

# Why Russia Wants Lebanon

by Grigory Melamedov

Russia's attempts to draw Lebanon into its sphere of influence by placing it under Moscow's air defense umbrella and selling weapons to Beirut have been discussed by American experts for years. Some analysts argue that Washington should not try to compete with the Kremlin there while others maintain that any concession is unacceptable. Russian arms sales to Lebanon would likely not affect the region's balance of power, but Moscow's expansion of its Syrian air defense umbrella could tip

the balance of forces in the Arab-Israeli and Iranian-Israeli conflicts and create a serious challenge for the United States in the near future.



Dmitry Terekhov

*During the Syrian war, Jerusalem used Lebanese air space to foil weapon transfers from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon. But in September 2018, Syrian air defenses shot down a Russian military aircraft during an Israeli operation. Moscow blamed Israel and deployed air defense systems to Syria, limiting the Israeli air force's freedom of movement and ability to prevent such transfers.*

## Moscow on the Mediterranean

During the first half of 2018, Russia increasingly expressed unhappiness with Israeli air strikes against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria. On September 17, 2018, Syrian air defenses shot down a Russian Ilyushin IL-20 military aircraft, supposedly by accident, during an Israeli operation. Moscow blamed Israel for the incident and immediately deployed S-300 air defense systems to Syria, significantly limiting the Israeli air force's freedom of movement. Russian military and civilian experts openly insisted that now was the time to show Israel that the Kremlin dictated the rules in Syria. Fyodor Lukyanov, chairman of the Presidium of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy stated: "If Israel were to defy Russia's dominant role, Russia would react and take a stand. This is unlikely to happen because Israel knows Russia defines the rules in Syria."<sup>1</sup>

The main Israeli objective in Syria was to prevent weapons transfers from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Jerusalem used Lebanese air space to foil such transfers. In November 2018, Lebanese president Michel Aoun asked Moscow to protect Lebanon's air space. Russian media reports that the defense ministry was favorably considering the idea alarmed the Israelis.<sup>2</sup>

Earlier, in February 2018, Russian natural gas producer Novatek obtained permission from the Lebanese government to develop natural gas fields in territorial waters in the Mediterranean Sea disputed by Lebanon and Israel. This action signaled that Moscow unambiguously sided with Lebanon and claimed the right to protect its natural gas investments during a military crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Times of Israel* (Jerusalem), [May 10, 2018](#).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *Russkiye Vesti* (Moscow), [Nov. 22, 2018](#).

The Russians remained neutral during Operation Northern Shield (December 2018–January 2019) when the Israel Defense Forces destroyed Hezbollah tunnels that crossed the Lebanese-Israeli border into northern Israel. However, Moscow's ambition to draw Lebanon into its sphere of influence predates its intervention in Syria and persists to this day. Tensions could rise again at any time.

## Russia and Lebanon

Lebanon is the only Middle Eastern country where Moscow can rely on a substantial Christian community. Its natural ally is the Orthodox Church, subordinated to the Patriarchate of Antioch. Currently, the Orthodox community comprises about 8 percent of Lebanon's population. In the Lebanese government formed in January 2019, four ministers represent the Orthodox community politically, including Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Health Ghassan Hasbani and Defense Minister Elias Abu Saab. Former minister of defense, Yaacoub Sarraf, whom Russian media had reported as favoring Russian arms sales to Lebanon, is also a member of the Orthodox Church.

Since the Stalin era, Soviet diplomats in Lebanon and Syria have been tasked with holding the Antioch Patriarch within the sphere of influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. Under Putin, contacts with the Orthodox Christians have tremendously increased, and Moscow has also sought to ally with the Maronites—Lebanon's largest Christian community. Historically, the Maronites' main international partner was France, but this relationship significantly weakened when the Maronite Patriarch of Antioch, Bechara Boutros Rahi, refused to support the "Arab Spring" and welcomed Russian troops in Syria. Because Rahi is subordinate to the Vatican, he tries to maintain a balance between Russia and the

West, but his position seems closer to Putin's than to the West's. As he stated on Vatican Radio:

So, if you want democracy, apply it and listen to what the people say. Want to know what the fate of Assad is? Let the Syrian people decide! It is not your place to decide the president of Syria, of Iraq, of Lebanon.<sup>3</sup>

Putin has also revived a network of religious and secular organizations formed to lobby for Moscow's interests in Lebanon, which went dormant after the Soviet collapse. The most noteworthy is the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (IOPS), which had created roughly a hundred Orthodox schools in the region since its foundation in 1872. Sergei Stepashin, former head of the Audit Chamber of the Russian Federation, is the IOPS's chairman, and Russia's deputy foreign minister Mikhail Bogdanov is a member. During the Russian operation in Syria, Bogdanov, as a special presidential representative for the Middle East, tried to establish a dialogue between Assad and the moderate opposition. Another prominent IOPS member is Oleg Ozerov, deputy director of the Africa Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, former ambassador to Saudi Arabia and former permanent representative to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

The Association of Orthodox Families of Beirut also lobbies for Russian interests in Lebanon and maintains close links with the IOPS. The Lebanese Sursock family is one of its most influential and cooperated with the Russian consulate general in Beirut as early

<sup>3</sup> *Vatican News* (Rome), [Apr. 14, 2018](#).



*Lebanese president Michel Aoun (left) meets with Russian president Vladimir Putin, Moscow, March 26, 2019. The Aoun, Aoun, Hariri, and Jumblatt families play major roles in Lebanese politics, and the Kremlin uses these contacts to its benefit.*

as the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Robert Sursock, one of the family's current representatives, served as chairman and chief executive officer of Gazprombank Invest Mena from 2009 to 2015.<sup>5</sup>

Lebanon is the only Arab country other than Syria where pro-Soviet leaders maintained power from the 1970s through the present. Nearly all of Lebanon's most powerful elites, both pro- and anti-Russia, remained in place after the "Beirut Spring" in 2005. The Hariri, Aoun, and Jumblatt families are hardly Russian assets, but they still play major roles, and the Kremlin uses this to its benefit.

Leading Lebanese politicians have long sent lobbyists to Moscow who have strong ties with Russian big businesses established

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Po Priglaseniyu IPPO Associaciya Pravoslavnyh Semey Beiruta Posetila Moskvu, The Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society website, [June 23, 2014](#).

<sup>5</sup> "Robert K. Sursock, Executive Profile," Bloomberg L.P., New York.

over the past quarter century. Notable among these are George Sha'ban, who has represented the Hariri family's business, Saudi Oger Ltd., in Russia for a long time and has helped Russian oil monopolies break into the Saudi market, and Amal Abu Zeid, President Aoun's representative to the highest rungs of the Russian political and economic elite, including President Putin. Abu Zeid's company, ADICO Investment Corporation, entered the Russian market in 2000, specializing in Russian oil enterprises in Southeast Asia, and in 2014, Abu Zeid was made advisor for Lebanese-Russian affairs in the Lebanese Foreign Ministry. He has active contacts with the Russian Orthodox Church as an influential member of the Lebanese Maronite community.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, since Soviet times, Moscow, has relied on Russia-educated Lebanese students, and there are some ten to twenty thousand of them now.<sup>7</sup> The Association of Alumni of Soviet Universities in Lebanon was established in 1970 and has since intensified its activities, comprising some four thousand members according to official Russian sources.<sup>8</sup> Russia experts also claim there are as many as eight

**Russia also influences Lebanese Christians via groups associated with European far-right parties.**

thousand mixed families in Lebanon formed by marriages of Russian women to Lebanese men.<sup>9</sup> The Russian media often mention that former

students now occupy high posts in the Lebanese economy and political system and that mixed families strengthen Russia's ties with Lebanon.

According to *Deutsche Welle* journalist Benas Gerdziunas, Russia also influences the Christian community via the European Solidarity Front for Syria, which is closely associated with European far-right parties, as well as with Lebanon's radical Levant Party that calls itself the defender of Eastern Christianity in the Arab world.<sup>10</sup>

### **Pushback inside Lebanon**

However, Moscow's growing influence worries some Lebanese politicians. That became clear in January 2019 when Lebanon's Ministry of Energy and Water gave the Russian state-owned oil firm Rosneft permission to manage the oil products storage terminal in the city of Tripoli for twenty years. According to *L'Orient Le Jour*, Druze leader and Progressive Socialist Party president Walid Jumblatt tweeted that the deal was reminiscent of the colonial powers' struggle for oil in the region a century ago. "With Rosneft in Tripoli," he wrote, "and tomorrow in Baniyas and Basra, Zarif-Lavrov [the Iranian and Russian foreign ministers] will be the headline of the new Middle East

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<sup>6</sup> Mohanad Hage Ali, "[Our Comrades in Beirut](#)," *Diwan, Middle East Insights from Carnegie*, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut, Apr. 25, 2018; "[Russia-Saudi Arabia Relations: Facts & Details](#)," Sputnik News Agency (Moscow), Oct. 5, 2017; Sanaa Nehme, "[Amal About Zeid](#)," *My Lebanon*, Moscow, Nov. 15, 2017; Reda Sawaya, "Ibr al-Hudud Bayna as-Siyasa wa-l-Iqtisad," *al-Akhbar* (Beirut), Apr. 22, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> "Chleny IPPO Prinyali Uchastiye Vo Vstreche S Livancami," *The Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society*, [Feb. 9, 2015](#).

<sup>8</sup> "Vsemirnaya Organizaciya Vypushnikov Vysshyyh Uchebnyh Zavedeniy," *Association of Alumni of Soviet Universities in Lebanon*.

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<sup>9</sup> Veniamin Popov, "[Russkaya Koloniya V Livane](#)," *Moscow State Institute of International Relations*, Apr. 25, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> *Deutsche Welle* (Bonn), [Aug. 5, 2018](#).

between the Russians and Persians.”<sup>11</sup> Despite such statements, Jumblatt and his son Taymour still frequently visit Moscow and maintain close contacts with Russian officials including deputy foreign minister Bogdanov.<sup>12</sup>

Antioch patriarch Ignatius IV (Hazim) opposed using the Orthodox Church for political purposes before he died in 2012.<sup>13</sup> His successor, Patriarch John X, takes a pro-Russian stance on many key issues,<sup>14</sup> making Moscow’s soft penetration into Lebanon easier than it otherwise would have been.

At the same time, some Orthodox Christians in Lebanon follow the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople—with which Moscow broke off relations—rather than the Antioch Patriarch. In October 2015, forty-six prominent leaders signed a petition denouncing the Russian Orthodox Church’s characterization of Moscow’s military intervention in Syria as a “holy war.” Russia’s claim that it is “protecting Christians,” they said, is a pretext for its nationalistic and political goals.<sup>15</sup> They believe that Moscow is using the same ploy to seize a more active role in Lebanon. Bishop Elias Audi of Beirut told Russian ambassador Alexander Zasytkin that his congregation “never asked to be protected.”<sup>16</sup>



Ron Przysucha

*Prominent Lebanese leaders signed a petition denouncing the Russian Orthodox Church’s characterization of Moscow’s Syrian military intervention as a “holy war.” Bishop Elias Audi (above) of Beirut told Russian ambassador Alexander Zasytkin that his congregation “never asked to be protected.”*

Audi and his small group of supporters is the only organized political force in Lebanon attempting to prevent Russian interference in the country. The pro-Russian lobby is much better organized and more active.

## **Russian Objectives and Methods**

Russia has two primary goals in the Middle East: to draw as many countries as possible from the U.S. sphere of influence into its own and to achieve a privileged position, if not a monopoly, in the regional weapons market. Both of these goals include Lebanon.

<sup>11</sup> Mohanad Hage Ali, “[Le Liban](#), Nouveau Banc d’Essai des Ambitions Régionales Russes,” *L’Orient Le Jour* (Beirut), Feb. 23, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Ali, “[Our Comrades in Beirut?](#)”; Rosanna Sands, “Hajj Lubnani Nahwa Musku?” *al-Bina* (Beirut), [Aug. 21, 2018](#).

<sup>13</sup> *Al-Monitor* (Washington, D.C.), [Dec. 24, 2012](#).

<sup>14</sup> *Orthodoxie.com* (Paris), [June 8, 2018](#).

<sup>15</sup> *Ya Libnan* (Beirut), [Oct. 16, 2015](#).

<sup>16</sup> *Deutsche Welle*, [May 20, 2018](#).

According to Alexander Shumilin of the Center for the Analysis of Middle East Conflicts at the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies of the Russian Academy, Putin has a two-pronged approach. As the Kremlin did during the Soviet era, Putin seeks to bind client states to Moscow by providing military assistance and economic support. The upside for the Russians is that the junior ally becomes dependent on Moscow; the drawback is that it is expensive. Putin also looks to foster the interests of large Russian businesses and increase their profits via the Kremlin's foreign allies. Each junior ally must, therefore, be financially sound. Both approaches help Moscow fill spaces neglected by Washington.<sup>17</sup>

The interrelationship between these methods is evolving. Putin used the Soviet playbook in Syria and rescued the Assad regime. However, near the end of the operation, tycoons linked to Putin's close aides signed contracts for postwar reconstruction work in exchange for oil, natural gas, phosphate, and other natural resource rights.<sup>18</sup>

After that, Russian expansion into Lebanon significantly changed. Though initially based on the principle of "economics first, then politics," Moscow later rushed to link Lebanon to Russia by focusing on its

**Putin fosters large Russian businesses and increases their profits via the Kremlin's foreign allies.**

relationship with Hezbollah and its attempt to sell weapons to the government. This plan meant sacrificing some of the economic benefits it might have reaped had

it moved more slowly.

### **Off and On Military Assistance**

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) were restructured in 2005-06, after the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri and the subsequent withdrawal of Syrian forces. Most of their weaponry came from the United States, though France, Germany, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Syria, and Russia also supplied weapons until 2008. Moscow's contribution comprised of heavy-duty mobile bridges, trucks, cranes, bulldozers, and other vehicles valued at about \$30 million.

The UAE contributed most to the small Lebanese air force with nine SA 342L Gazelle combat helicopters armed with machine guns, and France supplied the helicopters with fifty HOT long-range anti-tank missiles. Washington promised sixty-six surplus M60A3 tanks transferred from Jordan (after modifying the tanks' stabilization systems to allow them to fire while moving) and thirty-four M109 155mm turreted, self-propelled howitzers for delivery after 2009, though only 10 tanks and 12 howitzers were actually supplied.<sup>19</sup>

There were, however, two main problems with U.S. military assistance to Lebanon at

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<sup>17</sup> Alexander Shumilin, "Rossiyskaya Diplomatiya na Blizhnem Vostoke: [Vozvrat k Geopolitike](#)," Institut Français des Relations Internationales, Russie.Nei.Visions, May 2016, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, RBC News (Moscow), [July 6, 2018](#).

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<sup>19</sup> "[US Military Assistance to Lebanon](#): Equipping LAF Not Transforming It," *Defense Magazine* (Beirut), Oct. 2012; *The Times of Israel*, [Feb. 8, 2015](#).

that time: Washington's reluctance to supply heavy weapons, and internal bureaucratic procedures that slowed the implementation of the agreements. Washington also self-imposed three constraints in order to manage the balance of power:

- It would provide the LAF with sufficient firepower to counteract Hezbollah and Sunni terrorist organizations.
- It would not transfer weapons that could be captured by Hezbollah.
- It would not provoke any escalations at the Lebanese-Israeli border.<sup>20</sup>

These restrictions were clearly justified from the U.S. and Israeli perspectives but were resented by many Lebanese journalists and politicians. In December 2008, Russia made the first attempt to exploit this dissatisfaction by offering to sell T-54/T-55 tanks for roughly \$500 million during defense minister Elias Murr's visit to Moscow. As the deal went nowhere, the Kremlin offered ten MiG-29 jet fighters for free, only to be told by the Lebanese government that its army needed helicopters rather than these fighting aircraft.<sup>21</sup> Many experts in Russia and Arab countries claimed that U.S. and Israeli diplomats killed the deal,<sup>22</sup> but Moscow should have known that



*Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri (left) meets with Putin in Moscow, September 2017. Following a failed 2016 arms deal, Moscow banned Lebanese officials from Russia and refused to engage Beirut with similar initiatives. But the Russians relented as Lebanon is central to Moscow's Middle East goals.*

Lebanon would not be able to stomach a \$500 million price tag.

Either way, the offer sent an important message to Lebanon: If you can afford it, we will sell you heavy weapons without conditions. In addition, Putin had already demonstrated that he did not need approval from Russia's Federal Assembly to sign international agreements. Lebanon could purchase weapons whenever it wanted.

Moscow made another attempt in early 2010 and offered six Mi-24 helicopters, thirty T-72 heavy battle tanks, thirty 130-mm artillery systems, and a significant quantity of ammunition. On February 25, 2010, Moscow and Beirut entered a formal agreement on military-technical cooperation but nothing came of it.

<sup>20</sup> Aram Nerguizian, "[The Lebanese Armed Forces: Challenges and Opportunities in Post-Syria Lebanon](#)," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., Feb. 10, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, *The Times* (London), [Dec. 18, 2008](#); *Lenta.ru* (Moscow), [Mar. 1, 2010](#).

<sup>22</sup> Nour Samaha, "[Is Lebanon Embracing a Larger Russian Role in Its Country?](#)" The Century Foundation, New York, Aug. 7, 2018; *Tehran Times*, [Apr. 10, 2011](#).

Then, in 2013, jihadists from Syria attempted to infiltrate Lebanon. In response, Saudi Arabia pledged \$4 billion in assistance, mainly to purchase French military hardware. Riyadh suspended this pledge in 2016 after the Lebanese government failed to condemn attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran.

Russia again tried to fill the void, and in summer 2016, Lebanon's ambassador to Moscow, Shawki Bou Nassar, revealed that the two states were negotiating the purchase of a wide range of weaponry, including guns, 9M133 Kornet anti-tank guided missiles, and T-72 tanks.<sup>23</sup> Putin expected the negotiations to succeed and reacted harshly when Beirut failed to sign the deal, temporarily banning Lebanese officials from Russia and announcing the Kremlin's refusal to engage Beirut with these kinds of initiatives again.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, negotiations resumed after Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri visited Moscow in September 2017 and continued throughout 2018.

During this period, new factors influenced Moscow's Middle East policy. First, Russia's military leaders acquired more political power during the Syrian war, and the media repeated their talking points by pushing back against the opinion that Russian troops should not respond to Israeli strikes on Hezbollah or Iranian positions in Syria.<sup>25</sup>

Traditionally, the Russian military stayed out of politics and refrained from announcing weapons deliveries to other

**Russia perceived Lebanon as an extension of the Syrian war zone.**

countries. However, after Syria's allegedly accidental downing of the Russian IL-20 aircraft, the Ministry of Defense

blamed Israel before the foreign ministry commented. The defense ministry then announced its decision to send S-300 air defense systems to Syria, "in accordance with the President's instruction to strengthen the safety of the Russian military in Syria."<sup>26</sup> Discussion of additional ways to "punish Israel" appeared mainly in the media associated with Russian military circles.<sup>27</sup>

Also, U.S. military strikes in Syria further irritated Moscow. Russia perceived Lebanon as an extension of the Syrian war zone, and its ambassador to Beirut, Alexander Zasyupkin, announced on al-Manar, a Lebanese satellite television station affiliated with Hezbollah, that Moscow reserved the right to shoot down U.S. missiles.<sup>28</sup>

Another factor influencing Moscow's Middle East policy was its changing view of possible military action in Lebanon following President Aoun's November 2018 request that Russia extend its S-300 air defense umbrella to Lebanon. Third, Russian news media suggested that a foothold in Lebanon could boost Moscow's recovery and restoration efforts in Syria.<sup>29</sup>

While all this was happening, U.S. aid to Lebanon declined. The Trump administration recommended cutting military and security assistance by 80 percent from fiscal year

<sup>23</sup> *Geopolitica.ru* (Moscow), [July 11, 2016](#).

<sup>24</sup> *Ad-Diyar* (Beirut), Dec. 12, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, *Riafan.ru* (St. Petersburg), Federal News Agency, [Sept. 22, 2017](#).

<sup>26</sup> TV Rossiya-24 (Moscow), [Sept. 24, 2018](#).

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, *Pravda* (Moscow), [Sept. 18, 2018](#).

<sup>28</sup> *RIA Novosti*, [Apr. 11, 2018](#).

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, *Gaseta.ru* (Moscow), [Apr. 24, 2017](#).



2016 to 2018.<sup>30</sup> Moscow responded by offering Beirut a \$1 billion line of credit for weapons purchases<sup>31</sup> and even offered some assistance for free.<sup>32</sup> The draft agreement extended beyond the ordinary scope of arms agreements by including the following:

**In Moscow's view, Hezbollah should not be classified as a terrorist organization.**

- Protection of Lebanese territory by Russian air defense systems deployed in Syria.
- Access to and use of Lebanese ports, particularly the port of Beirut, for entry and repair of Russian warships.
- Access to and use of Lebanese airspace for passage of Russian aircraft.
- Access to three military bases, one of which had been used by the U.S.-led counterterrorist coalition until 2017.<sup>33</sup>

The ultimate fate of this proposal remains unclear. Hariri declined it in December 2018, but said he would accept Russian donations to Lebanon's internal security forces.<sup>34</sup>

In March 2019, Aoun met Putin in Moscow when, according to Russian media, they discussed arms transfers in addition to

the situation in Syria. However, the official joint statement did not mention an arms deal.<sup>35</sup> Russian experts and Lebanese supporters of

an alliance with Moscow accused Washington of pressuring the Lebanese leadership to sabotage the agreement.<sup>36</sup>

Putin may not expect his entire proposal to be accepted; one or two provisions may be enough to satisfy him. Either way, Russia is reverting to the Soviet principle of prioritizing military and strategic interests over commercial concerns.

## Russia and Hezbollah

From Moscow's point of view, the fact that Hezbollah has a so-called political wing means the entity as a whole should not be classified as a terrorist organization. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in early 2006:

The question of legalizing Hezbollah is not relevant. It is a legal, political Lebanese organization. It has representatives in parliament and the government. Hezbollah is part of the Lebanese Shiite community. It is not an imported product.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Hardin Lang and Alia Awadallah, "Playing the Long Game: [U.S. Counterterrorism Assistance for Lebanon](#)," Center for American Progress, Washington, D.C., Aug. 30, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> *The Arab Weekly* (London), [Mar. 18, 2018](#).

<sup>32</sup> *Naharnet* (Beirut), [Mar. 17, 2018](#).

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Kuznetsov, "[O Vozmozhnom Voyennom Sotrudnichestve Mezhdru Rossiyei I Livanon](#)," The Institute of the Middle East, Moscow, Apr. 13, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, *al-Akhbar*, [Nov. 27, 2018](#).

<sup>35</sup> [Joint statement](#) between Michel Aoun, Lebanese president, and Vladimir Putin, Russian president, Presidential Press Office, Kremlin, Moscow, Mar. 26, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Alexander Kuznetsov, "[Situatsiya v Livane](#)," The Institute of the Middle East, Moscow, Apr. 7, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Sergey Lavrov, Russian minister of Foreign Affairs, interview, "['Hezbollah' Ne Importny Product](#)," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Moscow, Sept. 6, 2006.



*A political poster shows (left to right) Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, Syrian leader Bashar Assad, and Russian president Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin and Hezbollah cooperated substantially in Syria. As many as 2,000 Hezbollah fighters may have been killed in Syria.*

Hezbollah members of parliament visited Moscow for the first time in 2011. The Russian media assumed they were probing the depth of Putin's support for Assad.<sup>38</sup> The Kremlin and Hezbollah cooperated substantially in Syria throughout the Russian intervention there.

Since then, Moscow has repeatedly insisted that Hezbollah fighters withdraw to Lebanon, for several reasons. First, Russia and Iran disagree about the future of Assad's army. Tehran wants to maintain a Shiite military bloc in Syria led by Hezbollah that would be subordinate to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Moscow would rather restore the regular Syrian army and leave no place for Hezbollah. Second, some Sunni militias have refused to make agreements with the Assad regime, despite Russian efforts, because local civilians are

afraid of Hezbollah. Third, Turkey and Israel have demanded that Hezbollah withdraw. Moscow cannot ignore these demands, especially since they align with its own preferences. According to some reports, the Russian army has even tried to stop a critical source of income for Hezbollah: drug trafficking along the Lebanese-Syrian border.<sup>39</sup>

Hezbollah's current posture toward Russia is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is incensed by its envisaged eviction from Syria. "The world is heading to a new achievement that Russia will cooperate with them to get Iran and Hezbollah out of Syria," Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah complained in June 2018.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, Hezbollah suffered such heavy losses that it had no choice but to reduce its presence. Despite what the party has won, it

<sup>38</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya, "[Russia in the Middle East: Motives, Consequences, Prospects](#)," Policy Focus 142, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., Feb. 2016, p. 28.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, *Novaya Gazeta* (Moscow), [July 22, 2018](#).

<sup>40</sup> Sayyed Hassan [Nasrallah](#), speech, reprinted in *Alahed News* (Beirut), June 8, 2018.

lost popularity both inside Lebanon and among other Arabs. According to retired Lebanese Brig. Gen. Hisham Jaber, some 1,500–2,000 Hezbollah fighters have been killed in Syria, and hundreds have been left with disabilities.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout 2018, many Russian experts blamed Beirut's indecisiveness over an arms deal on U.S. pressure and the Lebanese government's internal problems. Putin may have expected that the new government formed in January 2019, when a Hezbollah-led bloc emerged with a significant majority, would pursue a more pro-Russian policy. But Hezbollah's political success alarmed the other factions with Lebanese leaders routinely criticizing each other for aligning themselves with Hezbollah and Tehran. In February 2019, the former coordinator of the March 14 General-Secretariat, ex-member of parliament Fares Soaid called for forming an "opposition front" against Prime Minister Hariri, Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil and Hezbollah. Walid Jumblatt criticized Hariri as well.<sup>42</sup> Bassil, too, stated,

Hizbollah must admit that had it not been for the Free Patriotic Movement, it would not have managed to persevere in the face of Israel, terrorism or the isolation attempts.<sup>43</sup>

Many are angry at Moscow as well. Even Jumblatt, a Kremlin ally during the Lebanese civil war, said Lavrov and his

**Russian efforts in Lebanon have failed precisely because Lebanon is politically competitive.**

Iranian counterpart Zarif were trying to divide the Middle East as Sykes and Picot did during World War I.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, in February 2019, Nasrallah began lobbying for the purchase of an air defense system from Iran instead of Russia. In this political context, Russia will have a hard time maintaining an effective lobby unless it uses economic incentives and sacrifices Russian business interests for political gain.

### Putin's Options

Russia's primary source of political capital in the Middle East are actions taken by U.S. administrations that regional politicians interpret as weakness. In order to leverage it, however, Putin's image as a strong and resolute leader must be consistent. He cannot abandon his goal of drawing Lebanon into his sphere of influence after expending so much effort. All of Moscow's present clients are dictatorships, and Russian efforts in Lebanon have failed precisely because it is politically competitive.

But, Putin will press forward, and he has several options:

- To re-bind Lebanon to Syria by nurturing a powerful pro-Syrian coalition in Beirut. Since the formation of the newest government, Lebanon is likely to reorganize its political blocs, and Moscow may attempt to benefit from that adjustment.
- To establish Moscow as the principal mediator of Lebanese-Syrian

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), [Jan. 12, 2019](#).

<sup>42</sup> *Naharnet*, [Feb. 5, 2019](#).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, [Feb. 5, 2019](#).

<sup>44</sup> Muhannad al-Haj Ali, "Az-Zuhaf ar-Rusi ila Lubnan," *al-Modon* (Beirut), [Jan. 28, 2019](#).

relations while guaranteeing Lebanese sovereignty. By actively promoting the repatriation

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- of Syrian refugees from Lebanon, Russia is improving its relations with the Lebanese military, which may lead to an opportunity to police the Lebanese-Syrian border. If it can pull off the latter, Moscow might be able to expand its mission if violence erupts in the border region.
- If Russian oil and natural gas companies can obtain additional extraction rights in Lebanon, Moscow might be able to justify using private military contractors to protect them. This practice began in Ukraine in 2014, from where it spread to other parts of the world. In early 2018, for instance, over a hundred operatives of the Russian private military group Wagner were killed in combat operations near the Syrian town of Deir az-Zour. The group has been reportedly active in Libya, Sudan, and a number of Central African countries, where its personnel carry out security tasks for Gazprom, major Russian oil corporations, and companies engaged in gold and diamond exploration.<sup>45</sup> Such military contractors are not regulated by

Russian law—meaning the Kremlin does not take responsibility for them—and they could potentially intervene in new conflicts.

- Moscow's best bet is an à la carte offer of protection under Russia's air defense umbrella without strings attaching it to military aid. The strategy would be based on the developments in the Iran-Israel conflict. If Israel intensifies its attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah targets near its northern border, the Russian military lobby will become increasingly anti-Israel. Even if Putin does not want to aggravate relations with Israel, his desire or perceived need to appear strong would pressure him to proceed anyway.

Most Russian experts believe Hezbollah and Israel are stalemated, that neither side will seriously attack the other. But they are wrong. A heavily armed paramilitary organization with fresh combat skills, recent experience, and upgraded weaponry will not be idle for long if it is financially desperate. Hezbollah has only two options if Russia blocks it in Syria: discredit itself by inciting civil war in Lebanon or rally Arab support to its side by attacking Israel with Russian air support.

## Conclusion

While Putin follows the age-old adage of no permanent enemies and no permanent friends, he exhibits no such flexibility toward the United States. He has nurtured an atmosphere of anti-American hysteria in Russia since before he even took office and has locked himself into a permanent anti-U.S. course to preserve his legitimacy. If

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<sup>45</sup> See for example, *The Moscow Times*, [Nov. 12, 2014](#); Grzegorz Kuczyński, "Putin's Invisible Army," The Warsaw Institute Foundation, Mar. 30, 2018; Arti Gercek news agency (Köln, Ger.), [July 11, 2018](#); *Novaya Gazeta*, [Jan. 23, 2019](#).

Washington takes action against Iran, Putin will support Tehran both vis-à-vis the United States and in the Iranian-Hezbollah-Israeli conflagration that will likely erupt in such circumstances. This will make Lebanon a major battleground. It is therefore critical for Washington to ensure that any U.S.-Russian agreement on Syria would prohibit an expansion of Russia's defense system to Lebanon. Whether or not Washington and Moscow can agree, a comprehensive U.S. policy toward Lebanon and Syria would be best. The U.S. administration should also

focus on Christian communities in Lebanon to prevent them from irreversibly falling under the sway of Moscow, Hezbollah, and its Iranian patron.

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