. This follows repeated U.S. rejections of Egypt's attempts to purchase "Tier 1" U.S. military hardware that has been supplied to other Arab states.³⁴

Implications: Since Russia's ability to gain influence over Egypt is constrained, the strategic implications for U.S. interests are more limited than in the cases of Libya and Turkey. They are not insignificant, though. Primary U.S. concerns about Egypt-Russia relations center on the strategic implications of the purchase of the Su-35SE fighter - for Israel's security and the preservation of its qualitative military edge, for the potential signals it sends to other states that they can follow suit, and for the likely deterioration of U.S.-Egypt relations should Washington feel compelled to impose CAATSA sanctions. Egypt still sees itself as an indispensable U.S. strategic ally. That said, its decision to go forward with the SU-35SE deal represents an effort to diversify its military hardware supply following the imposition of sanctions over human rights violations as a result of Egypt's military crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. But it also reflects a desire to upgrade Egypt's air power range and capabilities following the United States' refusal to supply advanced weapons systems. The fact that Egypt, the second largest U.S. military aid recipient, was not deterred by the potential imposition of CAATSA (despite repeated warnings that, at a minimum, it would complicate future U.S. defense transactions with and security assistance to Egypt, and put at risk future U.S. weapons sales to Egypt³⁵) signals an erosion of the United States' image as the sole reliable provider of security in the region. Were the United States to impose sanctions on Egypt, it could risk a serious rupture in the bilateral relationship. A significant deterioration in relations could, in the worst case, jeopardize United States' preferential logistical access through Egyptian airspace and the Suez Canal, which is important for the United States' presence in the Gulf.

³⁴ Ali Dizboni and Karim El-Baz, "Understanding the Egyptian Military's Perspective on the Su-35 Deal," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/understanding-egyptian-militarys-perspective-su-35-deal>.

³⁵ Vivian Salama, "U.S. Threatens Egypt with Sanctions Over Russian Arms Deal," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 14, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-threatens-egypt-with-sanctions-over-russian-arms-deal-11573769929>; Sam Magdy, "US: Egypt Could Face Sanctions if it Purchases Russian Fighter Jets," *Associated Press*, November 18, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/f5ace786516e4086a42e61ab791a8059>.

Iraq's relations with Russia, benefiting from the legacy of a strong alliance during the Cold War, have expanded in recent years. That occurred as Iraq turned to Russian weapons in its post-2014 fight against ISIL amid perceptions of slow U.S. weapons deliveries and a modicum of Iraqi-Russian alignment on the Syrian conflict.³⁶ Economic cooperation has also continued—especially in the energy sector, where Gazprom, Rosneft, and Lukoil are particularly active—but it remains limited due to Iraq's continued security reliance on the United States, enduring instability in the country, and insufficient diversification of the Russian and Iraqi economies. Against that backdrop, Iraqi sources interviewed echo their Russian counterparts in suggesting that Russia is concerned with Iraq's stability, is looking to benefit from its existing investments, and hence has little interest in a hasty and full-scale U.S. withdrawal from the country.

As the United States weighs the extent and nature of its future military presence in Iraq, Russia is certainly well positioned to enhance its influence, generally enjoying a good reputation among Iraqis. Russia is well prepared for enhanced military-defense cooperation, given the mentality and bureaucratic culture in the Iraqi military enterprise. While Iraqis interviewed can therefore envision a maintained or slightly enhanced Russian influence in their country, they are hard-pressed to envision any scenario under which Russian troops would be stationed in Iraq.

Implications: The strategic implications of Russia's involvement in Iraq - notwithstanding its investments in the energy sector, security infrastructure, and ties with the government - are relatively modest. Also, the quadrilateral information center in Baghdad, established by Russia in 2015 and staffed by Russian, Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian military personnel, has seen very little activity. While Russia does not possess the economic and political resources required to counter the United States on an equal footing in Iraq, a further withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq might change the equation over time, especially if a more pro-Iran regime takes hold in Baghdad. Russia might seek to fill at least part of the ensuing security void by increasing arms sales, offering military advisors to the Iraqi Security Forces, and increasing its direct combat assistance to counter the Islamic State. Yet, Russia will likely be careful not directly to strengthen Iran-backed Shia militias, cognizant that undue Iranian influence in Iraq could undermine stability, Russian commercial opportunities in the country, and Russia's broader interest in balancing and equidistance between regional actors.

(4) “U.S. ALLIES SEEKING LIMITED ENGAGEMENT WITH RUSSIA”—GCC AND ISRAEL

The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Israel seek engagement with Russia to address specific security and economic needs, but their allegiance remains firmly with the United States as their preeminent strategic partner and security guarantor. Interlocutors from these countries emphasize that Russia is not and will never be their ally, is not trusted, and cannot replace the United States in the region. That said, they are willing (and even feel compelled) to work with Russia to address specific challenges, especially with regard to Iran, when the United States is viewed to be disengaged from the region.

³⁶ For additional analysis on the expansion of Russian-Iraqi relations since 2014, see Hanna Notte, “Moscow's Flexible Alliances in the Middle East: Opportunities and Constraints of Russia's Relations with post-Saddam Iraq,” *Al Bayan Centre Publication Series*, 2018, https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/7_dokument_dok_pdf_52697_1.pdf/5e687acd-d65a-e9a2-3fca-fd3b4b52f76?version=1.0&t=1539647362057.

The **Arab Gulf states** view their relations with Russia as a balancing act *vis-à-vis* the United States, citing years of frustration with U.S. inaction on Iran’s regional activities, the JCPOA, and a perceived reduced U.S. commitment to their security. They also remain interested in Russian weapons in the event of a U.S. failure to provide requested systems and recognize the need to coordinate with Russia in global hydrocarbon markets, notwithstanding competition. Russia is perceived in Gulf capitals as opportunistic, interested in attracting Gulf financial investments, and an actor that “does not take the relations with them seriously” and “looks at the Gulf states through the lens of their relations with Washington.” Russian soft power and grey-zone activities in the GCC are set to remain limited, given regional distrust of Russian media and a general lack of cultural affinity with Russia. Instead, the United States and Western countries remain the most attractive sources of weapon systems, markets, as well as favorite destinations for youth to pursue higher education.³⁷ Finally, the GCC countries’ respective positions on Russia’s role in regional conflicts yield a mixed picture: Russia and key Gulf states have diverged on Syria (although some are now considering rapprochement with Damascus), while they have been more aligned on Libya (where the UAE has, at least until recently, funded PMC Wagner activities). But it is the Kremlin’s perceived close relations with Iran—which are ultimately understood as enabling Iranian aggression—that especially limit the prospects of closer cooperation.

Israel has enjoyed close relations with Russia under President Putin, sustained by joint concerns about terrorism emanating from the MENA region, economic cooperation, and the presence of a large Russian immigrant community. Engagement with Russia has been required, according to Israeli sources to meet its core security objectives: Israel’s desire to restrict Iran’s freedom of action, dismantle Iranian military infrastructure, disarm Hezbollah, and ensure freedom of operations against Iranian or Iran-backed targets in Syria. Achieving these objectives has necessitated regular military-to-military engagement (with Russian-speaking officers on both sides) to ensure limited Russian disruption of Israeli efforts. Such Israeli engagement with Russia will continue to remain necessary, leading some (not all) in Israel to hope that the cultivation of ties with Russia could translate into influence on the negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program. Should Russia hinder Israeli operations in Syria more actively, or should the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMU) acquire strategic weapons from Russia, it would cause serious friction between Moscow and Tel Aviv. Israel’s main leverage over Russia resides in the risk that Israeli actions in Syria might lead to the toppling or severe damaging of the Assad regime as an unintended consequence of Israeli military exchanges with Iran.

Implications: The GCC and Israel will continue to view the United States as their main security partner, notwithstanding Russian efforts to accrue influence over these countries. Israel in particular views the United States as its Western anchor, main interlocutor, and the essential partner for its national defense. Moreover, Israel perceives Russia as a proliferator of weapons, nuclear technology,

³⁷ According to the 2020 Arab Youth survey, young people ranked the United States: first among non-Middle Eastern countries, and second overall, as the country in which they would like to live; second for the country they would most like their own country to be like; and as the non-Arab country that had increased its influence on the Arab world the most in the previous five years. However, of the young people surveyed, fifty-six percent saw the United States as more of an ally than an enemy, whereas for Russia, the figure was seventy-one percent, and for China, it was seventy-three percent. ASDA’A BCW, “A Voice for Change: A White Paper on the Findings of the 12th Annual Arab Youth Survey,” Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 2020.

and cyber threats to the region.³⁸ Yet, perceptions of U.S. disengagement or unpredictable policies, and of U.S. failure to address Iran’s nuclear program and its regional malign activities, could “push” the GCC and Israel to intensify their *ad hoc* cooperation with Russia in select areas.

Conclusion. Most U.S. regional friends and allies—the “balancers critical to NATO power projection,” “U.S. friends requiring sustained attention,” and “U.S. allies seeking limited engagement with Russia”—justify their engagement with Russia as being driven by a U.S. failure to provide them with an important security need: advanced weapons (Iraq, Egypt) or adequate protection against malign activities by regional foes (Israel, GCC and Turkey). Their preference is to engage with the United States, but Russia is an alternative they are “forced” to pursue, although such engagement also affords them a bargaining chip *vis-à-vis* the United States. It further appears that states with a strong past reliance on Soviet military systems and education (Egypt and Iraq) are more inclined to return to purchasing Russian weapons today. Vulnerability to Russian grey-zone activities—especially Russian disinformation—is most acute in conflict-prone environments like Libya and Syria, as well as in Turkey. That said, Russia is playing the long game in accruing influence, officially and in the grey zone, in all countries analyzed.

KEY FINDINGS

Overall, we conclude that the potential for Russia to increase its influence and jeopardize U.S. interests in the region is greatest among the “balancers critical to NATO power projection” and “U.S. friends requiring sustained attention,” i.e., Turkey, Libya, Egypt, and Iraq. With Turkey, enhanced Russian influence would contribute to undermining NATO cohesion. With Libya, it would enhance Russian power projection capacity in the Mediterranean and Africa. With Egypt and Iraq, it would erode U.S. credibility as chief provider of security assistance in the region, while potentially undermining stability in two Arab states that are key to broader regional stability and, in the case of Egypt, key to U.S. power projection in the Gulf. The Arab Gulf states (and Israel) are at present much less susceptible to Russian influence but may decide to increase their cooperation with Russia amid strengthening perceptions of further U.S. disengagement and failure to contain Iran.

Russia’s regional power projection is limited. Russia is in the MENA region to stay, and its push for a greater naval, air, and land presence and increased political influence will continue. Yet, it is important to note that Russia’s willingness and ability to compete with the United States in the region and thwart the United States’ pursuit of its strategic interests is not boundless. Politically, Moscow is not able to offer the same range and quality of alternative elements of statecraft such as development aid and diplomacy. Economically, bilateral trade between Russia and most Mediterranean countries is relatively low and investments from Russia are negligible. Militarily, since re-establishing its naval presence in the Mediterranean, Russia has had limited success in expanding its access to basing arrangements beyond Syria, and its air power in the region consists of fewer than four dozen fighters, bombers, and attack aircrafts. Operationally, it has acted with caution, avoiding undue risks, especially a direct confrontation with the United States.

Changing the current balance of power would require a major increase in Russia’s commitment of resources and deeper involvement in the region. There are no signs that Russia is interested in

³⁸ Chen Kane, W. Seth Carus, and Nima Gerami, “Final Report, Second U.S.-Israel Nonproliferation Dialogue,” November 30 – December 2, 2020 (unpublished).

assuming, or feels compelled to assume, such a commitment. Indeed, Russia's 2021 NSS emphasizes the need to focus resources on Russia domestically. Hence, Russia's attempts at influence-building in MENA will likely focus on areas where quick results can be achieved at low cost, will be aimed at preserving existing achievements, and are less likely entail resource-intensive efforts to compete with the United States. There is also a clear understanding of Russian limitations in such competition: Russian sources interviewed discount the prospects of Russia, for instance, successfully driving a wedge between the United States and its core regional allies.

Furthermore, on the operational level, Russia has reached its limits under the current force deployment:

- Russia cannot afford to conduct another expeditionary operation of the size of its intervention in Syria (however, smaller-scale deployments of military advisors and PMCs are possible);
- Russia's A2AD "bubble" over Syria is limited in range and, in a potential conflict with NATO, vulnerable to countermeasures. Setting up effective A2AD in Libya beyond existing assets would be a major expeditionary step and require a stable partner government granting official rights to Russia. Russia would need to deploy longer-range systems (e.g., Coastal Defense Cruise Missiles, such as the Bastion-P or the Bal) should it feel compelled to counter the Turkish navy deployed in Libya in the future. To date, there is no credible confirmation that Russia has deployed such systems. It is unlikely to deliver them to the Libyan National Army (LNA), being disinclined to add a risk to international shipping in the Mediterranean. Considering the enduring constraints of Russia's S-400 battalions in Syria, any air defense or coastal defense systems deployed in Libya would likely be limited, too. Finally, any Russian efforts toward a permanent base in the country would ultimately require Russia transitioning from the grey zone to an official presence in Libya.

Tolerable *status quo* but risks to U.S. interests in the future. For the United States, therefore, a Russian presence in the MENA region is tolerable at current levels, but it does complicate the realization of core U.S. interests. With very little investment, Russia can disrupt and undermine U.S. efforts, credibility, relations, and interests in the region. That ability is bolstered by Russia's focus on playing the long game, waiting it out, and exploiting opportunities when they present themselves (including when the United States makes mistakes).

On the strategic level, Russia's activities:

- entrench low-level conflict, both inter- and intra-state, thereby contravening U.S. efforts at ensuring regional stability and mitigating humanitarian crises, while tying U.S. forces down;
- undermine U.S. leverage over partners and its coercive power over adversaries, given Russia's willingness and ability to step in with security assistance; and
- could deter regional states from joining U.S.-led initiatives or fulfilling operational requests.

Russia's grey zone activities—even if not yet successful uniformly across the region - run the risk of incrementally expanding Russian influence by leading to an erosion of trust in the United States. The ripple effects of these Russian efforts - for societal stability, governance in regional states,

as well as for states welcoming the United States as a reliable partner - are potentially manifold. While these risks are not materializing today, they do pose a strategic concern over the medium- to long-run since the United States does not yet have an adequate toolbox to deal with them - short of using grey zone tactics itself.

On the operational level:

- U.S. planners need to take into account Russia's military presence when conducting operations as Russia can respond to what it perceives as U.S./NATO activities against its national interests in the region and beyond.
- Russia may be able to influence decision-making within a state directly, or indirectly, for example when the United States requests that a state host or base U.S. forces, use forces already based within that country, or grant permission to overfly that country. That could severely influence the U.S. military's ability to operate in a timely fashion.
- Russia's A2AD presence can complicate the ability of NATO's navies and air forces to operate within their range. Russia can use its military assets in Syria to harass U.S. and NATO aircraft and ships in the region, reach further into North Africa and the Mediterranean with the nuclear-capable bombers recently deployed in Syria,³⁹ attempt to deny NATO aircraft from operating in Syrian air space, or quickly move naval or aerial assets to other countries in the region. Future bases in Libya or elsewhere could pose additional challenges.
- In the future, Russia could increase its harassment of U.S. and NATO forces in the region. That could include unsafe and unprofessional intercepts in the air and at sea, or aggressive actions by Russian forces in Northeast Syria.
- Operational friction and action in the same theater might give the Russians opportunities for intelligence collection and operational learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Biden administration has declared that it will lead in the MENA region with diplomacy, end the "forever wars," and right-size the U.S. military presence in the region to focus U.S. military forces to counter the threat posed by a rising China and a resurgent Russia.⁴⁰

The challenge of "doing more with less" to maintain the *status quo*

Current U.S. regional policy towards Russia is an afterthought, as deployments focus on countering Iran and defeating terrorist groups such as ISIL. Right-sizing the United States' presence

³⁹ Jared Szuba, "Russia Reveals Deployment of Nuclear-Capable Bombers to Syria Airbase," *Al-Monitor*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/russia-reveals-deployment-nuclear-capable-bombers-syria-airbase>.

⁴⁰ Executive Office of the President, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>; Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

in support of U.S. interests will be difficult in this conflict-prone, resource-rich region situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa and at the intersection of vital sea, air, and land lines of communication. The challenge, then, is to employ the military and other instruments of U.S. national power effectively with a smaller military footprint.⁴¹ Importantly, since an increased reliance on Russia among regional states is largely rooted in their perceptions of U.S. policies (such as “re-balancing” away from the region, prioritizing democratization and a human rights agenda, or restricting arms sales), the United States should adopt a policy of “do no harm” and, when downsizing, avoid the emergence of gaps, seams, and vulnerabilities that Russia could exploit.

The United States’ military withdrawals from Afghanistan, the Gulf, and Iraq, which will significantly affect U.S. posture in the region and perceptions of U.S. commitment, will also degrade its operational readiness and complicate its ability to work together with allies and partners in complex environments at strategic distance. Against that backdrop, Russian influence—although it appears tolerable at current levels—will pose a risk to U.S. strategic interests in the region *incrementally*. Facing the challenge of implementing a resource-constrained security and defense strategy designed to shape the increasingly contested geo-strategic environment, the United States needs an effective strategy to counter Moscow’s *current* “low investment, high disruption” approach in MENA, in order to forestall any *future* Russian gains in undermining U.S. interests in the region and beyond, and to seize opportunities for cooperation with Moscow in select areas.

Rather than playing a zero-sum game with Russia across regional theatres and policy areas, the United States needs to counter Moscow’s “low investment, high disruption” approach through a **comprehensive yet tailored** strategy: **contain** Russia’s influence in Iran and Syria; **roll back** Russia’s influence in Libya and Turkey (given their centrality to NATO power projection and credibility in the region on the one hand, and their susceptibility to Russian influence on the other); **manage** Russia’s influence especially on the military and defense sectors in Egypt and Iraq, while offering reassurance to the GCC and Israel in order to **minimize** Russian influence in those countries. The country-specific recommendations detailed later in the report are calibrated toward those objectives. See **Table 1** for a summary of the individual countries’ rationales for engaging Russia on security/defense issues, the resultant risks to U.S. interests, and recommendations for the United States.

On the macro level, a first step is to draw more effectively on all resources available to the United States, including non-military DoD tools and U.S. government agencies, to generate better synchronization of effort to counter Russia’s MENA region activities:

- The United States should develop a **holistic, whole-of-government approach** covering the MENA region (including the Mediterranean and Black Sea). The approach should be developed and directed by a central body within DoD with authority over all relevant commands. It should be planned and coherently integrated by the Combatant Commands. It should be executed in country in a tailored fashion - by, with, and through the U.S. embassies - for effectively competing with global and regional powers, safeguarding allies, and reassuring partners in a meaningful-yet cost-effective manner.

⁴¹ Michael Eisenstadt, “Beyond Forever Wars and Great Power Competition.”

- Such a strategy must be inclusive of all Russian activity in the MENA region, which spans three theatres (North Africa, the Gulf, and the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean) and Combatant Commands, yet tailored based on the U.S. objectives towards Russia in the countries analyzed (e.g., containing, rolling back, managing, or minimizing Russian influence).
- To address Russia's grey zone activities, DoD should embrace at the Combatant Command-level a **Foreign Internal Defense-based approach** per Joint Publication 3-22.⁴² Foreign Internal Defense, an inherently Geographic Combatant Command (GCC)-level activity, employs a more holistic and inclusive whole-of-government approach than does the current GCC-Level Country Cooperation Plan. It also adjusts the focus of DoD and U.S. whole-of-government efforts to strengthening countries' ability to resist external influence and coercion and foreign-inspired subversion. It lays out tactics, techniques, and procedures for implementing measures to address specific Russian grey zone activities. Adopting the JP 3-22 approach will require the coherent

⁴² See Foreign Internal Defense, Joint Publication 3-22, August 17, 2018, validated on February 2, 2021, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_22.pdf?ver=2018-10-10-112450-103.

Table 1: Summary of Country-Specific Rationales, Risks and Recommendations

		Rationale for engaging Russia on security/defense	Factors enabling Russian influence-building	Risks of increased Russian influence to U.S. interests	Recommendations
Russia's friends	Iran	Russian past and current support (arms sales, diplomatic)	International isolation and sanctions; disillusionment re: normalization with the United States	Risk to U.S. troops, assets, and allies	<u>Contain</u> Russian influence
	Syria	Russian past and current support (military, diplomatic)	International isolation and lack of reconstruction support; path dependency given Russian 2015 intervention	Spillover of instability and low-level conflict to Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel	<u>Contain</u> Russian influence
Balancers critical to NATO's power projection	Turkey	Necessity to coordinate/cooperate on regional conflicts (Libya, Syria) in which Ankara confronts perceived foes	Friction with United States over range of issues (support for Syrian Kurds, 2016 attempted coup, etc.)	Undermine NATO cohesion	<u>Roll back</u> Russian influence
	Libya	LNA: military support; other Libyan actors: hedging	Vulnerability to Russian grey zone activities—especially Russian disinformation; perceived U.S./European disengagement	Enhance Russian power projection capacity into the Med/Africa; protracted instability and spill-over	<u>Roll back</u> Russian influence
U.S. friends requiring sustained attention	Egypt	U.S. failure to provide advanced weapons; general hedging	Historical reliance on Soviet military systems and education	Erode U.S. credibility as chief provider of security assistance in the region	<u>Manage</u> Russian influence especially on the military and defense sectors
	Iraq	U.S. failure to provide advanced weapons; general hedging	Historical reliance on Soviet military systems and education	Erode U.S. credibility as chief provider of security assistance; instability	<u>Manage</u> Russian influence especially on the military and defense sectors
U.S. allies seeking limited engagement with Russia	GCC	Protection against malign activities by regional foes	Perception of U.S. disengagement or oscillating policies	Erode U.S. credibility as guarantor of regional stability; Increased risk of escalation due to Iran's malign activities	Offer reassurance to <u>minimize</u> Russian influence
	Israel	Protection/ assistance against malign activities by regional foes	Perception of U.S. disengagement or oscillating policies	Erode U.S. credibility as guarantor of regional stability; Increased risk of escalation due to Iran's nuclear program, proxies	Offer reassurance to <u>minimize</u> Russian influence

integration of assets and capabilities of other USG agencies at Combatant Command and embassy levels.⁴³

- In addition, AFRICOM, CENTCOM, and EUCOM should support the establishment of a **NATO Center of Excellence** in a Mediterranean Dialogue country that will cover grey zone activities, study and counter MENA-specific malign and illicit activities, and develop effective defensive, and counter measures. The scope of such a center could include chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and high yield explosives (CBRNE) training, detection, and border security, addressing infectious disease, WMD counter-proliferation best practices, and critical infrastructure vulnerability assessments - areas in which Russia cannot compete in providing training credibly or where the threat it poses can be mitigated (for example, Russian grey zone activities benefit from illicit networks).
- Selective “naming and shaming” of Russian PMC atrocities and ineptness - bilaterally to regional partner governments (especially in Africa) - should be intensified, though such action needs to be complemented by serious diplomatic efforts, including with the UAE and Egypt (enablers of Russian covert military presence).
- With the decrease in military presence, the biggest hurdle will be for the United States to disassociate the perception of its regional commitment from the number of “boots on the ground.” To do so, DoD will have to develop an **information campaign** explaining the reduction in forces to reassure U.S. allies and friends of its long-term commitment. Such a campaign should demonstrate how reducing the risks to U.S. stationed forces—by shifting from land-based forces to greater emphasis on air forces, including airstrikes and over-the-horizon operations—increases Washington’s flexibility to respond to threats in various locations across the region.

With a reduced military presence, extended timelines for Foreign Military Sales transactions, and a continued U.S. focus on human rights when dealing with regional militaries, Washington would reap great benefit from focusing on training and maintenance, which in turn will ensure its allies and partners can perform high-end combat tasks, maintain readiness, and sustain themselves in operations. For that purpose, DoD should make **training and maintenance the centerpiece of security assistance** while still competing on weapons supply. That will assist in increasing trust in the United States and will further differentiate it from Russia (and China) in areas in which the United States excels. For that purpose, the United States should:

- Establish a **Combat Arms Training Center/Combat Maneuver Training Center** in Saudi Arabia – a Graffenwohr-like center to increase capability, readiness, and interoperability while affording U.S. rotational forces complex high-intensity training. Rotations through such a center will increase the likelihood of countries opting for U.S. maintenance, logistics, supply, training, communications, and other support activities, in all of which the United States also maintains an advantage over Russia (and China).

⁴³ The U.S. State Department’s Global Engagement Center (GEC) is already actively liaising across the USG to counter Russian disinformation. The GEC’s efforts should be expanded and intensified to combat Russian disinformation through a whole-of-government approach, targeting whole-of-society, especially in the countries most vulnerable to Russian grey zone activities.

- Establish a **Flag Exercise center for regional Air Forces** for the conduct of Red/Blue/Green Flag exercises, possibly in Jordan. That will support U.S. messaging that it is not leaving but rather shifting from U.S. land-based forces to greater emphasis on air forces, including airstrikes and over-the-horizon operations.
- Create, maintain, and expand **training programs that build lasting relations**, mutual commitments, and affinity. Such programs include expanded English language training, the National Guard State Partnership Program; Olmsted Scholars, Exchange Officers, MoD Advisors, Fulbright Scholars in the security and defense sector, and other opportunities to assign foreign troops to the United States and vice-versa.

With regard to force posture, the United States should:

- **Perforate Russia’s “arc of deterrence”** by reducing continuous combat deployments but **increasing rotational presence**, particularly rotations that culminate in major multinational exercises. Such exercises enhance readiness and increase regional expertise, while spreading the burden of cost to affluent partners. Rotations provide a recurrent forward U.S. presence that would deter aggression, deepen interoperability, increase regional cooperation, reassure local governments, and, as part of a FID-centered approach, enhance their ability to protect their own borders, and air, sea, and information spaces.
- **Burden-share** with allies and partners across the MENA region - especially NATO allies and partners (e.g., Australia), among DoD’s regional and functional commands, and throughout the USG and other stakeholder governments - to maintain a continuous all-domain presence. Sustained rotations of maritime and strike capabilities and other military presence activities in the region, such as those of the UK and France, will ensure an effective and sustainable Western presence backstopped by the United States. Pooling resources, sharing bases, and synchronizing carrier deployments are all options for increased effectiveness *vis-à-vis* Russia at lower cost.
- **Demonstrate responsiveness** by enacting **mitigation measures** to absorb any risks of adjusting current force posture, including by increasing prepositioned equipment stocks and exercises with a number of regional militaries to ensure the military is adequately prepared for future MENA region conflicts. Build deterrence by responding more consistently to adversaries’ tests and challenges, and act less predictably when responding.⁴⁴
- **Identified areas of cooperation with Russia.** Areas in which U.S.-Russian cooperation might be possible, should broader bilateral relations improve, or should ad-hoc opportunities arise, include areas such as: law enforcement, civil aviation, maritime and shipping security, counter-trafficking (particularly in non-proliferation-related areas), counter-terrorism, countering radical Islam that might resonate among Russia’s Muslim communities (including in the North Caucasus), and countering illicit trafficking (especially in narcotics flowing to Russia, e.g., through Uzbekistan). Two especially successful examples of U.S.-Russian cooperation over the last decade are the JCPOA in 2015 and the dismantlement of Syria’s chemical weapons in 2013-2014. While the unique circumstances of both cases are hard to replicate, the United States and Russia share an interest—and at times converge on tactics—in combating WMD and preventing

⁴⁴ A regional interlocutor mentioned 1988 Operation Praying Mantis as an example.

further proliferation in the region. That legacy of cooperation could be leveraged when ad-hoc opportunities for joint efforts emerge in the future. Finally, should the United States in the future decide to alter its military posture in Syria and leave the Northeast/Al-Tanf, it should engage in dialogue with Russia in order to mitigate unintended adverse consequences such as a further strengthening of Iranian/Iran-backed forces, or renewed hostilities between Turkey and the SDF, or among different Kurdish constituencies (neither of which would be in Russia's interest).

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are specific recommendations for each group of countries identified in the report:

(1) “RUSSIA’S FRIENDS” – IRAN AND SYRIA

U.S. strategies and policies toward Iran and Syria are rooted in considerations extending beyond Russia's involvement in these countries. This should continue to be the case, both because Washington has little capacity to erode Russia's influence with Iran and Syria (unless it fundamentally alters its policies *vis-à-vis* the Syrian and Iranian governments and drops its demands for a “change in behavior”), and because that desired change in behavior is not primarily a function of Russian support (meaning, Moscow itself has limited leverage to affect the conduct of the Syrian and Iranian regimes, although its means to elicit a change in Damascus' domestic policies is perhaps marginally greater). Given an increasingly robust convergence of these actors in “defying” U.S./Western pressure, the United States should also not expect to be able to drive a wedge between Russia and these states easily, notwithstanding competition between Moscow and Tehran for influence on the ground in Syria. Finally, U.S. strategy for countering malign Iranian activities should not focus principally on disrupting Iranian-Russian cooperation, since Iran's nuclear program and appetite for and ability to engage in destabilizing regional activities through proxies and its missile program are *not* primarily a function of Russian support.

(2) “BALANCERS CRITICAL TO NATO'S POWER PROJECTION” – LIBYA AND TURKEY

Russia will likely be able to consolidate and further enhance its influence over Libya and Turkey—with potential significant disruptions for NATO posture and ability to project power in the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean—unless the United States acts and takes preventive measures.

In *Libya*, U.S. military personnel expressed a need for clear policy guidance and expanded authorities and resources to counter Russia's activities and quest for enhanced access to military assets and bases. We recommend that the United States:

- Take a more visible and active role in Libya's future, to counter Russia's disruptive activities, mainly through the UN process, and to facilitate a deeper and more visible inclusion of regional partners, NATO and the EU, as well as individual European and African nations.
- Expand civil-military engagement with Libyan military leadership and MoD bilaterally in support of the UN framework and engage through NATO with the EU, AU and other UN partners in technical Security Sector Reform (SSR), leading to unified military structures in the country.

- Assign AFRICOM the lead role in a comprehensive and inclusive effort to deconstruct illicit networks in Libya in close cooperation with NATO Strategic Direction South Hub in Naples, Italy, and the Joint Interagency Counter-Trafficking Center at EUCOM. That should include addressing foreign fighters in Libya.
- Expose Russian grey zone activities – in particularly its disinformation campaigns and PMC Wagner presence – as part of a sustained government-to-government and media effort, informed by the Foreign Internal Defense-based approach, to undermine Russia’s presence and any pretense of Russian legitimacy in the country.
- Work with Turkey, bilaterally and through NATO, to ensure Ankara prioritizes the UN-led process for realizing its legitimate national interests in the Eastern Med while emphasizing that any collaboration with Russia in Libya is counter to allied and NATO’s interests.
- Prioritize, in the bilateral discussions with the UAE, the continued need to withhold support for Wagner.
- Prioritize, given the unstable *status quo* and potential counterterrorism implications in Eastern Libya, the development of a comprehensive approach with Egypt and UAE to Libya’s Eastern border region, to roll back Russia’s role.
- Coordinate within NATO an action plan for Libya and encourage Libya to request such action from NATO given the June 2021 NATO Summit declaration.⁴⁵

The biggest challenge the United States will have to overcome in *Turkey* is the weakening of historically pro-U.S. constituencies (the Turkish MFA) and erosion of pro-American sentiments among other important constituencies, such as the Turkish military. While Turkey’s balancing between Russia, the United States and NATO, which resulted in an unprecedented rapprochement with Russia, has been largely sustained by the personal proclivities of President Erdogan, it might put down institutional roots over the coming decade unless being countered. In addition, while the Turkish public has suffered from a lack of trust in the United States over the past two decades, views held of Russia have improved (although they remain at relatively low levels), which can be partially attributed to Russia’s intensive information campaigns in Turkey.⁴⁶ At the same time, Turkey perceives itself as the main - if not the only - realistic counterweight and only actor in the extended region that can restrain Russia. That sentiment should be leveraged by the United States. We recommend that, in Turkey, the United States:

- Intensify U.S.-Turkish military-to-military engagement including in NATO training, exercises, and operations; return Turkish officers (and troops) into their liaison role with U.S. forces in the region, and involve more Turkish assets in NATO activities to restore pro-U.S. sentiments.
- Enhance and publicize areas of military-to-military cooperation of NATO Allies with Turkey through NATO and other Western media outlets, to include applauding the areas in which Turkey has taken on a lead role or in which Turkey is carrying a significant burden as a nation, such as Turkey’s leadership of the NATO Very High

⁴⁵ According to NATO’s June 2021 Summit declaration NATO remains “committed to providing advice to Libya, upon its request, in the area of defense and security institution building, taking into account political and security conditions.”

⁴⁶ This assessment is based on an analysis of Turkish public opinion polls over the last decade, conducted by Infakto Research Workshop, Pew Research Center, the German Marshall Fund, Center for American Progress, and Istanbul Kadir Has University.

Readiness Joint Task Force, the Turkish F-16 force, and its recent troop deployment to Kabul airport.

- Send a very senior State and DoD delegation to Ankara to agree on an approach for the supply of spare parts and weapons systems, which Turkey needs to buy from the United States, and which are not covered directly under CAATSA, to prevent Russia from exploiting further opportunities to entice Turkey to buy Russian weapons.
- Identify ways to address the S-400 problem, through resuming the F-35 program on the conditionality of finding a face-saving solution to the S-400, such as mothballing the system, not activating or integrating its radars, deploying it outside the country (for example, sending it to Libya or Syria to safeguard against deployed Russian aircrafts), or dealing with the system along the lines of the Crete model.⁴⁷
- Manage public statements on withdrawing the non-strategic nuclear weapons deployed in Turkey. Turkish interlocutors were dismayed by the notion that the weapons could be withdrawn, as they see their presence in Turkey as serving not only Turkish but also U.S. Interests (such as deterring Russia and Iran).
- At the same time, DoD should prepare contingency plans for the deterioration of relations and a possible need to reduce its dependence on Turkish facilities and basing, considering options beyond the one recently opened in Jordan, for example in Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania.
- Solidify support for Turkey in Syria, including *vis-à-vis* Russia, by a) reassuring Turkey regarding Idlib by deterring any renewed Syrian regime/Russian offensives on Idlib (or other areas west of the Euphrates); b) discouraging partners in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) from attacking Turkish targets; c) continuing to press the PYD to include non-PYD political elements in the governance structures east of the Euphrates, to assuage Turkish concerns.
- Plan for Turkey after Erdogan by preparing an agreed interagency strategy and plan for robustly re-engaging the Turkish military and defense industrial complex in a post-Erdogan Turkey. As part of this plan, identify which jets in the F-35 production line could be offered to Turkey once the new government turns over the S-400.
- Assign an active duty two-star flag officer as Senior Defense Official in the US Embassy in Ankara, to reinforce the apolitical nature and importance of the defense relationship.

(3) “U.S. FRIENDS REQUIRING SUSTAINED ATTENTION” – EGYPT AND IRAQ

To prevent increased Russia-Egyptian cooperation and Egypt’s drift toward further relying on Russia for its military hardware, the United States should:

- Continue engaging with Egypt on the strategic, economic, and military implications of going forward with the SU-35SE, including on U.S. legal triggers for both sanctions and waivers. Should the United States find itself in a position in which it is obligated to impose CAATSA, it should communicate clearly to Egypt the gradual steps the United States will have to take to give Egypt the opportunity to change its course of action.
- Offer Egypt acceptable alternatives that address its stated objectives behind acquiring the SU-35SE (to secure the gas field in the Egyptian exclusive economic zone in the eastern

⁴⁷ Can Kasapoglu, “Can Greece’s S-300s Deployment Status Offer a Smart Way-Out For Turkey’s S-400 Troubles?” *edam*, February 9, 2021, <https://edam.org.tr/en/crete-model/>.

Mediterranean and gain leverage over Ethiopia in the context of their dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam). That could also include systems and ammunitions, such as the AIM-120 AMRAAM and F-15E fighter, if they do not challenge Israel's qualitative military edge.⁴⁸

- Even if CAATSA is imposed, continue to engage Egyptian military personnel in military exercises with the United States, to demonstrate the superiority of U.S. weapons systems, and military education exchange programs to strengthen the orientation of the Egyptian military leadership to U.S. military educational institutions.

Given the possibility of a U.S. gradual withdrawal from *Iraq*, to prevent Russia (but more importantly Iran) from gaining additional influence over Iraq's military and security institutions, the United States should:

- Maintain an enduring advisory mission to help develop Iraq's Security Forces. A small footprint of troops could help the Iraqi military improve civil-military relations over time, help the Iraqi Security Forces address several chronic weaknesses in logistics, intelligence, and air support, and help them professionalize their police forces and build civilian defense institutions.
- Coordinate with the NATO Mission Iraq and the European Union Assistance Mission regarding cost- and task- sharing.
- Negotiate a formal status of forces agreement to replace the outdated one currently in place.
- Continue maintenance support for Iraq's F-16 program, to restore Iraq's trust in the continuity of U.S. arms sales, supply, and maintenance.

(4) "U.S. ALLIES SEEKING LIMITED ENGAGEMENT WITH RUSSIA" – GCC, ISRAEL (AND JORDAN)

One of the biggest hurdles the United States will have to overcome when calibrating its military posture in the region will not be Russia's activities in the region *per se*, but rather concerns of U.S. allies and partners regarding a perceived U.S. disengagement and lack of sustained focus and interest, despite its preponderance of military power. As an expert from the Gulf opined, "Russia's increased role in the region is a result of U.S. mistakes and pivot. There is an American problem rather than a Russian problem."⁴⁹ While that statement reflects only part of the complex regional reality, it is a perception the United States should address actively and preemptively as it reduces its footprint, so that these states will not turn to Russia to address their security concerns regarding

⁴⁸ Dizboni and El-Baz.

⁴⁹ Interview (not-for-attribution) with an interlocutor from a GCC country. This opinion is shared by several former US officials interviewed for the project. Former CENTCOM Commander General Antony Zinni also remarked during a talk held at the Middle East Institute on February 8-9, 2021, that the level of US interest and commitment has waxed and waned, and that such an inconsistent approach has given openings to other powers. Similarly, Ambassador James Jeffrey, the former U.S. special envoy to Syria and former Ambassador to Turkey, observed to the authors that "the U.S. should not continue to ignore Russia ... [W]e see a real lack of focus on what Russia is doing, which I think is not only wrong, I think it's fatal."

Iran's nuclear program and malign regional activities. For that purpose, the United States should engage with its regional allies through close dialogue on implementing the following steps:

- Shift some of the current presence to a more agile and unpredictable posture of U.S. rotational forces and unpredictable short-term carrier rotations as an opportunity to maintain a high-level of readiness at lower cost while building interoperability with regional forces. Carrier transits of the region in lieu of deployments would be sufficient. This unpredictability could complicate Iran's decision-making. Meanwhile, the Navy could still keep smaller surface combatants in the Gulf to maintain its presence there and provide maritime security.
- Upgrade air and missile defenses of critical infrastructure to address Iran's short and medium range missiles numbers, range, and accuracy, and its weaponized drones. That can be done also through facilitating cooperation on a regional missile defense architecture involving Israel and Gulf Arab states.⁵⁰
- Support the creation of a regional maritime surveillance architecture with allies and partners to monitor threats to sea lines of communication and interdict Iranian arms transfers to its proxies.
- Build deterrence against Iran by responding more consistently to their tests and challenges, and act more unpredictably when responding.
- Employ a coherently-integrated Key Leader Engagement plan to reassure, educate, and involve key national leaders to discuss the efforts of malign and opportunistic actors in the region. The plan should include Washington-based, European, and Combatant Command/Service leadership visits.
- To the extent possible, elevate the ranks of the full-time in-country U.S. military representatives.
- Engage with allies prior to further full or partial withdrawals from the region, given the undesirability of such action from their standpoint.

To further reassure the GCC and Israel, specifically in Syria, the United States should:

- Continue to maintain a small military presence in Eastern Syria, including to maintain the possibility of responding to escalation events in other areas.
- Enter into dialogue with allies (Israel, Jordan, and the Syrian Kurds) on how they can take on missions that have so far been carried out by the United States, and on how they can receive technological-economic-political assistance for their implementation of those missions.

⁵⁰ In December 2020, Israeli missile defense chief Moshe Patel signaled that Israel would be open to working with the UAE and Bahrain on missile defense cooperation. "Israel Signals Openness To Future Joint Missile Defence With Gulf Partners," *Reuters*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/israel-gulf-missiledefence-int/israel-signals-openness-to-future-joint-missile-defence-with-gulf-partners-idUSKBN28P1HN>.