

Russian Influence in the Middle East

Economics, Energy, and Soft Power



American Security Project

Perspective

Rossella Cerulli

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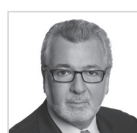
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David Wade is a consultant helping global corporations and organizations with strategic advice, public affairs and thought leadership, crisis communications, political intelligence gathering, and federal and legislative strategy.

In this Report:

This paper examines Russia's efforts to regain influence in the Middle East. It analyzes Moscow's attempt to capitalize on the United States' political withdrawal from the region and the consequential power vacuum left behind. In the past, Russia has operated in the Middle East through traditional hard power strategies, supplying arms and equipment in support of regional hard-liners. But now, Russian strategy has shifted to a multi-sector approach. This paper will use the case studies of Syria, Turkey, and Egypt to demonstrate how Moscow is employing a combination of military, economic, and soft power methods to rebuild Russia's reputation in the Middle East.

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IN BRIEF

- Through its activity in Syria, Russia has already gained prominence as a player in the Middle East. The current challenge facing Putin's regime is how to convert this country-specific hard-power-induced standing into broad, long-term political influence.
- Despite the changes in Middle Eastern policy throughout Russia's recent history, a consistent characteristic of Soviet, and now Russian policy in the region has been that it is always defined by competition with the West, especially the United States.
- The Arab Spring emphasized the divergence of the Russian position from those of Western nations, and set the stage for increasingly different foreign policies and competition for influence.
- The United States' declining reputation in the Middle East is accelerating Putin's ambitions for regaining and expanding Russian influence in the region. Disengagement under the Obama administration and the unpredictability of the Trump administration has created a power vacuum into which the Kremlin is eager to step.
- The case of Syria shows how hard power was necessary to re-establish Russian influence in the Middle East, but is not sufficient to maintain it in countries other than Syria. For this goal, the Kremlin has turned to soft power, as is evident from its approaches to other regional states such as Turkey and Egypt.

About the Author

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Introduction

As the United States' standing in the Middle East has declined, Russia is attempting to reemerge as a major regional player by filling the power vacuum and positioning itself as a mediator and strategic partner. In the past, Russia has operated in the Middle East through traditional hard power strategies, supplying arms and equipment in support of regional hard-liners. However, the Kremlin's strategy has shifted in recent years due to the new importance of rebuilding Russia's reputation as a reliable ally. Seizing upon the opportunity that rising mistrust of American motives has created, Moscow is increasingly using soft power strategies to project influence throughout the Middle East. The successful exercise of soft power is a pivotal part of Putin's renewed quest for "*derzhavnost*," or "great-poweriness."¹ Achieving Putin's goal of "great-poweriness" requires an extension of Russian influence via soft power mechanisms into the Middle East, where hard power alone has been insufficient.

Through its activity in Syria, Russia has already gained prominence as a player in the Middle East. But the current challenge facing Putin's regime is how to convert this country-specific hard-power-induced standing into broad, long-term political influence. In order to make this transition, Russia needs to convince its Middle Eastern partners of its reliability and intentions, as well as win over the public. Soft power appears to be the answer due to its unique ability to target both governments and the citizenry of multiple countries. In Moscow's dealings with Middle Eastern nations, we see how the hard coercive power on display in Syria is being pursued in tandem with soft power initiatives in other countries. Since soft power does not impose the same budgetary demands as hard power, it is a useful tool for the Kremlin, and has become a key aspect of Russian policy in the Middle Eastern countries of Turkey and Egypt. As specific initiatives in these countries show, Putin's administration has embarked on a series of ambitious economic, trade, energy, cultural, and media projects, all of which lend to achieving the goals of reshaping Russia's image in the Middle East and emerging as a newly dominant power.

This paper examines Russia's myriad soft power initiatives that are aiming to regain influence in the Middle East. It will consider how Moscow is capitalizing on the United States' political withdrawal from the region and the consequential soft power vacuum left behind. While American influence in Middle Eastern countries is still substantial, Russia is quickly attempting to rebuild its reputation through a multi-sector, soft power focused approach. This paper uses the case studies of Syria, Turkey, and Egypt to demonstrate how Moscow is employing these various soft power campaigns to rebuild Russia's reputation in the Middle East.

The Challenge of Russia's Image in the Middle East

Since World War II, Russian interests in the Middle East have been marked by competition with the West, in "a zero-sum competition for influence with the United States"² that peaked in the Cold War. At this time, the Kremlin viewed the Middle East as an area rife with potential for spreading Soviet influence and hoped to stave off American control of the region. The countries that seemed most easily amenable to Soviet partnerships were Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Algeria, because they showed a "socialist orientation" or "noncapitalist development model" in the eyes of Soviet elites.³ Throughout the Cold War, Middle Eastern states' relationship with the Soviet Union fell distinctly into the "client-patron" dynamic, as the USSR supported them through loans and infrastructure projects, reaping little economic payoff but hoping for political advantages in the larger conflict with the West.⁴

Soviet influence in the Middle East reached its height in the 1960s and 1970s, when Moscow provided aid to Arab countries fighting against Israel. In the lead-up to the 1967 Six Day War, the USSR provided significant economic aid and weaponry to Egypt and other Arab nations.⁵

The Kremlin's inability to prevent the military defeat of both Egypt and Syria in the Six Day War greatly harmed Russia's reputation in the Middle East.⁶ A similar dynamic played out during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when the USSR provided arms supplies to Egypt and Syria, both of which were eager to avenge the defeat of 1967. While Soviet-Egyptian relations were previously not at their strongest, 1973 saw a renewal of Soviet investment in the form of 1,500 military advisors, weaponry, and economic support.⁷ However, the outcome



An Israeli tank on the Golan Heights during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. CIA Photo.

of the war in a shaky UN-brokered cease-fire left the Soviet Union tainted in the eyes of its previous client states. Syria, irked by the USSR's collaboration with the U.S. to reach an early cease-fire, sought to diversify its military suppliers instead of relying solely on Soviet arms. Egypt turned its back fully on the Soviet Union, pivoting to the U.S. instead.⁸ As a result of the rifts caused in the aftermaths of the Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars, Russian influence substantially waned in the Middle East as countries turned instead to the United States for support.⁹

the 1970s. Specifically, Middle Eastern countries were dissatisfied with the Soviets' insufficient supply of military arms and equipment, especially in comparison to the West's technological superiority. When Mikhail Gorbachev took power in March 1985, his refocus on domestic policy (epitomized by *perestroika* and *glasnost*) meant that interest in the Middle East took a back seat.¹⁰

Arab countries' disillusionment with their Soviet supporter increased throughout

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 further weakened the state's influence in the Middle East, as persistent internal economic difficulties prevented the formation of a robust foreign policy. Russia all but disappeared from the Middle East immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This retreat from external partnerships led directly to a decline in Russia's reputation among Middle Eastern countries; according to a survey in 1991, while 96% of Arab citizens considered the USSR a "great military power," only 52% considered its successor, the Russian Federation, to be similarly powerful.¹¹

Vladimir Putin's accession to power brought a renewed interest in the Middle East, as he sought to reassert Russia as a global superpower via a revival of strategy focusing on carving out spheres of influence in regions where U.S. influence was waning. Putin's revived focus on the Middle East was motivated partly by "nostalgia for the legacy of Soviet influence," and partly due to economic and military cooperation interests.¹² Since taking power, Putin has steered Russia towards a policy of allying with status-quo actors in the Middle East.¹³

Despite the changes in Middle Eastern policy throughout Russia's recent history, a consistent characteristic of Soviet and then Russian policy in the region has been that it is always defined by competition with the West, especially the United States. Analysts during the Cold War predicted the likelihood of "prolonged political competition" as the two nations continue to vie for control of the Middle Eastern region.¹⁴ The historical dynamic has been described as "a zero-sum game of competition for influence,"¹⁵ and it seems clear that this pattern is continuing in the present moment. Now, the struggle seems to be playing out in the realm of soft power, with Moscow challenging Washington for a position of prominence in sectors of economics, energy, culture, and trade.

The Arab Spring: A Turning Point

The series of anti-government protests and subsequent armed rebellions that swept the Middle East and North Africa in 2010 - 2012, better known as the Arab Spring, had a profound effect not only on the region, but also on other states' reputations there. The protests were driven by popular discontent with oppressive autocratic regimes and low standards of living due to economic mismanagement.

The protests were catalyzed by the martyrdom of Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor who set himself on fire outside of the governor's office building in Tunisia.¹⁶ This action sparked a wave of popular demonstrations starting in Sidi Bouzid and continuing for two weeks throughout the country. After twenty-eight days of protests, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali resigned after 23 years in power, ushering in the democratization of Tunisia.¹⁷

The Tunisian Revolution rapidly spread, inspiring similar protests against other authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria. As the public demonstrations gained popularity and news coverage, many of the countries' governments responded with violent repression by the military or pro-government militias.¹⁸

Despite early hope for freedom, eight years after the beginning of the protests, authoritarianism and extremism have resurged in what has been referred to as the "Arab Winter," and only Tunisia has seen a successful transition to a constitutional democracy.¹⁹ While this wave of pro-democratic movement was initially met with praise for its potential to bring a new era of democracy in the Middle East, the longer-term results have been mixed. The Arab Spring has resulted in large-scale conflicts throughout the Middle East. These include the Syrian Civil War, the Libyan Civil War, the Yemeni Civil War, and a military coup in Egypt.²⁰

The intense political and social unrest highlighted by the Arab Spring has been seen by some analysts to have exacerbated prior divisions within Middle Eastern countries.²¹ These dynamics complicate the efforts of an outside power such as Russia to exert economic and cultural influence in the region. Clearly, the Arab Spring and its consequences have posed a challenge for Russian interests in the Middle East, and the Kremlin's policies have not been consistent in their response.



Protesters in Yemen in 2011 during the Arab Spring. Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons

Like the rest of the world, Russia has struggled to keep up with the cascading effects of rapid political and social change that have not been uniform across countries. The chaotic changes in governance structure and leadership have weakened Russia's economic and political relationships in the Middle East, and damaged its overall reputation.²² Therefore, Russian diplomacy faces a unique challenge in asserting its image in the Middle East due to conflicts in the region post-Arab Spring.

2011 marked an inflection point, when the Kremlin chose to not act against a proposed UN Security Council resolution dealing with the Libyan Civil War. Proposed by the UK, France, and Lebanon, UNSC Resolution 1973 sought to authorize use of military force in order to establish an immediate ceasefire and end of violence in Libya.²³ Despite Putin's denigration of the intervention as "defective and flawed... resembl[ing] medieval calls for crusades,"²⁴ Russia did not exercise its veto privilege as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, choosing to abstain instead, and therefore allowing the resolution to pass. As a result, Russia lost both its reputation as Libya's security guarantor and its previously beneficial economic ties to the country.²⁵

The Kremlin's response to the Arab Spring must be understood in the context of the tumultuous nature of Russian domestic politics at the time. The 2011-2012 parliamentary and presidential elections elicited widespread public protests and police crackdowns in major Russian cities. Newly-elected President Putin was quick to blame the unrest on U.S. and Western interference, accusing then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of inciting the protests.²⁶ These events in the domestic arena created a sensitive parallel to the Arab Spring protests, and as Putin regained Presidential power, solidifying central control and maintaining domestic stability was a top priority of his administration. This informed the development of a foreign policy emanating from the Kremlin that was profoundly anti-Western and intent on defending the value of state-led governance rather than liberal democracy.

The Arab Spring emphasized the divergence of the Russian position from those of Western nations, and set the stage for increasingly different foreign policies. While the U.S. viewed the protests as a shift towards Western-style democratic reform, Russian analysts at the time saw it as "a return to the traditional values of Middle Eastern societies, incorporating more Islamic identity."²⁷ In short, the Russian interpretation of the Arab Spring emphasized Islamization over democratization as the primary motivator. In an interview in 2012, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov criticized a global view of democratization, saying that "the attempt to 'transplant' models of state structure and development on the soil of other countries and export values, ignoring the traditions, values and cultures of others, as a rule, does not bring success."²⁸

This effort to push the narrative away from traditionally Western ideas and instead emphasize Islamization was an attempt to bolster Moscow's position in the Middle East in the midst of tumultuous change. Furthermore, it reflects a more general shift in Russian foreign policy towards confrontation with the West, and away from a focus on ideas that could have supported friendly relations, such as modernization. But due to the necessity of consolidating his political position at home in a context of increasingly vocal domestic unrest, when Putin regained power, he instead utilized paradigms of traditionalism and state-centric conservatism. This shift in policy ideas ushered in a more open confrontation with the West, as well as more openly hard-line criticisms of the dangers of fundamental Western ideas.²⁹ Russian policies towards the Middle East post-Arab Spring, and the resulting competition for influence, illustrate the results of this new dynamic.

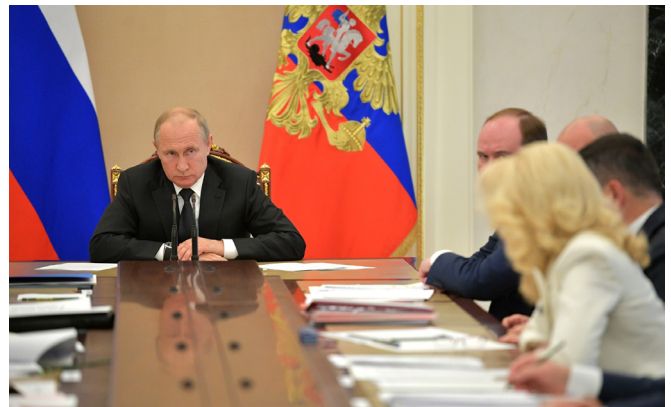
Policy Under Putin

In an article entitled “Russia and the Changing World” published in February 2012, Putin laid out his sweeping goals for shoring up relations with the Middle Eastern nations after the Arab Spring:

“It appears that with the Arab Spring countries, as with Iraq, Russian companies are losing their decades-long positions in local commercial markets and are being deprived of large commercial contracts... We intend to work with the new governments of the Arab countries in order to promptly restore our economic positions... We are interested in stepping up our political, trade and economic ties with all Arab countries, including those that... have gone through domestic upheaval. Moreover, I see real possibilities that will enable Russia to fully preserve its leading position in the Middle East, where we have always had many friends.”³⁰

Putin’s words reflect the importance of Russian interests in the Middle East post-Arab Spring. Under his leadership, Russia seeks to engage yet again in a classic struggle with the West for regional influence. In some ways, Putin’s policy mirrors the Cold War-era strategy of using military aid to win political allegiance from weaker nations: in 2015, \$5.5 billion in Russian arms exports were sent to the Middle East.³¹ However, the current push for influence over the region stands apart from its historical precedent, as strategy now relies heavily on soft power.

The United States’ declining reputation in the Middle East is accelerating Putin’s ambitions for regaining and expanding Russian influence in the region. Disengagement under the Obama administration and the unpredictability of the Trump administration has created a power vacuum into which the Kremlin is eager to step.³² While hard power can help shape an environment initially receptive to Russia, it is not the most effective tool for building long-lasting relationships and improving Moscow’s reputation. Therefore, Putin has strategically shifted towards soft power and “a spectrum of other tools”³³ that allow Russian influence to be projected throughout multiple sectors of Middle Eastern society.



Under Putin’s leadership, Russian policy in the Middle East has shifted to regaining previous influence.

By using a combination of economic and public diplomacy, Putin hopes to regain footing in Middle Eastern countries, capitalizing on the regional population’s growing mistrust of American intentions. There is already data suggesting that these efforts are bearing fruit: a 2019 poll which surveyed Arab youth (aged 18-24) shows that since 2016, the United States’ reputation has plummeted, while Russia’s has risen. In 2016, 63% considered the U.S. to be an “ally,” and it ranked as the 3rd “biggest ally” among Arab youth.³⁴ By 2018, the U.S. fell to 11th,³⁵ and the percentage of respondents considering it an “ally” at all plummeted in 2019 to 41%.³⁶ On the other hand, Russia’s reputation has seen the opposite trajectory. The amount of respondents considering Russia an “ally” rose from 60% in 2016 to 64% in 2019.³⁷ Furthermore, in 2018 Russia was listed as the 4th “biggest ally,”³⁸ a huge jump since in 2016 Russia did not even make it into the top ten.³⁹ Russia now ranks as the top non-Arab country considered among Arab youth to be their “biggest ally.”

The data above is sobering for the United States' hopes of maintaining influence in the Middle East, and shows how declining American reputation is inversely correlated with a climb in Russian popularity. This inverse relationship is the direct result of a purposeful strategy: Russia steps in to fill a vacuum left by retreating U.S. regional involvement. This dynamic and resulting turn in the tide of opinion has led some experts to declare that "there is in fact a soft-power battle between Russia and the U.S. in the Middle East," but "that Moscow has the momentum."⁴⁰ However, any analysis of both the decline in American reputation and the surge in Russian reputation must take into account a key difference: the varying levels of each country's actual activity in the region. Until very recently, the U.S. was committed to an active role in regional affairs. Russia, on the other hand, has only started to assert itself as a dedicated regional player in the last four years, and is able to avoid blame for regional mishaps or entanglement that is often directed at the United States.

These differing degrees of long-term involvement also explain a second pattern identifiable in the Arab Youth Survey Data: the discrepancy between Russia's rising geopolitical reputation and its lack of appeal based on more fluid, cultural levels. This is evident in responses to two questions: "which country in the world, if any would you like to live in?" and "which country in the world, if any, would you most like your country to be like?" Here, Russia does not make the top five "countries to live in" (United Arab Emirates, Canada, U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Germany) nor the top five "countries to emulate" (United Arab Emirates, U.S., Canada, Japan, and Germany).⁴¹ These results show that Russia does not yet hold the cultural and social allure that the U.S. does, despite the changes in both countries' reputations.

Syria

Russia's activity in Syria under the Putin regime is emblematic of a strategic reliance on hard power and coercive diplomacy, and has given the Kremlin a military foothold from which to shape the balance of power in the Middle East. Furthermore, Putin's comments about the situation in Syria show how he aims to position Russia as a counterweight to the United States,⁴² sending the message that the U.S. is to blame for the Middle East's security challenges, while Russia steps in to fill the newly-created power vacuum left in America's absence.

While Russia began militarily intervening in Syria in 2011, the justification for their military operations is found in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, which was signed by Putin in November 2016, and points to "external interference" as the main cause of instability and rising extremism in the country. It also highlights the Kremlin's goal of gaining an enhanced presence in the country and Middle East generally, in order to tackle instability abroad that could, if not stopped, eventually impact Russia within its own borders.⁴³

Russian support of President Bashar al-Assad has elicited global criticism, but has also served to catapult Russia to a position of strength in Syria, as the military operation has shown that the Kremlin's might can and will be exercised outside of its borders. A Russian military presence in Syria was instrumental in supporting al-Assad's regime. Gaining military prominence in Syria has had important benefits for Moscow; through its establishment of permanent military bases in the country, the Russian armed forces have a starting point from which to project military power throughout the Mediterranean and Black Sea.⁴⁴ Putin has already taken steps in this direction through the creation of the Russian Eastern Mediterranean naval flotilla.⁴⁵

The case of Syria shows how hard power was necessary to re-establish Russian influence in the Middle East, but is not sufficient to maintain it in countries other than Syria. For this goal, the Kremlin has turned to soft power, as is evident from its approaches to other regional states such as Turkey and Egypt.

Turkey

Russo-Turkish relations have been unsteady in recent history, especially after the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian fighter that crossed into Turkish air space from Syria in November 2015. Since then, leaders of both countries have striven to improve relations. Putin recently has taken advantage of the rising tide of authoritarianism in Turkey and its growing mistrust of the United States to align more closely with the nation, despite its NATO membership. Turkey's strengthening ties to Russia mean that it is caught between allegiances to the West and rising affinity to the Kremlin, a situation that has historical precedent.

Despite the countries' membership to opposing geopolitical blocs during the Cold War, a Turkish-Soviet/Russian dialogue has been prominent at times. A geopolitical balance between the two nations was achieved by the signing of the Montreux Convention in 1936 which regulated access to the Black Sea.⁴⁶ Cooperation between Ankara and Moscow only grew after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when diplomats from both sides worked together to preserve Russian access to the Black Sea by creating mechanisms to ensure access was unimpeded by Western military influence in the region.⁴⁷ However, the late 2000s marked a decline in Turkish trust of their former partner, due to Moscow's pursuit of expanding interests in the Russian-Georgian War of 2008. Furthermore, increased NATO-Russia tension continues to pose a threat to the balance of power in the Black Sea, making it difficult for Turkey to accommodate all nations' regional interests and avoid alienating Russia.⁴⁸

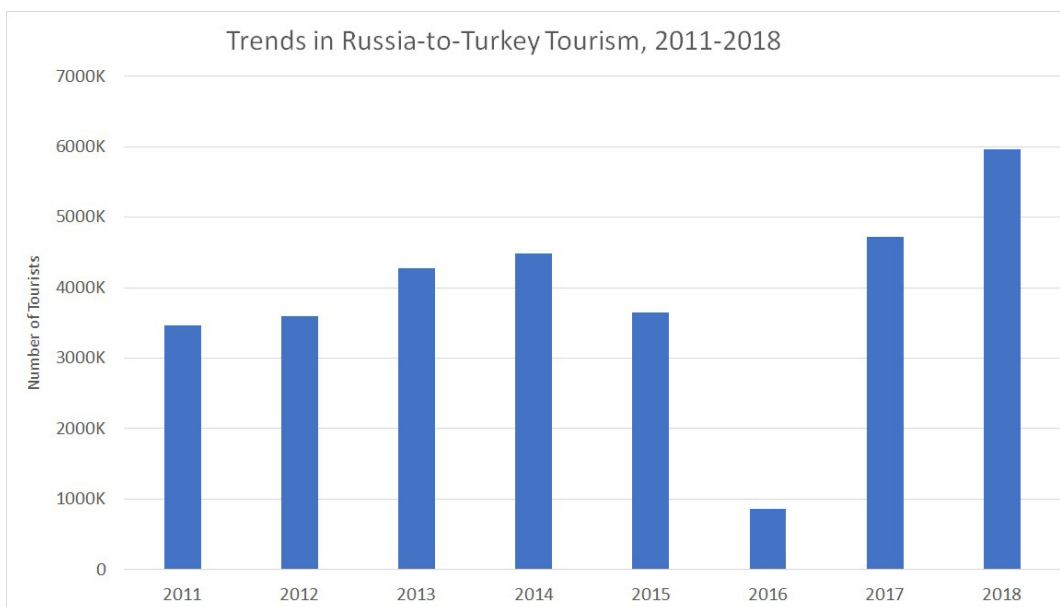
Russia's efforts to rehabilitate relations with Turkey have been in part facilitated by Ankara's growing mistrust of the United States; as usual, Putin has been quick to capitalize on weaknesses within NATO for his own gain. In dealing with Turkey, Russia is capitalizing on internal cracks in the NATO network, making use of Turkey's need to balance between the West and Moscow.⁴⁹ Ever since the American invasion of Iraq, Turkey has seen the U.S. as a destabilizing actor in the region, a perspective solidified by U.S. support of Kurdish militias in Syria.⁵⁰ Putin saw an opportunity to use this resentment for his advantage, and was quick to support Erdogan's growing authoritarian tendencies. Putin's efforts to bolster personal relations with the Turkish president are most notably seen in his response to the attempted coup of 2016. While most national leaders condemned Erdogan's intense crack-down on anti-government critics and suspension of the rule of law in Turkey,⁵¹ Putin used it as an opportunity to strengthen Russo-Turkish ties. He called Erdogan to express approval of the anti-dissident campaign, and hosted the Turkish president in St. Petersburg a month later.⁵² The growing Erdogan-Putin connection (measured by their twenty-three meetings and fifty-two phone conversations since June 2016)⁵³ has already paved the way for broader soft power measures.

Russia's soft power influence in Turkey has been quietly growing across multiple sectors. The most easily identifiable area is the energy industry. In May 2010, the two countries signed an agreement allowing Russia to build, own, and operate the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, Turkey's first nuclear power plant.⁵⁴ Construction on the plant began in 2018, and is scheduled to be operational by 2025.⁵⁵ The importance of energy ties in the Turkish-Russo relationship is further evident in their mutual gas dependency; Turkey is currently Gazprom's (Russia's state-owned natural gas company) second largest export market.⁵⁶ In an effort to further expand control over the Turkish gas market, Russia began work on TurkStream, a natural gas pipeline connecting the two countries across the Black Sea, in 2014.⁵⁷ TurkStream is a powerful symbol of Russian dominance over Turkey's gas supply. Ankara's reliance on Moscow for gas, plus Russian control of the in-progress nuclear plant, gives the Kremlin significant leverage via the energy sector.

Russian soft power initiatives in Turkey have also stretched into the realm of culture and tourism. In early August of this year, the two countries celebrated their third “Turkey-Russia cross-cultural year,” an initiative to increase cross-cultural collaboration.⁵⁸ Providing both government officials and the public with lavish performances, musical demonstrations, and exhibitions, the cross-cultural year is a classic example of cultural diplomacy. For the Kremlin, it offers an opportunity to target the Turkish public with positive images of Russia, reinforcing the idea that Moscow and Ankara can and should be natural allies. Furthermore, just a few weeks ago Putin lifted visa requirements for Turkish service passport holders, allowing Turkish citizens on business trips, diplomatic and consular missions, and other official trips to travel more easily to Russia. This new visa-free regime, while not directly impacting everyday Turkish citizens, is nonetheless an exercise of soft power, as it targets societal elites, whose visibility and positions as opinion-shapers have an effect on the public at large. A more significant step of allowing all citizens to travel visa-free between Turkey and Russia is still in the works, but it was initially spelled out in a 2010 bilateral agreement.⁵⁹ The partial enactment of this agreement for holders of service passports seems to suggest that a full enactment is possible in the near future, a move that would greatly increase tourism ties between the two nations.

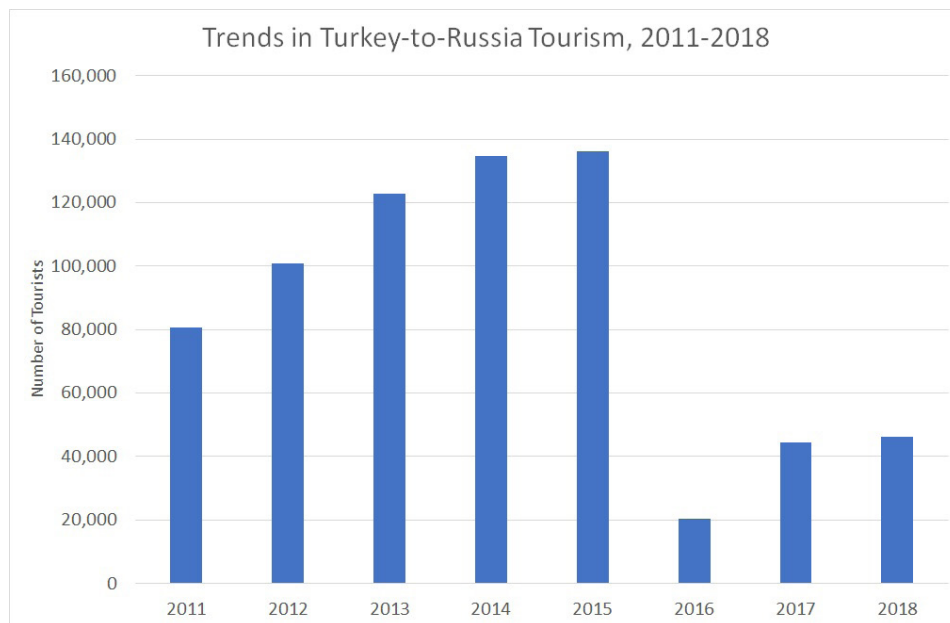
The economic results of these soft power initiatives are already becoming clear. As of February of this year, Turkish construction companies are working on 1,961 projects in Russia, yielding a net worth of \$73.1 billion.⁶⁰ While trade between the two countries declined between 2013 and 2016, it has increased since then at a rate of nearly 40% every year.

Another potential measure of soft power effectiveness is tourism. The number of tourists travelling between the two countries is also rapidly increasing since 2016; in 2017, 4.7 million Russians visited Turkey, up from the 866,000 in 2016.⁶¹ The increase in Russia-to-Turkey tourism, as illustrated below, shows that the closer trade and cultural connections are indeed yielding noticeable results. A growth in numbers of Russian tourists shows a rise in Turkey’s reputation among Russian citizens. Furthermore, increased Russia-to-Turkey tourism is advantageous for Russia, as it promotes greater exposure of Turkish people to Russian ideals and culture, through their interactions with more and more tourists.



Source: United Nations Statistics Division, Trade Statistics Branch. <https://comtrade.un.org/data>

Turkey-to-Russia tourism, however, has not experienced the same rapid growth. As shown below, the number of Turks travelling to Russia plummeted in 2016. This is partly due to Russia's suspension of the visa-free travel agreement with Turkey in November 2015.⁶² Prior to this date and since 2011, Turks and Russians were able to travel to each other's countries without obtaining a visa, as part of an agreement signed in May 2010 by Presidents Medvedev and Abdullah Gul.⁶³ The end of this visa-free agreement in late 2015 is one explanation for the plummeting numbers in following years. While Russia-to-Turkey tourism has met and even surpassed pre-2016 levels, the same cannot be said for the reverse. This trend suggests that Russian soft power initiatives have not yet yielded concrete results in terms of literal "attraction" to Russia. The low numbers in 2017 and 2018, while an improvement from 2016's low-point, do not suggest warm feelings or an inclination among the public to visit Russia. While there has been a shift in Turks' attitudes towards Russia—32% of Turkish citizens viewed Russia favorably in 2017, up from 13% in 2009⁶⁴—the same cannot be said for concrete action measured by the levels of tourists. Despite the soft power campaigns, restrictions such as visa requirements nonetheless prevent substantial citizen-to-citizen interaction. Perhaps these tourism trends drive home a hard truth about soft power: it takes quite a bit of time and no small effort to transform initiatives and high-level policies into citizen-level opinion change. Whether Moscow can overcome this challenge remains to be seen.



Source: Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, *Tourism Statistics* <https://www.ktb.gov.tr/EN-153017/tourism-statistics.html>

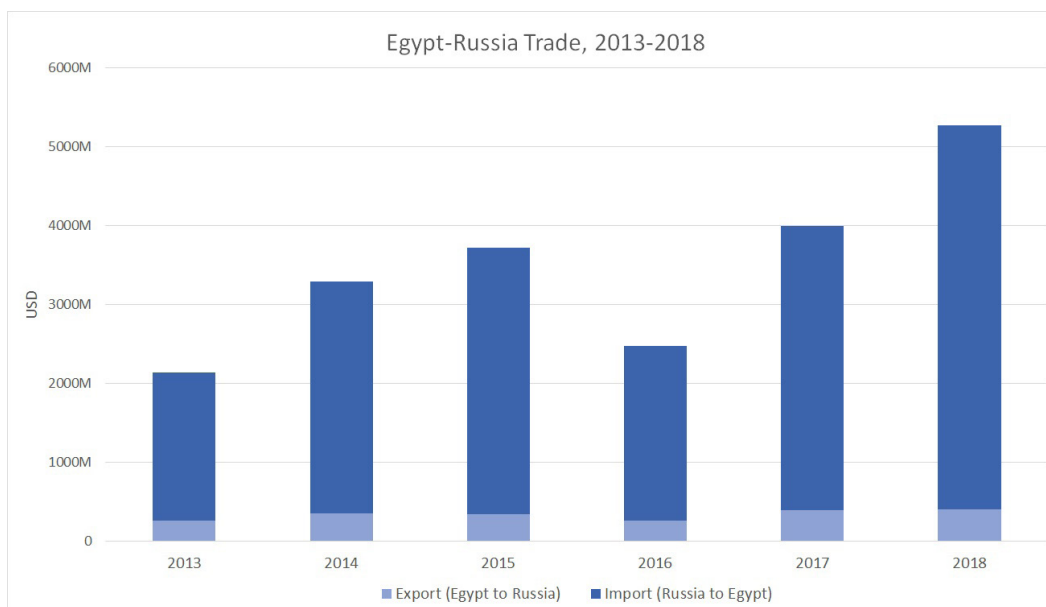
Egypt

Russo-Egyptian relations have been steadily improving since a military coup in July 2013 ousted President Mohamed Morsi. Since then, Putin and current Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi have been working to strengthen bilateral ties through military, economic, and cultural collaboration. Just as the Kremlin capitalized on U.S. withdrawal from Turkey to gain more influence, in Egypt, Russia is similarly stepping into a power vacuum left by the Obama administration. President Obama did not cultivate a relationship with Sisi due to the Egyptian president's poor record on human rights.⁶⁵

Putin on the other hand, has shown no such scruples, and was quick to show support for Sisi, inviting him to his personal residence in Moscow.⁶⁶ As with other countries in the Middle East, Russia is using Egypt's disappointment with U.S. policy to its advantage, by exploiting the space left by American retreat. The decline of the U.S. status among Egyptians is evident in a drop in the percentage of citizens with a favorable view of the United States: down from 30% in 2006 to 10% in 2014.⁶⁷ The Kremlin sees an opening in this change, and is eager to bolster its own position in Egypt as the U.S.' falters.

Increasing Russo-Egyptian cooperation is most apparent in the military-technical sector. Since President Sisi gained power, Russia has sought expanded access to Egypt's military infrastructure, and in 2017 the two presidents signed an agreement allowing mutual access to each other's airspace and airbases.⁶⁸ Parallel to this framework agreement, joint exercises between the two countries have become more common; since 2016 they have participated in annual "Defenders of Friendship" drills.⁶⁹ The access agreement and joint exercises together represent the deepest Russian presence in Egypt since 1973. In a move that translates this presence into direct collaboration, Putin and Sisi signed the Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation Agreement in October 2018, pledging collaboration on regional security threats as well as cooperation across a range of sectors.⁷⁰

Russo-Egyptian trade connections are stronger than ever. In May 2018, ministries of trade from both countries signed the Russian Industrial Trade Zone agreement, establishing an industrial zone in the Suez Canal Economic zone that is on track to attract \$7 billion in investments. The agreement will last 50 years, generating an estimated 35,000 jobs and allowing bilateral cooperation in manufacturing of products for both markets. According to Egyptian representatives, the agreement represents "an unprecedented leap in the level of industrial and investment cooperation between Egypt and Russia."⁷¹ This ambitious project is of key strategic importance for the Kremlin; through it, Moscow will gain access to new markets in the Middle East and North Africa and project economic influence through those regions, a necessity due to the harsh sanctions imposed by the U.S. and EU.



Source: United Nations Statistics Division, Trade Statistics Branch. <https://comtrade.un.org/data>

Russia's renewed focus on improving relations with Egypt has resulted in noticeable economic benefits. One estimate puts the number of registered businesses with Russian capital in Egypt at 400, and the amount of direct investments at \$100 million.⁷² Furthermore, direct Russian-Egyptian trade has grown considerably in recent years.

In another similarity to its strategy in Turkey, Russia is using closer energy ties to shore up influence in Egypt. Rosneft, Russia's largest oil company, owns a 30% stake in Egypt's Zohr gas field, allowing Russia to be intimately involved in what is quickly becoming one of the biggest gas deposits in the Mediterranean Sea.⁷³ Rosneft also signed a framework agreement with Egyptian companies setting intentions to explore opportunities for joint Russo-Egyptian gas ventures.⁷⁴ In 2015, Moscow provided Cairo with a \$25 billion loan to build the Dabaa Nuclear Power Plant, Egypt's first nuclear plant. Set to become operational in 2024, the plant is a key part of Sisi's plans to diversify Egyptian energy sources.⁷⁵ However, Russia's investment means that Moscow will continue to be involved in Cairo's energy development, exercising significant influence over Egypt's emerging nuclear power potential, just as it does in Turkey.

Russian efforts to strengthen cultural ties with Egypt have also accelerated in recent years. Roots of cross-cultural collaboration through educational exchange have been present since 2006, when the Egyptian Russian University (ERU) was opened in Cairo. ERU is the Middle East's oldest private university and works in cooperation with seven Russian institutions. It enrolls approximately 4,000 undergraduates and will soon offer degrees in nuclear engineering.⁷⁶ ERU is a central mechanism for connecting young Egyptian academics and professionals to Russia early in their careers. Another instrument of Russian soft power that has been successful in Egypt is the Russian Center for Science and Culture (RCSC), an operation that focuses on cultural and scientific cooperation as well as Russian-language promotion. The Rossotrudnichestvo Federal Agency operates six other RCSCs in the Middle East, all of which serve to promote Russian policies at the citizen level.⁷⁷

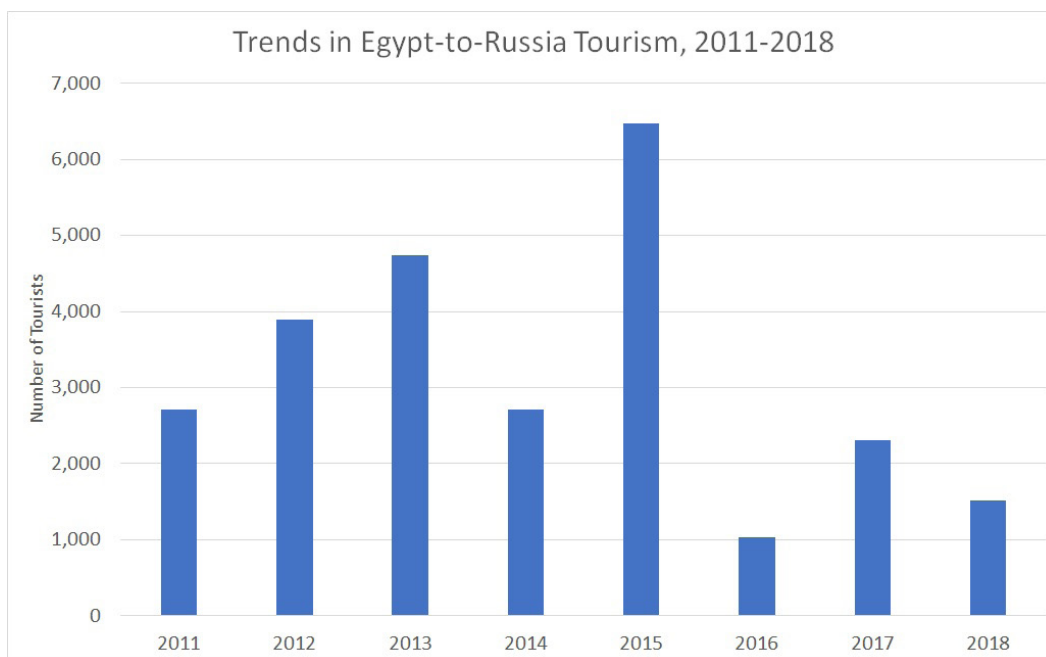
This expansion of citizen-targeted soft power can also be seen in the aggressive growth of state-sponsored *Russia Today* (RT) *Arabic*, which has become one of the top three most popular news outlets in the Middle East. *RT Arabic* was created in 2007, and has since evolved into an active presence on social media platforms, often eclipsing the popularity of other media outlets. For example, *RT Arabic* publishes five times more on Facebook than *Al Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya Arabic* (the other two top news sources in the Middle East). According to 2017 estimates, *Al-Hurra's* weekly Middle Eastern viewership of 16.4 million pales in comparison to *Al-Jazeera's* and *Al-Arabiya's*, both of which reach roughly 25 million viewers each week.⁷⁸ Yet *RT Arabic* claims that 6.7 million people view its content daily in the Middle East, meaning that if its numbers are reliable, it leads the pack with roughly 46.9 million viewers weekly.⁷⁹ As with any content published by *RT*, we should be skeptical of the reliability of these figures.

In Egypt specifically, *RT Arabic* is the 174th most popular website, easily surpassing *Al-Arabiya* (422nd), *Al-Jazeera* (1,172nd), and *Al-Hurra* (2,126).⁸⁰ The failure of *Al-Hurra* (Arabic for "The Free One") to garner substantial popularity is particularly notable, as it is the United States' main broadcasting effort aimed at the Middle East and North Africa.⁸¹ *Al-Jazeera's* low ranking in Egypt results from being banned in 2017 due to charges of supporting terrorism and propagating fake news; three of the outlet's journalists are on a government "terror list."⁸² This bolsters *RT Arabic's* presence in Egypt, since there are fewer outlets with which it must compete. *RT Arabic* has certainly been successful in establishing a presence in Egypt; the country is currently the ninth-highest consumer of *RT* online material worldwide.⁸³ *RT Arabic's* substantial position in Egypt allows the Kremlin to project pro-Russia positions throughout the country, reaching Egyptian citizens directly and shoring up its status as both a political and cultural ally.

A robust media presence does not necessarily signify robust influence. Without further research, we cannot determine if *RT Arabic*'s activity in Egypt translates into significant impact on the citizen-level. Analysis of media's and propaganda's effects is complicated due to the likelihood of fake or bot accounts which can artificially inflate rankings.⁸⁴ Since output of content does not automatically imply influence, further study is needed to determine more precisely the extent of Russian media programs. However, the mere existence of such programs do signify a concerted effort from the Kremlin to influence Middle Eastern publics by exposing them to pro-Russian news and positions.

In addition to its media programs, Russia is seeking to bolster tourism ties with Egypt. While direct flights to Egypt from Russia were suspended in 2015 after the Islamic State bombed a Russian passenger plane over Sinai, recent bilateral talks have focused on resuming normal travel. In April, Putin reestablished flights to Cairo and to Red Sea destinations.⁸⁵ Russians have already returned in strength to Egypt as tourists; in 2018, Russians were Egypt's second-largest inbound market.⁸⁶ The lifting of the three-year flight ban has been a boon to the Egyptian tourism industry, and signals Russia's renewed interest in citizen-level soft power influence, and the intention to spread pro-Russia messages via growth in outbound tourists to Egypt.

However, Egypt-to-Russia tourism reflects the same trend evident in Turkey in the past three years. As shown below, Russia seems to have become less attractive in Egyptian eyes as a tourist destination, with numbers actually decreasing from 2017 to 2018 despite a bump after 2016. Again, this downward trend reveals the profound challenge of achieving measurable public opinion change through soft power initiatives. Furthermore, it emphasizes how highly publicized events such as the 2015 bombing over the Sinai Peninsula keenly impact public views. Despite the aggressive economic, educational, and media programs Moscow has instituted in Egypt, citizens still remain wary of travelling to Russia. This could indicate the lingering deterrent effect of the 2015 attack, or the deeper memory of prior bad relations. Either way, Russian soft power has not yet made a tangible difference at the citizen-level.



Source: Federal State Statistics Service, *The entry of foreign citizens into the Russian Federation* <https://fedstat.ru/indicator/38479>

Conclusion

The post-Arab spring strategic and cultural landscape has catalyzed a shift in Russian policy towards the Middle East. While previous efforts in the region were motivated out of a desire to reclaim what were Soviet zones of influence at the height of the Cold War, the changes brought about by the Arab Spring forced a shift in Russian strategy. Now, the policy under Putin has expanded to utilize a wide range of soft power techniques. As the United States adopts a position of retreat and America's reputation continues to plummet among Middle Eastern nations, the Kremlin is ideally situated to step in and fill the emerging power vacuum. The success of Russian economic diplomacy and bilateral energy ties with Turkey and Egypt have led both countries to be increasingly intertwined with (and dependent on) Russia financially. Furthermore, Moscow's powerful media presence and aggressive cultural initiatives in these countries show how Putin's regime is taking steps to bolster political agreements with citizen-targeted soft power in order to strengthen Russian influence in multiple sectors of society. While these initiatives have not yet yielded concrete results at the citizen-level in terms of tourism numbers, their broader impact should not be ignored. Russia has certainly learned from its past and is seeking to use a wider array of mechanisms to exert influence over newly-vulnerable regions. As America abdicates economic and cultural leadership as a consequence of its political withdrawal from the Middle East, we should be prepared for a rise in Russian influence in every sector.

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The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan organization created to educate the American public and the world about the changing nature of national security in the 21st Century.

Gone are the days when a nation's security could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor and competitiveness of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with our partners and with all the tools at our disposal and address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this we must forge a bipartisan consensus here at home.

ASP brings together prominent American business leaders, former members of Congress, retired military flag officers, and prominent former government officials. ASP conducts research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them via events, traditional & new media, meetings, and publications.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, energy challenges, and our economic wellbeing. Partisan bickering and age old solutions simply won't solve our problems. America – and the world - needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge that consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities that abound.



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