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Russia's return to the Middle East

Building sandcastles?

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RUSSIA'S RETURN TO THE MIDDLE EAST
BUILDING SANDCASTLES?

Edited by Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secrieru

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146

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Contents

Russia and MENA sub-regions

Annex

Executive Summary

Russia's political, diplomatic, military and economic footprint in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has expanded visibly over the last decade. This *Chaillot Paper* provides a detailed account of Russia's spectacular return to the region. The paper depicts how major regional players have adjusted to the new reality but also addresses the question of the costs incurred by Russia's rise in Middle Eastern geopolitics, as well as the sustainability of its posture.

Although Russia has worked painstakingly to rebuild its influence and standing in the region since the mid-2000s, its efforts only began to pay off meaningfully in the wake of the Arab Spring. This is when Russia's resurgence in the region became clearly evident, culminating with the first major combat deployment of the Russian armed forces in 2015 in a war theatre located far beyond the post-Soviet neighbourhood.

Russia's dramatic re-emergence in the Middle East and North Africa is dictated first by economic and diplomatic imperatives. Examples include its efforts to engage the Persian Gulf monarchies in intensive energy diplomacy, its growing grain exports to MENA, and its own imports of fruit and vegetables from the region to offset the effects of the partial food embargo against the EU. Russia has also skilfully managed to overcome the diplomatic isolation in which the country found itself after the annexation of Crimea by playing the Middle Eastern card.

Russia's comeback has also been greatly facilitated by a number of politico-military opportunities. The Arab Spring and the subsequent wars in the region temporarily weakened ruling regimes (Egypt) or led to the collapse of regional powers (Syria, Libya), while the rise of Daesh or the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) put the threat of terrorism firmly back on the international security agenda. The increasingly chaotic situation in the Middle East, coupled with the waning commitment of the US, has nurtured local demand to explore alternative partnerships, and Russia has come to represent an appealing interlocutor for many regimes. Overall this constellation of circumstances provided Moscow with an opportunity to start filling some of the power vacuum left by the absence of US and European leadership, boost its regional diplomacy and reinsert itself militarily in the region under the banner of the fight against international terrorism.

Despite doomsday predictions that it would be dragged into a quagmire in the region, Russia managed to achieve several immediate successes. The military intervention in Syria ultimately rescued its key regional client. Russia's proactive energy diplomacy in the region helped to eliminate a glut on the oil market, which had previously

kept prices down. Russia's arms manufacturers have successfully expanded their presence in existing markets and penetrated new ones, as attested by the fact that in 2017 the Middle East absorbed the largest share of Russian arms exports. Moscow has skilfully navigated between regional powers with opposite interests: Israel and Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar or Iran and Saudi Arabia. Its agile diplomacy backed by credible force has turned Russia, at least in the short run, into an indispensable power in the region.

However, regional successes have also had a downside. Military, diplomatic and economic victories have come with costs which in turn militate against Russia's chances of entrenching itself as a powerbroker in the region in the long run. Russia has won several battles in Syria and through its military intervention saved the Assad regime from near collapse, but it has failed so far to secure a political settlement in the country. And ironically if Russia manages to secure such an outcome, Moscow's attractiveness for the regime in Damascus will significantly decline. When it comes to rebuilding the country and seeking funds for reconstruction, the Syrian government, whether led by Assad or a new ruler, is likely to turn to wealthier players to foot the bill. Moreover, Russia has so far failed to reap any substantial economic benefits from its intervention in Syria.

'Afghanistan syndrome' still imposes severe limits on how many soldiers Russia is ready to deploy officially overseas. As there is still great public sensitivity to high military losses the Russian government has preferred to minimise troop casualties as much as possible by prioritising stand-off warfare (known in Russian military jargon as 'contactless warfare') and instead to send mercenaries to shoulder the major brunt of fighting on the ground. Furthermore, Russia's limited expeditionary capabilities, exposed during the operation in Syria, constrain its ability to deploy large numbers of troops at long distance at any one time. The country's anaemic economic growth does not generate enough resources to invest in building extensive expeditionary forces and capabilities. These constraints are reflected in Russia's arms acquisition programme for the next decade which has significantly scaled back investments in naval capabilities and implicitly in power projection overseas.

Moscow's skilful energy diplomacy in the Middle East has brought the price of oil to a level that suits Russia's interests, enabling Russia to return again to a non-deficit budget. Overall, it has helped to stabilise finances and improve the country's macroeconomic outlook. At the same time, Russia has fewer incentives now to conduct reforms which would help to alleviate its heavy reliance on exports of raw materials. Successful energy diplomacy keeps Russia solidly anchored – indeed trapped – in a resource-based economy model, and thus highly dependent on the external economic environment.

Russia's comeback in the MENA region is palpable in the military and diplomatic fields. Moscow has also made headway in restoring its regional standing in the armaments and energy markets. But for all its renewed clout, Russia's staying power in the Middle East remains to be proven, as it lacks sufficient financial and economic means to sustain its geopolitical ambitions. And even Moscow's diplomatic

influence should not be taken for granted. Regional leaders are happy to engage with Russia, respond favourably to its overtures and exploit its return to the region for their own benefit. But all are tough partners over which Russia has little leverage if they do not see eye to eye. Last but not least, the permissive regional context which allowed Russia's comeback may not last long. The US and Europe in the last decade dismissed, and ultimately missed, Russia's growing role in the Middle East. But they are now alert to the challenge that this may pose, and thus Russia may be in for a more difficult ride in the Middle East in the coming years as it risks facing stiffer opposition both from within and outside the region.

Introduction: Russia's return to the Middle East

Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secrieru

The US Department of Defense's 1984 annual assessment of Soviet Military Power was particularly concerned with the rise of Moscow's influence in the Middle East and beyond. The document bluntly stated that: 'The USSR has greatly increased its offensive military capability and has significantly enhanced its ability to conduct military operations worldwide [...] Since invading Afghanistan 4 years ago, the USSR has established bases within striking distance of the Persian Gulf oil fields. The Soviets continue to deliver a growing arsenal of weapons to Syria, Libya, Cuba and Nicaragua. The number of Soviet personnel in Syria has grown from 2,000 to 7,000 [...] The USSR has increased its influence in the Third World through the presence of over 21,000 military advisers and technicians in nearly 30 countries. An additional 120,000 Soviet troops are stationed in Afghanistan, Cuba and Syria. The result is that the Soviets are able to cultivate pro-Soviet sentiments and influence local military policies.'[1]

1984 was also the year when US, French and Italian troops withdrew ignominiously from Lebanon, after the US and French military barracks were bombed by Hizbullah operatives acting with support from Syria and Iran. As Western troops pulled out, the Syrian military and their Soviet advisors must have felt satisfied. In 1984 also the US and its Western European allies were just freshly emerging from a major transatlantic row over the building of a gas pipeline from the USSR to Western Europe, in which the Soviets were receiving subsidised credits from Western European banks, while the US threatened to impose sanctions on European companies. At the time, Moscow's influence seemed to be in the ascendant again, after having been dealt a heavy blow when Sadat expelled the Soviets from Egypt in 1972. However it would soon transpire that this sense of resurgent Russian influence was a geopolitical illusion.

Current debates on Russia's growing role in the Middle East sound like an echo of the early 1980s. The upsurge of Russian activism in the military, diplomatic and even economic spheres in the Middle East raises the question of whether Moscow is not now playing the first fiddle in the cacophony of Middle Eastern crises. It is active on many fronts, as demonstrated by its military intervention in Syria, closely coordinated with Hizbullah and Iran; its growing role in Libya; Qatar's acquisition of a 19% stake in Rosneft; Moscow's cooperation with Saudi Arabia to manage oil

1. Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power*, Washington D.C., 1984, http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a152445.pdf

prices; its sale of air-defence systems to Turkey (allegedly to protect Erdogan's private residences); and burgeoning nuclear energy and arms sales in the region. To achieve its aims, it has established close diplomatic ties and (on the surface at least) friendly relations with Israel and Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Turkey and the Kurds, Egypt and Algeria.

This flurry of Russian activity gives rise to a series of questions. What drives Russia's renewed interest in the Middle East and North Africa, and how sustainable is Russia's 'comeback' in this part of the world? Is the region at the dawn of a new geopolitical era, or will Russia's engagement prove as ephemeral as Moscow's previous bouts of activism in the Middle East? Will Russia experience setbacks and end up pulling back from the region, or will it establish itself as a powerbroker there for years to come? How much bandwagoning (or counterbalancing) among local actors has been generated by Russia's rising presence in the region? What are the strategic effects of Russia's intervention in Syria and how sustainable are they? To what extent did Russia really put up a fight against Daesh or the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on the ground? What are the implications of these new Middle Eastern trends for the European Union and the US?

This *Chaillot Paper* – co-authored by a team of prominent foreign policy analysts from the EU, US, Russia and the Middle East – aims to address the above questions. The chapters in this volume will explore Russia's approaches to the Middle East in the military, arms sales, energy, and economic spheres, as well as Russia's relations with Syria, Israel, Turkey, Iran, the countries of North Africa, and the Gulf. In examining these various issues, this *Chaillot Paper* seeks to map Russia's comeback in the Middle East, but also to highlight several obstacles and counter-reactions that Russia is facing in the region.

Russia's regional perspective in MENA

Chapter 1

The Soviet Union in the Middle East: an overview

Florence Gaub and Nicu Popescu

Geopolitics is back in fashion. Almost thirty years after the end of the Cold War, there is renewed speculation among media, academic and diplomatic commentators about which of the great or regional powers is rising or declining in the Middle East. It all looks increasingly like a replay of Cold War dynamics. The parallels drawn between today and the Cold War era highlight great power animosity, competition, jockeying for pre-eminence, a frantic quest for clients and protégés, and rising competition in the economic, political, security, military and ideological spheres.

But the invocation of such vintage concepts and *leitmotifs* often fails to take account of many nuances pertaining to Cold War politics in the Middle East. The Cold War was not just a competitive scramble for power and dominance. It was also characterised by dramatic and sudden shifts in the influence of the respective superpowers, regional players instrumentalising the superpowers, as well as interludes of Soviet-American cooperation and self-restraint. This chapter is an attempt to restore some of those nuances, and help us approach today's situation in the Middle East with a certain historical perspective in mind.

The Soviets in the Middle East

On the political front, the Middle East and North Africa appeared quiet in the early years of the Cold War. The first Soviet legations opened in Arab countries towards the end of World War II; however by 1950 the local institutional landscape did not appear ripe for revolution. Despite Lenin's 1919 appeal to the populations of the region to 'wake up', Soviet ideology held little attraction for Arab nationalists and Russian influence was very limited.[1]

But the tide began to turn when the Egyptian monarchy was ousted by the Free Officers in 1952; although not communist, their anti-bourgeois and anti-imperialist

1. Rami Ginat, "The Soviet Union and Egypt, 1947 – 1955", PhD Thesis, London School of Economics, 1991, 24.

rhetoric overlapped to a large degree with Moscow's Marxist-Leninist discourse; and communism's redistributive vision was appealing to populations struggling with low levels of development, high levels of poverty and quasi-feudal structures. After all, land reform was one of the first policy priorities of Nasser and his comrades – in 1947, more than 65% of the land in Egypt was owned by less than 6% of the population.[2]

When the United States refused to deliver weapons to the new regime, it was therefore almost to be expected that Cairo would turn to the Soviet Union: in 1955, Egypt secured arms worth $250 million (including 150 MIG jets) from Moscow via Czechoslovakia. This, plus the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, led British Prime Minister Anthony Eden to the conclusion that 'Nasser, whether he likes it or not, is now effectively in Russian hands, just as Mussolini was in Hitler's', as he wrote to US President Eisenhower.[3] In an attempt to rebuke both Nasser and the Soviet Union, France and the United Kingdom engineered the Suez crisis, but achieved the opposite of what they intended: both European powers lost regional influence, whereas the Soviet Union's footprint in the Middle East expanded as much as Nasser's model of Arab socialism did.

By the early 1970s, more than half of the Arab monarchies had been removed and replaced by governments keen on profound social and political change; more than 20,000 Soviet military advisors (who arrived in Egypt in civilian clothing, then switched to Egyptian military uniforms) now worked in Egypt. They were tasked with ensuring Egypt's air defences against Israel and they did so successfully, thereby erasing much of Israel's air advantage.[4]

Moscow had access to Egyptian support bases at Alexandria and Mersa Matruh, and a naval base in Tartus, Syria. Friendship agreements had been signed with both Damascus and Cairo in 1971, and with Baghdad the year after.[5] Moscow also expanded into the Maghreb: Algiers received technical and financial assistance, as well as several loans for the purchase of military equipment, and Russian relations with Gaddafi's Libya grew closer, too. It did appear that the Soviet Union was succeeding in making the states in the region increasingly more dependent on it both economically and politically.

But as the Soviets sought to exploit local realities to weaken the West and expand their own influence, the locals sought to exploit the Soviets. Being geographically removed from the USSR, the Arabs were not in its 'backyard' and had more freedom of manoeuvre. When American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles allegedly warned

2. Joel Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement: Egypt's Free Officers and the July Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); 121; Stella Margold, "Agrarian Land Reform in Egypt", *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology,* 17, no. 1 (October 1957): 9-19.
3. "Letter from Prime Minister Eden to President Eisenhower: 1 October 1956," in Scott Lucas, *Britain and Suez: The Lion's Last Roar* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 69.
4. Vladimir Zolotarev, *Rossia (SSSR) v lokalnyh voinah* [Russia (USSR) in local wars], (Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2000).
5. John W. Copp, "Egypt and the Soviet Union, 1953-1970", Master's Thesis, Portland State University, 1986, 121, https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4806&context=open_access_etds

Nasser about getting too close to the USSR in the light of Soviet military takeovers in Eastern Europe, Nasser's self-confident reply was 'but how can they get at us? They went into Eastern Europe because they had common frontiers, so they could send their armies in. But the Red Army is a long way from Egypt'.[6]

Box 1: Gamal Abdel Nasser's Guide to Dealing with the Soviets*

Dos

1. Ensure you negotiate with them in a language that both sides understand, since bad translation can cause endless trouble (...) Their interpreters in the main languages, like English and French, are faultless, but those in less familiar languages, like Burmese, Swahili or Arabic, are to be avoided.
2. Go to Moscow provided with a good stock of anecdotes, jokes, proverbs and folk sayings (...) A man like Brezhnev will spend a great deal of time telling you jokes and proverbial stories or reminiscing about the time when he was a political commissar in the army. You must be able to cap jokes and stories with some of your own.
3. Go well briefed on the history of World War II and the fundamental part in it played by the Soviet Union. It is important that you know details – which general served in which command on which front, and so on. You must resign yourself to hearing over and over again about the experiences of your interlocutors in the 'great patriotic war', which is far and away the most memorable period in the lives of the present generation of Soviet leadership.
4. You will need a strong digestion and a strong head to survive all the toasts that are drunk by the Russians, and not just at formal banquets. If you do not think you will be able to cope, make your position very clear from the start. Tell your hosts at the outset that you don't drink, for reasons of health or religion.
5. It is most important that you should get to recognise the different languages talked in the Soviet Union. We tend to look on it as a monolithic government but there is always an interplay of forces going on inside it in which you may find yourself unwittingly caught up. You will hear different things – or things put in different ways – according to whether you talk with the leadership, with the military, or with the technocrats or bureaucrats. What really matters is what you hear from the leadership. If you place too much reliance on what you hear from others you are heading for disaster.
6. If you want something specific in way of aid from the Soviets, give them plenty of time. They don't like being surprised with last-minute demands. Everything has to be planned and their planning processes are extremely rigid.

6. Mohamed Heikal, *The Sphinx and the Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Middle East* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 65.

7. Remember that agriculture is the Soviets' Achilles heel. You can ask them for arms, or for factories, but, unless you are in a real crisis, never ask for wheat. They will almost certainly be unable to provide it. This will make them feel apologetic and embarrassed.
8. Remember that the Soviets assess any political problem with their eyes on the United States. America is an obsession with them.
9. Remember that the Soviets think on a different time-scale from yours. Your problems are probably urgent; they see things in terms of historical and revolutionary processes.
10. Always remember that the Soviets look at the prospect of another war with horror. They will never fail to remind you that the Soviet Union lost twenty million people in the Great Patriotic War, and will insist that only those who do not know what war means can contemplate with equanimity the thought of a nuclear confrontation.
11. You must realise that, for all their pragmatism, the Soviet leadership is made up of Slav peasants, easily moved to laughter and tears. They are fascinated by the attributes of power.

Don'ts

1. The Soviets will not permit any discussion of their errors, past or present. Even Stalin is not permissible as a target.
2. If you must quarrel with the Soviets, see that your quarrel does not last longer than a year, or 18 months at the outside (...) If the quarrel persists, and they come to the conclusion that there is nothing to be looked for from the leader with whom they are dealing, they will eventually give the signal that he is to be regarded as an enemy, The signal will be passed down through every level of the Soviet hierarchy (...) and once this has happened the process of rehabilitation will have been rendered almost impossible.
3. It is absolutely taboo to equate them with the US as a superpower. Never refer to 'the two superpowers'.
4. On no account try to defend China. China has become an even bigger phobia than America for the Soviets.
5. Don't take offence at what may seem to be their interference in your internal affairs. They are free with advice and warnings.

* Extract from Heikal, *The Sphinx and the Commissar*, 27-31.

Moscow's unwanted wars

As a result, leaders in the region managed to not just obtain what they wanted from Moscow – arms, money and even Soviet troops – but they also created a certain amount of trouble for the Soviet Union.

The 1973 Arab-Israeli war is a good example of how relations between the Soviet Union and its Middle Eastern interlocutors were often characterised by this kind of ambiguous and manipulative behaviour. In the run-up to the conflict, Moscow

tried – in vain – to dissuade the Arabs from going to war.[7] In fact, Egypt hoped that the presence of Soviet troops in Egypt would drag the USSR into the fight should things turn sour for Cairo. When the Soviets refused to fight Israel directly, Cairo was disappointed. In Egyptian eyes, the 1973 war left a 'legacy of mutual distrust and suspicion. The Arabs accused the Russians of coming to their aid during the fighting with too little and too late, both in respect of arms and diplomatic support' while the Soviets thought the Arabs failed to fight.[8] Even though the Soviets had troops on the ground in Egypt and up to 40 Soviet soldiers were killed by the Israelis in the years before that war, the USSR military refrained from getting directly involved in the war (though they supplied the Arabs with arms).

Syrian-Soviet interaction was another example of local disregard for Soviet geopolitical preferences. In 1980, for example, the USSR and Syria signed an agreement which stipulated that 'if a third party were to invade Syrian territory, the Soviet Union would become involved in the events'. The USSR sent in 5,000-6,000 military advisors (roughly as many soldiers as at the height of Russian involvement in Syria in 2016-2017) and massive amounts of weaponry. But when the Soviets requested a naval base in Latakia-Banias (in addition to their facility in Tartus), the Syrians refused.[9]

The Syrians could also be rather disrespectful of Soviet preferences in other ways. One Cold War anecdote has been related by Arkadii Vinogradov, who worked for 25 years in Syria as a Soviet diplomat and was the main Soviet advisor to the Syrian defence minister, as well as head of the team of Soviet military advisors in Syria. He tells the story of a Syrian captain, Mohammed Suleiman, who studied in a military academy in Moscow in the 1980s.[10] He once ran over and killed three Russian girls in a drunk driving incident. After he was sentenced by the Soviets, Damascus decided to extract him from prison by staging a road accident to frame a Soviet army captain, and aide to the Chief Soviet military advisor in Damascus. The Soviet officer was also thrown into prison, then exchanged for Mohammed Suleiman a few weeks later. Upon his return to Syria, Mohammed Suleiman was made a colonel and was appointed advisor to the Syrian president on weapons acquisitions. He went on to become a brigadier general and one of the most influential advisors to Bashar al-Assad. (He was killed by snipers during a party at his seafront villa in Tartus in 2008. Some suspected the Israelis, while a WikiLeaks cable suggested his death was the result of intra-Syrian rivalry.)[11]

7. Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War II to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 96.

8. Heikal, *The Sphinx and the Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Middle East,* 191.

9. Zolotarev, *Rossia (SSSR) v lokalnyh voinah.*

10. Arkadii Vinogradov, *Nepridumannaya Syria* [Syria in real life], (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnoshenia, 2017), 46.

11. "Middle East: Top Assad aide assassinated at Syrian resort," T*he Guardian*, 5 August, 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/05/syria.lebanon; Wikileaks, "The Global Intelligence Files," https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/24/2436109_-os-syria-lebanon-security-wikileaks-france-said-syrian.html; "Israeli special forces assassinated senior Syrian official", *The Intercept*, July 15, 2015, https://theintercept.com/2015/07/15/israeli-special-forces-assassinated-senior-syrian-official/; "Wikileaks: France said Syrian General killed in regime feud," *Naharnet*, August 25, 2011, http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/13646-wikileaks-france-said-syrian-general-killed-in-regime-feud

Superpower self-restraint

Even though Soviet-American relations were mostly competitive, at certain junctures they were marked by a degree of self-restraint, and even occasional moments of cooperation in the Middle East. After the ceasefire in the Yom Kippur War, Leonid Brezhnev allegedly inveighed against Moscow's Arab allies in the following terms: 'They [the Arabs] can go to hell! We have offered them a sensible way for so many years. But no, they wanted to fight. Fine! We gave them the latest technology. They had double superiority in tanks and aircraft, triple in artillery, and in air defence and anti-tank weapons they had absolute supremacy. And then what? Sadat woke me up twice in the middle of the night over the phone, "Save me!" He demanded that we send Soviet troops, and immediately! No! We are not going to fight for them. The people would not understand that. And especially we will not start a world war because of them.'[12]

And so the USSR ended up siding with the US in joint attempts to impose peace on the warring parties, but also losing a good degree of credibility with Egypt. The Egyptians complained when in 1969 'Gromyko produced yet another proposal for a settlement which bore remarkable similarities to an American proposal.' [13] Despite a lot of mutually hostile rhetoric between the US and the USSR, the two superpowers tried to avoid getting dragged into a direct military confrontation through the scheming of their regional allies.

When the US and France launched their military interventions in the Lebanese civil war in 1982, Syria tried to persuade the Soviets to do the same, but Moscow refused (although individual Soviet officers embedded with Syrian army units still ended up in Lebanon).

How Moscow failed

The end of Soviet penetration in the region began in 1972, when Egypt's President Sadat expelled the Soviet military advisors. Although Moscow maintained close ties with Syria and Algeria, it never managed to export its political system, secure the political dependence and allegiance of the Arab states and ultimately contain the United States in the region. There were essentially four reasons for this.

Firstly, Arab states had just emerged from an era where they had been part of another large geopolitical construct – either France's overseas empire, the British Empire or the Ottoman Empire – and they were not eager to subscribe to another. More importantly, as independence had been largely won on a nationalist narrative, these

12. Anatolii Chernayev, "Iz vospominanii: Brezhnev i Gorbachev" [From Memoirs: Brezhnev and Gorbachev], *Polis*, no. 3, 2012, 165.

13. Heikal, *The Sphinx and the Commissar*, 195.

states were implicitly at odds with Soviet ideology. After all, communism predicted the end of nation states, and the emergence of political systems built on economic status. But although communist parties emerged in every Arab country, they failed to gain traction. Arab nationalism exerted a far stronger appeal; in Iraq and Syria, the Baath party, combining Arab nationalism with some socialist elements, turned into the most important rival of the communist party. As Tunisian President Bourguiba noted in an op-ed for *Foreign Affairs* in 1957, 'the struggle for national independence served as a restraint and a deterrent' against communism.[14]

Secondly, although communism might generally appeal to the lower-ranking social classes, it focuses particularly on the working class. But at this point in history, the Middle East's working class was numerically quite small. Although World War II had led to a rise in the level of industrialisation, this had not yet led to the emergence of a proletarian class which had critical mass, and the political cohesiveness necessary, to articulate a coherent adhesion to communist ideals. Although trade unions were formed as early as 1920, the vast majority of lower-class Arabs worked in the agricultural sector, as small-scale peasants or land labourers. The Marxist narrative of the factory worker therefore appealed only to a minority group.

Thirdly, the strongly anti-religious discourse of communism was at odds with conservative Islamic societies; although communism managed to make inroads in other Muslim societies such as in Azerbaijan, the centrality of Islam in Arab culture was of such importance that communism struggled to coexist with it. At one non-aligned meeting, Libya's leader Gaddafi 'time and again, sought to draw a conclusive distinction between socialism and communism, and settled the matter by explaining that the Koran was the source of Libya's socialism, and not Marxist-Leninism.'[15] It was around this time, in the late 1970s, that Moscow was forced to recognise that other nations might follow a separate path to Marxism, adopting a different trajectory from the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the rise of Islamism as a political force crowded communism out as it adopted a narrative of social justice drawn from the same ideological pool.

Lastly but most importantly, the Soviet Union failed to become the region's patron because of its unwillingness to take clear sides in the conflict with Israel. Although Israel never became the communist state Moscow had originally hoped it would, Moscow hesitated to take a hard line against it, instead appealing for peaceful conflict resolution. Similarly, the Soviet Union did not condemn American strikes on Tripoli in 1986, despite close relations with Libya.[16]

14. Habib Bourguiba, "Nationalism: Antidote to Communism", *Foreign Affairs*, July 1957 issue.

15. "From the archive, 8 September 1973: Gaddafi and Castro clash over Soviet Union", *The Guardian*, September 8, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/08/gaddafi-castro-soviet-union-communism-1973

16. "Libya-Soviet ties reported strained", *New York Times*, May 6, 1986.

Conclusion

The saga of the Soviet Union's 40-year long presence in the Middle East proved to be a major source of misapprehension about the extent to which Moscow had successfully projected its power in the region. Neither Egypt, nor the region as a whole, turned out to be a client state of the Soviet Union. Instead, although their involvement in and influence over Egypt and Syria seemed at their height in the late 1960s and early 1970s, by the mid-1970s the Soviet geopolitical 'offensive was in a state of total collapse', as Nasser's friend and onetime propaganda minister, Mohamed Heikal, put it.[17] Although Moscow maintained close relations with Libya, Algeria, and Syria, (as the Pentagon noted in 1984, 'since the 1980s the number of Soviet personnel in Syria has grown from 2,000 to 7,000'),[18] it never managed to export its political system to the region or turn even its closest partners in the region into satellites or vassal states.

17. Heikal, *The Sphinx and the Commissar*, 275.

18. US Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power*, 1984, http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a152445.pdf

Chapter 2

What drives Russia's policy in the Middle East?

Dmitri Trenin

Russia's policy in the Middle East is important in its own right – Moscow has made a spectacular comeback to an extremely volatile region – but even more so as a crucible of Russia's emerging new global foreign policy, which is very different from both the practices of the last quarter-century, and from those of Soviet times.

This chapter builds upon a longer essay published in late 2017.[1] In it, this author argued that Russia's re-entry into the Middle East, culminating in the military intervention in Syria, was essentially part of Moscow's endeavour to return to the global geopolitical chessboard as a great power. Other motives, such as reversing the dynamics of the Arab Spring and the surge in Islamist radicalism, as well as physically eliminating extremists hailing from Russia itself, were secondary – including also turning Syria into a geopolitical stronghold and a military base for Russia in the region.

The essay also highlighted what appeared to be new and distinctive features of Russia's foreign policy which stood out in Moscow's recent activities in the Middle East. These were essentially pragmatism and political realism, characterised by a willingness to deal with all relevant players, treating no one wholly as an ally or wholly as an adversary; an ability to straddle conflictual divides, whether between the Israelis and the Iranians, the Turks and the Kurds, or the Sunni and Shia; and maintaining a clear focus on Russia's own national interests, whether linked to setting the oil price or promoting arms sales, ensuring technology transfers from Israel or investment from the Gulf States.

1. This allows the author not to plough the same ground again, but instead avail of the opportunity to take up the analysis where it was left off. See Dmitri Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018.)

Russia and the Middle Eastern conundrum

In December 2017, Vladimir Putin, on a flying visit to the Russian air base in Hmeimim, Syria, famously proclaimed victory in the military campaign against Daesh militants and the opponents of Bashar al-Assad's regime. The aftermath of that victory, of course, has demonstrated the many difficulties of making peace among Syrians, and of managing the diverging interests of the regional players involved in the Syrian conflict. In April 2018, the US-led missile strikes in Syria, provoked by the alleged use of chemical weapons in the town of Douma, brought the US and Russian armed forces closer to a direct military collision than at any time since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. In May 2018, the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) raised the prospect of a war between the United States and Iran. Suddenly, the Europeans found themselves closer to the Russian position on an important issue than to that of their US allies. Shortly before that, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu conferred with Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Russia's sacred Victory Day, just before launching a massive attack against Iranian targets in Syria, both countries being Russian allies.

The Middle Eastern conundrum seems tortuous and intractable. Yet, there are ways of negotiating its difficult geopolitical terrain, and at the time of writing Russia is continuing its politico-military adventure. As it proceeds, there are valuable takeaways at each turn of events that help inform Moscow's policy in the region and beyond. To identify the 'lessons learned', several key issues will be examined in this chapter: the management of a Syria where the war has ebbed, but peace remains elusive; the emerging rules of engagement between Russian and US military forces in the Middle East; and the careful balancing between sets of regional antagonists who are all valuable partners for Russia.

War after victory in Syria

There was little doubt in serious observers' minds that the victory announced by President Putin at Khmeimim was a victory in a military campaign, that confirmed Damascus as the main winner, rather than an event that ushered in peace in the war-ravaged land. Militarily victorious, Moscow immediately faced the wrath of the defeated parties and their sponsors. The 'peace congress' in Sochi, which Russian diplomacy had painstakingly sought to prepare within the so-called Astana process as the diplomatic platform for political negotiations between the Syrian government and the armed opposition, proved a failure. In Moscow's view the Syrian opposition, its Arab sponsors and Western countries were united in their determination not to let Moscow convert the fruits of its success on the battlefield into a lasting political dividend.

The setback in the peace process must have disappointed Russian diplomats, but only boosted the resolve of the Russian military and eventually the Kremlin to press the

opposition even harder. Russian forces helped Bashar al-Assad to eliminate a major pocket of resistance in the Eastern Ghouta province in April 2018. This enclave so near to the Syrian capital had been a major irritant and a source of real danger for Damascus. Even the Russian embassy there had been repeatedly targeted by Islamist rebels from positions as close as only 10 km away. Thus, the Russian response to the diplomatic blockade was to do 'another Aleppo': help the Syrian government forces to clear out a rebel stronghold. As in Aleppo in late 2016, they succeeded in winning back control over a strategically vital area, evacuating the surviving rebel fighters to the biggest remaining enclave, Idlib on the Turkish border. Having accomplished this, the Russians went on to help Assad win control over the rebel-held areas in south-western Syria, close to the Golan Heights.

With the peace process stalled and the political settlement as originally anticipated by Moscow in doubt, Russia had been preparing to replace Plan A (power-sharing among the parties in some new all-Syrian arrangement) with Plan B (helping consolidate Damascus's control over the most important parts of the country). The main political problem it now faced was no longer the opposition's recalcitrance, which was taken as a provisional 'no' answer to a negotiated settlement, but rather Bashar al-Assad's now greatly enhanced ambition to restore his regime's rule over all of Syria. An emboldened Bashar was clearly playing the Russians off against the Iranians, his other major ally and sponsor. Moscow was not amused.

Indeed, Moscow had entered into a situational alliance with both Tehran and Ankara, but right from the start that alliance was very different from either the NATO model or the Soviet Union's Warsaw Pact. Russia acknowledged and *de facto* accepted what it considered the legitimate national security interests of its notional allies. Thus, it agreed with Turkey that allowing PKK bases and training camps in the Kurdish-held Syrian territory along the Turkish border would constitute a threat to Turkey's security and stability. Putin, who hosted Tayiip Recep Erdogan in Sochi in January 2018 and made a point of travelling to Ankara on his first foreign trip after his re-election as president in March 2018, must have privately given the nod to Erdogan's military invasion of northern Syria. Yet Putin must have also extracted a pledge from Erdogan that the invasion would remain limited, and that Turkey would refrain from attempting to undermine the regime in Damascus. As for the Kurds, while taking the risk of facing a Kurdish outcry over the Turkish operation, Russia continued to support Kurdish autonomy within Syria – against the preferences of its ally in Damascus.

With regard to Iran, Russia understood Tehran's need to maintain a land link to its Lebanese ally Hizbullah, which Moscow regards as a legitimate politico-military actor in the region rather than a terrorist organisation, but looked askance at Iranian attempts to threaten Israel from within Syria. While Russia acknowledged Iran's and Hizbullah's role in achieving the very victory announced by Putin – the Russian military has never believed that any war could be won by air campaigns alone – it never supported Tehran's ambition to control Syria via the Assad regime and the Alawites.

US-Russian rules of engagement

In February 2018, Moscow was confronted with an embarrassing situation when a number of Russian mercenaries, recruited by Wagner, a private Russian military company operating in Syria, got into trouble as they tried to wrestle control of an oil well from a Kurdish group supported by the United States. The Russians, acting on behalf of pro-Damascus business interests, reportedly ignored US warnings and were attacked by the US forces, resulting in substantial casualties.[2] It is not clear why the US warnings had been ignored, or what kind of a relationship actually existed between the private company, still illegal under Russian law, and the Russian forces in Syria. In any event, Moscow replaced its top military commander in Syria, but abstained from retaliating against the US, probably recognising that Wagner had gone too far. This recognition must have contributed to establishing the rules of engagement between Russia and the United States in Syria.

A much more serious episode happened exactly two months later, as the United States launched missile strikes in notional retaliation for a spurious incident billed by the media as a chemical weapons attack by the Syrian government against civilians. Weeks before the incident, General Valery Gerasimov, chief of the Russian General Staff, warned about a coming 'provocation' in the form of a fabricated chemical weapons attack near Damascus, which would then be used as a pretext for massive US strikes against the Syrian government and military assets. Should that happen, Gerasimov warned, and if Russian personnel or assets were affected, Russia would not only intercept the incoming US missiles, but would launch its own strikes – against the platforms from which the US missiles were fired.

This was, in a nutshell, the scenario of the first US-Russian military showdown since the Cold War era**.** When the incident accepted by Washington as a chemical attack launched by the Syrian regime happened in April 2018, and President Trump vowed to retaliate, the United States and Russia found themselves closer to a direct military confrontation than they had been for over half a century. However, despite all the bombast coming from Trump, the actual strikes turned out to be very limited. The US, supported by Britain and France, destroyed just three structures described as Syrian chemical weapons facilities, and incurred no casualties – either Syrian or Russian, military or civilian. In the run-up to these strikes, James Mattis, the US Secretary of Defense, and General Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, expressly pleaded for the utmost restraint.

Deterrence has worked. The United States and Russia, despite their highly adversarial relationship, have *de facto* agreed to refrain from action which would result in a head-on clash between their militaries. The de-confliction mechanism, first established between Russian and US forces in Syria in 2015, has been tested and found effective.

2. There are still no confirmed numbers of dead and wounded. Estimates range from a few fatalities, which is probably too low, to several hundred, which appears exaggerated. However, the fact that casualties occurred, and the way in which they were inflicted, is more important than their actual number.

It has also expanded beyond the regional commanders in the Middle East to include the defence ministers and defence chiefs of the two countries, as well as the supreme commander of NATO forces in Europe. The 'hot line' between the Kremlin and the White House has also been regularly used. In early 2018, the three Russian intelligence chiefs, heads of the FSB (the Federal Security Service), the SVR (the Foreign Intelligence Service), and the GRU (the Military Intelligence Directorate), made an unprecedented joint visit to the United States. This is a far cry from the situation in 1962 when there was a sole channel of communication between the KGB station chief in Washington and Robert Kennedy, the US president's brother. Unlike in 1962, however, de-confliction these days does not necessarily lead to de-escalation of the wider US-Russian conflict.

Managing antagonists

On 9 May 2018, the million-strong Victory Day procession in Moscow, with people carrying portraits of relatives who fought (and in many cases died) in the Great Patriotic War, the so-called march of the 'Immortal Regiment', included a rare participant, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. The Israeli leader carried a photo of a Jewish Soviet colonel, a hero of the Soviet Union. Netanyahu, however, had come not only to mark the anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany. Having just revealed documents describing Iran's nuclear programme, he meant to engage Putin in a discussion of what to do over both Iran's nuclear programme and its growing – and, from Israel's perspective, menacing – presence in Syria.

The details of the conversation will remain unavailable to the general public. However, within hours of the Moscow dialogue, the Israeli Defence Forces hit scores of Iranian targets in Syria. Moscow issued only a *pro forma* statement calling on all sides to show restraint and avoid escalation. The Russians have long been trying to straddle one of the most serious lines of fracture in the Middle East, that between Israel and Iran. They were probably unimpressed by Netanyahu's Iranian documents, which the Israeli prime minister had revealed in order to give Donald Trump a fresh argument for leading the United States out of the JCPOA. At the same time, they took Israeli concerns about the Iranian presence on the ground in Syria much more seriously. As noted already, Moscow and Tehran do share some important interests in Syria, but certainly not all. When the Iranians launched their missiles into the Israeli-held Golan Heights, they, in the Russian analysis, went too far. Occasionally, the Russians believe, the Israelis also take things a step too far. The Iranian missile launches were in retaliation for an Israeli attack against an Iranian base in Syria, code-named T-4. By publicly revealing the identity of the attacker, Russia probably sent a signal to Israel. The ensuing missile exchange between Iran and Israel, which did not escalate further, might have led to a sort of mutual deterrence between the two antagonists in Syria. As for Moscow, it will continue looking for a balance between what it regards as the legitimate security interests of its situational ally Tehran and its valuable partner Israel.

With regard to the issue of the JCPOA itself, after President Trump's decision in May 2018 to withdraw from the international nuclear agreement with Iran, Russia vowed to support the accord even without US participation. As a result of that US move, the leading EU member states found themselves closer to Russia than to the Trump Administration. From Moscow's perspective, this opens a window for productive cooperation with US European allies which it does not see as Russia's actual opponents – unlike the United States, again the main adversary.

Russia's limitations in the Middle East

This chapter's largely illustrative overview highlights the salient features of Moscow's foreign policy in the Middle East. Russia engages militarily and diplomatically abroad in support of its claim to great power status. It continues to use its newly revived and rebuilt military power, still very modest by Pentagon standards, judiciously and overall quite effectively. It is guided by a *realpolitik* approach to international relations, which works well in the Middle East. It has been able to deter the United States and has accepted the need to exercise its own restraint. It has been ruthless to its opponents on the battlefield, but has found managing its own allies every bit as challenging. It has also been able to work across the many treacherous divides in the Middle East while promoting its own interests.

It is unclear whether this situation is sustainable in the long run. Russia is not the region's dominant power and its recognised security overlord. If push comes to shove, and Israel and Iran do engage in a real war, which would probably mean Israeli airstrikes against Iran itself, and Iranian retaliation, which might include missile attacks from Lebanon's Hizbullah, Russia would probably have to step aside, at a cost to its relations with both Jerusalem and Tehran. Moscow's current efforts, however, are aimed precisely at preventing such a situation from arising and helping establish a crude mutual deterrence between the two antagonists. On important, though less conflictual issues, such as the future of the agreement among the OPEC+ group on oil production, Russia has to pick sides bearing in mind its own national interest: it takes a position closer to Saudi Arabia rather than Iran.

Of course, Russia has to contend with a number of limitations. The economic and financial base of its foreign policy overall, and in the Middle East specifically, is still inadequate for a country that projects itself as a great power. Currently, Russia obviously punches above its nominal weight, measured in GDP terms, but skilfully compensates this with diplomatic activism and military successes, as well as its strong position as a major oil producer. However, its rather weak standing in the region's foreign trade landscape – where it does not feature prominently except as the exporter of a few key items, such as weapons, grain, and nuclear technology – limits its influence in the region. Its information resources – including the RT Arabic television channel – fall far short of those of Western countries, and thus Moscow is virtually unable to correct the highly negative view of its policies in the Middle East that is prevalent in the Western media. And lastly the extremely pragmatic,

'piecemeal' approach that has characterised the Russian handling of the region's issues has so far impeded a more strategic approach to the Middle East. Such an approach would require developing a long-term view of the region's place and role in Russia's twenty-first century global foreign policy; devising a set of sub-strategies towards various countries, ranging from an eventual settlement in Syria to a future management of Iran's nuclear programme to stable partnerships with Turkey, Israel, and Egypt; and harmonising those policies within a broader region-wide approach. With luck, Russia may manage to develop such a strategy in the future.

Chapter 3

Russia's energy diplomacy in the Middle East

Carole Nakhle

The 'Energy Strategy of Russia for the Period up to 2030', published in 2010, highlights promoting 'the strengthening of foreign economic positions of the country' as one of the Russian government's key priorities.[1] The Kremlin has pursued energy diplomacy more actively since, particularly with major energy-producing nations, in an endeavour to accomplish that aim.

Energy diplomacy typically refers to diplomatic and foreign policy activities conducted by a consumer country to secure access to energy resources from a producer country, with a view to ensuring *security of supply*. The EU-Russia energy relationship, for example, falls under this traditional paradigm of energy diplomacy conducted between a major energy consumer and supplier, with Russia often accused of leveraging its gas resources to achieve political goals in the European continent.

Energy diplomacy may also refer to efforts deployed by a producer country to secure access to markets, with a view to attaining *security of demand*. In this sense, from the perspective of producers, energy diplomacy takes on a different meaning: after all, producers sell the same product and compete for market share; what one economic actor loses is usually captured by a competitor.

The growing *rapprochement* between Russia and countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) encompasses the two forms of energy diplomacy. It is manifest in enhanced interaction and coordination among oil and gas-producing countries pursuing common interests, on the one hand, while nuclear energy, on the other hand, falls under the conventional category of producer-consumer diplomacy. In both cases, closer cooperation in the energy sphere facilitates and supports Russia's wider commercial and political aspirations.

1. Ministry of Energy of the Russian Federation, "Energy Strategy of Russia for the Period up to 2030," 2009, http://www.energystrategy.ru/projects/docs/ES-2030_(Eng).pdf

Common challenges

Together, Russia and MENA sit on 60% and 63% of the world's proven oil and gas reserves, respectively, and produce half of the world's oil and nearly 40% of its gas.[2] Any cooperation between these two giant players will therefore have significant implications for global oil and gas markets.

Today, Russia and MENA oil producers are facing similar challenges that make the case for cooperation particularly appealing. In the short term, they are having to contend with a relatively lower price environment, compared to only a few years ago: in 2011-2014 for example oil prices hovered around $100 per barrel. Furthermore, the ascent of, and growing competition from, US tight oil has created new dynamics in the oil market, given its ability to respond swiftly to price changes. When oil prices increase, for instance, there is a corresponding rise in tight oil production, thereby helping to keep a lid on any further price increases. In contrast, with conventional oil (produced by Russia and MENA), delays of several years are the norm before production responds to increases or decreases in prices. This is what economists describe as an *inelastic supply*. Conventional oil producers thereby continuously face the risk of losing market share to a more agile supplier, whenever oil prices increase enough to boost tight oil production.

In the longer term, aggressive climate change policies, if successfully implemented, can render oil and gas resources in the ground valueless irrespective of how extensive these may be. For instance, at their annual summit in 2015, the G7 leaders agreed to phase out the use of fossil fuels by the end of the century, while countries like France and the UK announced that they would ban the sales of petrol and diesel engines from as early as 2040. As the fight against global warming intensifies and development of alternative sources of energy and technologies rapidly expands, the outlook for oil demand is becoming increasingly uncertain. For economies that are heavily dependent on oil and gas, such changes threaten their long-term stability. In Russia, oil and gas account for about half of federal budget revenues; in MENA countries like Iraq that dependence can exceed 90%.

Taking these challenges into consideration, the dilemma for these producers then becomes: how to produce enough oil to safeguard such an important revenue base while protecting market share and maintaining prices at 'appropriate' levels that limit the expansion of tight oil, extend the longevity of their valuable asset as long as possible and deter the growth of alternative energy sources? The answer ultimately resides in cooperation which is facilitated by energy diplomacy.

2. *BP Statistical Review of World Energy (2018)*, https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/en/corporate/pdf/energy-economics/statistical-review/bp-stats-review-2018-full-report.pdf

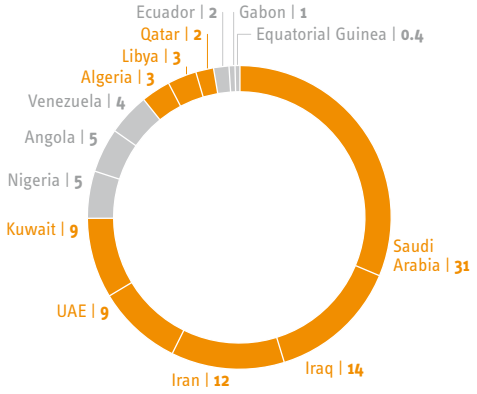
Favourable timing

Although Russia is no stranger to the MENA region, its footprint there has become increasingly visible over the last ten years, and this trend looks set to continue. In 2014, two consecutive events accelerated Moscow's pursuit of *rapprochement* with MENA countries, as it sought to diversify its energy relations and exports due to deteriorating relations with the West.

First, Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 prompted Western governments, led by the United States and the European Union, to impose sanctions on the country, targeting state finances, the energy and arms sectors. These sanctions have restricted Russian banks' and firms' ability to raise capital as well as their access to international financial markets.

Second, in the summer of 2014, oil prices collapsed, plummeting from more than $110 per barrel in June to less than $60 in December of that year. The combination of the sanctions and the collapse in oil prices hit the Russian economy hard. In 2015, Russia's GDP contracted by 2.8% and the economy was plunged into recession.[3]

Figure 1: OPEC crude oil production
share by country, April 2018, %



Data: IEA Oil Market Report May 2018

These developments prompted Russia to introduce new policies to stabilise its economy. The devaluation of its currency, the ruble, for instance, has facilitated the country's economic recovery. But due to the restrictions that the sanctions imposed Russian banks and companies were no longer able to raise capital on the global markets, and so an alternative means of raising funds was needed; and for this, an increase in the price of oil would of course be most helpful. MENA partly held the answer, primarily through the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), eight out of whose 14 members are from MENA countries, representing 83% of the organisation's oil production and most of its spare capacity, with Saudi Arabia ranking as the organisation's largest producer.[4]

3. World Bank, "From Recession to Recovery: Russia Economic Report," May 2017, http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/782451497437509084/Russia-economic-report-2017-from-recession-to-recovery

4. The International Energy Agency, *Monthly Oil Market Report*, May 2018, https://www.iea.org/oilmarketreport/reports/2018/0518/

OPEC+ deal

Prior to December 2016, Russia played with the idea of collaborating with OPEC in public, to put upward pressure on the price of oil, but its support remained limited to sympathetic statements that fell short of policy delivery. In December 2016, however, OPEC surprised the market by announcing not only a coordinated production cut for the first time since 2008, but also by declaring that a group of non-OPEC producers would join the move, with Russia taking the lead.

The alliance became known as OPEC+, targeting a combined production cut of 1.8 million barrels a day (mb/d). This agreement has been extended several times since. It is further believed that Russian mediation, at the highest level, contributed to Saudi Arabia and Iran putting their differences aside, thus ensuring the success of the deal.[5]

Although OPEC has a history of 'cheating', i.e. of members not abiding by their production quota, the OPEC+ alliance has proven to be much stronger than many expected: OPEC has achieved 147% compliance (in May 2018) partly because of its members' impressive discipline and partly because of unplanned supply disruptions in some OPEC member countries, mainly Venezuela.[6] Russia has also proved to be a reliable partner.

The cooperation has successfully put a floor under oil prices. Prior to the deal, prices were heading to below $40 a barrel. 18 months post-deal, they are trading at above $70: a win-win situation for Russia and its OPEC partners, particularly in the Middle East. Within a year, the Russian economy stabilised, turning from 'recession to recovery', as formulated in the title of a report issued by the World Bank.[7]

As the threat of US tight oil continues to loom, continuous collaboration is expected. Such collaboration is likely to take the form of a 'friendly' producers' association that closely monitors the market, with its main architects Saudi Arabia and Russia as the two key actors. At the OPEC meeting in June 2018, Saudi Arabia invited Russia to become an observer (non-voting) member of OPEC, thereby formalising and deepening the relationship between OPEC and Russia beyond a temporary deal.[8]

5. Rania El Gamal, Parisa Hafezi and Dmitry Zhdannikov, "How Putin, Khamenei and Saudi Prince Got OPEC Deal Done", *Reuters*, December 1, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-opec-meeting/exclusive-how-putin-khamenei-and-saudi-prince-got-opec-deal-done-idUSKBN13Q4WG
6. OPEC, "The 4th OPEC and non-OPEC Ministerial Meeting concludes," 2018, http://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/press_room/5081.htm
7. World Bank, "From Recession to Recovery," *Russia Economic Report* 37 (May 2017), http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/383241495487103815/RER-37-May26-FINAL-with-summary.pdf
8. "Russia Invited to be OPEC Observer by Saudi Arabia: Energy Minister Novak," *Platts*, June 2018. https://www.spglobal.com/platts/en/market-insights/latest-news/oil/062318-russia-invited-to-be-opec-observer-by-saudi-arabia-energy-minister-novak

Bilateral deals

MENA has also provided a helping hand to Russia's economy thanks to the recycling of its petrodollars. Several Arab producers have accumulated substantial financial reserves in sovereign funds. Although the real value of these funds is not publicly known, according to the Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute there is nearly $3 trillion locked up in various sovereign and investment funds across the region, with fund managers seeking lucrative investment opportunities.[9] One such destination has been the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), a state-owned investment vehicle, designed to attract foreign funds into the country.

Founded in 2011, the RDIF has attracted $30 billion of foreign capital into the local economy, with the funds being directly invested in Russian infrastructure and companies. The fund has established partnerships with several MENA investment bodies, particularly from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Abu Dhabi's Mubadala, Bahrain's Mumtalakat, the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), Qatar Holding, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), and DP World (United Arab Emirates - UAE) have all committed investments in the fund. The KIA was the first Gulf-based sovereign wealth fund (SWF) to co-invest with the RDIF in 2012.[10]

Post-2014, MENA investments increased significantly. In 2015, during the visit of the then Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman to Moscow, Saudi Arabia revealed that it would invest $10 billion in the RDIF. More recently, talks have been ongoing about Saudi Aramco acquiring a stake in the Arctic LNG-2 project led by Novatek, Russia's largest non-state natural gas producer, which would start producing liquefied natural gas (LNG) in the next four to five years. In an act of solidarity, Russia announced that its banks and investors would be interested in taking part in Aramco's planned initial public offering (IPO), which enjoys the strong personal support of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

In addition to the $2 billion that the Qatar Investment Authority committed to the RDIF in 2014, the Authority, jointly with commodities trader Glencore, acquired a 19.5% stake in Russia's largest oil company, Rosneft, two years later, for a price tag of approximately $12 billion.

Rosneft and other Russian energy companies are also pursuing commercial opportunities across the region. They have invested directly in oil and gas projects, from Algeria, to Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq and Oman, further building closer ties with various governments and local entities.

9. Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute, "Sovereign Wealth Fund Rankings", 2018, https://www.swfinstitute.org/sovereign-wealth-fund-rankings/

10. Russia Direct Investment Fund, "Partnerships", https://rdif.ru/Eng_Partnership/

Nuclear energy

In terms of producer-consumer energy diplomacy, Russia sees the MENA region as an attractive opportunity to expand its nuclear export market, given the region's rapidly growing demand for electricity. Russia is one of the world's largest nuclear technology exporters. The State Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom is its main vehicle, describing itself as 'No. 1 in the world in terms of the number of simultaneously implemented nuclear reactor construction projects (6 in Russia and 35 abroad).'[11]

Russia helped Iran to build its first nuclear power plant at Bushehr, which became operational in 2011. In 2016, Iran announced that it would build a second plant also with Russian help. Rosatom recently announced that it is in discussion with Saudi Arabia regarding the possibility of building some of the Kingdom's nuclear power plants. Saudi Arabia has an ambitious plan to build sixteen nuclear reactors by 2032. If the plan materialises, it will be the biggest commercial nuclear project in the region. Small wonder then that the world's leaders in nuclear power technology – American, Chinese, French, Korean, and Russian companies – are all courting Saudi Arabia, seeking to benefit from a particularly lucrative commercial opportunity.

In 2014, Jordan signed a deal with Rosatom, after the company won the tender to build the country's first nuclear power plant. Rosatom agreed to fund 49.9% of the $10 billion plant.[12] In 2017, Egypt also signed a deal with Rosatom to build four reactors over the next twelve years. Russia offered a long-term loan of $25 billion with a 3% annual interest rate to finance the construction of the El Debaa plant.[13] Although the Egyptian government selected Rosatom as the preferred bidder out of a total of three bids it claimed it received, it is unclear who the other bidders were, or whether they actually existed. Given the strengthening diplomatic and military ties between Egypt and Russia, the outcome of the 'bid' did not come as a surprise.

The economic benefits of nuclear technology to the exporter are clear: as detailed in one study, the 'four-unit nuclear power plant construction by Rosatom keeps 24,000 people in work in various segments of the nuclear industry inside Russia, while each ruble of the nuclear loan brings 1.8 rubles into the economy by way of orders for Russian enterprises, including fuel supplies, staff training, decommissioning services, and so on. Each ruble also provides 0.54 ruble of direct income to the Russian budget.'[14]

11. Rosatom website, http://www.rosatom.ru/en/about-us/
12. World Nuclear Association, "Nuclear Power in Jordan," 2017, http://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-g-n/jordan.aspx
13. "Russia to Lend Egypt $25 Billion to Build Nuclear Power Plant," *Reuters*, May 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-russia-nuclear/russia-to-lend-egypt-25-billion-to-build-nuclear-power-plant-idUSKCN0YA1G5
14. Nikita Minin and Tomas Vlcek, "Determinants and Considerations of Rosatom's External Strategy," *Energy Strategy Reviews*, vol. 17 (September 2017): 37-44.

Conclusion

Russia's energy diplomacy in the MENA region is proving to be successful. The growing energy ties between Russia and the MENA countries have, so far, resulted in mutual benefits, given common challenges and interests. For Russia, this has been in line with one of the priorities of its Energy Strategy up to 2030, namely to strengthen the country's foreign economic relations.

The OPEC+ deal has exerted upward pressure on oil prices, providing much-needed support to these players. The influx of MENA petrodollars into Russia's coffers has partly alleviated the impact of the Western sanctions against Russia. The investments by Russian oil and gas and nuclear companies in the sizeable MENA market are expected to have long-term positive repercussions for the Russian economy.

The MENA region, however, is far from being a coherent bloc. On the contrary, bitter rivalries between and within countries are the norm. Russia has tried to maintain a positive relationship with countries across the region, mediating between the likes of Saudi Arabia and Iran, militarily coming to the aid of the Assad regime in Syria which is fighting GCC-backed opposition factions, while at the same time signing lucrative commercial deals with the GCC.

As absurd as this may sound, it seems that Russia is skilfully manoeuvring its way through the region's political maze to achieve its strategic goals. How long can this balancing act be sustained? Given the current trend towards diminished American and European engagement with the Middle East it seems likely that for now Russia will continue to pursue its strategy in the region, while avoiding becoming mired in local political wrangling.

Chapter 4

Russian arms exports in the Middle East

Timofey Borisov

Russia has been one of the most active players in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region's armaments market since the mid-twentieth century, using arms exports as an important foreign policy instrument.

The first major breakthrough in this field was the Czech-Egyptian arms deal of 1955 which provided for the supply of a large batch of Soviet weapons worth $250 million to Egypt.[1] During the same period the USSR began arms sales to Syria. By the 1970s it had significantly expanded its presence in the regional arms market, adding a group of Arab socialist countries to the list of importers, namely Algeria, Iraq, Libya and South Yemen. These were the major recipients of Soviet weapons, even surpassing the Warsaw Pact member countries at the time.[2] Russia's MENA client base also included Jordan, Kuwait and Sudan (until the early 1970s).

The general state of the economy and internal political issues in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union inevitably led to a sharp decline in arms exports in all directions, including the MENA region. Defence industry companies suffered from the lack of investment and domestic procurement, and many of them had to switch their production lines to civilian goods or even go into liquidation. Despite the contracts for supply of BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) and Smerch multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) to Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which were important from the political and marketing perspectives, the Russian presence in the MENA arms market from the 1990s until the mid-2000s was insignificant. During that period the major recipients of Russian weapons were China and India which together accounted for 60 to 80% of all Russian supplies.[3] However that started to change a decade or so ago.

1. Mikhail Barabanov, Konstantin Makienko, Ruslan Pukhov and Aleksandr Rybas, "Военно-техническое сотрудничество России с зарубежными государствами: анализ рынков," [Military-Technical Cooperation between Russia and Foreign Countries: A Market Analysis], Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (Moscow: Nauka, 2008), 42-43.
2. Ibid.
3. "Интервью заместителя директора ФСВТС России М.В.Петухова" [Interview with Mikhail Petukhov, Deputy Director of the the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation of Russia], http://www.fsvts.gov.ru/materials/26795A8AD42B3137C325778B0042FB8B.html

Russia's comeback

The first major arms deal with a MENA country after the break-up of the Soviet Union took place in 2006. Moscow signed a $7.5 billion package of agreements with Algeria, which buys its weapons primarily from Russia. By 2009-2011 Algeria had bought more Russian weapons than China, and this included 34 MiG-29SMT/UMT light fighter aircrafts, 28 Su-30MKI(A) heavy multi-purpose fighters, 16 Yak-130 advanced jet trainers, 8 battalions of the S-300PMU-2 (SA-20) long range surface-to-air missile systems (SAMs) and185 T-90SA main battle tanks (MBTs). It also signed contracts with Russia for the modernisation of 250 T-72M tanks and 400 BMP-1 IFV, and the delivery of Metis-M1 and Kornet-E anti-tank missile systems (ATGM).[4]

The Algerian deal gave a significant boost to post-Soviet Russian arms exports, although it did not immediately lead to the strengthening of Russia's position in the MENA market. Moreover, several developments over which the Kremlin did not have entire control hindered Russia's ambitions in this respect. During 1989-1991 Russia and Iran signed several contracts with a total value of $5.1 billion, under the provisions of which in the following years Tehran received a large amount of weapons including MiG-29 fighters, Su-24MK strike aircrafts, S-200VE (SA-5) SAM systems, and the original Kilo-class submarines (Project 877EKM). Russia had also agreed to help organise the licensed production of T-72S tanks and BMP-2 IFVs in Iran, but in the late 1990s under US pressure the Russian government pledged to complete all shipments according to existing contracts by the end of 1999 and then to cease arms sales to Iran. The cooperation was resumed to a limited extent after the year 2000, however in 2010 Russia once again decided to cut off arms supplies to Iran as part of the implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1929 (adopted on 9 June 2010) and to freeze the previously concluded agreement for delivery of PMU2 (SA-20) SAM systems.[5] Later in 2011 Moscow also voted in favour of the UN arms embargo on Libya (UNSCR 1970), which led to the loss of expected profits amounting to $7 billion.[6] Apart from the financial losses incurred, these episodes tarnished Russia's reputation as a reliable arms supplier.

Nevertheless in recent years the MENA region has become one of the largest recipients of Russian weapons. This is due in some measure at least to the success of Russia's military campaign in Syria. In 2015 MENA countries accounted for 36% of all Russian arms exports, becoming the second most important market after the Asia-Pacific region which represented 48%.[7] In 2017 exports of Russian military hardware

4. "Алжир приобретет в России еще две подлодки" [Algeria will acquire two more submarines in Russia], *Kommersant,* May 2006, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/674444

5. "Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 22.09.2010 г. № 1154" [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of September 22, 2010], http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/31772

6. "Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 9 марта 2011 года N 286 "О мерах по выполнению резолюции Совета Безопасности ООН 1970 от 26 февраля 2011 г," [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 286 of March 9, 2011 on Measures to Implement UN Security Council Resolution No. 1970], https://rg.ru/2011/03/11/livia-site-dok.html

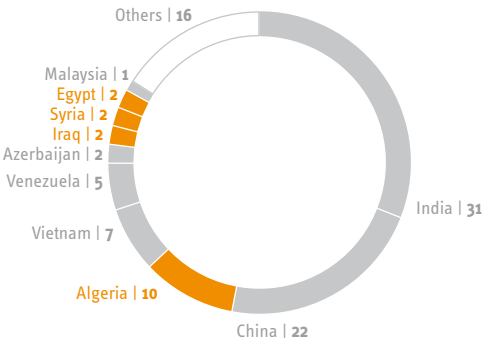
7. Andrey Frolov, "Итоги военно-технического сотрудничества России с иностранными государствами в 2015 году," [The Results of the Military-Technical Cooperation of Russia with Foreign States in 2015], http://cast.ru/products/articles/itogi-voenno-tekhnicheskogo-sotrudnichestva-rossii-s-inostrannymi-gosudarstvami-v-2015-godu.html

exceeded $15 billion.[8] The MENA region now ranked as the largest recipient of Russian armaments, accounting for almost 50% of the total. Furthermore, according to Alexander Mikheev, the director general of Rosoboronexport, Russia's state arms exports agency, there are contracts with 23 MENA countries worth $8 billion which represents about 20% of the total order portfolio.[9]

Algeria is one of the biggest importers of Russian arms in the MENA region. In 2007-2009 it received 28 Su-30MKI(A) multi-role fighters under the $1.5 billion contract of 2006, and in 2011-2012 it acquired 16 more aircraft worth $0.9 billion. In 2015 the third contract for 14 Su-30MKI(A) fighters was signed, the first eight of which were delivered in December 2016.[10] During recent years Russia has also supplied Buk-M2E (SA-17) medium-range SAM systems, Pantsir-S1 (SA-22) short-range SAM/gun systems, Mi-28NE attack helicopters and Mi-26T2 heavy lift cargo helicopters to Algeria. The importance of the Algerian arms market for Russia might be illustrated by the fact that it was the second country to procure the Iskander-E (SS-26) short-range ballistic missile system after Armenia, which is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) along with Russia.[11] Another example is the contract signed in 2014 on licensed production of 200 T-90SA MBTs with an estimated cost of $1 billion, which makes it one of the biggest deals in the world market regarding this type of weaponry.[12] In total since 2006 Algeria has received more than 500 T-90SA tanks. (In contrast France, Germany and the UK have between 200 and 250 tanks each).

Figure 2: The geographic structure of Russian arms deliveries

2001-2015, %



Data: *Eksport Vooruzheny* journal, 2006-2017; SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers

Another major recipient is Iraq, although in the period 2003-2012 it was mainly oriented towards arms imports from the United States. But in 2012 it signed a package

8. Official website of the President of Russia, "Meeting of Commission for Military-Technical Cooperation with Foreign States," http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56981
9. "Рособоронэкспорт" полностью выполнит годовой план по экспорту вооружения" [Rosoboronexport fully implemented the annual plan for arms exports], *TASS*, November 2017, http://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/4731347
10. "Алжир получил первые восемь истребителей Су-30МКИ(А) по третьему контракту" [Algeria received the first eight Su-30MKI(A) fighters under the third contract], BMPD, January 2017, https://bmpd.livejournal.com/2355958.html
11. "Россия поставила ОТРК "Искандер-Э" в одну из стран Северной Африки" [Russia has delivered Iskander-E ballistic missile systems to a country in the MENA region], *RIA Novosti*, November 2017, https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20171115/1508832294.html
12. Alexey Nikolsky, "Заключен контракт по лицензионному производству танков Т-90 в Алжире" [The contract on licensed production of T-90 tanks in Algeria concluded], *Vedomosti,* February 2015, https://www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/articles/2015/02/20/tank-alzhirskoi-sborki

agreement worth $4.2 billion with Russia, which was Moscow's biggest arms deal in the MENA region back then. In 2014 the country even became the second-biggest importer of Russian military equipment after India. During that year Baghdad received 9 Su-25 attack aircrafts, 12 TOS-1A heavy flamethrower systems, 6 Mi-28NE and up to 10 Mi-35M attack helicopters; also the deliveries of Pantsir-S1 systems began – all amounted to $1.7 billion.[13] In total Iran received 15 Mi-28NE and 28 Mi-35M attack helicopters. In February 2018 Iraq purchased 36 T-90S MBTs and 37 more are expected to be delivered in the coming months.[14] Now it is also considered to be one of the potential recipients of S-400 (SA-21) SAM systems.[15]

Egypt, which had an extensive arms deal with the US as part of its Camp David accord with Israel, is yet another important partner for Russia. In 2013 countries signed agreements worth more than $3 billion for the supply of Tor-M2E (SA-15), firearms and ammunition. In 2015 another contract for 46 MiG-29M/M2 at an estimated cost of $2 billion was signed.[16] Egypt was also the first country to order Ka-52 attack helicopters: it signed a contract for 46 Ka-52s in 2015, and the first deliveries were carried out in June 2017.

Does the Syrian campaign help Russian arms exports?

The Syrian campaign also has an impact on how Russia perceives and pursues its arms export strategy in the Middle East. This impact is not immediately quantifiable but it exists. Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict has had several consequences with respect to the promotion of its military and dual-purpose products. The first and the most evident one is the marketing of Russian weapon systems. During its intervention in Syria Moscow has tested about 200 new types of weapons and military equipment in real combat conditions, as stated by Vladimir Putin.[17] The president emphasised the Russian military's success in its first use of long-range high-precision weapons, namely the sea-launched Kalibr and air-launched Kh-101 cruise missiles. Several systems have demonstrated good performance, which is likely to have increased their attractiveness for potential buyers. These have included the Su-34

13. Elena Chernenko, Sergey Goryashko, and Ivan Safronov, "Багдад вышел в число лидеров по закупкам вооружений у Москвы" [Baghdad was among the leaders in arms procurement from Moscow], *Kommersant*, March 2015, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2697125

14. "Iraqi Defense Ministry receives T90S tanks from Russia," *TASS*, February 19, 2018, http://tass.com/defense/990795

15. "Бондарев рассказал о возможных претендентах на покупку С-400" [Bondarev told about possible candidates for the purchase of S-400], *Ria Novosti*, January 2018, https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20180123/1513157260.html

16. Alexey Nikolsky, "Согласован контракт на поставку 46 истребителей МиГ-29 в Египет" [The contract for the supply of 46 MiG-29 fighters to Egypt signed], *Vedomosti*, May 2015, https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2015/05/25/593348-soglasovan-kontrakt-na-postavku-46-istrebitelei-mig-29-v-egipet

17. 'Путин заявил о применении в Сирии 215 современных видов вооружений' [Putin noted that Russian forces used some 215 new types of advanced weapons systems in Syria], *Interfax*, January 2018, http://www.interfax.ru/russia/597769

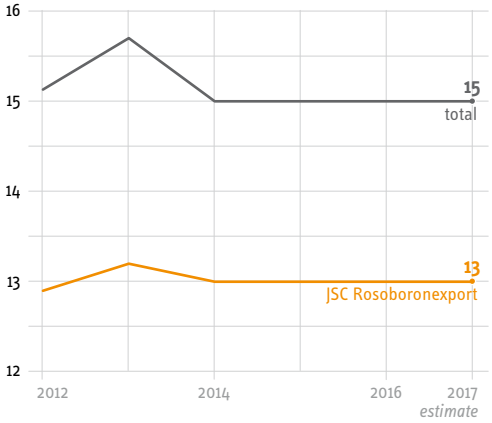
bombers, Su-30SM and Su-35 multirole fighters, Mi-28N and Ka-52 helicopters to name just a few. At the same time the operation has occasionally revealed deficiencies in certain weapons systems and provided information in the light of which Russian engineers can make further improvements.

The second, probably more significant effect is that Russia has demonstrated that it is an important security actor in the MENA region which cannot be ignored. Moreover, Russian political and military support for the Syrian government in such a difficult period might be perceived by the political leaders of other regional powers as an indicator that Moscow could be considered a responsible and reliable partner.

Taken together these factors could contribute to the promotion of Russian arms and military hardware throughout the region. And the first signs of this impact are already to be seen. For example, in December 2015, almost eight years since they began, negotiations on the supply of Su-32 bombers (an export version of Su-34) to Algeria were ramped up, as reported by the media. The estimated cost of 12 Su-32 aircrafts is about $500-600 million.[18]

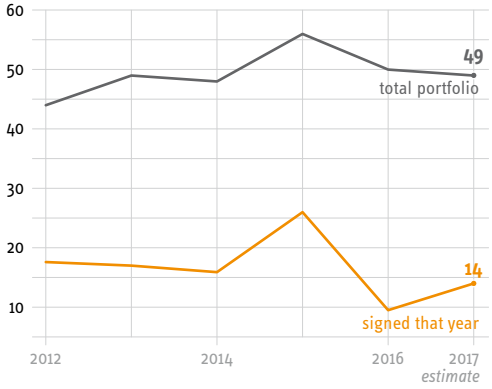
Saudi Arabia, which is a traditional recipient of US arms, has also expressed its interest in cooperation with Russia. During the visit by Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to Moscow in October 2017 the countries reached a preliminary agreement worth $3.5 billion that included the S-400

Figure 3: The dynamics of Russian arms and military equipment exports
2012-2017, $ billion



Data: *Eksport Vooruzheny* journal, 2012-2017

Figure 4: The dynamics of Russian contracts for the delivery of arms and military equipment
2012-2017, $ billion



Data: *Eksport Vooruzheny* journal, 2012-2017

18. Ivan Safronov, "Каким спросом пользуется российское оружие после Сирии" [What is the demand for Russian weapons after Syria?], *Kommersant*, March 2016, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2932551

SAM systems, TOS-1A systems, Kornet-EM ATGMs, automatic grenade launchers and the production of Kalashnikov AK-103 assault rifles in Saudi Arabia.[19] If carried out, these contracts would yield new opportunities for Russian arms exports in the region.

Russia is eager to enter the previously almost inaccessible market of the Persian Gulf monarchies. As has been already mentioned, the first tangible results of Moscow's efforts in this direction had been achieved in cooperation with the UAE. In August 2000 the UAE signed an agreement for the purchase and partial financing of Russian research and development efforts in the Pantsir-S1 (SA-22) project, thus helping it to create a modern and commercially viable weapons system. In 2017 UAE signed a letter of intent on the purchase of Su-35 fighters, and the two countries also agreed to jointly develop a new fifth-generation fighter based upon the MiG-29 twin-engine fighter aircraft.[20] During the same year Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Qatar where the Intergovernmental Agreement on Military-Technical Cooperation was signed: Moscow had concluded a similar agreement with Bahrain in 2016. Russia and Qatar are also holding talks on the possible delivery of Su-35 fighters.[21]

Iran is another prospective and attractive partner for Russia. In 2015 President Vladimir Putin signed a decree lifting the self-imposed ban on the delivery of S-300 SAM systems to Tehran: this was an important milestone in bilateral relations, although the restrictions limiting full-scale arms trade between the two countries still remain.[22] However, in accordance with UNSCR 2231, by the year 2020 the ban on conventional arms sales to Iran will have been lifted. Russia is eager to benefit from that window of opportunity and has already been negotiating the possible intensification of arms transfers.[23]

All in all, having successfully overcome the hurdles and setbacks of the 1990s, Russia has significantly expanded its presence in the Middle Eastern and North African arms market in recent years. This seems to be in line with the general thrust of Russia's foreign policy, aimed at improving its image as a reliable partner, increasing its influence and establishing long-term partnership relations with MENA countries. Moscow is concentrating on the further development of military and technical ties with major regional powers and is expecting to enter new markets, seeing arms sales not as the end goal, but as an instrument to boost other spheres of cooperation such as oil and gas, nuclear energy, trade in commodities, etc. But this strategy will certainly not be easy to carry out. The global arms market is becoming more and

19. Alexandra Dzhordzhevich and Ivan Safronov, "Россия и Саудовская Аравия как никогда сблизились в вопросах поставок С-400" [Russia and Saudi Arabia brought together their views on the supply of S-400 systems as never before], *Kommersant*, October 2017, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3429985

20. '"Russia's Rostec to co-develop 5th-gen fighter with UAE," *Defense News*, February 20, 2017, https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/idex/2017/02/20/russia-s-rostec-to-co-develop-5th-gen-fighter-with-uae/

21. "Россия и Катар ведут переговоры по возможным поставками Су-35" [Russia and Qatar are negotiating the possible supplies of Su-35 fighters], *TASS*, March 2018, http://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/4999532

22. Внесено изменение в Указ о мерах по выполнению резолюции Совета Безопасности ООН №1929 [President of Russia, Amendment to Executive Order on measures for implementing UN Security Council Resolution no. 1929], http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49248

23. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015), http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2231(2015)

more competitive and Russia will be exposed to fierce competition in the MENA market. The recent developments in relations with countries that have traditionally imported arms from the US and Europe do not necessarily signify they are switching to Russia for good, but reflects their aspiration to benefit from this competition between the major arms exporters and mitigate their exposure to political risks by diversifying their arms suppliers. Thus, while a window of opportunity has opened for Russia, of which it has already taken full advantage, the rapidly changing political environment in the region might yet make its own adjustments.

Russia and the regional outcasts

Chapter 5

Russia in Syria: a military analysis

Anton Lavrov

Russia's armed intervention in the Syrian civil war has been the first large-scale military operation that it has undertaken in its far abroad since the fall of the Soviet Union. It has already had lasting political and military consequences reverberating throughout the entire region. In order to gauge how successful this intervention has been, it is necessary to identify Russia's goals in Syria and its motivations for becoming involved in the conflict. The operation has provided a unique opportunity to observe the reformed Russian military in action and Russia's new military capabilities, shedding light on the strengths and weaknesses of the Russian military machine, and allowing Moscow to draw valuable lessons learned from the performance of its armed forces.

Russia's aims

When Russia entered the conflict the official goal of its military operation was declared to be the fight against internationally recognised terrorist groups – Daesh and al-Nusra. Moscow had reason to be concerned about the rise of Islamic extremism: the emergence of the new 'Islamic Caliphate' affected Russia directly. By the end of 2015, up to 5,000-7,000 people from Russia and the post-Soviet states had joined the ranks of Daesh or the so-called 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' (ISIS).[1] In June 2015, most jihadi terrorist groups in the Russian Caucasus, Chechnya, and Dagestan switched loyalty from al-Qaeda and officially swore allegiance to Daesh.[2]

1. The Soufan Group, "Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," December 2015, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf
2. "Выходцы с Кавказа в рядах ИГ (ИГИЛ)," [Peoples from the Caucasus in the ranks of the IS (ISIS)], *Kavkazski Uzel*, March 1, 2018, http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/251513/

But from the very first days of the operation in Syria, Russia's Aerospace Forces began to strike other anti-Assad rebel groups, including even groups supported by the US and Turkey.[3] In fact, most of the first airstrikes were not conducted against Daesh targets.[4]

This did not come as a big surprise, since even before sending troops to the region, Russia had firmly supported Assad in his efforts to crush the uprising. And at this stage of the war, the insurgents, rather than the Daesh militants occupying the remote desert regions of the country, threatened the very existence of the Syrian regime. In launching its military operation, Russia was motivated not only by the goal to interrupt the cycle of regime change that had swept through the Middle East in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring and to ensure the survival of the Assad regime, but also by practical considerations.

In the view of the Kremlin, a strong, united and functioning state is a necessary condition for the suppression of terrorism on its territory. In a TV interview conducted on the day before Russia's military operation in Syria began, Vladimir Putin said: 'we are trying to prevent the creation of a power vacuum in Syria in general because as soon as the government agencies in a state, in a country are destroyed, a power vacuum sets in, and that vacuum is quickly filled with terrorists. This was the case in Libya and Iraq; this was the case in some other countries.'[5]

In addition to these obvious goals, Russia also had another, less conspicuous reason for intervening in Syria. Many Western politicians and analysts believed that entry into the Syrian civil war was seen by the Russian leadership as a way of deflecting attention from the Ukraine conflict.

Latvian President Rajmonds Vejonis remarked in a television interview that 'at the time when Russia began to scale down its efforts in Eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin began to use the situation in Syria to improve its domestic reputation and to divert international attention from Ukraine.'[6] Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov dismissed such allegations as 'something which sick minds are presenting to the media.'[7] But there was at least some truth in the Latvian President's diagnosis of the situation.

3. "Official: Russia 'deliberately targeting' US-backed forces in Syria," *Fox News*, 14 October, 2018, http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/10/14/official-russia-deliberately-targeting-us-backed-forces-in-syria-dozens-killed.html
4. "Four-fifths of Russia's Syria strikes don't target Islamic State: Reuters analysis," *Reuters*, 21 October, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-strikes/four-fifths-of-russias-syria-strikes-dont-target-islamic-state-reuters-analysis-idUSKCN0SF24L20151021
5. Interview to American TV channel CBS and PBS, 29 September, 2015, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50380
6. "Latvian President: Russia using Syria to divert attention from Ukraine," *The Baltic Times*, December 3, 2015, https://www.baltictimes.com/latvian_president__russia_using_syria_to_divert_attention_from_ukraine/
7. Sergey Lavrov's press conference following Russia's Presidency of the UN Security Council, New York, October 1, 2015, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/1825252

Large-scale fighting in the Donbass region ended in February 2015, but the political consequences of the conflict for Russia were still grievous. The Ukrainian question continued to overshadow its relations with the West. Moreover, the US-led attempt to politically isolate Russia from the rest of the world was a blow to Putin's pride.[8]

In this sense it can be argued that Russia settled on Daesh as a convenient enemy. Having entered the fight against the terrorist organisation, Russia wanted to demonstrate that it could be a useful partner for the West, capable of helping to resolve the most pressing international problems. Speaking at the United Nations General Assembly President Putin called for the creation of 'a genuinely broad international coalition' to fight Daesh.[9]

The Russian intervention in Syria has from the beginning been – and, as the events of the first half of 2018 have shown, remains – a very dangerous gamble. But it had a certain success from the very beginning. Days before the start of the Russian air campaign in Syria, the United States was forced to restore military-to-military contacts with the Russian armed forces, which had been interrupted for the previous year and a half, in order to avoid military incidents.[10] The first meeting between Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama since the annexation of Crimea also took place.[11] However, while contacts with the United States remained very limited, relations with most of the countries of the Middle East dramatically improved.[12] Russia managed to break out of its political isolation, and the Ukrainian question was put on the back burner even in Europe.

The Russian military footprint in Syria

Initially, the Russian leadership did not plan to be drawn into a prolonged conflict. Having deployed modernised aircraft and new precision weapons, it was expected that a quick government victory over the rebels and terrorist groups would follow. Alexey Pushkov, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Duma, anticipated

8. "Obama: U.S. Working To 'Isolate Russia'," *Time*, March 3, 2014, http://time.com/11900/obama-u-s-working-to-isolate-russia/

9. "Vladimir Putin of Russia Calls for Coalition to Fight ISIS," *The New York Times,* September 27, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/29/world/europe/russia-vladimir-putin-united-nations-general-assembly.html

10. "DOD Puts Military-to-military Activities With Russia on Hold," U.S. Department of Defense, March 3, 2014, http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=121759

11. "Obama and Putin's First Formal Meeting in Two Years Described as 'Businesslike' Despite Tensions," *ABC News*, September 28, 2015, http://abcnews.go.com/US/obama-putin-set-rare-sit-meeting-amid-tensions/story?id=34094684

12. "Putin Is Filling the Middle East Power Vacuum," *Bloomberg*, October 3, 2017, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-10-03/putin-is-now-mr-middle-east-a-job-no-one-ever-succeeds-at

that Russian operations in Syria would last 'three or four months.'[13] One year after the start of the operation Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov recalled: 'when our active actions began, and our Aerospace Forces joined the fight against terrorists, we expected that the operation would last for several months.'[14]

These expectations were to prove overly optimistic. But Russia was able to adapt to the new reality of prolonged conflict and successfully support a small expeditionary force in Syria over an extended period of time.

Depending on the strategic situation, the number of aircraft at the Russian base in Syria fluctuated from more than 40 warplanes in early 2016 and at the end of 2017 to just 20-24 during a lull in summer 2016. There were also about 20 Russian attack and transport helicopters in Syria at any given time. In addition to the forces stationed in the country, Navy ships and submarines attacked targets in Syria with cruise missiles from the Mediterranean and the Caspian Sea. Strategic bombers flying from bases in Russia supported the Russian operation in Syria.

Also, groups of Russian military advisers were assigned to almost all Syrian regular army units from battalion level upwards. They consisted of several staff officers, artillery spotters, aviation controllers, translators, and support personnel.[15]

The Russian Ministry of Defence did not disclose the total strength of the Russian contingent. But judging from indirect information, even at peak times, it only consisted of about five thousand people. After the number of Russian forces was reduced in December 2017, it became even smaller. In the presidential elections in Russia in March of this year, 3,840 Russian citizens were included in the voter lists in Syria.[16] Most of them were military, but this number also included civilian contractors and diplomatic personnel.

As in previous conflicts, official casualty numbers have not been published. But losses have remained small, given the fact that the Russian military is not involved in direct ground combat. It is known that 91 Russian servicemen have been killed in Syria in total. 52 of these deaths were combat-related – among the victims were the crews of crashed and downed aircraft, elite Spetsnaz soldiers, who directed close air support and conducted forward air control, and advisory officers who worked on the front line. Another 39 lives were lost in the recent crash of the An-32 transport aircraft when it was attempting to land at Khmeimim airbase in Syria.[17]

13. Interview with Alexey Pushkov, October 2, 2015, http://www.europe1.fr/emissions/l-interview-politique/la-coalition-americaine-a-fait-semblant-de-bombarder-daech-pendant-une-annee-2523383

14. "Богданов: операция ВКС в Сирии должна была продлиться несколько месяцев" [Bogdanov: the operation of the VKS in Syria was expected to last several months], *RIA Novosty,* September 26, 2016, https://ria.ru/syria/20160926/1477859123.html

15. Interview with Chief of Russian General Staff, Komsomolskaya Pravda, December 27, 2017, https://www.kp.ru/daily/26775/3808693/

16. Official Data by the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation, http://www.foreign-countries.vybory.izbirkom.ru/region/foreign-countries?action=show&global=true&root=994001256&tvd=499400168175&vrn=100100084849062&prver=0&pronetvd=null&region=99&sub_region=99&type=226&vibid=499400168175

17. "Чо известно о погибших в Сирии российских военных" [What is known about the dead Russian military personnel in Syria], *Kommersant*, May 27, 2018, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3460282

Losses at this level remain acceptable to Russian public opinion. Furthermore, only professional military personnel - officers and contract soldiers – have been killed. Conscripts are not sent to Syria.

To date (from September 2015 to June 2018), the Russian military has lost seven planes and twelve helicopters during the intervention.[18] Out of 35,000 sorties, only one Russian plane was shot down by hostile fire from the ground. Another bomber was lost in an incident with Turkey.[19] The remaining five (including two carrier-borne fighters) crashed due to technical problems and crew errors. Striking almost exclusively from an altitude of more than 4 kilometres, Russian combat planes have remained immune to man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADS) and the fire of small-calibre anti-aircraft guns.

Helicopters flew fewer sorties than aviation, but they had to operate at low altitudes and mostly during the day. Their losses from hostile fire are therefore higher. Six of the fleet of twelve helicopters were shot down or destroyed on the ground by missiles. Four Russian attack helicopters were burned after a mortar shelling of the forward airfield at the T4 airbase by Daesh militants in May 2016.[20] Losses of land equipment remained insignificant, with just several trucks being destroyed. One armored car, 'Tiger', was lost in a rare ambush-style attack in which four Russian soldiers were killed.[21]

Apart from the official involvement of the Russian regular forces in Syria, Russian mercenary military companies are also present. They are a fairly new phenomenon that emerged in 2014-2015 during the fighting in the east of Ukraine.[22] The legal status of such 'companies' remains ill-defined even in Russia, and their very existence is refuted by the Russian authorities. In Syria, they have acted with the unspoken blessing of the Russian Ministry of Defence and sometimes in cooperation with it, but outside of the military chain of command.[23]

They are mercenaries in the old-fashioned sense, resembling Italian Renaissance mercenary companies even more than today's infamous Western private military companies (PMCs). They obtain money and even heavy military equipment from Syrian and Russian oligarchs and fight to protect their business interests.

18. Calculated by the author based on media reports.
19. "Turkey's downing of Russian warplane - what we know," *BBC News*, December 1, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581
20 "Isis 'destroys' Syrian airbase and four Russian helicopters," *Independent*, May 24, 2016, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-destroys-syrian-airbase-and-four-russian-helicopters-a7046646.html
21. "Жертвой фугаса стал российский генерал" [The Russian general became a victim of IED], *Kommersant,* March 6, 2017, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3235107
22. "Проект 'Мясорубка'. Рассказывают три командира 'ЧВК Вагнера'» [Project 'meat mincer'. Three commanders of 'PMC Wagner' speaking], *Radio Svoboda*, March 7, 2018, https://www.svoboda.org/a/29084090.html
23. "Russian Mercenaries: Vagner Commanders Describe Life Inside The 'Meat Grinder'," *Radio Free Europe*, March 14, 2018, https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-mercenaries-vagner-commanders-syria/29100402.html

One of the tactical commanders described their initial role as expanding zones of influence rather than engaging in full-scale military operations: 'They take territory under control – as a rule, oil and gas fields – and then guard these territories. They are paid for this … But it is impossible to control an oil field if there are hostile fighters 500 metres away, so they have to force them out.'[24]

They were subsequently deployed offensively to capture towns and oil fields from the crumbling 'Islamic Caliphate.'[25] The participation of such 'contractors' in close combat has led to much bigger losses than in the 'official' Russian military contingent. But there are no exact figures and estimates fluctuate wildly from dozens to thousands. Best guesses put casualty figures among Russian mercenaries in the hundreds.

These limited losses indicate that Syria did not become a 'quagmire' for Russia as Barack Obama had predicted, even if Russia did not achieve the quick victory for which the Kremlin had initially hoped.[26] Moreover, it was not a costly intervention for Russia. Boldest estimates put the total cost of the first 20 months of the military operation in Syria at only around $2.4 billion.[27] This has not put a huge strain on the $50 billion annual budget of the Russian Ministry of Defence. The end of the civil war is still far off, but it seems that the Russian military presence in Syria can be sustained without too much difficulty.

A much more challenging question is what to do after the end of the war. The astronomical cost of rebuilding Syria is clearly beyond the capacity of the Russian budget.

Achievements and lessons learned

By mid-2018 Russia had fulfilled its mission of stabilising the Assad government. Before the Russian intervention, the ruling regime's eventual defeat seemed preordained. In 2015 only one-sixth of the country's territory remained under the government's control.[28] As of spring 2018, the government controls not less than 57% of the territory of the country where 73% of its pre-war population lived, and has seized control of the principal rebel strongholds – Eastern Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta.

24. Ibid.
25. "Большое интервью членов ЧВК Вагнера" [A big interview with Wagner's PMC members], Onpress.info,https://onpress.info/bolshoe-yntervyu-chlenov-chvk-vagnera-112488
26. "No sign of Obama's predicted 'quagmire' as Russia's engagement in Syria escalates," *Washington Post*, September 30, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/no-sign-of-obamas-predicted-quagmire-as-russias-engagement-in-syria-escalates/2016/09/30/5b3e4d18-8723-11e6-ac72-a29979381495_story.html
27. "Opposition Party's Report on Russia's Syria Campaign Costs Dismissed by Government," *The Janestown Foundation*, July 31, 2017, https://jamestown.org/program/opposition-partys-report-on-russias-syria-campaign-costs-dismissed-by-government/
28. "Syrian Government Loses 5/6th of Territory, IHS Says," *IHS Markit*, August 22, 2015, http://news.ihsmarkit.com/press-release/aerospace-defense-security/syrian-government-loses-56th-territory-ihs-says

Anti-Assad rebels and radical Islam groups in Idlib combined hold less than 11% of the territory.[29] But even in the event of a complete military victory over them, Syria will remain fragmented into three zones controlled by different foreign powers. Almost a quarter of the country is controlled by Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) units, supported by the United States.[30] Two large areas are occupied by Turkey and its proxy army of rebels and Islamists. The prospect of reuniting Syria therefore seems remote. Russia prevented the fall of Assad, but has not been able to restore the whole country to him.

Initially, Russia did not insist on keeping Assad in power and was ready for some form of political transition.[31] But now, after the string of government military victories, Russia seems more committed to Assad remaining in power.

In return for Russia's assistance, Damascus signed a deal with Moscow allowing Russia to use air and naval bases in the country for another 49 years. To preserve these, which are its only bridgeheads in the region, Russia must be sure that the civil war will end either with the complete military victory of Assad and his coalition or with a diplomatic solution accompanied by conditions favourable to Russia. And maintaining Assad in power seems like the most straightforward way to preserve Russian influence and bases.

The length of the conflict has enabled the Russian military to acquire valuable insights and skills, with Syria becoming an ideal testing ground for new Russian weaponry and tactics. Many new-generation weapons have not only been used in Syria for the first time in real combat conditions but subsequently improved by manufacturers after an assessment of their performance, and then re-tested again. To date 210 new weapons have been tested and evaluated in Syria.[32]

Russia's military operation in Syria was conducted for the first time by the Joint Operational Headquarters. From Russia's Khmeimim airbase, it simultaneously controls land, air and naval assets in Syria, as well as coordination with foreign allies on the ground. At the strategic level of command, the operation was supervised by the new National Defence Centre in Moscow, which was established only in December 2014. The new control system radically improved the interaction between troops, which historically has been a weak point in the Russian military.

Russian military officers are able to hone their combat and tactical skills in Syria. They work in the country on short 2-3-month shifts. This has allowed more than

29. "Map of Control and Influence in Syria: February 16, 2018," Omran Center for Strategic Studies, http://en.omrandirasat.org/publications/reports/map-of-control-and-influence-syria-16-february-2018.html

30. Ibid.

31. "Russia stance on Assad suggests divergence with Iran," *Reuters,* November 3, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia/russia-stance-on-assad-suggests-divergence-with-iran-idUSKCN0SS0TY20151103

32. "Шойгу: в Сирии протестировано 210 образцов оружия" [Shoigu: 210 samples of weapons tested in Syria], *Interfax,* March 11, 2018, http://interfax.az/view/727970

48,000 officers and soldiers to gain experience in Syria in the space of just two and a half years. So, for example, all the commanders of the military districts of Russia took turns to be commanders of the Joint Operational Headquarters at Khmeimim. 80-95% of aviation crews have also operated on shifts in Syria at least once.[33]

In the Syrian war theatre, probably the most serious challenge faced by the Russian armed forces has been in the area of tactical reconnaissance. With modern high-precision weapons, locating targets is a more difficult task than actually hitting them. Russian satellite reconnaissance capabilities are still not very impressive. This was partially compensated by using many light but long-endurance drones, such as the Orlan-10 reconnaissance drone. In Syria, several dozen were deployed. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) performed more than 1,000 sorties a month and spent many more hours in the air than piloted aircraft.[34] They were used not only for reconnaissance but also for evaluating the results of airstrikes in real-time and for adjusting artillery fire.

Russian aviation has demonstrated radically improved capabilities when it comes to hitting stationary targets. This is due to the use of the new *Gelest* digital targeting systems for dumb bombs, and the greater use of precision weapons. But it still has difficulties with the search-and-destroy missions against small-sized mobile objects. In the first months, there were huge problems even with close air support (CAS) on the battlefield. Since 2017, there has been a marked improvement, but it is still not enough. Russian bombers and fighters are still not equipped with sufficiently sophisticated sights or reconnaissance containers to independently locate small-scale targets. A serious drawback also is the lack of MALE-class armed drones, which are still in development.

In the Russian military, striking such targets and providing CAS to the ground forces on the front line remains the specialised task of helicopters. But even the newest Mi-28N and Ka-52 helicopters, deployed to Syria, did not prove to be very successful at night missions. This led to an emergency programme to accelerate their modernisation.[35]

The unsuccessful deployment of the Russian aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* to the shores of Syria in the winter of 2016/2017 was a source of deep disappointment to the Kremlin. This was the first time in decades that the Russian fleet had the

33. "Более 48 тысяч российских военных получили боевой опыт в Сирии" [More than 48 thousand Russian military received combat experience in Syria], *RIA Novosti*, December 22, 2017, https://ria.ru/syria/20171222/1511541630.html

34. "Российские беспилотники ведут круглосуточный контроль в Сирии, заявил Шойгу" [Russian drones are conducting round-the-clock observation in Syria, Shoigu said,], *RIA Novosti,* October 27, 2017, https://ria.ru/syria/20171027/1507669571.html

35. "Российские Ми-28 оснастили провальной электроникой" [Russian Mi-28 equipped with subpar electronics], *Lenta.ru,* November 30,2017, https://lenta.ru/news/2017/11/30/mi28/

opportunity to prove itself in real combat and confirm the need for aircraft carriers in its ranks. But the effectiveness of its deck aviation was considerably less than that of shore-based Aerospace Forces. Moreover, out of only 154 sorties launched from the carrier,[36] two fighter jets were lost in accidents.

The Navy managed to redeem its reputation somewhat with the successful launch of over a hundred Kalibr cruise missiles from frigates, small corvettes, and diesel submarines. This new weapon was tested in battle for the first time in the course of Russia's intervention in Syria. With it ships were now able to attack ground targets up to 1,500 kilometres from the coast – a useful capability which the Russian Navy did not previously possess.

Even though the contingent deployed by the Russian military was small, it was necessary to deliver over 1.6 million tons of cargo to Syria by sea and by air.[37] This pushed Russian military logistics to the limit: the Navy even had to purchase old civilian vessels for military transport.[38] This shows that Russia's expeditionary capabilities remain severely limited. It is not clear if Russia could, if necessary, maintain an overseas contingent in Syria of more than a few thousand people and half a hundred aircraft.

Syria and the future of the Russian armed forces

The combat experience gained in Syria will determine how the Russian armed forces evolve in the foreseeable future. The adoption of a new State Armament Programme was delayed and not signed until February 2018, in order to take the lessons learned from the Syrian campaign into account. It is known that it will place more emphasis on the development and purchase of large quantities of precision weapons,[39] increasing the accuracy and effectiveness of artillery, and that there will be a substantial investment in upgrading the ground forces' outdated fleet of amored vehicles.

Priority is given to the strengthening of strategic aviation, which can now use long-range non-nuclear cruise missiles. Financing of the Navy procurements, in comparison with the previous programme, is significantly reduced. In view of the new military budget constraints, investment in a 'blue-water' ocean fleet was considered not to be cost-effective. In the next ten years, there are no plans to begin construction of

36. "Russia steps up military presence in Syria, despite Putin promise," *Fox News,* January 11,2017, http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/01/11/russia-steps-up-military-presence-in-syria-despite-putin-promise.html

37. "Операция в Сирии показала силу России" [Operation in Syria showed the strength of Russia], *Red Star*, January 31, 2018, http://redstar.ru/index.php/news-menu/vesti/v-voennyh-okrugah/iz-tsentralnogo-voennogo-okruga/item/35940-operatsiya-v-sirii-pokazala-silu-rossii

38. "Россия привлекла для перевозки грузов в Сирию десять гражданских судов" [Ten civil vessels were brought to Syria for cargo transportation], *RBC*, November 15, 2015, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/15/10/2015/561fb5539a79471d00663b1e

39. "Russia's new armament program to focus on precision weapons," *TASS,* December 27, 2017, http://tass.com/defense/983376

new aircraft carriers or helicopter carriers.[40] Preference is given to the Aerospace Forces, rather than the Navy, as a tool for projecting force beyond Russia's borders. Also, there are no indications of a major expansion of expeditionary capabilities. Russia's conventional forces will still be focused on defending Russian territory and projecting power on the near abroad.

The civil war in this Middle Eastern country has become an opportunity for Moscow to closely observe the military actions of the US and NATO countries. This has allowed Russia to get a close look at modern Western tactics and weapons, and gauge their effectiveness, and to compare the performance of its own weapons with those used by rival powers against the same targets. Also, the Russian military has been able to closely monitor several massed cruise missile strikes launched by NATO countries and gain first-hand experience of the effectiveness of Soviet-era and more modern Russian air defences against such a threat. The acquisition of such insights and information is of critical importance for the successful future development of the Russian armed forces.

40. "Russia's State Armament Programme 2027: a more measured course on procurement," *IISS Military Balance* Blog, February 13, 2018, https://www.iiss.org/en/militarybalanceblog/blogsections/2018-f256/february-1c17/russia-state-armament-programme-d453

Chapter 6
Russia's non-war on Daesh

Florence Gaub

Russia's military campaign in Syria has been a masterpiece in strategic disinformation. Moscow showed up late to the international fight against Daesh – the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – a full year after the US-led coalition had been launched, following an official request from the Syrian government for it to intervene. The military campaign which Russia subsequently conducted in Syria actively undermined the campaign waged by the international coalition. Although only months earlier President Putin had declared somewhat boldly that Daesh 'does not pose a direct threat to Russia',[1] Russia now stated that its objectives in Syria were to give 'exclusively air support to the Syrian armed forces in their fight against ISIS.'[2]

The military intervention in Syria was presented in the Russian media as a war on Islamic terrorism, in glaring contradiction of the way in which Russia actually conducted operations on the ground. Extensive evidence, gathered through crowdsourcing and open source analysis, disproved Russia's claim that it was bombing Daesh: in fact, more than 90% of its airstrikes targeted non-jihadist rebels. Not even Daesh's nemesis, the al-Qaeda--affiliated Nusra Front, was targeted. If that was not evidence enough, Daesh was losing territory only in areas where Russia was *not* militarily active.

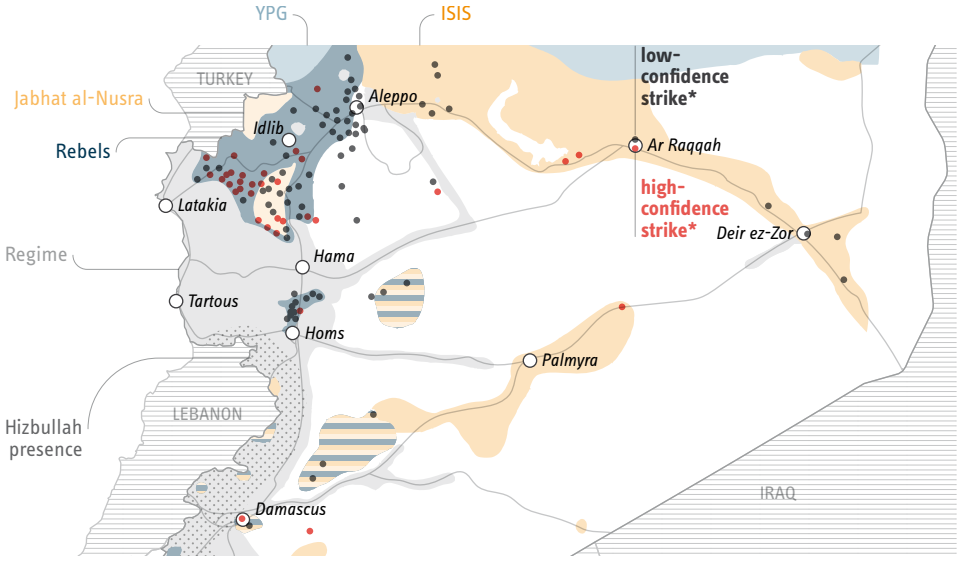
Instead of defeating Daesh, Moscow was helping the Syrian regime crush the only viable political alternative left, the vast array of militias operating under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army. Backed by Russian air cover, Syrian troops were finally able to push back into territory in the west of the country that had previously been lost, and ultimately retake Aleppo. As this was the real objective of the campaign, it was perhaps only logical that Putin declared 'mission accomplished' in spring 2016,

1. Official website of the President of Russia, "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin," April 16, 2015, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49261
2. "Russian air strikes on Syrian targets raise 'grave concerns' in US," *Financial Times*, September 30, 2015, https://www.ft.com/content/a72cee0a-674e-11e5-a57f-21b88f7d973f

when Daesh still held an area equal in size to the territory then controlled by the Syrian regime.[3] Of course, Russian operations continued, and Putin announced, on two further occasions, that the objectives of the mission had been accomplished, declaring victory against Daesh in December 2017.

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, Moscow maintained the narrative of its anti-Daesh fight – and not merely to cover its operations in international legitimacy. Constant repetition of lies, so the exercise shows, will yield results eventually, regardless of how many times they are disproved thanks to the well-documented 'illusory truth effect' whereby repeated exposure to false information leads to the acceptance of it as truth – or at least creates a strong element of doubt.

Figure 5: Approximation of Russian airstrikes in Syria
30 September–28 October 2015



* **High-confidence strikes** designate strikes that have been verified and corroborated by reliable sources with a high level of accuracy; **Low-confidence strikes** designate strikes attested by less reliable secondary sources.
Data: Institute for the Study of War

Repeating endlessly that the Syrian opposition was colluding with Daesh, that the options in Syria were either Assad or Islamist terrorists at the helm of the country, that Daesh was a Western creation in the first place and has enjoyed Western support throughout the Syrian conflict – and that Russia was the only country willing to face it down – definitely had a strategic impact: it discredited the Syrian opposition;

3. "More than 90%' of Russian airstrikes in Syria have not targeted Isis, US says", *The Guardian,* October 7, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/russia-airstrikes-syria-not-targetting-isis; "Lawmakers authorize use of Russian military force for anti-IS airstrikes in Syria," *TASS Russian News Agency,* September 30, 2015, http://tass.ru/en/politics/824795http://tass.ru/en/politics/824795; Atlantic Council, "Distract Deceive Destroy: Putin at War in Syria," April 2016, http://publications.atlanticcouncil.org/distract-deceive-destroy/assets/download/ddd-report.pdf.

it reduced the complexities of the Syrian war to a binary choice between the Assad regime and a takeover by Islamic extremists; it hollowed out European and American public support for regime change in Syria at a time when refugees were streaming into Europe; and it portrayed European and American governments as responsible for the bloodshed. In sum: this was a stratagem designed to change Western policy on Syria – and towards Russia itself, which had languished in isolation following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in Donbass.

Step one: opposition? Which opposition?

The first *victim* of Russia's Daesh narrative was and is, of course, the Syrian opposition: but the *target* of the campaign was the public in Europe, the United States – and indeed in Russia, whose public also needed to be convinced.[4]

Although the Kremlin's statements on Russia's military campaign clearly identified Daesh as the target, official language used by both the government and the media soon began to blur the lines, referring to all militias active in Syria as 'extremists', 'Islamists' and 'terrorists'.[5] Even organisations such as the White Helmets, dedicated to the rescue of civilians from combat zones, became the target of a campaign accusing them of having links with al-Qaeda.[6] This was in stark contrast to language that had previously been used: in the early years of the war, neither Putin nor other Russian officials defined the entire opposition in those terms. Although the Kremlin's objectives diverged from the opposition's goals from the outset, the narrative was then about protracted instability and peaceful change – and clearly aimed at preventing a Western intervention in Syria, which would only lead to terrorism, as Putin noted in an op-ed. At this point, the Russian narrative was at odds with the regime's narrative which, from the beginning of the conflict, portrayed the uprising as the work of terrorists.[7] But the emergence of Daesh on the Syrian battlefield led to a change in rhetoric in Moscow; from 2014 onwards, all armed opposition groups were regarded as either Islamist or collaborating with Islamists. This served two purposes: it tapped into international sentiment and revulsion against Daesh, and by the same token discredited those forces which could pose a threat to the Assad regime as they represented a credible political alternative.

Around the same time, a second line of narration emerged: the portrayal of the Syrian conflict in almost Manichean terms as a choice between the Assad regime and Daesh.

4. Levada Center, "Syria and the plane crash in Egypt," November 23, 2015, https://www.levada.ru/en/2015/11/23/syria-the-plane-crash-in-egypt/; Levada Center, "Syria," July 10, 2016, https://www.levada.ru/en/2016/06/10/syria-2/

5. "Russian anti-terrorist op in Syria," *RT*, https://www.rt.com/trends/russia-syria-op/; "Syria War: What the mainstream media isn't telling you about Eastern Ghouta," *RT*, March 5, 2018, https://www.rt.com/op-ed/420521-syria-eastern-ghouta-aleppo-media/

6. "How Syria's White Helmets became victims of an online propaganda machine," *The Guardian*, December 18, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/18/syria-white-helmets-conspiracy-theories; BBC Monitoring, "Syrian president condemns West, vows to survive protests," January 11, 2012.

7. Vladimir Putin, "A Plea for Caution From Russia," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html

The Syrian opposition, now eliminated from the discussion through having been amalgamated with Daesh, no longer featured as an option in this vision of things. 'People are not fleeing from the Bashar al-Assad regime — they are fleeing from the Islamic State', Putin stated.[8] His foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, even claimed that 'all of our Western partners, without exception, are telling us that they understand perfectly well the nature of the main threat in the Middle East and North Africa. It is not the Assad regime, but the Islamic State.'[9] Neither statement was true, but as always with disinformation, this was not the point.[10] Instead, this discourse was aimed at removing the opposition from the equation, and presenting the Syrian war as a battle between a secular regime and a brutal terrorist entity. 'Syria's Bashar Assad is not a perfect leader, but certainly better than the Islamic State', Russian media outlet RT noted.[11] The Russian narrative also had the effect of portraying Western leaders as hypocrites, saying one thing in private and another in public.

The persistent repetition of this discourse eventually did have an impact on European and American opinion regarding the Syrian conflict. By October 2015, 70% of the American public stated that the government had no strategy for Syria, and 53% considered that 'Putin has the upper hand in Syria'. Some Western media even uncritically adopted the Russian narrative: the British *Express* for instance noted that 71% of people who responded to a poll organised by the newspaper said that they 'support Vladimir Putin's bombing campaign in Syria, which is blitzing a large number of Islamic State owned buildings and vehicles' – when Russian sorties were, in fact, not 'blitzing' Daesh.[12]

Originally supportive of the Arab uprisings of 2011, policymakers and public alike began to echo the Russian narratives. For example, François Fillon, former French prime minister and candidate for the presidency in 2017, declared that Bashar al-Assad was a bulwark against Islamist terrorism and the protector of Middle Eastern Christians.[13]

An American senator endorsed the notion that all opposition groups in Syria could be lumped together as terrorist: 'I travelled all around the country and repeatedly

8. Official website of the President of Russia, "Vladimir Putin answered Russian journalists' questions," September 4, 2015, http://en.special.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/50234

9. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Voskresnoye Vremya TV programme, September 13, 2015," September 13, 2015, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/1744777

10. "Assad poses bigger threat to Syrians than Isis, warns thinktank," *The Guardian*, 15 September, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/15/syrian-president-bashar-al-assad-bigger-threat-than-isis; Charles Lister, "The West is walking into the abyss on Syria," September 28, 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/09/28/the-west-is-walking-into-the-abyss-on-syria/

11. "Syria's Bashar Assad is not a perfect leader, but certainly better than Islamic State,"*RT*, March 31, 2017, https://www.rt.com/op-ed/382958-assad-turkey-us-rex-tillerson/

12. Fox News Poll, "Syria, Benghazi and the US Economy," October 14, 2015, http://www.foxnews.com/politics/interactive/2015/10/14/fox-news-poll-syria-benghazi-and-us-economy.html; "More than 70% SUPPORT for Vladimir Putin's bombing campaign despite Middle East tensions," *Express*, October 13, 2015, https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/611495/Vladimir-Putin-bombing-campaign-poll-support-syria-middle-east

13. "Pour Bachar Al-Assad, la position de François Fillon sur la Syrie est 'une très bonne chose'," *Le Monde*, January 9, 2017, https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2017/article/2017/01/09/pour-bachar-al-assad-la-position-de-francois-fillon-sur-la-syrie-est-une-tres-bonne-chose_5059694_4854003.html#57QmCkAtQhPxfZ92.99

Syrians are offended by this idea of rebels or opposition. To them, they are all terrorists'[14] – chiming with the views expressed by President Putin who in October 2015 declared: 'There's no need to play with words and split terrorists into moderate and not moderate. I would like to know what the difference is.'[15] French far-right leader Marine Le Pen joined the chorus: 'The question comes down to the choice: do you want there to be at least some form of state or Daesh?'[16]

This un-nuanced, black-and-white view of the conflict soon permeated Western public opinion as well. American media outlets repeated the Russian narrative: 'Supporting Assad remains the only realistic path that will return us to the relative stability of the pre–Arab Spring days, and that will defeat ISIS. No one is more motivated to defeat ISIS than Assad'.[17] When a French MP called for *rapprochement* with Assad in the fight against Daesh, a leading national newspaper wondered: 'Do we have to choose between Assad and ISIS?'[18] Think tanks, too, began to argue in favour of a policy accepting that Assad remain in power – and ultimately, even the United Nations Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura conceded that Assad was 'a crucial part of the solution' – when originally, he had been identified as a crucial part of the problem.[19] Both France and the United States began to relent on their original demand for Assad to step down even before the transition in Syria began – of course, not solely as a result of Russian disinformation, but adhering to Russia's presentation of the situation as boiling down to a choice between Assad and the jihadists.

What had disappeared from the discussion was the root cause of the Syrian conflict – which had nothing to do with Daesh and everything with Assad.

Step two: blaming the West

After the Syrian opposition, Europe and the United States were the second target of Russian propaganda attacks. As with the campaign against the opposition, this

14. "For average Syrians, all members of opposition are terrorists - State Senator Richard Black," *Russia Today*, January 27, 2017, https://www.rt.com/op-ed/375287-syria-draft-constitution-rebels/

15. 'Vladimir Putin accuses US of backing terrorism in Middle East', *The Guardian*, 22 October 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/22/vladimir-putin-accuses-us-backing-terrorism-middle-east

16. "Le Pen Says Assad May Be Lesser of Two Evils for Syria's Future," *Bloomberg,* February 20, 2017, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-02-20/le-pen-says-assad-may-be-lesser-of-two-evils-for-syria-s-future

17. "Accept the Uncomfortable Truth: It's Time to Support Assad," *National Review*, January 7, 2016, https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/01/supporting-assad-best-option/; RTL, "Syrie : 'Il faut se rapprocher de Bachar al-Assad pour mieux détruire Daesh', dit Thierry Mariani," May 22, 2015, http://www.rtl.fr/actu/international/syrie-il-faut-se-rapprocher-de-bachar-al-assad-pour-mieux-detruire-daesh-dit-thierry-mariani-7778439575

18. "Faut-il choisir entre Bachar el-Assad et l'État islamique?, " *Le Figaro*, May 26, 2015, http://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/monde/2015/05/26/31002-20150526ARTFIG00196-faut-il-choisir-entre-bachar-el-assad-et-l-etat-islamique.php

19. Julien Barnes-Dacey, "To end a war: Europe's role in bringing peace to Syria," European Council on Foreign Relations, September 12, 2017, http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/to_end_a_war_europes_role_in_bringing_peace_to_syria7223; "U.N. Envoy Says Assad Is Crucial to Defusing Conflict in Syria," *New York Times*, February 13, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/14/world/middleeast/un-envoy-to-syria-says-assad-is-crucial-to-hopes-to-end-war.html

narrative comprised two main strands: it accused the West of having created Islamists in the first place, and of covertly cooperating with them.[20] Both lines of narrative tap into certain perceptions that both Middle Eastern and Russian audiences tend to have anyway, and are therefore probably designed mainly for their consumption.[21]

The first, the notion that Islamism is a phenomenon created by Western countries, is spun around the 'original sin' of American support to the Taliban during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. While it is true that Western powers aided the mujahideen opposition to Moscow at the time, it was the USSR which plunged Afghanistan into four decades of civil war, destabilising the entire country, and mobilising Islamist networks of all sorts across the region. However, this notion fits neatly with the view that since it was the invasion of Iraq in 2003 which paved the way for the emergence of Daesh, it was the United States which created Daesh, as President Putin claimed – letting it be understood that they did this intentionally. With regard to Syria, this narrative was reinforced by claims in the Russian media that the Obama administration funnelled weapons to 'an insurgency they knew was linked to al-Qaeda in order to overthrow the Syrian government. Al-Qaeda has built its largest affiliate in history as a direct result of this reckless US regime change policy.' In the same article, RT claimed that Western states 'prolonged the slaughter and empowered al-Qaeda'.[22] Such accusations gradually had an impact on European public opinion, too: an opinion poll suggested that some 31% of French citizens believed that 'jihadist terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda and ISIS were in reality manipulated by Western intelligence services'.[23]

The second part of the narrative is that the West did not just unleash the beast, but that it colludes with jihadists in Syria too, as claimed by Russian foreign minister Lavrov. According to this interpretation of events, it does this by refraining from targeting them in airstrikes and obstructing the Syrian regime's efforts to fight Daesh.[24] For instance, Putin claimed that the coalition's bombing of Raqqa, Daesh's self-declared 'capital', was designed not to defeat Daesh but to obstruct pro-government forces.[25] In December 2017, after the fall of Daesh strongholds Mosul and Raqqa (neither of which Russia had bombed), Putin declared 'we defeated ISIS'. In fact the opposite happened. While Russia barely bombed Daesh, most of the fighting that succeeded in wresting Syrian and Iraqi territories from the terrorist organisation's control was

20. "Reports on US training 'ex-terrorists' in Syria concerning," *RT*, December 25, 2017, https://www.rt.com/news/414189-syria-terrorists-training-lavrov/; Itar-Tass, "Washington uses terror groups in Syria for its own goals," *TASS*, November 21, 2017, http://tass.com/politics/976604

21. Levada Center, "Syria", October 22, 2014, https://www.levada.ru/en/2014/10/22/syria/

22. "Syria War: What the mainstream media isn't telling you about Eastern Ghouta," *RT*, March 5, 2018, https://www.rt.com/op-ed/420521-syria-eastern-ghouta-aleppo-media/

23. IFOP, "Enquête sur le complotisme," December 2017, 69, https://jean-jaures.org/sites/default/files/redac/commun/productions/2018/0108/115158_-_rapport_02.01.2017.pdf

24. "US protecting Syria jihadist group - Russia's Lavrov," *BBC News,* September 30, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37520793; "Russia accuses US of training ex-ISIS fighters in Syria," *New York Post*, December 27, 2017, https://nypost.com/2017/12/27/russia-accuses-us-of-training-former-islamic-state-fighters-in-syria/

25. '"Go back to Raqqa & bury bodies': Putin calls for investigation into strikes on civilians in Syria," *RT*, March 10, 2018, https://www.rt.com/news/420923-raqqa-crimes-investigation-putin/; "US destroying Syrian cities liberated from ISIS to obstruct pro-Assad forces – analyst," *RT*, October 15, 2017, https://www.rt.com/news/406751-mayadeen-syria-liberation-isis/

done by Kurdish forces, the Iraqi government with close Western air and intelligence support, and even some Western special forces on the ground. Only when French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian expressed his surprise at this claim did Russia backpedal, stating that it was the Syrian regime that had defeated Daesh (still giving no credit to Western efforts).[26]

A convincing narrative?

Russia manipulated the international revulsion over the atrocities committed by Daesh for essentially three purposes: to achieve its strategic goal of ensuring the Syrian regime's survival; to discredit Western efforts not just in Syria, but in the region more generally; and to bolster support for its strategy and policies. Russia's 'ISIS narrative' was accepted mainly in Russia itself; its impact in Europe and the United States was not as profound but still important enough to create cracks in a previous near-consensus on the Syrian war as a morally justified uprising against a repressive and brutal regime. Nevertheless, Russian strategic communication did not succeed in changing either European or American policies on Syria – for the time being. It did, however, bring international efforts for a negotiated transition in Syria to a near halt.

Where Russia failed, however, was in convincing Middle Eastern audiences of its storyline: according to different surveys, two thirds of Arabs see Russia's role in the Syrian conflict as negative. On average, three out of four Arabs are of the view that Russia is a major source of instability in Syria – ranking it just a few points behind the United States, regarded as the main culprit.[27] Overall, 66% of Arab citizens have a negative perception of Russia (while 75% have a negative view of the United States), and 69% say Russia poses a threat to Arab stability.[28] Although much has been written about Russia's 'return to the Middle East', this seems to be more about power projection than about reality.

In sum, some important lessons can be drawn from Russia's use of Daesh as a strategic communication tool: the first is that repetition alone is often enough to create an illusion of truth, and efforts to refute such assertions are often of no avail. This poses challenges to Western policymakers who seek to counteract fake news with real news. The second is that while communication alone is not enough to change a state's policy, it can undermine its efforts significantly; although ultimately not as successful as feared, Russia's Syria narrative has changed the dynamics of the war's story-telling to its advantage. Thirdly, the Russian narrative builds on

26. Official website of the President of Russia, "Meeting with President of Syria Bashar al-Assad," December 11, 2017, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/56353; "Russia bewildered at France's statement on Syria," *AMN*, December 10, 2017, https://mobile.almasdarnews.com/article/russia-bewildered-frances-statement-syria/

27. Zogby Research Services, "Middle East 2016: Current Conditions and the road ahead," November 2016, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52750dd3e4b08c252c723404/t/58509580ff7c5039b9505e67/1481676164948/SBY2016+FINAL.pdf

28. Arab Center Washington DC, "2016 Arab Opinion Index", 11; Zogby Research Services, "Sir Bani Yas Forum - Public Opinion 2017", 7.

historical grievances such as alleged Western support to the Taliban during the USSR-Afghanistan war in the 1980s, the invasion of Iraq and NATO's campaign in Libya to strengthen its argument and build a larger, anti-Western case. As a result, its story is more believable and hence has greater resonance. Fourthly and lastly, Russia used Daesh to reduce the complexities of the war in Syria to a stark choice between the Assad regime and Islamist terrorism – a version of events in which an audience weary of war was eager to believe. The cumulative effect of these factors was that while Russia presented its intervention in Syria in the autumn of 2015 as an anti-terrorist operation that was supposed to lead to an alliance with the West (and hence to Russia's de-isolation after the war in Ukraine and the relaxation of sanctions), Moscow's non-war on Daesh ended up heightening, not alleviating, its tensions with the West.

Chapter 7

Russia and the 'resistance axis'

Julien Barnes-Dacey

Russia's widening role in the Middle East is interwoven with its relationship with the Iranian-led 'resistance axis' that now extends from Lebanon to Iran. This axis links Hizbullah, the powerful Lebanese Iran-backed Shiite paramilitary organisation, the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, as well as Iraqi militia forces. Russia's partnership with these actors has been forged in the Syria conflict, where they have joined forces behind the now largely successful goal of ensuring the Assad regime's survival. But it is also a relationship tinged with uncertainty. It has long been the aim of Western actors, and increasingly, regional states, to drive a wedge between Iran and Russia in order to extract a more favourable settlement in Syria.

This ambition is likely to be disappointed. While there are clearly divergences between Russia and the pro-Iran axis – and it remains difficult to call this partnership a meaningful strategic alliance – the shared interest of preserving the Assad order trumps other differences. Russia does not have the necessary leverage to chart an independent path, and would risk sacrificing its wider gains in Syria if it broke with Tehran.

Convergence

Syria represents ground zero for Russia's partnership with this 'resistance axis', with both sides firmly committed to propping up Assad. Russia's 2015 military intervention in Syria allegedly resulted from a visit to Moscow by the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Qassem Soleimani, where he pleaded the case for direct support from Moscow as Syrian opposition forces advanced.[1]

1. "How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow," *Reuters,* October 6, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh/how-iranian-general-plotted-out-syrian-assault-in-moscow-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006

Since 2015 the two countries have worked together – along with Syrian regime forces, those of the Lebanese militant group Hizbullah, and a broader array of Iranian-backed militia forces, including from Iraq – to shore up Assad's military position. Russia has provided aerial support to regime and Iranian-backed forces on the ground. In 2016 it launched strikes on Syrian opposition positions from Iran's Hamedan airbase, the first time a foreign power had used the country as a military base since the 1979 revolution. Russia, Iran, Iraq and Syria also established a joint security and intelligence-sharing cooperation mechanism in October 2015, with operation rooms in Baghdad and Damascus.[2] This also now draws in Hizbullah and is known as the 4+1 group.

These combined efforts have effectively ensured Assad's victory in the civil war, even if Damascus faces ongoing obstacles to gaining control of the entire country.[3] The military track has been accompanied by Russian and Iranian participation, along with Turkey, in the Astana Process, which has sought agreement between the three key external actors on military dynamics. Moscow has simultaneously blocked Western-led measures in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) aimed at sanctioning Assad or further enhancing the prospects of a UN-mediated agreement.

Fundamentally, Russia and Iran share a common interest in resisting perceived US-led efforts to orchestrate regime change in Syria, although they nonetheless view the conflict through different lenses.[4] For Russia, Syria is significant primarily within the context of the international order and Moscow's desire to block perceived hegemonic US attempts to engineer political change right across the globe. The conflict also offers Moscow an opportunity to re-establish itself at the top table of international power and diplomacy. This latter ambition includes a desire to reassert itself militarily in the Middle East.

For Iran, by contrast, the conflict in Syria is centred on its position in the regional order. Tehran fears that regime change in Syria represents the first domino of a US-Israeli-Arab Gulf effort to challenge Iran's wider position and ultimately bring about the collapse of the Islamic Republic in Iran.[5] In this sense Iran's commitment to the survival of the pro-Iranian Assad order is partly driven by perceived existential necessity.

While precise motives differ, the two countries share a firm commitment to ensuring that outside pressure does not dislodge Assad. This extends to a shared understanding

2. 'Iraq, Russia, Iran and Syria coordinate against ISIS', *Al Jazeera,* September 27, 2015, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/iraq-russia-iran-syria-coordinate-isil-150927125919507.html
3. Julian Barnes-Dacey, 'To end a war: Europe's role in bringing peace to Syria," ECFR, *Policy Brief*, September 12, 2017, http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/to_end_a_war_europes_role_in_bringing_peace_to_syria7223
4. Ellie Geranmayeh and Kadri Liik, "The new power couple: Russia and Iran in the Middle East," ECFR, *Policy Brief*, September 13, 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/iran_and_russia_middle_east_power_couple_7113
5. Author's interviews with Iranian officials and analysts, 2014.

about the threat posed by Sunni extremism, interpreted in the broadest possible sense as any group opposed to Assad. While Iran sees extremism as an immediate threat given geographical proximity, Russia also feels threatened by radicalisation, particularly as it risks playing out among its own Muslim population.

Divergence

Still, even as this relationship has clearly delivered success on the ground, it would be a mistake to over-interpret the depth of the alliance. There are also clear differences between the two states.

Within Syria, these differences in many ways reflect the different motivations driving respective interventions. Russia remains focused on asserting itself as a major player on the international stage. Moscow has sought to use the conflict to secure a platform of international credibility, including through high-level engagement with the US, by presenting itself as the necessary pathway towards any solution to the Syrian crisis.

Towards this end Russia has, at times, invested in delivering a political settlement that would give it international legitimacy (as well as providing an exit strategy to avoid becoming mired in a longer-term intervention).[6] Despite being clear that it will not abandon Assad, Moscow has recognised limited opposition aspirations in an attempt to jump-start a regime-favourable political settlement. This has at times involved putting pressure on the regime to make minimal compromises by, for instance, accepting a Russian-drafted constitution advocating de-centralisation.[7] Russia's convening of the Syrian Congress of National Dialogue in Sochi in January 2018 also aimed to advance this track.

But Assad has repeatedly rebuffed these efforts, playing off corresponding Iranian distrust. Iran's preoccupation with defending its regional security interests has pushed it, like Assad, to assume a zero-sum position *vis-à-vis* the opposition. Both are fearful that any small compromise risks opening the door to a wider cascade of change. Rather than work with Russia to exert pressure on Assad to make minimal concessions, Tehran has in fact reinforced the Syrian leader's intransigence.

Iran's position is partly shaped by ongoing unease about Russia's ultimate objectives in Syria and questions over whether Moscow may eventually seek to squeeze Iranian influence out of the country.[8] This reflects differences between the two over the desired end state in Syria. Russia has pressed for a strong central government and the institutionalisation of non-state militias. In part this is because the military has long been its channel of influence in Syria. But it also appears to reflect an

6. See Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Russia's policy in Syria: Efforts to pivot to a political track," Valdai Discussion Club, December 15, 2017, http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russian-policy-in-syria/

7. "Russian-drafted new constitution for Syria promises Kurds greater autonomy," *The New Arab*, January 26, 2017, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/1/26/russia-drafted-new-constitution-for-syria-promises-kurds-greater-autonomy

8. Author's interview with Iranian officials and analysts, 2016 and 2017.

ideological view that power should lie with the central state. While Assad opposes Russian attempts to engineer a political track, he shares the Russian desire to ensure central control over domestic security forces and has to contend with some internal pressures to ensure that Iran does not create a state within a state.

Iran, by contrast, which successfully deploys non-state actors right across the region, resists this approach. For Tehran, attempts to demobilise its militia forces in Syria, including by limiting the role of Hizbullah, threatens its ability to maintain influence and makes it vulnerable to wider pressures. Moscow and Tehran have, on occasion, clashed on this issue including at meetings of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) when Russia proposed the institutionalisation of non-state forces.[9] This rivalry for control of the Syrian state has played out beyond the security sphere with ongoing competition between Moscow and Tehran for control of Syria's economic resources and government contracts.[10]

These various differences have manifested themselves with occasional displays of active rivalry on the ground. Tehran has repeatedly expressed concern that Russia's military and political initiatives, often accompanied by increased engagement with the US, were taking place before Assad was sufficiently strengthened and at Iran's expense.[11] Tehran has at times played an active obstructionist role. In December 2016, for instance, Iranian-backed forces blocked a Russian-negotiated opposition withdrawal from Aleppo city, forcing wider opposition compromises.[12] As recently as June 2018, tensions arose between Russian and Iranian-backed Hizbullah forces over respective deployments close to the Syrian-Lebanese border.[13] With regard to the issue of chemical weapons use it is not beyond the realm of possibility that Assad utilised them, possibly with Iranian acquiescence, partly as a means of polarising the wider environment and ensuring the failure of any Russian initiatives.

Russia, for its part, has occasionally hinted at retributory action. Some in Tehran, for instance, blamed Moscow for not providing air cover when 13 IRGC fighters were killed in a Jabhat al-Nusra attack on the town of Khan Tuman near Aleppo.[14] Russia's control of Syrian air space has also allowed it to green-light continued Israeli air strikes on Iranian-backed positions in Syria, and even US-led air strikes on regime targets after its use of chemical weapons in April 2018. These have, in part, been interpreted as Russian attempts to get Assad and Iran to fall into line with Russian ambitions.

9. Author's interview with Western diplomat, 2016.
10. "Assad offers Russia reconstruction benefits at Iran's expense," *The Syrian Observer*, February 28, 2018, http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Features/33899/Assad_Offers_Russia_Reconstruction_Benefits_Iran_Expense
11. Author's interview with Iranian officials and analysts, 2016 and 2017
12. " Iran-backed militias block Aleppo evacuation as shelling resumes," *The Guardian*, December 14, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/14/aleppo-residents-evacuation-uncertainty-ceasefire-deal-assad
13. "Tensions flare between Syrian leader's foreign backers," *SFGATE,* June 9, 2018, https://www.sfgate.com/world/article/Tensions-flare-between-Syrian-leader-s-foreign-12981371.php
14. Geranmayeh and Liik, "The new power couple."

In the shadow of the Gulf States and Israel

Russia's alliance with Iran and the wider network of 'resistance' states also needs to be placed in the context of Moscow's outreach to other regional actors, many of whom are Iranian foes. Even as Moscow has worked with Iran in Syria, it has continued to deepen ties with Arab Gulf States. Indeed, Moscow has made a deliberate attempt to avoid the perception that it is siding with the Shia world in a sectarian regional conflict and has actively pitched itself as a security partner to Arab Gulf States.[15] Towards this end it supports the position of the Gulf Arab States in Bahrain and Yemen, based on the same proclaimed principles it applies in Syria regarding the importance of non-interference and the legitimacy of the central state. This essentially puts it at odds with the Iranian position.

The same is true for Israel, with whom Moscow has maintained close ties despite working with Iran in Syria, including by permitting repeated Israeli air strikes against Iranian and Hizbullah military assets through Russian-controlled airspace.[16] Russia has not been adverse to sending the message to both Israel and the Gulf States that its presence in Syria should be welcomed as the best means of limiting Iranian influence, a sentiment that has increasingly been embraced in Tel Aviv and Riyadh as military options to oust Assad and forcefully squeeze Iran out of Syria have fallen by the wayside.[17] Moscow has skilfully exploited this dynamic to position itself as an indispensable partner to those opposing the consequences of its military intervention and partnership with Iran in Syria.

By contrast Russia's ties with the other states in which actors from the 'resistance axis' are present, namely Lebanon and Iraq, are less developed. Ties with Hizbullah and Iraqi Shia militias are primarily viewed through the lens of the Syria conflict. Moscow's recent attempts to strengthen its role in these two countries were largely rebuffed. In Lebanon, a Russian attempt to initiate a $1 billion arms sales and cooperation package faltered, allegedly due to the opposition of Prime Minister Saad Hariri under US pressure.[18] A similar scenario unfolded in Iraq where a Russian offer of stepped-up military backing was turned down by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi for fear of losing US support.

The future of Russia and the resistance axis

Russia's ties to the 'resistance axis' appear to be primarily driven by a shared alignment of interests focused on the immediate situation in Syria rather than

15. Author's interview with senior Gulf official, March 2018.
16. Author's interview with senior Israeli official, March 2018.
17. Author's interview with senior Saudi and Israeli officials, January and March 2018.
18. "Russia's military offer stalls in Lebanon, for now", *Asia Times*, April 8, 2018, http://www.atimes.com/article/russias-military-offer-stalls-lebanon-now/

a deeper alignment of interests. It is not inconceivable that this relationship will yet turn into a more strategic partnership, particularly given heightening tensions between Russia and the US, as well as between Iran and the US following President Trump's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). But for the moment Moscow seems unlikely to double down in full support of Tehran given its wider international ambitions. If anything, Moscow appears to be seeking maximum benefit by maintaining ties to all actors. This may even at times include exacerbating tensions between allies as a means of strengthening the importance of its own position.

But there is a long way to go from this position to the prospect of a serious rupture between Russia and Iran, even if divergences become more apparent with time. It remains a mistake and a misapprehension – one that has long bedevilled Western, and increasingly regional, policy – to imagine that the two countries can be significantly wedged apart, particularly over the question of Assad's fate. In many ways Russia is now stuck with Iran, whatever the message it is transmitting to Tel Aviv and Riyadh. On the one hand Moscow has largely delegated the task of on-the-ground fighting to Iranian-backed forces. Even with Assad's strengthened position, Damascus remains dependent on these forces. In the end any Russian attempt to seriously curtail the Iranian presence could threaten Assad's ability to consolidate his strengthened position, a risk Russia is unlikely to take.

At the same time, and perhaps more significantly, Russia does not actually have the leverage to dislodge Iran from Syria. Tehran has autonomously cemented its position in Syria and Russia has neither the military nor political appetite to challenge this position. If anything, it is now Assad and Iran that wield the greater leverage. Both have on occasion succeeded in defying Russian ambitions in Syria, to the extent that Moscow has often bent to their will rather than vice versa. In some respects, Russia is now caught in a trap of its own making. Having so firmly tied its international credibility to defending the Syrian regime, Russia is unable to exert significant pressure on Assad or his Iranian backer when they defy Moscow. Ultimately, the tactical and ambiguous nature of Russia's relationship with Iran in Syria also reflects the weakness of the Kremlin's position.

Russia and MENA sub-regions

Chapter 8

The 'comrades' in North Africa

Dalia Ghanem-Yazbeck and Vasily Kuznetsov

Russia's relations with North Africa date back a long time. The USSR traditionally had a stable relationship with Maghreb countries based primarily on political affinities, its principal allies at the time being Algeria and Egypt. The Kremlin's influence faded in the post-Soviet era as the financial and economic crisis that engulfed it eventually weakened Russia's foothold in the region. Russia has been working towards regaining its status since the early years of the new millennium, once it was able to improve its economic situation somewhat. Since then, Moscow has actively sought to capitalise on available opportunities in the Maghreb by deploying its energy diplomacy and its military equipment to appeal to North African countries. This begs the question: what is Russia aiming to achieve in North Africa and how? And what are the prospects for Russia's engagement in the region?

By developing bilateral relations with Rabat, Algiers, Tunis and Cairo, Moscow is making inroads in North Africa to strengthen and expand its presence in a region that has traditionally fallen within a European/American sphere of influence. Through the pursuit of energy diplomacy, economic activities, and security and defence relations, the Russian Federation intends to (re)build its presence in the Maghreb and eventually regain its political influence in the region.

With the beginning of the Arab uprisings in 2011, Russia's reaction was cautious. It called,[1] first, for non-interference and non-intervention and voiced its concern regarding the potential rise to power of radical Islamists.[2] For Russia, an abrupt regime change was synonymous with instability and unknown internal ramifications if Islamism were to triumph. Part of the Russian establishment was concerned about

1. "Ответ Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова на вопрос корреспондента «РИА Новости» о ситуации в Египте" [The Foreign Minister of Russia Sergei Lavrov's answer to the RIA Novosti reporter's question about the situation in Egypt], The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation , February 3, 2011 http://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/220434

2. "Выдержки из стенографического отчёта о заседании Национального антитеррористического комитета" [Extracts from the report on the meeting of National Counter-terrorist Committee of Russia], *Kremlin.ru*, February 22, 2011 http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/10408

the resonance of Islamism among the Russian Muslim community (15-25 million)[3] and the inspiration that political Islam might provide for the expansion of an opposition movement in Russia. In general, Russia's reaction seemed confused and inconsistent.[4] While aligning with the West in some cases, such as Tunisia and Egypt, where it accepted the transition to a more democratic political system, and in Libya despite initial resistance, Moscow's attitude contrasted sharply in other countries, especially in Syria. The decline of US influence in the Middle East and Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, the Ukrainian crisis in 2013, and the political dynamics in the Arab world offered Russia the chance to display its renewed regional significance, boost its international visibility and credibility, and restore its lost influence**.** Later, the Kremlin would capitalise on its military success in Syria as well.

Russia-Egypt: a new alliance

Egypt is considered one of Moscow's closest North African partners. It was an old ally of the USSR until its defection to the US camp in the 1970s. During the Arab uprisings in 2011, Moscow formally, but without enthusiasm, supported the revolution in Egypt. The Kremlin recognised the prompt rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, and demonstrated the flexibility of its diplomatic policy by being able to 'make friends with everyone.'[5] President Vladimir Putin met with President Mohamed Morsi twice in 2013.[6] With Morsi's overthrow and the rise to power of General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi in 2013, both Moscow and Cairo showed great interest in reviving their historic relationship. Vladimir Putin visited Egypt in 2015[7] and 2017,[8] and President Sisi has visited Moscow three times since 2014. Bilateral visits of government members have become a regular occurrence. Egypt is an important ally for Moscow, and the latter demonstrated its readiness to act in unison with Cairo during its mediation of the Libyan crisis and in the Palestinian-Israeli settlement.

Cooperation is important in the military-security sector. Since March 2015,[9] a Joint Russian-Egyptian Commission for Military-Technical Cooperation has been operating.

3. "Об итогах Всероссийской переписи населения 2010 г. Сообщение Росстата" [The Results of 2010 Russian National Population Census. Rosstat's Report], *Demoscope Weekly*, http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2011/0491/perep01.php; "Islam in Russia," *Al Jazeera*, March 7, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/islam-russia-180307094248743.html
4. "Russia and the Arab Spring," Middle East Institute, April 3, 2012, http://www.mei.edu/content/russia-and-arab-spring
5. Interview of S.V.Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation to the Egyptian Newspaper *Al Ahram*, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, November 5, 2012. http://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/136170?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_7OvQR5KJWVmR&_101_INSTANCE_7OvQR5KJWVmR_languageId=en_GB
6. "Арабская Республика Египет" [The Arab Republic of Egypt], The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/eg/?currentpage=main-country
7. "Официальный визит в Египет" [The Official Visit to Egypt], *Kremlin.ru,* February 9-10, 2015, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/trips/47656
8. "Рабочий визит в Египет" [The Working Visit to Egypt], *Kremlin.ru,* December 11, 2017, http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/trips/56360
9. "Федеральная служба по военно-техническому сотрудничеству (ФСВТС России). Пресс-релиз" [Federal Service for the Military-Technical Cooperation. Press Release], Federal Service for the Military-Technical Cooperation, March 5, 2015 http://www.fsvts.gov.ru/materials/346C9AFE84C2E21843257F3B002AD384.html

In 2016 joint counter-terrorism exercises named 'Defenders of Friendship–2016' took place, in which 500 servicemen from both states participated.[10] In 2017, Cairo and Moscow signed a preliminary agreement under which Russian military planes would be able to enter Egyptian airspace and use military bases in the country.[11] If this agreement is finalised, Russia will have succeeded in setting up the most significant deployment of foreign forces in North Africa since the 1970s.[12] Furthermore, the two countries signed numerous bilateral agreements regarding the technical-military sphere. Russian officials even claimed that Moscow could meet every Egyptian demand for almost any modern weapon, excluding strategic nuclear weapons.[13] According to available sources, since 2014 the total volume of trade between the two countries in this sector has reached $3.5 billion. Mi-8MT/Mi-17 transport helicopters, Buk-M2/SA-17 and S-300VM/SA-23 SAM systems, anti-tank and anti-ship missiles and other kinds of weaponry have been exported to Egypt during the last few years. Additional delivery of equipment such as Mistral-class ships for troops' transport is being discussed.[14]

Moreover, in 2017 Egypt became one of Russia's top 20 partners and the primary importer of Russian agricultural goods.[15] After a sharp drop in bilateral trade in 2015 caused by the fall in oil prices, consistent growth occurred in the following years.[16] In 2017, it reached just over 61%, which represented a total trade volume of $6.73 billion.[17] Russian exports to Egypt represented $6.2 billion, mainly comprising cereals, hydrocarbons, and ferrous metals. The total volume of Russian wheat exported to Egypt in 2017 amounted to 6.7 million tons, and this accounted for more than half of all Egyptian wheat imports amounting to 11.2 million tons. At the same time, Egyptian exports to Russia reached $500 million.[18]

Cooperation between Egypt and Russia exists in the energy sector as well. In October 2017, Russian petroleum giant Rosneft signed a deal with Italian Eni for the acquisition of 30% of its interests in the concession agreement to develop the

10. "Defenders of Friendship-2016 joint Russian-Egyptian counter-terrorist exercise", Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, https://structure.mil.ru/mission/practice/all/more.htm?id=12098828@egNews
11. "Russia negotiates deal for its warplanes to use Egypt bases," *AP News*, November 30, 2017, https://apnews.com/bdfae4502ca74c1eacdbf6d32252e8f4?utm_campaign=SocialFlow&utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=AP
12. "Russia expanding Middle East footprint with Egypt bases," *The New Arab*, December 15, 2017, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2017/12/15/russia-expanding-middle-east-footprint-with-egypt-bases
13. "МиГи долетели до Каира" [The MiGs reached Cairo], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, November 29, 2017, https://rg.ru/2017/11/29/sergej-shojgu-obsudil-v-egipte-postavki-rossijskogo-oruzhiia.html
14. "Russia, Egypt Discussing Mistral LHD Equipment Deal," *Naval Defence Industry News*, February 9, 2018, http://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/news/defence-news/2018/february-2018-navy-naval-defense-news/5935-russia-egypt-discussing-mistral-lhd-equipment-deal.html
15. "Круглов В.С. Анализ географии внешней торговли РФ в 2017 году" [Kruglov V.S. The Geography of Russia's Foreign Trade in 2017. Analysis], *International Economy in Russia and the World*, January 22, 2018, http://вэд24.рф/analiz-geografii-vneshnej-torgovli-rf-v-2017-godu.html
16. "Арабская Республика Египет" [The Arab Republic of Egypt], The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/eg/?currentpage=main-country
17. "Торговля между Россией и Египтом в 2017 г." [The Trade between Russia and Egypt in 2017]. *Russian Foreign Trade*, February 15, 2018, http://russian-trade.com/reports-and-reviews/2018-02/torgovlya-mezhdu-rossiey-i-egiptom-v-2017-g/
18. Ibid.

Zohr gas field.[19] Similarly, an agreement on the construction of a nuclear power plant with a capacity of 1200 MW[20] was signed in 2015,[21] and it was supplemented in 2017 with a long-term contract for the maintenance of the plant.[22] Additionally, the creation of a Russian industrial zone[23] in Port-Said is on the Russian-Egyptian cooperation agenda.[24]

Cooperation in the tourism sector is also important. Until 2015, tourism was the most visible sphere of cooperation between the two countries. In 2013 2.4 million Russians visited Egypt compared to 3.1 million in 2014.[25] Russian tourists spent around $2.5 billion in Egypt in a period when the total Egyptian income from tourism was around $7.3 billion. However, Egypt experienced a significant drop in tourism from Russia after the crash of a Russian passenger plane downed by a faction of Daesh, Wilayat Sinai, in October 2015. The crash caused the death of 224 passengers. As a result, Moscow banned direct flights to Egypt for two and half years,[26] and the numbers of Russian tourists dropped sharply to barely reach 100,000 tourists in 2016-2017.[27] The ban was finally lifted in 2018 but only for flights to Cairo.

Russia-Algeria: more than just weapons?

Russia also has an economic interest in Algeria, a long-standing ally and weapons buyer with which it shared a close relationship during the Soviet era. For Algeria, the USSR was an affordable source of financing for the construction and production of equipment, but especially for the acquisition of weapons. Between 1962 and 1989, Moscow is believed to have supplied $11 billion in military equipment to Algeria

19. "Не прошло и года. Роснефть закрыла сделку по приобретению 30% доли участия в газовом месторождении Zohr" [Within a Year. Rosneft has closed the transaction of purchase of the 30% share in Zohr gas field], *Neftegaz.ru*, October 9, 2017, https://neftegaz.ru/news/view/165634-Ne-proshlo-i-goda.-Rosneft-zakryla-sdelku-po-priobreteniyu-30-doli-uchastiya-v-gazovom-mestorozhdenii-Zohr

20. "'Росатом' ожидает запуска всех контрактов по АЭС в Египте до конца года" [Rosatom expects every contract on the nuclear power plant in Egypt to be launched during this year], *RIA Novosti*, November 1, 2017, https://ria.ru/atomtec/20171101/1508024669.html

21. "Россия подписала соглашение о строительстве первой АЭС в Египте" [Russia signed the agreement on the construction of Egypt's first nuclear power plant], *RBC*, November 19, 2015, https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/564deeea9a79473987063238

22. "Египет и «Росатом» утвердили рекордные контракты на строительство АЭС" [Egypt and Rosatom signed unprecedented contracts for the nuclear power plant construction], *RBC,* December 11, 2017, https://www.rbc.ru/business/11/12/2017/5a2e88b29a794759db1a99a8

23. "Российских предпринимателей ознакомили со спецификой ведения бизнеса с Египтом" [Russian entrepreneurs learned about the unique qualities of business in Egypt], Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation, March 13, 2017, https://tpprf.ru/ru/vneshnie-svyazy/vneshnie-svyazy-news/-i180902/

24 А Борщевская, "Зона свободной торговли в контексте укрепляющихся российско-египетских связей [Anna Borschevskaya, "Free-trade zone in the context of closer relations between Russia and Egypt"], *Inosmi.ru*, August 28, 2017, https://inosmi.ru/economic/20170828/240128137.html

25. "Число туристов из России в Египте в 2014 году увеличилось на 700 тысяч" [The number of Russian tourists in Egypt has increased by 700 thousand in 2014] , https://ria.ru/society/20150525/1066384370.html *RIA Novosti*, May 25, 2015

26. "Приостановка авиасообщения с Египтом. Хроника событий" [The Chronicles of Egypt Flight Ban], *TASS*, November 6, 2015, http://tass.ru/obschestvo/2413958

27. "Российских самостоятельных туристов в Египте стало в 5 раз больше" [5 times more independent tourists visited Egypt last year], Association of Tour Operators, February 12, 2018, http://www.atorus.ru/news/press-centre/new/42191.html

which represented up to 80% of Algeria's stock of armaments.[28] These weapons were paid for through loans that the Soviet Union granted to Algeria. In the 1990s, the relationship between the two countries came to a halt as Algeria was struggling with its 'black decade' and Russia with the aftermath of the Soviet's Union dissolution.

Since the start of the new millennium, Russia has tried to reconquer its position in this formerly lucrative market. With an increase in arms imports of 277%[29] between 2012 and 2016, Algeria is now the world's fifth-largest arms importer. Military cooperation with Russia is significant, and trade between Algeria and Russia went from $700 million in 2007 to $4 billion in 2016[30] – two-thirds of this trade was in the sphere of military cooperation. The country ranks among the top five Russian weaponry clients, with more than 80% of its equipment coming from Russia.[31] Algeria accounted for 10% of Russian weapons exports in 2016.[32] In 2006, Moscow announced the settlement of Algeria's debt which amounted to $4.7 billion.[33] The debt was a source of concern for Algeria, and for Russia, writing it off meant facilitating the substantial improvement and expansion of political and economic relations with the North African country. This settlement was compensated the same year with a $7.5 billion Russian arms sales agreement for main battle tanks, missile systems, jet fighters, and training aircrafts.[34]

Beyond these substantial military revenues, trade between Russia and Algeria is minor and of little significance for either side even after the signature of a strategic partnership in 2001, supposed to give a 'fresh impetus' to bilateral relations.[35] For the first four months of 2017, Algerian exports to Russia (mainly dates and some industrial products) barely reached $2 million.[36] This is insignificant even in comparison to other North African countries whose trade with Russia is still negligible. That same year, for instance, Tunisia's exports to Russia amounted to $37 million and Egypt's $137 million.[37]

28. "Russia and Algeria: Partners or Competitors?," Middle East Policy Council, Winter 2017, http://www.mepc.org/journal/russia-and-algeria-partners-or-competitors
29. "Trends in international arms transfers, 2016," *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, February, 2017, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Trends-in-international-arms-transfers-2016.pdf
30. "Alexey Shatilov, représentant commercial de la Russie : «Nous pouvons aider l'Algérie dans le domaine des hautes technologies»", *Algerie Eco*, June 22, 2017, https://www.algerie-eco.com/2017/06/22/alexey-shatilov-representant-commercial-de-russie-pouvons-aider-lalgerie-domaine-hautes-technologies/
31. "Visite de Messahel à Moscou : le Sahara occidental au menu", *TSA*, February 18, 2018, https://www.tsa-algerie.com/visite-de-messahel-a-moscou-le-sahara-occidental-au-menu/
32. "Trends in international arms transfers, 2016," *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, February, 2017, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Trends-in-international-arms-transfers-2016.pdf
33. « Coopération : la Russie annule une dette algérienne de 4,7 milliards de dollars » *Algérie Monde Infos*, January 13, 2018, http://www.algeriemondeinfos.com/2018/01/13/cooperation-russie-annule-dette-algerienne-de-47-milliards-de-dollars/
34. Viktor Litovkine, « Les armes russes sur le marché algérien, » *Sputnik News*, April 17, 2007, https://fr.sputniknews.com/opinion/2007041763824090/
35. "Algeria, Russia have 'opportunities' to boost 'mututally beneficial partnership,'" *Africa Business Intelligence*, October 10, 2017, http://emerging-africa.org/public/en/article/actualite/algeria-russia-have-opportunities-to-boost-mutually-beneficial-partnership
36. Abderrahmane Mebtoul, "Algérie - Russie : des échanges économiques très timides", *Le Matin d'Algérie*, October 11, 2017, http://www.lematindz.net/news/25584-algerie-russie-des-echanges-economiques-tres-timides.html
37. Caterina Lalovnovka, « Les exportations de l'Algérie vers la Russie en berne, » *Maghreb Intelligence*, July 19, 2017, https://www.maghreb-intelligence.com/exportations-de-lalgerie-vers-russie-berne/

Similarly, despite the ratification[38] in 2006 of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Russian Public Joint Stock Company Gazprom and Algeria's government-owned oil and gas corporation Sonatrach, as well as a joint venture[39] exploration and exploitation project signed in 2014, cooperation in the energy sector is limited. Furthermore, Algeria is Africa's largest natural gas producer, Africa's second-largest oil producer after Nigeria, and Europe's third-largest gas supplier after Norway and Russia. As a result, the North African country and the Russian Federation are rivals competing for the same markets. However, while their cooperation is limited, these developments gave credence to the idea that greater coordination between the two gas producers is possible, thereby highlighting the EU's gas dependency and vulnerability.

Russia has also been active in the civilian nuclear technology sector. In 2017, Algeria and Russia signed a MoU between the Algerian Atomic Energy Commission (COMENA) and the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation (ROSATOM).[40]The latter announced that Algeria was planning the construction of a nuclear power station with a pressurised water reactor for 2025.[41] This agreement allows Moscow to showcase its scientific capabilities and, more importantly, consolidate its regional footprint in the long term.

Russia flirts with Morocco

This close relationship with Algiers did not stop Moscow from engaging with Rabat, with whom Algiers has a tumultuous relationship mainly because of the Western Sahara. Russia aims at developing its ties with North African countries without establishing an exclusive relationship with any. In 2016 Russia signed a 'deep strategic partnership' with the Cherifian kingdom, as it had done with Algeria in 2001. Regarding the Western Sahara issue, unlike the clear sympathy that the Soviet Union showed for the Algerian position, Russia is applying 'positive neutrality.' [42] The statement of the deep strategic partnership declared that 'The Russian Federation takes due account of the position of the Kingdom of Morocco for the settlement of this problem and takes note of the socio-economic projects launched by Morocco in the southern provinces to develop the region and improve the living conditions

38. "Algeria," *Gazprom*, http://www.gazprom.com/about/production/projects/deposits/algeria/
39. "Gazprom's Next Acquisition- Algeria?," *Oilprice.com*, February 22, 2014, https://oilprice.com/Energy/Natural-Gas/Gazproms-Next-Acquisition-Algeria.html
40. "Algeria, Russia ink five cooperation agreements," *Algeria Press Service*, June 27, 2018, http://www.aps.dz/en/economy/20532-algeria-russia-ink-five-cooperation-agreements
41. "Accord algéro-russe pour la construction d'une 1re centrale nucléaire", *Le Matin d'Algerie*, September 3, 2014, http://www.lematindz.net/news/15106-accord-algero-russe-pour-la-construction-dune-1re-centrale-nucleaire.html
42. "La position de la Russie sur le conflit du Sahara Occidental, selon une note confidentielle marocaine", *Diaspora Saharaui*, http://diasporasaharaui.blogspot.com/2016/01/la-position-de-la-russie-sur-le-conflit.html

of its population."[43] At the same time, the Kremlin retains warm relations with the Polisario Front whose representatives visit Moscow regularly.[44] By doing so, the Russian government hopes to show its Moroccan partners that it holds the potential means of leverage which could be used if need be.

Russia and Morocco also signed several agreements regarding different sectors such as education, air traffic, marine fishery, environment, military, energy, as well as agriculture.[45] The latter is a substantial sector as 97% of Moroccan exports to Russia are composed of food products. In 2016, the kingdom exported 351,000 tons of agricultural products, mainly citrus fruits and tomatoes. Russia represents nearly 18% of the total value of Moroccan food exports. The same year, Morocco was the leading supplier of tomatoes to Russia and second of citrus fruits. It is also Russia's largest supplier of frozen sardines. The economic trade between the two countries exceeded $3 billion in 2017.[46] However, the trade balance is deficient for Morocco as it imported $1,08 billion worth of goods (gas, fertilisers, sulphur, and coal among other products) from Russia and exported only $71 million.[47] The cooperation between the two extended to nuclear energy in 2017 when the Moroccan Ministry of Energy, Mines, and Sustainable Development signed a MoU with the Russian state nuclear company ROSATOM for the use of civil nuclear energy. This came after the two countries signed a MoU in 2016 on cooperation between the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs in Morocco and the Central Religious Organisation in Russia for the training of Russian imams by the Kingdom.[48]

Russian inroads in Tunisia

As for Tunisia, it is Russia's most marginal partner in terms of its North African foreign policy. Warm relations between the two countries have always existed as shown by the preservation of the two Orthodox churches in Tunis and Bizerte, and the presence of the Tunisian embassy in Moscow in the former mansion of Stalin's henchman Lavrenty Beria. Nonetheless, these are symbolic gestures rather than real political partnerships. During their successive presidencies, both Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali chose to align with Europe and the US rather than with Russia. Observing the developments in the country after 2011, Russia was

43. "King Mohammed makes a strategic visit to Russia," *Submit 123 Press Release*, March 16, 2016, https://newsreleases.submitpressrelease123.com/2016/03/18/king-mohammed-vi-makes-a-strategic-visit-to-russia/

44. "Делегация Полисарио в Москве обсуждает последние события вокруг Западной Сахары" [Polisario's delegation discusses the latest events around Western Sahara in Moscow], *Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic,* April 11, 2018, http://sadr-russia.ru/delegaciya-polisario-v-moskve-obsuzhdaet-poslednie-sobytiya-vokrug-zapadnoj-saxary/

45. "Medvedev au Maroc: Onze accords signés pour renforcer le partenariat stratégique maroco-russe", *HuffPost Maghreb*, October 11, 2017, https://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2017/10/11/medvedev-au-maroc-onze-accords-signes-pour-renforcer-le-partenariat-strategique-maroco-russe_n_18237080.html

46. "Maroc-Russie : Un partenariat 'win-win'," *Aujourd'hui le Maroc*, October 12, 2017, http://aujourdhui.ma/actualite/maroc-russie-un-partenariat-win-win

47. Hassan El Arif, « Le Maroc et la Russie renforcent leur partenariat » , *L'Economiste*, October 12, 2017, http://www.leconomiste.com/article/1018646-le-maroc-et-la-russie-renforcent-leur-partenariat

48. "Morocco to Train Russian Imams," *Morocco World News*, March 19, 2016, http://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2016/03/182434/182434/

ready to develop relations either with the Ennahda Party-led coalition 'Troïka' government (2011-2014) or with Beji Caid Essebsi who represented the party of the 'old' Tunisian elite led by Nidaa Tounes. As a result, the Russian authorities invited Essebsi's associates to Moscow during the Troïka reign twice in 2012 and 2013, as well as members of the Ennahdha Party leadership in 2017 and 2018. Since then, several meetings have taken place between Tunisian officials and their Russian counterparts and both sides have agreed on forging closer links and intensifying their cooperation in trade, economy, science, technology, and security. However, the central focus of Russian-Tunisian relations lies not in politics, but in the economy, and above all, in tourism.

Historically, Tunisia was not among the most popular destinations for Russian tourists. In 2014 when more than 3 million Russians visited Turkey and more than 2 million chose Egypt,[49] only 250,000 travelled to Tunisia for their holidays.[50] The 2015 terrorist attacks in the Bardo Museum and Sousse resort hit the tourist sector hard in Tunisia. As a result, tourist visits dropped across the board, including for Russians as demonstrated by the fact that only 50,000 visited Tunisia in 2015 compared to 250,000 the previous year.[51] However, this situation changed a year later, and Russia became the third nation to provide the largest contingent of holidaymakers to Tunisia after Algeria and Libya.[52] This is mainly due to two events: the aforementioned ban on direct flights to Egypt and Moscow's restrictions on tour companies advertising holidays in Turkey after a Russian fighter jet was shot down near the Syria-Turkey border.[53] As a result, Tunisia witnessed a sharp rise in Russian tourist arrivals that reached 650,000 in 2016. In 2017, at a time when 6.7 million[54] tourists visited Tunisia, around 520, 000 were Russians.[55] Tourism – which represents around 8% of Tunisian GDP – is the cornerstone of Russian-Tunisian economic cooperation, and this is paving the way for Moscow's political influence in Tunisia.[56]

49. "Тунисская Республика" [Republic of Tunisia], The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/tn/?currentpage=main-country
50. "Посол РФ: турпоток в Тунис сократился почти в пять раз в 2015 году" [Ambassador of Russia: the tourist flow to Tunisia has grown five times smaller in 2015], *RIA Novosti*, February 3, 2016, https://ria.ru/tourism/20160203/1369189221.html
51. "Посол РФ: турпоток в Тунис сократился почти в пять раз в 2015 году" [Ambassador of Russia: the tourist flow to Tunisia has grown five times smaller in 2015], *RIA Novosti*, February 3, 2016 https://ria.ru/tourism/20160203/1369189221.html
52. « Afflux russe sur les plages de Tunisie » , *Le Point Afrique,* October 3, 2015, http://afrique.lepoint.fr/economie/afflux-russe-sur-les-plages-de-tunisie-03-10-2016-2073228_2258.php
53. "Turkey's downing of a Russian warplane- what we know," *BBC News*, December 1, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581
54. "Tunisie : le tourisme bondit de 23% en 2017", *Le Quotidien du Tourisme*, December 27, 2017, http://www.quotidiendutourisme.com/destination/tunisie-le-tourisme-bondit-de-23-en-2017/159354
55. "Турпоток из России в Тунис сократился, но показал органический рост" [The number of Russian tourists in Tunisia has decreased, but the flow proves its organic growth], Association of Tour Operators, December 28, 2017, http://www.atorus.ru/ru/main/news/press-centre/new/41799.html
56. "Les revenus du tourisme en hausse de 19% en Tunisie cette année", *Le Figaro*, August 22, 2017, http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-eco/2017/08/22/97002-20170822FILWWW00161-les-revenus-du-tourisme-en-hausse-de-19-en-tunisie-cette-annee.php

Russia in the region: what's next?

Since the beginning of the new century, and especially after the 2011 Arab revolutions, Russia has made a comeback in the MENA region. The Federation has shown its capacity to negotiate with several actors (excluding entities such as Daesh and al-Qaeda) in the Middle East (i.e., Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia) and in North Africa (Algeria, Morocco, Egypt) despite the rivalries that exist between these countries. Moscow has diversified its relations in North Africa and is more flexible than before as the Kremlin is well aware that political ties and allegiances are fluid and uncertain in the region.

Military cooperation is likely to endure as the North African countries' military expenditures are increasing, and Russia remains an attractive supplier. As for nuclear energy cooperation, because of the costs and time involved in projects and the vital need for economic diversification, it is not clear whether cooperation in this domain would be fruitful or not. One thing remains certain: by working with the EU's southern neighbours, Russia is building up its future capacity to pressure the EU when it deems it in its interest to do so while simultaneously projecting to the world the image of a stronger Russia. However, this influence should not be overstated. North Africa is a region that exists on the margins of Russia's foreign policy ambitions. Russia's priorities lie elsewhere in the post-Soviet era, namely in the Euro-Atlantic countries and the Asia Pacific. Having said this, it is still safe to say that in the years ahead both the EU and the US will have to come to terms with the Kremlin's increased presence in the Maghreb.

Chapter 9

Understanding Russia-GCC relations

Dmitriy Frolovskiy

Relations between Russia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have undergone significant changes over the past two decades. In the early 2000s they were frequently strained and occasionally fractious, due in large part to Moscow's suspicions that the Gulf monarchies were lending support to the Islamist insurgency in the Northern Caucasus. A few years later, in the mid-2000s, relations gradually started to improve with economic issues acquiring visibility and topping the agenda, only to be challenged again in 2011 by the events of the Arab Spring. Finally, the Kremlin's recent military deployments, as well as the diplomatic and economic initiatives which it has launched across the Middle East, have complicated the picture, while altering previous patterns of interaction.

The evolution of Russia's policy towards the GCC

Following Russia's military campaign in the Northern Caucasus, Russia-GCC relations were marked by controversy. The Russian authorities accused the Gulf monarchies of funding Islamic terrorism in the North Caucasus.[1] After Russia regained control of the situation in Chechnya and following the economic rebound of the mid-2000s relations began to improve. The Kremlin notably altered its perception of Saudi Arabia as the chief sponsor of international terrorism following the visit of Crown Prince Abdullah to Moscow in September 2003.[2] However the scope of relations remained confined to shared concerns about economic cooperation in global energy markets.

1. Timofey Borisov, "Na chiy dengi vouyut Chechnskie Boeviki," [Who funds the Chechen militants?], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Reprinted by FSB, 16 June 2001, http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/smi/overview/single.htm%21id%3D10342361%40fsbSmi.html; "Federalnaya Slujba Bezopasnosti Rossii raspolagaet dostovernoy informaciey o putyah i sposobah finansovoy podderjki voorujennih formirovaniy mejdunarodnih terroristov, voyuyuchih na territorii Chechenskoy Respubliki" [Federal Security Service of Russia disclaims reliable information on the ways and methods of financial support for armed formations of international terrorists in the Chechen Republic], http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/press/message/single.htm%21id%3D10340914%40fsbMessage.html

2. Official website of the President of Russia, "President Vladimir Putin Held Negotiations with Abdullah Ibn Abdul Aziz Al Saud, The Crown Prince Of Saudi Arabia," September 2, 2003, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/29294; Faryal Leghari, "The Arab connection to Chechen conflict," March 3, 2006, https://www.khaleejtimes.com/editorials-columns/the-arab-connection-to-chechen-conflict

The Arab Spring emerged as another challenge to Russia-GCC relations. The Kremlin perceived the 2011 uprisings and subsequent regime changes as undermining its long-standing alliances and partnerships in the region and jeopardising its geopolitical influence.[3] The prospect of Bashar al-Assad's regime being toppled meant that Russia risked losing its only strategic foothold in the Middle East and ultimately being removed from the regional political equation. Moscow also grew alarmed about the possible spread of anti-government sentiment and political Islam both across the Central Asian states and at home. In contrast, Qatar and the UAE advocated for a no-fly zone over Libya, and Doha emerged as a vocal opponent of the Assad regime, pouring in tens of millions of dollars to arm the Syrian rebels.[4]

Russia's military deployment in Syria in 2015 marked a new chapter in Russia-GCC relations. The military campaign, which allowed Russia to preserve its major foothold in the Middle East, established Moscow as a powerbroker capable of shaping geopolitical dynamics and the contours of regional security. Against this background, therefore, it is important to understand what drives current Russia-GCC relations, and in particular what are the ultimate geopolitical and economic goals that Russia and the Gulf monarchies are striving to achieve.

Russia's view of the GCC

The Kremlin's approach towards the GCC reflects the grand strategy that it pursues throughout the Middle East. The rise of radical non-state actors such as Daesh – or the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – and other militant groups poses a direct threat to Russia's own southern borders, and has led it to raise its profile in the Middle East. The United States' shrinking influence has further allowed Moscow to accentuate its presence in the region. It likewise enjoys well-established relations with major regional powers, including Egypt, Israel, Iran and Turkey. The decision to extend Russia's lease of military facilities in Tartus and the Khmeimim air base by a further 49 years could help Russia to shape geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East for many decades.[5]

Russia's perceives the GCC as an entity with three subdivisions.[6]

- Saudi Arabia, the major power, and its closest allies, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), constitute the first subgroup. Meanwhile, Manama and Abu Dhabi

3. Alexey Malashenko, "Russia and the Arab Spring," Carnegie Moscow Center, October 2013, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/russia_arab_spring2013.pdf
4. "How Qatar Seized Control of the Syrian Revolution," *Financial Times*, May 17, 2013, https://www.ft.com/content/f2d9bbc8-bdbc-11e2-890a-00144feab7de
5. Deutsche Welle, "Russia to extend Tartus and Hmeimim military bases in Syria," *DW.COM*, December 26, 2017, http://www.dw.com/en/russia-to-extend-tartus-and-hmeimim-military-bases-in-syria/a-41938949
6. Dmitriy Frolovskiy, "Чего хотят друг от друга Россия и монархии Залива" [What Russia and the Gulf Monarchies want from each other], Carnegie Moscow Center, http://carnegie.ru/commentary/72897.

adhere to a moderate geopolitical rhetoric that is occasionally at odds with Riyadh; both are overwhelmingly dependent on Riyadh and its power play;

- Kuwait and Oman adopt neutral stances on most geopolitical issues. Both have worked in tandem to promote diplomatic solutions to the war in Yemen and rift over Qatar, and serve as backchannels between Riyadh and Tehran;[7]

- Qatar, the small but wealthy peninsular nation in the Persian Gulf, constitutes the third entity in this subdivision. Its leadership traditionally pursues an independent foreign policy, and utilises available soft power instruments to project external influence.

Meanwhile, Russia's approach towards the GCC is dictated by its own strategic considerations, as it seeks to covertly exploit existing divisions within the organisation. Despite the Kremlin expressing its commitment to developing relations with Riyadh, culminating with the historic visit of Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz to Moscow in October 2017, it likewise seeks to maintain good working relations with Riyadh's regional adversary, Doha.[8] This was demonstrated by the visit to Moscow of Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani in March 2018.[9]

Moscow is keen to be perceived as an 'honest broker' when dealing with the GCC.[10] The Kremlin played this role during the GCC rift over Qatar, when it refrained from taking sides and urged the opposing parties to engage in dialogue to resolve the impasse, while highlighting shared concerns for promoting inclusive regional stability.[11] When the crisis erupted, foreign minister Sergei Lavrov remarked that Moscow's intention was to remain uninvolved: 'These are bilateral relations of the states. We do not interfere in these decisions.'[12]

The Kremlin's major priority is to reduce the GCC countries' alleged support for militant Islamist groups and anti-Assad forces. This goal dictates the need to engage with the most intransigently anti-Assad actors in the Riyadh-led group, notably Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Moscow hopes that in the light of the eventual division of Syria into spheres of influence dominated by the major powers involved in the conflict – Russia, Iran, Turkey and the US-led coalition – the Kremlin's interests and territorial claims will be respected. Its strategy is to utilise coercive diplomacy *vis-à-vis* the GCC nations to ensure the desirable outcome.

7. Giorgio Cafiero and Theodore Karasik, "Yemen War and Qatar Crisis Challenge Oman's Neutrality," Middle East Institute, July 6, 2017, http://www.mei.edu/content/article/oman-s-high-stakes-yemen

8. Holly Ellyatt, "Russia Rolls out the Red Carpet for Saudi King with Billion-dollar Deals on the Table," CNBC, October 5, 2017, https://www.cnbc.com/2017/10/05/saudi-king-visits-russia-as-billion-dollar-deals-on-the-table.html

9. "Qatari Emir in Russia to Discuss Syrian Crisis,"*Al Jazeera*, March 25, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/qatari-emir-russia-discuss-syrian-crisis-180325195253621.html

10. Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Policy in the Middle East: Prospects for Consensus and Conflict with the United States," The Century Foundation, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/trenin_middle_east.pdf

11. Leonid Issaev, "Russia and the GCC crisis," *Al Jazeera,* June 13, 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/06/russia-gcc-crisis-170613073826800.html

12. "Lavrov prokommentiroval diplomaticheskiy scandal vokrug Katara" [Lavrov commented on the Qatari diplomatic scandal], *Ria Novosti,* June 5, 2017, .https://ria.ru/world/20170605/1495842179.html

Moscow is also preoccupied with its own rapidly growing Muslim population and its radicalisation.[13] Russia believes that the rise of non-traditional Islam could be fuelled by funding from abroad, including the GCC, and capable of igniting domestic insurgency and religious extremism. This concern leads Russia to seek cooperative and friendly relations with major Islamic hubs across the Middle East, including those in the GCC, with the aim of ultimately emerging as a trusted partner in the eyes of the Sunni Arab states.

Russia's efforts have been successful. The latest Zogby research poll shows that the percentages of those who consider that it is important to have good relations with Russia across the surveyed countries of the Middle East are higher than they were in 2016.[14] According to a survey conducted in 2018, the largest sample of public opinion among young people in the Middle East, Russia is increasingly regarded as the top non-Arab ally, with 20% seeing it as the region's best friend.[15]

Another Russian goal is to boost trade and investment with the GCC. Russia's struggling economy and lack of foreign investment drive it to seek new sources of funding. In effect, it is willing to exert hard power and exploit possible security risks to the GCC to obtain economic benefits in return.[16]

The Gulf nations, while troubled by internal dissensions, are aware that Russia's strategy in the region is underpinned by a coherent logic. They perceive Russia as an expanding regional power and influential player on global energy markets, but one that is struggling economically and that therefore relies on hard power to pursue its foreign policy objectives. The monarchies strive to maintain diverse options for geopolitical manoeuvring in light of a broader regional competition with Tehran, with Moscow emerging as both rival and intermediary. Therefore, the GCC countries consider that it is vital to maintain stable diplomatic relations to ensure that their interests are taken into account.

Both sides recognise the importance of economic diplomacy in a context of geopolitical competition. The Gulf monarchies are willing to scale up their trade relations with Moscow but hope to maintain their own regional influence and presence amidst changing geopolitical dynamics, while pragmatically acknowledging that Russia will not change its strategy towards the Syrian crisis and across the Middle East.

13. Alexey Malashenko, "Islamic Challenges to Russia, From the Caucasus to the Volga and the Urals." American Enterprise Institute, May 13, 2015, http://carnegie.ru/2015/05/13/islamic-challenges-to-russia-from-caucasus-to-volga-and-urals-pub-60334; Alexey Malashenko, "Divisions and Defiance Among Russia's Muslims," Carnegie Moscow Center, November 20, 2015, https://carnegie.ru/commentary/62042

14. Zogby Research Services, "Sir Bani Yas Forum - Public Opinion 2017", https://bit.ly/2Hz0LKa

15. "Arab Youth Survey 2018," ASDA'A Burston-Marsteller, http://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/findings.html

16. Theodore Karasik, "Why is Qatar Investing so much in Russia?," Middle East Institute, March 8, 2017, http://www.mei.edu/content/article/why-qatar-investing-so-much-russia; Frank Kane, "'Reset' for Russian-GCC trade relations, but still a long way to go," *Arab News*, June 4, 2017, http://www.arabnews.com/node/1110241

Russia and Saudi Arabia

The Kremlin places a high premium on relations with Saudi Arabia compared to the rest of the GCC. Moscow perceives Riyadh as a major regional power with an impressive array of soft power instruments at its disposal thanks to its religious centres, hydrocarbon wealth and influence on global energy markets. The Kingdom also has the richest and one of the most powerful armies in the Arab world. Cooperation between the two could further strengthen Russia's position within the region.

Riyadh acknowledges the importance of the Kremlin for regional security and as a player in global hydrocarbon markets.[17] It is worried about Moscow employing hard power to project geopolitical influence and seeks to engage it further in economic cooperation to ensure amicable relations.

The Saudi leadership perceives Russia's alliance with Tehran and support of Bashar al-Assad as posing a threat to its national interests. The upcoming accession to the throne of the reform-oriented Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, clearly poised to become the next King, indicates that changes are in the offing. Given high youth unemployment (currently running at 32.6%), rampant corruption, sectarian tensions in the oil-rich Eastern Province and more, it is clear that reforms are essential to ensure the regime's survival. Furthermore, the fact that Riyadh's oil reserves are likely to run dry in 70 years' time means that it will not be able to rely indefinitely on its hydrocarbon wealth.[18]

Saudi Arabia's domestic concerns drive it to seek for *rapprochement*. The success of Saudi reforms under the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative depends on security and peace in the short term.[19] With Russia emerging as the rising regional power, the Kingdom is keen to maintain good relations with the Kremlin to further its long-term goals.

Russia-Saudi Arabia relations are also marked by a number of controversies. Both countries hold different views on Yemen and the blockade imposed on Qatar. Riyadh regards Russia as a regional ally of Iran: with Saudi Arabia losing ground to pro-Iran regimes in Syria and Iraq, being challenged in Lebanon, as well as bogged down in

17. Evelina Zakamskaya, "Glava MID Saudovskoy Aravii ob otnocheniyah c Rossiey," [Head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia talks about relations with Russia], "Mnenie", *Russia 24*, October 7, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsItopYU-M0

18. "Unemployment, youth total (% of total labor force ages 15-24) (modeled ILO estimate),"Data, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS; "Corruption Perceptions Index 2017," Transparency International, https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017; Frederic Wehrey, "The Forgotten Uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 14, 2013, http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/06/14/forgotten-uprising-in-eastern-saudi-arabia-pub-52093; John Kemp, "Saudi Arabia's oil reserves: how big are they really?" *Reuters*, July 11, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-oil-kemp/saudi-arabias-oil-reserves-how-big-are-they-really-kemp-idUSKCN0ZL1X6

19. "Our Vision: Saudi Arabia, the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds, the investment powerhouse, and the hub connecting three continents," *Saudi Vision 2030*, http://vision2030.gov.sa/en

Yemen, it is important to persuade Moscow to diversify its regional cooperation beyond Tehran.[20] However, both nations share good relations with Cairo and express a similar resolve to combat Islamic extremism, serving as a strong foundation for cooperation.

Better relations with Riyadh might help Moscow in altering Saudi Arabia's intransigent anti-Assad stance and persuading the ruling regime to withdraw its support of various rebel groups in Syria. With the scramble for Syrian territories coming to an end, the post-conflict reconstruction phase is looming.[21] Russia needs to ensure inaction from Riyadh to avoid the anti-Assad elements creating serious disruption.

Saudi Arabia is eagerly deploying its economic diplomacy to smooth bilateral relations. As seen from the Kremlin, both nations already constitute an oil alliance with the common goal of stabilising oil prices and undermining the resilience of the US domestic shale oil industry. Therefore, enhanced energy and economic cooperation could continue to mend further geopolitical differences in the medium-term.[22]

Russia's interaction with leading global economies and top international contractors has enhanced its perception of its own significance as an economic power.[23] Moscow can parade the strategic success of its economic diplomacy, as further demonstrated by the participation of Russian investors in Saudi Aramco's initial public offering (IPO).[24]

During the Saudi king's visit to Moscow in October 2017, Russian officials reported Riyadh's plans to invest in more than 25 different projects in Russia.[25] Special attention should be given to the close partnership between the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) and the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia (PIF) that was announced as a result of the Saudi king's visit to Russia and meant the establishment of a new platform for Russian-Saudi energy investment.[26] Two years prior to the king's visit, a deal was agreed between the PIF and the RDIF for the joint investment of $10 billion in infrastructure and other projects.[27]

20. David Ignatius, "A young prince is reimagining Saudi Arabia. Can he make his vision come true?," *The Washington Post*, April 20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/a-young-prince-reimagines-saudi-arabia-can-he-make-his-vision-come-true/2017/04/20/

21. Sune Engel Rasmussen, "In Syria, Foreign Powers' Scramble for Influence Intensifies," *Wall Street Journal*, February 28, 2018, https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-syria-foreign-powers-scramble-for-influence-intensifies-1519817348

22. Evelina Zakamskaya, "Glava MID Saudovskoy Aravii ob otnocheniyah c Rossiey," [Head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia talks about relations with Russia], "Mnenie", *Russia 24*, October 7, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsItopYU-M0

23. Dmitriy Frolovskiy, "America buying into Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's vision." *Haaretz.com*, March 18, 2018, https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-america-buying-into-saudi-crown-prince-s-vision-1.5912997

24. Samantha Gross, "The Saudi Aramco IPO is a game-changer for the Saudi economy," Brookings, June 6, 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/06/06/the-saudi-aramco-ipo-is-a-game-changer-for-the-saudi-economy/

25. "Saudovskaya Araviya investiruet v bolee chem 25 rossiyskih proektov" [Saudi Arabia will invest in more than 25 projects in Russia], *RIA Novosti*, October 4, 2017, https://ria.ru/economy/20171004/1506213502.html

26. "Rdif, Pif and Saudi Aramco Announce the Establishment of a New Platform For Russian-Saudi Energy Investment," Russian Direct Investment Fund, October 5, 2017, https://rdif.ru/Eng_fullNews/2660/

27. Kathrin Hille, "Saudi Sovereign Fund to Invest $10bn in Russia," *Financial Times*, July 6, 2015, https://www.ft.com/content/0205a0d6-2412-11e5-bd83-71cb60e8f08c

Earlier in 2018 Russian Novatek PJSC and Saudi Aramco signed an energy memorandum and agreed to team up on Novatek's $20 billion Arctic LNG-2 project.[28] Riyadh's interest in reducing its domestic power sector's dependence on crude oil and Russia's quest to boost its liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports could emerge as powerful incentives for more cooperation.[29]

Both nations are getting actively involved in public diplomacy. In January Riyadh increased the quota of Russian citizens travelling to the country for this year's hajj to 20,500, with the possibility of increasing it by a further 4,500 places.[30] The number of pilgrims is likely to be one of the highest in Russia's history. Furthermore, the latest St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) was also attended by the largest Saudi delegation in its 22-year history.[31]

Russia and Qatar

Russia-Qatari relations have in the past been characterised by a number of vicissitudes. Moscow perceives Doha as a wealthy emirate that values its independence from Riyadh and its foreign policy stance towards the country is guided by pragmatism. The Qatari leadership perceives Russia as an emerging power with sufficient capacity to challenge its geopolitical ambitions but as an ally on the global energy markets.

Qatar was convinced that Russia was behind the assassination of Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, a former president of the breakaway Chechen Republic, in Doha in 2004.[32] Bilateral relations between the two countries were officially downgraded following an incident involving the Russian ambassador Vladimir Titorenko at Doha airport in 2011.[33] Titorenko was assaulted after allegedly refusing to show diplomatic mail that he was carrying to security officials. The ambassador had previously made public statements in support of the Syrian regime.[34]

Doha has various assets and strategies for ensuring its protection against external threats. The country hosts the Al Udeid Air Base, which is one of the US's largest

28. Wael Mahdi and Elena Mazneva, "Russians, Saudis May Go Beyond Oil Alliance With LNG Project," *Bloomberg.com*, February 14, 2018, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-02-14/russia-saudis-may-go-beyond-their-oil-alliance-with-lng-deal

29. OPEC, "Declaration of Cooperation," November 30, 2017, http://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/press_room/4696.htm

30. Hajj Reporters, "JUST IN: 20, 500 Russia Muslims to Perform 2018 Hajj," January 31, 2018, http://new.hajjreporters.com/just-in-20-500-russia-muslims-to-perform-2018-hajj/

31. "SPIEF 2018 to be attended by biggest Saudi delegation in forum's history," Russian Exports, National Information Portal, March 27, 2018, http://www.rusexporter.com/news/detail/5286/

32. Steven Lee Myers, "Qatar Court Convicts 2 Russians in Top Chechen's Death," *New York Times*, July 1, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/01/world/qatar-court-convicts-2-russians-in-top-chechen-s-death.html

33. "Russia withdraws envoy to Qatar after attack," *Reuters*, December 5, 2011, https://af.reuters.com/article/commoditiesNews/idAFL3E7N535820111205

34. "Rossiya i Qatar ssoryatsya iz-za rukoprikladstva," [Russia and Qatar are quarrelling over a physical fight], *Interfax,* December 5, 2011, http://www.interfax.ru/russia/220228

overseas military facilities. Qatar effectively leverages its hydrocarbon wealth and media empire – the jewel in the crown of which is the pan-Arab Al Jazeera television network – to project soft power in the region.[35] Doha also maintains ties with a number of Islamist groups across the Middle East and beyond.

Despite Doha's extensive financial and political support to anti-Assad opposition groups in Syria, Moscow's intervention has altered the course of the war. Russia has expanded its regional influence as a result of its military campaign in Syria, and may now pose a threat to Doha's regional ambitions.

Although Moscow largely abstained from picking sides during the GCC rift over Qatar and maintained its self-declared impartiality, Russian officials expressed readiness to increase supplies of food to Doha to relieve the blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.[36] Two official visits of the new Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, to Moscow in 2016 and 2018, and regular communication by phone with Vladimir Putin, indicate an upward trend in bilateral relations. The Qatari leadership appreciated Russia's offer to supply increased provisions; it seems likely that Doha and Moscow will remain committed to cooperative relations in the years to come.

As Russia is looking to attract foreign funds to bolster its struggling economy, it might seem a likely destination for Qatari investment.[37] However, despite Doha recently announcing its readiness to acquire a stake of up to 25% in Moscow's Vnukovo International Airport, Russia's third-largest hub, it does not consider Russia as a major investment destination.[38] Overall, the assets of the Qatar Investment Authority in Russia are valued at more than $2.5 billion.[39] But this volume of investment is rather low compared to Qatar's other trading partners from Western Europe, North America and East Asia; in the case of Russia Doha seems to use investment purely as a tool to promote economic diplomacy.

Both nations are likewise interested in engaging in energy diplomacy. There has even been some speculation that one of the main contributing factors to the Syrian conflict was Doha's ambitions to build a pipeline through Syria that could jeopardise Russian gas exports to Europe. Russia and Qatar are the world's largest LNG exporters and cooperate within the framework of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF). The latter has so far not delivered the anticipated results and largely performs a symbolic role in maintaining previous agreements.

35. Dmitriy Frolovskiy, "Seriy cardinal blijnego vostoka. Kak malenkiy Qatar pokoril bolshoy region" [Eminence grise of the Middle East. How small Qatar conquered the giant region], Carnegie Moscow Center. http://carnegie.ru/commentary/69917

36. "Rossiya gotova narastit postavki prodovolstviya v Qatar," [Russia is ready to increase supplies to Qatar], *TASS,* June 8, 2017, http://tass.ru/ekonomika/4323794

37. Mohammed Sergie, "The Tiny Gulf Country With a $335 Billion Global Empire," *Bloomberg.com*, January 11, 2017, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-01-11/qatar-sovereign-wealth-fund-s-335-global-empire

38. "Qatar Airways set to invest in Moscow's Vnukovo airport," *Air Cargo News,* April 4, 2018, http://www.aircargonews.net/news/airline/single-view/news/qatar-airways-set-to-invest-in-moscows-vnukovo-airport.html

39. "Why Is Qatar Investing so Much in Russia?," Middle East Institute, http://www.mei.edu/content/article/why-qatar-investing-so-much-russia

During the latest visit of the Emir of Qatar to Russia, an agreement was signed between Russian oil giant Rosneft and the Qatar Foundation on cooperation in the field of science and education.[40] Doha also became the owner of a 19.5% stake in Rosneft PJSC after the troubled CEFC Energy Co announced that it would not proceed with the original deal.[41]

Doha waived entry visa requirements for Russian citizens in 2017, leading to a further increase in the number of Russian tourists visiting the country.[42] Early in 2018 Doha opened a representative office of Qatar Tourism Authority in Moscow; 2018 was also declared the Qatar-Russia year of culture.[43] But levels of cultural exchange and tourism remain insufficient to influence bilateral relations.

The pattern of Russia-Qatari relations is unlikely to have any significant impact on Qatari relations with its key European allies, with whom it has established stronger economic and political ties. Doha remains committed to its pragmatic and independent geopolitical stance and for the foreseeable future is likely to continue to rely on the strategies and tactics that have been in place for decades.

Russia and the UAE

Russia does not pose any major geopolitical threats to the UAE and it is unlikely that any disagreements will disrupt current interactions. Moscow sees the emirate as a peaceful and development-oriented oasis that pursues a moderate course in foreign policy. Abu Dhabi perceives Moscow as an emerging power that possesses substantial resources and would like to avail of opportunities for improving economic cooperation between the two countries. In effect, Russia-UAE relations are mostly confined to developing diplomatic and trade exchanges.

Despite advocating different political agendas and supporting opposite factions across the Middle East, the UAE does not seek to challenge the Kremlin's regional approach. Abu Dhabi was receptive to Russia's presence in the region even before changes took place in Doha and Riyadh. Despite the UAE being firmly against Assad's regime, its leadership refrained from criticising Moscow over its actions and has

40. "QF and Rosneft Unveil New R&D Hub at QSTP," Qatar Foundation,, March 28, 2018, https://www.qf.org.qa/news/qf-and-rosneft-unveil-new-rd-hub-at-qstp;

41. "Glencore and Qatar take 19.5% stake in Rosneft," *Financial Times*, December 2016, https://www.ft.com/content/d3923b08-bf09-11e6-9bca-2b93a6856354; Javier Blas and Elena Mazneva, "Qatar Steps in to Buy Rosneft Stake After China Deal Collapses," May 4, 2018, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-04/china-s-cefc-won-t-buy-rosneft-shares-from-glencore-led-group

42. "Qatar Waives Entry Visa Requirements for Citizens of 80 Countries," Qatar Airways, August 9, 2017, https://www.qatarairways.com/en/press-releases/2017/Aug/qatar-waives-entry-visa-requirements-for--citizens-of-80-countri.html#

43. "Upravlenie po turismu Qatara presentovalo rossiyskoe predstavitelstvo I oboznachilo prioriteti" [Qatar Tourism Authority opened headquarters in Russia], *Vesti.ru,* March 30, 2018, http://travel.vesti.ru/article_37356

remained largely committed to a balanced approach to bilateral relations. Russia has maintained constant contacts with the UAE leadership and expressed support to Abu Dhabi in its longstanding territorial dispute with Iran over the islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb.

Both Russia and the UAE have been vocal advocates of religious moderation and the need to combat Islamic extremism. In 2016 the Abu Dhabi-based Tabah Foundation acted as co-organiser of the Grozny Conference that brought together some of Sunni Islam's most influential leaders and notably excluded Salafism and Wahhabism from its definition of Sunni Islam.[44] Both nations likewise committed to supporting the Egyptian president, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, and Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, the Libyan military strongman.

Moscow is keen on boosting economic diplomacy and hopes to win lucrative military and energy contracts with the UAE; it also hopes that the UAE will expand its investments in Russia's infrastructure. Abu Dhabi is interested in Russia's agricultural exports, especially given its own food security concerns, and is eager to attract more Russian tourists.[45] The Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) has already committed to multibillion dollar worth investments in infrastructure through the RDIF.[46] Mubadala Investment Company has also pledged investments of up to $6 billion in infrastructure and transport.[47]

Relations between Moscow and Abu Dhabi do not pose any direct risks to the EU's presence in the region. Russia's faltering economy is too weak to undermine trade between the EU and the UAE, and Russia-UAE relations are essentially confined to the sphere of economic diplomacy, marked by a shared moderate approach to geopolitical issues.

Conclusion

Relations between Russia and the GCC countries were previously characterised by distrust and diplomatic tensions. But the pattern of interaction has changed dramatically within the span of just a few years, giving way to a more balanced and cooperative relationship. This evolution may be ascribed to the GCC nations' ability to skilfully adapt to new geopolitical realities in a context where the Kremlin is

44. James Dorsey, "Fighting for the Soul of Islam: A Battle of the Paymasters," *The Huffington Post*, September 30, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-dorsey/fighting-for-the-soul-of_b_12259312.html; "Islamic Conference in Chechnya: Why Sunnis Are Disassociating Themselves from Salafists," *Firstpost*. September 9, 2016, https://www.firstpost.com/world/islamic-conference-in-chechnya-why-sunnis-are-disassociating-themselves-from-salafists-2998018.html

45. Jumana Khamis,, "UAE's long-term food security strategy under study," *GulfNews*, February 8, 2018, http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/society/uae-s-long-term-food-security-strategy-under-study-1.2170588; "Russian visitors to GCC to increase 38% by 2020," *GulfNews*, January 13, 2018, http://gulfnews.com/business/sectors/tourism/russian-visitors-to-gcc-to-increase-38-by-2020-1.2156253

46. Anne-Sylvaine Chassany, "Abu Dhabi Plans to Invest up to $5bn in Russian Infrastructure," *Financial Times*, September 11, 2013, https://www.ft.com/content/372b18e6-1af4-11e3-87da-00144feab7de

47. Fareed Rahman, "RDIF in Talks with UAE Partners for Investments," *GulfNews*, December 3, 2017, https://gulfnews.com/business/sectors/investment/rdif-in-talks-with-uae-partners-for-investments-1.2134596

now considered to be the major rising power player in the Middle East. In contrast, Russia carefully navigates a path between the GCC actors and tries to maintain open channels of communication with all the parties, while remaining committed to its self-appointed role as 'honest broker' and the broader geopolitical strategy that underpins its approach to the Middle East.

Chapter 10

Russia and Turkey: the promise and the limits of partnership

Dimitar Bechev

Ambiguous ties

Russia's relationship with Turkey is riddled with ambivalence. The two former empires are both partners and competitors: in the Middle East, the Southern Caucasus, the Black Sea as well as in the Balkans. Yet, historical memories and present-day divisions notwithstanding, Russians and Turks have managed to contain conflicts, identify overlapping interests and build positive ties. In the space of two years, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan went from tenuous cooperation, through outright confrontation after the downing of a Russian jet by a Turkish F-16 in November 2015, to a reinvigorated partnership. In the aftermath of the failed coup in Turkey on 15 July 2015, Russian-Turkish relations flourished anew. Moscow and Ankara co-sponsor the Astana talks on Syria, while their militaries work side-by-side on the ground. Energy cooperation, dating back to the 1990s, is again in full swing with the TurkStream natural gas pipeline and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant currently in construction. Turkish agricultural imports are back on the Russian market while Russian tourists are once more flocking to Antalya and other coastal resorts in Turkey. Meanwhile, Turkey has made headway towards purchasing a Russian-made S-400 surface-to-air missile system, sending ripples across NATO. Estranged from its traditional allies in Europe and the US, the Turkish government has rebuffed the sanctions against Russia, most recently refusing to expel diplomats in response to the Skripal affair. Putin and Erdoğan have turned into something of a double act in international politics, with their meetings becoming ever more frequent.[1] Western pundits and Turkish oppositionists alike draw a parallel between Erdoğan's authoritarian style and Putin's autocratic regime in Russia.

1. There have been more than ten summits between the two leaders since August 2016.

This chapter investigates the factors shaping Russian-Turkish relations and their development across key issue-areas. It also maps out the implications for the Middle East and North Africa and for Western policy.

What is behind the Russian-Turkish partnership?

After the end of the Cold War, few would have ventured to predict that Russia and Turkey would befriend one another. Ankara was staking a claim to leadership in Central Asia, the Southern Caucasus and even over the Turkic-speaking and Muslim communities within the Russian Federation itself. This was at odds with Moscow's own ambition to defend the integrity of the fledging Russian Federation and retain hegemony over the former Soviet Union. The Turkish security establishment, for its part, regarded Russia with suspicion on account of its links to hostile states such as Greece, Syria, Armenia and Iran. By the late 1990s, however, Russia and Turkey had succeeded in steering their relationship in a constructive direction. In the 2000s, Putin and Erdoğan inherited positive momentum from their predecessors and were able to build on it further.

There are several key drivers that have shaped the *rapprochement*: economic links, normative convergence, Turkey's geopolitical posture and domestic evolution, and Russia's growing ambitions in the Middle East.

First, *economic interdependence*. Thanks to natural gas, Russia (a major exporter) and Turkey (a consumer) have seen their energy systems increasingly intertwined. The Soviet Union started pumping gas over the so-called Trans-Balkan Pipeline in 1988. Two decades later, Turkey became Gazprom's second-largest market for Russian natural gas after Germany, thanks to the Blue Stream pipeline which was inaugurated in 2005. Turkey, although it runs a structural trade deficit owing to its reliance on Russian gas supplies, has seen a number of its privately owned construction companies doing profitable business across Russia as well as in other parts of the former Soviet Union. Russians are one of the largest groups of foreign visitors to the country, usually surpassed only by the Germans. In 2017, 4.72 million Russian citizens visited Turkey, a fivefold increase from the previous year when Moscow imposed sanctions on Ankara.

Second, *convergent attitudes to state power*. Both Russia and Turkey share a political culture that prioritises national security and sovereignty over liberal values. In the 1990s, they started to accommodate one another over sensitive issues such as the Kurdish question and Chechnya. For instance, in late 1998, President Boris Yeltsin and Prime Minister Evgeny Primakov turned down the political asylum application by Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) who had been expelled from Syria under Turkish pressure. A year later, Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit declared the second war in Chechnya was Russia's domestic business, after

meeting Vladimir Putin, already anointed as successor to Yeltsin. Putin's vision of rule by a strong hand, defence of national interests against Western encroachment, and top-down modernisation of society has traction among Turkish elites and society, transcending the secular/religious divide.

Third, Turkey has always been keen to *engage Russia and minimise the risk of conflict*. During the 2008 war in Georgia, for instance, it kept its allies at arm's length, eager not to antagonise Russia. Having invested in the Black Sea Naval Force (BLACKSEAFOR), a regional forum alternative to NATO, Ankara launched a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform which was aimed at engaging Moscow. Similarly, even if it decried the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and showed sympathy for the plight of fellow Tatars in the peninsula, Turkey shrank from joining the Western sanctions. Ankara has been performing an intricate balancing act between the West and Moscow.

Fourth, Turkey's authoritarian drift since the early 2010s has put it at odds with the West and brought it closer to Russia. Erdoğan blamed foreign powers for the Gezi protests (a failed 'colour revolution' of sorts), resented the Obama administration's failure to enforce its 'red lines' after the Syrian regime used chemical weapons against civilians, and portrayed its erstwhile allies, now turned bitter enemies, from the Fethullah Gülen movement as stooges of the US and Israel. The collapse of the Kurdish peace process in Turkey in the summer of 2015 and the renewed fighting between the government and the PKK further poisoned relations with the US and the rest of NATO. America's key ally on the ground in Syria, the Kurdish-dominated People's Protection Units (YPG), is considered in Ankara as a local extension of the PKK. Conversely, although it has its own links to the Syrian Kurds and unlike the West never listed the PKK as a terrorist organisation, Russia could help keep YPG in check. Moscow, which clamped down on the Gülenists in the mid-2000s, gets credit for having come out firmly on Erdoğan's side during the July 2016 coup. The US meanwhile is castigated for its failure to hand over the exiled leader of the movement. The West therefore is perceived as a threat to the regime. Russia, in turn, respects Turkey's sovereignty and is 'open for business'.

Last but not least, Turkey has proved an essential interlocutor for Russia in the Middle East. Ankara is critical to the Kremlin's bid to leverage military gains in Syria by securing a power-sharing agreement which would keep the Assad regime in place while also guaranteeing Russian interests. Turkey is a bridge to various factions of the armed opposition and, with some caveats, to the Sunni monarchies in the Gulf. The Russia-Turkey-Iran triangle underwriting the Astana talks on Syria has come to be a pillar of Moscow's foreign policy in the Middle East as well as on the global stage.

Areas of interaction

Syria

In the initial stages of the Syrian conflict, Russia and Turkey simply agreed to disagree and compartmentalise their relationship. But during the 'jet crisis' of 2015-6, Syria took a heavy toll on bilateral ties given the economic cost of the sanctions imposed by Russia. According to Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Şimşek, Turkey lost more than $10 billion – over 1% of its GDP. Thanks to Russian airstrikes, Turkey's adversaries – the Assad regime and the Syrian Kurds – made territorial gains at the expense of its allies and clients, e.g. the Salafist Ahrar al-Sham militia or the Free Syrian Army (FSA). But in August 2016, following the *rapprochement*, Russia gave the go-ahead to Turkey's incursion into northern Syria, as Turkey's own list of priorities gradually shifted from seeing Assad ousted towards fighting the Kurds, while increasingly accepting the idea that Assad might remain in power in the end, thanks to Russia's intervention. With air support from Russia, Operation 'Euphrates Shield' created a buffer zone in the northern Aleppo province, pushing out Daesh and stemming YPG's advance westwards. The Kurdish-dominated militia was prevented from seizing the entire, 900 km-long Turkish-Syrian border. In early 2018, Russia allowed Turkey to capture the Afrin enclave from YPG, by opening Syrian airspace and withdrawing its military police units that had been embedded with the Kurdish militia.

By backing Turkey, Russia made strategic gains, too. Forces loyal to Assad and Iran conquered rebel-held areas like East Aleppo, vacated after a deal brokered by the Turks. The talks in Astana, co-sponsored with Turkey and Iran, enabled Russia to play the peacemaker and reach out to 'the moderate opposition', i.e. more or less anyone apart from Daesh and the al Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Moscow championed de-escalation zones across Syria, including the city and region of Idlib (the largest enclave under opposition control). With the failure of the Sochi conference (January 2018), however, Astana turned into a diplomatic fig leaf, allowing the regime and the Russians to push hard against the rebel-controlled areas. Yet Turkey has not challenged the Russian-backed offensive in any significant way, as it relies on Moscow's support for Olive Branch, its operation against Afrin. Russia has been profiting from the mounting tensions between Turkey and the US. Following Afrin, the Turkish Armed Forces have turned their sights to the strategic city of Manbij and the territories east of the Euphrates held by YPG and the American military. But it has been playing a double game all the same: never fully cutting its political and military links to the Syrian Kurds who are likely to play a key role in Syria's postwar future.

Foreign fighters

A less visible but equally important aspect involves foreign fighters from Russia and the former Soviet Union residing in Turkey or passing through Turkey en route to

Syria and Iraq. Initially, Turkey tolerated the 'jihadi highway' as it furthered the fight against the Assad regime. Russia, too, reportedly gave radicals free passage in 2012-13 – to counter potential risks during the Sochi Winter Olympics. However, from 2014 onwards, Turkey itself became the target of Daesh attacks as, after much foot-dragging, it joined the international coalition. Some of the perpetrators have come from post-Soviet Central Asia. Still, Russia and Turkey find it hard to cooperate at the level of intelligence and law enforcement services. True, the two militaries fought side-by-side against Daesh in 2016-17. At the same time, Turkish authorities typically turn down requests for extradition of Russian nationals suspected of terrorist links. Immigrants from the North Caucasus, adhering to Salafism (whether of the militant variety or not), are staunch supporters of Erdoğan and the AKP. The Turkish authorities also resent the assassinations of Chechen activists on Turkish soil, with Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) under suspicion. It is worth mentioning that Russian Muslims and Central Asians fight not only in the ranks of Daesh but also Salafist militias like Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam (which Russia now considers moderate and negotiates with but also fights against).[2] Lastly, Turkey has not severed links with HTS, formerly an al-Qaeda affiliate, which is entrenched in the last significant rebel pocket around Idlib.

Energy

Apart from the Syrian conflict, energy is an area where Russian and Turkish strategic interests intersect. Poor in indigenous resources but with a growing economy and a rising population, Turkey is dependent on imported hydrocarbons. Russia has been a top source of natural gas (covering around 60% of Turkey's consumption) and, to a lesser degree, crude oil. Once the nuclear power plant at Akkuyu is completed in the mid-2020s,[3] Rosatom, the Russian state nuclear corporation, will have a stake in the domestic electricity market as well. With 1114 MW, Akkuyu's first unit (out of four in total) corresponds to roughly 1.6% of the country's current generation capacity. Turkey hopes to partly replace Ukraine as a transit country for Russian gas after 2019, once Gazprom's agreement with Kyiv expires. The TurkStream pipeline, currently under construction, will consist of two parallel pipelines with a combined capacity of 31.5 billion cubic metres (bcm), one catering for the Turkish market and the other delivering gas to the EU. Turkey recently issued its approval for the overland section of TurkStream 2 – which will connect to EU markets via either Bulgaria or Greece.

At the same time, Turkish policymakers and experts regard dependence on Russia as a challenge. The priority has been to diversify energy imports and transform from a consumer to a transit country or even a trading hub. The much-discussed Southern Gas Corridor, tapping into deposits off Azerbaijan's Caspian coast, is becoming a reality with the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) and its extension into the EU, the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). TANAP was unveiled in June 2018, while TAP (started

2. Together with HTS, Ahrar al-Sham played a key role in the capture of Idlib in 2015, the only provincial centre controlled by the rebels. Jaish al Islam, once dominant in the eastern suburbs of Damascus, has relocated to the Euphrates Shileld area in northern Aleppo controlled by Turkey.

3. The target date for the first unit is 2023, the centennial from the establishment of the Republic of Turkey.

in 2016, with an initial capacity of 10 bcm), is due to come on-stream after 2019. Once operational, the Southern Gas Corridor will ship natural gas from northern Iraq, Central Asia and, potentially, the new fields in the Eastern Mediterranean.[4] In short, Turkey is as much an ally of as a competitor to Russia when it comes to gas deliveries to Europe.

Figure 6: Russian gas pipelines across the Black Sea

Data: BBC

Security in wider Europe

Like Russia, Turkey is a country with connections to multiple regions. Apart from the Middle East, the focus of its foreign policy since the outbreak of the Arab Spring if not before, it has strong historical, socio-political and economic ties to the Caucasus and the Balkans too. In the Southern Caucasus, Turkey has been cultivating a three-way alliance with Georgia and Azerbaijan which has diplomatic, defence and economic dimensions. A case in point is the Baku-Tbilissi-Kars railway inaugurated in 2017 as well as the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline. The grouping is a form of soft balancing against Russia as well as Armenia, Russia's closest partner in the region. The same goes for Turkey's thriving partnership with Ukraine. However, there are clear limits to the extent to

4. The main fields are located in the exclusive economic zones of Cyprus, Israel and Egypt. Turkey has been opposing exploration commissioned by Cyprus, arguing that it violates the sovereign rights of Turkish Cypriots.

which Ankara could use those connections to even the playing field with Russia. Given the Russian military buildup in occupied Crimea post-2014, the upgrade of bases in Armenia (a stone's throw away from the Turkish border), and its presence in Syria where Russia has emerged as the powerbroker, Turkey is practically encircled and has less room for manoeuvre than in the past.[5]

Implications for Western policy

Despite the rhetoric on both sides and the apparent chemistry between Putin and Erdoğan, Russia's relationship with Turkey could be described as a marriage of convenience rather than a full-blown alliance. Ankara is unlikely to jettison its extensive political, institutional and economic links with the West and throw itself into the arms of Moscow, as many fear. The current Turkish foreign policy is fundamentally unilateralist, based on maintaining a balance between Russia and the West. The Turkey-Russia-Iran triangle may make headway in carving out spheres of influence in Syria but will fall short of providing a lasting political solution. It is no substitute for the US either, however extensive the decline of Washington's influence in the Middle East appears to be. Much like Russia, Turkey will remain open for business with the West, pushing aggressively for what it considers to be its vital national interests.

Clearly, differences between Russia and Turkey are not going to go away. Beyond Syria, where Moscow is unlikely to scupper its ties to the Kurds, there are other potential flashpoints: Nagorno-Karabakh where tensions between Azeris and Armenians remain high, and Bosnia and Herzegovina which is being pulled apart by rival ethnocratic elites aligned with Russia and Turkey respectively. However, it is safe to assume that Putin and Erdoğan share a preference for keeping conflicts under control in the name of shared interests. With the 2016 crisis behind them, Moscow and Ankara are likely to adhere to pragmatism as they have in the past.

5. International Crisis Group, "Beyond Syria: Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus," Europe and Central Asia Report no. 250 (28 June 2018), https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/250-russia-and-turkey-black-sea-and-south-caucasus

Chapter 11

Russia and Israel: an improbable friendship

Mark N. Katz

Israel is closely allied with the United States – the country which Russian leader Vladimir Putin regards as Russia's greatest adversary. Russia cooperates closely with Iran – the country which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu regards as an existential threat to the Jewish state. Simple logic would suggest, therefore, that Russia and Israel must be seriously at odds since each works closely with the other's main adversary. But this is not the case. Especially since the rise of Putin at the turn of the century, Russia and Israel have developed close, friendly relations. They cooperate extensively in the economic, military and intelligence spheres. In addition to their government-to-government relationship, there is also a strong societal connection between the two countries as a result of over a million Russian speakers having emigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union, and of large numbers of Russian tourists visiting Israel every year (including over 550,000 in 2016). There are, of course, some serious differences between Russia and Israel – including over Moscow's relations with Tehran. Russia and Israel, however, have pursued good relations with each other despite these differences. The Russian-Israeli relationship, then, defies simple logic because it is the result of a more complicated equation based on a common fear of radical Sunni Muslims, personal chemistry between Putin and conservative Israeli leaders, and a willingness to continue bilateral cooperation despite divergences on certain issues (especially Iran).

A counterintuitive partnership

The Putin era has not been the only time when Russia has enjoyed cooperative relations with Israel. Under Stalin, the Soviet Union was one of the very first countries to recognise the Jewish state after it declared independence. After Khrushchev came to power, however, Moscow became aligned with Arab nationalist governments that were both anti-Western and anti-Israeli. Moscow, though, maintained diplomatic relations with Israel during the early part of the Cold War until it severed them at the time of the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War in which the Jewish state defeated the forces of Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Yet while the Soviet Union was a vocal supporter

of the Palestinian cause, it did not call for the destruction of Israel as certain Arab governments and Palestinian groups did at that time.[1] And despite the severance of diplomatic relations, Soviet-Israeli contacts continued via the Russian Orthodox Church's representation in Jerusalem.

Soviet-Israeli relations were restored at the very end of the Gorbachev era in October 1991, and improved under Yeltsin in the 1990s during the high point of Jewish emigration from the former Soviet Union to Israel. But under the direction of long-time Soviet Middle East expert Yevgeny Primakov (who served as foreign minister and then prime minister under Yeltsin), Moscow was more focused on improving relations with anti-American regimes in Iran and Iraq and became more critical of Israel.[2]

After Putin came to power at the end of 1999, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon began courting him in the early 2000s. While most Western leaders either criticised or remained silent about Putin's re-intervention in Chechnya, Sharon actually praised it. His argument that Russia and Israel were both threatened by Muslim terrorists (whether Chechen or Palestinian) apparently resonated with Putin – especially when Russian-Israeli intelligence cooperation deepened in the wake of the 2004 Beslan incident. When Putin made his first visit to Israel in 2005 (a trip which also included Egypt, but not Syria), the Russian president expressed his strong support for the security of the Jewish state.[3]

There are other factors that have made good relations with Israel valuable to Russia. One is that Russian arms sales to certain countries are enhanced with the addition of Israeli technology. Another is that Israel has become one of the only sources of Western military technology for Russia (including for unarmed aerial vehicles) – especially after France cancelled the sale of Mistral aircraft carriers to Russia in 2015. Furthermore, Israel did not join Western governments in criticising Russia for its intervention against Georgia in 2008 (indeed, Israel halted its budding military cooperation with Georgia during this war),[4] annexation of Crimea in 2014, and intervention in eastern Ukraine afterwards.[5] Beyond government-to-government ties, the Russian-Israeli relationship has been strengthened by extensive trade links; the million-strong Russian-speaking diaspora in Israel (including many Jews who, like Natan Scharansky, left the USSR or Russia because they did not like how they

1. For examples of such statements, see Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA), "Precursors to war: Arab threats against Israel," The Six-Day War, http://www.sixdaywar.org/content/threats.asp.
2. Robert O. Freedman, "Russia and the Middle East: the Primakov era," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 2, no. 2 (May 1998): 1-8, http://www.rubincenter.org/meria/1998/05/freedman.pdf.
3. Mark N. Katz, "Putin's pro-Israel policy," *Middle East Quarterly*, 12, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 51-9, https://www.meforum.org/articles/2005/putin-s-pro-israel-policy.
4. Mark N Katz, "Implications of the Georgian crisis for Israel, Iran, and the West," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 12, no. 4 (December 2008): 4-5, http://mars.gmu.edu/bitstream/handle/1920/5585/Meria_katz_Dec_2008.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.
5. Patrick Hilsman, "Drone deals heighten military ties between Israel and Russia," *Middle East Eye*, October 4, 2015, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/analysis-drone-deals-highlight-military-ties-between-israel-and-russia-24061368.

were treated there, but then became advocates of close Russian-Israeli relations after moving to Israel); the hundreds of thousands of Russian tourists visiting Israel every year; and Israeli accommodation of Russian Orthodox Church interests in the Holy Land.[6]

Converging interests in Syria and beyond

While Barack Obama and some other Western leaders sought to embrace the political change represented by the Arab Spring, Putin and Netanyahu both preferred the preservation of the *status quo* and feared that the overthrow of ruling regimes would unleash forces hostile to both Russia and Israel.[7] While it had long objected to the Assad regime's cooperation with Iran in aiding the highly anti-Israeli Lebanese Shia movement, Hizbullah, the Israeli government did appreciate that Damascus had maintained peace on the Syrian-Israeli armistice line established after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.[8] Israeli fears that this border would no longer remain calm if the Assad regime was weakened or replaced has made the Netanyahu government more sympathetic to Russian arguments that the Assad regime remaining in power is the least bad alternative for Syria.[9]

What has been disturbing for Israel about Syria, though, is the role played there by Iran and Hizbullah. Israel does not want to see these two actors gain predominant influence in Syria and thus be in a better position to attack Israel.[10] But that being the case, the Russian intervention in Syria that began in 2015 which was so upsetting to the West was actually somewhat reassuring to Israel since Iran and Hezbollah could be more easily restrained by the Russians if they are present in Syria than if they are not. Indeed, as Samuel Ramani noted, 'Putin's March 14 [2016] announcement of a partial Russian military drawdown from Syria surprised the Israeli political establishment, and increased fears of Iranian belligerence.'[11] While it is not clear whether, or what sort, of agreement Israel and Russia may have reached regarding Syria, what is known is that Netanyahu and Putin have consulted extensively about

6. Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Maturing of Israeli-Russian relations," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Spring 2016, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-maturing-of-israeli-russian-relations; "Алексей Голубович, "К визиту Нетаньяху: что Россия может получить от экономики Израиля,"[Towards the Netanyahu visit: What Russia can obtain from the Israeli economy], *Forbes.ru*, March 9, 2017, http://www.forbes.ru/finansy-i-investicii/340519-rossiysko-izrailskie-ekonomicheskie-svyazi-ne-tolko-neft-na; Jessica Steinberg, "Mother Russia returns to grand duke's Jerusalem compound," *Times of Israel*, July 13, 2017, https://www.timesofisrael.com/mother-russia-returns-to-grand-dukes-jerusalem-compound/.

7. Jeffrey Martini et al., "Syria as an arena of strategic competition," RAND Corporation, 2013, 2, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR213/RAND_RR213.pdf.

8. Ian Black, "Israelis watch intently as Syrian rebel forces approach Golan Heights border," *The Guardian*, June 19, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/on-the-middle-east/2015/jun/19/israelis-watch-intently-as-syrian-rebel-forces-approach-golan-heights-border.

9. Cnaan Liphshiz, "Can Israel benefit from sheriff Putin policing the Middle East?" *The Times of Israel*, October 13, 2015, https://www.timesofisrael.com/can-israel-benefit-from-sheriff-putin-policing-the-middle-east/.

10. Judah Ari Gross, "Netanyahu: Israel acts to keep game-changing arms away from Hezbollah," *The Times of Israel*, January 9, 2018, https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-israel-acts-to-keep-game-changing-arms-away-from-hezbollah/.

11. Samuel Ramani, "Why Russia and Israel are cooperating in Syria," *Huffpost*, June 23, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-russia-and-israel-are-cooperating-in-syria_us_576bdb68e4b083e0c0235e15?guccounter=1. Putin, of course, did not withdraw Russian forces from Syria either on this or subsequent occasions when he announced that he would.

it and Moscow has not stopped Israel from attacking Hizbullah targets in Syria.[12] Indeed, now that Russia, Iran, and Hizbullah have largely defeated Assad's internal opponents, not only has competition heated up between Moscow and Tehran for influence in Damascus, but Russia has indicated support for Israeli calls for Iranian forces to depart from southern Syria.[13]

There are other areas besides Syria in which Russian and Israeli interests either coincide or do not clash. Both welcomed the overthrow by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the Egyptian military leader, of the elected Muslim Brotherhood president Mohammed Morsi in 2013. Neither Russia nor Israel has shown much concern about the al-Sisi government's subsequent suppression of the opposition and crackdown on democracy.[14] Russia and Israel both cooperate with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.[15] And both Russia and Israel have sought cooperation with the Erdogan government in Turkey, although the Turkish president has not been an easy interlocutor to deal with for either of them.[16] Moscow does continue to criticise Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians, but Putin does not give the Palestinians any material support that would allow them to seriously challenge Israel.[17]

Thus, despite the fact that they each cooperate closely with the other's greatest adversary, Russia and Israel have established a strong reciprocal relationship on the basis of the common interests that they share and a mutual willingness to pursue them notwithstanding their differences.

What can ruin the partnership?

There are, however, at least three possible scenarios that could undermine this state of affairs.

12. In February 2018, though, a Putin phone call to Netanyahu reportedly halted the escalation of direct conflict between Israeli and Iranian forces. Amos Harel, "Putin's phone call with Netanyahu put end to Israeli strikes in Syria," *Haaretz*, February 15, 2018, https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iran/putin-s-call-with-netanyahu-called-time-on-israel-s-syrian-strikes-1.5809118.
13. Joost Hiltermann, "Russia can keep the peace between Israel and Iran--but following the hostilities over the weekend, does Putin want to?" *The Atlantic*, February 13, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/israel-syria-iran-hezbollah-putin-assad/553217/; and Jonathan Marcus, "Is Israel driving a wedge between Russia and Iran?" *BBC News*, May 31, 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-44313744.
14. On the overall convergence of Russian-Israeli interests, see Nikolay Pakhomov, "The Russia-Israel relationship is perfect realpolitik," *The National Interest*, March 23, 2017, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-russia-israel-relationship-perfect-realpolitik-19881.
15. On Saudi-UAE-Israeli cooperation, see Adam Hanieh, "Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates: new regional alliances and the Palestinian struggle," Middle East in London blog (SOAS University of London), 27 January, 2018, https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/the-middle-east-in-london/2018/01/27/israel-saudi-arabia-and-the-united-arab-emirates-new-regional-alliances-and-the-palestinian-struggle/.
16. Raziye Akkoc and Ezzedine Said, "Iran, Russia, Turkey team up to hold sway in Syria," *The Times of Israel*, April 2, 2018, https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-russia-turkey-team-up-to-hold-sway-in-syria/.
17. According to one of Moscow's leading analysts of Russian foreign policy, Dmitri Trenin, Russia is 'no longer a sponsor of the PLO, which is now mainly supported by the European Union.' Dmitri Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 90.

One relates to the most important difference between them: Iran. If it turns out that Moscow proves unwilling or unable to prevent Iran from becoming more powerful in Syria and increasing its support for Hizbullah there, Israel is highly likely to take matters into its own hands and act forcefully against both Iran and Hizbullah in Syria. Moreover, Israel is likely to receive American assistance in this. If Russia sides with Iran and Hezbollah, it will alienate Israel and collaboration between them will rapidly diminish. But even if Moscow seeks to avoid siding with Iran, American-supported Israeli action against Iran and Hizbullah in Syria (and perhaps elsewhere) will make Russia look like a bystander in Syria and not a great power – something that Putin will clearly not appreciate. Indeed, Putin can be expected to strongly resist behaviour on the part of any state that would tend to make Russia look less like the great power he has worked so hard to rebuild it as – even if this means sacrificing the benefits Moscow derives from Russian-Israeli cooperation. Whether or not this scenario arises, of course, depends on how Iran behaves in Syria now that the Assad regime is no longer seriously threatened by its opponents, and whether Moscow can actually keep its reported assurances to Israel that the Russian presence in Syria serves to restrain Iranian behaviour. According to *The Economist*, 'Israel's security chiefs are coming to realize that the Kremlin will not exert itself to limit Iran's role in Syria.'[18]

Another possible threat to continued Russian-Israeli cooperation is that US-Russian relations deteriorate so much that Washington is no longer willing to tolerate Israeli collaboration with Moscow, or at least not to the extent that it has so far. While Israel is well known for being able to go its own way in defiance of Washington's advice and requests, an end to Israeli security cooperation with Russia might well be a demand to which Israel may have to acquiesce to if Washington really insists on it. But without Russian-Israeli cooperation continuing, Moscow will have much less incentive to take Israeli interests into account in its relations with Tehran. Moreover, if these two scenarios (both heightened Israeli-Iranian conflict and increased US-Russian tensions) arise simultaneously, the Russian-Israeli relationship is even more likely to be negatively affected.

While there is a significant possibility that either or both of these first two scenarios might occur in the short term, there is a third, long-term scenario that might well arise independently of them. On the Russian side, the strong degree of Russian-Israeli cooperation that has evolved since Putin first came to power has been something that he in particular has valued and pursued. According to Dmitri Trenin, the Russian military and security services, and even ordinary Russians, also value Moscow's ties to the Jewish state.[19] But if Putin's successor does not share this positive view of Israel, it is not at all certain that the present level of Russian-Israeli cooperation can continue. Some Russian sectors and institutions that currently benefit from Russian-Israeli cooperation, such as the Russian arms export industry and certain elements of the Russian security services, may seek its continuation, but a new leader who does not share Putin's positive view of Israel may change Moscow's policy towards

18. "Israel v Iran in Syria: heating up," *The Economist*, April 14, 2018, 40 (US edition), https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21740471-conflict-between-two-powers-escalating-israel-determined-stop.

19. Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?,* 89-90.

it. Whether or not this occurs, of course, will not be clear unless and until there is a successor to Putin, and this is not likely to occur until at least 2024 or perhaps even later. At some point, though, there will be a successor to Putin. Whether there is sufficient Russian interest to continue cooperation with Israel or whether this was something idiosyncratic to Putin will then become clear.

Yet while the scenarios that could lead to its dimunition or even termination are real, Russian-Israeli cooperation is quite strong at present. Because of the benefits it provides for both sides, both Putin on the one hand and Netanyahu (or any other Israeli prime minister) on the other are likely to work hard to prevent outside factors from derailing it.

Conclusion: Russia in the Middle East – from surge to quagmire?

Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secrieru

Russia's comeback in the Middle East is real and incontestable. But much of the surprise and disquiet that Russia's resurgence in the region has generated is at least partly due to the dismissive attitude to Russia that was prevalent in the West in the early days of Moscow's military intervention in Syria. US President Barack Obama encapsulated this dismissive attitude when he argued that Russia would get 'stuck in a quagmire' in Syria, that its intervention would not work, and described Russia's conduct of the war as a 'recipe for disaster'.[1] This set the bar for assessing Russia's actions so low that the very fact that Russia managed to avoid being sucked into a quagmire almost automatically led to any successes it achieved in its military campaign being magnified by the media as stunning accomplishments, and hailed as more impressive and sustainable than was perhaps actually the case. Hence, the longer Russia has stayed in Syria, the more analysis of Russia's role and presence in the Middle East has tended to veer towards the other extreme – that of exaggerating Russian power. Neither extreme is very helpful for an understanding of Russia or the Middle East. The idea that Russia is the new regional superpower, acting as it pleases in the region, and dictating terms of engagement to regional players, is as false as the previously widespread belief that Russia was an irrelevant player, driving at full speed into a quagmire. The truth is somewhere in between. The chapters in this volume have sought to draw the contours of Russia's new role in the Middle East, steering clear of both dismissiveness and excessive awe with regard to Russia's new role in the region.

Russia's comeback(s)

Russia is back in the Middle East on multiple fronts. First and foremost Russia is back in a military sense. It has for the first time put boots on the ground in a war

1. "Obama: Russia heading for 'quagmire' in Syria," *CNN*, October 2, 2015, https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/02/politics/president-obama-syria-russia-assad/index.html; "Obama says Russian strategy in Syria is 'recipe for disaster'", *The Guardian*, October 2, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/02/us-coalition-warns-russia-putin-extremism-syria-isis

zone outside the post-Soviet region and has conducted an air and ground campaign in Syria for three years already. Russia secured the Khmeimim air base in Syria in the early stages of the war and subsequently the transformation of its naval facility in Tartus into a permanent naval base. Russia trained the forces of the military commander Khalifa Haftar controlling eastern parts of Libya,[2] conducted demining operations in Benghazi[3] and negotiated a deal with Egypt to use its airspace and airbases when need be.[4] Moscow increased supplies of arms to its traditional clients (e.g., Syria) and even began to conclude arms deals with countries in the region that had traditionally been customers of the US (e.g. Egypt), including members of NATO (e.g. Turkey).

Russia is also back diplomatically. Moscow has done a good diplomatic job of navigating different regional rivalries and tensions – between Iran and Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Turkey and the Kurds, among others. This is all the more striking given that Russia's Middle East diplomacy contrasts sharply in style and tone with Russian diplomacy in the West or the post-Soviet space. While Russian diplomacy in the West and much of the post-Soviet space is often volatile, conflictual, and even arrogant; Russia's approach to the Middle East is the opposite of that: more emotionally detached, low-key, patient and respectful – diplomatic in other words. As a result Russia has managed to orchestrate a situation where even its potential regional adversaries (e.g., the Arab Gulf States) are not too unhappy about its growing presence. Skilful great power management combined with America's faltering Middle East foreign policy have ensured that all geopolitical actors in the region engage with Russia and pay due respect to its interests. Moscow is all too aware that after dumping its ally in Afghanistan in 1989 Russia incurred huge reputational losses. By stepping in to save its client in Syria Moscow hoped to recover some great power prestige and credibility in the region. And it has to some extent achieved this among regional elites. However, just as in Afghanistan, the victims of Russia's operation in Syria are Muslims, including many civilians, a fact which has inevitably impacted negatively on Russia's overall image in the region.

Russia is also back economically, although in a less spectacular manner. Its economic comeback is not only about arms exports, but also agricultural products, tourism and civil nuclear projects. Another important pillar of Russia's return is unprecedented cooperation with OPEC countries to manage oil prices. In the past Russia quite often behaved as a free rider, pumping more oil as OPEC members were reducing quotas to boost the price. Lately, however, Russia has behaved as a responsible stakeholder by helping to shape the deal to curb oil production and manage the oil markets and enforce its implementation by all sides.

2. "Libya's eastern parliament speaker praises Russia's training of Haftar-led forces," *Libyan Express*, January 7, 2018, http://www.libyanexpress.com/libyas-eastern-parliament-speaker-praises-russias-training-of-haftar-led-forces/

3. Anna Boitsova, Inna Sidorkova and Anton Baev, "Glava ChVK rasskazal o rabote rossiiskih spetsialistov v Livii" [The Head of ChVK informed about the work of Russian specialists in Libya], *RBK*, March 13, 2017,

4. "Rossiya vstupila v peregovory s Egiptom ob ispolizovanii voennyh aviabaz" [Russia entered the talks with Egypt on use of military air bases], *Meduza*, November 30, 2017, https://meduza.io/news/2017/11/30/rossiya-vstupila-v-peregovory-s-egiptom-ob-ispolzovanii-voennyh-aviabaz

Russia's comeback on these various fronts has been facilitated by a number of factors and developments. Today Russia has the military means to do what it was not able to do a decade ago. In Syria Russia has replicated to some degree what the US army did in the first war in Iraq in 1991. Although the quarter century time-lag between the two operations drew a dismissive response in Western military circles, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that there are not many armies in the world that can pull off such operations today. The Russian armed forces have been upgraded and modernised since the military reforms initiated in 2008, thereby endowing Russia's diplomacy with clout it sorely lacked in the 1990s and coveted in the early years of the new millennium. Russia is also more self-confident in the wake of its swift annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent war in Donbass. Russia's threshold for the use of military force is much lower than was the case a decade ago. And as domestic politics often become closely intertwined with external politics, from the Kremlin's point of view, as long as casualties are kept to a minimum, a small war can be useful for the purpose of mobilising domestic opinion.

These domestic drivers are accompanied by external factors which paved the way for Moscow's resurgence. Although Russia imposed itself on the Middle Eastern stage, the US's progressive withdrawal from the region after 2010 left a vacuum which facilitated Moscow's return to the region. Moreover, many local players do not seem to mind Moscow's greater role. While reluctant to accept Russia as a dominant player, they will happily see Russia's growing presence in the region erode US and European power, which increases their options for geopolitical manoeuvring. This applies even to some of the US's and Europe's closest allies in the region – which have their frustrations with the West anyway. In the wake of the Arab Spring the US was perceived by the elites in the region as having abandoned its allies (e.g. Mubarak in Egypt). Washington's reluctance to intervene in Syria's war, in particular after the first chemical attacks carried out by the Assad regime in 2013, further undermined the credibility of the US in the region. It should not come as a surprise therefore that there is to some extent local demand for Russia's presence. Without imperilling its alliance with the US, Israel wants Russia to remain in Syria in order to counterbalance and minimise Iran's military presence in this country. In contrast, Turkey wants Russia to counterbalance the US and extract from both the most advanced military platforms. Saudi Arabia wants Russia to help manage oil prices. Clearly, Russia is a shrewd geopolitical player, unencumbered by a human rights agenda and well-versed in Middle Eastern 'bazaar diplomacy'. And thus for many in the region Russia is often an easier interlocutor to deal with than the EU or the US.

Blowbacks and setbacks

What Russia has achieved in the region over the past three years looks impressive. However, Russia's foreign policy faces several important limitations which constrain its choices and cast doubt on its ability to further deepen its presence in the Middle East.

To begin with, Russia may have had a 'good' war in Syria, but to what end? The stated objectives of Russia's intervention have not always been reflected in reality. Early on Russia declared or implied that its goals were to save Assad, but also to reset relations with the West, dilute the sanctions regime, obtain some concessions over Ukraine, and fight Daesh. But throughout the war, Russia seems to have neglected some of those objectives and focused instead on enjoying the advantages that have accrued to it in its bilateral relations with Syria, Iran, Turkey, Israel and other local players, putting aside wider geopolitical goals. Furthermore, Russia has not yet articulated its plan for the Middle East and has not unveiled what kind of order it envisions in the region, if any at all. Thus, the question of what is the ultimate purpose of Russia's presence remains largely unanswered. Instead, having boots on the ground has almost become an end in itself. In a television interview President Putin confirmed the open-ended character of Russia's military presence in Syria, reiterating that Russian armed forces 'will be there as long as it benefits Russia.'[5] It seems that the fact of having established a military presence in the region overrides any other quantifiable objectives, which can be invented at will in order to legitimise Russia's presence locally or internationally. In the last three years, Moscow's discourse on its operation's objectives oscillated according to developments in the region. However, while being there can make a country's flag visible, it can also leave it with a bloody nose, in particular in the absence of a realistic exit strategy. Notably, since Russia last declared victory, in December 2017, it has officially lost more soldiers in Syria than in the period 2015-end of 2017.[6]

'Afghanistan syndrome' (national trauma caused by huge military casualties) still constrains Russia's behaviour too. On the one hand, the deployment of Russian troops far overseas signals that Russia is in the process of overcoming this syndrome. The success of its military operation in Syria, which has instilled a sense of renewed confidence in the ranks of its armed forces, has helped to further counter the deleterious effects of the Afghanistan debacle, but only partially. On the other hand, 'Afghanistan syndrome' influences the way Russia wages war, as Moscow is now more anxious to keep its troops out of harm's way. Hence, in its conduct of the military campaign in Syria Russia has focused on 'contactless warfare' (prioritising air over land operations), and sending Russian mercenaries to fight on the battlefield alongside Hizbullah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Russia's sensitivity to casualties signals a 'Westernisation' of Russian attitudes towards soldiers' lives. The scars left by the Afghanistan campaign and the two Chechen wars have reduced public tolerance of large-scale military casualties. Therefore, it is unlikely that Russia will be deploying tens of thousands of troops across the Middle East in the near future as the Soviet Union did in Afghanistan, Egypt and Syria during the Cold War.

Russia has displayed significant military prowess in its intervention in the Middle East, but the country's ongoing economic difficulties impose limits on how much

5. Direct Line with Vladimir Putin, June 7, 2018, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57692

6. Between 2015 and 2017 Russia officially confirmed 43 casualties. In the first 5 months of 2018 Russia officially confirmed 48 casualties. "Chto izvestno o o pogibshih v Sirii rossiiskih voennyh" [What is knowns about Russian military who perished in Syria], *Kommersant,* May 27, 2018, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3460282

Russia can offer to its clients in the region and hence on its attractiveness as a partner for economic development. Russia might successfully wage a small war, but there are serious doubts whether Moscow is capable of organising and financing reconstruction efforts. Lately, Russia has been more insistently calling on the West to get out its chequebook and bankroll reconstruction efforts in Syria and in this way stabilise the country. Recently Bashar al-Assad mentioned that Syria will need the enormous sum of $400 billion for this purpose.[7] Regardless of whether the sum is overinflated or not, it is not difficult to imagine that once the civil war ends, whoever rules Damascus will need huge funds to rebuild the country. And in all likelihood Damascus will start knocking on doors in search of funds in capitals other than Moscow or Tehran.

Russia's efforts to expand in the nuclear energy field are not going smoothly either. Usually Russia backs Rosatom projects worldwide by providing state loans. However, in the case of a project for two nuclear reactors to be built in Jordan by 2022, Moscow declined to finance the enterprise and suggested that its Jordanian counterparts look for commercial loans. As a result Rosatom's plan for expansion in Jordan, which looked promising on paper, rapidly fell apart as it ran up against economic realities. Russia's drive to attract investment from the Persian Gulf states is also a sign of a weakening economy desperate to attract funds to compensate for the dwindling stream of credits and loans from the West since sanctions were imposed in 2014.

Russia's weak economic base also has implications for the country's expeditionary warfare capabilities, which are essential to sustain Russia's presence in the Middle East in the future. Russia's state armaments programme for 2018-2027 deprioritised the construction of a blue-water navy (apart from submarines) for reasons of cost and it seems that the Russian defence industry has not recovered Soviet-era skills and aptitudes needed to build large war vessels with a wide radius of operation. Thus, there is clearly a limit to how much military power Russia can deploy and sustain in future in the region.

Russia's foreign policy successes, as impressive as they may seem on television, often come at a high domestic economic cost. Russia's success in managing oil prices in cooperation with OPEC, while it has helped to balance the books, has further disincentivised the government in Moscow from carrying out structural reforms, deepening the country's reliance on exports of raw materials. But high oil prices have already driven the development of alternative – shale or solar – energy sources to Russia and Saudi Arabia's detriment. So the victory might be a Pyrrhic one. Another apparent success that Russia has achieved – the military intervention in Syria – has only hardened the resolve of certain states not to grant it sanctions relief or emboldened them to slap Russia with new sanctions. This means that Russia has fewer resources available for further military spending (the military budget is already decreasing), for the modernisation of its armed forces and power projection, or for

7. "Assad otsenil zatraty na vosstanovlenie siriiskoi ekonomiki v 400 milliardov dollarov" [Assad estimated Syria will need 400 billion USD to rebuild its economy], *Novaya Gazeta,* April 15, 2018, https://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/2018/04/15/141010-asad-otsenil-zatraty-na-vosstanovlenie-siriyskoy-ekonomiki-v-400-milliardov-dollarov

investment in education, infrastructure and human capital, thus accentuating the cloud of uncertainty hanging over Russia's economic future. And it is not the first time that Russia's foreign and military policy successes have been accompanied by systemic economic failures as the other side of the coin.

Russia's presence in the Middle East has exposed some limits to its diplomatic ambitions too. Polls and surveys indicate that populations in the region have a low level of confidence in Putin's foreign policy.[8] The diplomatic shield that Russia provided for Damascus in the UN following the chemical attacks in Syria has hardly made Russia and Putin popular. The Arab street, angered by Russia's military strikes, can force politicians to change tack on Moscow, at least rhetorically. The same goes for local leaders. The Arab leaders behave respectfully towards Russia for now. But that respect is shallow and cannot be counted on indefinitely. At the first sign of Russian weakness, Moscow will be pushed aside without scruples, as happened multiple times during the Cold War. And even one of Russia's most successful relationships in the region, that with Israel, hinges on the personality and leadership of President Putin. There are doubts in Tel Aviv whether this relationship will survive after Putin exits Russian politics.

Last but not least, the West also imposes limits on Russia's surge in the region. The Kremlin launched the military operation in Syria amid declarations of building an anti-terrorist coalition with the West. But these hopes and ambitions were rapidly dashed. For the first time since the Cold War Russia and the US were involved in a direct military confrontation when Russia via its mercenaries directly attacked US soldiers near Deir-ez-Zor in February 2018. Instead of 'rebooting' relations, Russia's policy in the Middle East has only inflamed tensions with the West. Russia is certainly more respected now, but its military intervention in Syria has led the Western powers, with more resources and consequently better staying power, to organise a concerted pushback against Russia in the Middle East.

The Cold War demonstrated that any snapshot of power realities at any given moment can be misleading and illusory. Spectacular reversals of power and prestige have regularly haunted both the US and Russia. And even if history never repeats itself entirely, there is enough repetition in it for observers to take Russia's new role in the Middle East seriously and adapt to it, without overestimating Russia's capacity to sustain its presence and entrench its power in the region in the long term.

8. Pew Research Center, "Publics worldwide unfavourable toward Putin, Russia," *Global Attitudes & Trends*, August 16, 2017, http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/08/16/publics-worldwide-unfavorable-toward-putin-russia/

Annex

Abbreviations

AKP	Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*)
bcm	billion cubic metres
BLACKSEAFOR	Black Sea Naval Force
CAS	Close air support
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
FSA	Free Syrian Army
FSB	Federal Security Service
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GECF	Gas Exporting Countries Forum
HTS	Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant (*Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*)
IFV	Infantry fighting vehicle
IPO	Initial Public Offering
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
KGB	Committee for State Security (*Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti*)
KIA	Kuwait Investment Authority
LNG	Liquefied natural gas
MALE	Medium-altitude long-endurance
MANPADS	Man-portable air-defence systems
mb/d	million barrels per day
MBT	Main battle tank
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MLRS	Multiple Launch Rocket System
MoD	Ministry of Defence
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MW	Megawatt(s)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
OPEC	Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PIF	Public Investment Fund
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*)
RDIF	Russian Direct Investment Fund

SAM	Surface-to-air missile
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SWF	Sovereign Wealth Fund
TANAP	Trans-Anatolian Pipeline
TAP	Trans-Adriatic Pipeline
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAV	Unmanned aerial vehicle
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
USD	United States Dollars
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
YPG	People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*)

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