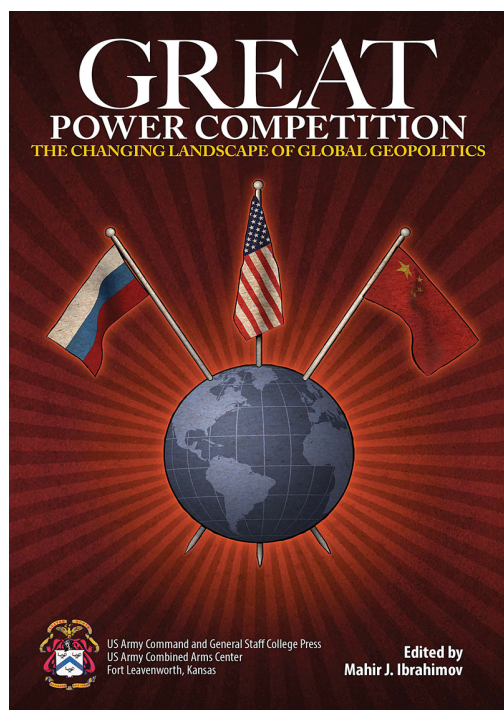


# Russia's Soft Power Projection in the Middle East

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**Editor's note.** This article is a slightly modified version of chapter 1 of *Great Power Competition: The Changing Landscape of Global Geopolitics*, a collection of articles compiled and published in December 2020 by the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, an imprint of the Army University Press, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The author of the article examines in detail the origin and evolution of Russian “soft power,” a concept coined by Harvard Professor Joseph S. Nye Jr., who defined it as a nation’s ability to get what it wants “through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attraction of the country’s culture, political ideals, and policies.” Nye went on to say that when a nation’s “policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, [its] soft power is enhanced.” The author compares and contrasts the current Russian view of soft power with that of the former Soviet Union and also with the modern-day West, especially as it is developed and employed under the guidance of Russian President Vladimir Putin. This is a timely overview of one of the most important features of current international conflict. The entire collection of articles, which treats a range of other topics dealing with international competition, can be accessed at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combats-studies-institute/csi-books/great-power-competition-the-changing-landscape-of-global-geopolitics.pdf>.

Political scientist Joseph S. Nye Jr. defined soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attraction of the country’s culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced.”<sup>1</sup> For a state to be successful, according to Nye, hard power is necessary; but it is also important to shape long-term preferences of others and project values. Soft power projection helps attract partners and allies.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the Kremlin always emphasized hard power. During the Soviet era, the following phrase encapsulated so many aspects of Soviet life it became a trope: “If you don’t know, we will teach you; if you don’t want to, we will force you.”<sup>3</sup> In more recent history, Moscow has focused on hard power projection; the brutal suppression of Chechnya’s struggle for independence, the 2008 war with Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, and the 2015 military intervention in Syria to save Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad

all highlight Moscow's preference for hard power. Indeed, in private conversations, Western policymakers often argue that Russia has no power to attract. The Kremlin has yet to treat its own citizens well—let alone those of other countries. An oft-cited example of Moscow's inability to attract is that generally people do not dream of immigrating to Russia; rather, they tend to dream of emigrating from Russia to developed democracies, contributing to Russia's brain drain.

In this context it may be tempting to conclude that Russia does not project soft power at all. Yet the reality is more nuanced. Moscow, while abusive to its own citizens, devotes a great deal to soft power projection—often more so than to hard power. However, it defines soft power on its own authoritarian terms. While much attention has been devoted to these activities in the West and the post-Soviet space, the Middle East provides fertile ground for Russian efforts, which have received far less attention.

For nearly two decades under Vladimir Putin, Moscow consistently focused on soft power projection in the region and cultivated an image of a neutral powerbroker and peacemaker, as well as a business partner. In addition to diplomacy, trade, and tourism, Moscow projects its influence through the Russian Orthodox Church, culture centers, major sports events, Chechnya's strongman Ramzan Kadyrov, and Kremlin-controlled propaganda outlets such as RT and Sputnik. Moscow cultivates attraction by projecting authoritarian values, which resonate in a region with little history of democracy. Through this soft power projection, Moscow cements leverage to secure influence at the expense of the West.

## Moscow's Authoritarian Interpretation of Soft Power

A major source of confusion about Russia and soft power is Moscow's interpretation of the term. According to Nye himself, the Kremlin is failing "miserably" because it is attempting to project soft power using the state and with a zero-sum approach.<sup>4</sup> To succeed, Russia (and China) in his view, "will need to match words and deeds in their policies, be self-critical, and unleash the full talents of their civil societies. Unfortunately, this is not about to happen anytime soon."<sup>5</sup> Framed this way, it would seem the Kremlin and soft power just do not go together. Yet Moscow has its own broad authoritarian interpretation of the term. It is ultimately pragmatic and aimed at building leverage. This includes projection of values—just not democratic ones. This is why it is zero-sum and government-led, and why this approach runs counter to Nye's definition. Indeed, both democracies and the Kremlin fund nonprofit organizations—a soft power tool; but where democracies are open and transparent, those funded by the Kremlin are opaque and subversive.

Russian pro-Kremlin academic Sergei Karaganov argues that the Kremlin definition of soft power is different from that of the West. "Russian political leaders have largely interpreted the soft power concept in a very instrumental and pragmatic way," he wrote. "Many Chinese and Russian soft power initiatives often pursue overtly pragmatic, interest-based goals rather than aim to take into account international partners' interests."<sup>6</sup> Karaganov indicated that this broader interpretation of soft power "contradicts Nye's definition because [Nye] excludes coercion as well as economically driven influence ('payment' in his terminology) from soft power."<sup>7</sup> In the Russian interpretation, these are acceptable soft power instruments. Russian scholars note that the terms "soft power," along with "foreign policy image," have taken a prominent position in Russia's policy discourse; Russian analysts

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discussed over the years the need for Russia to better project soft power.<sup>8</sup> Moscow always cared about its image—domestically and internationally.

Perception of legitimacy by others especially mattered to the Kremlin, though differently from how Western governments understand the idea and how to pursue it. In early years when the Bolsheviks consolidated power, they took small steps first then watched for outside reactions; when there was little to none, they proceeded to larger domestic atrocities. Nye himself acknowledged that after World War II, the Soviet Union's communist ideology found an appeal in Europe and the Third World. The Soviet Union presented its ideology as a better and legitimate alternative to that of the West and pushed moral equivocation between the two. Leaders carefully cultivated select foreigners as “useful idiots” who would present the Soviet Union in a highly skewed if not entirely fictitious light. Among the most famous of these is perhaps Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* journalist and Stalin apologist Walter Duranty, whose reporting helped Stalin hide from the world his 1932–33 crime of state-led famine in Ukraine. Furthermore, the Kremlin cultivated other sources of attraction. Russian analyst Innokenty Adyasov wrote, “Yury Gagarin was the best instrument of Soviet soft power: never, perhaps, in the post-war world was sympathy toward the USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics] so great ... the personality of the earth's first cosmonaut had an impact.”<sup>9</sup> The Soviet Union also used soft power tools like major sporting events as opportunities to improve its international image—and spared no expense, human or financial.

## The Russian Diaspora as a Soft Power Tool

The Soviet Union fell but the Kremlin even under Boris Yeltsin had a policy toward Russia's diaspora, which it would soon instrumentalize as a soft power tool.<sup>10</sup> Israeli journalist and author Isabella Ginor recalled an interview she conducted with then Russian foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev in 1995 in Jerusalem. It is illustrative of the difference between Western and Kremlin approaches to soft power regarding the country's “compatriots”—Russian speakers living abroad:

IG: You mentioned Russia's commitment to protect “Russian speakers” everywhere. I'm a Russian speaker. Does that include me?

AK: Of course.

IG: But I never requested Russia's protection.

AK: No one is asking you.<sup>11</sup>

The issue of Russians and Russian speakers is compounded by profound confusion about term definitions, which often gets lost in translation. In English, “Russian” can mean either an ethnic Russian or a Russian citizen—there is no distinction. In Russian, “russkiy” means ethnic Russian and “rossiyanin” is a Russian citizen. A Russian-speaking Ukrainian or Jew, for example, would be a “rossiyanin”—a Russian citizen—but not a “russkiy.” Yet in official documents, people write “russkiy” rather than “rossiyanin” as a nationality.<sup>12</sup> Even in everyday speech, Russian speakers routinely use the two terms interchangeably. For the Kremlin, the Russian-speaking diaspora has been a soft power tool, yet as Mikhail Suslov writes, “The understanding of Russian ‘compatriots’ abroad’ has never been the same.”<sup>13</sup> When Putin presented his illegal Crimea annexation in March 2014 as a “rescue” of Russia's “compatriots” in Ukraine, he also played on and reinforced confusion over the definition of a Russian “compatriot”; he defined nationality in terms of language and ethnicity.<sup>14</sup>

## Soft Power Emphasis under Vladimir Putin

Moscow turned to soft power early into Putin's first presidency, with a major focus on the immediate post-Soviet space. Fiona Hill, a prominent Russia scholar and former Russia advisor to President Donald Trump, wrote in August 2004 that Moscow's soft power projection efforts in the former Soviet Union produced clear results:

There is more to Russia's attractiveness than oil riches. Consider the persistence of the Russian language as a regional lingua franca—the language of commerce, employment and education—for many of the states of the former Soviet Union. ... Then there is a range of new Russian consumer products, a burgeoning popular culture spread through satellite TV, a growing film industry, rock music, Russian popular novels and the revival of the crowning achievements of the Russian artistic tradition. They have all made Russia a more attractive state for populations in the region than it was in the 1990s. ... Instead

of the Red Army, the penetrating forces of Russian power in Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia are now Russian natural gas and the giant gas monopoly, Gazprom, as well as Russian electricity and the huge energy company, UES—and Russian culture and consumer goods. In addition, private firms—such as Russia's Wimm-Bill-Dann Foods—have begun to dominate regional markets for dairy products and fruit juices.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, the results of Moscow's soft power efforts were so significant in the early Putin years that, according to Hill, they outweighed Moscow's hard power projection. "Since 2000, Russia's greatest contribution to the security and stability of its vulnerable southern tier has not been through its military presence on bases, its troop deployments, or security pacts and arms sales," she wrote.<sup>16</sup> Thus Putin focused on image projection far more than observers may have realized, and in those years it appeared to pay off. But these years also saw the rise of peaceful color revolutions in the post-Soviet space that the Kremlin perceived as orchestrated by the United States. They also touched the Middle East, with Lebanon's Cedar revolution. For the Kremlin, the most significant was Ukraine's Orange revolution of November 2004 to January 2005. In this context, Moscow increasingly worked in the former Soviet Union to consolidate power among Russia's "compatriots." For the Kremlin, "protection," or "rescue," of Russian compatriots from fictional enemies was the perfect pretext to justify aggression, and events to promote Russian language and culture served as a pretext for cementing leverage inside the target countries, positioning Moscow as a decision-maker. In this sense, compatriots were a soft power tool under the Kremlin's definition of the term; the Kremlin would protect them whether they asked to be protected or not. The southern tier has been important both in terms of Russia's interest in what it called the "near abroad" and a "privileged sphere of influence," but also because it connected to the Middle East. Historically, the Kremlin considered itself vulnerable in this region. For this reason, both czarist Russia and the Soviet Union looked for ways to protect this "soft underbelly." For the Soviet Union and for Putin's Russia, this also meant undermining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) southern flank.

As for Russian-speaking "compatriots," although the majority reside in post-Soviet space, the Kremlin talked about it in global terms. In the Middle East, immigrants from Russia and the former Soviet Union quickly added approximately one million to Israel's population; at the end of the Cold War, this total hovered just under five million.<sup>17</sup> In more recent years, Putin routinely emphasized that Russia and Israel had a "special relationship" primarily because of Israel's Russian-speaking immigrants.<sup>18</sup> Putin closely studied the fall of the Soviet Union, as did Yevgeny Primakov, former chief of Soviet security services and later Russia's prime minister in Boris Yeltsin's government. Both came to believe that from a purely strategic perspective, the Soviet Union made a mistake by antagonizing Jews, especially the Jewish population in the USSR. The year 2004 saw not only Ukraine's Orange revolution but also Russia's return as an international donor; over the years, the country increasingly cultivated this role. These events had a profound effect on the Kremlin. A reference to Russia in the West as a "re-emerging donor" became common.<sup>19</sup>

In December 2005, Moscow also launched Russia Today ("Rossiya Segodnya" in Russian, eventually renamed RT) as its flagship propaganda outlet for projecting its narrative to overseas audiences and discrediting the West. "When we designed this [RT] project back in 2005," Vladimir Putin said in an interview years later, "we intended introducing another strong player on the world's scene ... but also try, let me stress, I mean—try to break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams."<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Kremlin cast a wide net with its soft power projection.

## Aggression Accompanied by Soft Power Projection

With time, Putin grew more ostensibly aggressive in his foreign policy—aggressiveness accompanied by efforts to improve Russia's image. Putin's February 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference sent a clear signal of this more aggressive foreign policy posture.<sup>21</sup> Yet in June the same year, he approved the Concept on Russia's Participation in International Development Assistance, which presented "a strategic vision of the substance and priorities of Russia's policy concerning the provision of international financial, technical, humanitarian, and other aid to facilitate socioeconomic

development of recipient countries, help resolve crisis situations caused by natural disasters and/or international conflicts, and strengthen Russia's international position and credibility."<sup>22</sup> The document listed regional priorities that went beyond the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to include the Asia-Pacific, Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. With regard to the Middle East specifically, the document prioritized "strengthening of relations."

The following year, Russia's January 2008 Foreign Policy Concept focused not only on the Kremlin's traditional themes of a multipolar world, perceived American domination, and a stated goal for Russia to become "an influential center in the modern world"; it also emphasized soft power in general and its use to achieve these goals and strengthen Russia's international position:

Together with the military power of States, economic, scientific and technological, environmental, demographic, and informational factors are coming to the fore as major factors of influence of a state on international affairs... Economic interdependence of States is becoming one of key factors of international stability... Strengthening of international position of Russia and solution of the tasks related to the establishment of equal mutually beneficial partnerships with all countries, successful promotion of our foreign economic interests and provision of political, economic, information and cultural influence abroad require the use of all available financial and economic tools of the state and provision of adequate resources for the Russian Federation's foreign policy.<sup>23</sup>

Although the document addresses "mutually beneficial partnerships," it is important to remember to read between the lines. Moscow pays lip service to these ideas but in reality, tends to see partners as subjects. Yet in this context it is clear that Moscow understood the importance of projecting soft power and was intent on using it to achieve its goals. Following Moscow's aggression against Georgia in August 2008, the Kremlin launched a massive propaganda campaign to boost its international image, especially in the West. Russian officials discussed using soft power as a foreign policy driver that year and noted that Putin and Russian

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had done the same on multiple occasions.<sup>24</sup>

In September 2008, a month after Moscow's aggression that led to a war with Georgia, Putin issued a decree creating the Federal Agency on the Affairs of CIS Countries, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation—Rossotrudnichestvo for short. By its own description, "the activities of Rossotrudnichestvo and its overseas agencies are aimed at implementing the state policy of international humanitarian cooperation, facilitating the spread abroad of an objective view of modern Russia."<sup>25</sup>

The next month, Lavrov gave an interview on the eve of a major international conference on Russian compatriots living abroad. He said that soft power is gaining greater importance and highlighted that Moscow should be using it specifically in relation to its "compatriots." In the same interview, Lavrov described the victim as the criminal—he talked of Georgia's "aggression" against Southern Ossetia.<sup>26</sup> Rossotrudnichestvo's activities, for their part, raised concerns among law enforcement agencies in democratic countries about possible intelligence operations. Just as RT was a propaganda channel, Rossotrudnichestvo would be another instrument of the Russian state—anything but objective, contrary to its official pronouncements. Such methods stood in stark contrast to how democratic societies projected their values, yet they fit within the Kremlin interpretation of soft power.

The year 2012 marked several milestones in Russia, including with regard to the Kremlin's soft power projection. In late 2011 to early 2012, massive anti-Putin protests erupted throughout the country—the largest since the fall of the Soviet Union. In addition to famously blaming U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for "giving the signal" for protestors to come out, Putin penned a series of articles in the mainstream Russian press. He outlined his vision for the country, including on economic and foreign policy fronts, and focused on Russia's problems, especially the Arab Spring. When discussing his foreign policy vision, Putin talked about improving Russia's image, including the need to promote a positive and "accurate" image of Russia abroad.<sup>27</sup> Soon after in July that year, he raised the importance of using soft power at a high-level meeting with Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives in international organizations:

Let me remind you that “soft power” is all about promoting one’s interests and policies through persuasion and creating a positive perception of one’s country, based not just on its material achievements but also its spiritual and intellectual heritage. Russia’s image abroad is formed not by us and, as a result, it is often distorted and does not reflect the real situation in our country or Russia’s contribution to global civilization, science, and culture. Our country’s policies often suffer from a one-sided portrayal these days. Those who fire guns and launch air strikes here or there are the good guys, while those who warn of the need for restraint and dialogue are for some reason at fault. But our fault lies in our failure to adequately explain our position. This is where we have gone wrong.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, in February 2013, Russia officially incorporated soft power into its foreign policy toolkit while indirectly putting the blame on the United States for what it perceived as destabilizing soft power projection—a consistent Kremlin theme. This interpretation highlighted the Kremlin’s own spin on the concept of soft power:

Soft power, a comprehensive toolkit for achieving foreign policy objectives building on civil society potential, information, cultural, and other methods and technologies alternative to traditional diplomacy, is becoming an indispensable component of modern international relations. At the same time, increasing global competition and the growing crisis potential sometimes creates a risk of destructive and unlawful use of “soft power” and human rights concepts to exert political pressure on sovereign states, interfere in their internal affairs, destabilize their political situation, manipulate public opinion, including under the pretext of financing cultural and human rights projects abroad.<sup>29</sup>

Moscow’s evolution in terms of soft power application coincided with a new stage of aggression in international affairs when it illegally annexed Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014 and began a covert war in Eastern Ukraine. Yet Moscow continued to care about its international image, orchestrating a referendum in

Crimea under the barrel of a Russian gun to create a perception of legitimacy for its actions. Moreover, RT channels began broadcasting in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany to continue promoting the Kremlin viewpoint in the West, which was rightfully outraged by Kremlin activities. Senior Russian officials such as Lavrov continued to talk about the importance of using soft power in the years after.<sup>30</sup>

Moscow’s success (or lack thereof) in the post-Soviet space and the West warrants a separate discussion. As the Kremlin grew increasingly aggressive toward its neighbors over the years and employed a variety of tools to destabilize and divide Western democracies, Moscow’s image became arguably mixed at best. Moscow succeeded in annexing Crimea and fighting a war in Eastern Ukraine, but it also brought Ukrainians closer together and consolidated their efforts to join the West. The overall feelings of Russian-speaking “compatriots” toward Russia itself tended to be mixed. That Russia remained under sanctions was also a testament to widespread negative Western views of Putin’s Russia. The Kremlin continued to use its soft power tools through government-controlled organizations presented as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or, more accurately, GONGOS (government-organized nongovernmental organizations, a term that emerged in the post-Soviet space); culture centers; and information operations that continue to destabilize democracies and cement the Kremlin’s influence in the post-Soviet space. This massive effort should be taken seriously. In this sense, the Kremlin’s grip was growing. At the same time following Moscow’s Crimea annexation, the G-8 kicked Russia out as a member, and at the time of this writing, an invitation for reentry does not appear forthcoming. While U.S. President Trump called for Russia’s readmittance, Germany and other European countries rejected such a move. That said, the situation may change as France and Germany continue to pursue a reset with Russia and if more voices in the United States and the West broadly call for a reset with Russia.<sup>31</sup> Regardless, the Middle East has been a different story.

## **Leveraging through Soft Power in the Middle East: Diplomacy, Tourism, and Trade**

Once Putin succeeded Yeltsin, he worked steadily and consistently to return Russia to the Middle East, as envisioned some years earlier by Yevgeniy Primakov.

A skilled Arabist who was Russia's prime minister in the late 1990s, Primakov held notions of a "multipolar" world also promoted by other Russian officials. In this view, Russia should not let the United States dominate any region, least of all the Middle East. Russia's June 2000 Foreign Policy Concept defined Moscow's Middle East priorities largely in terms of soft power—"to restore and strengthen positions, particularly economic ones"—and noted the importance of continuing to develop ties with Iran.<sup>32</sup> The January National Security Concept also highlighted "attempts to create an international relations structure based on domination by developed Western countries in the international community, under U.S. leadership."<sup>33</sup> The November 2016 version highlighted the importance of the Middle East in Russian foreign policy and named "external interference" (a euphemism for the United States) as a major cause of regional instability.<sup>34</sup> These documents, together with those mentioned in previous sections, show both Moscow's intent to become a major player in the region from the very beginning, and its emphasis on soft power as a key instrument in achieving this aim.

Putin's approach to the region was pragmatic from the very beginning—not unlike his overall approach to soft power. He worked to build and maintain ties with virtually every major actor in the region and, by 2010, had already built good relations with all regional governments and most key internal opposition movements.<sup>35</sup> Through Putin's efforts, Russia regained political, diplomatic, and economic influence in the region.

Among his soft power instruments, he emphasized trade, especially arms and hydrocarbons but also goods such as foodstuffs, along with growing Russian tourism, diplomatic exchanges, and provision of high-technology goods such as nuclear reactors, and in some cases major loan forgiveness, such as \$13.4 billion debt forgiveness to the Syrian regime. Over the coming years, Turkey, Egypt, and Israel emerged as top destinations for Russian tourists, which especially mattered to Turkey's and Egypt's economies. It was a tap Putin could turn on and off. When Russian tourists could not go to Turkey and Egypt, many went to Tunisia. Tunisian Tourism Minister Selma Elloumi Rekik said, "We also note that the growth of the Russian market is continuing; it was not a temporary phenomenon as some claimed but a real trend that we can capture and encourage."<sup>36</sup> Morocco aimed to attract as many as two million

Russian tourists by 2020.<sup>37</sup> While initial numbers were in the tens of thousands, such stated aspirations matter.

Moscow also built leverage through construction of Turkey's and Egypt's nuclear power plants. Moscow's continued strategic search for port access also mattered in terms of Russia's strategic levers of influence. Moscow and Cairo signed an industrial free-trade zone; while the primary purpose was likely political, the economic dimension is also worth mentioning.

In the Persian Gulf area especially, Moscow's soft power projection focused on financial instruments, getting Gulf leaders more interested in Russian weaponry, encouraging sovereign wealth fund agreements, and organizing business councils and traveling exhibits that created forums for Russian-Arab commercial deals.<sup>38</sup>

Moscow paid pensions to former Soviet citizens living in Israel—even as it had no money to adjust Russian citizen pensions for inflation. This was another example of Moscow's pragmatic soft power projection that had little to do with genuine concern for people—compounded by the fact that the dollar value was largely symbolic, approximately \$200 a month.<sup>39</sup>

Moscow also recognized West Jerusalem as Israel's capital before Washington recognized Jerusalem in its entirety.<sup>40</sup> Senior regional leaders routinely paid their respects to Putin in Moscow, and this trend increased over the years. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, for example, made more trips to Moscow than to Washington during the Obama and Trump presidencies. Israeli high-tech goods were an important component of Putin's relationship with the Jewish state.

In sum, Putin's pragmatic approach was more successful than that of the Soviet Union's ideological blinkering.<sup>41</sup> Unencumbered by ideology, Putin offered a clear and simple narrative as an alternative to the West—a narrative on an authoritarian, anti-Western great power that resonated with the region's leaders. Putin's September 2015 military intervention in Syria officially returned Russia as a key region player and positioned Putin as a regional powerbroker. Soft power alone could not do that. Yet without his previous years of investing in relationships and building influence as Putin had done, Putin would not have been able to take full advantage of the chance that Syria had presented him; he had invested in the groundwork that created receptivity to Moscow on a deeper level, and beyond Syria alone, and especially in the context of American

retreat from the region that began under the Obama administration. Indeed, it is the broader overall emphasis on Putin as peacemaker, a regional powerbroker—in itself a projection of soft power, of Russia's image—that continued to play a key role in his success in the region beyond the use of his military. This earned him often-begrudging respect in the region for sticking to his guns—ironically, while simultaneously cultivating an image of a neutral broker—and also clearly picking a side in Syria and sticking by his promises. As Jeune Afrique noted, Moscow earned a reputation among the region's leaders for not intervening in domestic affairs and, most importantly, keeping its promises.<sup>42</sup>

Ironically, Moscow's success in the Middle East was an example of how soft and hard power reinforced each other—seemingly consistent with Nye's argument for soft power. Putin enabled and protected Syria's Assad, who was responsible for one of the worst humanitarian tragedies since World War II; and more broadly across the region, Moscow's influence perpetuated low-level instability and reinforced the region's antidemocratic proclivities, showing just how different Moscow's interpretation of soft power was from that of Western analysts like Nye. Ultimately, Moscow's soft power efforts were to build pragmatic, hardnosed leverage in the region. As prominent Lebanese journalist Hussam Ittani wrote:

It was believed that Russia's intervention would completely wreck relations between it and Arab countries that support the Syrian opposition. Russian diplomacy, however, succeeded in shifting Arab attention towards issues that concern them both, such as energy. Russia has, throughout this period, maintained its policy on sensitive issues that concern Arabs, such as the Palestinian cause. Pragmatism, therefore, dominated Russian-Arab relations and both parties succeeded in averting a clash by adopting a list of priorities, although not ideal, that reflects the balance of power on the ground.<sup>43</sup>

## Leveraging through Soft Power in the Middle East: The Orthodox Church and Cultural Outreach

Diplomacy and economic leverage are critical elements, but the Kremlin also resorted to other tools.

The Russian Orthodox Church was a subtle and critically important soft power tool in the Middle East, in the backdrop of Putin's multipolar world vision for the Middle East—to counter perceived Western hegemony, imperialism, and moral degradation.

The Kremlin aligned the Russian Orthodox Church with the state as both a domestic and foreign policy tool, and revived Russia's historical mission as the main protector of Eastern Orthodox Christianity in the Middle East. The idea was not entirely separate from “protection” of Russian “compatriots” abroad in a sense of presentation of both as under threat—a claim that could sound more credible in the Middle East than in the former Soviet Union.

Jerusalem always mattered to the Russian Orthodox Church, both to czarist and especially imperial nineteenth-century Russia. At the time, the Church exercised influence over Greek, Armenian, and Arab Orthodox communities in the Ottoman Empire. It funded schools, churches, and hostels in Palestine and Syria.<sup>44</sup> Under Putin, the Russian Orthodox Church attempted to revive the idea, along with broader historic notions of Russia as the “Third Rome,” with its own spin in terms of connections to state foreign policy of expansion into the Middle East. The church in this context presented itself as a unifying force for all Christians in the region and the main pillar of stability protecting Christian communities. This was among the many reasons why the church and the Kremlin cultivated ties with Israel.

In a 2015 presidential decree, Putin created the President Putin Palestinian Organization for Culture and Economy, a school in Bethlehem.<sup>45</sup> According to Israel Defense, approximately 500 Palestinian children attended in 2017. The school opened under the auspices of the Orthodox Imperial Society, originally founded by Czar Alexander III and restored in its official name in May 1992. Indeed, for Russian Patriarch Kirill, the reestablishment of the society was critically important; seven years earlier, the Israeli government returned to Russia a building associated with this society—a mark of Russia's prestige and influence in Israel.<sup>46</sup> In January 2019, Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian National Authority, met with the head of the Orthodox Imperial Society of Palestine; according to Russian chief propaganda outlet RT, the society would work to bring more Russian pilgrims to Palestine.<sup>47</sup>



In Lebanon, Moscow courted the country's relatively large Christian community, mainly via the Orthodox Gathering (al-Liqaa al-Orthodoxi), founded in 2011. The most prominent member of this group, Elie Ferzli, was Lebanon's deputy parliament speaker and former information minister who was a long-time supporter of the Assad regime. In January 2014, a Russian parliamentary delegation—including Sergei Gavrilov, head of a Duma committee that focused on “defending Christian values,” and Russian ambassador Alexander Zasytkin—stopped in Lebanon en route to Syria and met with members of the Orthodox Gathering and other figures.

Gavrilov called on the stakeholders to form a joint council with the goal of “activating cooperation on all levels.”<sup>48</sup> In October and November 2017, they held a spate of meetings that resulted in calls for closer cooperation with Orthodox entities in Lebanon, including the Orthodox Gathering. According to Deutsche Welle, the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (IOPS)—a tsarist-era NGO that was revived after the fall of the Soviet Union—had become “the centerpiece of the Kremlin's activity” in Lebanon.<sup>49</sup>

The Church also played an important role in Russia's Syria campaign. Patriarch Kirill and other Russian priests praised Putin's efforts while some Russian priests blessed war planes that went to Syria and sprinkled holy water on missiles. They compared Russia's Syria campaign to “holy,” or “sacred war”—characterizing the intervention as a fight against terrorism, a “holy” fight that should unite everyone.<sup>50</sup> Kirill also linked the fight against terrorism in the Middle East with the Soviet Union's fight against fascism during World War II—a critically important Kremlin theme to consolidate Russian society domestically; this also played a major role in its links with Israel. Kirill's May 2016 statement is illustrative:

We know that the victory in the Great Patriotic War was a righteous victory. ... This is why from the very beginning the Great Patriotic War was named as a sacred [or holy] war, that is the war for the truth. ... God grant that this ideal of the Christ-loving army never leaves our people, our Armed forces. And today, when our warriors take part in hostilities in the Middle East, we know that this is not aggression ... this is a fight against

the terrible enemy in itself evil is not only for the Middle East, but for the whole human race. This evil we call terrorism today, ... today the war on terror is a holy war.<sup>51</sup>

The church also continued to develop ties within Syria. In September 2018, for instance, Kirill met with the grand mufti of Syria.<sup>52</sup> In May that year, a group of children “of fallen Syrian soldiers” came to Moscow at the invitation of Combat Brotherhood, an all-Russian veterans' organization. They met with Kirill at Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral and performed the famous Russian song from the World War II era, “Katyusha,” in Arabic and Russian.<sup>53</sup>

In addition, the Russian Orthodox Church cultivated a perception of establishing “a stable relationship with all religious faiths in the region.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, the church's efforts were not limited to the Christian world alone; it also cultivated ties with its Muslim counterpart in the region. For example, Kirill repeatedly described ISIS as an extremist organization that warped the true meaning of Islam and called for a broad alliance in the region to fight extremism—a call that was similar to Putin's calls for a broad multilateral coalition to fight terrorism.

Separately from religion, Moscow promoted Russian culture throughout the region, primarily through cultural centers run by Rossotrudnichestvo and the Russkiy Mir Foundation. These agencies, however, may have had wider goals in mind pertaining to serving as intelligence fronts and tools for general subversion. Russian culture centers have become common throughout the region—for example, in Kuwait, Lebanon, and Tunisia—and their number is growing.<sup>55</sup> In Lebanon, for example, press reports indicated more would be forthcoming. Anecdotally, these centers often provide genuinely useful services, such as ballet classes. Several years ago, a Russian culture center in Kuwait hosted a Soviet movie night; to the surprise of many, the room was packed. As part of Moscow's growing relations with Morocco, the Russian departments of culture and foreign affairs planned a major festival of Russian artists in Agadir, while King Mohammed VI granted Moroccan nationality to a Chechen mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter, Mairbek Taisumov.<sup>56</sup>

Moscow's Syria intervention, not unlike interventions in the post-Soviet space, saw the rise of Kremlin attempts to improve its image with regard to

its activities there. Thus, approximately a dozen Russian humanitarian organizations mushroomed in Assad-controlled areas of Syria, secular and religious, Christian and Muslim. The Russian Defense Ministry largely coordinated distribution of aid around Syria.<sup>57</sup> Moscow's main purpose for these organization was political, rather than humanitarian; while the miniscule aid distribution produced little substantive change, it generated positive news coverage for Moscow. These organizations did not go through the same level of scrutiny as Western organizations seeking permission to work in Assad-controlled areas. Indeed, this situation was reminiscent of Moscow's involvement in efforts to bring Syrian refugees home from Lebanon; the few who did return often faced brutal treatment from the Assad regime. The refugee situation remained unresolved—while Moscow positioned itself as indispensable and gained leverage over all parties.

### Leveraging through Soft Power in the Middle East: Muslim Russia and Propaganda

Russia's very identity developed in close proximity to the Middle East and Islam. Moscow likes to present itself as a country that culturally understands the region better than the West, comes with no colonial baggage, and was an alternative to Iran. Moreover, as Russia's overall population declined, its sizable Muslim majority of roughly twenty million has been growing, adding to the reasons why Moscow wanted to cultivate the Middle East. Moscow appealed to the self-interest of the region's leaders who felt comfortable dealing with Putin. Moreover, Middle East officials do not worry about the Russian equivalent of a Foreign Corrupt Practices Act when dealing with Moscow. Russia's ties to the Kurds went back approximately two hundred years and remained critically important.<sup>58</sup>

Chechen republic leader Ramzan Kadyrov has been another tool of Moscow's soft power projection. Putin installed Kadyrov in 2009; two years later, Kadyrov's horses began racing in the Dubai World Cup and he began to cultivate a positive image with Middle East leaders and make business connections.<sup>59</sup> In May 2017, the United Arab Emirates-backed Sheikh Zayed Fund opened in Grozny and pledged \$300 million to be spent over the next decade for small and medium business enterprises in Chechnya. The next year, a luxury hotel, The Local, opened in Chechnya. It was the first North Caucasus region hotel sponsored by a foreign funder, the Fabulous Abu Dhabi

Hotel Management Company. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed attended the opening ceremony. Egypt's national football team stayed in this hotel during the World Cup, which Russia hosted that summer. Kadyrov, just like the Orthodox Church and secular Moscow organizations, also funded humanitarian ventures in the Muslim world.

In 2020, the Muslim World League (MWL) for the first time launched an international conference on religious peace and coexistence in Moscow. The fifth session, held in Grozny, discussed the foundations of Russia's religious and ethnic relations and the country's relationship with the Islamic world.<sup>60</sup> The MWL chose Russia for the summit because in its view, the country had been a model of religious and ethnic harmony in recent years. In April 2020, Moscow and Grozny hosted Islam: A Message of Mercy and Peace. Representatives of over forty-three countries attended this conference on Islam and according to Kremlin-run Regum, described Chechnya as one of the most "dynamically developing regions" and Russia as "the best friend of Islam and doesn't pursue a policy of double standards" (an indirect reference to the United States).<sup>61</sup> At the conference, Kadyrov received a number of awards and titles, such as "hero of Islam" and "star of Jerusalem."<sup>62</sup> It may be premature to talk about tangible achievements beyond lofty pronouncements, but Moscow's approach to working with the league contrasts with Europe's choice to expel it.<sup>63</sup>

Russian information manipulation has been another important though unnoticed element of Russia's soft power projection in the region.<sup>64</sup> Dmitry Kiselyov, a key Kremlin propagandist, once described journalism as a warfare tactic. His description encapsulated Moscow's interpretation of soft power: "If you can persuade a person, you don't need to kill him. Let's think about what's better: to kill or to persuade? Because if you aren't able to persuade, then you will have to kill."<sup>65</sup>

The Middle East—a region with little history of a free press, inherently distrustful of the West, accustomed to government-controlled media and conspiracy theories—was arguably predisposed to Russian influence more so than democratic societies. The two most visible Kremlin outlets in the region were RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic. As mentioned in the earlier section, RT came out in Arabic after it was introduced in English, which shows the direction of the Kremlin's thinking early on. The RT and Sputnik objectives were to build legitimacy for the Kremlin and discredit the West. While the two outlets

typically sowed confusion and played on conspiracy theories, their Middle East efforts emphasized building legitimacy through reporting local news such as human-interest stories and sometimes coverage of Russia itself, all to boost Moscow's image. In its coverage of the situation in Syria, for example, RT Russia portrayed Syria as dysfunctional, a country that needed someone to come and fix things, and Russia as somewhat on the side, not directly involved.<sup>66</sup>

Another key feature of Moscow's efforts was an emphasis on social media targeting the region's large youth bulge. Moscow clearly invested significant resources in its Arabic propaganda, more so than in other regions. While it may not get as much bang for its buck in the Middle East as elsewhere, Russia's long-term investment in youth could pay off in the long run. Indeed, one recent Arab Youth Survey found that 64 percent of young Arabs saw Russia as an ally, while only 41 percent said the same about the United States. Moreover, the perception of the United States as the enemy had nearly doubled since 2016.<sup>67</sup> In Turkey, Sputnik played a critical information operations role.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, given the media environment in Turkey, some of the best Turkish journalists went to work for Sputnik radio; even pro-Western and anti-Recep Tayyip Erdoğan analysts admitted that Sputnik produced quality work, even as they recognized its propaganda component. More to the point, many saw Russian media as the only independent alternative in President Erdoğan's Turkey. Lastly and more recently, RT and Sputnik increasingly partnered with local regional media outlets to enhance their legitimacy. Thus, in September 2018 Egypt's state-controlled *Al-Ahram* entered a partnership with Sputnik. *Al-Ahram*'s history as the voice of the Arab nationalist movement had symbolic meaning. It embedded Sputnik deeply within the narrative of traditional Arabic-language media. Morocco's News Agency (MAP) and Sputnik signed an agreement "to strengthen bilateral cooperation" in December 2018; and in May 2020, Sputnik and Radio and the United Arab Emirates' WAM news agency signed a memorandum of understanding to exchange information.<sup>69</sup>

Moscow's Arabic propaganda remains an under-studied subject. More than anything, however, the Kremlin's inroads in the region's information space highlight Western own narrative problem in the Middle East and to the extent that the Kremlin's narrative resonates, the West has yet to put up an equally competitive alternative.

## Conclusion

The Kremlin is committed to methodically building leverage throughout the Middle East. It uses all tools in its arsenal and intends them to reinforce each other, and while the Russian military matters, Moscow's soft power approach that supports its hard power efforts has been the most effective—within the confines of Moscow's own definition of soft power. From a broader strategic perspective, the U.S. is increasingly shifting toward great power competition. But policymakers and analysts disagree on whether the Middle East is a distraction from this competition or an arena for it. Moscow for its part, however, unambiguously sees this region as crucial to its great power competition with the United States in particular, and the West more broadly.

Moscow's authoritarianism together with great power ambitions stand fundamentally at odds with those of liberal democracies, and thus their goals in terms of attraction, and means to attain them, also fundamentally differ from those of democratic governments and societies. The deeper underlying issue with Moscow's soft power projection is whether democratic or authoritarian values are ultimately more attractive—and how much sway Moscow's leverage holds. The answer to some extent depends on how well each side makes its case in the context of current global resurgence of authoritarianism. If the West doesn't compete for the Middle East, the relationships Moscow continues to cultivate on multiple levels throughout the Middle East and North Africa will over time pose an overall greater strategic challenge to American interests beyond this region. ■

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