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Why is Russia flexing its muscles in the Middle East?

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Dr Alexander Titov, Queen's University Belfast

This is Russia's first military engagement outside of the former Soviet Union, *but Moscow's links with the Middle East and Syria have deep roots*. Soviet involvement in the Middle East started in earnest in the mid-1950s. The background was the process of decolonization after WWII, with some 25 new states emerging in 1957-62 alone. The Soviet Union offered an alternative model of modernisation: anti-Western but progressive. This made the USSR a popular power in the developing world - in contrast to Eastern Europe where it was imposing its own version of colonialism.

The degree of Soviet influence is, however, debatable as the Middle Eastern states often used superpower rivalries to their own advantage, sometime switching their allegiance. For example, Egypt under Nasser was the main recipient of the Soviet military and economic aid in the 1950s and 1960s. However, it radically changed its foreign policy orientation under his successor Sadat, culminating in the Camp David accords of 1979, when Egypt becoming the first Arab nation to sign a peace treaty with Israel.

After Egypt's defection to the US, Syria and Iraq remained the USSR's most important clients in the Middle East, a situation maintained in Syria to the present. This included supplies of weapons, training of the officer corps, and economic aid. Around 70% of Syrian arms have come from Russia, while by the mid-2000s around 10,000 Syrian officers had been trained at Russian military academies, and hundreds of Russian advisers had been serving with the Syrian army even before 2011. Such close military relations clearly facilitate the ease and effectiveness of **the latest Russian intervention** on the side of the Assad regime, although this is by no means the main reason behind **it**.

Russia *also* views Western *involvement in* the Middle East as a destabilising factor (for example, the Iraq war **in** 2003 and Libya in 2010), based on misguided projection of Western values around the world. The West, on the other hand, blames Russia for supporting regimes that *have* lost their moral legitimacy. The Middle East is also important for Russia because it is at the centre of world politics. By engaging as a central player in Syria, the Kremlin has changed its status *from regional to world power*.

The longing for recognition as an equal power by the West has been the driving motive of Russian foreign policy for most of its history. This became particularly acute after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, with its sudden change from being one of two superpowers to becoming an ordinary state. Even Boris Yeltsin's period, when Russia was at its weakest, saw attempts to confirm its special status with the West. **Lacking other means to assert itself**, Russia's actions in Ukraine and Syria **display** in a modern guise Alexander III's famous phrase that 'Russia has only two allies - its army and its navy'.

So a general pattern is discernible in Russia: a failed attempt at reform (Westernisation or liberalisation) is usually followed by a period of reaction which sees a revival of a strong anti-Western sentiment. The failure of Perestroika in the 1980s, and of **democratisation** in the 1990s, made Putin's anti-Westernism seem almost inevitable. The question is how long this period of reaction will last before a new cycle of reform begins again.