

# The Geopolitics of Oil and Natural Gas: Russia is Back to Stay in the Middle East

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Russia is back. President Vladimir Putin wants the world to acknowledge that Russia remains a global power. He is making his stand in Syria.

The Soviet Union acquired the Tartus Naval Port in Syria in 1971 without any real purpose for it. With their ships welcomed in Algeria, Cuba or Vietnam, Tartus was too insignificant to be developed. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia lacked the funds to spend on the base and no reason to invest in it.

The Russian return to the Middle East brought them first to where the Soviet Union had its closest ties. Libya had been a major buyer of arms and many of the military officers had studied in the Soviet Union. Russia was no longer a global power, but it could be used by the Libyans as a counter force to block domination by the United States and Europeans.

When Gaddafi fell, Tartus became Russia's only presence in the region. That and the discovery of vast gas deposits just offshore have transformed the once insignificant port into a strategic necessity.

Earlier at the United Nations, Russia had failed to realize that Security Council Resolution 1973 that was to implement a new policy of "responsibility to protect" cloaked a hidden agenda. It was to be turned from a no-fly zone into a free-fire zone for NATO. That strategic blunder of not vetoing the resolution led to the destruction of Gaddafi's regime and cost Russia construction contracts and its investments in Libyan gas and oil to the tune of 10 billion dollars.

That was one more in a series of humiliating defeats; and something that Putin will not allow to happen again while he is president. Since his time as an officer in the KGB, he has seen the Soviet Empire lose half of its population, a quarter of its land mass, and most of its global influence. He has described the collapse of the Soviet Union as a "geopolitical catastrophe."

In spite of all of the pressure from Washington and elsewhere to have him persuade Bashar Al-Assad to relinquish power, Putin is staying loyal to the isolated regime. He is calculating that Russia cannot afford to lose among the Arabs what little prestige that it has remaining and gain a major political and economic advantage in Southern Europe and in the Eastern Mediterranean.

What Russia lost through the anti-AI-Assad alliance was the possibility to control the natural gas market across Europe and the means to shape events on the continent. In July 2011, Iran, Iraq, and Syria agreed to build a gas pipeline from the South Pars gas field in Iran to Lebanon and across the Mediterranean to Europe. The pipeline that would have been managed by Gazprom would have carried 110 million cubic meters of gas. About a quarter of the gas would be consumed by the transit countries, leaving seventy or so million cubic meters to be sold to [Europe](#).

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