

Putin Wants to Be the Middle East's Go-To Problem Solver

Putin's trolling of Trump isn't just about missiles.

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President Vladimir Putin's [offer](#) to sell Russian air defense systems to Saudi Arabia is about more than mere trolling, even though it caused laughter from Iran's President Hassan Rouhani. Putin was trying to persuade the entire Middle East that working with him is more effective than cooperating with the U.S.

One could regard it as a kind of mafia-style protection offer: The new, more aggressive gangster on the block is making a bid because the current king of the streets has grown lazy and risk-averse.

On Monday, Putin was in Ankara for talks on the Syrian conflict with Rouhani and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He made every effort to blend in, referencing the Quran and

making constant references to Muslim traditions.

“The Holy Quran says violence is only acceptable when defending your kin,” Putin [told](#) a press conference after the summit. “So we’re willing to provide aid to Saudi Arabia in defending their kin, their country.” The Saudis should “make a wise, statesmanlike decision,” he suggested, and purchase S-300 air defense systems as Iran did, or the more modern S-400 ones which Turkey recently purchased. “They will reliably protect any Saudi Arabian infrastructure,” Putin said, referring to the recent drone attack on Saudi refineries.

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Putin’s Quranic scholarship is a little dubious (the Islamic holy book actually [permits](#) Muslims to fight back when attacked, not when protecting “kin”), but Rouhani was willing to let it pass. He asked Putin facetiously which system he’d recommend to the Saudis — the S-300 or the S-400. “Let them have their pick,” Putin replied.

In reality, it’s the S-400 that Russia has been [trying hard](#) to sell to Saudi Arabia, so far without success. It has also offered the missiles to Qatar. Neither the S-300 nor the S-400 has seen any real combat use. Theoretically, and as seen in exercises, these are powerful weapons. But not even Syria’s Bashar Al-Assad, who has had a few opportunities to use the S-300s he received from Russia last year, has done so.

The point of acquiring such systems isn’t so much to shoot down enemy aircraft and missiles but to make a bid for Russian support in case of a crisis. For that, Erdogan, whose country is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, has been willing to live with the threat of U.S. sanctions and even lose access to U.S.-made F-35 fighter jets.

Russia’s bid to replace the U.S. as the go-to problem solver in the Middle East is based on the success of its relatively low-cost but highly effective intervention in Syria, where the Russian air force and deniable mercenaries have helped propel Assad’s forces to victory in a bloody civil war. Putin’s foray in Syria was meant, in part, as a sales demonstration to Middle Eastern regimes: Russia will, if asked, intervene on the side of the incumbent ruler in the interest of stability, and it will do so quickly and without political strings attached.

The U.S. offers neither of these advantages.

President Donald Trump is, at heart, an isolationist unwilling to send U.S. troops overseas, and his instinct so far has been to pull out of Middle Eastern countries rather than start new wars. The current field of Democratic presidential hopefuls is almost uniformly [pacifist](#): Most of the candidates support a quick withdrawal from Afghanistan, and all are for ending U.S. support for Saudi Arabia’s intervention in Yemen. The U.S. public is tired of overseas military adventures.

Russia’s advantage in this regard is that Putin doesn’t care what the public thinks when he feels it’s in Russia’s interest to intervene militarily in some far-off place. Moreover, he uses Kremlin-friendly private military companies to provide a cloak of deniability.

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Putin also makes a point of not trying to tell his situational allies — or perhaps “clients,” current and potential, is a better word — how to run their countries. Assad may be up to his elbows in blood, but he’s the “legitimate” ruler; Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman may be responsible for the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, but Putin has gone [out of his way](#) to act friendly with the prince when others shunned him.

U.S. help often comes with patronizing advice and sometimes even with direct support for regime change. Putin defends the right of incumbents to act in line with what they see as their traditions — thus the several references to the Quran he made in Ankara.

This, of course, makes for some awkward exceptions to the ancient rule that says the enemy of one’s enemy is one’s friend. Russia’s closeness to Iran, on full display on Monday, is an irritant to Saudi Arabia, especially when the U.S. says Iran was responsible for the drone attack on Saudi infrastructure. On the other hand, Russia is Saudi Arabia’s natural ally in protecting the global oil market from the disruption caused by U.S. shale operators. Besides, Saudi Arabia working with the Kremlin could potentially be a way to end Iranian provocations since Moscow will talk with Tehran rather than hit it with sanctions as the U.S. does.

It’s hard to see Saudi Arabia siding openly with Russia and undermining its long-standing alliance with the U.S., no matter how tempting Putin might make it sound. Putin’s foreign policy record doesn’t spell trustworthiness, and his steadfast support for Assad isn’t proof that he’ll be as unfailingly loyal to other potential clients. Besides, the U.S. has shown the crushing might of its military on more occasions than Putin’s Russia; there’s no question that its ability to win any conventional armed conflict is greater than Russia’s today.

In the medium to long term, however, which power is seen as the chief problem-solver in the Middle East depends on U.S. willingness to bring its might to bear. Trump’s actions against Iran haven’t been overwhelmingly effective. The Yemen conflict, in which the U.S. has sides with the Saudis, is still raging. U.S. foe Assad controls most of Syria. And Turkey hasn’t suffered any adverse consequences for defying the U.S. with its S-400 purchase.

Putin is waiting in the wings and signaling that he speaks the same language as the clients he’s courting.

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