

A resurgent Russia returns to the Middle East



■ Russian soldiers are seen guarding a checkpoint near Wafideen camp in Damascus, Syria.

Reuters



They have spoken only once since the downing of a Russian plane in Syria in September, which Moscow blamed on Israel. But phone calls between Putin and Netanyahu at the time played a part in tamping down the worst of the animosity, diplomats say.



When not hosting visitors, Vladimir Putin is often on the telephone, usually sorting out problems relating to Syria but, in the process, cultivating close relationships with some of the United States' dearest friends.

Turkey and Israel – nearly three dozen times with the leaders of those two countries just in the past year.

Russia wants to 'hear all sides'

Apart from Syria, Russia has shown little inclination to wade into most of the region's myriad conflicts, such as the Yemen war, the Arab-Israeli peace process and the dispute between Qatar and its neighbours. But Putin has welcomed anyone who wants to visit, making Moscow a must-stop destination for leaders with a problem to solve.

"Putin is effectively working as the psychoanalyst of the region," said Malik Dahlan, a Saudi who is a professor of international law and public policy at Queen Mary University of London.

"The Russians are happy to hear all sides, and anyone who wants to speak, they're happy to listen."

Phone diplomacy

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Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who called Trump a "true friend" of Israel, has spoken 11 times on the phone with Putin over the past year and only three times with Trump. Netanyahu has visited Moscow four times in the past year. He has visited Washington twice since Trump became president.

It's unclear whether Putin and Netanyahu's rapport will survive building tensions between Israel and Iran in Syria and also Lebanon, where the Iranian-backed Hezbollah militia has expanded its influence.

Turkey drifts into Moscow's orbit

Turkey, a longtime US ally and Nato partner with a centuries-old history of rivalry with Russia, has been drifting deeper into Moscow's orbit of influence as their cooperation in Syria expands.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the past year has spoken 20 times on the phone with Putin and seven times with Trump. Erdogan's decision to purchase Russia's advanced S-400 missile system, which Moscow says will be delivered next year, offers one example of how their burgeoning relationship could challenge the cohesion of Nato.

Back in Iraq

Russia has also been warming up to Iraq, a US ally and recipients of US military aid. Moscow has completed arms deals with the government, invested in an oil pipeline linking the Iraqi region of Kurdistan to Turkey and opened an intelligence-sharing centre with the Iraqi military in Baghdad, signalling its return to a country lost as an ally after the United States toppled Saddam Hussein.

– Washington Post

