



Between opportunities & risks  
Russia's influence in the Middle-East

# Agenda

Russia in the Middle East

**Syria: Bashar al-Assad & chaos**

Turkey: a precarious balancing act

Israel: difficult choices

Egypt & the oil monarchies - Takeaways



## Russia in the Middle-East

A most enviable position  
after 6 years of military  
intervention in Syria

A major **power broker** (the  
West sidelined)

None of the regional powers  
have supported sanctions  
against Russia



## Russia in the Middle-East

A flexible diplomacy

The invasion of Ukraine:  
significant **challenges** ahead  
for Russia in the region

# Russia and the Middle-East

## 1. Russian ambitions





## Russia and the Middle East

Access to warm waters

Competition with the West

Arms sales

**A buffer against radical Islam**

Islam: the religion of many ethnic minorities in Russia

(15% of Russian population)

## Russia and the Middle East



**Access to warm waters**



## Russo-Turkish War (1768-1774)

Catherine II's primary objective: a  
**permanent Russian presence** in  
the Black Sea

Access to warm waters

## 1783: the annexation of Crimea

Access to the Dardanelles and  
Bosphorus Straits







## Eyeing Constantinople, the Bosphorus & the Dardanelles

### **1833:** Treaty with Turkey

The Dardanelles to be closed to foreign warships if requested by Russia

Revoked in 1841 (London Convention)

Russia suspected of planning to transform the Black Sea into a "*Russian lake*"

# The Crimean War (1853-1856)

## Great Britain

Russia's ambitions: a threat to the route to India (via the Mediterranean)

## France

Freedom of the seas

Renewed French influence





Sergei Sazonov

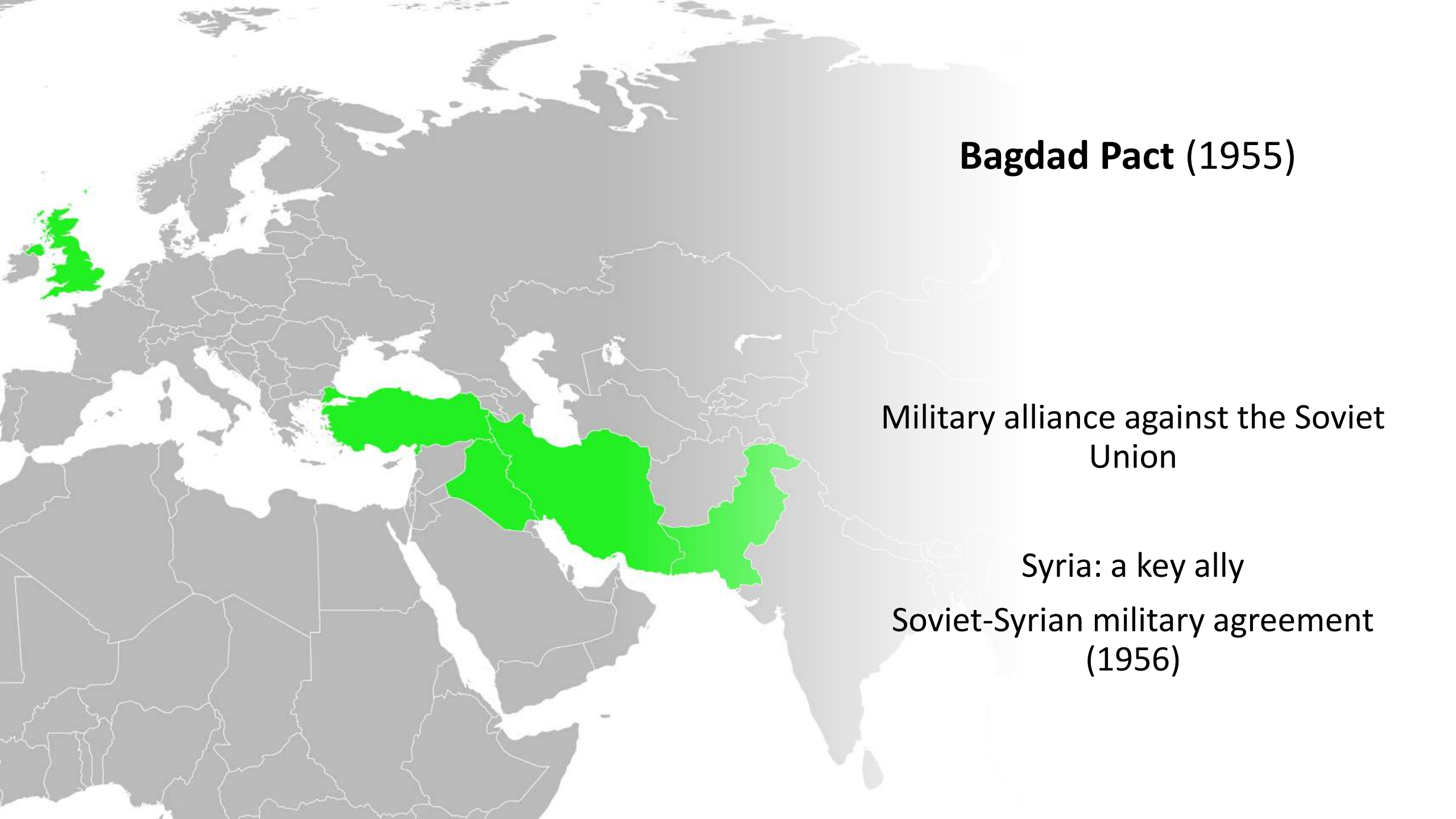


WW1: Renewed Russian ambitions over  
Constantinople and the straits



Russia and the Middle East

Competition with the West

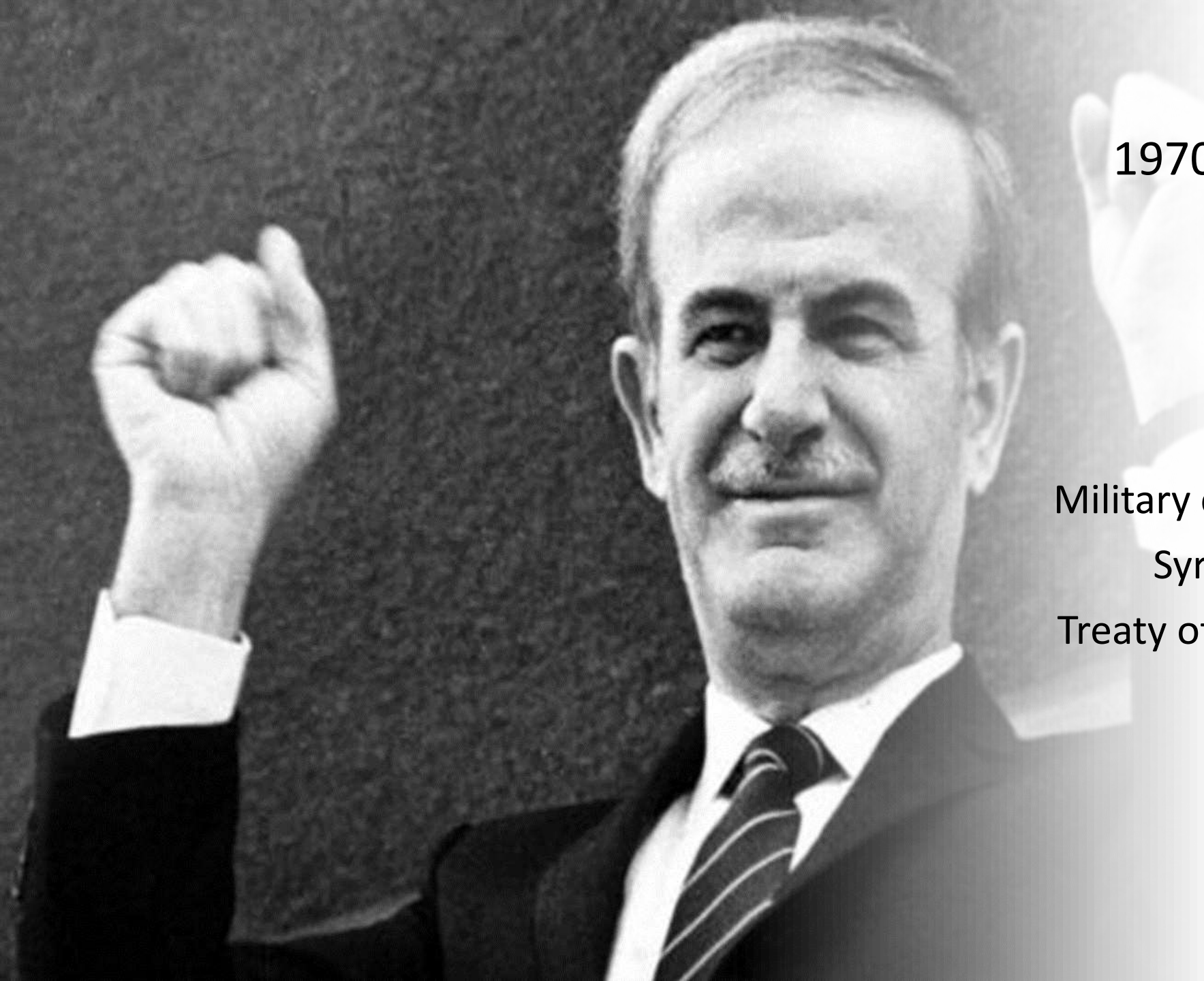


## Bagdad Pact (1955)

Military alliance against the Soviet Union

Syria: a key ally

Soviet-Syrian military agreement  
(1956)



1970: Hafez al-Assad in  
power

Military coup supported by Moscow

Syrian debt renegotiated

Treaty of **Friendship & Cooperation**  
(1980)



**1985-1991**

Military aid to Syria  
interrupted

## The 1990s

Boris Yeltsin's priority: Russia's relationship with its *"near abroad"*

Painful economic transition

Military intervention in Chechnya





LARIS KARKLIS/THE WASHINGTON POST



U.S. intervention in Iraq  
(2003)

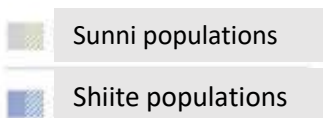
Growing anti-American  
sentiments in the region

Closer Russia-Syria relations

# Russia and the Middle-East

## 2. Syria: Bashar al-Assad & chaos





Mediterranean Sea

The Shiite corridor  
INTERVENTIONS OR SUPPORT TO...

- 1 Lebanese Hezbollah
- 2 Syrian regime
- 3 Iraqi government

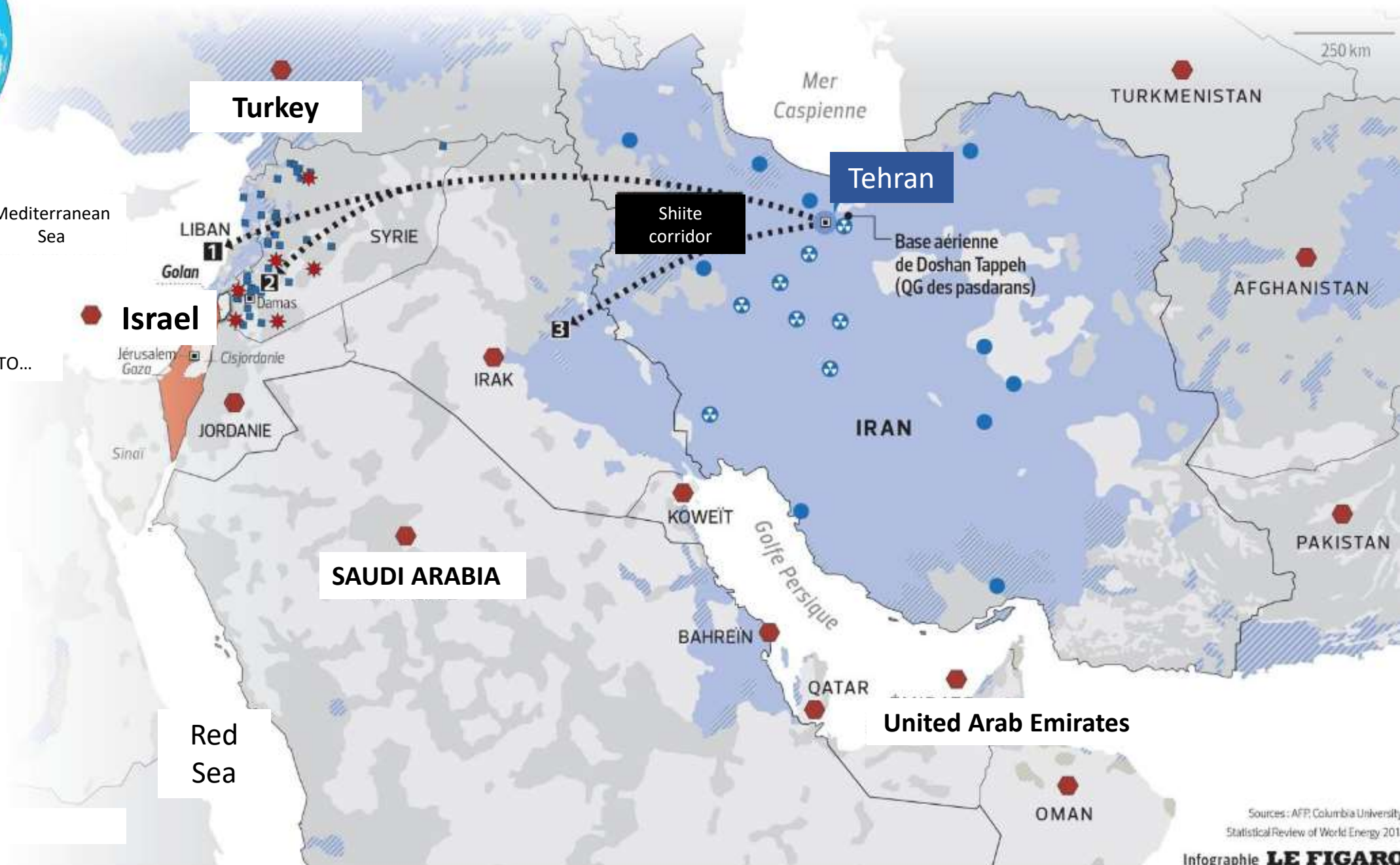
■ Main Iranian or allies to Iran forces in Syria

⚛ Alleged Iranian nuclear military site

● Other nuclear site

■ Permanent U.S. military base

★ Main Israeli strikes in Syria



Sources: AFP, Columbia University  
Statistical Review of World Energy 2011

Infographie **LE FIGARO**

**Supporting Syria at  
all cost**





## The Arab Spring

Russia (like the rest of the world)  
caught off guard by the Arab  
Spring

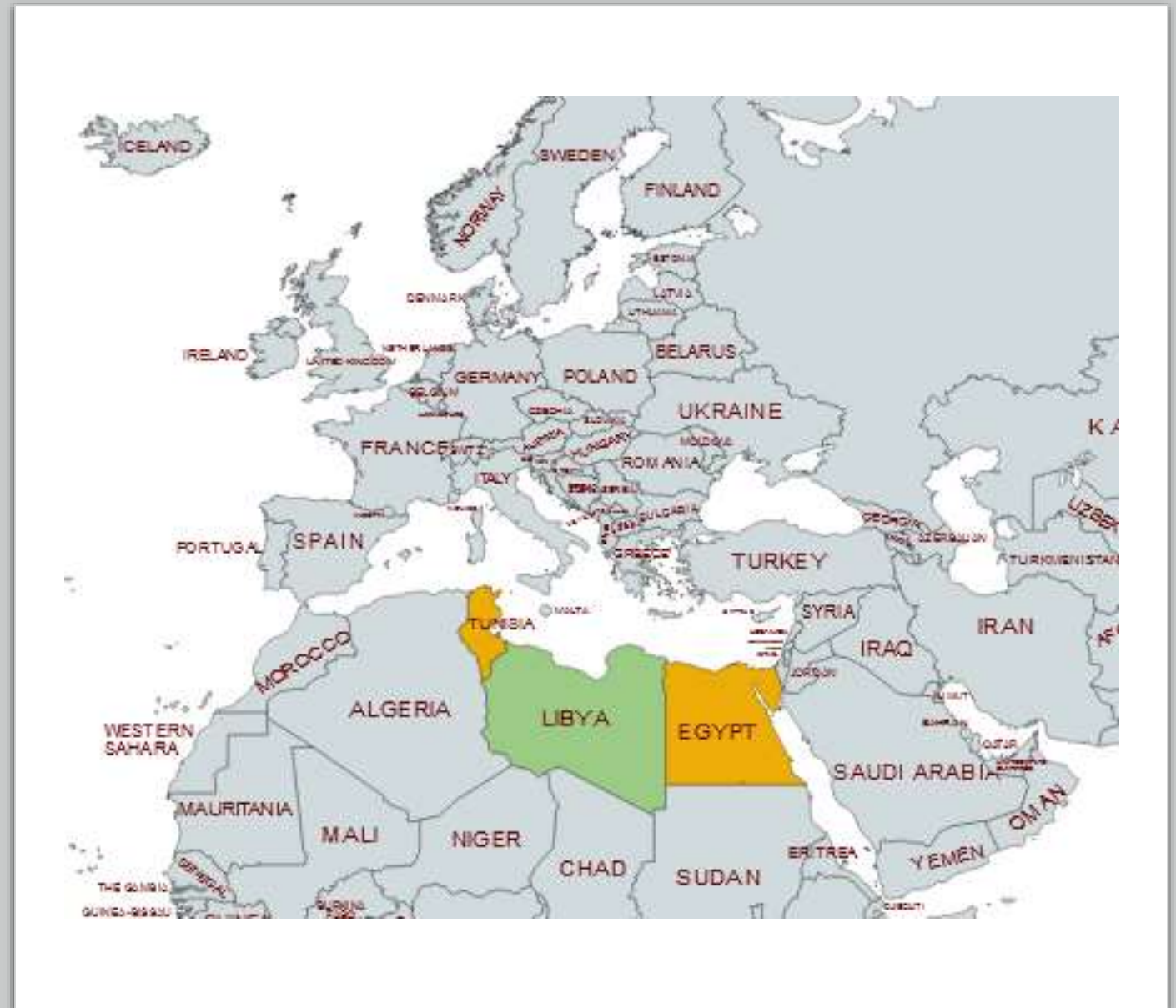
Tunisia, Egypt...

The result of “pro-American  
movements” (Moscow)

# The Libyan Revolution

**17 March 2011: UN Security Council Resolution 1973**  
authorizing a **military intervention** to protect protesters

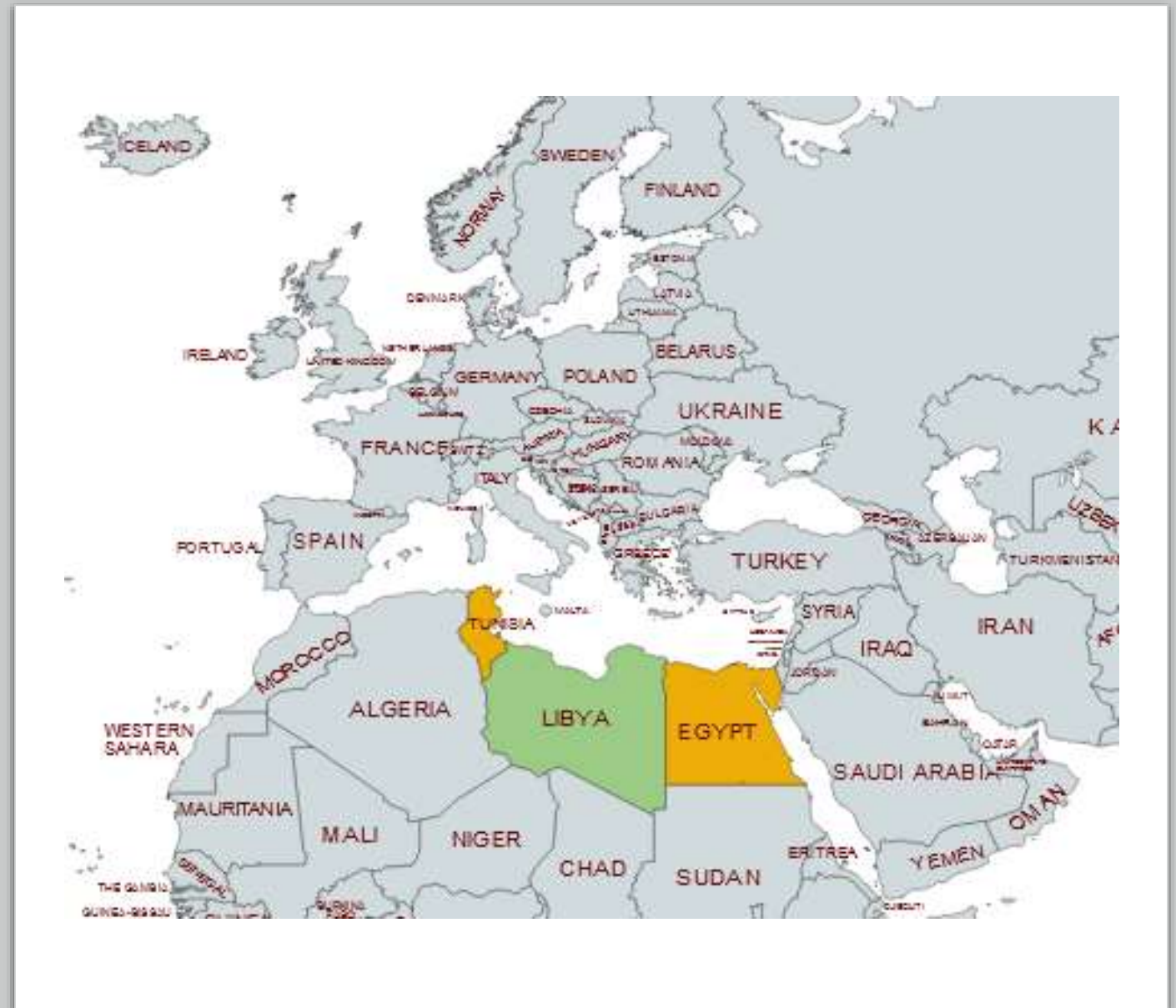
**No regime change** on the agenda  
Russia **abstained**



# The Libyan Revolution

**A Western-led coalition:** regime of Colonel Qaddafi overthrown

Moscow furious



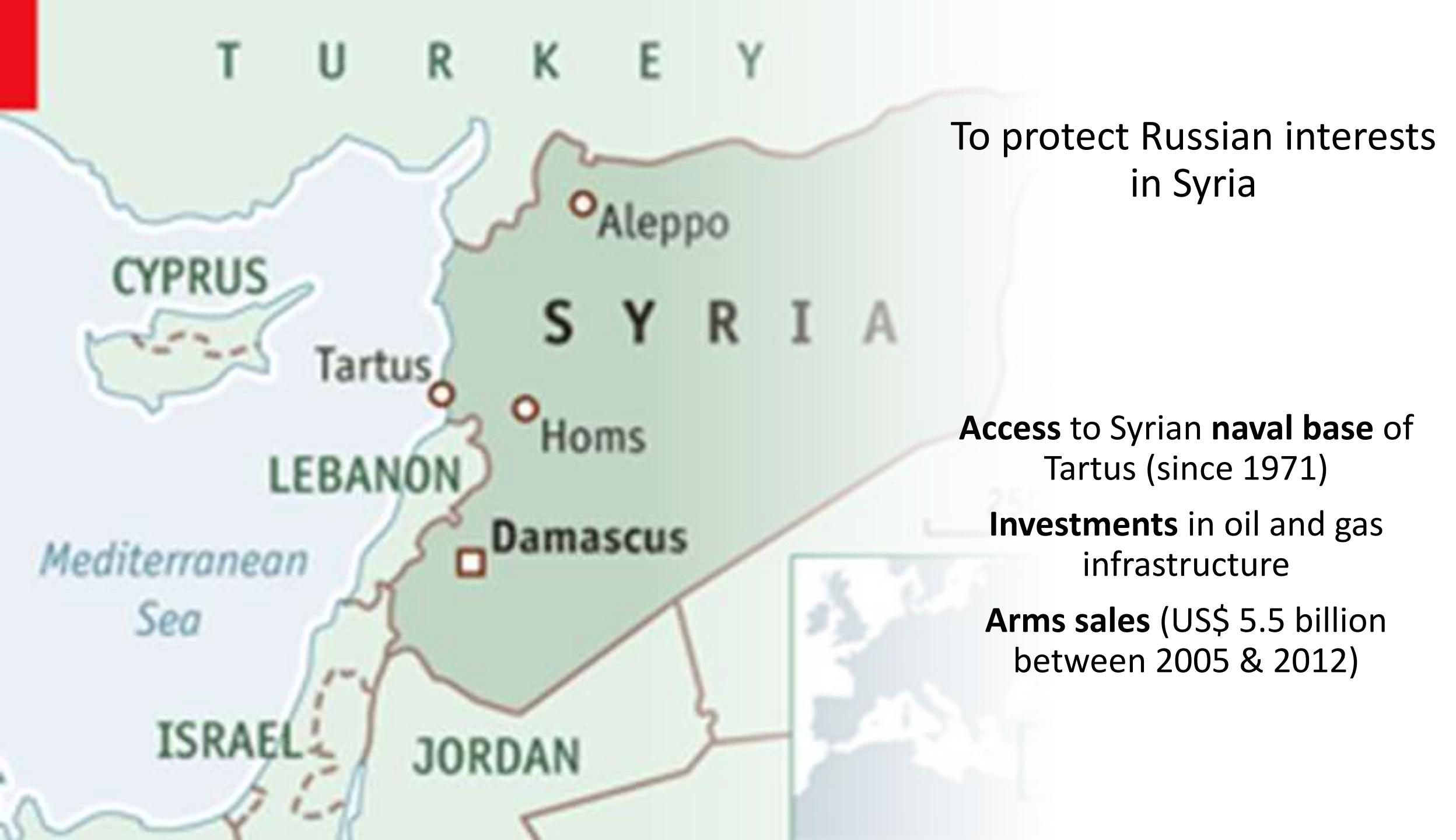


Peaceful demonstrations  
against the Syrian regime

Moscow: to stop another “colored  
revolution” promoted by the West

A “Western conspiracy”

No to a regime change in Syria



# Bashar al-Assad's response

## 1. Repression

Involvement of the *Mukhabarat*  
(Syrian special forces)

Tight cooperation with Soviet  
KGB

Trained by former Nazi officer  
Alois Brunner



**Bashar al-Assad's response**

## **2. Spreading false information**

Peaceful demonstrators are armed



## Bashar al-Assad's response

### 3. Playing the Jihadist card

January 2012: hundreds of Jailed Jihadists freed

The plan: **to radicalize** further the revolution

Moscow & Damascus: the war against **terrorism**





## Confusion in the West

How to differentiate from the pro-democracy rebels (**Free Syrian Army**) & the Jihadists (both fighting the regime!)

=

Insufficient support



## A humanitarian crisis

Widespread use of torture  
2.5 million refugees by  
August 2014

5.5 million Syrians displaced  
(total population: 23 million)

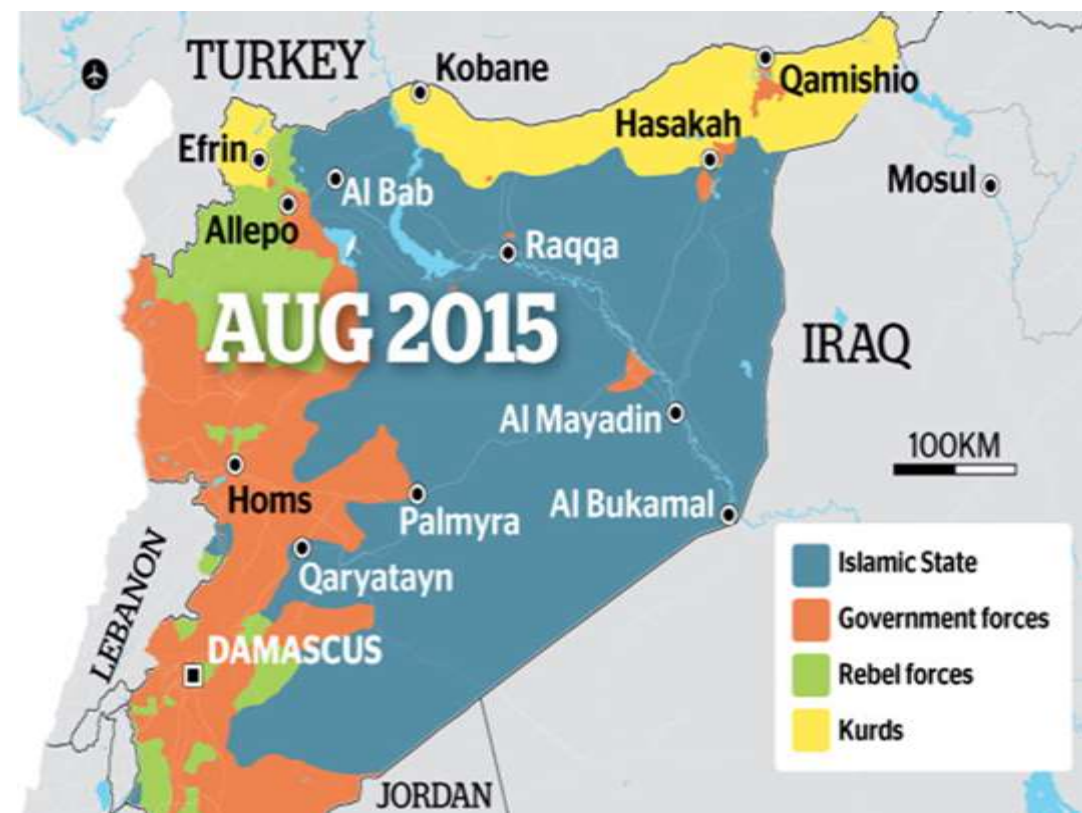
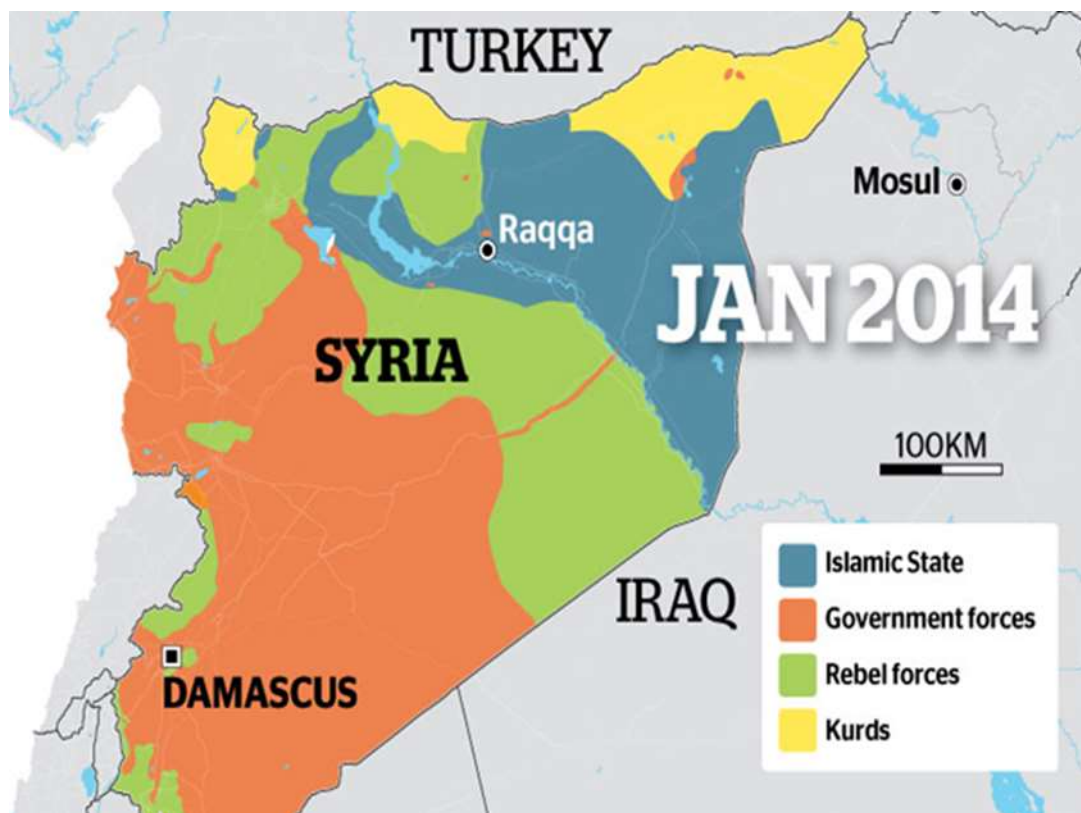
The use of **chemical  
weapons** (prohibited by  
international law)

## Barack Obama's famous "*red line*"



**September 2013:** no U.S. intervention following the use of chemical weapons in Syria

Putin's interpretation: the West (the U.S.) not ready to intervene militarily anywhere





**Putin & al-Assad: democracy is  
chaos**

An authoritarian regime as the only  
solution to Syria's problems



August 2014

An **international military intervention** against the Islamic State

Operation *Inherent Resolve*

70 states & international organizations

Russia out

A portrait of Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a dark blue suit, a white shirt, and a dark tie with a small white pattern. The background is a solid blue color.

## Putin's game plan

To let the coalition conduct the fight  
against the Islamic State

Russian military intervention in Syria  
1 year later



Between opportunities & risks  
Russia's influence in the Middle-East



30 September 2015

Russian military intervention began

90% of its targets: anti al-Assad's forces  
other than IS

Civilian targets (hospitals)

The concept of "double strikes": a  
second raid targeting rescue workers



## Obstruction at the UN

15 UN resolutions vetoed by  
Russia

The West accused of neo-  
colonialism (regime change)



**2017**

Victory over the Free Syrian  
Army

**Next target:** Islamic State  
(within the scope of the war  
against terrorism)

Consensus with the West



A concert in the ruins of  
ancient Palmyra

Concert led by renowned Russian  
conductor **Valery Gergiev** (a  
supporter of Putin)

Performed in the capital of South  
Ossetia in 2008 (Russo-Georgian  
war)



## The Astana process

Military balance in favor of the Assad regime

Peace process aimed at ending the Syrian conflict  
(Russia, Turkey & Iran)

The U.S. sidelined



## The Astana process

Four “de-escalation zones” across Syria

Local ceasefires

Only one of those zones left (the 3 others reconquered by al-Assad forces backed by Russia)



Al-Assad regime as the only  
political alternative

Russian pressure for the  
reintegration of Syria to the **Arab  
League** (excluded in 2011)

Rebuilding and pacifying Syria



## Challenges

Shifting local alliances

Resurgence of Jihadist groups in the north

Iran's competition to control key sectors of Syrian economy

Turkish presence (also in the north)



Was it worth it for Russia?

A significant military deployment in  
Syria



Over 200 new weapons (tanks, missiles,  
aircraft) tested or modified in Syria

**2015:** 26 missiles launched  
from Russian frigate off coast  
of Kazakhstan ( 1500 km)

A clear message to the West





Was it worth it for Russia?

Russia able to promote its armament to  
potential buyers





Was it worth it for  
Russia?

A significant military  
deployment in Syria

The use of “*dumb bombs*”  
(unguided) & highly  
dangerous cluster bombs  
(which release  
submunitions)



Was it worth it for  
Russia?

Hospitals, schools, markets  
and residential areas as  
targets

Aerial bombardments +  
artillery against cities

The physical elimination of  
all opposition

Syria: a ruined country

**2018 Russo-Syrian agreement:**  
exclusive rights over gas and oil  
(zones controlled by the regime)

Investments needed to rebuild Syria  
estimated at 388 US\$ billion

The West invited to help financially  
The answer: NO!



# The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019

Sanctions against Syrian government for war crimes

The EU and wealthy Gulf monarchies prevented from investing in Syria

Russia unable to cope with rebuilding costs alone



# The war in Ukraine

Russia **isolated** at the UN  
Any talks over the future of  
Syria now postponed



Al-Assad's immediate support of  
Russia's "*special military  
operation*" in Ukraine

The recruiting amongst Syrian  
militias to reinforce Russian  
troops in Ukraine

Syrian "contingent": 16 000 men

# Russia and the Middle-East

## 3. Turkey: a precarious balancing act





Fragile cooperation with  
Turkey

Common economic interests  
(tourism, natural gas...)

BUT

**Few common goals in Syria**



How to deal with Kurdish  
forces?

Kurdish forces seen as terrorists  
by Turkey

BUT

Russia's allies



## Opposite views on Libya

Russia and Turkey back different factions

Libya's resources in natural gas: a priority for Turkey (energy sovereignty)

Russia's influence in the Mediterranean (naval base) and Africa



# Turkey's military **drones** sold to Ukraine and used to fight Russian forces (Donbass)

## Moscow: a provocation





A fragile balance

**No Turkish sanctions** against Russia

The Bosphorus Strait & the Dardanelles **closed off to Russia & Ukraine** by Turkey AFTER the passage of the Russian fleet

The longer the war, the more challenging keeping such balancing act will be!

# Russia and the Middle-East

## 3. Israel





## Difficult choices with Israel

**Abraham Accords** (September 2020):  
normalization of Israel's diplomatic relations with  
the **United Arab Emirates** and **Bahrain**



A serious blow to Russia's overall strategy in the  
region

Enhanced tensions with **Iran**

**Russia's alliance with Iran**

Further weakness of **Palestinian** cause

**Russia: a long time champion of the Palestinian  
cause**



Good Russia-Israel relations  
but...

Palestinian cause central to negotiate  
acceptable peace

Israel's colonies in Transjordan deemed  
illegal by Moscow

Moscow's efforts to help reconcile key  
Palestinian factions (Hamas & Fatah)

Russia eager to play the indispensable  
**power broker**



## Russia's intervention in Syria

Russia has become a *“kind of neighbor in the north for Israel”*

Russia's control over Syria's airspace



Jewish immigration from former  
Soviet Union to Israel

1.5 million Russian & Ukrainian Jews  
have emigrated to Israel



## Israel's main objective

To prevent Iran and its allies  
(Hezbollah) to gain further influence  
in Syria

Moscow has kept a blind eye from  
Israel's military strikes in Syria

Moscow's increasingly difficult  
**balancing act** between Iran & Israel



**Strong but non essential  
ties with Egypt**

No tensions with Egypt  
Economic ties

Egypt as a go-between with Saudi  
Arabia  
(Saudi Arabia support anti-Assad  
militias in Syria)





Common fear of radical  
Islam

Egypt supportive of Syria's  
reintegration to the Arab League

Same views on Libya

BUT

Key financial allies and supports (oil  
monarchies of the Gulf)

The relations with the U.S.: a priority



## *The Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act*

Signed into law by Donald Trump in  
2017: any country dealing with  
Russia's defense and intelligence  
sectors to be sanctioned

Egypt bought 31 fighter aircraft from  
Russia in 2018

Another fragile **balancing act!**



## The war in Ukraine

Egypt condemned Russia's invasion  
of Ukraine  
BUT

**Official neutrality**

Egypt highly dependent on grain  
imports from Russia & Ukraine

## The oil monarchies in the Gulf

Key objective until recently:

To rally the oil monarchies to a **gradual normalization** of Assad's regime & the **financing** of Syria's **reconstruction**





## The war in Ukraine

The impact of the war on Russia and global economies

Official neutrality of the oil monarchies  
Russia's invasion not condemned & NO sanctions

How long will the oil monarchies be able to maintain that position?



## Takeaways

Russia's diplomatic advantages over the West in the Middle-East until February 2022

**Russia's diplomatic efforts in the region now in peril**

The U.S. likely to put pressure on Middle East countries to revisit their relationship with Moscow