

# The American- Russian Strategic Competition in the Arab Middle East

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## The Historical Context

The presence of global powers in the Arab Middle East region is not new. American and Russian involvement goes back to the 18th and 19th centuries, when the area was part of the Ottoman Empire. Cultural and commercial relations between the rising power, the United States of America, and the region started to grow, beginning in 1833 when the United States and the Sultanate of Oman signed a Treaty of Amity and Commerce followed by the opening of an American Consulate in Oman in 1838 and the subsequent accreditation of the first Omani Arab diplomat in the United States. The American presence included commercial, educational, and cultural activities as well as missionary work, through which humanitarian services were extended to the local population. At that time, the strategic view toward the region was not quite clear due to the policy of isolation, which branded American relations abroad.

It is because of the development of a naval strategy by Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, the strategic naval thinker and historian, and the presence of the US Navy beyond the limits of the contiguous seas and oceans littoral to the American mainland, that gave a push to increased understanding of the strategic interests of the United States. The notion of “national interests” started to develop and a US naval and diplomatic presence began to materialize. The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and the policies of President Woodrow Wilson gave centrality to the new role of the United

States as a superpower. In the Arab world, particularly in the Gulf region, American interests became apparent, most visibly through competition over oil with the United Kingdom; gaining the Saudi oil concessions was one of the most important accomplishments of the United States during that period.

## US-USSR Competition

For the Russians, a presence in warm waters had been a dream since the days of Peter the Great. Washington started to promote its interests in the region during and after World War II, when a naval base was established in Juffair, Bahrain. The Russians were lagging behind in the aftermath of the war, which forced the Soviet Union to consolidate its gains in Germany and Eastern Europe and to reconstruct internally rather than compete with the mighty victor of the war – the United States. The establishment of NATO as the main apparatus for guaranteeing the stability and security of Europe sparked the Cold War, when the Soviet Union created the Eastern Bloc alliance, or the Warsaw Pact. Washington preempted the situation in the Middle East by creating the Baghdad Pact, known later as the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), leaving Moscow with no leverage to strategically challenge and confront US predominance in the Middle East.

Gamal Abdul-Nasser’s revolution and his quest for assistance from the Soviet Union gave the Russians an unprecedented means to break into the region and challenge American prevalence.

Egypt, Syria, and finally Iraq developed friendlier terms with the Russians than with the West. After Iraq's pullout from the Baghdad Pact, it became known as CENTO but diminished over time, leaving the southern front of the Soviet Union more secure than before. The Soviet Union's involvement in the region increased and attracted more countries into its sphere of influence, breaking away from the United States. By the 1970s, a series of strategic cooperation treaties were reached and signed between the Soviet Union and Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and South Yemen. This left US allies exposed, and the masses branded them as reactionaries who collaborated with the West against Arab interests. The Soviets consolidated their gains by supporting the Ethiopian coup d'état and the Mengistu Haile Mariam regime. Later, Soviet-supported and Marxist South Yemen unified with North Yemen, forming the new Republic of Yemen, which had more of an affinity to the United States. The competition found its end by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the exit of the East European states from the Warsaw Pact and the latter's collapse, thus freeing themselves from Soviet hegemony.

What was left of the Soviet deployment in the region were naval facilities in Algeria and Syria. Arms sales as a source of hard currency decreased; indeed, Russia was almost crippled during the decade of the nineties under President Boris Yeltsin.

## **Superpowers Trading Places**

The return of Russia as a power on the global stage came with the ascension of Vladimir Putin to the presidency and he vowed to regain the country's status as a superpower. This goal meant challenging the US presence and interests in the region. President Barack Obama's low-profile involvement in the Middle East provided a golden opportunity for Putin to renew and consolidate Russian interests there. But it was during the first years of Putin's presidency (2000-2004) that he solidified his power and set his priorities, which included increased involvement in the Arab Middle East. To the Russians, the proximity and strategic value of this area makes it very important.

In those years, and as a part of consolidating his power, Putin chose to regain control over Chechnya by curbing Islamic extremism, which he subsequently accomplished though with a heavy price. Then he faced a showdown with NATO on Georgia, during which the Russian-supported separatists in Sokhumi were victorious over Georgian troops. This was a very important message to the Americans – that Russia under Putin was not the same as that under Yeltsin.

Putin viewed the 2011 collapse of Libyan Col. Muammar Qadhafi's regime and the air battle conducted over Libya to force Qadhafi out as a deception and humiliation to Russia. He waited for the right moment to retaliate, and this was given to him by the tentative policy of the Obama Administration toward the civil war in

Syria and the Bashar al-Asad regime. Putin came to the support of Asad the moment he was about to fall; Russia waged a large-scale air campaign, followed by a land and naval initiative, to rescue the Syrian president and save his regime. It was another retaliatory move by Putin against the Americans, as a response to NATO's role in the Ukraine.

Another factor that gave the Russian policy in the Arab Middle East a push forward was the Obama Administration's preference for Asia-Pacific ties over the historical and traditional American relations with Arab Middle Eastern countries. Since then, the region has become a field in which accounts tended to be settled between the Russians and the Americans regarding the strategic interests of both parties. Moscow became the sole sponsor of the Syrian crisis with authority to make decisions about Syria's future. Putin pursued certain steps to secure his gains such as normalizing relations with Turkey, solidifying his alliance with Iran, and controlling developments in Syria. He created links with the Arab Gulf states to neutralize their opposition to the new Russian campaign to regain a foothold in the Arab Middle East, including a series of official visits with traditional US allies in the region.

### **US and Russian Engagement in the Middle East**

The main motives behind the American-Russian competition are rooted in the conflict between the Trans-Atlantic and Eurasian geopolitical theatres. Russia, as the main

sponsor of the Eurasian geopolitical understanding, believes that the Arab Middle East is an original part of Eurasia. The United States, on the other hand, views the Mediterranean Sea as home to the majority of the Arab countries, geographically and strategically. The geographic proximity between the Arab world and Europe imbues the region with geopolitical importance. This closeness explains the friction between Europe and Russia as well as the interests of the United States, and the West, in this part of the world.

When the Obama Administration adopted the Asia-Pacific strategy, it appeared as if the United States sailed away from the Middle East. Washington's low profile encouraged the reach of Iran and the growth of nongovernmental terrorist actors like ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Iranian-backed militias. Finally, Russia had its chance to engage in the affairs of the Arab Middle East in a way contrary to the national interests of the Arab countries and of the United States. This does not mean that the national interests of the Arabs and the Americans are congruent or identical; rather, it suggests that Russian intrusion in the region is harmful to both parties.

The Obama Administration's policy of noninvolvement in the internal conflicts of the region was very harmful to the aims and interests of the United States. In this context, the Trump Administration's strategy regarding Syria, Iraq, and Iran will be decisive for the future of the region. The recent visits of King Abdullah II of Jordan, Saudi Arabian Deputy

Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, and Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi of Iraq clearly show a greater interest in the region, as compared to the previous administration. The fates of the Iran nuclear deal, the war against ISIS, Russian-Turkish cooperation, and the Iranian expansionist policy in the region will

necessarily affect the American-Russian competition there. Closer Turkish-Russian strategic relations will enforce and consolidate the Russian thrust, while victory over ISIS on both the Iraqi and Syrian fronts will increase the stakes for the United States to regain its historical position in the region.

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