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Submission from:

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Introduction

1. This submission is in response to the Foreign Affairs Committee's request for evidence about 'the UK's engagement with the Middle East and North Africa'. This submission focuses on Russia's growing engagement in the region, especially through regional conflicts, namely in Syria. It, therefore, also interacts with questions about the presence of Private Military Companies, whether the UK should prioritise stability over democracy promotion, and prospects for UK cooperation with allies.
2. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has had a limited presence in the Middle East, mostly represented by unofficial and personal connections between the former Soviet Union and Middle Eastern states and organisations. While subsequent Russian Foreign Policy (FP) concepts have mentioned the Middle East, it was not until 2013 that Putin's more assertive foreign policy towards the region was outlined. The emphasis on the Middle East in 2013 was spurred in part by the Arab uprisings that swept across the region in 2010 and 2011, morphing into prolonged wars in Yemen, Libya, and Syria. The latter has become both a central interest for and an instrument of Russian foreign policy in the region. Russia's FP Concepts since 2013 assert that a greater Russian presence in the Middle East is geared towards promoting multipolarity, and deterring Western interventionism, which Moscow views to be a cause of popular and, at times, pro-democratic movements in: the Middle East; Russia itself; and Russia's immediate neighbourhood.¹ Russia has inserted itself into matters of international security, in an attempt to make itself indispensable to them and increase its influence globally.

¹https://russiaeu.ru/userfiles/file/foreign_policy_concept_english.pdf;
https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/0413pp_monaghan.pdf;
<https://interkomitet.com/foreign-policy/basic-documents/foreign-policy-concept-of-the-russian-federation-approved-by-president-of-the-russian-federation-vladimir-putin-on-november-30-2016/>;
https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/.

3.

What is Russia doing in the Middle East and what is the impact on UK interests?

4. Russia has involved itself **militarily** in regional conflicts not only to bolster its traditional partners, but to secure its indispensability to matters of international security. This has not only been Russia's strategy towards promoting an alternative security framework in the Middle East, which has historically been underwritten by Western powers, but also to overcome its international isolation after sanctions were imposed on Moscow after its annexation of Crimea in 2014. Moscow's intervention in Syria exemplifies this strategy.

3.1. Russia's military intervention in Syria, beginning at the end of September 2015, was the first of its kind outside of the former Soviet Union since its collapse. Moscow's Syria intervention has been related to the concept of **anti-access area/denial (A2/AD)**.² While some have claimed Russia to be building an A2/AD framework that spans the eastern and southern peripheries of Europe (from Ukraine to Libya),³ it is only in Syria, where Russia controls a naval base (Tartous), several airbases across the country (most notably Hmeimim) and has a S-400 surface-to-air missile defence system, that could be cautiously categorised as an A2/AD bubble. Even still, it is less so in Russia's capabilities and military strategy, and more so in its grand strategic interests in Syria, also observed in Moscow's approach to Ukraine, that indicates a carving out of influence over certain regions that includes military, diplomatic, economic, and informal strategies to curb the influence of its rivals. The Kremlin does not desire complete control over Syria, but decisive influence in Syria and the broader region to exert leverage over other foreign policy areas, such as Ukraine. Russia's military insertion into an area previously dominated by NATO members can be explained by Moscow's desire to promote multipolarity in the region and globally.

3.1.1. Prior to Russia's military intervention in Syria, Russia had no functioning military bases in the region (Tartous was largely

²<https://www.euromesco.net/publication/in-from-the-cold-russias-agenda-in-the-middle-east-and-implications-for-the-eu/>; <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/putins-war-in-syria-9780755634644/>: p. 72.

³https://www.academia.edu/41760494/The_Political_Military_Aspects_of_Russian_Engagement_in_the_Syrian_Civil_War_in_V_Sazonov_I_Ploom_A_Saumets_edts_Russia_Syria_and_the_West_From_the_Aftermath_of_the_Arab_Spring_in_the_Middle_East_to_Radicalisation_and_Immigration_Issues_in_Europe.

dilapidated). Now, Russia's free and unfettered control over **Tartous naval base** until at least 2066 has facilitated a long-term Russian military presence in the Mediterranean. It has been instrumental in the delivery of Russian weapons to bolster al-Asad's regime and the expansion of its influence in the country and the region.

3.1.2. Russia has also gained several **military airbases**, the first and most important of which is Hmeimim airbase, from which Russia has launched air attacks in support of al-Asad's military operations. Additionally, Russia has partial control over al-Jarrah military air base near Aleppo, recaptured from ISIS in 2017.⁴ Moscow also gained Shayrat airbase in Homs in 2015, Tiyas (T-4) airbase in West Palmyra, and in Manbij after former US President, Donald Trump, withdrew US troops in 2019, in addition to a helicopter base in Qamishli.⁵ These have not been formally consolidated, however, with al-Asad's military gains and retention of territory, Russia's military presence in Syria is being entrenched.

3.1.3. After the Russia Su-24 warplane was downed by Turkish forces in Syria in 2015, Moscow sought to bolster its air defences by introducing the **S-300 air defence system** but stalled its delivery upon Israel's request. In 2018, the downing of a Russian Il-20 reconnaissance plane in Latakia by Syrian forces, who mistook it when the Israeli military used it for cover, prompted the delivery of S-300, and later S-400, air missile defence systems. This weapons delivery expanded Russia's surveillance and combat reach into Israel, Lebanon, Palestine, northern Jordan and the South of NATO-member, Turkey.⁶

⁴<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/16/assad-will-welcome-new-russian-military-bases-in-syria>; <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-syria-restore-syrian-air-base-joint-use-2023-01-23/>.

⁵<https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/putins-war-in-syria-9780755634644/>; p. 81; <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/10/trump-withdraws-troops-syria-fallout#:~:text=In%20the%20latest%20development%2C%20Trump,for%20a%20Turkish%20military%20incursion.>

⁶<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34976537>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/after-downing-of-russian-plane-moscow-to-supply-s-300-missile-system-to-syria/29506669.html>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/after-downing-of-russian-plane-moscow-to-supply-s-300-missile-system-to-syria/29506669.html>.

3.2. Russia's military presence in Syria has proliferated its **military partnerships**, both operationally and through weapons trade.

3.2.1. Russia's military intervention in Syria, a congested military arena, has provided it with the opportunity to pragmatically coordinate with **UK partners**, such as Israel and NATO member Turkey to prevent unnecessary escalation, coordinate operations, and balance interests. However, Turkey's presence in northern Syria has been described as an illegal occupation by Russia, much like the US's minimal presence in Syria.⁷ Additionally, Israeli air operations in Syria, targeting Iranian installations, have been increasingly condemned by Russia and Syria, especially in the context of recent escalations between Israel and Hamas.⁸

3.2.2. Furthermore, the Syrian arena has been concertedly used by Russian military manufacturers and exporters, such as Rostec and Rosoboronexport, to **promote the efficiency and value of Russian weapons**. Most controversially, Turkey procured the Russian S-400 system, over which the US sanctioned Ankara and removed it from its F-35 programme, despite three NATO countries having previously procured S-300s.⁹ Between 2010 and 2016, Russian exports accounted for just over 40% of global air defence systems sales.¹⁰ Iran acquired a Russian S-300 air defence system in 2016 and Su-35 fighter jets this year. However, Russia's poor military performance in Ukraine, its greater need for its own weapons, and a stringent sanctions regime on Russian weapons exports limits Russia's military exports. Egypt cancelled an order of Su-35s for fear of US sanctions. Last year, Russian defence manufacturers were

⁷<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/02/13/russia-accuses-turkey-of-breaking-syria-deals-rejects-erdogan-claim-a69272>; <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/are-putin-and-erdogan-doing-territorial-swaps-in-syria-again/>.

⁸<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/russia-says-israeli-air-strikes-on-syria-unacceptable/articleshow/104863533.cms>.

⁹<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/24/turkey-tells-us-at-nato-russian-defence-purchase-is-done-deal>; <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/russian-s-300s-used-by-3-nato-member-countries/1449436>.

¹⁰<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-03-20-russia-arms-exporter-connolly-sendstad.pdf>.

unable to process \$1 billion for arms deals primarily due to sanctions, a blow to one of the most significant industries in Russia.¹¹ However, regional importers of Russian weapons tend not to be traditional British partners or allies in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Israel, Oman, or Qatar.¹²

3.3. Russia has also tested the utility of **Private Military Companies** (PMCs), such as the Wagner Group, in Syria. The use of Wagner for sensitive and unofficial operations has enabled the Russian state to gain strategic control over areas of Syria's economy, especially the hydrocarbons industry, territory, and important infrastructure with plausible deniability. PMCs have been crucial to Russia gaining economic returns on its investment in Syria, which will be explored in paragraph 4.

4. Since Russia's military intervention in Syria, Moscow has had its sights set on **economic returns** on its military investment. While the Syrian uprising in 2011 spurred many Russian businesses to leave Syria, Russia's military intervention in Syria signalled its interest in Syria's reconstruction and was supported by Walid al-Muallem, Syria's foreign minister. Russia has utilised its position in Syria to try to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions imposed over its invasion of Ukraine and its actions in Syria. While large Russian-owned international companies have been deterred from operating in Syria, smaller and less transparent entities, especially those already sanctioned, have least to lose and most to gain from engaging in business in Syria. Since the Syrian uprising, Russian companies have emerged in Syria's education, financial, tourism, real estate, and manufacturing sectors. Most importantly, since 2013, Syria has offered Russian companies, especially those already under sanctions, favourable agreements to manage and develop its resources. Between 2014 and 2017, Soyuzneftegaz, Sroytransgaz, and Evro Polis, headed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, were awarded contracts, apportioning significant stakes in Syria's hydrocarbons industry.¹³ Spurred by al-Asad's promise that Russian companies would be the sole external actors in regime-controlled areas with

¹¹<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-03-20-russia-arms-exporter-connolly-sendstad.pdf>;

¹² <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/19/iran-russia-arms-weapons-defense-exports-ukraine-war-middle-east/>;

¹³<https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-soyuzneftegaz-syria-idAFL6N0M718Z20140313>;

<https://en.thebell.io/russian-mercenary-army-financier-made-oil-deal-syria-just-clash-u-s-troops/#:~:text=The%20legally%20binding%20agreement%20regarding,Zor%2C%20The%20Bell%20has%20earned>; <https://blogs.eui.eu/medirections/the-hellish-cycle-continues-for-syria-the-economic-impacts-of-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>; <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-03-08RussiaAndIranEconomicInfluenceInSyria.pdf>.

rights to Syria's oil, gas, and phosphates, Wagner Group set about capturing territory in strategic locations, such as around Deir Ez-Zor, which culminated in clashes in February 2018 with US and Kurdish-SDF forces, killing 200 Russian mercenaries.¹⁴ Mercury and Velada, Russian entities sanctioned alongside Evro Polis and Stroytransgaz,¹⁵ received exploration rights in Syria's north-western oil and gas fields in 2019.¹⁶ Many of these deals are advance contracts likely to be actionable once reconstruction begins, but Russia is unable to cover the estimated \$400 billion needed. China's admission of Syria to its Belt and Road Initiative in January 2022 and the promotion of Syria as a Strategic Partner in September may be an indicator of future Chinese funding for reconstruction and returns on Russian investment. However, China remains cautious over investing in Syria due to the protracted conflict and political instability.¹⁷

5. Russia has also tried to promote multipolarity through its **diplomatic involvement in Syria** by contesting international norms, namely Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the promotion of liberal democracy globally. By bolstering authoritarian governments not partnered with the West, such as al-Asad's regime, at the UNSC and Russian-led peace processes, namely the Astana platform, Moscow has challenged the West's policy goals of democracy promotion, economic liberalisation, and humanitarian intervention for the protection of human rights. It has done so to promote an alternative order in the Middle East and globally that privileges statism over individual freedom, something that appeals to governments that do not subscribe to liberal democratic values.¹⁸ This has bolstered Russia's soft power among certain populations, especially those whose interests are satisfied by non-liberal democratic incumbent regimes.¹⁹ Furthermore, Russia has expanded its media reach in the Middle East, launching Arabic language channels of RT and Sputnik, which overtook the BBC's World Service frequency in Syria and Lebanon in January 2023.²⁰ Information campaigns have become a key component of Russia's

¹⁴<https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/putins-war-in-syria-9780755634644/>;

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/13/russian-mercenaries-killed-us-airstrikes-syria>.

¹⁵ <https://www.whitecase.com/insight-alert/eu-targets-wagner-group-and-three-oil-gas-companies-over-alleged-human-rights>; <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/j12369>.

¹⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-oil-russia-idUSKBN1YL0VK>.

¹⁷ K. Houghton (2023), "The Competition over Norms: The Case of the Syrian Conflict," in <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/09/china-syrias-assad-gets-political-fanfare-no-funding-commitments>.

¹⁸ <https://www.routledge.com/China-Russia-and-the-USA-in-the-Middle-East-The-Contest-for-Supremacy/Houghton-Houghton/p/book/9781032444079>.

¹⁹ <https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/en/publications/conservative-soft-power-liberal-soft-power-bias-and-the-hidden-at>; C. Cleveland (2023), "The Word on the Street: Gauging Public Perceptions of Washington, Moscow, and Beijing," in <https://www.routledge.com/China-Russia-and-the-USA-in-the-Middle-East-The-Contest-for-Supremacy/Houghton-Houghton/p/book/9781032444079>.

²⁰ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2386741/media>.

foreign policy operations globally, particularly in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Local-language Russian media channels have been a unique and efficient tool in disseminating a narrative that portrays Russia as a benevolent bulwark against chaos, especially in areas that have been affected by Western intervention, such as the Middle East.²¹

5.1. Furthermore, Russia's integrated military-diplomatic strategy that pressures local leaders into peace agreements, tantamount to surrender deals, promote a form of illiberal conflict resolution and peacebuilding, which privileges the state rather than human and political rights. The de-escalation zones designated by Russia, Iran, and Turkey at the Astana peace talks in May 2017 have been systematically targeted by Russian and Syrian forces to force local populations into submission and local leaders into agreements with the regime, underwritten by the Russian Reconciliation Center. These agreements brought formerly rebel-held areas back into the fold of the regime, at great cost to civilian life and infrastructure. Populations in so-called reconciled areas have had to choose between being evacuated to Idlib (mainly rebel fighters, conscription evaders, activists, and humanitarian workers) or staying in regime-recaptured territory where they are subject to vetting, arrest, and forced disappearance.²²

6. **The impact on UK interests:** Russia's presence and actions in Syria are of strategic importance to the UK.

6.1. Russia's actions in Syria have threatened the interests of NATO, and specifically its member, Turkey. While Turkey has remained committed to NATO, the situation in Syria has required Turkey to work closely with Russia, and at times has had to balance its commitments to NATO allies and Russia simultaneously.

6.2. Russia has also gained bases in the region, securing a foothold in a strategically important region where Western powers have underwritten security since the end of WWII.

²¹<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-disinformation-machine-has-middle-east-advantage>.

²²<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13533312.2023.2242761>.

- 6.3. Russian weapons exports are far less varied as compared to the variety of defence products sold by the UK. However, Russia has been interested in selling some of its most advanced weaponry to regional actors, which has analogous capacity to Western weaponry. Its client base is also far more varied than that of the UK, with MENA states, such as Algeria, Syria, Yemen, and Iran, importing most of their weapons from Russia, Iran proving its capacity in reverse-engineering advanced weaponry that may threaten British interests.²³
- 6.4. While the UK has few economic interests in Syria, small British oil companies, such as Gulfsands Petroleum, have nominally been evicted from Syria. With the political situation still volatile and the Syrian regime having promised Russia unique access to Syria's oil and gas resources, and the continued threat of sanctions, these companies are likely to lose their pre-war stakes in Syria's hydrocarbon's industry.
- 6.5. The winding down of the BBC's World Service and the rising popularity of Arabic-language Russian media channels in Syria and the broader Middle East may limit the UK's influence amongst the general populations of the region and its soft power. The dissemination of information is always set within a narrative, and Russian media outlets are keen to influence regional populations in favour of its policies and worldview. These may counter the UK's narratives and hinder local buy-in of British policies within the region.
- 6.6. The UK's interest in protecting and promoting human rights is threatened by local agreements brokered by Russia between local leaders and the regime.

Recommendations

7. NATO and should remain receptive and proactive towards issues in the region. Regular assessments of regional developments and a willingness to be proactive in situations

²³<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-03-20-russia-arms-exporter-connolly-sendstad.pdf>; <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1244018/distribution-of-arms-imports-into-algeria-by-country-of-origin/#:~:text=Russia%20is%20the%20main%20supplier,third%20leading%20import%20partners%2C%20respectively>; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/19/iran-russia-arms-weapons-defense-exports-ukraine-war-middle-east/>.

wherein its member states are directly involved, such as Turkey in the case of Syria, would prevent reliance on external powers, such as Russia, in regional, if not global, crises, like the Syrian conflict. This may also bolster the mutual influence of NATO partners during flash points and prevent the pursuit of unilateral policies that are detrimental to other members and the promotion and protection of human rights.

8. The UK should cooperate with its allies to find economic mechanisms that also deter already sanctioned individuals and entities, such as the late Yevgeny Prigozhin and his companies, Evro Polis, Velada, and Mercury, which obtained contracts in Syria's hydrocarbons industry, from benefitting from war zones and sanctioned states in the region. This could include coordinated and comprehensive asset freezes for all key individuals associated with such companies. Furthermore, stringent sanctions on Russia's weapons exports should be maintained.
9. The UK, in its prominent position as a permanent member of the UNSC, should support the review of the norm of R2P to make the conditions of its invocation more precise and its implementation a prerogative of international institutions rather than the international community to avoid impasses at the UNSC over human rights abuses. R2P has been a contentious issue for the international community, particularly between Russia, China, and Western powers. While its implementation has thus far been flawed, spurring a protracted conflict in Libya, international indecision in time-sensitive situations where civilian lives are at risk, such as in Syria, could be avoided if the R2P norm were revised and approved by all UNSC members. This would likely include a transference of implementation power from states to IGOs, like the UN, to avoid the perception that R2P is a tool of interventionist national foreign policy.
10. The UK should try to engage with local populations via an increased offering of satellite and radio media outlets. A greater awareness of BBC Arabic and a wider variety of British media outlets in local languages would counter the media narrative that often espouses anti-Western rhetoric and legitimises the authoritarian practices of Russia's partners in the region.

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