

Even as Russia tries to balance its game in the Middle East, it cannot undermine the decades of partnerships *vis-a-vis* the United States that have existed in the region - Neha Dwivedi*

On the 70th anniversary of the United Nations, Russia President Vladimir Putin openly criticised “those that found themselves at the top of the pyramid after the cold war” and [conveyed that Russia was prepared for action in the Middle East](#). Almost two years since Russia intervened in Syria, there is a growing consensus that Russia is here to stay. From entering into defence deals to engaging in diplomatic manoeuvring, Russia has demonstrated its will to stay in the region which continues to witness the predominance of the United States.



Russia's tactics to sell and divide may work in its favour as the country finds its way through the complicated and violent region called the [Middle East](#) | Image: Middle East Monitor

Russia's High-Risk Gamble in the Middle East

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, with the help of Russia, has seized most of the territory that he had lost to the [Islamic State and the rebel forces](#). At a time when questions were raised on America's strategy in defeating the Islamic State, Russia, formed its own coalition, [along with Iran, Syria and Iraq](#). Iran, over the course of the war, emerged to become a crucial partner of Russia, particularly in its fight against rebels and jihadists. However, as Russia prepares to project its power beyond Syria, it appears that the country is engaging in a high-risk gamble.

If certain media sources are to be believed, Russia is giving Israel a free hand in reducing Iran's military [presence in Syria](#). Following a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Kremlin, Putin called for the withdrawal of Iranian forces including [Lebanon based Hezbollah from Syria](#). Additionally, Israel is using Syria's airspace, which is controlled by Russia, for launching attacks against [Iranian forces and Hezbollah](#). Interestingly, Russia has maintained a neutral response to the US-Turkey Manbij deal that

calls for the removal of People's Protection Units (YPG) from [the northern Syrian city of Manbij](#). While Russia's official response to the deal has been moderate, the alleged strikes by Russia in the Idlib province on June 7 suggests that Russia would not hesitate to use force if [situation runs out of control](#). Turkey was infuriated with the air strike which had the potential to expand the Syrian regime's influence on Idlib.

Russia Playing it tactical to become a Strategic Player

The Russian made S-400 Surface-To-Air Missile system has found potential buyers in the Middle East. The growing popularity of the portable weapons system has not gone down well with the US which has been dissuading countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Qatar from [signing weapons deals with Russia](#). David Schenker, the nominee to be Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, advised them to avoid military purchases that would be "potentially sanctionable". The US threats have not deterred Turkey, a key NATO member which has decided to proceed with [S-400 deal with Russia](#).

The importance of weapons has particularly increased in light of the US decision to sabotage the Iran nuclear deal. Additionally, Russia's decision to sell weapons to countries that have been involved in proxy or direct conflict with each other reflects the country's willingness to take risks. Qatar which has been involved in a bitter crisis with Saudi Arabia has been in the [process of buying S-400](#). Saudi Arabia which itself has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for purchasing a number of weapons, including S-400 from Russia, has threatened Qatar with military actions if it [acquires the same air weapon](#). Russia's tactics to sell and divide may work in its favour as the country finds its way through the complicated and violent region called the Middle East.

The Two Way Balancing Act

Even as Russia tries to balance its game in the Middle East, it cannot undermine the decades of partnerships *vis-a-vis* the United States that have existed in the region. The vulnerability of the region while serving as an opportunity for Russia can become its biggest dilemma. While the mutually beneficial projects might serve the short-term goal of Russia, to sustain in the long term, it would require the confidence of its traditional allies. As Russia plays the balancing act, it needs to assess the long-term consequences of risking its

relations with Iran for countries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia that share a decade-long relationship with the U.S.



Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, with the help of Russia, has seized most of the territory that he had lost to the Islamic State and the rebel forces | Image: Sputnik

While the risks remain pertinent, Russia's huge gamble may pay off in light of latest diplomatic and security decision taken by President Donald Trump. The fear of Iranian threat following the breakdown of the Iran nuclear deal and his decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital may pursue the countries to pursue an alternate option - Russia. Even so, the countries may resort to a balancing act between the United States and Russia. In such a scenario, Russia runs the risk of being stuck in a two-way game.

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