

ORION FORUM

Gulf Arab Engagement with Russia

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Last month, the Emir of Qatar and the Sultan of Oman visited Moscow, where they met with President Vladimir Putin. These visits to the Kremlin highlight Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members' efforts to deepen ties with Russia across geopolitical, security, energy, economic, and diplomatic fronts.

Such engagements affirm Moscow's enduring influence in the Arab world despite the [blow](#) to Russia's regional standing following former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's ouster five months ago. They also reflect a broader trend of Middle Eastern countries seeking to diversify their international partnerships beyond the West. Among policymakers in the Gulf, there is a widespread view of Russia as a global player with a productive role to play in the Middle East.

Qatar's Emir Returns to Moscow

On April 17, Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and Putin addressed the crises in the Levant. It was an opportunity for Qatar and Russia to exchange views on issues where they have much common ground.

Notably, the Qatari leader came to Moscow shortly after Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa paid his first official [visit](#) to Doha since Assad's fall. Qatar has established itself as an important backchannel between post-Ba'ath Syria and Moscow, with Emir Tamim relaying to Putin the new Syrian government's desires to foster a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Russia. While meeting with Emir Tamim in the Kremlin, Putin [expressed](#) his country's concerns about instability in Syria and, specifically, Moscow's interests in the preservation of the Syrian nation-state's territorial integrity against the backdrop of Israeli aggression aimed at fragmenting the war-torn country.

Mindful of Russia's support for the former regime, Moscow's relationship with the new Islamist government in Damascus will naturally face some difficulties. Yet, with the West continuing to impose crippling sanctions on Syria while Tel Aviv, with full support from Washington, carries on with its destabilizing military intervention and land theft in Syria, Sharaa's government is [engaging](#) Moscow pragmatically—both directly and via the Qatari channel. Russia's position in favor of [lifting](#) sanctions on Syria and its [desire](#) to play a role in the country's reconstruction offer Moscow opportunities to retain clout in Damascus despite last year's change of regime. One of Russia's key national interests in post-Assad Syria is maintaining its military presence in the country, which is key to Moscow's ability to project military power not only throughout the Middle East but also on the African continent. Within this context, Qatar stands to play an important role as an interlocutor based on its strong relationships with Damascus and Moscow.

The Russian president emphasized his stance in favor of implementing a new ceasefire while condemning the continued killing and starvation of Palestinians in the besieged enclave. "We know that Qatar is making very serious efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unfortunately, the initiatives put forward, including by you, have not been implemented—peaceful people continue to die in Palestine, which is an absolute tragedy of today," Putin [told](#) Qatar's leader.

The visit also entailed Emir Tamim and Putin [signing](#) an agreement in which their two countries will each put USD 1.14 billion into a joint investment fund. Additionally, Kirill Dmitriev, who heads Russia's sovereign wealth fund, Russian Direct Investment Fund, [stated](#) that Doha has invested much in Russia's infrastructure and that Russian firms seek to enter Middle Eastern markets in the Middle East in collaboration with Qatari partners.

The Omani Sultan's Landmark Visit

Days later the Sultan of Oman came to Russia, making him the [first](#) Omani head of state to pay an official visit to Moscow. Sultan Haitham's landmark trip to Russia came shortly before the third round of American-Iranian talks were held in Muscat under Omani auspices. Nuclear diplomacy between Washington and Iran was a major focus in the sultan's meeting with Putin. With Russia having stakes in these talks preventing an armed conflict over Iran's nuclear program, Moscow is supportive of Muscat's role in the diplomatic process.

Similar to Emir Tamim's visit, when Sultan Haitham was in Moscow he spoke with the Russian leadership about Gaza. This is an issue where Omani and Russian officials see eye to eye in terms of the roles of the UN charter and international law when it comes to a durable solution to the conflict and justice for Palestinians.

On the economic side, Sultan Haitham and Putin [discussed](#) ways for the two countries to explore new investment and trade opportunities across various sectors. Oman has a desire to see Russia build on its already [growing](#) economic ties with the Sultanate to play a larger role in Oman's economic diversification agenda, Vision 2040. While agriculture and energy are currently the [two dominant](#) areas in Omani-Russian commercial relations, [tourism](#), which is a [pillar](#) of Oman's Vision 2040, is another area in bilateral affairs with much room for growth.

This visit has much potential to elevate Omani-Russian ties to new heights. Among Russian elites there is growing talk of Oman becoming a strategic partner on par with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Such a step forward in bilateral relations would align with Muscat's interests in deepening engagement with Russia, which began taking place during the 2010s when Yusuf bin Alawi was the Omani foreign minister and the two countries were frequently holding meetings to discuss issues where interests aligned to notable degrees, including Syria, Yemen, and the 2017-21 blockade of Qatar.

The Wider Picture

Nearly 39 months after Russia launched its "special military operation" in Ukraine, Moscow seeks to build its ties with Arab states and other Global South countries. Such relationships help Russia circumvent geopolitical and economic pressures from the West, undermining efforts to isolate Moscow.

Within this context, Russia's relationships with the oil- and gas-rich countries of the Gulf are set to grow in importance throughout the future. It was significant that during Sultan Haitham's visit to Moscow, Putin [announced](#) plans for a Russia-Arab League summit to be held later this year, inviting the Omani leader while adding that "many of our friends in the Arab world support this idea."

With Saudi Arabia [hosting](#) talks on the Ukraine conflict in Riyadh earlier this year, with American, Ukrainian, and Russian officials participating, the Kingdom is seeking to help wind down the war. Also, the Qataris and Emiratis have played important roles in brokering [prisoner swaps](#), [returning](#) Russian and Ukrainian children to their families, and deals to [protect](#) energy infrastructure and nuclear facilities from attacks. Although these Gulf states have all joined Western powers in voting in favor of UN General Assembly resolutions to condemn Russia's invasion, occupation, and annexation of land in parts of Ukraine, none of the GCC members have imposed any sanctions on Moscow and Putin along with Russia's foreign minister have been welcome guests in some Gulf capitals since the war broke out in 2022. The Omani foreign minister's strong [criticism](#) of sanctions on Russia served to secure Muscat greater goodwill among the Russian leadership and add to Moscow's perceptions of Oman as a friendly Arab state despite its historic closeness to Washington and London.

While the UAE, of all the six GCC members, has the strongest partnership with Russia, the Qatari emir and Omani sultan's visits to Moscow last month speak to Doha and Muscat's value to Putin's government as Arab partners that engage actors in all geopolitical blocs. As bridge builders with foreign policy strategies resting on the idea that speaking to all sides in conflicts is wise and rational, Qatar and Oman are set to be important players when it comes to Russia's foreign policy interests in relation to the "New Syria", American-Iranian nuclear talks, and diplomatic efforts to wind down the Ukraine conflict.

**image credit:* Anadolu Agency.

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