



Russia's Presence in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean

OE Watch Commentary: Historically Russia has always wanted to gain access to the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Its centuries long successive battles with the Ottoman Empire were fought mostly to achieve this objective. While Russia gained its first access point to the Mediterranean by establishing a naval base in Syria in the 1970s, it was not until the Syrian civil war that it became a major player in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. The accompanying article from Turkey's state-run news agency, *Anadolu Ajansı* provides insights into increased Russian activities in the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

According to the article, Russia's national security strategy and military doctrine require Russia to be a major player in the Middle East for various reasons. First, the activities of terrorist groups and the risk of them getting their hands on nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction is a major concern for Russia. Second, Russia wants to block European countries' search for a natural gas supplier who would be an alternative to Russia; as its position as a formidable supplier of natural gas provides it with leverage over the energy security of major European countries. As such, Russia has been closely following the hydrocarbon discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean in addition to working to curb the possibility of natural gas flowing from the Persian Gulf to Europe.



Vladimir Putin in Khmeimim Air Base in Syria.

Source: Kremlin.ru via Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_Putin_in_Khmeimim_Air_Base_in_Syria_\(2017-12-11\)_24.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_Putin_in_Khmeimim_Air_Base_in_Syria_(2017-12-11)_24.jpg), CC-BY-4.0

Russia's policy towards Iran is also part of its power play for greater influence in the Middle East. Through maintaining good relations with Iran, Russia extends its influence to the Persian Gulf to balance and leverage the United States' influence in the greater Middle East. Iran's Shia proxy groups in Iraq and Syria support Russia's policies in those countries. Russia and Iran also collaborate in controlling the price and output of petroleum. While Russia sees an ally in Iran, it does not want a stronger Iran which does not rely on Russia.

Russia's national security strategy and military doctrine call for an active role in the Eastern Mediterranean balance of power, for three reasons. First, this allows Russia to have a rapid response in the Middle East and protect Russian interests by fortifying its naval and air bases in Syria's Tartus and Khmeimim respectively. A naval base in Syria enables Russian naval ships and submarines sailing in the Mediterranean at all times. To this end, Russia is trying to establish more naval bases in the region including in Egypt and Libya. Second, Russia wants to keep an eye on hydrocarbon exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean and in Libya because natural resources in these regions could potentially compete with its supply in European markets. Russia also intends to prevent any efforts of constructing pipelines transmitting natural gas from the Persian Gulf to Europe through the Eastern Mediterranean. **End OE Watch Commentary (Gündüz)**

“The current Russian national security strategy and military doctrine also aims to be effective in [the Middle East]...”

Source: “Rusya Orta Doğu’da ne yapmak istiyor? (What does Russia want to do in the Middle East?),” *Anadolu Ajansı*, 18 March 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/rusya-orta-dogu-da-ne-yapmak-istiyor/1770192>

Moscow's interest in the Middle East is not new. The Russians aimed to be active in this vast geography including mainly in the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and North Africa during the Tsarist and Soviet periods. The current Russian national security strategy and military doctrine also aims to be effective in this region...

In its concept of national foreign policy, the Russian Federation declares that it sees the Middle East as a priority area in terms of global security problems. The possibility of the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction and the activities of terrorist organizations in this region are considered among the primary threats. Russia, one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), sees itself as one of the parties to the Middle East problems as a member of the Middle East Quartet.

However, Russia does not declare its intention of preventing being “bypassed” by the West within the scope of Europe's energy security policies. Since the 2005 Russia-Ukraine gas crisis, Western countries have been making efforts to provide alternatives to energy from Moscow and to establish energy transmission lines that will “bypass” Russia. The control of the Eastern Mediterranean coasts is gaining importance [due to] plans to direct the natural gas deposits in the Persian Gulf to Europe...

The Russian Federation considers the Mediterranean an important area of interest, as explained in its National Security Strategy and Military Doctrine. It wishes to make the Russian navy effective in green (open seas) and blue (ocean) waters and to keep it in constant navigation... Russia wants to patrol near the crisis regions and continue its existence. In addition, in order to be able to use its nuclear warhead missiles when necessary, Russia aims to keep its submarines and ships carrying them in the Mediterranean. According to Russia, the Tartus port in Syria alone is not enough. For this reason, Russia's search for a base on the North African coast continues. In this context, it continues its dialogue with Egypt or Libya.

Libya interests Russia due to its geopolitical importance of having Africa's largest hydrocarbon resources and its proximity to Europe. In Libya, as in Syria, directing energy resources to Europe may lead to Russia being left out of the energy equation...

Iran is the third important policy area of Russia in the Middle East. Iran stands out as a support factor for Russia both in the use of airspace and in policies against the USA. Iran's influence in Iraq is also important in this respect. Russia also uses Iran in balancing the US and its allies in the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. Iran's Shia militias have also supported Russia's policies in Syria and Iraq for a long time... Iran is also an actor that Russia wants to see [as an ally to control] oil prices and supply.