

**Russia's Strategic Objectives in the Middle East and North Africa**  
Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives  
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa  
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Opening Statement by Vladimir V. Kara-Murza  
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Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutsch, esteemed Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this important and timely hearing and for the opportunity to testify before you.

Our subject today is “Russia’s strategic objectives in the Middle East,” and before we discuss the substance it is important to clarify the terms: what we are talking about are the objectives of Vladimir Putin’s government. For many Russians, including myself, it is an uncomfortable equivalence to make between our country and the current regime in the Kremlin that has not resulted from democratic elections.

The Kremlin’s involvement in Middle Eastern affairs today is the most active it has been since the heyday of the Cold War. And, just like Hafez al-Assad—with whom Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev professed to be “fighting shoulder to shoulder”—was Moscow’s ally in the 1970s and 1980s, so is his son Bashar al-Assad today<sup>1</sup>. From the start of the internal conflict in Syria in 2011, Mr. Putin has been a staunch defender of the Assad regime, providing it not only with political support and diplomatic cover, but also, since 2015, with direct military help, as the Russian Aerospace Forces have conducted bombing raids against Assad’s opponents. The Kremlin has blocked eight Syria-related resolutions at the United Nations Security Council. Most recently, on April 13 of this year, Russia’s acting UN ambassador, Vladimir Safronkov—behaving in a manner more appropriate for a bar brawl than the UN Security Council—vetoed a draft resolution calling for an international investigation into the chemical gas attack in Khan Sheikhoun.

Vladimir Putin’s support for the Syrian dictator is consistent with his longstanding hostility to popular movements—not only in the Middle East, but also in post-Soviet countries like Georgia and Ukraine, where mass protests have toppled authoritarian governments. In the fates of these strongmen driven from power he sees his own possible fate. Indeed, he has publicly compared the demonstrations that swept across Russia earlier this year—when tens of thousands of people went to the streets to protest against authoritarianism and corruption, most recently just this week—to the “Arab Spring” and to Ukraine’s Maidan revolution<sup>2</sup>. The protests in Russia were met with a harsh response, with peaceful demonstrators beaten up by riot police, and with hundreds arrested.

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<sup>1</sup> *Reuters*, October 5, 1978

<http://www.itnsource.com/shotlist//RTV/1978/10/05/BGY511020085/?v=1>

<sup>2</sup> *RBC*, March 30, 2017 (*in Russian*)

<http://www.rbc.ru/politics/30/03/2017/58dcfb469a794724c89684df>

The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation signed by Mr. Putin mentions “the growing threat of international terrorism.”<sup>3</sup> Yet the Kremlin’s approach to this issue has been ambivalent. For example, unlike the United States and the European Union, the Russian government refuses to recognize Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorist organizations. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has met with Hamas leader Khaled Mashal on several occasions. In January, Mr. Lavrov hosted a meeting in Moscow for representatives of several Palestinian groups, which included Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, also designated by the U.S. and the EU as terrorist organizations<sup>4</sup>. Asked in a recent interview why the Russian government considers some terrorists to be “bad” and others “good,” Russian Ambassador to Israel Alexander Shein responded that “we do not consider them [Hamas and Hezbollah] terrorists at all.”<sup>5</sup> This comes despite the fact that Russian citizens in Israel have been among the victims of these groups.

With many historical, cultural, and family ties between Russian and Israeli societies, and with fully one-fifth of Israelis—including many members of Israel’s government—speaking Russian as their first language, it would seem natural that Russia should treat the State of Israel as a close partner. Instead, the Kremlin’s principal ally in the region, alongside Bashar al-Assad, is the Islamic Republic of Iran, where Moscow remains the largest supplier of weapons; where it is actively pursuing new contracts in atomic energy; and which it continues to provide with significant diplomatic support.

Vladimir Putin’s objectives in the Middle East have been consistent both with his domestic behavior and with his approach to other parts of the world: support fellow dictators and undermine efforts at democratization—what his Foreign Policy Concept refers to as “ideological values... imposed from outside.”<sup>6</sup> Military involvement in Syria has also been used by the Kremlin for domestic propaganda, to divert public attention from economic difficulties at home and to back up the claim that Mr. Putin has restored Russia’s status as a “great power”—a claim that is hardly consistent with reality. A reminder of this came just last month, as the leaders of what is now known as the G7 held their annual summit in Sicily—for the fourth time now without Russia, which was suspended from the group of major world powers because of Mr. Putin’s violations of international law.

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<sup>3</sup> Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation  
[http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6B6BZ29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6B6BZ29/content/id/2542248)

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (*in Russian*)  
[http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2597654](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2597654)

<sup>5</sup> *War and Peace*, Channel 9 Israel, June 9, 2017 (*in Russian*)  
<http://9tv.co.il/video/2017/06/09/67579.html>

<sup>6</sup> Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation  
[http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6B6BZ29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6B6BZ29/content/id/2542248)