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## Syria: Russia's Best Asset in the Middle East

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Andrej Kreutz

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**IFRI**

27 RUE DE LA PROCESSION  
75740 PARIS CEDEX 15 – FRANCE  
TEL. : 33 (0)1 40 61 60 00  
FAX : 33 (0)1 40 61 60 60  
E-MAIL : [ifri@ifri.org](mailto:ifri@ifri.org)

**IFRI-Bruxelles**

RUE MARIE-THERESE, 21  
1000 BRUXELLES  
TEL. : 32(2) 238 51 10  
FAX : 32 (2) 238 51 15  
E-MAIL : [info.eurifri@ifri.org](mailto:info.eurifri@ifri.org)

WEBSITE : [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org)

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## Author

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Andrej Kreutz was trained in International Law and European History at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland, and in Comparative Politics and International Relations at the University of Toronto, Canada, where he received his PhD. His works include: *Vatican Policy on the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: The Struggle for the Holy Land* (New York, Greenwood, 1990) and *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe* (Westport, Praeger Security International, 2007). Until 2010, he taught Political Science and History at the University of Calgary and Mount Royal College in Calgary.

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## Summary

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Russia's foreign policy towards Syria and the Greater Middle East is generally not aggressive. It is a defensive policy aimed mainly at developing its traditional political and economic interests in the region and protecting its Southern borders. It is possible that Syria's pivotal role for the Kremlin might be diminished by Russia's growing political and economic involvement with almost all states of that region and its greater stress on profitable economic relations. However, Syria will remain Moscow's most important partner in the Arab East, because of: its relative independence from the West, its secular government, a well-established tradition of bilateral cooperation and the fact that it provides access to the Mediterranean. Russian-Syrian relations have always been more political and strategic than economic in nature. This differentiates them from the relations Russia has with Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries of the region.

## Introduction

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Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia—greatly weakened—has needed to focus its attention mainly on the nations of the former Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the Arab and Islamic countries of the Middle East have remained of substantial interest to Moscow. With Europe's largest Muslim population,<sup>1</sup> Russia wants to have good relations with the centers of the Islamic World, whose support could be used in the struggle against anti-Russian terrorism and Caucasian separatism. The March 2010 bombing attack in Moscow's metro (killing 40) again reminded the world that Russia is still threatened by large-scale terrorist attacks and separatist movements in Northern Caucasus. Consequently, Islam and its believers are a part of Russia's own life and prospects for the future. Relations with them might prove more important for Moscow than is the case of the US or even other Western powers, and need to be expanded and cultivated.

No less important is the need for strategic access to the Mediterranean Sea, which Russia as a largely land-locked country values highly, opening the way to the Indian Ocean and providing more security to its southern flank. Feeling surrounded by the members of pro-Western alliances even within the CIS, Moscow wants to escape encirclement, and find allies to the South. Arab peoples, who had never been submitted to Russian conquest, have for the most part been friendly and open to Russian diplomatic efforts—with the possible exceptions of some oil-producing countries, most importantly Saudi Arabia.

In the Arab East, Syria, probably one of the most independent countries from the West, has had close and well-established relations with Moscow for a long time. The historical background illustrates that Russian-Syrian relations have always had a predominantly political and strategic nature. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, especially after the two Chechen conflicts, the security of Russia's Southern neighborhood and radical Islam have become strategic issues for Moscow. These concerns have become additional reasons for Russia to foster good relations with Islamic states, plus the desire to prevent Western encroachment and geopolitical concerns such as access to the Mediterranean.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Pew Research Center report "On Mapping the Global Muslim Population", as of 8 October 2009, Russia had 16,482,600 Muslim inhabitants, which represented 11.7% of its total population. However, the real figures are difficult to establish. One needs to distinguish between practicing and cultural traditional Muslims, the latter number probably being much higher. As the peoples of the former USSR had been submitted to a long-lasting anti-religious campaign, the religious attachments often survived as a part of social traditions and popular culture.

However, recent developments in the Middle East and Russia's growing political and economic involvement with almost all states of the region tend to diminish Syria's pivotal role for the Kremlin. Damascus itself is looking for options to develop its relations with the US and certain European states in order to break out of the international isolation caused by opposition to its activities in Lebanon. China, for its part, is a remote and apparently self-centred power among the great powers—though seeing Syria as an increasingly important trading hub for Chinese interests in the Middle East and Africa.<sup>2</sup> However, Syria's policy has not proved successful and thus the Syrian leadership remains largely reliant upon the —often nuanced—diplomatic support of Russia.

Ultimately, for Moscow it is a matter of acquiring leverage to improve Russia's room to maneuver in the Arab-Muslim world and to remain an important player on the world scene. Moscow does not want to be involved in a potential conflict between Syria and Israel (tied in a dispute over the ownership of the Golan Heights, officially annexed by Israel in 1981), and tries to balance its relations with both countries without alienating the US and the major Arab states.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> C. Lin, "Syria in China's New Silk Road Strategy," *China Brief*, The Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 10, No. 8, April 2010, <[www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=36264&cHash=ac6dfc2626](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=36264&cHash=ac6dfc2626)>.

<sup>3</sup> J. Nocetti, "From Moscow to Mecca: Russia's Saudi Arabian Diplomacy," *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 52, June 2010, <[www.ifri.org/downloads/ifrinocettirusaudiarabiaengmay2010.pdf](http://www.ifri.org/downloads/ifrinocettirusaudiarabiaengmay2010.pdf)>.



## From “Socialist Friendship” to Political Pragmatism

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The USSR had established diplomatic links with Syria in 1944, even before the international community formally recognized the country as an independent state in April 1946. From the mid 1950s until the late 1980s the two sides developed multi-faceted bilateral relations. In the words of American historian Walter Laqueur: “as a field for large-scale Soviet investments and a political showcase for the advantage of Soviet help, Syria was a somewhat more promising choice than Egypt.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, after Egyptian President Sadat’s break with the Soviet bloc and alliance with the US in the 1970s, Moscow’s assistance to Damascus reached its peak: Syria becoming the largest non-communist recipient of Soviet weapons.<sup>5</sup> However, even at that time, and despite Syria’s frequent requests, in its support for Damascus, the USSR was not ready to mirror the US’s constant protection of and assistance to Israel.

A decline in Soviet-Syrian relations had already been noticed in the early 1980s, but Gorbachev’s perestroika brought about a dramatic change in Moscow’s relations with Damascus. Soviet arms supplies to Syria were declining steadily, and Soviet-Israeli rapprochement and the flow of Soviet-Jewish immigration to Israel became a major bone of contention.<sup>6</sup> The predominantly ideological premises of Soviet-Syrian relations quickly evaporated, and in December 1991 the Soviet Union disintegrated. The Russian Federation had to recreate a Middle East policy from scratch.

During the 1990s, Syrian-Russian relations retained some importance, but bilateral relations, partly restored after the 1992-1994 hiatus, were only a shadow of earlier Soviet-Syrian relations.<sup>7</sup> The place of Syria in Moscow’s new Middle Eastern diplomacy needed time to be re-established and was largely shaped by regional and global developments.

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<sup>4</sup> W. Laqueur, *The Struggle for the Middle East: The Soviet Union in the Mediterranean 1958-1968*, London, Macmillan, 1969, p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> D. Hopwood, *Syria 1945-1986: Politics and Society*, London, Unwin Hyman, 1988, p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> R.A. Hinnebusch, “Revisionist Dreams, Realist Strategies: The Foreign Policy of Syria,” in B. Korany, A.E. Hillal Desouki (eds.), *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1989, p. 293.

<sup>7</sup> A. Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* Westport, Praeger Security International, 2007, p. 18-25.

## ***Syria in Russia's Middle Eastern policy***

In the early 1990s, Russia became frustrated by its failure to be admitted to the US-dominated international community as a “normal” country. A number of factors—its Soviet past, ambiguous domestic developments, large nuclear arsenal, and enormous territory—made its Western integration difficult, if not impossible. NATO expansion in 1999 and 2004 into its neighborhood alienated Moscow even further. The Russian leadership started to revive the geopolitical threat perceptions of their Soviet predecessors. This sense of vulnerability was now increased because of the country's apparent weakness and chronic tension in the North Caucasus, and its impact upon Russia's Muslim population. After the rise to power of Vladimir Putin, and especially after the American war in Iraq, Russian-Arab and Middle Eastern diplomacy acquired new relevance as one of the important tools to ensure Russia's security and further its economic interests. Relations with Syria and the rest of the Arab World under Putin were characterized by caution and driven by pragmatic pursuit of Russian interests. Just as Russia wants its presence in the Middle East to be re-established, all Arab nations are looking toward it having a stronger political role there. The Syrian President was correct in his analysis that “the Arab World pins great hopes on strengthening Moscow's hand in the world.”<sup>8</sup> The Egyptian, Saudi and Jordanian leaders and other “moderate,” pro-Western Arab leaders voiced similar opinions.<sup>9</sup> Russia has its own strategic interests in the Middle East, which include the security of its Southern neighborhood, good relations with Islam, and access to the Mediterranean. The enormous regional imbalance of power in the favor of the US thus represents a concern for many Russian experts.

Although Dmitry Medvedev became President of the Russian Federation in May 2008, Putin's influence remains important. As Prime Minister, he can take part in shaping the major directions of its domestic and foreign policy.<sup>10</sup> One of the major vectors of foreign policy as it has developed under the Putin and Medvedev presidencies has been a desire to set aside the humiliations of the 1990s and return Russia to the top table of international affairs. This policy adds a further dimension to Russia's involvement in the Middle East, a region which lies at the heart of many of the world's most pressing international questions. Russia's influence in the resolution of these problems is a prerequisite for its being taken seriously as an international actor of the first rank.

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<sup>8</sup> “Syrian President: Arab World Pins Great Hopes on Strengthening Moscow's Hand,” ITAR-TASS, 25 January 2005.

<sup>9</sup> “Syrian President Says Arab-Israeli War Remains Central Problem in Middle East,” ITAR-TASS, 25 January 2005.

<sup>10</sup> The Russian Foreign Policy Concept which was signed by president Medvedev in May 2008 specifies that the cabinet, headed by the Prime Minister, carries responsibility for implementing Russian foreign policy. J. Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield. 2009, p. 13.

The role of Syria in this wider policy was crucial for a long time, and more important than that of other countries of the Arab East. However, Syria is not one of the most influential or richest nations of the region. During the last decade, Russia has wanted to develop its relations with Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon and the non-Arab countries of the Middle East such as Israel, Turkey and Iran. At the same time greater stress in Moscow's policy has been laid on the commercial interests, and relatively less on the political and strategic considerations upon which Russo-Syrian relations are founded.<sup>11</sup>

At present Moscow's financial deals with a number of nations in the Greater Middle East—particularly Turkey and Israel—by far exceed Russia's trade with Syria. Up to 2004, Russian trade relations had been quite modest and reached only \$ 218 million, with Russian exports amounting to \$206 million.<sup>12</sup> However, from 2004 to 2008, when Western pressure on Syria was greatest, trade between the two countries started to acquire a new importance. In November 2009, Russia's Stroytransgaz launched its largest project in Syria since the Soviet era—a gas-processing plant near Homs, a city in the western part of the country. The plant will help to cover 50 percent of the Syrian electricity industry's demand for gas.<sup>13</sup>

Between 2005 and 2008, Russian-Syrian trade relations developed more dynamically than before, and a bilateral trade turnover peaked in 2008 at almost 2 billion US dollars.<sup>14</sup> However, it fell to 1.36 billion dollars in 2009 as a result of the global financial and economic crisis.<sup>15</sup> President Medvedev's visit to Damascus in May 2010 was also intended to constitute an important push to bolster relations and cooperation between the two nations.<sup>16</sup>

However, the importance of Damascus for Moscow is not based on economics alone. Their relations still have a more political and strategic nature, providing Russia with access to the Mediterranean and political support far stronger than might be expected from any other Arab nation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> P. Rivlin, "The Russian Economy and Arms Exports to the Middle East," Tel Aviv, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, *Memorandum No. 79*, November 2005.

<sup>12</sup> "Russia: Putin Praises Level of Relations with Syria during Meeting in Kremlin," Interfax, 25 January 2005.

<sup>13</sup> "Gas Processing Plant—Russia's Biggest Project in Syria," ITAR-TASS, 18 November 2009.

<sup>14</sup> "Russian Foreign Minister Interviewed by Syrian News Agency SANA," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 5 June 2009.

<sup>15</sup> "Article by Dmitry Medvedev in Syrian Newspaper Al Watan," Kremlin.ru, 9 May 2010, <<http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/212>>.

<sup>16</sup> "Russian Foreign Minister Interviewed by Syrian News Agency SANA," *op. cit.* [14]

<sup>17</sup> As Konstantin Makienko of the Center for Strategic and Technical Analysis in Moscow stressed, "Syria is our crucial and the only ally in the Middle East." *Cited in*: M. Zygar, A. Grytskova, "Tartus too Small for Pyotr Velikiy," *Kommersant*, 24 September 2008, <[www.kommersant.com/p1030595/r\\_527/Pyotr\\_Velikiy\\_unable\\_to\\_enter\\_Tartus/](http://www.kommersant.com/p1030595/r_527/Pyotr_Velikiy_unable_to_enter_Tartus/)>.

## The Israeli Factor

Soon after taking office in 2000, Putin put great stress on the positive and even friendly relations of his country with Israel.<sup>18</sup> He does not show any particular pro-Arab sentiment, which might be identified in former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov; however, Putin has also proved to be remarkably free of biases towards the West, including the US and Israel.<sup>19</sup> Yet, some state officials and military personnel with contacts and firsthand knowledge of the Arab world still promote relations with the Arab world, including Russian-Syrian relations. One example is Colonel General Leonid Ivashov, who previously led the Russian Defense Ministry's main Directorate for International Military Cooperation. He has complained recently that "our [Russian] military-technical cooperation with the Middle Eastern countries, with the Arab world, and with Iran is under Tel-Aviv's control."<sup>20</sup>

Russian-Syrian relations, and especially Moscow's military cooperation with Damascus, have often been subjected to criticism and even pressure from the US and Israel. However, the policy cultivated by Putin—continued by Medvedev—of good relations with all countries of the Middle East, has been fairly successful so far.<sup>21</sup> Tel Aviv seems to appreciate its relations with Moscow, even seeking to influence Russia's relations with the Arab nations and Iran.<sup>22</sup> Israeli-Russian relations are based on strong business relations, and the presence of over one million Russian-speaking Israeli citizens. Moscow considers Israel to be a powerful and well-established state, making relations with it a political necessity. In addition, Russian leaders have always kept in mind the power of the pro-Israel lobby, and the Jewish population in the US.

Russia has tried to support the peace effort in the Middle East, but it has obviously no effective power to promote a resolution to the conflict. Moscow is trying to balance its relations with Israel and the Arab nations, including the Hamas faction in Palestine. This might be a thin line to walk, but until now it has worked, perhaps "because, as Moscow well knows,

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<sup>18</sup> M.N. Katz, "Putin's Pro-Israeli Policy," *Middle Eastern Quarterly*, Winter 2005, p. 51-59. Available from: <[www.meforum.org/690/putins-pro-israel-policy](http://www.meforum.org/690/putins-pro-israel-policy)>.

<sup>19</sup> His historic speech at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Conference on Security Policy on 10 February 2007 is the most explicit example of this. Available from: <[http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138\\_type82912type82914type82917type84779\\_118123.shtml](http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml)>.

<sup>20</sup> "Russia's Defense Cooperation with the Arab Nations Restricted by Israel's Pressure – Analyst," Interfax, 7 September 2010.

<sup>21</sup> M.N. Katz, "Russia's Greater Middle East Policy : Securing Economic Interests, Courting Islam," *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 49, April 2010, <[www.ifri.org/downloads/ifrirussiamiddleeastkatzengapril2010.pdf](http://www.ifri.org/downloads/ifrirussiamiddleeastkatzengapril2010.pdf)>.

<sup>22</sup> On the Israel-Russia relationship, see P. Razoux, "The Keys to Understanding the Israel-Russia Relationship," NATO Defense College, Rome, *Research Paper* No. 42, November 2008. Available at: <[www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=6](http://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=6)>.

while each party disapproves of Moscow's ties to its opponents, each would prefer to have some support from Moscow rather than none."<sup>23</sup>

During the April 2010 visit of a delegation from the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee of the Israeli Knesset to Moscow, its members voiced their complaints regarding the outcome of the Second Lebanese War in 2006, when, according to them, "the latest types of weapons were found to be at Hizbollah's disposal."<sup>24</sup> Such illegal arms transfers might have taken place in the past, but they have never been widespread, and the chance of recurrence now seems quite minor: Russia does not wish to spoil relations with Israel and the US.

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<sup>23</sup> M.N. Katz, "Russia in Mideast: More of Same," *Middle East Strategy at Harvard*, 10 July 2009, <<http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2009/07/russia-in-mideast-more-of-same/>>.

<sup>24</sup> "Israel, Russia Sign Strategic Cooperation Pact, Discuss Iran, Islamic Terror," *Israel OSC Summary*, 17 April 2010.

# Resurgent Russia, Isolated Syria: A Communion of the Needy?

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## *Syrian support for Russia's Middle East policy*

The Baathist regime in Damascus remains the most secular regime in the Arab East; it has consistently supported Moscow's policy in Northern Caucasus, and strongly condemned the Chechen insurgents as terrorists.<sup>25</sup> In August 2008, Syria was the second country after Belarus to express public support for Russia in its short war and acute political conflict with Georgia.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the Syrian President, who visited Russia on 20-21 August 2008, offered to allow Moscow to deploy its Iskander missiles on Syrian soil, and stated that his country is "striving to develop strategic relations with Russia in the interests of security in the whole world." He added: "we are ready to cooperate with Russia in any project that can strengthen its security". He described the 2008 war with Georgia as a "continuation of US cold war policy", and as "the culmination of attempts to encircle and isolate Russia." According to him, Syria opposes that because "Russia has always been supportive of the peace process, and we are dealing with the active role that Russia might play in this regard."<sup>27</sup> As such Syria has lent support to Moscow not only in its efforts to justify its military intervention in Georgia—an act which opened it up to severe criticism from the West—but also in its wider aim to increase its influence in the Middle East.

Although the Syrian President's offer to host Iskanders was not accepted by Moscow, the strategic interests of both nations are in fact somewhat convergent. The Russian Federation needs an ally in the Arab East, which is the historical and religious centre of the Islamic World, but which is also almost completely dominated by the US. Syria is one of very

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<sup>25</sup> In September 2001, Damascus welcomed the Chechen leader, Akhmad Kadyrov, who was cooperating with Moscow. During his visit, the Supreme Mufti of the Syrian Arab Republic, Sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro, condemned terrorism in "all its forms and manifestations." Ramzan Kadyrov, the son and political successor of Ahmad Kadyrov as president of Chechnya, visited Syria in March 2010. During his visit the new Great Mufti of Syria, Akhmad Badruddin Khasum thanked him for his help in establishing close international relations between Syria and Russia. "R. Kadyrov Held a Meeting with the Chechen Diaspora of Syria", *Chechen Republic Today*, 12 March 2010.

<sup>26</sup> "US to Syria: Do not Meddle in Russia-Georgia Conflict," *Haaretz*, 25 August 2008.

<sup>27</sup> "My zaranee znali, chto Zapad stremitsiya blokirovat' Rossiyu," [We Knew That the West Would Intend to Block Russia], *Kommersant*, 20 August 2008. Available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?docid=1013457](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?docid=1013457)>.



few states in the region that are relatively independent from American control; because of that, it is more willing to cooperate with Russia. It can offer Moscow a number of strategic advantages such as access to the Mediterranean, a relatively secure foothold in the Arab East, and a chance to acquire some influence in Arab-Israeli relations, something that Moscow has long sought. In return, Damascus expects diplomatic protection against possible American and Israeli threats, and weapons and other advanced technology supplies that it cannot get from other sources. In addition, Russian-Syrian relations have for a long time been a useful way for both countries to maintain their international prestige and self-confidence.

During his May 2010 visit to Damascus, President Medvedev wanted to stress the importance of Syria and the Arab East for Russia and to magnify Russia's prestige and role in the region. His visit was focused not only on his country's bilateral relations with Syria, but also on the peaceful settlement of the Middle East conflict.<sup>28</sup> According to him, Russia "would continue to do everything [...] to help assist the Arab-Israeli peace process" which "should result... in the freeing of Arab lands occupied in 1967, in the creation of an independent Palestinian state which will live in peace with Israel."<sup>29</sup>

### ***The End of Syria's international isolation?***

Use of bilateral relations to achieve improved security was even more characteristic of the Syrian regime, which understandably felt threatened after the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, and to a lesser extent during the Lebanese crisis. Russia and Syria took a similar position towards Iraq, and in the spring of 2003 then Russian President Putin suggested that, like Iraq, regime change could be implemented in Syria.<sup>30</sup> In July 2003, in an apparent show of Russian independence, the Russian Foreign Minister invited Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to visit Russia.<sup>31</sup> At that time the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSRA)<sup>32</sup> proposing sanctions against Syria was going to be discussed by the US Congress prior to adoption in December 2003, and one might

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<sup>28</sup> Medvedev's Visit to Syria Focuses on Mideast Peaceful Settlement," ITAR-TASS, 12 May 2010.

<sup>29</sup> "FYI Medvedev Critical of US Role in the Mid-East, Calls for Nuclear Free Region," ITAR-TASS, 11 May 2010.

<sup>30</sup> "Even if there are people who do not like the regime in this country, it should not be changed under pressure from outside." A. Kreutz, *op. cit.* [7], p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> A. Andreev, "V Moskve zhдут Bassara Assada," [Al-Assad Is Awaited in Moscow], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 17 July 2003.

<sup>32</sup> The Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act is a bill that the US passed into law on 12 December 2003. The bill's stated purpose is to end what the US sees as Syrian support for terrorism, to end Syria's presence in Lebanon, which has been in effect since the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990, to stop Syria's alleged development of WMDs, to cease Syria's illegal importation of Iraqi oil and to end illegal shipments of military items to anti-US forces in Iraq.

have seen this invitation as a Russian declaration of support for Damascus and a challenge to US Middle Eastern policy.

However, as noted above, Russian support for Syria has always been limited by the need to avoid possible negative repercussions from Washington and Tel Aviv. Moscow considers its relations with both to be far more important than those with Syria.<sup>33</sup> This explains, in part, Russia's abstention from the September 2004 UN Security Council vote when Resolution 1559 was adopted.<sup>34</sup>

In Moscow's view, "the Resolution covered just one aspect of the Middle East situation, while other issues in a comprehensive regional settlement are left out." Another reason for abstention was the concern that the resolution dealt with Lebanese domestic affairs, against the express wishes of the Lebanese government. After the assassination of Rafiq al Hariri in Beirut on February 2005, Syria was in fact forced to withdraw from Lebanon. At the time, a Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman argued that Syrian forces had indeed played a positive role in the past, but there was no need for this role in the new context.<sup>35</sup>

After Hariri's murder, French-Syrian relations were disrupted and Syria found itself alienated from its major Arab neighbors: Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt. Thus Damascus had to rely even more on Russian help.

Syria's international isolation was an important factor allowing a new Moscow-Damascus rapprochement between 2004 and 2008, the highpoint of Western pressure on Syria. That being said, probably even more important was the renewal of Moscow's proactive foreign policy which was conceived as a defense after the American war in Iraq in 2003 and the 2004 NATO enlargement.

In January 2005 President Assad made his first visit to Moscow. His talks with Putin and other Russian leaders were seen as friendly and fairly successful. Moscow wrote off 73 % of Syria's 13.4 billion US dollar debt to the Russian Federation.<sup>36</sup> In the political field, the declaration signed by the presidents of both countries expressed their joint positions on the most important Middle Eastern and global issues.

Following his talks with Assad, in a thinly veiled criticism of US policy towards Syria, Putin stated that Moscow and Damascus favored "a stable, democratic world based on norms of international law, precluding power pressure or interference in the affairs of a sovereign state." Putin also defended Syria against Israel's actions, saying that he "welcomes

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<sup>33</sup> D. Trenin, "Russia's Policy in the Middle East: Prospects for Consensus and Conflict with the United States," New York, The Century Foundation, 2010, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> The resolution was sponsored by the US and France, calling for an end to the Syrian military presence in Lebanon and for the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias on its territory.

<sup>35</sup> "Russian Foreign Minister Says: Syrian Forces Played Positive Role in Lebanon," ITAR-TASS, 27 April 2005.

<sup>36</sup> "Moscow Writes off 73% of Syria's Debt," Interfax, 25 January 2005.



Syria's inclinations for a political dialogue with Israel and its readiness to resume the talks without strings attached."<sup>37</sup>

An apparent unity of political views on both sides and Moscow's strong political support for Damascus came at the time of Syria's worst international troubles and isolation of the country from the Western powers, including France, which had historical links with Syria. The Syrian leadership might have seen the rapprochement with Moscow as a necessity. Moscow, which was frustrated by growing US influence in its traditional neighborhood and concerned about its own Muslim population,<sup>38</sup> took the opportunity to renew its direct involvement in the Middle Eastern. However, the argument of an American scholar that Syria's deplorable international situation was exactly the position "Putin wants Syria to be in," in order to get "preferential access for Russian arms and petroleum to Syria" seems to be rather far-fetched.<sup>39</sup> Developments in the Middle Eastern, including Syria's predicament, had certainly not been of Russia's making. Furthermore, Moscow had and still has a much more important strategic interest in Syria than the rather modest commercial transactions outlined above.

Moscow staunchly opposed the discussion regarding sanctions on Syria. In October 2005, Russian diplomats criticized the anti-Syrian draft resolution until the last possible moment during the UN Security Council debate on the report by Prosecutor Detlev Mehlis' international commission, which accused high-ranking Lebanese and Syrian officials of involvement in the Hariri killing. Damascus' situation was particularly difficult as "the Syrian's best hope, Paris, which used to invariably take an opposition stance vis-à-vis America, has sharply changed its attitude toward Lebanese affairs."<sup>40</sup> Only Russia argued that "Hariri was considered an opponent of Syria but not an enemy of that county, since the Syrians have cooperated with various political forces in Lebanon at various times,"<sup>41</sup> concluding that the allegations against Syria were most likely to be politically motivated.<sup>42</sup> Moscow believed that the US wanted the withdrawal of Syrian peacekeepers from Lebanon in order to diminish Syria's political influence in the region. Russia's position on the issue ran counter to American pressure, and it did not find sufficient support from the other countries.

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<sup>37</sup> V. Romankova, "Russia's President Putin Says Road Map Real Way to Resume Mideast Peace," ITAR-TASS, 25 January 2005.

<sup>38</sup> In September 2004, in the Beslan school occupation by Chechen and Inghushetian terrorists, at least 334 hostages were killed, including 186 children. On Beslan's impact on Russian domestic and foreign policy, read A.P. Tsygankov, "New Challenges for Putin's Foreign Policy," *Orbis*, University of Florida, Winter 2006, p. 158-159.

<sup>39</sup> M.N. Katz, "Putin's Foreign Policy Toward Syria," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 1, March 2006.

<sup>40</sup> Y. Shestakov, "Tell me Who your Friend Is?" *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 57, No. 8, March 2005, p. 19.

<sup>41</sup> I. Groshkov and G. Volfson, "Internationalizing an Assassination," *The Current Digest of The Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 57, No. 7, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* See also A. Samokhotin, "American Storm Clouds over Syria. Washington Urges the International Community to Put Pressure on Damascus," *The Current Digest of The Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 57, No. 7, 2005, p. 2-3.

However, although some Russian politicians demanded that Moscow veto the proposed draft and “put an end to America’s arbitrariness,”<sup>43</sup> Russia was persuaded by the softening of the resolution’s wording, and in November 2005 voted with the other nations to adopt Resolution 1636 on Syria. The statement regarding the threat of sanctions was replaced by a neutral reference to “other means.”<sup>44</sup> These developments can be seen as typical of Russian policy towards Syria and the Middle East in general. Being unable to challenge the overwhelming American and Israeli control of the region, Russia nevertheless tried to limit its full implementation. This behavior is noticeable not only in Russia’s relations with Syria, but also with Iran and Hamas.<sup>45</sup>

Syria’s political situation started to improve in 2007, starting from its attendance—by the invitation of the US—at the Middle East peace conference held in Annapolis in November that year. In July 2008, French President Nicolas Sarkozy invited President Assad to participate in the inauguration of the Union for the Mediterranean in Paris, and in September 2008 Sarkozy himself visited Damascus. His trip to Syria was followed by his meeting there with the Syrian President, the Turkish Prime Minister, and the Emir of Qatar. Since then, many other European and Middle Eastern leaders, and even American politicians, have followed Sarkozy’s lead. In February 2010, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallam announced that the US had asked Damascus to approve its choice of ambassador to the country.<sup>46</sup> One week later, Syria approved the US government’s nomination, ending more than five years’ absence.<sup>47</sup> Far from being an international pariah state, as it was just a few years ago, Syria has started to be seen by some commentators as “a key country along a new axis being formed in the Middle East, which includes Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.”<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, this optimism has been shown to be premature. The Syrian-Israeli talks mediated by Turkey did not bring the expected results, and Israel started to accuse Syria of supplying weapons for Hezbollah in Lebanon.

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<sup>43</sup> “Zhirinovskiy Hopes for Russian Veto of Anti-Syria Resolution,” Interfax, 31 October 2005.

<sup>44</sup> V. Sergeyev, “Russian Website Says Resolution 1636 ‘Suited Everyone except Syria.’ Syria Not Pleased with Minor Victory,” *Gazeta.ru*, 1 November 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Moscow had initially reacted positively towards the Brazilian-Turkish nuclear swap deal with Iran, which was signed on 17 May 2010, and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov voiced his country’s “concern” over US planned sanctions, describing them as “going against the principle of the supremacy of international law as laid down in the UN Charter” (V. Radyuhin, “Russia Comes Out on Top in Iran Deal,” *The Hindu* 20 May 2010). However, under US pressure, on 9 June 2010 Russia joined other permanent members of the UN Security Council voting for a resolution to impose new sanctions on Iran. As a result, Moscow did not supply the S-300 air defense systems to Iran.

<sup>46</sup> A. Issacharoff, “Syria is Blowing off Steam, not Rattling Sabers,” *Haaretz*, 7 February 2010.

<sup>47</sup> “Syria Approves New U.S. Ambassador,” *Syria Today*, 14 February 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Z. Bar’el, “Peace with Syria no Less Vital than Stopping Iran’s Bomb,” *Haaretz*, 7 February 2010.

Although the Syrian Foreign Ministry rejected the accusations as groundless and as paving the way for future Israeli aggression,<sup>49</sup> US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton took the Israeli side and spoke harshly about “Syrian transfer of weapons—especially longer-range missiles to Hezbollah” which “would pose a serious threat to Israel’s security.” Defending the Obama administration’s decision to restore diplomatic relations with Damascus, she stressed that “the US is not re-engaging with Syria as a reward or a concession. Engagement is a tool that can give us added leverage and insight, and a greater ability to convey a strong and unmistakably clear message aimed at Syria’s leadership.”<sup>50</sup> On 3 May 2010 American sanctions against Syria, which had been imposed in May 2004 and reinforced in 2007, were renewed by US President Obama.<sup>51</sup> Thus the much discussed American-Syrian détente has either come to an end or become more precarious.

In another show of diplomatic support, President Medvedev’s visit to Damascus in May 2010 coincided with the rise of the new tensions and threats against Syria. His visit demonstrated both Russia’s protective role and the importance of Russian-Syrian relations and their limited practical importance. The Russian President said that the Arab-Israeli dialogue “must result in a comprehensive, just and long-term reconciliation, the liberation of all the Arab lands occupied in 1967, and the creation of an independent Palestinian state.”<sup>52</sup> The Russian leader thus echoed Syrian conditions for reconciliation with Israel. At the same time, however, no new contract in the military-technological sphere was concluded; once again, Moscow did not want to irritate Israel.

Medvedev and Assad called for a nuclear free zone in the Middle East, “because any other development of the situation will mean regional and possibly global catastrophe.”<sup>53</sup> Largely supporting Arab goals and interests, Medvedev hailed Russia’s active stance in assisting Middle-East settlement, and met with Hamas Politburo Chief Khalid Mashaal.<sup>54</sup> As Hamas and its leaders are shunned by the Western Powers, Medvedev’s talks with the Hamas leader were also intended to show Moscow’s openness and credibility, to all parties in the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> I. Humaydi: “Six Israeli Motives Behind the Scud Missile Campaign,” 23 April 2010. *Al Hayeh* online (Syria).

<sup>50</sup> “Clinton Blasts Syria Arms Transfers to Hizbollah,” *Voice of America* online, 30 April 2010.

<sup>51</sup> “Obama renouvelle les sanctions américaines contre le régime syrien,” *France 24*, 5 April 2010.

<sup>52</sup> V. Kuzmin, “Moscow Daily: Medvedev’s Visit to Syria ‘Center of Attention’ in Near East,” *Damascus Wedge*, 12 May 2010.

<sup>53</sup> “Russia, Syria call on Iran to comply with Nuclear Non-Proliferation Rules,” *Rossiia 24*, 11 May 2010.

<sup>54</sup> “Medvedev, Hamas’ Mishaal Discuss Latest Palestinian State of Affairs,” KUNA online, 11 May 2010.

<sup>55</sup> M.A Smith, “The Russia-Hamas Dialogue, and the Israeli Parliamentary Elections,” UK Defence Academy, Conflict Studies Research Centre, *Middle East Series*, 06/24, June 2006. Available from: <[www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/middle-east/06%2824%29MAS.pdf](http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/middle-east/06%2824%29MAS.pdf)>.

## Military Diplomacy

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Russia's cautious diplomatic support for Syria is paralleled by its modest supplies of modern weapons and technology to that country. Weapons supplies might be used as bargaining tools with the Americans or the Israelis.

### ***Pivotal but Uneven Military-Technical Cooperation***

Although Putin assured the Israelis that Moscow would not jeopardize Israel's security, and Russia has neither the means nor the intention to seriously upset the regional balance of power, it is not in its best interests that Syria—a traditionally friendly Arab state—be left without any defensive power. Even before 2006, though no modern weapons were supplied, Russia continued to modernize and repair military hardware used by the Syrian army, and continued to train personnel for the Syrian military forces at senior officer level.<sup>56</sup> By 2006 about 10,000 Syrian officers had received training at both Soviet and Russian military academies. Western experts estimated that even in 2006 up to 2000 Russian military advisors were serving in the Syrian military. Russian officers had also taught at Syria's officer training academy.<sup>57</sup>

Assad's first visit to Russia in 2005 did not result in a new sales agreement for sophisticated arms. During his stay in Moscow, the Russian Defense Minister stated that Russia "will not supply offensive weapons to Syria: no missile defense systems, Iskander E or Igla portable missile air defense systems."<sup>58</sup> However, it can be argued that was not the main Syrian concern at that time. During the 2005-2008 period, the most important thing for Damascus was Moscow's political support and diplomatic protection.

In 2006, Russia delivered to Syria the vehicle mount variant of Russian Kolomna KBM Strelets multiple launch units for use with the GM 39 Igla fire-and-forget surface-to-air missile (SAM) system.<sup>59</sup> These

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<sup>56</sup> A. Konovalov, "Russia: Defense Ministry Rules Out Supplying Offensive Weapons to Syria," ITAR-TASS, 25 January 2005.

<sup>57</sup> U. Klusmann, "An Old Base/ Friendship Gets a Facelift," *Der Spiegel*, 22 June 2006.

<sup>58</sup> Known as SA-18s under the NATO classification. A. Konovalov, "Russia: Defense Ministry Rules Out Supplying Offensive Weapons to Syria," ITAR-TASS, 25 January 2005.

<sup>59</sup> "Syria Receives First Strelets SAM," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 23 August 2006.

missiles are purely defensive and their design prevents them from being used as shoulder-launched missiles.<sup>60</sup>

Under American and Israeli pressure, Russia was unwilling to supply Syria with the man-portable Igla air defense system which differs from Strelets, and in January 2007 Sergey Chemezov—then Director General of Russia’s arms export monopoly, Rosoboronexport—denied rumors that from 2006 further deliveries of the Strelets air defense system had been sent to Syria.<sup>61</sup> However, during the next two years, Syria upgraded its air defense capabilities with new Buk-2M Ural medium-range theatre defense missiles procured from Russia,<sup>62</sup> and the first batches of the Pantsir-S1 short-range self-propelled air defense system, also delivered by Russia.<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, repeated Syrian requests to procure the long-range Russian S- 300 PMU self-propelled SAM system have not been met,<sup>64</sup> and in September 2009 Rosoboronexport froze contracts signed in 2007 for the sale of sophisticated aircraft MIG 29 Fulcrums and MIG-31s to Syria. The reasons given were “political sensitivities about potentially upsetting the balance of power in the Middle East,”<sup>65</sup> and probably just as in the case of the S- 300 surface-to-air missile systems, strong Israeli pressure on Moscow.

## ***Preserving the Strategic Balance of Power in the Middle East***

Even if, as the Israeli press reported, the four MIG-31E fighter jets, which are mainly intelligence-gathering planes, would finally be delivered to Syria, “they will be without offensive capabilities and with a Syrian understanding that Russia would not provide effective ‘after sale service.’”<sup>66</sup> Importantly, there has been no mention of the possible delivery of the MIG Fulcrums—similar to the F-16s operated by the Israeli Air Force, these can function as interceptors and bombers. The linking of these events confirms the thesis that while Russian-Syrian military technical cooperation is partly driven by business and the will to make

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<sup>60</sup> “Russia: Designer Says Shoulder-Launched Use of Strelets Impossible,” *Interfax*, 1 March 2006.

<sup>61</sup> “Rosoboronexport Denies Claims of Strelets Deal with Syria,” *Jane’s Defense Industry*, 1 March 2007.

<sup>62</sup> “Annual Defense Report: The Middle East and Africa,” *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, 14 December 2009.

<sup>63</sup> M. Hassington, “Syria Receives First Batch of Pantsir Air Defenses,” *Jane’s Information Group—International Defense Review*, 6 June 2008.

<sup>64</sup> “Annual Defense Report: The Middle East and Africa,” *op. cit.* [62].

<sup>65</sup> “Russia Industry Sources Allege Sale of MIGs to Syria,” *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, 4 September 2009. See also “Y. Kisieleva, “Fighter Contract Self Destruct: All Work on MIG-31 for Syria Has Been Halted,” *Kommersant*, 20 May 2009.

<sup>66</sup> H. Keinan and Y. Katz: “Four MIGs Sold to Syria will be Without Offensive Capabilities, Israel Told,” *Jerusalem Post* online, 8 September 2009.



profit, strategic and political considerations in the region are far more important. On the other hand, the Russian Federation, which does not want to antagonize Israel and the US, also does not want to leave Syria, which is its ally, completely defenseless. Moscow cannot try to change the existing balance of power in the region,<sup>67</sup> but wants to make the situation more comfortable to live with for Syria. In a 2005 interview for Israel TV, Putin drew attention to an incident when Israel sent a squadron of F-16 fighter jets on a low-altitude mission circling President Assad's summer residence near a Russian base. According to Putin, Russian military supplies to Syria could make "low altitude flights over the residence of the Syrian president" more difficult in future.<sup>68</sup>

In August 2008 Russia turned down Assad's effort to acquire Iskander-E missiles, a single-stage solid propellant system with a range of between 280 and 400 km, capable of carrying nuclear or conventional warheads.<sup>69</sup> Even earlier, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, was quoted as saying that the only system exported to Syria would be "defensive weapons that do not violate the strategic balance of power in the Middle East."<sup>70</sup> Despite the frequent rumors and accusations in some Western media, that has really been and still remains the Russian policy toward Syria and the Arab Middle East. Nevertheless, as Russian experts stress: "It is impossible for only one side to make concessions in response to the other side's concerns." Russia "had more than once refused to supply the promised weapons to Syria, for example, Iskander E missile systems and Igla portable anti-aircraft missile system" in order to satisfy Israeli requests.<sup>71</sup> But Russia, which does not want to completely sacrifice Syria's interests, has decided recently that in spite of Israeli and American protests, it will deliver Yakhont supersonic anti-ship cruise missile systems to Syria.<sup>72</sup> This system is considered to be essentially defensive, and under the existing circumstances it would be "almost physically impossible to hand it over to a third party [terrorists] secretly, even if someone wanted to."<sup>73</sup>

Russian weapons and advanced technology supplies to Syria, though limited, remain of vital importance to the country. In December 2009, when EADS had been unable to start the contracted delivery of Airbus planes—due to American sanctions—Syria turned to Russia to lease two Russian Tupolev aircraft.<sup>74</sup> During last year's session of the Russian-Syrian Inter-Governmental Commission in Damascus, one

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<sup>67</sup> "Putin in Israel, Defends Sale of Missiles to Syria and Nuclear Supplies to Iran," *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 30 April 2005.

<sup>68</sup> Der Spiegel, op. cit. [55].

<sup>69</sup> "Russia Turns down Syrian Missile Request," *Jane's Information Group*, January 2008.

<sup>70</sup> "Syria Seeks Defensive Weapons System from Russia," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 27 August 2008.

<sup>71</sup> "Pundit Rejects Israeli's Concern over Russian Missile Supplies to Syria," *Ekho Moskvyy News Agency*, 19 September 2010.

<sup>72</sup> "Russia to Deliver Bastion Missile Systems with Yakhont Missiles to Syria under \$300 million Contract," *Interfax*, 20 September 2010.

<sup>73</sup> "Russia Sees no Damage in Yakhont Arms Deal with Syria," *Interfax*, 21 September 2010.

<sup>74</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Syria: Country Report*, January 2010, p. 12.

of the main issues discussed was Syria's use of Russia's GLONASS communication satellites for civil purposes.<sup>75</sup>

An important achievement of the last two years has been increased Russian-Syrian naval cooperation. The Russian Federation inherited from the Soviet Union a small logistics base for its Navy in the Syrian port of Tartus, the second largest port city in Syria after Latakia. During post-Soviet times, the facility fell into disrepair, and was largely abandoned. However, in September 2008, Moscow launched negotiations with Syria to convert Tartus into a permanent naval base. In the summer of 2009, a new floating dock structure was delivered to Tartus.<sup>76</sup> The Russian Navy regards Syria as a vital base for operations in the Mediterranean and surrounding regions. The naval base in Syria could significantly boost Russia's operational capabilities because ships based there are capable of reaching the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal, and the Atlantic through the Straits of Gibraltar in a matter of days. According to some Russian experts, the Russian Black Sea Fleet will also be based in Syria.<sup>77</sup> The logistical facility in Tartus has already been expanded. The visit in April 2010 of the nuclear-powered missile cruiser Peter Velikiy, the flagship of Russia's Northern Fleet, emphasized the importance of this naval base for Russia.

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<sup>75</sup> "Syria Has Chances for Coop. in Info-Technologies," ITAR-TASS, 19 November 2009.

<sup>76</sup> "Russia to Upgrade Tartus Naval Logistics Base 2010," ITAR-TASS, 13 January 2010.

<sup>77</sup> "Russian Experts Set out Syria's Tartus, Novorossiysk Naval Base Plans," RIA Novosti, 24 April 2010.

## Conclusion

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Syria has come a long way since the depth of its international isolation between 2003 and 2008. During this period the importance of Russia's diplomatic support was greatly valued. While relations with Moscow can no longer be considered to hold the importance they did during the cold war, they have retained their political and strategic nature and they will certainly not be neglected in the future. For Moscow, the development of its relations with Syria corresponds with its traditional and present interests in the Islamic Middle East. In addition to its proximity to Russia's borders, the threat of Islamic extremism in the North Caucasus makes it crucial to Russian domestic security.

While Moscow is eager to foster these relations, its interest in keeping good relations with all regional players requires it to temper its support to Damascus. The influence of Israel and the US upon Russia's Syrian policy is clear, not least in the level of military support Moscow is willing to offer. In Russia, Syria has not found the champion that it seeks to rival the support the US lends to Israel. Many of Damascus' most pressing desires are therefore left unfulfilled: the Golan Heights remain under Israeli occupation and even the limited *détente* of relations with the West appears to be flagging. In such a context, only Russia seems to be willing and able to provide some efficient support and protection for Damascus. The Syrians are interested in balancing their international status and demonstrating to the United States their Russian support.

Russia's interest in enhancing cooperation with Syria is also a function of its interest to promote its own status in the international arena. President Medvedev's recent visit and Russia's demonstrative support for Syria stem from Russia's drive to become an influential actor. Striving to increase its influence in the Middle East, Russia attempts to be the only actor maintaining a positive dialogue with all parties to the Middle Eastern conflict. Accordingly, Russia views itself as having a more concrete role in Middle Eastern issues than the Quartet's other members, and intends to conduct itself independently. The Syrian track presents a perfect opportunity; as President Medvedev has stated, he intends to press the "reset button" on the peace process. Syria has a similar interest, which prompts it to strengthen Russia's status as an independent player in the Middle East, which will in turn upgrade Syria's own status in the region.

Assuming there is no new major war or some other cataclysmic event in the Middle East, these trends are likely to continue. Despite the modest level of economic exchanges and the consistent deferral or refusal to transfer sophisticated weapons technology, Russian-Syrian relations now seem stable and correspond more or less to the needs of both parties. Their historically close relations allow Russia to raise its international



profile and to have access beyond the reach of the US, while Syria has a partner that will offer diplomatic support even at times of deep international isolation.