

A photograph of Vladimir Putin sitting at a dark, reflective desk. He is wearing a dark blue suit, a light blue shirt, and a patterned tie. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. His hands are clasped in front of him on the desk. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The desk's surface reflects his face and hands.

PUTIN'S MEDITERRANEAN GAMBIT

Endgame Unclear

Mark N. Katz

The **Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East** examines political and economic dynamics in the Middle East and recommends US, European, and regional policies to encourage effective governance, political legitimacy, and the unlocking of human and economic potential in the region. Our work also highlights success stories of individuals and institutions who overcame significant challenges in pursuit of social, economic, and political progress.

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Cover: Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a meeting with government members via a video link in Moscow, Russia, March 10, 2021.
Credit: Sputnik/Alexei Druzhinin via Reuters.

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For more than 250 years, Russian leaders have sought to project power and influence in the Mediterranean region. Sometimes these efforts have met with a significant degree of success. At times, though, Russia has pulled back from the Mediterranean because of setbacks in the region, events in Europe, or convulsions inside Russia. These pullbacks, however, have never been permanent and have always been followed by renewed Russian efforts to gain influence in the region.

This pattern spans Tsarist and Soviet times. Notable attempts to project Tsarist influence in the Mediterranean occurred in the 1770s, when Catherine the Great sought to promote rebellion in Egypt against Ottoman rule and her forces briefly occupied Beirut in 1773-74; in the 1830s, when Nicholas I this time helped the Ottoman Empire suppress rebellion in Egypt and extracted important concessions from the Sultan for having done so; and during World War I, when (despite their poor performance against Germany) Tsarist forces threatened to overwhelm the Ottomans in their Anatolian heartland and Russia obtained British and French consent for Russia to take control of the Turkish Straits in the secret 1916 Sykes-Picot-Sazonov agreement (as it should be known, as Tsarist Russia was the third party along with Britain and France). Notable Tsarist pullbacks from the region occurred during the Napoleonic Wars, when Tsarist forces had to concentrate on their fight against Napoleon inside Russia itself; as a result of Russia's humiliating defeat in the Crimean War (1853-56); and the downfall of the Tsarist Empire in 1917.¹ The Soviets were able to project Moscow's influence in the region during the Cold War through their alliances and partnerships with anti-Western Arab Nationalist regimes in Egypt, Syria, Algeria, and Libya. Moscow experienced an important setback in the 1970s, though, when Egypt allied instead with Washington. Later, Moscow pulled back from the region in the wake of the collapse of communism and the USSR itself in 1989-91.²

President Vladimir Putin's determination to revive and even expand Russian influence in the Mediterranean, then, is a continuation of this

advance-following-retreat pattern. Since his rise to power at the end of 1999, Putin has met with a considerable degree of success, despite what initially appeared to be setbacks for Russian influence. In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam Hussein, despite Putin's objections. Later, Washington supported the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, which not only resulted in the downfall of pro-Western rulers in Tunisia and Egypt, but also toppled long-standing Russian partners Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya and Ali Abdallah Saleh in Yemen, and threatened to topple another, Bashar al-Assad, in Syria. Since September 2015, when Russian direct military intervention in Syria began, Russian influence in the Mediterranean region has grown quite strongly.

This paper will explore: 1) how, as well as how effectively, Putin has increased Russian influence in the Mediterranean on a country-by-country basis; 2) what broader objectives Putin appears to be pursuing through expanding Russian influence in the Mediterranean; 3) the factors that have helped and hindered Putin's achievement of these objectives; and 4) why the United States should be concerned about growing Russian influence in the Mediterranean as well as how the Biden administration should respond to it.

The Growth of Russian Influence in the Mediterranean during the Putin Era

The most dramatic example of increased Russian influence in the Mediterranean during the Putin era has been Moscow's successful intervention in Syria. Moscow, which had a long relationship with Damascus dating back to the Cold War, provided support for the Assad regime from the outset of the Arab Spring uprising against it. Moscow's direct military intervention came as the Assad regime appeared to be on the verge of being ousted from much or even all of Syria, despite being defended by the Qods Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Lebanese Hezbollah, and other pro-Iranian Shi'a militia groups. Russia's intervention not only helped the Assad regime to survive, but to

1 Paul du Quenoy, "Arabs under Tsarist Rule: The Russian Occupation of Beirut, 1773-1774," *Russian History* (2014), 128-141; David MacKenzie, *Imperial Dreams, Harsh Realities: Tsarist Russian Foreign Policy, 1815-1917* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1994); and Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

2 Gordon H. McCormick, *The Soviet Presence in the Mediterranean*, RAND Corporation, P-7388, October 1987, <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2008/P7388.pdf>; and Lorenz M. Lüthi, *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 563-94.



Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Russia, May 17, 2018. Credit: Sputnik/Mikhail Klimentyev via Reuters.

take back much of the territory that it had previously lost to its opponents. Russia also was able to retain and expand its Soviet-era naval base at Tartus on Syria's Mediterranean coast, and to build an air base at Hmeimim. These two bases facilitate Russian military operations in Syria as well as its presence in the broader eastern Mediterranean.³ Russia's intervention in Syria even burnished Putin's image with Middle Eastern governments opposed to the Assad regime, which saw the Russian leader as someone who more stoutly defends his allies than the United States has done (e.g., with the Shah of Iran in 1979 and Egypt's Mubarak in 2011).⁴

Putin's support for the Assad regime was undertaken to prevent in Syria what happened in Libya in 2011. Qaddafi's opponents, with help from several Western and Arab governments, not only

overthrew his regime but executed him. Qaddafi had been a long-standing Russian partner (though often a difficult one), and his downfall seemed to vitiate Putin's recent efforts to revive and expand Moscow's military and economic ties with Libya.⁵ Now, following Moscow's successful intervention in Syria, Russia has once again become involved in Libya, sending forces from the Wagner Group, a Russian private military contractor, and fighter aircraft to support (along with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates) the forces of General Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya against the internationally recognized (including by Moscow) Government of National Accord based in western Libya. Russia's role in the Libyan petroleum sphere also has expanded.⁶

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- 3 For analyses of Russia's military operations in Syria, see Seth Jones, ed., *Moscow's War in Syria*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2020, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/Jones_MoscowsWarinSyria_WEB_update.pdf; and Robert E. Hamilton, Chris Miller, and Aaron Stein, eds., *Russia's War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/russias-war-in-syria.pdf>.
 - 4 Amir Asmar, "Why Would Arab Leaders Pursue Strategic Partnerships with Russia?," blog post, Council on Foreign Relations, November 5, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-would-arab-leaders-pursue-strategic-partnerships-russia>.
 - 5 On Putin's efforts to restore Russian influence in Libya in the 2000s, see Mark N. Katz, "The Russian-Libyan Rapprochement: What Has Moscow Gained?," *Middle East Policy* (Fall 2008), 122-28.
 - 6 Brian Katz and Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr., "Moscow's Next Front: Russia's Expanding Military Footprint in Libya," Commentary, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 17, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/moscows-next-front-russias-expanding-military-footprint-libya>.

Especially remarkable has been the development of close ties between Russia and Turkey. Putin has built on Russian-Turkish economic ties that developed before he came into power, taking advantage of Turkish resentment toward the West over various issues (including lack of progress toward Turkey's long-awaited European Union (EU) accession; US support for the Kurds in Iraq and later in Syria; US refusal to extradite Fethullah Gulen, a Muslim cleric and former ally turned foe of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, from the United States to Turkey; and Erdogan's belief that Washington and other Western governments supported the unsuccessful 2016 coup attempt against him). The recent Russian sale of S-400 air defense missile systems to Turkey has upset Washington so much that it has decided not to sell the new F-35 fighter aircraft to Turkey and has imposed economic sanctions on Ankara—which responded by doubling down and signing an agreement to purchase additional Russian S-400s in August 2020.⁷ Further, the Russian-Turkish (or more accurately, the Putin-Erdogan) relationship has survived the severe downturn that occurred after Turkish forces shot down a Russian military aircraft in the vicinity of the Syrian-Turkish border in 2015 as well as their support for opposing sides in the conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh.⁸

Putin started to work on improving Russia's ties with the Mubarak regime in Egypt in the early 2000s and was discomfited by its later downfall. Even so, Moscow maintained good relations with Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, who was elected to power in 2012; Russia, though, welcomed his overthrow and replacement by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in 2013. When the Obama

administration cut back on US arms sales to Egypt as a way of expressing its disapproval for al-Sisi's overthrow of a democratically elected government, Putin stepped in with an offer to sell Russian arms to Cairo. Russian-Egyptian ties have been close ever since.⁹

Russia's relations with Israel have grown remarkably friendly—especially between Putin and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who have spoken both in person and by phone on numerous occasions. In addition to intelligence cooperation between them, Israel became an important source of military technology for Moscow. Although no agreement was publicly announced, an understanding appears to have been reached at the time of the 2008 Russian-Georgian War, whereby Israel ended its military cooperation with Georgia in exchange for an unspecified degree of Russian restraint in arming Syria and Iran.¹⁰ Indeed, while Moscow has sold S-400 air defense missiles to Turkey and has discussed the possibility of selling them to Saudi Arabia and Qatar, so far it has only sold the less-advanced S-300 system to Iran—and only then after a lengthy delay between 2010, when then-President Medvedev suspended the 2007 agreement (despite Tehran's already having paid for the weapons) at the behest of the United States and Israel, and 2015, when President Putin lifted the suspension after Iran agreed to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.¹¹ Further, after the Russian military intervention in Syria began in 2015, Russia and Israel reportedly came to an understanding about deconfliction whereby Moscow does not interfere in Israeli attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria and Israel does not attack Russian or other targets there that are of

7 "Turkey Signs Another Contract with Russia for S-400 Missile Defense Systems," *EurAsian Times* (citing a TASS report), August 23, 2020, <https://eurasiantimes.com/turkey-signs-another-contract-with-russia-for-s-400-missile-defense-systems/>.

8 Semih Idiz, "Cracks in Turkish-Russian Ties Begin to Show," *al-Monitor*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/10/turkey-russia-s400-tested-cracks-ankara-moscow-ties-show.html>.

9 Mohamed Maher, "Egypt and Assad: Calculations, Pragmatism, and Morality," *Fikra Forum*, a bilingual platform of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 25, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egypt-and-assad-calculations-pragmatism-and-morality>; and "Global Perspectives: Egypt-Russia Relations," *Wilson Center*, October 28, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/global-perspectives-egypt-russia-relations>.

10 Mark N. Katz, "Middle East Review of International Affairs (December 2008), 4-5, <http://mars.gmu.edu/xmlui/handle/1920/5585>; and Fred Weir, "Secret Israeli Deal to Stop Russian S-300 Missile Sale to Iran?," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 21, 2009, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2009/0921/secret-israeli-deal-to-stop-russian-s-300-missile-sale-to-iran>.

11 April Brady, "Russia Completes S-300 Delivery to Iran," *Arms Control Today*, *Arms Control Association*, December 2016, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2016-11/news-briefs/russia-completes-s-300-delivery-iran>. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is the formal name for the nuclear deal.

particular concern to Moscow.¹² In addition, while Moscow also has maintained good relations with the two main Palestinian movements, Fatah and Hamas, Putin has not aided them in ways that would harm his relations with Israel.¹³

Elsewhere in the Mediterranean, Moscow has especially good relations with Algeria, which has become one of the largest buyers of Russian weaponry.¹⁴ Russian business and other figures close to the Kremlin reportedly maintain large financial interests in Cyprus, where Russian naval vessels have been making regular port calls since 2015.¹⁵ Moscow also has reportedly given support to influential anti-NATO and anti-EU political parties in several countries on the European side of the Mediterranean, including Italy, Greece, France, and Spain.¹⁶ Putin's relations have been especially strong with Italy, which purchases substantial quantities of Russian natural gas and which does not share the view of other NATO members that see Russia as a threat.¹⁷

What Are Putin's Objectives?

What this summary shows is that Putin has sought to extend Russian influence throughout the

Mediterranean ever since he first came to power at the turn of the century and especially since the beginning of the Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015. Further, he has accomplished this at relatively little cost. The relatively limited Russian military presence in Syria has been much more successful than the much larger Soviet one in Afghanistan in the 1980s and US ones in Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11. While the Soviets rarely got paid for their weapons sales to radical regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere, Russia has been getting paid for weaponry going to the Mediterranean region's larger buyers, either by the recipients themselves (Turkey, Algeria) or others (as the UAE and Saudi Arabia reportedly have done on behalf of Egypt).¹⁸ Putin's greater willingness to work with the region's authoritarian or illiberal leaders, compared to the West's more critical view of them, has helped Russia gain influence.

What, though, are the broader objectives that Putin is pursuing in the Mediterranean? There appear to be several.

First and foremost, Putin has engaged in an active Mediterranean policy as part and parcel of Russian

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- 12 Author interviews with former officials were conducted in confidentiality. Separately, both Russian and Israeli sources have publicly referred to this deconfliction agreement (which has reportedly been revised over time), but neither side has revealed much detail about how it works except to say that it involves communication between Israeli Defense Forces and Russian military forces in Syria. According to one Israeli press report, Russia "has maintained a deconfliction hotline with Israel, allowing the Jewish state to freely carry out the attacks as long as it is informed beforehand." See "Israel Says 'Understandings' with Russia Reached over Syria," *Times of Israel*, December 12, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-says-understandings-with-russia-reached-over-syria/>.
 - 13 Katz, "Implications of the Georgian Crisis," 7-8; Paul Iddon, "Israel Will Never Let Iran Improve Syria's Decrepit Air Defenses," *Forbes*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2020/07/10/israel-will-never-let-iran-upgrade-syrias-decrepit-air-defenses/?sh=386e7512357d>; and Adnan Abu Amer, "What is Behind the Russia-Hamas Rapprochement?" *Al Jazeera*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/11/27/what-is-behind-the-russia-hamas-rapprochement>.
 - 14 Russia delivered major arms to forty-seven states between 2015 and 2019, according to Russia-based New Defence Order Strategy, with 55 percent of the exports going to India, China, and Algeria. See: "An Overview of Russia-Algeria Military Cooperation," New Defence Order Strategy, April 21, 2020, <https://dfnc.ru/en/vtc/an-overview-of-russia-algeria-military-cooperation/>.
 - 15 According to a *Financial Times* report, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Palmer urged Cyprus to stop "Russia's regular navy port calls," which were contributing to "destabilising actions" in Syria. Michael Peel, "Moscow on the Med: Cyprus and its Russians," *Financial Times*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/67918012-9403-11ea-abcd-371e24b679ed>.
 - 16 Alina Polyakova et al., *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses*, vol. 2, Atlantic Council, November 2017, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/The_Kremlins_Trojan_Horses_2_web_1121.pdf; and Rick Noack, "The European Parties Accused of Being Influenced by Russia," *Washington Post*, November 17, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/11/17/the-european-parties-accused-of-being-influenced-by-russia/>.
 - 17 Numerous reasons have been cited for Italy's positive view of Russia, including friendly ties between Putin and several Italian politicians, the desire to preserve trade with an important partner, the legacy of the relatively cooperative Soviet-Italian relationship during the Cold War, the Italian public's reputed indifference to values in foreign policy, the influence of the pro-Putin Russian diaspora in Italy, and Italian resentment toward the EU. See: Artem Patalakh, "Italy as the Kremlin's 'Trojan Horse' in Europe: Some Overlooked Factors," *E-International Relations*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/04/11/italy-as-the-kremlins-trojan-horse-in-europe-some-overlooked-factors/>; Joanna Plucinska and Mark Scott, "How Italy Does Putin's Work," *Politico*, March 3, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-election-fake-news-sunday-bufale-misinformation-vladimir-putin-russia/>; and Nona Mikhelidze, "Italy and Russia: New Alignment or More of the Same?" *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, April 16, 2019, <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/italy-and-russia-new-alignment-or-more-same>.
 - 18 It is not clear whether the Assad regime in Syria actually pays for its Russian weapons, but Moscow's own successful use of Russian weaponry in the Syrian conflict has reportedly helped boost sales to paying customers elsewhere. Lama Fakih, "Russia Makes a Killing off its Military Support to Assad," *Atlantic Council*, March 12, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russia-makes-a-killing-off-its-military-support-to-assad/>; "KSA, UAE to Finance Russian Arms Deal with Egypt," *Egypt Independent*, February 7, 2014, <https://egyptindependent.com/ksa-uae-finance-russian-arms-deal-egypt/>.

rivalry with the United States. At a minimum, he has sought to ensure that the United States cannot exclude Russia from the region—as Moscow feared could result from the demise of Qaddafi and potential downfall of Assad.¹⁹ Even more effectively, though, Putin has increased Russian cooperation with traditional US allies in the Mediterranean—especially Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and Italy. While the United States might be wary of the extent to which their cooperation with Moscow has grown, all of them argue that they need to cooperate with Russia for reasons affecting their vital economic and strategic interests despite US concerns.²⁰

An important component of the anti-American aspect of Putin's Mediterranean policy is the desire to weaken the NATO alliance. With Montenegro's 2017 accession to the alliance, all the countries on the European, northern side of the Mediterranean are now NATO members. Putin's good relations with Turkish leader Erdogan and sale of S-400s to Turkey despite NATO objections, however, have served to further the long-standing Russian goal of undermining alliance cohesion within NATO. While Russian support for various anti-NATO political parties and politicians in member states has not resulted in any withdrawing from NATO or its military command (like France did in 1966 until it rejoined in 2009), Putin may hope that these actors may temper their countries' cooperation with NATO as Turkey's Erdogan has done. On the other hand, the greater Russia's military presence in the Mediterranean grows, through acquiring bases on the Middle Eastern side, the more Moscow may be able to threaten NATO's southern flank.

Rivalry with the United States and a desire to weaken NATO, though, are by no means Putin's only motives for seeking to expand Russian influence in the Mediterranean. As noted earlier, the Tsarist government sought to expand Russian influence in the Mediterranean long before Soviet-US rivalry began after World War II. Even in the unlikely event

that the Russian-US rivalry somehow ended, Russia could still be expected to seek influence in the Mediterranean region. One reason is the defensive goal of maintaining Russian influence in the Black Sea. Maintaining access from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean through the Turkish Straits is vital not just for the Russian Navy, but also for seaborne trade to and from southern Russia.²¹

Moscow's petroleum—especially natural gas—interests also have been an important motive for Putin to seek influence in the Mediterranean. Ever since the Russian-Ukrainian gas crises, Moscow has sought to avoid dependence on Soviet era pipelines through Ukraine subject to disruption by Kyiv to deliver Russian gas to Europe. In addition to Nord Stream and the as-yet-uncompleted Nord Stream 2 pipelines delivering Russian gas directly to Germany via the Baltic Sea, Russia also has sought to bolster its capacity to ship gas across the Black Sea through Turkey to southern Europe via the TurkStream pipeline system now under construction.²² Maintaining good relations with Turkey, then, is essential for Putin's plans to reduce or even eliminate Russian dependence on Ukraine for pipeline access to Europe.

Beyond Turkey, several European Mediterranean countries are already important to Russia as natural gas customers (including Italy, France, and Greece),²³ while several Middle East and North Africa nations are important to it as rivals in selling natural gas to Europe as well as investment opportunities for doing so (including Algeria, Libya, and Egypt).²⁴ Friendly ties with all of them are important for Moscow to dissuade customers from seeking rival gas suppliers, discourage gas-exporting rivals from acting to undercut Russian gas sales to Europe, and allow Russian firms the opportunity to invest in their gas sectors.

Several Mediterranean countries—especially Turkey, Algeria, and Egypt—also have been buyers

19 For insight on the impact of the downfall and death of Qaddafi on Putin's thinking, see Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin, new and expanded edition* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2015), 310.

20 Mark N. Katz, "When the Friend of My Friends Is Not My Friend," Atlantic Council issue brief, May 2019, 5-8, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/When_the_Friend_of_My_Friends_is_Not_My_Friend.pdf.

21 Luke Coffey, "Russia in the Black Sea," Middle East Institute website, June 18, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-black-sea>.

22 Sarah E. Garding, et al., "TurkStream: Russia's Newest Gas Pipeline to Europe," Congressional Research Service, February 5, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11177.pdf>.

23 "Delivery Statistics: Gas Supplies to Europe," Gazprom Export, January 2021, <http://www.gazpromexport.ru/en/statistics/>.

24 Rauf Mammadov, "Russia in the Middle East: Energy Forever?," in Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank, eds., *Russia in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2018), 221-26.

of Russian arms.²⁵ In addition to geopolitical advantages that Moscow may hope to derive from arms sales, the economic benefits from doing so are highly important for the Russian arms industry. Further, Russia sells large quantities of wheat to both Turkey and Egypt.²⁶ Turkey and Italy were Russia's fourth- and seventh-largest export markets, respectively, in 2019.²⁷ With numerous Western economic sanctions having been imposed on Russia, the willingness of several countries in the Mediterranean region (as well as elsewhere) to continue their economic interactions with Moscow has been an important lifeline for Putin that he wants to maintain and even expand.

In addition, Putin has a strong interest in preventing Sunni jihadist forces from growing stronger in the Mediterranean region and becoming better able to support similar forces in the Muslim regions of Russia. Putin himself cited the need to prevent Chechen rebels who had left Russia to fight in Syria from returning to Russia as justification for Moscow's intervening to defend the Assad regime.²⁸ Putin saw the 2011 Arab Uprisings, which burst forth mainly in Mediterranean countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria), as similar to earlier "color revolutions" in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004, which he viewed as US-sponsored attempts to somehow foster a similar revolution in Russia. Putin also saw the Arab Spring revolutions as resulting in the replacement of reliable secular authoritarian regimes not with democracies but with either jihadist regimes or chaos, which jihadist forces could thrive in. Indeed, the Russian Defense Ministry even claimed that the United States was cooperating with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham in Syria.²⁹ Yet

"Putin has a strong interest in preventing Sunni jihadist forces from growing stronger in the Mediterranean region and becoming better able to support similar forces in the Muslim regions of Russia."

even if Russian-US rivalry receded, Moscow would continue to worry about the rise of jihadism in the Mediterranean region and its potential for spilling over into southern Russia.

Another Russian objective is better enabling Moscow to operate further afield. The Russian military presence in Syria contributed to Moscow's ability to deploy men and materiel to eastern Libya in defense of General Haftar's forces there.³⁰ Similarly, the Russian presence in Libya may enable Moscow to enhance its presence in the Sahel and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa.³¹ As Russia's military presence on the Middle Eastern side of the Mediterranean grows, Russia may be able to limit how NATO forces based on the European side can operate in the region.³² Already, Russia's greater presence in the Mediterranean as well as its good relations with Egypt may have facilitated Russia's recent establishment of a naval facility in Sudan on the Red Sea—where Russia really is playing catch up with not just external powers but regional ones in obtaining Red Sea naval facilities.³³

25 Details about arms transfers from suppliers (including Russia) to recipients (including Mediterranean countries) can be found on the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Arms Transfers Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>. See also Tatiana Kondratenko, "Russian Arms Exports to Africa: Moscow's Long-Term Strategy," DW Akademie, part of Deutsche Welle, May 29, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/russian-arms-exports-to-africa-moscows-long-term-strategy/a-53596471>; and Michael Godwin, "A Fly in the Ointment: Turkey's S-400 Problem," *New Europe*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/a-fly-in-the-ointment-turkeys-s-400-problem/>.

26 Alexei Lossan, "How Russia Became the World's Leading Wheat Exporter," *Russia Beyond*, November 3, 2020, <https://www.rbth.com/business/332948-russia-leading-wheat-exporter>.

27 Daniel Workman, "Russia's Top Trading Partners," *World's Top Exports*, March 16, 2020, <http://www.worldstopexports.com/russias-top-import-partners/>.

28 Mark N. Katz, "Assessing Putin's 'Fight Them There Not Here' Strategy in Syria," *Atlantic Council*, September 28, 2015, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/assessing-putin-s-fight-them-there-not-here-strategy-in-syria/>.

29 Shaun Walker, "Russia's 'Irrefutable Evidence' of US Help for ISIS Appears to Be Video Game Still," *Guardian*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/14/russia-us-isis-syria-video-game-still>.

30 Katz and Bermudez, "Moscow's Next Front."

31 Eric Schmitt, "Russian Attack Jets Back Mercenaries Fighting in Libya," *New York Times*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/11/us/politics/russian-jets-mercenaries-libya.html?searchResultPosition=10>.

32 Robyn Dixon, "Russia's Ally in Libya Is Battered by Defeats. But Moscow Has Wider Goals to Expand its Influence," *Washington Post*, June 6, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-libya-war-putin/2020/06/05/c3956bf4-a109-11ea-be06-af5514ee0385_story.html.

33 Samuel Ramani, "Russia's Port Sudan Naval Base: A Power Play on the Red Sea," *Royal United Services Institute*, December 7, 2020, <https://rusi.org/commentary/russia-port-sudan-naval-base-power-play-red-sea>.

Finally, another reason for Putin to actively seek increased Russian influence in the region is to get a jump on China before Beijing turns its attention to the Mediterranean more fully than it has up to now. Indeed, with its businesses and development-assistance efforts, which are far stronger than Russia's, China has already acquired significant economic influence not just in the Mediterranean region, but along the Black Sea. With China already having established a Red Sea naval base at Djibouti, Russia and other nations must contemplate the possibility of it establishing one or more in the Mediterranean as well.³⁴

What Helps and What Hinders Putin's Prospects in the Mediterranean

The policies Putin pursues are not the only determinants of his success in enhancing Russian influence in the region. Several additional factors are helping Putin in this quest. Other factors, however, serve to limit Russian influence in the region, or even threaten to reduce it.

The widespread perception that the United States has become less interested in the Mediterranean region has enabled Russian influence to expand there.³⁵ While the validity of this perception is debatable, the near withdrawal of US forces from Syria, the lack of American involvement in Libya (along with the drawdown of US forces from Iraq and Afghanistan), and Washington's growing attention to China and Asia in general have certainly contributed to this impression. With the United States seen as less active, Russia more active, and other external powers not yet active in the Mediterranean, governments in the region appear to

have concluded that they have no choice but to deal with Russia.

Another factor furthering its influence is the perception that the region's governments can deal more successfully with Russia now, compared with the past. Indeed, Putin has demonstrated a willingness to work with each and every government in the region. During the Cold War, status quo regimes in the region feared Soviet support for revolutionary regimes and movements, and worried that Moscow sought their overthrow; distrust of Soviet professions of friendship kept them clinging to Western powers instead. By contrast, Putin poses as a stout protector of the status quo while he portrays the United States and Europe as recklessly promoting democratization efforts that result in war and chaos. For the United States' authoritarian allies, as well as democratic ones fearing what democratization efforts in neighboring countries might lead to, what appears to be Russia's greater commitment to preserving the regional status quo is appealing.³⁶

Though some Mediterranean governments have found Russian policy toward one or more country in the region to be concerning, they have often found the policies of another country still to be even more so. While Israel, for instance, has qualms about Russia's presence in Syria, it is far more concerned about the Iranian presence there. Thus, Israel sees collaborating with Russia on deconfliction in Syria as an important means of constraining the ability of Iran and Hezbollah to act against Israel from there.³⁷ Similarly, there are other governments in or near the region that seem to feel far more threatened by policies being pursued by Turkey than those pursued by Russia. Egypt and the UAE, as well as Russia, were surprised by how Turkish military intervention enabled the Government of

34 Plamen Tonchev, "A New Kid on the Block? China in the Security Conundrum of the Eastern Mediterranean," Elcano Royal Institute, July 24, 2020, <https://blog.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/a-new-kid-on-the-block-china-in-the-security-conundrum-of-the-eastern-mediterranean/>.

35 Marc Pierini, "New Power Struggles in the Mediterranean," Carnegie Europe, July 30, 2020, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/07/30/new-power-struggles-in-mediterranean-pub-82403>.

36 Amir Asmar, "Why Would Arab Leaders Pursue Strategic Partnerships With Russia?," Council on Foreign Relations blog, November 5, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-would-arab-leaders-pursue-strategic-partnerships-russia>; and Wolfgang Mühlberger, "Arab Public Opinion: The View on Russian Foreign Policy," in A. Ferrari and E.T. Ambrosetti, eds., *Forward to the Past: Old Theatres of Russia's International Projection*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2020, 87-107, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/forward-past-newold-theatres-russias-international-projection-25797>.

37 According to retired Israeli Major General Amos Gilead, "The Russians play a key role. . . . They can block alleged Israeli operations in Syria and anywhere else they want. I think that the Russians—and it's not their official policy, but that's how I understand it—want to keep Syria to themselves. They are not interested in Iran being too powerful in Syria. And that is one of several reasons why they are tolerating alleged Israeli operations against Iran. So in a way, we have this common interest with the Russians." Izabella Tabarovsky, "Israel and Russia: An Interview with Maj. Gen. (Res.) Amos Gilead," Russia File, a Kennan Institute blog, Wilson Center, February 4, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/israel-and-russia-interview-maj-gen-res-amos-gilead>.



French President Emmanuel Macron talks to Russian President Vladimir Putin during a video conference Friday, June 26, 2020 at the Elysee Palace in Paris, where they discuss the coronavirus, Libya, Syria, and relations with the United States under then-US President Donald Trump. Credit: Raphael Lafargue/ABACA via Reuters.

National Accord to push back the advances made in western Libya by their ally, General Haftar, in 2020.³⁸ Similarly, Greece is far more concerned about its differences with Turkey—especially over Turkish plans to build a gas pipeline across the Mediterranean to Libya through what Athens considers Greek territorial waters—than its differences with Russia.³⁹ Further, Turkey's support for Islamist forces in Syria and elsewhere in the region is seen as a threat by Israel, Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia.⁴⁰

Moreover, Putin has up to now managed in several instances to successfully cooperate with opposing

sides simultaneously in hot and cold conflicts as well as to cooperate with governments with which Russia also competes. A dramatic example of this capacity can be seen in its relations with Turkey. Moscow and Ankara have supported opposite sides in conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Indeed, their support for opposing sides in Syria temporarily led to a severe downturn in Russo-Turkish relations when Turkish forces shot down a Russian military aircraft flying in the vicinity of the Syrian-Turkish border in November 2015. Their relations soon recovered from this episode, however, and have continued to be cooperative despite their differences. Indeed, Erdogan seems

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- 38 Akram Kharief, "Libya's Proxy War," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 2020, <https://mondediplo.com/2020/09/04libya>; and Jackson Pack and Wolfgang Pustai, *Turning the Tide: How Turkey Won the War for Tripoli*, Middle East Institute policy paper, November 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-11/Turning%20the%20Tide%20-%20How%20Turkey%20Won%20the%20War%20for%20Tripoli.pdf>.
- 39 Anton Mardasov, "Can Russia Benefit from Turkey-Greece Spat?" *al-Monitor*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/10/russia-benefit-turkey-greece-tensions-s400-s300-missile.html>.
- 40 David L. Phillips, "The Truth about Turkey's Role in Syria," Columbia University Institute for the Study of Human Rights, March 1, 2020, [http://www.humanrightscolumbia.org/news/truth-about-turkey%E2%80%99s-role-syria#:~:text=Erdogan%20made%20Turkey%20the%20major,conveyed%20to%20jihadists%20in%20Syria.&text=It%20assisted%2040%2C000%20foreign%20jihadists,was%20deeply%20unsettling%20to%20Russia](http://www.humanrightscolumbia.org/news/truth-about-turkey%E2%80%99s-role-syria#:~:text=Erdogan%20made%20Turkey%20the%20major,conveyed%20to%20jihadists%20in%20Syria.&text=It%20assisted%2040%2C000%20foreign%20jihadists,was%20deeply%20unsettling%20to%20Russia;); "Turkey Is Increasingly Becoming a Threat to Israel," *Jerusalem Post*, July 5, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/turkey-is-increasingly-becoming-a-threat-to-israel-635054>; David Hearst, "A New Message Resounds in the Arab World: Get Ankara," *Middle East Eye*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/new-message-resounds-arab-world-get-ankara>; and Jonathan A. Hoffman, *Israel and the Counterrevolutionaries: Gauging Tel Aviv's Evolving Regional Alliances after the Arab Uprisings*, Durham Middle East Paper no. 102, Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Durham University, 2020, <https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/imeis/DMEP102-IsraelandtheCounterrevolutionaries.pdf>.

to have better relations with Putin than with most Western leaders. Similarly, while Russia strongly supports the Assad regime's campaign against its internal opponents, there is one group Damascus would like to reassert its control over that has good relations with Moscow: the Syrian Kurds. In addition, while Israel and Iran bitterly oppose each other, Moscow has managed to maintain close relations with them both.

There are, however, factors that could limit, or even reduce, Russian influence in the Mediterranean region. Supporting opposing sides simultaneously poses risks for Putin and his success in this regard may not last. Although Russian-Turkish relations recovered following the 2015 shutdown episode, ongoing Russian-Turkish competition in regional conflicts serves to limit how much Erdogan can trust Putin as well as Turkish willingness to break with the United States and the West.⁴¹ Similarly, Russian cooperation with Israel and Iran has served to limit how much each one can trust Moscow. Despite Russian acquiescence to Israeli attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria, continued Russian support for Iran there and elsewhere reinforces Israeli reliance on the United States as its principal ally in countering Iran. At the same time, Russia's enabling Israel to attack Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria has only bolstered Tehran's distrust of Moscow and motivated Iran to compete with Russia for influence there.⁴²

Moscow argues that since it has good relations with everyone in the region (except the jihadists), and Washington does not, Russia is in a better position than the United States to resolve the region's many conflicts and tensions.⁴³ On the face of it, this argument might well appear to be true. However, while Moscow claims to be in a good

position to help others resolve conflicts, Russia has not yet succeeded in doing so. What Moscow has had some success with is achieving various forms of cease-fire agreements aimed not at resolving conflicts, but at freezing them. The problem with these is that they usually result in one or more of the local parties to them calculating that they would be better off resuming the fight to gain advantages that will be codified in yet another Russian-sponsored cease-fire agreement. Russia has sometimes even supported breaches of cease-fire agreements it helped negotiate.⁴⁴ Yet even when Moscow wants such agreements to be observed, there is a tendency for unresolved frozen conflicts to become unfrozen and cause problems for Moscow that it would prefer to avoid (as recently occurred in Nagorno-Karabakh).

Moscow, of course, might not have such problems if it could take advantage of its ability to talk with all sides to help antagonistic parties in the region actually resolve conflicts. So far, however, various sets of antagonists have not been willing to avail themselves of Moscow's services. Iran and Israel, for example, do not appear interested in achieving any sort of rapprochement or even détente with each other, much less with Russian support. Further, the kind of peace agreement that Moscow has proposed for Syria—basically one in which Assad's internal opponents both accept the regime's authority and become a part of it in a junior capacity—has not only been unappealing to most of Assad's Sunni Arab and Kurdish opponents, but also to Assad himself, who (much to Moscow's annoyance) has been unwilling to make any sort of concession to them.⁴⁵ As a result, conflicts continue and one or more parties involved look for support from other external powers, thus limiting or even challenging Russian influence.

41 Jeffrey Mankoff, "Don't Forget the Historical Context of Russo-Turkish Competition," War on the Rocks, April 7, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/dont-forget-the-historical-context-of-russo-turkish-competition/>; and Ayla Jean Yackley, "Caucasus Skirmish Pits Russia against Turkey, Straining Shaky Alliance," Politico Europe, July 21, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/azerbaijan-armenia-caucasus-skirmish-pits-russia-against-turkey-straining-shaky-alliance/>.

42 Maysam Behraves and Giorgio Cafiero, "Can Russian-Iranian Alignment in Syria Last?" Middle East Institute, October 16, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/can-russian-iranian-alignment-syria-last>; "A Look at Russian and Iranian Rivalry in Syria," TRT World, December 22, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/a-look-at-russian-and-iranian-rivalry-in-syria-42591>; and Khaled al-Khateb, "Is Russia Exploiting Iranian Weakness in East Syria?" al-Monitor, January 27, 2021, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2021/01/syria-iran-russia-israel-airstrikes-defectors-influence.html#ixzz6WxjsnWL.

43 Mark N. Katz and Hussein Ibish, "Can Moscow Be an Effective Mideast Mediator?" Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, March 24, 2017, <https://agsiaw.org/can-moscow-effective-mideast-mediator/>.

44 Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Russian Way of War in Syria: Threat Perception and Approaches to Counterterrorism," in Robert E. Hamilton, et al., eds., *Russia's War in Syria* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020), 27-32, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/russias-war-in-syria.pdf>.

45 Mark N. Katz, "Has Moscow Really Turned against Assad?," Atlantic Council blog, May 12, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/has-moscow-really-turned-against-assad/>.

Another drag on Russian influence in the region (and elsewhere) is Russia's economic weakness. Moscow recognizes that pacifying Syria will require a large-scale economic reconstruction effort there. Moscow, though, is neither willing nor able to pay for this itself. So long as the task of reconstruction there is unfulfilled, Syria will remain unstable and require a Russian military presence to prevent threats to the Assad regime from reemerging. Russian officials have sought to persuade Western and Gulf Arab governments that they should pay for the reconstruction of Syria (which would include lucrative contracts for Russian firms). Doing so, they argue, would halt the flow of Syrian refugees to Europe, potentially reverse the flow that has already occurred, and prevent the reemergence of Sunni jihadist forces.⁴⁶ This argument is seen by some as an implicit Russian threat that Western refusal to underwrite a Russian-orchestrated reconstruction effort will result in further refugee flows (which will include jihadist elements) from Syria into Turkey and Europe. These Russian efforts to persuade or intimidate others into paying for Syrian reconstruction, however, have not yet been successful. Further, Western governments are not likely to be persuaded by these Russian efforts unless the Assad regime makes concessions to its internal opponents. However, Russia's very success in propping up Assad has enabled him to resist making concessions to his opponents. Thus, Moscow remains stuck in a war that it cannot bring to a satisfactory conclusion.

How Should the United States Respond?

The new Biden administration does not have the same unrealistic expectations for improved US-Russian relations that previous post-Cold War US presidents had when they first came to office. The Kremlin, for its part, anticipated a worse US-Russian relationship under Biden in all areas other than strategic arms control.⁴⁷ An overall improved relationship would enable Washington and Moscow to regulate their rivalry in various regions—including the Mediterranean—and even work together on various common interests, such as battling jihadist

“An overall improved relationship would enable Washington and Moscow to regulate their rivalry in various regions—including the Mediterranean—and even work together on various common interests, such as battling jihadist forces and resolving conflicts.”

forces and resolving conflicts. An overall poor or deteriorating US-Russian relationship, by contrast, will mean that Russian foreign and military policies in different regions—including the Mediterranean—will be aimed at weakening, if not eliminating, US influence. What makes it especially difficult for the Biden administration to respond effectively to this challenge is that so many US allies in the Mediterranean now have a stake in continued cooperation with Russia. Despite Washington's concerns, its allies that cooperate with Russia want to continue doing so—especially those that think Washington may be losing interest in the region.

How, then, should the Biden administration respond to Moscow's Mediterranean policies? Perhaps it is best to start by warning that the United States should avoid pursuing either a complacent policy on the one hand or a counterproductive one on the other. A complacent policy would be one which assumes that because previous Russian/Soviet efforts to expand influence in the Mediterranean have all eventually resulted in setbacks, and because Moscow pursues contradictory aims through simultaneously supporting opposing sides in regional conflicts and disputes now, Washington really does not need to actively counter Moscow here since Putin's efforts to expand Russian influence in the Mediterranean are likely to come to grief anyway. This may indeed happen eventually as a result of an internal political crisis in Russia (as may be occurring now with the demonstrations that erupted after Putin opponent Alexei Navalny

46 Jennifer Cafarella with Jason Zhou, *Russia's Dead-End Diplomacy in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War, November 2019, 27-30, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Report%20-%20Russia%E2%80%99s%20Dead-End%20Diplomacy%20in%20Syria%20-%20November%202019.pdf>.

47 “Russia Sees Relations with U.S. Going ‘From Bad to Worse,’” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 23, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-sees-relations-with-u-s-going-from-bad-to-worse-/31015391.html>.



President Joe Biden speaks during a brief appearance at the White House, January 25, 2021.
Credit: REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque/File Photo.

was arrested in January 2021). This is not, however, something Washington can count on occurring anytime soon, if at all. So long as Putin remains in power and continues to see the United States and the West as Russia's principal opponents, he will certainly continue trying to increase Russian influence in the Mediterranean even further through his preferred method of stoking conflicts and antagonisms there.

On the other hand, a counterproductive policy would be one in which the United States determines that Russia is so great a threat that Washington must impose sanctions on its allies for their own good until they see the light about Russia and stop cooperating with Moscow in ways generating US disapproval. As recent experience with US sanctions on allies for trade with Russia, China, or Iran shows, however, US allies do not appreciate such sanctions.⁴⁸ Nor are they necessarily effective: in the Mediterranean region itself, Washington's first threatening and then actually imposing sanctions

on Turkey for buying Russian S-400s has not yet led Turkey to reverse course. Indeed, these sanctions have only served to worsen US-Turkish relations.⁴⁹ A similar result could be expected from any US effort to impose sanctions on other states in the Mediterranean (or anywhere else) in response to how they cooperate with Russia.

What is needed instead is a US effort to show all states in the Mediterranean and the outside powers active there, especially Russia, that the United States is not leaving the region and remains strongly committed to it. A particularly strong message to this end would be a continued US military presence in the Mediterranean—including that of the US Sixth Fleet.⁵⁰

In addition, the United States should engage in a regular dialogue with each of its Mediterranean allies about Russian behavior in the region as well as how their interactions with Moscow affect other US allies as well as the United States itself. The

48 For an elaboration of this argument, see Mark N. Katz, "Three Things They Hate about Us: American Policies that Its Allies Deplore," *Adjusting to Change: American Foreign Policy in a Complex World* blog, November 2, 2020, <https://marknkatz.wordpress.com/2020/11/02/three-things-they-hate-about-us-american-policies-that-its-allies-deplore/>.

49 "US Sanctions NATO Ally Turkey over Russian S-400 Defence Missiles," *Al Jazeera*, December 14, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/14/us-sanctions-nato-ally-turkey-over-russian-missile-defence>.

50 This report previously stated the Seventh Fleet rather than Sixth Fleet, but this was corrected on May 7, 2021.

United States may thus be able to persuade some governments that a greater degree of wariness of Russia is in their interests. On the other hand, some US allies may be able to reassure Washington that certain aspects of their cooperation with Russia are not necessarily harmful and may even be beneficial.

The most effective way, though, for the United States to contain or even reverse the more harmful aspects of Russian behavior in the Mediterranean would be for Washington to do the one thing that Moscow has been unable or unwilling to accomplish so far: help resolve or reduce the regional conflicts and disputes whose continuation often benefits Moscow. There are, of course, some conflicts that American diplomacy may be unable to resolve. It is doubtful, for example, that Washington can successfully mediate between the Assad regime and its internal opponents in Syria or bring about détente between Israel and Iran.

US diplomacy, though, might be able to resolve or reduce conflicts and disputes involving two or more of its traditional allies and their proteges on opposing sides. If, for example, the United States could mediate a resolution to the conflict in Libya between Egypt, the UAE, and their proteges in eastern Libya on the one hand and Turkey and its proteges in western Libya on the other, this could serve to reduce the demand for the presence of Russian private military contractors and aircraft in eastern Libya. Indeed, the fear of a peace settlement in Libya—no matter who helps bring it into being—provides an incentive for Moscow to not see this conflict fully resolved, but frozen, as Moscow has managed to do elsewhere.⁵¹ Similarly,

US mediation of the dispute between Greece, Cyprus, and France on the one hand and Turkey and its proteges in western Libya on the other over gas pipeline routes across the Mediterranean could reduce Russia's ability to benefit from the tensions between these two groups.

Conflict resolution and reduction initiatives, of course, are not something that the United States should pursue just to limit Russian influence in the Mediterranean. If they work, they are something positive in their own right. Even when these efforts do not come to fruition, their pursuit may prevent ongoing conflicts and tensions from escalating even further. Conflict resolution and reduction efforts will not eliminate Russian influence in the Mediterranean—nor should they be expected to do so. Russia, as noted earlier, has sought a presence in the Mediterranean not just because of its rivalry with the United States, but in pursuit of other political and economic interests which are not all harmful to the United States and its allies. What a US policy focusing on conflict resolution and reduction would do, though, is play to the demonstrated American strength of successfully mediating between actual or potential allies who have been at odds with each other, compared to Russia's track record of at best negotiating cease-fires that tend to break down eventually because they do not resolve the underlying conflicts. A concerted US attempt to resolve and reduce conflict and tension in the Mediterranean also would show states there that the United States is not withdrawing from the region but is committed to remaining in it as a positive force instead.

51 In January 2021, Wagner forces in Libya reportedly undertook actions designed to thwart a United Nations-sponsored peace deal. Nick Paton Walsh and Sarah El Sirgany, "Foreign Fighters Were Meant to Leave Libya This Week. A Huge Trench Being Dug by Russian-backed Mercenaries Indicates They Plan to Stay," CNN, January 22, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/22/africa/libya-trench-russia-intl/index.html>.

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