Report

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Russia's Fading Leverage in the Middle East

Amid geopolitical realignment, the region hedges beyond Moscow.

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Key Takeaways

- Russia is no longer a decisive power broker in MENA, but it remains a spoiler and opportunistic enabler, relying on selective access, logistical hubs, arms transfers, sanctions-adaptation mechanisms, and transactional partnerships.
- Regional actors' hedging limits both Russian influence and Western leverage. They seek autonomy through diversification, exploit Russian weakness without abandoning ties, and keep Moscow useful as a counterweight without granting it decisive influence.
- Syria remains the clearest test of whether Russia can still turn residual military access into political relevance. If that foothold erodes further, Moscow's regional posture is likely to shift more decisively toward Libya and other lower-visibility theaters.
- Israel's expanded operational freedom underscores the erosion of Moscow's former role as an airspace gatekeeper in Syria. This change has reduced the deterrent value of Russian presence while increasing the risk of miscalculation, horizontal escalation, and structural instability.
- The 2026 Iran war pushed GCC states toward tighter risk management and made ties with Russia costlier to compartmentalize. Selective functional cooperation may persist, but Moscow is increasingly seen as enabling Tehran, and this narrows its cooperative prospects in the Gulf.

Executive Summary

Alignments in the Middle East and North Africa are wide open. Confronted with a growing set of threats by 2026, regional powers are intensifying hedging and balancing, reinforcing diversified, multivector foreign policies and competitive multipolarity. In this volatile environment, Russia has shifted from the perceived success of its low-cost expeditionary model—most visible after the 2015 Syria intervention—to a more constrained and marginal posture after 2022, as the war in Ukraine absorbed military capacity, political attention, financial resources, and diplomatic bandwidth.

Three shocks reshaped regional risk perceptions and Russia's standing: the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks and the ensuing Gaza war; the fall of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024; and the 2025–2026 US-Israeli airstrikes on Iran. Together, they accelerated regional realignment, narrowed the operating space of several Iran-aligned actors, returned Palestine to the center of regional diplomacy, opened a new competition for influence in post-Assad Syria, and triggered a sharpened sense of vulnerability in the Gulf. For Moscow, the result has been a shift from expansion to damage control, prioritization, and adaptation under strain.

Russia is no longer a decisive power broker in MENA, but it remains a spoiler and an opportunistic enabler. Its leverage now lies increasingly in selective access, logistical hubs, arms transfers, sanctions-adaptation mechanisms, and transactional partnerships. Regional actors continue to hedge. Türkiye combines calibrated opportunism, deconfliction, and leverage over the Straits[1] and post-Assad Syria. Israel maintains operational coordination with Russia in Syria even as Moscow's ties with Iran strain the relationship. Gulf states preserve selective functional ties, especially in energy, while viewing Russia as a costlier partner after the Iran war. And Egypt, Algeria, Libya, and the UAE reflect a broader pattern of diversification without alignment.

Syria remains the clearest barometer of Russia's regional position. The fall of Assad removed Russia's most important regional anchor and turned Syria from a launchpad for power projection into a test of whether

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Moscow can still translate residual military access into political relevance. As Russia's Syria platform thins, Libya and the Sahel are emerging as the main arenas of Russian adaptation. Moscow is losing the ability to set outcomes, yet it retains enough access, networks, and pressure points to shape outcomes at the margins and raise the price of Western actions in a more competitive and volatile Middle Eastern order.

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Introduction

Geopolitical shocks over the past few years, culminating in the 2026 US-Israeli military operation against Iran, left alignments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) wide open. Confronted with a growing set of threats, regional powers are intensifying hedging and balancing as a pragmatic response to uncertainty. In doing so they reinforce diversified, multi-vector foreign policies and competitive multipolarity.[2]

In this volatile environment, Russia's role is dynamic, too. The aftermath of Hamas' attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Gaza war reshaped regional threat perceptions and narrowed the operating space of several Iran-aligned actors. Key regional powers are recalibrating their approach to Moscow in a high-risk environment in which confidence in US security commitments has become more conditional.[3]

Based on information gathered between March and May 2026 from available open-source intelligence, expert interviews, and a stakeholder discussion, this analysis will seek to explore how the shocks of the past few years have changed Russia's standing with key regional players such as Türkiye, Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Egypt. It will also consider how regional powers hedge against, or with, Russian influence in the region and how these dynamics interact with Russia's posture in Syria and the broader Middle East.

Russia's Positioning: From Successful Patron to Marginalization

Russia's Middle East posture over the last decade has aimed to secure Mediterranean naval access, influence energy markets, undermine NATO/EU influence, leverage instability for diplomatic standing and—since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022—break Western-imposed isolation.[4] Its main leverage came from Russian basing in Syria, its second foothold in Libya and the Sahel, energy diplomacy via OPEC+, arms sales, diplomacy-with-everyone, and its sanctions-evasion channels.[5] Beyond strategic and diplomatic aims, Moscow also pursued more pragmatic material interests such as preserving arms markets, securing energy and nuclear contracts, extracting rents through state-linked mercenary and security networks, and leveraging conflict environments for access to ports, logistics, commodities, and sanctions-evasion channels.[6]

Over this period, Russia's positioning in the region has shifted from the perceived success of its low-cost expeditionary model—most visibly after Russia's 2015 Syria intervention—to a more constrained and marginal posture after 2022, as the war in Ukraine absorbed military capacity, political attention, financial resources, and diplomatic bandwidth. Russia's limits became more pronounced where Moscow struggled to translate military presence (army or private military companies) into durable political outcomes or economic benefit, notably in Libya and parts of the Sahel. In Syria, Russia's ability to shape outcomes weakened in parallel with Israel's degradation of Iran's Syrian proxy networks, culminating in Moscow's failure to prevent the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024—a setback that further reduced Russia's leverage with several regional actors. From Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria onward, Damascus had been Moscow's primary military anchor in the region. The Tartus naval base, the Hmeimim airfield, and integrated air-defense networks in these two bases enabled Russia to project power into the Eastern Mediterranean, sustain naval deployments outside the Straits, and retain leverage over regional diplomacy.[7]

Since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow's MENA posture shifted from large-scale force projection toward leaner, calibrated engagement: limited troop deployments, strategically placed bases, increased use of paramilitary forces and contractors, attempts at political mediation, and opportunistic moves where Western presence declined—all maximizing leverage with minimal resources.

In the wake of the 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, which triggered the Gaza war and broader regional escalation, Russia's posture has been shaped less by expansion than by damage control, prioritization, and adaptation under strain. The regional escalation hit as Russia's military, naval, diplomatic, and financial bandwidth was already heavily absorbed by the war against Ukraine, accelerating recalibration rather than enabling a new assertive push.[8]

The late 2024 collapse of the Assad regime, a close Kremlin ally, and with it the loss of Russia's main regional anchor, was a substantial blow to Russia's posture. Although Moscow was able to retain access to key military facilities and remained an economic partner to the new government in Damascus, the drawdown of its forces and the reallocation of assets to the Black Sea and Libya reduced its ability to exercise air power from Syria or deter regional actors. Russia's naval posture in the Eastern Mediterranean also contracted compared to its pre-2022 ambitions, with access constraints linked to the Black Sea battle space dynamics and Türkiye's enforcement of the Montreux Convention (closing the Straits to belligerent warships). As its Syria platform thinned, Russia increasingly used Libya as a compensatory hub and secondary Mediterranean anchor.[9]

Strategically, Russia's behavior since October 7 has emphasized risk avoidance and diplomatic hedging. Moscow eschewed direct entanglement in the Israel–Hamas war and subsequent confrontations, presenting itself rhetorically as a stabilizing actor while preserving working relationships with all involved. But it has adopted a more critical tone toward Israel in defense of a two-state solution for Palestine.[10] Russia also sought—mostly unsuccessfully—to position itself as a mediator in Syrian dynamics and broader regional disputes. This balancing reflects limited leverage: Russia lacks the hard-power means to act as a decisive broker and relies instead on deconfliction and political signaling.[11]

Economically and institutionally, Russia continues to pursue selective gains in the region—arms sales, energy partnerships, sanctionsadaptation mechanisms, and security cooperation—without major resource commitments. Overall, in the years before the 2026 Iran war, Russia's MENA strategy shifted from power projection to strategic preservation, prioritizing access, logistics, and reputational relevance while accepting a reduced regional role driven by overstretch and competing global demands.

Three Geopolitical Shocks that Shaped the Middle East

After Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 altered Russia's outlook and presence in the Middle East, three geopolitical earthquakes reshaped regional risk perceptions and hedging: the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks and the ensuing Gaza war; the fall of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024; and the 2025-2026 US-Israeli airstrikes on Iran.

The October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel and the subsequent Israeli campaign in Gaza led to a broader escalation of conflict across the region and operationally linked multiple theaters (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen-Red Sea).[12] It also effectively halted normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel and returned the Palestine file to the center of regional diplomacy.[13]

Israel's post-October 7 regional posture has been actively revisionist, with a high level of willingness to use force across theaters.[14] In the Levant, Israel's sustained campaign increased pressure on Iran-aligned networks such as Hezbollah and other Iranian affiliates, degraded their capacities, and constrained their freedom of action, shifting the security balance away from Iran and the so-called "axis of resistance"[15] in Israel's favor. Rather than settling the regional order, the net effect has been to raise uncertainty and intensify competitive adaptation as actors adjust tactics, dispersion, and escalation thresholds across multiple fronts.[16]

The highly asymmetrical Gaza war also widened the West-vs-"Global South" political gap, shaping regional leaders' rhetoric and diplomatic alignment behavior.[17] As spillovers disrupted trade and energy flows, both regional and global powers' priorities increasingly included connectivity and freedom of navigation to secure critical shipping routes, ports, and chokepoints.[18]

For Moscow, the post-October 7 environment reinforced a military preference for risk-managed presence over assertive maneuver. With Israeli freedom of action expanding, Iran-aligned networks degraded, and US and regional force postures in flux, Russia had stronger incentives to preserve deconfliction channels, protect residual basing access, and avoid commitments it no longer had the capacity to underwrite.[19]

The Fall of the Assad Regime in December 2024 opened a new competition for influence in the Levant and turned post-Assad Syria into a major arena of contestation, notably for Türkiye and Israel. For Russian military thinking, Assad's fall mattered not only because it removed an ally, but because it degraded Syria's value as an integrated platform for Mediterranean access, Levantine airspace management, and logistical support to Russian activity stretching into Libya and the Sahel.[20] Following Assad's removal, external powers such as Israel and Türkiye increasingly set the limits of maneuver for the new authorities in Damascus, risking the destabilization of the transition.[21] Assad's fall also further cemented Iran's regional decline by removing a key state partner and disrupting Iran's Syria-based logistics for Hezbollah, forcing Tehran and Hezbollah to adapt to costlier, riskier supply routes and reducing Syria's permissiveness as an operational hub.[22]

Türkiye's interest in containing Kurdish political and security pressures and easing the strain of hosting Syrian refugees has resulted in an expanded role for Ankara in Syria.[23] Türkiye sees maintaining leverage in Syria—especially through a leading role in reconstruction—as essential to preserving its influence and achieving its goal of becoming a regional hub for trade routes, transport links, and energy corridors.[24] For Israel, Assad's fall and the ensuing vacuum shifted priorities toward managing uncertainty on its Syrian border and using the post-Assad moment to expand military action and positions in Syria.[25] The Gulf states expanded their presence in Syria from selective re-engagement to using reconstruction finance and port and logistics investments as influence tools.[26]

The June 2025 12-day war and subsequent March 2026 US-Israeli airstrikes on Iran—ongoing at the time of writing—formed a threshold moment in the Middle East security balance. Tehran's economic and kinetic retaliation across the Gulf left the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in a state of shock. Beyond immediate damage, the strikes punctured the Gulf's carefully cultivated image of predictable stability underpinning its diversification model and connectivity proposition.[27] The security alliance with Washington is increasingly discussed in the Gulf as both an asset and a liability, enhancing protection as well as creating new vulnerabilities.[28] Although it is too early for any conclusive net assessments of these events, evidence suggests that they have triggered a sharpened sense of vulnerability and a systemic geoeconomic jolt to Gulf risk perceptions and foreign policy calibrations.[29]

For Russia, the Iran war generated short-term upside—higher oil revenues from the Hormuz disruption and the diversion of US bandwidth away from Ukraine—yet the strategic balance sheet is likely to be mixed.[30] Moscow's alleged wartime support to Tehran[31] risks further degrading its standing with Gulf capitals through the perception that Russia is willing to disregard their interests in Iran's favor. This reduces the value Gulf states attach to cooperation with Russia and highlights the limited benefits of their restraint on Ukraine. Accordingly, Arab Gulf states could be expected to approach Russia with greater wariness, limiting Russia's cooperative prospects in the region even as compartmentalized cooperation such as energy cooperation in OPEC+ persists.

A further tentative shift is related to perceptions: Due to the defense connections between the two theaters, Iranian strikes are pushing Gulf actors to see their own security as linked to the Ukraine war, rather than as a distant Russia-West contest. From the Kremlin's perspective, the war's effect of distracting Washington and aggravating fissures among NATO allies may outweigh the costs of friction with Gulf partners; yet this also creates openings for Ukraine to cultivate security and investment ties in the Gulf through an increasingly explicit linkage of theatres.[32] Russia's Iran partnership deepened through intelligence and material linkages, while Ukraine leveraged air-defense and counter-drone experience to build cooperation with GCC states. Iranian Shahed drones, now manufactured and upgraded in Russia, reportedly made their way back to Tehran. Conversely, Zelensky travelled to the region to sign security cooperation agreements with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar to supply the Gulf states with air defense interceptor drones and expertise in exchange for investment in the Ukrainian drone industry.[33]

Analysts disagree on whether Russia will ultimately be a net winner from the Iran war. While higher revenues and a potential relaxation of international sanctions amount to an economic and geopolitical upgrade, the war also undercuts Moscow's great-power brand by highlighting its limited ability to protect partners, contributes to Russia's marginalization in mediation formats led by others (GCC states, Pakistan, and Türkiye), and entrenches the Ukraine war by relieving fiscal pressure rather than incentivizing de-escalation.[34] Ultimately, Moscow's net gain will also depend on the war's duration and US domestic politics, especially if it enables electoral gains for US political forces that could limit Russia's power projection in the future.[35]

Regional Powers' Evolving Attitudes Toward Russia

Regional powers' attitudes toward Russia must be viewed against the competitive multipolarity that emerged after the 2011 Arab uprisings and entrenched hedging and multi-vector foreign policies as a default rationale for regional actors' partnerships.[36]

Despite nominally opposing Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, none of the (Arab) Middle Eastern countries joined Western sanctions. Many instead used Russian-Western differences over Ukraine to benefit economically, helping Russia evade sanctions and redirecting trade away from the West.[37] At the same time, a common denominator has been the careful balancing approach many of these states have adopted in relation to Russia.

Türkiye

Türkiye is a central hedging actor whose bargaining power is amplified by its role as one of NATO's key southern anchors, hosting US tactical nuclear weapons and controlling key maritime chokepoints. In the emerging strategic environment, Ankara seeks to prevent both Israeli and Iranian dominance and avoid state fragmentation while managing diverse relationships with regional powers. Ankara's approach of calibrated opportunism makes Türkiye one of the few regional actors capable of simultaneously constraining and accommodating Russia while retaining strategic flexibility.

Russia–Türkiye relations are marked by sustained energy interdependence and high-level bargaining alongside managed geopolitical rivalry in several theaters. Russia also remains a backstop and bargaining chip for Ankara when its Western and NATO ties are under strain.[38] Despite opposing Moscow in Syria and Libya, Ankara avoids direct military confrontation through deconfliction and pragmatic dialogue. It has used selectively enforced airspace restrictions on Russian military flights to Syria—officially framed as sanctions compliance—to signal leverage without burning bridges. Likewise, Ankara's enforcement of the Montreux Convention constrains Russian naval mobility while staying within international law, limiting Moscow without overt alignment against it.[39] For Moscow, Ankara's leverage is not only diplomatic but operational: Turkish control over the Straits, selective restrictions on military transit, and its growing weight in post-Assad Syria mean that Russia's residual

Levantine posture now depends more heavily on managing competition with Türkiye than at any time since 2015.[40]

On Ukraine, Ankara has pursued a balancing posture, implementing Western sanctions only selectively while maintaining economic engagement. It has used its access to both sides to play an intermediary role (including brokering the Black Sea Grain Initiative and pursuing additional Black Sea maritime arrangements), even as competition with Russia persists in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus.[41] Defense ties remain politically consequential but structurally constrained: Türkiye's acquisition and continued possession of the Russian S-400 system has fueled persistent friction with the United States and NATO and continues to complicate Türkiye' attempts to revisit the Pentagon's F-35 program. At the same time, Ankara has signaled interest in additional S-400 purchases even amid sanctions threats.[42]

Energy cooperation between Russia and Türkiye is anchored in Rosatom's Akkuyu nuclear plant in Türkiye, which is expected to provide around 10% of Turkish electricity, and in the TurkStream gas pipeline, which has reinforced Türkiye's role as a key transit route and prospective hub for Russian gas as Moscow sought alternatives to lost European gas pipeline revenues.[43] Trade and financial links between Ankara and Moscow expanded after 2022 but have faced growing exposure to sanctions and policy pressure, with Turkish actors also seeking diversification away from long-term dependence on Russian energy. Even so, Russia remains deeply embedded in Türkiye's energy and payments landscape.[44]

Israel

Since 2022, the relationship between Moscow and Tel Aviv has been strained by Israel's partial alignment with Western positions on Ukraine and by the consequences of Russia's deepening ties with Iran. Israel initially avoided providing lethal aid to Ukraine and did not fully implement Western sanctions, yet frictions grew as Russia expanded military cooperation with Iran, including transfers of and cooperation on drones—an issue Israeli officials have criticized as a direct security concern.[45]

In Syria, the two sides have maintained a deconfliction mechanism to avoid direct clashes, enabling Israel to conduct hundreds of strikes against Iranian-linked targets with Russian awareness amid Russia's military presence since 2015 and the resulting need for sustained military-to-military communications.[46] Since October 7, 2023, Israel's regional actions have focused on Iran and its proxies, with Syria treated as a permissive battlespace rather than as a sovereign adversary. Since then, Israel has continued extensive air operations over Syria, including intercepting Iranian missiles and striking Iranian-linked assets. The absence or degradation of Russian A2/AD systems—especially after the withdrawal of S400s from Syria—has expanded Israeli freedom of action.[47] For Russia, this is more than a bilateral irritation: Israel's expanding room for action in Syria underscores the erosion of Moscow's former role as an airspace gatekeeper and weakens the deterrent value that once made Russian presence politically useful to multiple regional actors.[48]

In the immediate aftermath of Assad's fall, Israel moved to destroy much of the Syrian Arab Army's remaining heavy weapons and air-defense infrastructure while expanding its territorial hold in southern Syria. Israel has pragmatically avoided direct confrontation with Russia in Syria even as Moscow's influence there waned, and views Russia less as a strategic threat than as a declining but still relevant gatekeeper. Russian support for the Iranian war effort in the 2026 war is likely to cause the relationship to deteriorate further. Overall, ties are likely to remain tense but bounded by the continued mutual need for operational coordination in Syria.[49]

Iran

Russia-Iran ties have deepened over the past decade[50], accelerating after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and culminating in an Iranian-Russian Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2025.[51] Iran–Russia defense-industrial cooperation increased as Iran supplied large numbers of its Shahed drones to Russia as a key asset on the Ukrainian battlefield, and helped Russia localize production on its soil. These actions illustrated how Tehran's sanctions-era comparative advantage—cost-effective UAVs and permissive logistics—translated into wartime leverage with Moscow.[52] The two sides also routinely cooperated in evading Western sanctions and doubled their bilateral trade since 2022.[53] The partnership with Iran also fed back into Russian military adaptation: Beyond immediate battlefield utility in Ukraine, it strengthened Moscow's interest in low-cost strike systems, sanctions-resilient defense cooperation, and deniable or indirect forms of regional military support that fit a resource-constrained posture.[54]

At the same time, Russia's weakened posture in the Middle East deprived Iran of a major diplomatic and military shield, forcing Tehran to absorb higher risks or reduce visibility.[55] While Tehran remained embedded in Syria and Lebanon through its extensive proxy networks, its position has become more exposed over the past few years amid Russia's drawdown and Israel's sustained air campaign. Iran's hedging strategy through mid-2025 remained largely asymmetric and proxybased, avoiding direct escalation with Israel while maintaining pressure through regional partners. In the run-up to the 2026 US and Israeli war on Iran, Tehran faced increasing Israeli interdiction and diminishing Russian protection in Syria. This constraint also sharpened Israel–Russia tensions because Russia's military cooperation with Iran became a growing Israeli security concern.[56] Reports of Israeli interception of Iranian missiles over Syria have highlighted Tehran's reduced operational freedom.[57] During the 2026 US-Israeli air campaign, US officials confirmed that Moscow provided support to Tehran (including satellite-enabled targeting and Russian-upgraded versions of the Iranian-origin Shahed drone).[58] The threat environment was further sharpened by reported Russian-supplied Verba MANPADS, with US reporting indicating that at least one American jet was downed in recent weeks by a shoulder-fired heat-seeking missile.[59] Tehran, in turn, deployed its geography as a core geopolitical asset by closing the Strait of Hormuz and hijacking global commodity markets, economically benefitting Russia. Looking ahead, Russia-Iran ties are likely to deepen further in defense-industrial and sanctions-circumvention terms, but remain fundamentally asymmetric and transactional.

Saudi Arabia

Russia–Saudi Arabia relations have been primarily a functional, energy-centered partnership in which coordination through OPEC+ (co-led by Riyadh and Moscow) has enabled both sides to manage global oil supply and support prices via repeated, large-scale production cuts since 2022.[60] Regular personal contacts between Putin and Mohammed bin Salman underscore this market-management alignment even amid broader geopolitical differences.[61] Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, Saudi Arabia has pursued a balancing posture, avoiding Western sanctions while also positioning itself as a diplomatic interlocutor (such as in mediation linked to Russia–Ukraine prisoner exchanges).[62] Riyadh's post-2022 oil policy illustrates its pragmatic balancing approach as it did not comply with the US request to increase oil production for price stabilization but instead reduced production in coordination with its OPEC+ partner Russia. Outside energy, trade and investment discussions remain secondary, and security cooperation with Russia is constrained by Saudi Arabia's deep, long-standing reliance on US defense cooperation and systems.[63] Intermittent Saudi interest in Russian S-400s has so far functioned less as a serious attempt to reorient the kingdom's defense architecture than a hedging instrument for signaling strategic autonomy to Washington.[64]

United Arab Emirates

Russia–UAE ties have expanded markedly since 2022 into a largely transactional partnership in which the UAE functions as a commercial, financial, and logistical interface for Russia amid Western sanctions. For Moscow, ties with Gulf states no longer compensate for the loss of hard-power leverage in Syria, but they remain important to a different model of regional presence centered on oil coordination, sanctions adaptation, investment access, and the political insulation that comes from being treated as a partner rather than a pariah.[65]

Bilateral trade between Russia and the UAE has increased sharply, and the latter has become a hub for Russian capital and business activity (including gold flows), as well as a destination for Russian expatriates and firms relocating from Europe and North America.[66] This role has also drawn sustained Western scrutiny over sanctions evasion and associated financial flows, as the UAE increasingly served as a hub for goods no longer sold directly to Russia.[67]

Politically, Abu Dhabi has pursued a balancing strategy—abstaining on key UN votes on Ukraine while keeping channels open to both Moscow and Western partners and, at times, acting as an intermediary (including facilitating a major Russia–Ukraine POW exchange).[68] Energy coordination is a central pillar via OPEC+, where Russia and the UAE have aligned on market-management measures such as production cuts since 2022.[69] Security ties are largely limited to defense-sector engagement, while the UAE remains structurally closer to Western defense partners, particularly the United States.[70] During the 2026 war on Iran, the UAE was the Gulf country hit hardest by Iranian missile targets, and Russia's support to Iranian satellite-targeting is likely to strain Russian-Emirati ties moving forward.[71]

Qatar

Russia–Qatar relations are based on a pragmatic, energy-centered partnership combining coordination with structural competition in global gas markets. As leading gas exporters, both engage through mechanisms such as the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) to sustain dialogue on market stability, although Qatar's LNG dominance and Russia's (historically) major pipeline-gas role place them in overlapping but distinct segments of the global gas trade.[72] Post-2022, LNG has assumed greater relative importance in Russia's gas export model as pipeline sales to Europe have collapsed, marginally increasing its overlap—and competition—with Qatar in global gas markets. Beyond energy, bilateral economic ties remain modest relative to Qatar's Western and Asian partnerships.[73] Like its fellow GCC members, Doha has pursued a balancing approach since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, maintaining engagement with Moscow while preserving close alignment with the United States. This suggests that the relationship is likely to remain stable but limited rather than develop into deeper strategic alignment.

Egypt

Egypt's US security umbrella means that its posture toward Russia is marked by institutional hedging and diplomatic balancing. Cairo maintains close militarytomilitary ties with Russia—including port visits and arms cooperation—despite remaining firmly embedded in US security frameworks. Egypt's guardianship over the Suez Canal gives it leverage with both Moscow and Western partners, and it has not restricted transit for either. Russia–Egypt ties are embedded in a strategic partnership centered on nuclear energy, oil, and grain cooperation.[74] Evidence suggests that Egypt facilitated Russian sanctions evasion in the oil trade.[75] Russia is also a major, long-standing arms supplier to Egypt, providing capabilities spanning earth-observation satellites (supporting intelligence, surveillance, and monitoring), multiple surface-to-air missile systems, combat helicopters, MiG-29M fighter-ground-attack aircraft, assorted munitions, and ground vehicles.[76] The flagship civilian project is Rosatom's $30 billion contract to build the El-Dabaa Nuclear Power Plant, which is expected to supply about 10% of Egypt's electricity.[77]

On food security, Egypt—the world's largest wheat importer—imported over 8,000,000 tons of Russian grain in 2025, but also announced that it would no longer accept wheat exported by Russia from occupied regions of Ukraine.[78] While Alexandria has served as a recurring Russian Navy port call and staging point for joint naval exercises, these calls have been reported as diplomatic signaling and military-to-military engagement rather than as operationally essential.[79] From a Russian military perspective, Egypt matters less as a prospective ally than as a permissive node. Arms sales, naval visits, and strategic infrastructure ties help Moscow preserve visibility and episodic access along the Eastern Mediterranean–Red Sea corridor without requiring the kind of formal basing arrangement it once enjoyed in Syria.[80]

Libya

Moscow's main assets in Libya—Russian support for Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), the use of air bases and logistics hubs in Eastern Libya, and the deployment of Russian contractors and military equipment—provide it with access to the Mediterranean and influence over migration routes to Europe. The regions of Eastern Libya, particularly Tobruk and Benghazi, have grown in importance as a logistical gateway to Africa and a partial substitute for Russia's foothold in Syria. The deployment of air-defense systems and the expansion of the Afrika Corps underscore Moscow's intent to preserve influence southward even as Levantine options narrow. However, this presence remains politically fragile and dependent on local power balances and lacks the infrastructure needed for sustained high-end military operations.[81]

For Russian military planners, Libya is not a substitute for Syria in terms of prestige or operational depth, but it is increasingly a compensatory hub—a politically looser platform for airlift, stockage, contractor deployment, and southward projection into the Sahel at lower visibility and lower formal commitment.

From Haftar's perspective, the relationship is transactional and unstable.[82] The LNA leverages Russian military support, air defenses, and logistics to consolidate internal power while avoiding formal basing commitments that could provoke Western backlash. Russia's Eastern Libyan partners thus accept Russian systems and personnel without granting sovereign basing rights, maintaining flexibility amid dual power structures. Haftar uses Russian presence as leverage against rivals but does not fully align with Moscow's strategic goals. Notably, Libya is also another theater where Russia finds itself on opposite sides with Türkiye, which supports the competing Libyan government in Tripoli.

Algeria

Algeria has been one of Russia's most reliable regional partners, yet it still hedges carefully.[83] It avoids hosting permanent Russian bases or potentially enabling Russian naval operations, but uses its relationship with Moscow to diversify security partnerships, assert autonomy from Western pressure, and maintain diplomatic flexibility.[84] Russia–Algeria relations rest on a long-standing strategic partnership anchored in defense, with Russia supplying an estimated 70%–80% of Algeria's military equipment since the 2000s and delivering advanced systems including Su-30 fighters, S-300 air defense systems, and T-90 tanks.[85] Algeria has recently considered the United States as an alternative arms supplier, but available reporting suggests this has not (yet) amounted to a decisive shift away from Russian defense-industrial ties.[86] Politically, the relationship is reinforced by high-level engagement, Algeria's participation in joint military activities, and Algiers' 2023 Moscow-backed BRICS application.[87] Algeria has avoided condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, abstaining on key UN votes in line with a strategic non-alignment posture. It maintains bilateral cooperation with Russia.[88]

Energy ties add both coordination and competition: Algeria's role as a major gas supplier to Europe has benefited in part from reduced Russian flows after 2022, including increased exports to partners such as Italy.

Yet Algeria continues its engagement with Russia through mechanisms such as the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF).[89] Militarily, joint naval activity (including reported Mediterranean drills in November 2022) and recurring port calls—such as a the recent visit by a submarine carrying nuclear-capable Kalibr cruise missiles and a small bilateral naval exercise in December 2023—serve as visible signals of sustained military-to-military alignment. These activities are complemented by the 2023 declaration on an upgraded strategic partnership, which explicitly includes transportation and logistical support.[90] For Moscow, Algeria's value lies less in its ability to offer a replacement base than in the preservation of a politically friendly western Mediterranean interface for port calls, naval signaling, and defense-industrial continuity at a time when Russian access elsewhere has become less certain.[91]

Syria: Russia's Barometer in the Levant

Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syria has re-emerged as a high-stakes arena for competition among regional and extra-regional actors—many simultaneously testing access, avoiding over-commitment, and keeping alternative partners in play. For Russia, the priority is retaining a strategically valuable foothold. For neighbors and Gulf states, it is shaping the new order without inheriting Syria's security and reconstruction liabilities.[92] In military terms, Syria has shifted for Russia from a launchpad for regional power projection to a test of whether Moscow can preserve useful access under conditions of diminished resources, contested legitimacy, and growing dependence on local and regional bargaining.

Militarily, Russia has shifted from an anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) anchor toward a thinner posture centered on preserving Hmeimim as a transit and logistics hub even if it cannot sustain a robust naval base at Tartus.[93] Before December 2024, Syria also served as a venue to trial weapons systems, sharpen expeditionary logistics, and signal military modernization. This increased Russian leverage by making Moscow a necessary interlocutor for actors including Türkiye, Israel, Iran, and the United States.[94] After Assad's removal, Russia pulled equipment and personnel from dispersed positions while seeking to preserve parts of its basing architecture around Hmeimim and the Tartus area. The suspension of long-term contracts with the Syrian government for Tartus and Hmeimin suggests that the Syrian government intends to renegotiate them. Based on satellite imagery, media reported that Russia was withdrawing equipment from Hmeimim in an early drawdown and repositioning.[95] Other reporting cited MAXAR imagery to show that Russia was removing S-400 units from the airfield.[96] Because air assets at Hmeimim are difficult to assess given the extensive hangar infrastructure developed in 2018–2019, full confirmation is not possible. However, available current and historic imagery suggests a drawdown of Russian aerospace forces since 2024. A confirmed removal of the long-range tier would degrade Russia's ability to sustain a high-end A2/AD posture in the Levant.[97]

Tartus also saw a steep reduction. Imagery from November 2025 shows no Russian assets at Tartus and only occasional resupply use (including at least nine An-124 sorties and four ground convoys).[98] Another report states that most or all Russian ships were removed and vehicle concentrations later dispersed.[99] The downgrade of Tartus is in practice less consequential to Russia for now given that Russian military cargo and naval vessels are currently denied passage of the Straits. Tartus primarily served as a support hub to these ships. A potential closure of Hmeimim as the current air transit hub to transport cargo and soldiers to Africa, by contrast, could be more consequential for Russia's interests.

Türkiye has tried to convert its long-standing military footprint and relationships with Syrian armed coalitions into leverage over emerging power brokers in post-Assad Syria. It also hedges through talks with Damascus and pressure on Kurdish formations. Since October 7, 2023, Türkiye has been rhetorically critical of Israel but operationally restrained, showing no clear intent to escalate militarily or fundamentally revise its coordination arrangements in Syria. Reporting in 2025 indicated that Ankara intended to maintain a military presence and deepen defense coordination with the new authorities, including by providing potential advisers and cooperating on training.[100] EU agencies' Syria security reporting also documents the evolving map of control in early 2025, including changes around Afrin and Syrian National Army-held zones.[101] Türkiye's dual track is to retain leverage on the ground while seeking a framework that prevents durable Kurdish autonomy and reduces the risk of direct confrontation with other external actors.

Israel's post-Assad posture has focused on shaping its southern border theater while avoiding ownership of Syria's governance or reconstruction. It has combined intensive air operations with an expanded ground security buffer aimed at denying hostile capabilities near the Golan Heights and preventing strategic weapons leakage. Reporting by Armed Conflict Location and Data (ACLED), summarized in Al Jazeera, counted 600+ Israeli attacks in the year after Dec 8, 2024, averaging nearly two per day.[102] Separately, Israel reportedly captured roughly 350 km^2 in the expanded buffer and established at least nine bases inside newly occupied territory.[103]

For Russia, signs of US retrenchment in Syria affect not so much the symbolic balance with Washington as the operational environment in eastern Syria. A thinner US footprint there could open space for regime reentry and Russian influence while increasing local instability. Public reporting estimated US force levels at around 900 troops in Syria in late 2025.[104] Following Syrian forces' seizure of a key northeast region taken from Kurdish forces, media outlets in early 2026 reported US withdrawals from key positions, including the handover of alTanf.[105]

Seen from Moscow, the resulting landscape favors neither restoration nor withdrawal, but selective entrenchment. This would involve retaining air and logistics nodes, probing opportunities in the northeast and on the coast, and relying on mediation, military police, and deconfliction rather than large-force presence.[106]

Gulf engagement (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE) has focused on stabilization, humanitarian relief, and selective reconstruction finance—often framed as a way to curb Iranian resurgence and shape the new order without underwriting an open-ended state-building project. Analyses highlight diverging Gulf approaches and competition over Syria's political trajectory. The hedge is financial and diplomatic: Offers of support are typically incremental, conditioned, and coordinated with (or constrained by) Western sanctions policy.

The Syrian government under Ahmed Al-Sharaa is pursuing a defensive hedging strategy under constraint. The strategy aims at regime consolidation and external diversification (preserving limited Russian ties for leverage and security guarantees, cautiously distancing itself from Iran, tolerating Israeli freedom of action, and signaling openness to broader regional reintegration). It has little incentive to sever ties with Moscow and instead uses Russian basing access—especially the continued operation of Hmeimim—as leverage in negotiations. At the same time, it is improving relations with other regional actors to widen its options amid uncertainty. In practice, Damascus appears to be treating Tartus and Hmeimim less as fixed commitments than as bargaining chips. It has reportedly suspended long-term arrangements and cancelled or renegotiated major Russian economic and port contracts. It is exploring alternative port upgrades with non-Russian partners, signaling a recalibration without inviting direct Russian retaliation.[107] At the same time, the government's room for maneuver remains constrained by limited air-defense capacity and a focus on internal consolidation over regional activism.

Strategic Implications and Outlook

Over the next three to five years, the key question for Russia will be where it can still preserve, reconfigure, or weaponize residual leverage amid a more competitive and volatile Middle Eastern order. Some key observations on the shifting regional balance of power in MENA, and implications for Russian interests, follow from the above.

- **Russia is no longer a decisive power broker in MENA, but it remains a spoiler and an opportunistic enabler.** Over the next three to five years, this points less to a renewal of Russian dominance and more to a more selective strategy of obstruction, brokerage, and disruption wherever Western attention is thin and local actors remain willing to transact. The partial erosion of Russia's military posture in Syria and the Mediterranean has reduced Moscow's capacity for power projection, coercive diplomacy, and A2/AD leverage. However, Russia retains enough presence—logistical hubs, arms transfers, PMCs, and selective partnerships (notably in Libya and Algeria)—to complicate Western objectives.
- **Regional actors' hedging behavior limits both Russian influence and Western leverage.** To varying degrees, examples from the Gulf, the Levant and North Africa illustrate a broader pattern: Regional powers seek autonomy through diversification, not alignment. They exploit Russian weakness without abandoning ties, using Moscow as a counterweight to Western pressure while avoiding irreversible commitments. Conversely, they utilize the Russia-Western fallout over Ukraine to benefit economically. Over the medium term, this hedging logic is likely to persist even if Russia weakens further, because the main driver is not confidence in Moscow but regional states' desire to avoid overdependence on any single external patron.
- **Syria will remain the clearest test case of whether Russia is still able to translate residual military access into political relevance.** Syria's transformation reduces Russian leverage but increases regional volatility. The fall of the Assad regime removed Russia's most important regional anchor and turned Syria into a more openly competitive arena. Moscow has retained access to key facilities for now, but its drawdown has reduced its ability to shape airspace and deter regional actors at a time when Israel, Iran, Türkiye, and Gulf states maneuver with fewer constraints and higher uncertainty. This raises risks of renewed instability, migration pressure, and escalation spillovers, even as Russia's absolute influence declines. If Moscow retains Hmeimim as a viable air and logistics hub, it could preserve limited leverage in the Levant and sustain its role as a connecting hub toward Libya and the Sahel. If, by contrast, Russian access in Syria is reduced further or becomes politically untenable, Russia's regional posture could conceivably shift even more decisively toward Libya and other lower-visibility theaters.
- **Israel's expanded military freedom and revisionist ambitions create both risk and opportunity for regional and external actors.** In the Levant, degraded Russian air-defense coverage and sustained deconfliction have widened Israel's operational room to constrain Iranian-linked capabilities. But the same reduction in external guardrails increases the risk of miscalculation and horizontal escalation, particularly if Iran compensates through asymmetric means. Although it is too early to assess the full consequences of the 2026 Iran war, available evidence points to a broad recalibration of the GCC's threat perception and risk calculus. This has reinforced many regional actors' perception of Israel, widespread since 2023, as an aggressive security hegemon that must be contained alongside Iran.[108] Over the coming three to five years, a central risk is that Israel's expanded operational freedom may outlast the

current conflict and harden into a less constrained regional security posture. De-escalatory international diplomacy with Tel Aviv will be necessary to prevent Israel's tactical gains from translating into structural instability for the region.

- **The 2026 Iran war pushed GCC states toward tighter risk management and made their relations with Russia costlier to compartmentalize.** The strikes on Iran and retaliation across the Gulf exposed the downside of regional modernization and connectivity models built on the assumption of predictable stability and reinforced the view among regional stakeholders that reliance on US security guarantees can simultaneously deter threats and attract them.[109] For Russia, this created short-term economic upside but increased reputational and political costs. Moscow is seen as enabling Tehran, making Gulf engagement with Russia more conditional even if energy coordination persists. Over the coming years, Gulf states will heavily prioritize Gulf stability to reassure residents and investors. They are therefore likely to maintain selective functional ties with Russia while narrowing the room for compartmentalization of Moscow's enabling of Iranian aggression.
- **Libya and the Sahel are emerging as the main arenas of Russian adaptation.** As Russia's Syria platform thins, its reliance on Libya as a logistics and access node points to a shift toward lower-cost, politically ambiguous influence in North Africa and the Sahel. This shift intersects directly with migration, maritime security, and instability on the EU's southern flank. Ignoring these secondary theaters would allow Russia disproportionate leverage at low cost. In the medium term, these theaters are likely to become the main test of whether a weakened Russia can still generate outsized influence through low-cost security insertion and logistical entrenchment.

Overall, in the near term, Russia is unlikely to recover its former role as a central power broker in the Middle East, but it will remain capable of shaping outcomes at the margins through selective access, coercive instruments, and transactional partnerships. The key variable will not be whether Moscow can rebuild regional primacy, but whether it can preserve enough footholds—in Syria, Libya, and permissive financial and logistical nodes—to remain relevant as a spoiler and opportunistic enabler. Moscow is losing the ability to set outcomes, yet it retains the access, networks, and pressure points necessary to raise the price of Western policy and trade disruption for relevance. Syria is the clearest barometer of this shift as it has developed from anchor of Russian power projection to a contested arena in which Russia can at best preserve a foothold and at worst watch others consolidate. If Russian access in Syria contracts further, Moscow will likely pivot more heavily toward Libya, the Sahel, and other lower-visibility arenas. If regional fragmentation deepens and Western attention remains uneven, Russia's posture, though diminished, may still yield disproportionate influence. Containing Russian influence in MENA will therefore depend less on direct confrontation than on systematically closing the permissive pathways through which a weaker but still adaptive Russia can translate disorder into leverage.

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