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RUSSIAN ENCROACHMENT IN ARAB COUNTRIES SINCE 2011

BREWING PROBLEMS FOR THE EU IN THE
MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA?

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INTRODUCTION¹

The post-WWII Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have been a theatre of stiff competition between newly established nation-states, dubbed by Kerr as the 'Arab Cold War' between the 1950s and 70s, and the two superpowers² the US and USSR. As both powers have their clients in the region. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the next round of regional competition started re-shaping regional relations. It is frequently asserted that the MENA entered into yet another dynamic phase of the 'New Regional Cold War' in the post-2003 marked once again by increased regional power competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their respective allies.³ While the sectarian Shia-Sunni dimension of this stand-off is not the primary driver, it is undoubtedly a mobilizing factor. A string of Arab revolutions triggered the newest phase of the MENA Cold War since 2011. Followed by instability which prompted both MENA countries and external players to scramble for increasing or maintaining their influence.⁴ Santini notes that it effectively makes the MENA regional security complex increasingly heterarchical with "(...) *multiple and heterogeneous power centres, different power rankings, a more visible and relevant role of non-state and transnational actors, and the fragmentation of regional norms.*"⁵

An integral part of this 'heterarchical' intra-regional post-2011 dynamics are outside actors maneuvering their way into the MENA. May it be the omnipresent US, or EU countries, newcomers such as China, or Russia, returning to the region after an unprecedented disengagement in the 90s and early 2000s? Vladimir Putin's third presidency in 2012-18 marked a definitive return of Russia to the MENA theatre, culminating with Moscow's intervention in Syria in September 2015. Its engagement experienced notable traction, including labelling its activities, especially in Syria, as the 'Russian New Great Game.'⁶ The pressing question is how to read Russian re-discovery of the MENA, and what implications does it have? Explanations of Russian engagement oscillate between acknowledging Russian comeback to the region as a decisive power and downplaying Moscow's imprint due to its structural, economic, and political weaknesses preventing it from playing a significant role.⁷

This study provides a brief overview of Russian and EU policies towards the MENA, followed by case studies of Russian engagement in three distinctive groups of countries in 2011-20: the Arabian Peninsula, Levant and Iraq, and North Africa. Examining them in a comparative perspective, we attempt to solve the

¹ All on-line sources were accessed on September 18, 2020, if not stated otherwise.

² See Fred H. Lawson, "The Resurgence of the Arab Cold War," *Review of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 2 (August 2015), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26250453>.

³ F. Gregory Gause III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," *Brooking Doha Center Analysis Paper*, no. 11 (July 2014), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/English-PDF-1.pdf>.

⁴ John Turner, "Great Powers as Client States in a Middle East Cold War," *Middle East Policy*, 14, no. 3 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2012.00552.x>.

⁵ Ruth Hanau Santini, "A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Security Complex Theory Revisited," *The International Spectator* 52, no. 4 (2017), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03932729.2017.1371487>, 93.

⁶ Bassam Barabandi, Aaron Hesse, and P. J. Dermer, "Russia's New Middle East Great Game," *Middle East Institute*, October 5, 2015, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-new-middle-east-great-game>.

⁷ See for example Steven A. Cook, "Russia Is in the Middle East To Stay," Council on Foreign Relations, March 26, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/russia-middle-east-stay>, and compare to Dmitri Trenin, "Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities and Policy Drivers," *Carnegie & The Chicago Council of International Affairs* (2016), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16_Trenin_Middle_East_Moscow_clean.pdf.

following puzzle: What is the nature of Russian foreign policy towards Arab countries? What are its main drivers? Is it a systematic and multi-sectored concerted effort across security, economic, political sector, or somewhat ad hoc, narrow-focused engagement?

The principal added value of the study lies primarily in looking into what implications do Russian policies in Arab countries have for the EU;⁸ making it a distinctive contribution given most publications on the matter are US policy-focused.⁹



8 Implications specifically for the EU and its member states are only rarely discussed, see for example Pavel K. Baev, "European Assessments and Concerns About Russia's Policies in the Middle East," in *Russia in the Middle East*, eds. Theodore Karasik, Stephen Blank (Washington D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2018), 131-53, <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Russia-in-the-Middle-East-online.pdf?x74670>.

9 See for example, Eugene Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None," *Carnegie, The Return of Global Russia* (October 2019), <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/WP-Rumer-MiddleEast.pdf>.

RUSSIAN (RE-)ENGAGEMENT IN THE MENA AND ITS DRIVERS

Tsarist Russia had a long tradition of interactions with the region, mainly through the strategic competition over the Caucasus and the Black Sea with the Ottoman Empire, fighting in total thirteen wars until 1917.¹⁰ Unlike Western European powers, Russia was mostly absent from the post-WWI colonial carve-up of Ottoman domains. Consequently, its "(...) *moral credentials among the Arabs both on the official and popular level were considerably higher than the West's.*"¹¹ The USSR, however, engaged substantially with the Arab countries only since the mid-50s with Khrushchev's ascendancy.¹² Further back and forth relationships with new Middle Eastern states existed mainly against the background of Cold War competition with the US, which gradually entered the region in the 50s and 60s, overshadowing Britain and France as decisive players in the region. Soviet engagement was mainly revolving around the search for a network of various client states and friendly actors, including Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Syria, Yemen, or Palestinian Liberation Organisation, and later Lebanese Hezbollah. In turn, Arab leaders pragmatically utilized the Cold War stand-off to earn the best possible deal from either the US or the USSR. For example, Egypt, a Soviet ally under President Nasser, turned to the US for better financial

incentives during Sadat's presidency since 1970, with Moscow losing a crucial partner in the region.

Gorbachev's 'new political thinking' aiming at easing tensions with the US and salvage the USSR economically precipitated détente in the MENA, with attempts to improve relations with Israel and ultimately to turn a blind eye on the US-led war against Saddam's Iraq in 1990-91.¹³ Following the fall of the USSR, Russia under President Yeltsin (1991-99) further retreated from the region, shrinking its engagement merely to Iran and Turkey.¹⁴ Russia focused on the 'Near Abroad' in its 'minimalistic sense,' i.e., Soviet succession states. A proponent of re-gaining Russia's great power status, in what he asserted was now a 'multipolar' world, was Yevgeniy Primakov, foreign minister in 1996-98 and until May 1999 Russian PM.¹⁵ Primakov laid ground to Putin's policies towards the Middle East, creating a framework that is according to some "(...) *intrinsicly anti-American and motivated by an obsession to recover Russia's great power status of bygone times.*"¹⁶ Ultimately, Primakov-Putin's notion of their 'multi-vectored' foreign policy is to deny the US full possession of the MENA region.¹⁷

10 Andrej Kreutz, "The Geopolitics of Post-Soviet Russia and the Middle East," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2002), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41858403>.

11 G. M. Yemelianova, "Russia and Islam: The History and Prospects of a Relationship," *Asian Affairs* 26, no. 3 (1995), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/714041286>, 284.

12 Robert O. Freedman, "From Khrushchev and Brezhnev to Putin: Has Moscow's Policy in the Middle East Come Full Circle?," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 5, no. 2, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2347798918762197>.

13 Kreutz, "The Geopolitics of Post-Soviet Russia."

14 Anna Borschevskaya, "Russia in the Middle East. Motives, Consequences, Prospects," *The Washington Institute for the Near East Policy, Policy Focus*, no. 142 (2016), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PF142-Borschevskaya.pdf>.

15 Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East."

16 Stephen Blank, "The Foundation of the Russian Policy in the Middle East," in *Russia in the Middle East*, eds. Theodore Karasik, Stephen Blank (Washington D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2018), 28-60, <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Russia-in-the-Middle-East-online.pdf?x74670>, 28.

17 Ibid.

In 2003-08, there was a phase of increased Russian activism in the MENA region under Putin's auspices, briefly interrupted by Medvedev's presidency in 2008-12.¹⁸ Both new foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and Putin engaged in a series of high-level visits, working mainly on the revival of 'old alliances' with Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Syria, or Yemen, specifically focusing on establishing economic cooperation and re-discovering markets for its arms.¹⁹ Soviet-era alliances are crucial for understanding Russia's return to the region since these nations were the first to experience Moscow's wooing. Simultaneously, the pragmatism of Arab states attempted balancing and flirting with both Washington and Moscow to secure the best deal possible, appears to be a reoccurring behaviour pattern on their side notably since 2012. Already present, broader ambitions in looking for new partners could be observed with Putin's visits in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in 2007, Morocco, or Jordan.

The full-blown Russian return to Middle Eastern affairs arguably came after 2012, when Moscow engaged with 'old allies' in more depth and worked on forging new partnerships with Arab nations. Kozhanov optimistically notes there is a limited number of issues where EU's and US' interests "(...) coincide and present opportunities for cooperation between Russia and the West."²⁰ Nevertheless, patterns of non-cooperation prevail due to significant incompatibilities. After all, Putin's speech at the UN General Assembly on September 29, 2015, expressed deep dissatisfaction over Western and US's role in the region, in particular, lamenting they "(...) continue to export revolutions, only now these are 'democratic' revolutions."²¹ This causes instability and

insecurity "(...) resulted in the emergence of areas of anarchy, which were quickly filled with extremists and terrorists."²²

A breaking point was the deployment of the Russia Air Force to Syria (September 2015), to turn the military tides for Assad's regime quickly losing ground to rebels and ISIS despite Iranian boots on the ground.²³ Russia not only boosted its credibility for possible allies, by protecting its partners but showed military prowess. Since 2015, there is little doubt that Russia has ensured its seat at the table in the MENA. The question remains, how strong a voice and position can Moscow have since a mere 'return' does not automatically mean decisive influence. As Rumer notes, "It was the absence of Russia from the region in the aftermath of the Cold War that was a major departure from the norm."²⁴ Trenin argues that overarching Russian objective in the MENA region is to become a major power, ideally to restore "(...) the country's position as a great power outside of the former USSR."²⁵ Others, in turn, point at apparent limitations to this ambition, citing structural constraints, such as lack of economic and soft power.²⁶

Broad drivers of Russia engagements in MENA could be identified as follows:

- **Security interests** - Domestically, Russia, with up to 16% Muslim population,²⁷ is worried that instability and the rise of Islamic extremism would spread on its soil, especially to the Caucasus and thus needs to be contained at the source – in the MENA region. On the broader security perspective, it seeks to re-establish military presence, especially in the Mediterranean.

- **Political interests** - Russia, as part of its quest to renew its (global) power status, needs to have a foothold in the MENA region and a seat at the regional table, which in turn can also be used as leverage in negotiations with the US and Europe.²⁸ While doing so, it presents itself as an alternative²⁹ to the West, presenting itself as non-ideological, pragmatic, respecting sovereignty, and ready to talk to all.³⁰

- **Economic interests** - Russia wishes to maintain and extend its exports and sales to the MENA region, especially in strategic sectors of its industry – arms, energy sector, including nuclear technology. At the same time, it seeks to attract foreign investments from the Gulf Countries in particular.³¹ These efforts would further diversify Moscow's economic relations and alleviate the effects of the 2014 Western sanctions due to Russian annexation of Crimea and occupation of Eastern Ukraine. Ensuring energy security and "ownership of energy resources, including in the Near East,"³² is mentioned in the National Security Strategy from 2009 to 2020. The proposed Energy Strategy 2035 identifies sustaining Moscow's position in global energy markets as the foremost interest.³³ The final document adopted on April 2, 2020 and the Ministry of Energy's risk analysis identifies any external competition to its global energy exporter positions, including the emergence of new players, as an existential threat to cope with.³⁴ Russia, as the world's biggest producer of crude oil and the second-largest producer of gas, has vested interest in managing oil prices and ensuring its position in supplying gas to Europe.³⁵

18 For example, Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russian Policy Across the Middle East. Motivations and Methods," *Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Research Paper* (2018), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-02-21-russian-policy-middle-east-kozhanov.pdf>.

19 See Shehab al Makahleh, "The Arab View of Russia's Role in the MENA: Changing Arab Perceptions of Russia, and the Implication for US Policy," in *Russia in the Middle East*, eds. Theodore Karasik, Stephen Blank (Washington D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2018), 61-86, <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Russia-in-the-Middle-East-online.pdf?x74670>.

20 Kozhanov, "Russian Policy Across the Middle East," 1.

21 "70th Session of the UN General Assembly," *President of Russia*, September 28, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>.

22 Ibid.

23 Christopher Kozak, "An Army in All Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria," *Institute for the Study of War, Middle East Security Report*, no. 26 (2015), <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/An%20Army%20in%20All%20Corners%20by%20Chris%20Kozak%201.pdf>.

24 Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East," 2.

25 Trenin, "Russia in the Middle East."

26 Becca Wasser, "The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East," *RAND Corporation, Perspective* (2019), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE340/RAND_PE340.pdf.

27 Borschevskaya, "Russia in the Middle East."

28 See Kozhanov, "Russian Policy Across the Middle East."

29 James Sladden, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable, and Sarah Grand-Clement, "Russian Strategy in the Middle East," *RAND Corporation, Perspectives* (2017), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE236.html>.

30 Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East."

31 Rauf Mammadov, and Theodore Karasik, "Implications of Gulf sovereign wealth funds investing in Russian oil projects," *Gulf State Analytics*, <https://gulfstateanalytics.com/implications-of-gulf-sovereign-wealth-funds-investing-in-russian-oil-projects/>, Wasser, "The Limits of Russian Strategy."

32 "National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020," *Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Kingdom of Thailand*, May 12, 2009, <http://thailand.mid.ru/en/national-security-strategy-of-the-russian-federation>.

33 Tatiana Mitrova, and Vitaly Yermakov, "Russia's Energy Strategy-2035. Struggle to Remain Relevant," *Études de l'Ifri, Russie.Nei. Reports*, no. 28 (2019), https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/mitrova_yermakov_russias_energy_strategy_2019.pdf.

34 Sergey Sukhanov, "Russia's Energy Strategy 2035: A Breakthrough or Another Impasse?," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17, no. 78 (2020), <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-energy-strategy-2035-a-breakthrough-or-another-impasse/>.

35 Russia is the largest supplier of gas to the EU, providing 38.3% of gas in 2019. To compare, Norway, the second largest supplied 24.5%. See Eurostat, "EU import of energy products – recent developments," *Eurostat – Statistics Explained* (June 2020), <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/pdfscache/46126.pdf>.

THE EU'S POLICIES TOWARDS MENA

For the EU, the Middle East and North Africa, in particular, represents a neighbourhood of wide-scale diverse countries, incoherent in common needs, often drowning in their problems and civil wars, such as in Syria, Libya, Yemen or Iraq. Further, states within MENA are challenging obstacles, springing from the internal geo-political struggles, unemployment, trafficking and smuggling, nepotism, and corruption. As both regions are connected with colonial history and geographic proximity, EU countries take an interest in developments in MENA countries. The spatial proximity of this region is affecting the functioning of the EU. Its member states often have different attitudes towards individual countries, which they associate mainly with the issue of illegal immigration. For example, as early as 1990, most receiving countries, namely France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy urged the EU to intensify relations with North Africa. This step led to the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Conference in Barcelona in 1995,³⁶ defining three main fields of mutual cooperation.³⁷ Firstly, the Political and Security field focusing on the creation of 'a common area of peace and stability.' Secondly, the Cultural and Human fields discuss cultural exchange and mutual understanding, which

could help to get to know the whole region better. And thirdly, the Economic and Financial field with the aim of the building of eventual free trade areas.³⁸ These three areas of cooperation fell under the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) signed by EU member states and the twelve Mediterranean Partners involving Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey.³⁹ In 2009, the EMP was renamed the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM).⁴⁰ A 'financial bridge' was secured between the two groups through the MEDA program and in 1995-2003 as a financial instrument acquired for €5.4 billion of the total €6.4 billion of budgetary resources used for the mutual economic cooperation.⁴¹

After 2000, the reciprocal ties fell under the European Neighbourhood Policy (or the ENP, which replaced the MEDA after a period of two terms⁴²), which was established in 2004, and complemented by regional multilateral cooperation initiatives⁴³ of the Union for the Mediterranean.⁴⁴ The ENP was created due to several reasons. After the US invasion in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), the European-neighbourhood geostrategic position changed, and Europe needed

36 Bessma Momani, "The EU, the Middle East, and Regional Integration," *World Economics* 8, no. 1 (January-March 2007), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Bessma_Momani/publication/23725077_The_EU_the_Middle_East_and_Regional_Integration/links/0c96052b3157f9e7ed000000.pdf.

37 Richard Youngs, "20 Years of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership," *Mediterranean Politics, Carnegie Europe* (May 2015), <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2015/05/18/20-years-of-euro-mediterranean-partnership-pub-60337>.

38 Ibid.

39 United Nations, "The EU, the Mediterranean and the Middle East – A longstanding partnership – EU memo/Non-UN document," (June 2004), <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-201804/>.

40 It is important to add, that both of the designation – the EMP and UfM are still used in literature and policy debates. Youngs, "20 Years of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership."

41 United Nations, "The EU, the Mediterranean and the Middle East."

42 Stefanie Georgakis Abbott, "The EU and the Middle East: From the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership to the Union for the Mediterranean," *Conflict and Diplomacy in the Middle East: External Actors and Regional Rivalries, E-International relations* (November 2018), <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/11/28/the-eu-and-the-middle-east-from-the-euro-mediterranean-partnership-to-the-union-for-the-mediterranean/>.

43 Yannis A. Stivachtis, "The 'Civilizing' Empire: The European Union and the MENA Neighborhood," *Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 4, no. 2 (April 2018), <https://www.athensjournals.gr/mediterranean/2018-4-2-1-Stivachtis.pdf>.

44 Abbott, "The EU and the Middle East."

to react. Additionally, the EU enlargement in 2004 expanded the external borders with the new security challenges to come.⁴⁵ However, the post-9/11 environment did not contribute to the development of relations, affected by the increasing popularity of Islamist political movements in Arab states in the Mediterranean.⁴⁶ The terrorist attacks in the US, including those in Europe, opened a new debate about a policy in the MENA region and also brought new deradicalization attitudes with emphasis on counter-terrorism policies.⁴⁷

Despite all these efforts, the EU did not ratify any all-embracing document addressing the MENA region, building its policy more on reactions than actions. Thus, the EU response on events happening in the region is slowed down by the inconsistent attitude of individual member states, not to mention lengthy bureaucratic processes. As mentioned earlier, the spatial proximity of these regional affairs has significant consequences on EU member states, especially those in the south, sharing the Mediterranean coast. Therefore, the EU must be concerned about the issue of immigration flows associated with the diplomatic negotiations of 'source states' or 'states serving as a transfer' to EU countries, such as Turkey is.⁴⁸

Conflicts like in Syria, Libya, or Yemen⁴⁹ pose an additional challenge for the EU, while it fails to play a significant role in their resolution. The EU also proved to be unable to keep the Joint Comprehensive Plan for Action (JCPOA or Iran nuclear deal) alive as the US backpedaled from it in May 2018, as well as meaningfully contributing to solving the crisis within the GCC.⁵⁰

The EU's stance towards regional developments is inherently ambivalent. On the one hand, it strives to ensure stability and security. This ultimate goal is at times in conflict with the EU's fundamental liberal democratic values as most of the MENA countries have more or less illiberal regimes. Seeing the region through a European self-image as a 'civilizing' actor promoting democratic principles, may not be accepted by MENA countries (in particular when other actors, such as Russia or China, do not condition their support on adherence to such values).⁵¹

European attitudes toward the so-called Arab Spring since 2011 in individual countries were incoherent. The EU's stance towards regime changes was far from unified and 'same for all'.⁵² Still, the EU lacks consistent foreign policy towards MENA countries.

Through the ENP, it focuses on bilateral ties, with its specific tools as Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) or Association Agreements (AA) governing EU relations tailored to individual MENA countries.⁵³ In 2014, the ENP was overhauled into the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI), which includes Arab countries: Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. The ENI budget totaled €15.4 billion in 2014-20 or 24% of EU expenditures for external action.⁵⁴ Further, ENI funds serve to deepen cross-border cooperation and multi-country involvements. The EU's engagement in Arab MENA countries stands on bilateral relations between EU member states and the states of MENA. The EU's tendency to promote its liberal democratic values abroad is, at times, sidelined at the expense of security and economic interests in the MENA.⁵⁵ The Mediterranean Arab MENA countries, in particular, are

major trade partners for the EU, with €84,6 exports in goods in 2019 within ENI.⁵⁶

As opposed to Arab countries in the Mediterranean, the EU-GCC countries relations are comparably even less developed. In 1988, the Cooperation Agreement between the EU (at that time, European Community was the fundamental institution of the European integration process⁵⁷) and the GCC was signed, focusing on energy, trade, technology, or investments.⁵⁸ The next benchmark was the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which should have been a step towards a deeper integration between the regions.⁵⁹ The FTA was supposed to cover other areas of financial and trade cooperation.⁶⁰ However, these efforts failed after the GCC unilaterally suspended negotiations with the EU in 2008. While a different 'outlook on human rights' was cited as the main reason, the GCC was also worried about deeper liberalization of services and investment and the EU's unwillingness to cut import duty on Gulf petrochemicals.⁶¹ The EU and GCC signed a Joint Action Programme (JAP) on 14 June 2010.⁶²

The JAP 2010-2013 focused on the issue of energy diversification, concentrating on the potential of the alternative energy technologies infrastructure, such as renewable energy technologies, nuclear safety, electricity, and water.⁶³ The GCC remains a significant trade partner, representing the fourth-largest export market (€99.8 billion in 2017), and the EU is the GCC's largest trading partner (€43.8 billion in 2017).⁶⁴

The EU has a limited political impact in the GCC countries, which can be attributed both to the relative geographic distance and the priority of the US presence. Moreover, some of the European countries, namely the UK and France, are more involved in the GCC due to the historical links, interpersonal connection, security issues, and long-lasting mutual trade. Another obstacle to strengthening the EU's position in the GCC is the refusal of these countries to share their influence.⁶⁵ Brexit further complicated the situation with London put between the EU and Washington orbits may pursue independent or conflicting policies with the EU.

45 Yannis A. Stivachtis, "The EU and the Middle East: The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP)," in *Conflict and Diplomacy in the Middle East External Actors and Regional Rivalries*, ed. Yannis A. Stivachtis (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2018), 110-127, [https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/E-IR_Conflict-and-Diplomacy-in-the-Middle-East-E-IR\(5\).pdf#page=118](https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/E-IR_Conflict-and-Diplomacy-in-the-Middle-East-E-IR(5).pdf#page=118).

46 Abbott, "The EU and the Middle East." <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/11/28/the-eu-and-the-middle-east-from-the-euro-mediterranean-partnership-to-the-union-for-the-mediterranean/>.

47 Youngs, "20 Years of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership."

48 Przemysław Osiewicz, "The EU and the Middle East: In search of strategy," *Middle East Institute* (January 2019), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/eu-and-middle-east-search-strategy>.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Youngs, "20 Years of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership."

53 Stivachtis, "The EU and the Middle East."

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Author's calculation of EU export to individual countries in 2019. European Commission, "Countries and regions, Trade in goods – 2019," <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/>.

57 Hadeel Alazawi, "Cooperation and obstacles between EU & GCC," *ARTYKUŁY NAUKOWE* (2016), http://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.desklight-07048491-63f0-4c08-bb0d-6ba780afa6eb/c/Cooperation_264-276.pdf.

58 Silvia Colombo, "Bridging the Gulf: EU - GCC Relations at a Crossroads," *IAI Research papers* (2014), https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iairp_14.pdf.

59 Ibid.

60 Alazawi, "Cooperation and obstacles between EU & GCC."

61 Richard Youngs, "Impasse in Euro-Gulf Relations," *FRIDE* (April 2009), https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/130999/WP80_Impasse_in_euro_ENG_abr09.pdf.

62 Colombo, "Bridging the Gulf: EU - GCC Relations at a Crossroads."

63 Ibid.

64 Tanja Porčnik, and Miguel Cervantes, "Giving the EU-GCC Trade Relations a Chance," *CATO Institute* (March 2020), <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/giving-eu-gcc-trade-relations-chance>.

65 Cinzia Bianco, "A Gulf apart: How Europe can gain influence with the Gulf Cooperation Council," *ECFR* (February 2020), https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/a_gulf_apart_how_europe_can_gain_influence_with_gulf_cooperation_council.

The EU financial aid to individual Arab MENA countries from 2011 to 2018 (in billion EUR).

MENA COUNTRY	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL
Arabian Peninsula									
Yemen	0.19	0.20	0.32	0.30	0.32	0.43	0.74	0.66	3.16
Bahrain	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0
Kuwait	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0
Oman	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0
Qatar	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0
Saudi Arabia	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0
UAE	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0
Levant and Iraq									
Iraq	0.90	0.16	0.13	0.28	0.45	0.82	1.37	0.89	4.19
Jordan	0.18	0.30	0.31	0.28	0.53	0.96	0.80	0.82	4.17
Lebanon	0.20	0.22	0.27	0.36	0.46	0.74	0.62	0.69	3.55
Syria	0.10	0.24	0.78	0.77	1.01	1.71	1.73	1.73	8.05
North Africa									
Algeria	0.20	0.17	0.18	0.17	0.15	0.17	0.20	0.19	1.44
Egypt	0.43	0.94	0.44	0.60	0.55	0.74	0.72	0.95	5.38
Libya	0.12	0.62	0.88	0.73	0.57	0.93	0.30	0.16	0.95
Morocco	0.93	1.08	1.24	1.36	1.10	1.62	1.57	0.92	9.82
Sudan	0.41	0.30	0.25	0.20	0.21	0.26	0.27	0.36	2.26
Tunisia	0.75	0.81	0.63	0.64	0.63	0.70	0.83	0.77	5.75

4

NORTH AFRICA: FIGHTING TO KEEP THE COLD WAR TRADITION ALIVE



Russian attempts to create new partnerships in North Africa, guided by Primakov’s notion of ‘multipolar world,’ can be traced back already to the 2000s with concerted diplomatic efforts resulting in the most part in inking various strategic cooperation agreements. However, Russia mainly managed to continue its special Cold War relationship with Algeria and rejuvenated its ties with Qaddafi’s Libya. The string of Arab revolts, starting in Tunisia in January 2011, marked increased Russian efforts to create partnerships with new regimes in the region. Hallmark of Russia’s declared policy was presenting itself as a pragmatic, non-ideological partner respecting domestic political choices of each country.

Russian policies are mostly reactionary, exploiting gaps, such as in the case of Egypt, whose

rapprochement with Russia was possible due to president Sisi’s attempts to create a bargaining chip facing the US and the EU pressure on domestic policies. Similarly, in the case of Libya, Russian engagement in the civil war revolves around ensuring a seat at the table during the settlement and having a foothold in the post-conflict setting. Sudan also fits the pattern with Russia rushing in to secure its position after its long-term ally president Bashir was deposed on April 11, 2019. Nonetheless, it appears that where an exploitable gap does not occur, Russia does fail to step in wooing new partners among traditional US and EU partners such as Morocco and Tunisia. That is even with Egypt, the increased level of engagement can hardly be seen as Cairo’s strategic pivot towards Russia.

4.1 Egypt

Egypt, under President Sadat, underwent a pivot from the USSR towards the US bloc in the early 1970s and little changed until Putin’s ascendancy. Following Mubarak’s visit to Moscow in April 2001, a bilateral agreement on the mutual development of trade, economics, industry, science, and technology was inked.⁶⁶ Putin visited Cairo in April 2005, for the

first time in 40 years.⁶⁷ Egypt still maintains cordial relations with the US, receiving \$8.9 billion aid in 2011-2018.⁶⁸ Moreover, the 2001 Association Agreement with the EU came to effect in June 2004 and further boosted political and mainly economic relations while creating a free trade zone with Egypt.⁶⁹ Consequently, trade exchange more than doubled from €11.8 billion

66 Borschevskaya, “Russia in the Middle East.”

67 “Putin arrives in Egypt,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/27/world/middleeast/putin-arrives-in-egypt.html>.

68 Figures are extracted from “Foreign Aid Explorer,” USAID, 2020, <https://explorer.usaid.gov/>.

69 “Euro-Mediterranean Agreement Establishing an Association Between the European Communities and their Member States, of the One Part, and the Arab Republic of Egypt, of the Other Part,” 2001, http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/egypt/aa/06_aaa_en.pdf.

in 2004 to €27.9 billion (27.9% of Egypt's trade volume) in 2017.⁷⁰ Egypt also received €7.5 billion European financial assistance in 2007-18.⁷¹

Improvement of Moscow-Cairo relations occurred at times when the Obama administration criticized the coup and Sisi's authoritarian practices, which even led to a temporary suspension of most of the aid to Egypt for 2014 and paused weapon system deliveries.⁷² However, these funds are since back on track.⁷³ Even the halted major biannual US-led multinational exercise 'Bright Star' resumed after eight years in September 2017.⁷⁴ Similarly, the EU maintains a pragmatic approach to Cairo and has taken no tangible action or even strong rhetoric against Sisi's regime's increasing authoritarian tendencies.⁷⁵ With the US and the EU turning a blind eye to domestic affairs, be Egypt is arguably less likely to divert from its traditional Western partners. The Moscow-Cairo relationship has limits, especially in the economic sector, since Russia is not able to commit much-needed investments to the staggering Egyptian economy.⁷⁶ Even multi-billion purchases of Russian arms would hardly be possible without funding from Gulf allies.⁷⁷

During the Mursi's presidency since June 2012, ties between Egypt and Russia were mostly put on hold

despite one Mursi's visit to Moscow in April 2013, when he unsuccessfully tried to secure a \$2 billion loan.⁷⁸ After the military coup on July 3, 2013 and Sisi's ascendancy, president Putin endorsed Sisi's bid for the presidency during his Moscow visit in February 2014 (even before al-Sisi announced it himself).⁷⁹ With Sisi's presidency, the 'honeymoon' with Moscow truly commenced and included several high-level visits, signing new cooperation agreements, expanded military cooperation as well as Russian attempts to enter Egyptian gas sector. Sisi visited Moscow four times only in 2013-15 and hosted Putin in Cairo on February 15, 2015,⁸⁰ and on December 11, 2017.⁸¹ Later the comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation were signed between the two countries in Sochi on November 17, 2018, focusing on upgrading political and economic relations.⁸² It further expanded on the 2+2 meetings between countries' foreign and defense ministers since November 2013.⁸³ Sisi also co-chaired a major Russian initiative, the Russia-Africa Forum, held on October 23-24, 2019, aimed at wooing African states, including by signing up to \$12.5 billion deals.⁸⁴ A contributing factor to cordial relations is undoubtedly also good personal ties between the two leaders with Trenin asserting that "Putin sees the Egyptian leader as the only viable option capable of bringing a modicum of stability to the Arab world's biggest nation."⁸⁵

Trade between the two countries grew significantly, with Russia exports increasing from \$2.35 billion in 2011 to \$7 billion in 2018, making it the most critical buyer of Russian goods among Arab countries.⁸⁶ Russia is essential for the tourism sector, with around 3 million Russian tourists going to Egypt every year as of 2015⁸⁷ (a significant number since, in 2019, 13.6 million tourists visited Egypt in total⁸⁸). Tourism was hit by Russia's decision to suspend flights to Egypt following the crash of Metrojet flight on October 31, 2015, due to suspected bomb explosion on board, killing 224 people on board, mostly Russians. Flights to Cairo resumed in April 2018,⁸⁹ but crucial charter flights directly to sea resorts, such as Sharm al-Shaikh, are still suspended as Egypt works on improving airport security.⁹⁰

Egypt also reached a preliminary agreement with Rosatom on constructing a nuclear power plant in al-Dabaa in February 2015, which was finalized in September 2017. Russia agreed to finance \$25 billion (85% of the cost of the project) through a 13 years loan, and the construction of the first of four 1200 GW reactors is scheduled to start in mid-2021.⁹¹ It is worth mentioning that Egypt only turned to Russia after President Obama in 2009, effectively scrapping Bush's February 2006 Global Nuclear Energy Partnership. Since then, the US has shown little interest in expanding strategic energy relations with Egypt.⁹²

Russia also agreed on building an exclusive Russian industrial zone in Port Said, the complementing Suez Canal Area Development Project, on May 23, 2018, expecting to invest up to \$7 billion.⁹³ This project is however stalled and no works are underway as of August 2020.

Russia invested in the quickly developing gas sector. Gazprom and Tatneft plan to solidify their position in Egypt by investing in the Port Said Russian industrial zone. In October 2017, Rosneft bought a 30% stake in Eni-operated giant Zohr offshore gas field, producing 180 million m3 of gas as of March 2019.⁹⁴ Consequently, in January 2019, Egypt, for the first time, exported more gas than imported to satisfy domestic demand.⁹⁵ Russian companies, for example, Zarubezhneft, which started drilling in two offshore sites in December 2019,⁹⁶ are eager to partake in what is coined as "astonishing gas renaissance."⁹⁷ Egypt certainly has ambitions, with president Sisi noting in 2018 that he has "been dreaming about it for four years, that we become a regional hub for energy."⁹⁸ While Egyptian gas would be coming at a higher price than the Russian one due to its more expensive offshore drilling, it is a way to diversify supplies to Europe strategically. Mamedov argues that "By helping MENA producers send more oil and gas to Europe's Mediterranean region, Russia makes the idea of pipelines connecting areas outside the region and Europe less feasible."⁹⁹ Should Russia

70 "Egypt," *European Commission* (2020), <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/egypt/>.

71 Figures are extracted from "EU Aid Explorer," *European Commission*, 2020, <https://euaidexplorer.ec.europa.eu/>.

72 Amy Hawthorne, "What's Happening with Suspended Military Aid for Egypt? Part I: The Apaches et al. One Year On," *Atlantic Council, Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East* (2014), https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Whats_Happening_with_Military_Aid_to_Egypt_Part_I.pdf.

73 Roberta Rampton, and Arshad Mohammed, "Obama ends freeze on U.S. military aid to Egypt," *Reuters*, April 1, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-egypt-military/obama-ends-freeze-on-u-s-military-aid-to-egypt-idUSKBN0MR2GR20150401>.

74 Michael Battles, "U.S., Egypt kick off Exercise Bright Star 2017," *U.S. Central Command*, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/1308877/us-egypt-kick-off-exercise-bright-star-2017/>.

75 See for example Kelly Petillo, "Upholding values abroad: Europe's balancing act in Egypt," *European Council on Foreign Relations* (2020), https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_upholding_values_abroad_europes_balancing_act_in_egypt.

76 Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East."

77 Lazar Berman, and Moshe Albo "Egypt's Strategic Balancing Act between the US and Russia," *The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security* (2020), <https://jiss.org.il/en/berman-albo-egypts-strategic-balancing-act-between-the-us-and-russia/>.

78 Alexander Bratersky, "Morsi Seeks Union with Kremlin, Fails to Get Loan," *The Moscow Times*, April 21, 2013, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/04/21/morsi-seeks-union-with-kremlin-fails-to-get-loan-a23463>.

79 Jonathan Marcus, "Sisi in Russia: Moscow's Egyptian Gambit," *BBC*, February 13, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26177792>.

80 Mark N. Katz, "Putin's Visit to Egypt: Much Pomp but Little Circumstance," *Atlantic Council*, February 11, 2015, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/putin-s-visit-to-egypt-much-pomp-but-little-circumstance/>.

81 Sergey Balmasov, "Putin's visit to Egypt inspires hope for growth in Cairo," *Al-Monitor*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/russia-egypt-putin-visit-sisi-syria-turkey.html>.

82 Menna A. Farouk, "Egypt-Russia partnership deal takes bilateral ties to new heights," *Al-Monitor*, October 28, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/10/egypt-russia-cooperation-agreement-economic-relations.html>.

83 "Egypt's foreign Minister, top army officials head to Russia for 2+2 dialogue," *Egypt Independent*, June 23, 2019, <https://egyptindependent.com/egypts-foreign-minister-top-army-officials-head-to-russia-for-22-dialogue/>.

84 Henry Foy, "Russia turns on the charm at first Africa summit," *Financial Times*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/b042bd8e-f648-11e9-9ef3-eca8fc8f2d65>.

85 Trenin, "Russia in the Middle East," 3.

86 Figures are extracted from "The Atlas of Economic Complexity," 2020, <https://atlas.cid.harvard.edu/explore>.

87 Ayman Saad, "Egypt desperately seeking Russian tourists," *The Arab Weekly*, August 14, 2016, <https://theArabweekly.com/egypt-desperately-seeking-russian-tourists>.

88 Mira Maged, "Egypt's tourism saw 21% growth in 2019: UNWTO," *Egypt Independent*, January 22, 2020, <https://egyptindependent.com/egypts-tourism-saw-21-growth-in-2019-unwto/>.

89 "Russia's Aeroflot to resume flights to Egypt on April 11," *Reuters*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-egypt-flights-aeroflot/russias-aeroflot-to-resume-flights-to-egypt-from-april-11-idUSL8N1QV5PF>.

90 See Mel Plant, "Blast-proof tourism: Egypt builds a wall around Sharm al-Shaikh to 'keep out terrorist and Bedouins'," *The New Arab*, October 25, 2019, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2019/10/25/egypt-is-building-a-concrete-wall-around-sharm-el-sheikh>.

91 "Russia Kicks Off Work on Egypt's First Nuclear Power Plant," *Warsaw Institute*, February 26, 2020, <https://warsawinstitute.org/russia-kicks-off-work-egypts-first-nuclear-power-plant/>.

92 Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia-Egypt Nuclear Power Plant Deal: Why Ignoring Egypt's Needs Is Bad for the U.S.," *The Washington Institute for the Near East Policy* (2015), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russia-egypt-nuclear-power-plant-deal-why-ignoring-egypts-needs-is-bad-for>.

93 Nataliya Bugayova, and Jack Ulises, "The Kremlin's Campaign in Egypt," *The Institute for the Study of War* (2018), <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20-%20Russia%20Egypt%20Campaign%20-%20June%202018.pdf>.

94 Clifford Krauss, and Declan Walsh, "Egypt Looks to Offshore Gas Field for Growth and Influence," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/11/business/energy-environment/egypt-gas.html>.

95 Ibid.

96 "Russia's Zarubezhneft announced it acquired two offshore concessions in Egypt," *Reuters*, December 24, 2019 (in Arabic), <https://ara.reuters.com/article/businessNews/idARAKBN1YS12X>.

97 Chris Stephen, "Egypt's gas gold rush," *Petroleum Economist*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.petroleum-economist.com/articles/upstream/exploration-production/2019/egypts-gas-gold-rush>.

98 Krauss, and Walsh, "Egypt Looks to Offshore Gas."

99 Rauf Mammadov, "Russia in the Middle East: Energy Forever?," in *Russia in the Middle East*, eds. Theodore Karasik, Stephen Blank (Washington D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2018), 212-39, <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Russia-in-the-Middle-East-online.pdf?x74670,220>.

continue to invest in new exploratory offshore drilling projects (and one should expect it will be doing so), its leverage over where Egyptian gas could prove detrimental to attempts to diversify gas supply from North Africa.

A crucial aspect of boosted Russo-Egyptian cooperation concerns both arms deals and military collaboration. Since Sisi came to power, Egypt obtained almost \$3.5 billion worth of Russian weaponry in 2011-19 (33.6% of Egypt's arms imports), making it the second-biggest buyer of Russian arms among Arab countries after Algeria.¹⁰⁰ Only in September 2014, Egypt ordered 46 MiG-29M jets, helicopters as well as surface-to-air systems Buk M2 and Tor M2 for \$3.5 billion.¹⁰¹ A number of these deals and plans are yet to come to life. For example, the 2015 contract for 46 Ka-52 helicopters¹⁰² faced technical difficulties, and only 12 were delivered as of the end of 2018, prompting Egypt to buy more Apache helicopters from the US.¹⁰³ In March 2019, Egypt reportedly ordered \$2 billion worth of next-gen fighters Su-35s.¹⁰⁴ In June 2020, Egypt supposedly planned to acquire 500 T-90MS main battle tanks under the license-build agreement.¹⁰⁵ The tanks should be assembled in a facility in Egypt.¹⁰⁶

However, the NATO countries remain the most important: France \$3 billion and the US \$2.26 billion in 2011-19 as compared to Russian procurements for \$3.5 billion.¹⁰⁷ While the EU stayed silent on the matter of Egypt procuring advanced Russian weaponry, the US voiced their reservations. State Secretary Mike Pompeo warned Cairo on November 14, 2019, that such purchases as planned Su-35s would, at minimum, complicate further arms deals with the US as well as military aid.¹⁰⁸ Apparently, Egypt takes these warnings under consideration since the Su-35 agreement was never officially confirmed despite news that they are already 'en route' to Egypt in August 2020.¹⁰⁹ If needed, the US could impose sanctions under the CAATSA as it did to China in September 2018 for buying Russian S-400¹¹⁰ and Su-35 and still threatens to impose on India for the October of 2016 S-400 deal.¹¹¹

The two countries also intensified joint military drills, such yearly paratrooper exercise 'Defenders of Friendship' organized since 2016.¹¹² Another issue is Russian hunger for military and naval bases in North Africa. On October 30, 2017, Russia reportedly approved a preliminary deal to use Egyptian airspace and military bases.¹¹³ In October 2016, Russia allegedly negotiated about leasing and renovating Sidi Barani

naval base.¹¹⁴ However, both of these deals remain on hold from the Egyptian side. It is highly unlikely that Egypt signs any document that would allow for major permanent Russian naval or military bases to exist due to its interest in maintaining ties with the US (and the EU/NATO countries for that matter). That is even though Russian forces were reportedly deployed already since early 2017 in Sidi Barani and Mersa Matruh bases to support Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA).¹¹⁵

4.2 Sudan

Russia has enjoyed a decades-long relationship with Sudan and supported Omar al-Bashir's regime even after the 2005 UN arms embargo following the regime's ethnic cleansing campaigns in Darfur. Following the country's partition in the aftermath of the South Sudanese independence referendum in July 2011, Russia continued its relationship with the regime of President Omar al-Bashir. Russian imports rose from \$112 million in 2011 to \$509 million in 2018 (6.68% of the country's imports).¹¹⁷ Moscow also supplied \$244 million worth of arms in 2011-19, out of \$795 million worth Sudanese procurements in total.¹¹⁸ Russia also provided Su-35 fighters to Khartoum in November 2017, becoming a first Arab country flying Russia Su-35s.¹¹⁹ In 2016, Russia agreed to export 170 T-72 tanks to Sudan.¹²⁰

While Sudan lost 75% of its oil reserves to partition,

Egypt, like Russia, supports the LNA in the Libyan civil war. In Libya, Egyptian and Russian interests converge, especially since Turkey militarily intervened in Libya in January 2020 to tip the scales in favour of the Tripoli-based government and to secure Libya's hydrocarbons and disputed maritime borders, which puts it at odds with Egypt. Sisi also supports Assad's regime in Syria, a key Russian ally.¹¹⁶

significant gold deposits were found in 2015.¹²¹ Consequently, Russian companies explored investment opportunities in Sudan's natural resources, especially gold, as of the March 2017 agreement between the Sudanese government and Esimath suggests.¹²² Another Russian company in the fledgling mining industry is M-Invest and its subsidiary Meroe Gold, reportedly also securing significant concessions.¹²³ Sudanese President al-Bashir also visited Moscow in November 2017 (for the first time since the 1970s) in a bid to deepen economic, political and security ties. Al-Bashir blamed the US for the partition of the country in 2011 and called for Russia to tackle US meddling as well as noting that he "discussed with the Russian president and minister of defense the possibility of setting up a military base on the Red Sea."¹²⁴ In January 2019, Sudanese parliament

100 Figures are extracted from "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

101 Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Tactical Side of Russia's Arms Sales to the Middle East," in *Russia in the Middle East*, eds. Theodore Karasik, Stephen Blank (Washington D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2018), 183-211, <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Russia-in-the-Middle-East-online.pdf?x74670>.

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106 Ibid.

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108 Khalid Hassan, "Will Egypt heed US threat of sanctions for Russian jet deal?," *Al-Monitor*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/11/washington-warns-egypt-against-acquisition-russian-su-35.html>.

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110 Lesley Wroughton, and Patricia Zengerle, "U.S. sanctions China for buying Russian fighter jets, missiles," *Reuters*, September 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-sanctions/u-s-sanctions-china-for-buying-russian-fighter-jets-missiles-idUSKCN1M02TP>.

111 Shankyaneel Sarkar, "'Possibility of sanctions on India remain on the table', says top US diplomat," *Hindustan Times*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/possibility-of-us-sanctions-on-india-remain-on-table-report/story-YUQle0dHxtczHnOLLCVxVO.html>.

112 Jörgen Elfving, "Egyptian Paratroopers on Russian Soil: 'Defenders of Friendship 2019'," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 133 (2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/egyptian-paratroopers-on-russian-soil-defenders-of-friendship-2019/>.

113 "Russia Negotiating Deal For Its Warplanes To Use Egyptian Bases," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 1, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-negotiating-deal-for-warplanes-use-egyptian-bases-/28889662.html>.

114 "Egypt 'ready to agree' new Russian air base on coast," *Middle East Eye*, October 11, 2016, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-ready-agree-new-russian-air-base-coast>.

115 Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, and Lin Noueihed, "Exclusive: Russia appears to deploy forces in Egypt, eyes on Libya role – sources," *Reuters*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-libya-exclusive/exclusive-russia-appears-to-deploy-forces-in-egypt-eyes-on-libya-role-sources-idUSKBN16K2RY>.

116 Oren Kessler, "Egypt Picks Sides in the Syrian War," *Foreign Affairs*, February 12, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-02-12/egypt-picks-sides-syrian-war>. See also George Mikhail, "Egypt boosts ties with Syria," *Al-Monitor*, November 14, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/11/egypt-parliament-host-syria-ambassador-to-restore-relations.html>.

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121 Marcel Plichta, "Why Russia Is Standing By Sudan's Bashir," *World Politics Review*, March 29, 2019, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/27714/with-russian-activity-in-sudan-growing-moscow-stands-by-bashir>.

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drafted a deal allowing Russia to build a naval base on the Red Sea coast.¹²⁵

Russia went a great deal to protect al-Bashir, when he faced widespread protests calling for his resignation in December 2018. Apparently, M-Invest, owned by Putin's close aide Yevgeniy Prigozhin, was instrumental in creating state-of-the-art counter-campaign to quell the protests.¹²⁶ At the same time, Russian officials also tried to delegitimize the demonstrators.¹²⁷ However, al-Bashir was deposed after a 30-year rule by a military coup on April 11, 2019, installing the military-led Transitional Military Council (TMC). Moscow, previously supporting al-Bashir, utilized its ties with the Sudanese military to solidify its foothold. Russia, along with China, in support of the junta, blocked the UN Security Council's condemnation of security forces' crackdown on protestors against the TMC in Khartoum, which resulted in 120 deaths on June 3-6, 2019.

The TMC in turn, agreed to uphold existing economic, military¹²⁸, and political agreements with Moscow as the chairman of Sudanese Sovereign Council (a military-dominated governing body replacing the TMC in August 2019) Abdulfatah al-Burhan noted after the Russia-Africa Summit held in Sochi on October 23-24, 2019.¹²⁹ On the other hand, al-Burhan made it clear that he puts on hold any plans for establishing

a permanent foreign military presence.¹³⁰ Russian influence continues since Prigozhin's M-Invest, a cover for Wagner PMC, continues to operate in Sudan, which prompted the US to impose further sanctions due to their activities in the country on July 15, 2020.¹³¹

Russia endorsed the August 2019 agreement between the military and civilian actors to share power until elections scheduled for 2022, perhaps precisely because the military is still the kingmaker. However, its ties with civilian leadership are strongly constrained due to Moscow's previous support of al-Bashir and internal meddling. Russia will likely work on preventing the military from losing its grip. Another hurdle is Russian maneuvering between Egypt and Sudan as "(...) *Cairo accuses the Sudanese of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, while Khartoum blames the Egyptians for supporting South Sudan.*"¹³²

The EU provided €4.7 billion aid to Sudan in 2007-18¹³³ and approved €426 million since August 2019, specifically to support "the consolidation of Sudanese transition."¹³⁴ A pattern of Russian attempts to gain longer-term influence in the weakened country through a combination of economic concessions and influencing political processes via Moscow-tied entities as the Wagner Group follows the Libyan and Syrian suite, and thus should be of concern and actively countered.

gas in 2019, making it the third-largest supplier after Russia and Norway.¹³⁵ The EU remains the most critical trading partner, importing €16.3 billion

worth of goods and, in turn exporting €16.9 billion as of 2019.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, despite the Association Agreement between Algiers and the EU came to force in September 2005, political, economic and security cooperation remains rudimentary, especially when it comes to required market liberalization.¹³⁷ For example, Algeria has maintained somewhat protectionist laws regarding the oil and gas sector, ensuring that the state company Sonatrach always has a 51% share in any project.¹³⁸ Up until the 2020 Finance Act, the percentage of Algerian ownership was required for any company established in Algeria. Now, it is limited only to strategic activities.

Consequently, Algeria received only €2.5 billion assistance in 2007-18, much less compared to its smaller neighbours such as Tunisia and Morocco.¹³⁹ Algeria's ties to the US remain limited to cooperation on combating terrorism (mainly information sharing). It is asserted that "Algeria's reliance on Russia for most of its defense acquisitions is also a point of friction, though Algerian purchases of U.S. equipment have increased in recent years."¹⁴⁰

Algeria remains the most important ally for Russia with rejuvenated and deepened multi-faceted relations since the early 2000s, tracking their origins to the Cold War era. In 1969-89, Algeria procured \$11 billion worth of Soviet arms, having 90% of its

weaponry of the East bloc origin in 1991.¹⁴¹ Russia and Algeria signed a strategic cooperation agreement already in 2001, including the memorandum of understanding between countries' ministries of defense (the first such treaty inked between Russia and an Arab country).¹⁴² Trade turnover between the two countries also increased to \$3.4 billion in 2019.¹⁴³ In comparison, Russia exported only \$0.35 billion worth of goods to Algeria in 2005.¹⁴⁴ Russia also signed a memorandum of understanding on nuclear cooperation with Algeria in April 2016.¹⁴⁵

Relations further deepened with Putin during his visit in March 2006, writing off \$4.7 billion Soviet-era debt in exchange for new arms procurements.¹⁴⁶ Indeed in 2011-19, Algeria bought \$6.38 billion worth of arms (71.6% of total Algerian weapons purchases).¹⁴⁷ Among these are advanced systems, including vessels and submarines, Su-34 bombers, T-90SA Tagil tanks, APCs, surface-to-air defense systems, radars, connection to Russian Global Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS) since June 2018, as well as Iskender-E surface-to-surface mobile ballistic system.¹⁴⁸ Since October 2017, talks are underway about possible procurement of the S-400 air defense system¹⁴⁹ as Algeria engaged in negotiations with the US to avoid CAATSA sanctions should it move forward with the purchase.¹⁵⁰ While there is active military cooperation and intelligence sharing, just as during

4.3 Algeria

Algeria maintains strong trade ties with European countries, especially when it comes to exporting its natural resources as it supplied 10.6% of European

125 John C. K. Daly, "Russia deepens presence in Sudan," *The Arab Weekly*, March 24, 2019, <https://thearabweekly.com/russia-deepens-presence-sudan>.

126 "Bashir Turned to Russian Company to Quell Protests," *Sharq al-Awsat*, April 26, 2019, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/1696041/bashir-turned-russian-company- quell-sudan-protests>.

127 Samuel Ramani, "Moscow's Hand in Sudan's Future," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, July 11, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/79488>.

128 "Russia signs military deal with Sudan," *UA Wire*, May 26, 2019, <https://www.uawire.org/russia-signs-military-deal-with-sudan>.

129 <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/el-burhan-sudan-to-continue-cooperation-with-russia>

130 Laura Barber, "China's Response to Sudan's Political Transition," *United States Institute for Peace* (2020), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/05/chinas-response-sudans-political-transition>.

131 "The United States Imposes Sanctions on Russian Financier's Global Sanctions Evasion Network," *U.S. Department of State*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-imposes-sanctions-on-russian-financiers-global-sanctions-evasion-network/>.

132 "No chance of Russian military base in Sudan."

133 Figures are extracted from "EU Aid Explorer," *European Commission*, 2020, <https://euaidexplorer.ec.europa.eu/>.

134 "EU-Sudan Relations," *European Commission*, 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/factsheet_eu_sudan_june_2020.pdf.

135 Eurostat, "EU import of energy products."

136 "Algeria," *European Commission*, 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/algeria/>.

137 See also Alex Walsh, "Algeria-Europe economic integration: Where are we now and where do we go?," *Middle East Institute* (2020), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/algeria-europe-economic-integration-where-are-we-now-and-where-do-we-go>.

138 Ibid.

139 Figures are extracted from "EU Aid Explorer," *European Commission*, 2020, <https://euaidexplorer.ec.europa.eu/>.

140 Alexis Arieff, "Algeria," *Congressional Research Service, In Focus* (2020), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11116>.

141 Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East." See also Andrew McGregor, "Defense of Domination? Building Algerian Power With Russian Arms," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 122 (2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/defense-or-domination-building-algerian-power-with-russian-arms/>.

142 Kester Kenn Klomegah, "Understanding Russia-Algerian Strategic Partnership," *Modern Diplomacy*, July 19, 2020, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/07/19/understanding-russia-algerian-strategic-partnership/>.

143 Ibid.

144 Figures are extracted from "The Atlas of Economic Complexity," 2020, <https://atlas.cid.harvard.edu/explore>.

145 "Russia and Algeria signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the cooperation on peaceful use of nuclear energy," *Albawaba*, April 28, 2016, <https://www.albawaba.com/business/pr/russia-and-algeria-signed-memorandum-understanding-cooperation-peaceful-use-nuclear-ener>.

146 Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia's growing influence in North Africa," *Atlantic Community*, February 26, 2019, <https://atlantic-community.org/russias-growing-influence-in-north-africa/#>.

147 Figures are extracted from "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

148 McGregor, "Defense of Domination?."

149 Yuri Barmin, "Russia in the Middle East Until 2024: From Hard Power to Sustainable Influence," in *Russia in the Middle East*, eds. Theodore Karasik, Stephen Blank (Washington D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2018), 338-66, <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Russia-in-the-Middle-East-online.pdf?x74670>.

150 Lamine Ghanmi, "Algeria seeks to avoid US sanctions over Russian arms purchases," *The Arab Weekly*, October 5, 2018, <https://thearabweekly.com/algeria-seeks-avoid-us-sanctions-over-russian-arms-purchases>.

the Cold War times, Algeria refuses to allow Russia to have a naval base on Algerian soil, despite Moscow repeatedly expressed interest in renting Mers al-Kabir base near Oran.¹⁵¹

In the energy sector, there is only a limited space for cooperation between Russia and Algeria since they are indeed competitors in supplying gas to Europe. Algerian protectionist policies and the decisive role of Sonatrach prevent any significant advancement of Russian companies in the Algerian gas sector. Gazprom downplayed its role in drilling and exploration, as it left the major gas field Zlamla al-Rekeb and Zlamla al-Rekeb North in November 2018.¹⁵² Lukoil signed a memorandum of understanding of possible production and exploration with Sonatrach in May 2020,¹⁵³ but in general, Russian imprint in the Algerian energy sector remains relatively low. Nevertheless, Russia keeps a close eye on possible major gas pipeline projects, further diversifying supply to Europe. As soon as the EU and Nigeria signed a deal on Trans-Saharan Pipeline, bringing up to 30 billion m³ of gas per year from Nigeria through Algeria to Europe, Russia immediately invested in July 2009 \$2.5 billion into Nigerian Petroleum Corporation.¹⁵⁴ While this pipeline is unlikely to materialize anytime soon both due to security issues in Sahara-Sahel regions and because Europe diversifies its gas supply with the LNG (for example, the US surpassed Algeria in supplying gas to Spain in May 2020¹⁵⁵).

While Russia's position has been historically more aligned with Algeria and the Polisario Front seeking

independence of Western Sahara, Russia struggles to be more active in resolving the conflict since 2018 maintaining 'positive neutrality'.¹⁵⁶ When it comes to Libya, Moscow's and Algiers outlooks diverge. Algeria supports Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), fearing Haftar's control over Tripoli and, to that extent in became more active in backing the GNA since Haftar's attack on the city started in April 2019.¹⁵⁷

Following Abdulaziz Bouteflika's decision to run for the fifth time for a president, a wave of protests hit the country in February 2019. Pressured by the military, Bouteflika withdrew from the race and resigned on April 2, 2019. Although presidential elections were held on December 12, 2019, with Abdelmadjid Tebboune winning the office, the vote was boycotted by many with only 41% participation (according to unofficial figures even 10-15%) as the demonstrators refused Tebboune and viewed him as a military-installed figure.¹⁵⁸ Algeria's transition from the *ancien régime* is far from over in 2020.¹⁵⁹ Interestingly, Russia, usually loudly supporting the status quo, did not express any significant support for its two-decades-old ally Bouteflika. Instead, it carefully, from the onset, maintained that it is an internal issue, not discrediting the protests movement. As Putin noted on the sideline of the Russia-Africa Summit held in Sochi on October 23-24, 2019, "*We are aware that major political events are taking place in Algeria. We sincerely wish success to the Algerian people in overcoming the current difficult transitional period.*"¹⁶⁰

It appears that Russia is pragmatic, careful not to alien possible new forces coming to power, which could

lead to liberalization that would bring Algeria closer to the EU or the US. One could argue that continuous political uncertainty with regards to domestic and

foreign policies of the country is indeed a threat to Russian interests and until now privileged relations with Algerians.

4.4 Tunisia

Both the US and the EU eagerly supported Tunisia's regime transition at the onset of the Jasmine Revolution, which led to president Ben Ali's ousting in January 2011. Cooperation further deepened since 2011, with President Obama declaring Tunisia as a Major Non-NATO Ally on July 10, 2015,¹⁶¹ receiving significant assistance for the security sector of up to \$885 million in 2011-2018.¹⁶² The Tunisian security apparatus, especially the military, remained purposely weak during Ali's regime. Later it needed to ramp up its capabilities facing the threat of domestic Islamist extremists such as Ansar al-Sharia or other ISIS-linked groupings.¹⁶³ The magnitude of Tunisia extremist problem is illustrated by around 30 thousand Tunisia travelling to join Sunni insurgencies in Syria or Iraq in 2013-April 2017, while out of that, 27 thousand were stopped by the authorities, some 2,900 reached their destination.¹⁶⁴ This has become increasingly pressing with ISIS attacks in June 2015 in Sousse and March 2015 in Bardo National Museum in the capital, specifically targeting the country's vital tourist industry.

Thus, security cooperation on a bilateral level: with the US direct military presence within the train, advise,

and assist program at least since February 2017;¹⁶⁵ Germany-US assistance to improve border security and other counterterrorism cooperation efforts, especially with France and the UK since 2015.¹⁶⁶ On a multilateral level, Tunisia lively cooperates with the EU¹⁶⁷ and with NATO, having an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme since 2014.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, the EU provides financial assistance to help Tunisia's transition - €4.2 billion in 2007-18¹⁶⁹ and based on the Privileged Partnership signed in 2012 and since then further enhanced political, economic as well as security cooperation.¹⁷⁰

With Tunisia having firm ties with the West, Russia has only been able to make limited progress in an attempt to build relations in North Africa, especially since the post-2011 Tunisia became much closer to the US and the EU. Tunisia's repeatedly expressed readiness to diversify relations with Russia, for example, as noted during Russian FM Lavrov's visit in January 2019. Still, such courtship has not been followed by any significant steps to deepen relations or counterterrorism cooperation, as suggested.¹⁷¹ Lavrov's Maghreb tour secured Tunisia's support for Syria's return to the Arab League,¹⁷² which is, however,

151 Barmin, "Russia in the Middle East Until 2024."

152 James Cockayne, "Algeria: Gazprom Stalls on El Assel," *MEES*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.mees.com/2019/2/1/oil-gas/algeria-gazprom-stalls-on-el-assel/38366360-2634-11e9-83e1-ef4d479ff042>.

153 "Algeria's Sonatrach signs MOU with Russia's Lukoil," *Reuters*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-algeria-energy-lukoil/algerias-sonatrach-signs-mou-with-russias-lukoil-idUSKBN22G1JC>.

154 "EU, Russia struggle for stake in trans-Saharan gas pipeline," *Deutsche Welle*, July 7, 2009, <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-russia-struggle-for-stake-in-trans-saharan-gas-pipeline/a-4461768>.

155 Safaa Kasraoui, "Algeria Loses Status as Spain's Main Gas Supplier," *Morocco World News*, May 10, 2020, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2020/05/302151/us-overtakes-algeria-as-spains-main-gas-supplier/>.

156 Mohammed Issam Laaroussi, "Russia's Search for Strategic Partnership in North Africa: Balancing Algeria and Morocco," *The Washington Institute for the Near East Policy* (2019), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/russias-search-for-strategic-partnerships-in-north-africa-balancing-algeria>.

157 Alia Brahimi, and Akram Khariief, "Why Algeria is suddenly more interested in Libya," *Atlantic Council*, March 6, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/why-algeria-is-suddenly-more-interested-in-libya/>.

158 Yahia H. Zoubir, "Can Algeria overcome its long-lasting crisis?," *Brookings*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/01/15/can-algeria-overcome-its-long-lasting-political-crisis/>.

159 M. Tahir Kilavuz, and Sharan Grewal, "Algerians have been protesting for over a year. Here's what you need to know," *Brookings*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/02/26/algerians-have-been-protesting-for-a-year-heres-what-you-need-to-know/>

160 "Meeting with the Head of the Republic of Algeria Abdelkader Bensalah," *President of Russia*, October 24, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61895>.

161 Office of the Spokesperson, "Designation of Tunisia as a Major Non-NATO Ally," *U.S. Department of State*, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/07/244811.htm>.

162 Figures are extracted from "Foreign Aid Explorer," *USAID*, 2020, <https://explorer.usaid.gov/>.

163 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Tunisian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria," *The Washington Institute for the Near East Policy, Policy Notes*, no. 55 (2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote55-Zelin.pdf>.

164 Ibid.

165 Lilia Blaise, Eric Schmitt, and Carlotta Gall, "Why the U.S. and Tunisia Keep Their Cooperation Secret," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/world/africa/us-tunisia-terrorism.html>. See also Hijab Shah, and Melissa Dalton, "The Evolution of Tunisia's Military and the Role of Foreign Security Sector Assistance," *Carnegie Middle East Center* (2020), <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/04/29/evolution-of-tunisia-s-military-and-role-of-foreign-security-sector-assistance-pub-81602>.

166 Anthony Dworkin, and Fatim Zohra El Malki, "The southern front line: EU counterterrorism with Tunisia and Morocco," *European Council on Foreign Relations* (2018), https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_southern_front_line_eu_counter_terrorism_cooperation.

167 Ibid.

168 Umberto Profazio, "Tunisia's reluctant partnership with NATO," *IJSS* (2018), <https://www.ijss.org/blogs/analysis/2018/04/tunisia-reluctant-partnership-nato>.

169 Figures are extracted from "EU Aid Explorer," *European Commission*, 2020, <https://euaidexplorer.ec.europa.eu/>.

170 "Tunisia," *European Commission* (2020), https://ec.europa.eu/neighborhood-enlargement/neighborhood/countries/tunisia_en.

171 Marianna Belenkaya, "Russia keeps plugging away at cooperation with North Africa," *Al-Monitor*, January 29, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/01/russia-north-africa-algeria-morocco-tunisia.html>.

172 "Tunisia says Syria's 'natural place' is within Arab League," *The Arab Weekly*, January 26, 2019, <https://theArabweekly.com/tunisia-says-syrias-natural-place-within-arab-league>.

more connected to Tunisia's longer-term pragmatic shift in its views on Assad's regime.¹⁷³

In the economic sector, Russian exports decreased from \$1.15 billion in 2011 to \$0.68 billion in 2017. Russia also failed to supply any arms, despite offering several systems to Tunisia,¹⁷⁴ as Europe and the US are by far the leading weapon suppliers of Tunisia \$400 million procured arms in 2012-19.¹⁷⁵ It was, however, reported that Russia shared satellite imagery on terrorist group movements and smuggling operations with Tunisia since 2016.¹⁷⁶

Tunisia has been grossly affected by the spill-over of the protracted Libyan conflict, costing it a drop in GDP by 24% only in 2011-15.¹⁷⁷ Deadly ISIS incursion from Libya to Tunisian town of Ben Gardane on March 7, 2016,¹⁷⁸ further boosted cooperation with NATO countries, not with Russia. Tunis, same as Algerians, supports Tripoli-based GNA since *"They fear the prospect of a Haftar victory, which they view as a vehicle for increased Egyptian influence along their border with Libya."*¹⁷⁹ It not only put them at odds with Russia throwing their weight behind Haftar and Moscow's determination to stand against Turkish support of the GNA since January 2020.

The conflict, since increased Russian and Turkish engagement, experienced a rapid proliferation of usage of advanced weaponry, including drones jets,¹⁸⁰ anti-tank weapons such as Javelins, and surface-to-air systems.¹⁸¹ Such developments naturally made Tunisia, preferring a settlement rather than further escalation and risk of more spillover, more anxious.

Tunisia's oil and gas sector, with a modest production of 60 thousand b/d of oil in 2013 and 1.2 billion m³ of gas in 2017. The region remains dominated by Western companies such as Austrian OMV, Italian ENI, and the British BG Group,¹⁸² with no reports of Russian companies interested in investing. Tunisia also signed a memorandum of understanding on nuclear energy in June 2015, followed by the September 2016 agreement on nuclear cooperation.¹⁸³ The single most significant Russian imprint has been the ten-fold increase of Russian tourists visiting Tunisia. The year 2016 saw 600 thousand Russians visiting the country.¹⁸⁴ While the initial growth was due to cancelled flights from Russia to Egypt in 2019, the number remained at 635 thousand.¹⁸⁵ Yet, it is an overstatement, based mainly on the mere existence of nuclear cooperation agreement and the increased tourism, to state that Tunisia has actually *"edged closer to Moscow in recent years."*¹⁸⁶

4.5 Libya

Qaddafi, after assuming power in 1969, almost immediately turned to the USSR for support and remained an important Cold War ally. After a break in the 1990s, Russia began courting Libya once again in the 2000s. A breaking point was indeed Putin's visit in Tripoli in April 2008, which resulted in writing off \$4.5 billion Soviet-era debt in exchange for future business deals, arms contracts, and energy deals.¹⁸⁷ Indeed, the timing of Russia rushing in for its old ally was no coincidence since the EU began to normalize and expand ties with Qaddafi as UN sanctions against his regime were called off following Libyans dropping their WMD programme in 2003.¹⁸⁸

Subsequently in 2009, Russia signed arms deals for \$4 billion for the modernization and acquisition of new weapon systems.¹⁸⁹ More agreements were inked on the rejuvenation of railways (\$3 billion¹⁹⁰) and various oil and gas energy deals (\$4 billion).¹⁹¹ In total, Russia lost up to \$11 billion with the fall of Qaddafi's regime in October 2011. While Russia still holds Libya obliged to fulfill agreements, such as the Gazprom-Wintershield agreement on gas or for participation in Eni-led consortium inked in 2011, Libyan officials both in Tripoli- and Tobruk-led governments are silent on the matter.

Post-Qaddafi's Libya was plagued by instability, internal political disputes, and general inability to create a functioning state. The US largely disengaged from Libya, as illustrated by the decline of financial

assistance from \$210 million in 2011 to a mere \$20 million in 2014.¹⁹² The EU countries were unable (or unwilling) to ensure a smooth regime transition, and the nation descended into the second Libyan civil war since 2014. Also, EU financial assistance to Libya remained relatively low (around €1 billion in 2011-18¹⁹³), and countries such as Italy were counting on bilateral agreements, such as the memorandum of understanding between Rome and Tripoli on curbing illegal migration inked on February 2, 2017.¹⁹⁴ The war is a highly transnationalized conflict between internationally (UN) recognized GNA in Tripoli led by PM Sarraj and the Tobruk-based parliament backed by the LNA led by Khalifa Haftar. The EU proved to be an impotent platform, and its members supported different sides of the conflict. France backed the LNA, and Italy took side of the GNA. Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Russia, and France stood by Haftar for the most part, while Turkey, Qatar, Italy, and Algeria threw their weight behind Sarraj.

Russia, however, has appeared to go a great length into balancing its position and does not close channels with the GNA to *"hedge all possible contingencies, keep all options open, and maintain Russian leverage in a future settlement."*¹⁹⁵ Moscow deployed up to 1,200 Wagner Group contractors to support the LNA by May 2020.¹⁹⁶ Haftar repeatedly visited Russia, once in November 2016, asking for military assistance to fight ISIS elements in the country.¹⁹⁷ On other occasions, Haftar reportedly agreed to procure Russian arms

173 Amel al-Hilali, "Tunisia joins Arab efforts to mend ties with Syria's Assad," *Al-Monitor*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/01/tunisia-ennahda-restore-ties-syria-regime-arab-league.html>.

174 Sarah Feuer, and Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia Makes Inroads in North Africa," *The Washington Institute for the Near East Policy* (2017), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russia-makes-inroads-in-north-africa>.

175 Figures are extracted from "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

176 Feuer, and Borshchevskaya, "Russia Makes Inroads."

177 Frederic Wehrey, "Tunisia's Wake-Up Call: How Security Challenges from Libya Are Shaping Defense Reforms," *Carnegie Middle East Center, Working Paper* (2020), <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Wehrey-TunisiaDefense.pdf>.

178 Michaël Béchir Ayari, "Seven to Stead a Tunisia under New Attack," *International Crisis Group*, March 9, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/seven-ways-steady-tunisia-under-new-attack>.

179 Claudia Gazzini, "What Prospects for a Ceasefire in Libya?," *International Crisis Group*, January 18, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/what-prospects-ceasefire-libya>.

180 "US says Russia sent advanced fighters to aid mercenaries in Libya," *Al-Jazeera*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/military-accuses-russia-deploying-fighter-jets-libya-200526140634761.html>.

181 See for example Wehrey, "Tunisia's Wake-Up Call."

182 EIA, "Tunisia," *U.S. Energy Information Administration* (2020), <https://www.eia.gov/international/overview/country/TUN>.

183 "Tunisia, Russia Signed Nuclear Cooperation Deal," *Egypt Oil & Gas*, September 29, 2016, <http://egyptoil-gas.com/news/tunisia-russia-signed-nuclear-cooperation-deal/>.

184 Feuer, and Borshchevskaya, "Russia Makes Inroads."

185 "About 635 thousand Russian tourists will visit Tunisia in 2019," *Russian Travel Digest*, December 25, 2019, <https://russtd.com/about-635-thousand-russian-tourists-will-visit-tunisia-in-2019.html>.

186 Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Growing Influence in North Africa," *The Washington Institute for the Near East Policy* (2019), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-growing-influence-in-north-africa>.

187 Lund, "Russia in the Middle East." See also Tom Pfeiffer, "Gaddafi visits Russia on arms, energy drive," *Reuters*, October 30, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-russia/gaddafi-visits-russia-on-arms-energy-drive-idUSTRE49S90G20081030>.

188 Amir M. Kamel, "Trade and peace: the EU and Qaddafi's final decade," *International Affairs* 92, no. 3 (2016), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/ia/trade-and-peace-eu-and-gaddafi-s-final-decade/inta92-3-10-kamel.pdf>.

189 Alexei Anischuk, "Gaddafi fall cost Russia tens of blns in arms deals," *Reuters*, November 2, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-libya-arms/gaddafi-fall-cost-russia-tens-of-blns-in-arms-deals-idUSL5E7M221H20111102>.

190 Ibid.

191 Celia López, "What is Russia looking for in Libya?," *Atalayar*, May 30, 2020, <https://atalayar.com/en/content/what-russia-looking-libya>.

192 Figures are extracted from "Foreign Aid Explorer," *USAID*, 2020, <https://explorer.usaid.gov/>.

193 Figures are extracted from "EU Aid Explorer," *European Commission*, 2020, <https://euaidexplorer.ec.europa.eu/>.

194 "Libya: Renewal of migration deal confirms Italy's complicity in torture of migrants and refugees," *Amnesty International*, January 30, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/libya-renewal-of-migration-deal-confirms-italys-complicity-in-torture-of-migrants-and-refugees/>.

195 Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East," 35.

196 Michelle Nichols, "Up to 1,200 deployed in Libya by Russian military group: U.N.," *Reuters*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-sanctions/up-to-1200-deployed-in-libya-by-russian-military-group-u-n-report-idUSKBN2212XW>.

197 Maria Tsvetkova, "Libyan commander visits Russia to ask for help fighting Islamists," *Reuters*, November 29, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-libya-haftar/libyan-commander-visits-russia-to-ask-for-help-fighting-islamists-idUSKBN1301VP>.

sometimes in 2017.¹⁹⁸ Russia also requested Haftar to provide it with a naval base in Tobruk.¹⁹⁹ Moscow printed and shipped 4 billion dinar banknotes a year for the LNA since 2016, which Tripoli considers as counterfeited.²⁰⁰

In turn, Rosneft signed a significant deal with the Tripoli-based Libyan National Oil Corporation in February 2017 on oil off-take, which also opened doors to further exploration and extraction projects.²⁰¹ Tatneft also resumed exploration in December 2019 in Hamada Basin – a primarily GNA area.²⁰² The GNA delegation received an invitation to the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi held on October 23-24, 2019, where Tripoli was promised a supply of 1 million tons of wheat as well as more projects on oil and gas exploration and electrification.²⁰³

Russia's balancing act between the GNA and Haftar's LNA became increasingly problematic, especially since the November 2019 agreement between Sarraj and Turkey on defense cooperation and disputed demarcation of maritime borders, which met with harsh reaction from Egypt and Greece.²⁰⁴ Turkey inserted itself into the conflict with deployment of troops and up to 3,800 Syrian mercenaries on Tripoli's side in January-March 2020 to support the GNA²⁰⁵ facing the LNA offensives since April 2019. Russian mediation efforts failed with Haftar abruptly leaving

Moscow on January 14, 2020, short of reaching a ceasefire agreement with Sarraj.²⁰⁶ On April 27, 2020, Haftar boldly announced his plan to scrap the 2015 UN-mediated Libyan Political Agreement as the main framework for the settlement of the conflict and instead claimed that he would militarily take over Tripoli.²⁰⁷ Russia, in turn, criticized Haftar's "move to seize control of the country" and repeated its commitment to finding a solution "through politics and diplomacy."²⁰⁸

As tides of the battle turned in the favor of the GNA due to Turkish support in which it retook most of the lost territory. Russia once again boosted its support for the LNA with its jets flown to Jufra base in May 2020.²⁰⁹ Russian FM Lavrov maintained that while Haftar is ready to sign the ceasefire agreement as of July 8, 2020, the GNA now delays acting as a spoiler.²¹⁰ With a further escalation in 2019-20, Russia continues to insert itself into the Libyan conflict, and have a say in the nature of its resolution. As Ramani pointedly noted on Russian pragmatism, "Unlike the UAE and Egypt, Russia did not support Haftar because it believed that the LNA possessed the capabilities to unite Libya under his rule. Instead, Russia backed Haftar's offensive to help the LNA achieve enough military success to bolster its stature in diplomatic negotiations."²¹¹ Russia seeks to secure that in the post-conflict Libya, its oil and gas companies,

investments in other sectors, including military and possibly (albeit far-fetched goal) permanent military presence, especially naval, are not threatened. No

matter whether it is the LNA, the GNA, or other actors in charge.

4.6 Morocco

Morocco is one of the oldest and most reliable US allies among Arab countries, further deepening with the country's designation as the Major Non-NATO Ally by president Bush in 2004,²¹² receiving \$1.2 billion in 2011-18.²¹³ Rabat also enjoys a privileged partnership with the EU and has especially strong ties with France, relying both on the Union's diplomatic support (over Western Sahara dispute), and trade and financial assistance, receiving billions since the Association Agreement with the EU was signed in 2000. In 2007-18, the EU sent almost €13 billion to Morocco.²¹⁴ The EU countries remain a vital trading partner for Morocco, especially Spain, with whom the country pragmatically vastly improved relations in the 2000s on the illegal migration issue.²¹⁵ In 2018, Spain, France, Germany, and Italy constituted over 45% of total imports. Likewise, 55% of Moroccan exports were to these countries.²¹⁶

Moroccan leadership, in recent years, started to feel that overdependence on the EU as a weakness as it "has often had to accept trade restrictions and criticism of its human rights record from some European countries."²¹⁷ Rabat, in their quest for diversification, looked upon China, the GCC countries, as well as to Russia.²¹⁸ Rabat and Moscow

signed a strategic cooperation agreement already in July 2002, and Putin visited Rabat in September 2006. King Mohammed VI arrived in Moscow in March 2016²¹⁹, and subsequently, reached several agreements, including on nuclear energy²²⁰ and military cooperation in October 2017, were inked.²²¹ PM Medvedev noted on October 11, 2017, that "relations between Russia and Morocco have entered a new phase since the last visit of King Mohammed VI of Morocco to Moscow in March 2016," and that "Morocco remains our strategic partner in the Arab world and Africa in general."²²² While Hamdani labels Russian turn to Morocco as the "most prominent shift in Russia's diplomatic approach to the Maghreb in the past years,"²²³ Moscow's efforts yielded minimal results, short of Rabat changing their strategic partnerships with the EU and the US.

High-level visits continued, and during the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, held on October 23-24, 2019, Russia signed a \$2.2 billion deal with Moroccan Mya Energy to build an oil refinery with an initial capacity of 100,000 b/d.²²⁴ The country's only refinery ceased to operate in 2015 due to massive debts, and since then, Morocco was eager to find an investor to save the sector. "That incapacity created space to enter this

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207 "Militia leader Haftar claims mandate to rule Libya, UN-backed government denounces 'coup'," *France24*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200429-without-naming-libya-s-haftar-france-condemns-unilateral-action-in-libya>.

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217 Yasmina Abouzzohour, "Morocco," *European Council on Foreign Relations, Mapping European Leverage in MENA Region*, 2020, https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/mapping_eu_leverage_mena/morocco.

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219 Saad Guerraoui, "Morocco, Russia bolster strategic ties," *The Arab Weekly*, March 25, 2016, <https://theArabweekly.com/morocco-russia-bolster-strategic-ties>.

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223 Zuhair Hamdani, "Russia develops its relations with Maghreb utilizing arms and economics," *Al-Jazeera*, April 24, 2017 (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/3iGxobF>.

224 "Russia's VEB signs deal to build two billion euro refinery in Morocco: report," *Reuters*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-morocco-refinery/russias-veb-signs-deal-to-build-two-billion-euro-refinery-in-morocco-report-idUSKBN1X22KG>.

specific sector with limited economic exposure-which is precisely what Russia did through this agreement.”²²⁵ Russia tries to insert itself into the Moroccan energy sector to influence gas exports to Europe from North Africa and to have a stake in any new pipeline projects. Russia repeatedly expressed readiness to invest in Morocco’s gas sector, as Moscow’s energy minister Alexander Novak noted in September 2017, especially Gazprom and Novatek, are ready to invest “to supply LNG, construct gas pipeline and terminal.”²²⁶ Specifically, he was mentioning participating in the Moroccan project of LNG liquefaction terminal in Jorf Lasfar, a \$4.6 billion project, also connecting to the existing Maghreb-Europe Pipeline and thus opening a possibility of exporting Russian LNG to southern Europe.²²⁷ The project is yet to materialize, and its estimated completion was postponed from 2025 to 2028. International tenders are yet to be opened.²²⁸

Trade relations remain at low, actually decreasing with Russian exports to Morocco at \$2.23 billion in 2012 to less than \$1.1 billion in 2018.²²⁹ Morocco also continues to rely on Western-made, primarily US weaponry, signing a major \$3.8 billion deal for F-16 fighters in March 2019 in addition to modernizing its existing F-16 fleet for almost \$1 billion.²³⁰ It also plans to upgrade its Abrams tanks, and procure other advanced weaponry.²³¹ While Morocco was reportedly interested in buying the Russian S-400 air defense system, it apparently backed down from the idea, arguably due to the threat of US CAATSA sanctions.²³²

Another major hurdle in deepening relations with Morocco is the Russian stance towards the Western Sahara conflict. As it is perceived that Russia tends to lean toward Algeria, Moscow’s much more valuable ally. The decades-old conflict between Morocco’s claiming the territory, and the Sahrawi nationalists, represented by Polisario Front and backed by Algeria and Qaddafi’s Libya in the past, is the single most crucial issue for Rabat. While Polisario used to be Moscow’s Cold War ally, Russia has since opted its rapprochement attempts with Morocco for a more balanced stance, trying to insert itself as an arbiter into the conflict. While in March 2017,²³³ Moscow hosted Polisario representatives in Moscow; Polisario was, in turn, not invited to the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi on October 23-24, 2019.²³⁴ In the April 2018 UN Security Council resolution, Russia, unlike in 2017, used stronger words against Polisario’s deployment into the Guergerat buffer zone as well as its intentions to relocate its headquarters.²³⁵

It appears that Russia is merely maintaining a more balanced stance rather than genuinely shifting support to Rabat on the Western Sahara issue, which puts claims that Morocco seeks to deepen ties with Russia due to waning support of the US under scrutiny. Similarly, France, also a permanent UN Security Council member, still throws its weight for Morocco on the issue, and Russian maneuvering space is limited due to its privileged ties with Algeria.

225 Dario Cristiani, “Exploiting the Vacuums: Russia and North Africa in the Wake of Sochi Summit,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 164 (2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/exploiting-the-vacuums-russia-and-north-africa-in-the-wake-of-the-sochi-summit/>.

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229 Figures are extracted from “The Atlas of Economic Complexity,” 2020, <https://atlas.cid.harvard.edu/explore>.

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232 “Fearing Trump, Morocco reconsiders US arms instead Russia’s,” *Middle East Monitor*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190529-out-of-fear-of-trump-morocco-reconsiders-uss-mim-104-patriot-instead-of-russias-s400/>.

233 Habibulah Mohamed Lamin, “How Polisario Front hopes to partner with Russia in Western Sahara,” *Al-Monitor*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/originals/2017/04/western-sahara-polisario-sell-russia-moscow-visit.html>.

234 Hamza Guessous, “Russia-Africa Summit Leaves Polisario in the Cold,” *Morocco World News*, October 23, 2017, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2019/10/285160/russia-africa-summit-leaves-polisario-in-the-cold/>.

235 See Jacques Roussellier, “A Role for Russia in Western Sahara?,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, June 5, 2018, <https://carnegeendowment.org/sada/76532>.

5

LEVANT AND IRAQ: DEPENDENT FRIENDS IN DAMASCUS AND OTHER ACQUAINTANCES

Syria remains the most crucial Russian ally in the MENA, hosting electronic surveillance facilities,²³⁶ airbase, and the only naval base in the Mediterranean. Since 2011, Russia not only intervened militarily to save the regime from military defeat in a trans-nationalized civil war but also expanded its presence as well as used the conflict to re-insert itself into wider regional affairs. Despite the strength of the US and Iranian foothold in post-2003 Iraq, Russia managed to at least partially way in, especially in the energy sector and arms sales. However, its position remains limited, and any further encroachment is effectively blocked by Washington’s and Tehran’s interests. Russian attempts to woo a close Western ally, Jordan, largely failed. The same goes for Lebanon, which is desperate for economic assistance and cannot risk losing the

financial support of the US and the West and resists Russian courting. In Lebanon, the situation is further complicated by competing with Iranian influence, projected by Hezbollah. While Russia works with Iran to some extent, especially in Syria, their cooperation has become increasingly constrained since 2016.²³⁷

The case of Levant and Iraq illustrate inherent constraints in Russian power projection. Firstly, it is only able to exploit gaps provided by other regional and global players (mainly the US). These gaps are, when felt needed, closed, for example, by threatening to cut Western financial support. Secondly, states like Jordan or Lebanon need financial assistance that Russia is not able or willing to provide. Thus its engagement usually remains limited to Moscow’s prioritized sectors: energy and arms.

5.1 Iraq

Moscow had a long-standing relationship with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Only in 1958-90, Moscow sold \$30.5 billion worth of military equipment to Baghdad.²³⁸ Continuous relations are also illustrated by Putin’s envoy Primakov’s visit to Iraq in February

2003, which unsuccessfully tried to convince Saddam to step down.²³⁹ While Russia, along with France, labeled US led-invasion and occupation of Iraq “a direct violation of international law, and a major political mistake,” it was in no position to alter the

236 Julian Borger, “Russian military presence in Syria poses challenge to US-led intervention,” *The Guardian*, December 23, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/23/syria-crisis-russian-military-presence>.

237 There is a number of surfacing divergences: economic interests, political visions both for Syria and in the region as well as Damascus’ deliberate balancing between Tehran and Moscow. See for example, Sinan Hatahet, “Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria,” *Chatham House, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Research Paper* (2019), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russia-and-iran-economic-influence-syria/2019-03-08RussiaAndIranEconomicInfluenceInSyria.pdf>. Udi Dekel, “Russia and Iran: Is the Syrian Honeymoon Over?,” *INSS Insight*, no. 1177 (2019), <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/russia-iran-syrian-honeymoon/>. Mark N. Katz, “Iran-Syria air defense pact could cause Russian-Iranian friction,” *Atlantic Council*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/iran-syria-air-defense-pact-could-cause-russian-iranian-friction/>.

238 John C. K. Daly, “Russia Reemerging as Weapons Supplier to Iraq,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 43 (2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-reemerging-weapons-supplier-iraq/>.

239 “Former Russian PM on Iraq mission,” *CNN International*, February 23, 2003, <https://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/02/23/sprj.irq.primakov.reut/index.html>.

course of events.²⁴⁰ The post-2003 Iraq, plagued by a series of Sunni insurgencies, chronic weakness, and instability culminating with ISIS ascendancy in 2014, has remained a weak state - an open playground for global and regional actors to engage in power plays while taking Iraqi sovereignty in little to no regard. This competition included chiefly the US, Iran, and China (mainly economically²⁴¹) and, to a lesser extent, European countries, Turkey, Gulf countries, or Russia.

Despite frequent calls to end US military presence in the country, Washington had up to 5,200 soldiers in Iraq in June 2020²⁴², and around 3,000 more troops from EU countries mainly engaged in training missions in January 2020.²⁴³ Deep politico-economic-military cooperation will likely continue within the 2008 Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation as the current Iraqi PM Mustafa al-Kadhimi has been engaged in the Strategic Dialogue since June 2020.²⁴⁴ The US still provides considerable assistance to the Iraqi government, almost \$14.5 billion in 2011-19.²⁴⁵ The EU committed nearly €11 billion to Iraq in 2007-18.²⁴⁶ However, as Mansour notes, it lacks cohesion, and “*The EU does not have enough leverage to force parties to come to the table nor to act in the way it wants.*”²⁴⁷

Moscow briskly adapted to a new reality, hoping not to lose a significant ally in the region by assuring the Iraqi delegation in December 2003 that it is

willing to forgive a long-standing debt from the Soviet times in exchange for access to opportunities in Iraq. Russian companies already had a foothold since 1995, when Moscow committed to investing \$15 billion to giant West Qurna-2 and North Rumaylan fields.²⁴⁸ Russia managed to maintain at least some footing in the bustling Iraqi energy sector. In 2005, Lukoil provided millions in humanitarian aid. In February 2008, Russia wrote off Iraqi debt of \$12.9 billion.²⁴⁹ Soon, Russian companies became successful in being awarded various exploration blocks and projects: 80% in West Qurna-2 in 2009, producing around 400 thousand b/d, or 10% of Iraqi output,²⁵⁰ still largely underdeveloped Block 12 for Bashneft in 2012;²⁵¹ or in September 2019, Block 17 located in largely ungoverned spaces of Anbar province for Stroytransgaz.²⁵² However, these stakes remain relatively low compared to, for example, China, which until mid-2019 invested \$20 billion mainly to energy projects while Baghdad is also sending around 20% of its oil production to Beijing.²⁵³

Russia also invested in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq’s (KRI) hydrocarbons, the gas sector in particular. While it modestly entered the emerging market in 2012-13, it went on an investment spree, despite Baghdad’s dispute with the KRI over sharing oil revenues. In February 2017-March 2018, Rosneft invested \$5.3 billion.²⁵⁴ Deals included a plan to build a gas pipeline supplying up to 30 bcm, or 6% of Europe’s

consumption through Turkey.²⁵⁵ The specific timing helped the KRI to alleviate the economic crisis (and debt up to \$25 billion). However, the main driver for the KRI was that it failed to attract any significant players from the US, Europe, or Turkey to develop its gas sector over the years. It attracted only small to midsize players to invest in hydrocarbons.²⁵⁶ In the political or security sector, there is little space for Russia to deepen ties with the KRI since its security and existence is guaranteed by the US since the 1990s. When it comes to balancing Baghdad-KRI relations, Russia wishes to be a guardian of state sovereignty and facilitator of dialogue between different actors to make sure it has stakes in any major parlay.²⁵⁷ Nevertheless, when it comes to Iraq, Russia’s ability to project power, offer incentives to local actors, or to compete with players with much more substantial leverage such as Iran or the US is limited.

Apart from the energy sector, expanding military-technical cooperation is a priority for Moscow in Iraq. Russia already scored a significant arms deal in 2012, with \$4.2 billion hauls, including 48 Pantsir-C1 anti-air systems, jets, or 40 Mi-28NE helicopters.²⁵⁸ Later, Moscow delivered the first batch of refurbished

Su-25 ground attack aircraft in June 2014.²⁵⁹ Another significant purchase included 73 T-90 main battle tanks, delivered in February by April 2019.²⁶⁰ In 2011-19, Russia sold over \$2.1 billion worth of military equipment to Iraq, over 30% of Baghdad’s total procurements (significant even compared to US arms sales worth \$3.5 billion).²⁶¹

FM Lavrov maintained in June 2014 that the rise of ISIS in Iraq is simply “*an illustration of the complete failure of the adventure, which was started primarily by the United States and Britain and which they let get out of control completely.*”²⁶² In turn, Moscow repeatedly offered enhanced intelligence and security cooperation. In September 2015, an intelligence sharing cell between Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Russia was established, yet its activities remained limited.²⁶³ The Iraqi government repeatedly expressed its interest in improving its air defences by procuring S-300 or S-400 Russian systems, which again came in the spotlight with increased US and Israeli airstrikes against pro-Iranian elements of Popular Mobilization Forces militias since late 2019.²⁶⁴ However, it is unlikely that Baghdad will push through due to US pressure and the threat of the CAATSO sanctions.

5.2 Syria

One could argue in the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia’s interest in the MENA was almost exclusively limited to Syria and Iran. Syria has remained the last and only Russian garrison in the Mediterranean hosting its navy in Tartus and also major electronic

surveillance facility in Latakia.²⁶⁵ Moscow also resorted to writing off Syria’s \$9.8 billion debt already in 2005.²⁶⁶ Assad’s Syria, still a pariah labelled as part of the ‘axis of evil’ during Bush’s administration following the 9/11 attacks, did not manage to normalize its

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241 Daniel J. Samet, “China, Not Iran, Is the Power to Watch in Iraq,” *The Diplomat*, October 30, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/china-not-iran-is-the-power-to-watch-in-iraq/>.

242 Alissa J. Rubin, Lara Jakes, and Eric Schmitt, “ISIS Attacks Surge in Iraq Amid Debate on U.S. Troops Levels,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/10/world/middleeast/iraq-isis-strategic-dialogue-troops.html>.

243 Nikolaj Nielsen, and Elena S. Nicolás, “3,000 troops from 19 EU states in Iraq. Will they stay?,” *eerver*, January 8, 2020, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/147065>.

244 “Joint Statement on the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue,” *U.S. Department of State*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-iraq-strategic-dialogue/>.

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247 Renad Mansour, “Iraq,” *European Council on Foreign Relations, Mapping European Leverage in the MENA Region* (2020), https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/mapping_eu_leverage_mena/iraq.

248 Tareq Y. Ismael, and Andrej Kreutz, “Russian-Iraqi Relations: A Historical and Political Analysis,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2001), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41858394.pdf>.

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250 Tomáš Kaválek, and Filip Sommer, “Russia’s Imprint in Iraqi Kurdistan: Rosneft’s Ascendancy,” *Middle East Policy* 26, no. 4 (2019): 91-101.

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254 Kaválek, and Sommer, “Russia’s Imprint in Iraqi Kurdistan.”

255 Ibid.

256 Ibid.

257 See also Samuel Ramani, “Russia’s Outreach to Iraqi Kurdistan: A Gambit for Energy Investment and Regional Status,” *RUSI Newsbrief* 40, no. 1 (2020), https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/20201601_ramani_krg_web.pdf.

258 Daly, “Russia Reemerging.”

259 Fred Weir, “Russia to the rescue in Iraq? Moscow delivers jet fighters to Baghdad,” *CS Monitor*, June 30, 2014, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2014/0630/Russia-to-the-rescue-in-Iraq-Moscow-delivers-jet-fighters-to-Baghdad>.

260 “Iraq receives more T-90 battle tanks from Russia to boost ground force,” *PressTV*, April 9, 2019, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2019/04/09/593026/iraq-receives-more-T90-battle-tanks-from-Russia-to-boost-ground-force>.

261 Figures are extracted from “SIPRI Arms Transfers Database,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

262 “Russia slams US ‘failure’ in Iraq ahead of UN Security Council talks,” *The Daily Star*, June 12, 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/ArticlePrint.aspx?id=259813&mode=print>.

263 Elias Groll, “Iraq Strikes Intel Sharing Agreement with Russia, Syria and Iran,” *Foreign Policy*, September 27, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/27/iraq-strikes-intel-sharing-agreement-with-russia-syria-and-iran/>.

264 Ruslan Mamedov, “Will Russia reinforce Iraq’s air defences,” *Al-Monitor*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/09/russiairaqairdefensesisraelus.html>.

265 Borger, “Russian military presence in Syria.”

266 Aron Lund, “Russia in the Middle East,” *Swedish Institute for International Affairs* (2019), <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2019/ui-paper-no.-2-2019.pdf>.

relations with Western countries. Much awaited reforms with young Bashar Assad coming to power in 2000 ended up only with economic overhauls oriented at privatization and opening to foreign investments.²⁶⁷

The new EU- and US-imposed sanction regimes after the civil war escalated have prevented any further engagement, including buying Syria's oil, worth \$3 billion in 2011.²⁶⁸ Both the US and the EU (over €8 billion in 2011-2018²⁶⁹) financial assistance was almost exclusively for humanitarian and relief purposes. While the US maintains a decisive influence in Syria, which includes boots on the ground by sponsoring Kurdish-led administration in the northeast since late 2014, the EU's policy is more passive. It maintains its commitment to the UN-sponsored political resolution of the war with a genuine political transition, including creating a democratic, pluralistic and inclusive government and only then it would consider lifting sanction regime or raising funds for post-war reconstruction.²⁷⁰

Russia gradually increased its military and material support for Assad's regime during the war along with Iran and Hezbollah just as the regional actors – the Gulf States and Turkey, the US, France and the UK initially invested in supporting the opposition both politically and materially to topple the regime. Russia threw its weight into the conflict more pro-actively following the August 2013 regime's chemical attack in Ghouta, which was supposed to be a 'red line' for US intervention, as President Obama stated in August 2012.²⁷¹ Moscow and Washington agreed to destroy Syria's chemical weapons stockpile and production

on September 14, 2013, under international control as Syria joined the Chemical Weapons Convention.²⁷² This event effectively marked Russian diplomatic return as a significant stakeholder in the Syrian conflict – a counterpart whom the US (and the UN-sponsored process for that matter) must take into account.²⁷³ Moscow-led diplomatic efforts on Syria, the so-called Astana Process launched in January 2017, aimed at formalizing talks between Russia, Iran and Turkey at best “demonstrates the success of Moscow's agile military and diplomatic strategy in Syria, it also highlights the Kremlin's inability (or unwillingness) to resolve the interminable crisis.”²⁷⁴

In 2011-19, Russia exported \$1.6 billion worth of arms to Syria, over 90% of total Syrian weapon procurements in that period.²⁷⁵ Military assistance further deepened since September 2015, when Russia, establishing itself at Hmeimin Airbase (now permanently rented for 49 years²⁷⁶), arguably saved Damascus from losing the war. The biggest game-changer was the deployment of Russia air force, which provided much needed aerial domination and close support on the frontlines against rebel groups. Russia argued its intervention was motivated by combating ISIS – over 9,000 people indeed joined ISIS in Iraq and Syria from Russia, Caucasus, and Central Asia, posing a significant threat to Russian national security upon their possible return home²⁷⁷). Nonetheless, Moscow's focus was initially mainly on securing non-ISIS rebel garrisons, such as the crucial city of Aleppo re-captured in December 2016. Russian boots on the ground were instrumental in advising, providing information as well as training and acting as a deterrent force in certain areas.

Moreover, deployment of Russian advanced air defense systems – S-300 in October 2018²⁷⁸ and Russian-operated S-400 already in December 2015²⁷⁹ – further bolstered control of Syrian airspace. Moscow also deployed scores of contractors from its PMC, Wagner Group, as an auxiliary force.²⁸⁰ In December 2019, Syrian and Russian navies held the first exercise.²⁸¹ There is little doubt that the Russian military presence will decrease. Moscow scrambles for more permanent garrisons as president Putin ordered his defense and foreign ministers in May 2020 to hold talks to expand military facilities and naval access beyond the two official bases in Hmeinin and Tartus.²⁸² In June 2020, reports suggested that Russia is expanding its base at the Qamishli airport in the northeast of the country, dominantly under the control of the US-backed Kurdish dominated forces.²⁸³

Although it is estimated that all and all, Russian deployment costs around \$1 billion per year²⁸⁴ – are not an excessive financial commitment – Moscow appears to be increasingly pragmatic in its Syrian policies. Notably, since April 2020, there has been previously unthinkable increased criticism of Assad in the Russian media, think-tanks lamenting over Assad's inflexibility and corruption, refusing any political concession that would enable UN-sponsored conflict resolution to kick in.²⁸⁵

Russia was also instrumental in training and building and commanding the regime's security forces that are glued together from auxiliary pro-regime militias and regular military units, chiefly the 5th and the 6th Corps, and the Tiger Forces.²⁸⁶ Russia also maintained pragmatic cooperation with Iran, including sharing bases such as T-4 in Homs.²⁸⁷ Moscow also maintained ties with Iranian proxies such as Lebanese Hezbollah. Hezbollah in turn got its hands on longer-range tactical missiles, laser-guided rockets or anti-tank weapons manufactured in Russia.²⁸⁸ In 2016, Russia was briefly using Iranian airports to launch strikes in Syria, but later the deal was cut by Tehran.²⁸⁹ Moscow's relations with Iran over Syria soared as Tehran prefers to spread influence through empowering (armed) non-state actors. In contrast, Russia visualizes a strong centralized allied state as a guarantee of stability. The rift has been increasingly coming to light with Israel hitting hundreds of Iranian targets in Syria, with Russia turning a blind eye since it controls the country's skies. Nevertheless, Moscow still abstains from criticizing Iranian presence as Nikolay Patrushev, the head of the Russian Security Council noted in January 2020: “Iran is in Syria at the invitation of the legitimate government and is actively involved in fighting terrorism. Therefore, of course, we will have to take into account the interests of Iran.”²⁹⁰

267 See Samir Seifan, “The Road to Economic Reform in Syria,” *St Andrews Papers on Contemporary Syria*, 2011, <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/view/717621>.

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272 James Blitz, “Syria crisis: US and Russia agree chemical weapons deal,” *Financial Times*, September 15, 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/2b3ea90c-1d2a-11e3-af8f-00144feab7de>.

273 See Rumer, “Russia in the Middle East.” Kozhanov, “Russian Policy Across the Middle East.”

274 Charles Thépaut, “The Astana Process: A Flexible but Fragile Showcase for Russia,” *The Washington Institute for the Near East Policy* (2020), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-astana-process-a-flexible-but-fragile-showcase-for-russia>.

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281 “Russia, Syria Hold First Joint Naval Drills,” *The Moscow Times*, December 17, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/12/17/russia-syria-hold-first-joint-naval-drills-a68638>.

282 “Russia aims to boost military facilities in Syria,” *Deutsche Welle*, May 30, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-aims-to-boost-military-facilities-in-syria/a-53624765>.

283 Sirwan Kajjo, “Russia Eyes Military Expansion in Northeast Syria,” *VOA News*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/russia-eyes-military-expansion-northeast-syria>.

284 Yuri Barmin, “Russia in the Middle East Until 2024: From Hard power to Sustainable Influence,” in *Russia in the Middle East*, eds. Theodore Karasik, Stephen Blank (Washington D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2018), 338-66, <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Russia-in-the-Middle-East-online.pdf?x74670>.

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286 Alexey Khlebnikov, “Russia and Syrian Military Reform: Challenges and Opportunities,” *Carnegie Middle East Center* (2020), <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/26/russia-and-syrian-military-reform-challenges-and-opportunities-pub-81154>.

287 Jones, “Dangerous Liaisons.”

288 Jesse Rosenfeld, “Russia Is Arming Hezbollah, Say Two of the Group’s Field Commanders,” *The Daily Beast*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/russia-is-arming-hezbollah-say-two-of-the-groups-field-commanders>.

289 Anne Barnard, and Andrew E. Kramer, “Iran Revokes Russia’s Use of Airbase, Saying Moscow ‘Betrayed Trust’,” *The New York Times*, August 22, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/23/world/middleeast/iran-russia-syria.html>.

290 Raphael Ahren, “Moscow said it will look out for Iranian interests at upcoming Jerusalem meet,” *The Times of Israel*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/moscow-to-look-out-for-iranian-interests-in-upcoming-jerusalem-meet/>.

In 2009, it was estimated that Russian investments in Syria amounted to over \$19 billion.²⁹¹ In 1963-91, the Soviets sold \$26 billion worth of military equipment.²⁹² Russia had major economic deals in line, which were interrupted by the civil war since 2011, and instead of turning a profit, it became costly. In response, as Synaps notes, "(...) *Russia and Iran look to recoup their expenditure in Syria by appropriating growing shares of its remaining assets, in a process that amounts to mortgaging the country's economic future. Most striking is Russia's deepening influence over Syria's oil, gas, and phosphate resources.*"²⁹³ Indeed, Russian companies since 2018-19 swiftly re-entered the Syrian oil and gas sector, securing various new favourable deals on-shore and offshore, reportedly taking 25% of profits.²⁹⁴ It is worth noting that any offshore works would require getting foreign companies in consortia on board since Russian companies lack the technology and expertise. While Syria's oil sector stagnated during the war (from around 400 thousand b/d in 2008-10 by 90%) and it only has modest

reserves of 2.5 billion barrels,²⁹⁵ its gas reserves may very well be substantial.²⁹⁶ Almost none of these projects and newly assigned exploration blocs experienced any significant activity as of July 2020. Yet, these long-term agreements are crucial since they virtually assure Russian monopoly over the Syrian energy sector. Various oil and gas pipeline projects (e.g., Qatar-Turkey, Iran-Turkey, Kirkuk-Syria) remain elusive.²⁹⁷ Still, control over the Syrian energy sector provides insurance that Russia will not be left out should any of the plans come to life.

Russia also committed itself to various projects, such as a 49 year rental of Tartus port facilities in 2017, promising a \$0.5 billion investment in 4 years.²⁹⁸ However, Russia and its companies lack an appetite and funds to engage in any meaningful reconstruction of Syria, hoping that once the conflict ends, various sanctions will be lifted, and both regional heavyweights from the Arabian Peninsula, the EU, and the US will partake in funding Syria's reconstruction.

5.3 Jordan

Jordan, a Major US and Non-NATO Ally since 1996, remains a critical strategic partner both for Washington and European NATO countries, especially the UK, firmly within the Western camp during the Cold War. Amman hosts over 3,000 US troops and is a major receiver of foreign aid from the US (in 1946-2020, \$22 billion),²⁹⁹ which is crucial for Jordan's increasingly stumbling economy, and hosting over 650 thousand Syrian refugees as of August 2020.³⁰⁰ In 2011-18, total US aid amounted to \$9.2 billion, with

one third allocated for military aid and two thirds to aid economic sector.³⁰¹ The EU is another major donor, committing almost €5 billion in 2007-18, peaking at the height of the Syrian war spillover in 2016-18 with €2.56 billion.³⁰² Additionally, there is strong military cooperation and training between Jordanian armed forces and NATO militaries. Jordan and the Alliance cooperate on a wide range of projects, including the 2018 NATO Jordan Defense Capacity Building Project, aimed at significant reform and modernization of the

Kingdom's armed forces.³⁰³

Since King Abdullah II, assumed the throne in 1999, he travelled to Russia a stunning nineteen times, but only till mid-2018, yet it appears that there is no "*significant political or economic background for this friendship.*"³⁰⁴ President Putin, was on the sideline of the Valdai International Discussion Club in October 2019, which labelled Jordan as a key Russian partner in the region and was praised for deepening trade relations.³⁰⁵ However, Russian imports to Jordan remain low at \$0.5 billion in 2018 or 2.64% of total Jordanian imports.³⁰⁶ Major economic projects discussed between the two countries were scrapped, or their realization remains a matter of a distant future, such as the November 2018 plans for the Russian industrial zone in Jordan.³⁰⁷

Russia was chosen as a preferred bidder for a nuclear plant project already in October 2013. As the preliminary deal for the two-reactor plant with 2000 MW was signed in March 2015 and Russia was supposed to finance 49% of the \$10 billion project.³⁰⁸ However, the whole idea was scrapped in May 2018, as Jordan faced deepening financial constraints and Russia pushed for less favourable loans from private banks instead of government coffers' financing.³⁰⁹ This episode once again shows Russian economic

foreign policy constraints – while Jordan desperately needs investment, Moscow simply lacks the resources. Instead, Jordan was able to continue securing \$7 billion based on the memorandum of understanding with China in September 2015, from which, for example, the Attarat shale oil power plant is being built.³¹⁰

Jordan is resource-poor, except for some shale oil³¹¹ and significant uranium deposits.³¹² More shale oil and gas may be yet discovered as Jordan was awarding more exploration tenders in 2017.³¹³ Nevertheless, there are no reports of significant new discoveries, and the Amman's 2019 plans revolve around getting oil from shale (25,000 b/d).³¹⁴ Russia is, however, mostly absent from the Jordanian energy sector, apart from a short Zarubezhneft's engagement. The Russian state company signed an exploration deal in May 2011,³¹⁵ but then pulled out a year later.³¹⁶ In March 2016, it was reported that Amman is engaged in talks with Gazprom to supply LNG to often stabilize the fluctuating Egyptian gas supply.³¹⁷ Egypt's supply through the Arab Gas pipeline is still intermittent; on average it provided 50% of the country's demand in 2019.³¹⁸ More importantly however and based on the September 2016 \$10 billion gas deal, Jordan secured a supply of Israeli gas from a Leviathan field, albeit facing domestic discontent for dealing with

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307 "Jordanian, Russian ministers sign cooperation protocol," *Jordan Times*, November 14, 2018, <https://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/jordanian-russian-ministers-sign-cooperation-protocol>.

308 Suleiman al-Khalidi, "Jordan signs \$10 billion nuclear power plant deal with Russia," *Reuters*, March 24, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-jordan-nuclear-russia/jordan-signs-10-billion-nuclear-power-plant-deal-with-russia-idUSKBN0MK2QD20150324>.

309 Mohammad Ghazal, "Jordan to replace planned nuclear plant with smaller, cheaper facility," *Jordan Times*, May 26, 2018, <https://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/jordan-replace-planned-nuclear-plant-smaller-cheaper-facility>.

310 Mohammad Ghazal, "All set for building oil-shale power plant," *Jordan Times*, March 16, 2017, <http://jordantimes.com/news/local/all-set-building-oil-shale-fired-power-plant>.

311 EIA, "Jordan," *U.S. Energy Information Administration* (2017), <https://www.eia.gov/international/overview/country/JOR>.

312 "Nuclear Power in Jordan," *World Nuclear Association* (2019), <https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-g-n/jordan.aspx>.

313 Andrew Roscoe, "Jordan invites interest for oil and gas exploration," *Middle East Business Intelligence*, November 7, 2017, <https://www.meed.com/jordan-invites-interest-oil-gas-exploration/>.

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318 Gnana, "Exclusive: Jordan eyes oil shale."

the ‘enemy’, which has been delivered since January 2020.³¹⁹ Jordan, as per the agreement between Texas-based Noble and Israeli Delek is supposed to receive on average, 8.2 million m³ a day.³²⁰ The majority of Jordan’s daily average daily consumption of around 10 million m³ of gas.³²¹

As for the security cooperation, Russian and Jordan agreed to coordinate specific security policies regarding Syria under the ‘special working mechanism’ since October 2015.³²² Intelligence sharing and collaboration aimed at securing the Kingdom’s northern border and ultimately stabilizing southern Syria.³²³ Consequently, Amman’s interest

in securing its border with Syria resulted in the Moscow-Washington-Amman agreement on de-escalation zones in Dara’a, Suwayda, and Qunaitra in July 2017.³²⁴ Jordan, once the first Arab country to call for Assad to step down, has softened its stance towards Damascus³²⁵ and became more pragmatic, arguing along with Egypt and Gulf countries for the readmittance of Syria to the Arab League.³²⁶ Despite Jordan playing a crucial diplomatic role,³²⁷ the US was still principal actor in the July 2017 agreement and one could hardly read such developments as Moscow and Amman “steadily inching towards one another, forging a marriage of convenience, (...) undermining U.S. influence in the process.”³²⁸

5.4 Lebanon

Russia’s attempts to deepen military cooperation with Lebanon have always failed as the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) rely mostly on US, UK and French made weaponry. Lebanon received \$2.4 billion US aid in 2011-18 with around half allocated for the security sector.³²⁹ The LAF also proved to be a non-sectarian, respected partner, albeit still relatively weak against Hezbollah and instrumental in preventing the spillover of ISIS and al-Qaeda-linked groups from Syria.³³⁰ Moreover, Lebanon is major recipient EU assistance, receiving over €4.6 billion in 2007-18,³³¹ including €1.3

billion to aid the country in hosting almost 1 million Syrian refugees.³³² Lebanon’s troubled economy relies heavily on international support: for example, in April 2018, a CEDRE investment conference was held in Paris with \$11.8 billion pledged from European Investment Bank, Islamic Development Bank as well as donor countries such as Saudi Arabia, France, or the US.³³³ Among the European countries, France remains the most important partner for Lebanon, as illustrated after a devastating explosion in Beirut port on August 4, 2020, when president Macron rushed to

the country³³⁴ and also co-chaired a major UN donor conference to aid Lebanon financially.³³⁵

Russia attempted to court Lebanon in December 2008, offering T-54/T-55 tanks worth \$0.5 billion and 10 MiG-29 jets as a gift, but the deal went cold.³³⁶ The same pattern repeated with offers in 2010 and once again the summer of 2016 when Russia offered T-72 tanks and Kornet anti-tank systems and with a new \$1 billion deal discussed in February 2017.³³⁷ Following the episode, Putin even briefly barred Lebanese officials from travelling to Russia.³³⁸ Lebanese President Aoun reportedly also asked Moscow to protect its airspace in November 2018, arguing Israel uses it for its strikes in Syria.³³⁹ PM Hariri then scrapped the following draft agreement on air defense, access to ports, bases, and airspace in December 2018.³⁴⁰ The reason for the botched deals with Russia is two-fold: firstly, Lebanon does not have funding and relies almost solely on financing new procurements through US financial aid; secondly, it would undoubtedly lose US security support and possibly face CAATSA sanctions³⁴¹ (after all meager \$5 million Russian security aid from November 26, 2011, was directed towards the Ministry of Interior,³⁴² not the LAF as the US objected).

Lebanon has been mostly dependent on oil and gas supply either via its ports in the Mediterranean or the Arab Gas Pipeline from Egypt via Jordan and Syria. However, there may be substantial oil and mainly gas reserves offshore, which the Lebanese government put as up to over 700 billion m³.³⁴³ Beirut has been interested in developing its gas sector, gradually selling the idea as a potential saviour of the indebted Lebanese economy (\$90 billion or 170% the GDP in March 2020³⁴⁴). Lebanon has been facing imminent economic implosion, and its currency lost 80% of value in July 2020 compared to October 2019.³⁴⁵ President Aoun noted on February 27, 2020, that gas exploits can bring up \$8 billion to coffers in the first year and that the gas sector would “represent a cornerstone to rise from the abyss.”³⁴⁶

Russia has made a certain inroad into the Lebanese energy sector. Moscow signed a memorandum of understanding to develop the oil and gas sector in October 2013.³⁴⁷ Later, in December 2017, Russian company Novatek (as a minority, 20%, stakeholder in consortia with Italian ENI and French Total³⁴⁸) were awarded exploration Blocks 4 and 9, the latter’s drilling being delayed as of July 2020, in part due to its role being on the disputed maritime

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343 EIA, “Lebanon,” *U.S. Energy Information Administration* (2020), <https://www.eia.gov/international/overview/country/LBN>.

344 Marc Jones, “Can’t pay, won’t pay: What now for Lebanon’s debt crisis,” *Reuters*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-debt-analysis-scenario/cant-pay-wont-pay-what-now-for-lebanons-debt-crisis-idUSKBN20X2TH>.

345 Liz Sly, “The lights go out on Lebanon’s economy as financial collapse accelerates,” *Washington Post*, July 19, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-lights-go-out-on-lebanons-economy-as-financial-collapse-accelerates/2020/07/19/3acfc33e-bb97-11ea-97c1-6cf116fe26c_story.html.

346 “Lebanon to begin offshore oil and gas exploration on Thursday,” *The National*, February 27, 2020, <https://www.thenational.ae/business/energy/lebanon-to-begin-offshore-oil-and-gas-exploration-on-thursday-1.985093>.

347 Michal Kranz, “Russia expands ties in Lebanon’s oil, gas sector,” *Al-Monitor*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/04/lebanon-american-russia-influence-energy-sectors.html>.

348 Ibid.

border between Israel and Lebanon.³⁴⁹ First offshore explorations, starting in February 2020, did not yield positive results as Lebanese energy minister Raymond Ghajar noted in April 2020.³⁵⁰ More blocks are yet to be awarded, and the profitability of the whole venture is yet to be seen. The project also competes with the proposed EastMed Pipeline on the table from January 2020, supplying gas through Greece, Israel, and Cyprus (however distant its realization may now seem).³⁵¹ Nevertheless, Russia appears to make further inroads into the Lebanese energy sector – it participates in tenders for offshore regasification units.³⁵² In January 2019, it rented Tripoli's aged oil terminal for 49 years aiming to expand its capacity to 450 thousand tons and later to 1.5 million tons.³⁵³

Russian attempts to woo Lebanon have so far been far from resembling systematic and successful efforts to gain leverage over Beirut or forge an alliance. Apart from organized efforts to insert itself into possibly emerging Lebanese oil and gas sectors, Russia failed to convince Lebanon to boost any military cooperation, which prefers higher benefits stemming from US and European backing. In turn, Lebanese officials express reliance on Russia in facilitating the return of Syrian refugees, which Russia itself can hardly deliver as it will rely on broader post-war arrangements.³⁵⁴

Moreover, Moscow's relationship with Hezbollah is increasingly troubled as Moscow's interest not only diverges with Iran in Syria, but also due to Russia's imminent interests to maintain its cooperation with Israel. Russia claims that Hezbollah is a legitimate actor who is an integral part of the Lebanese political landscape and it closely cooperated in Syria where Hezbollah deployed thousands of troops. However, the relationship became problematic as Hezbollah's Secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah lamented in June 2018 that *"The world is heading to a new achievement that Russia will cooperate with them to get Iran and Hezbollah out of Syria."*³⁵⁵ Another reason is Lebanon's catastrophic economic situation. With Russia having limited financial resources and a pattern of spending money only where it is profitable if it is among top priorities in the MENA region (as in Syria), Lebanon is not a *"junior ally"* that is *"financially sound."*³⁵⁶

6

RUSSIAN HESITANT ADVENTURES IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

This chapter will analyze Russian interests and efforts in individual countries of the Arabian Peninsula that are representing another field for Russian foreign policy. Moscow focuses on its own energy market strategies (particularly in the gas sector). At the same time it pursues its game plan of 'making friends with everybody' and opportunistic actions in this part of Middle East arena prioritizing building long-term strategic partnerships. Except for the Syrian case, it often happens that Russia stands on both sides of the conflict to some extent, maintaining ties with almost every regional or local actor in the region.³⁵⁷ For example, Russia offered to play the role of the mediator during the Qatar crisis in 2017, standing between Qatar and the Anti-Terror Quartet which included Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt.³⁵⁸

The Arabian Peninsula holds geopolitical and geostrategic importance as it stands on one of the largest oil and gas reserves in the world which also involve Mecca and Medina, two of the holiest sanctuaries of Islam. The religious dimension is quite important for Russian foreign policy that concerns radical Islamism. As to which the Kremlin fought against in Chechnya and in the North Caucasus region³⁵⁹ in the 1990s and at the turn of the 20th

and 21st centuries. Although, nowadays the Russian Muslims play a significant role in keeping the balance on a spiritual level which connects certain parts of Russia with the whole MENA region.³⁶⁰ These circumstances are creating a space for the involvement of other regional and global actors including themselves into the affairs of this region and Russia is no exception. In terms of worldstage competition, Russia has the advantage of closer proximity to this region which looks at the Indian Ocean as a potential future critical global market. The geographical delimitation of the Russian influence involves some of the Gulf countries³⁶¹ with its internal ties within the GCC, which includes Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE, Oman, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).³⁶² Nevertheless, the GCC does not contain Yemen, which is also an object of this study within Russian efforts in the region.

Although the GCC members established strong relations with the US, this does not mean that they are not in favour of Russia's efforts. Moscow is using the mistakes and oversteps of US policy towards the Gulf countries, consolidating its position. For example, historically, the *"emergence of anti-Saudis sentiments in Washington,"*³⁶³ made a Russia Saudis cooperation

³⁴⁹ Humud, "Lebanon."

³⁵⁰ Timour Azhari, "Lebanon's first offshore gas drill is a huge disappointment," *Al-Jazeera*, April 27, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/lebanon-offshore-gas-drill-huge-disappointment-200427182315344.html>.

³⁵¹ Angeliki Koutantou, "Greece, Israel, Cyprus sign EastMed gas pipeline deal," *Reuters*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-cyprus-israel-pipeline/greece-israel-cyprus-sign-eastmed-gas-pipeline-deal-idUSKBN1Z10R5>.

³⁵² "Eight consortia bid for regasification unit units," *Business News*, November 30, 2018, <http://www.businessnews.com.lb/cms/Story/StoryDetails.aspx?ItemID=6830>.

³⁵³ Sunniva Rosa, and Jonathan Brown, "Russia looks to energy for a foothold in Lebanon," *The National*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/russia-looks-to-energy-for-a-foothold-in-lebanon-1.834405>.

³⁵⁴ Raed Jabr, "Aoun Hinges on Putin's Role in Return of Syrian Refugees," *Sharq al-Awsat*, March 27, 2019, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/1652561/aoun-hinges-putin%e2%80%99s-role-return-syrian-refugees>.

³⁵⁵ Melamedov, "Why Russia Wants Lebanon."

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Mustafa Naji, "Yemen's role in Moscow's Mideast Comeback," *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies* (June 2019), http://sanaacenter.org/files/Yemens_Role_in_Moscow_en.pdf.

³⁵⁸ Diana Galeeva, "Balancing Adversaries: Russian Policy in the Gulf and the Role of Russian Muslims," *LSE Middle East Blog*, January 2, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/01/02/balancing-adversaries-russian-policy-in-the-gulf-and-the-role-of-russian-muslims/>.

³⁵⁹ Naji, "Yemen's role in Moscow's Mideast Comeback."

³⁶⁰ Galeeva, "Balancing Adversaries."

³⁶¹ "The Gulf countries" is the designation for countries which are surrounding the Persian Gulf. In addition to the GCC states, Iraq and Iran should fall into this category, having its own shores by this Gulf.

³⁶² Almqabali Mazin Said Musabah, "Russia's relations with Gulf states and their effect on regional balance in the Middle East," *RUDN Journal of Political Science* 20, no. 4 (2018), <http://journals.rudn.ru/political-science/article/view/20397/16567>.

³⁶³ Roland Dannreuther, "Russia and the Middle East: A Cold War Paradigm?," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 3 (2012).

more possible.³⁶⁴

The KSA and other Gulf countries were also shocked by the US (and the West) steps of turning away from its long-standing ally President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt; intervention in Libya in 2011; reluctance to take part in the events in Syria after the Arab Spring in 2011; or supporting Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal) deal in 2015.³⁶⁵ These policies were attributed to the Obama administration for which the Gulf countries and the KSA in particular³⁶⁷ were perceived as disengaging from the region, losing interests in cooperation, and potentially turning to their rival, Iran.³⁶⁸

The mutual ties between the GCC countries and Russia could be further strengthened also due to perceived incoherent and unpredictable MENA policies of the Trump administration.³⁶⁹ Trump's, as opposed to Obama's policies, turned out to be more aggressive, accompanied by thoughtless rhetoric and resolute actions, especially against Iran. In May 2018, Trump withdrew from the JCPOA and ordered an increase of the sanctions on Iran. Especially the KSA and the UAE perceived the steps countering Iran as indeed positive.³⁷⁰

The Gulf states are trying to diversify their foreign partnerships as they traditionally have privileged ties with the West and the US in particular. Political

structures, as well as authoritarian modes of governance, in Russia and most Arab MENA states are closer to each other. Economically, both Russian and most Arab MENA states economies are also developing and dependent on revenues from natural resources.³⁷¹

For Moscow's Middle East policy, the Arab Spring in 2011 presented an opportunity for strengthening its endeavour to re-insert itself into the region as an alternative partner to the US and Europe. For example, some EU countries (chiefly France and the UK) and the US resorted to suspending arms sales to Arab states, citing their authoritarian tendencies.³⁷² Russia was ready to replace arms suppliers to the regional governments with Bahrain procuring Russian arms for the first time.³⁷³ Moreover, the US and European credibility were tarnished as local elites in the Gulf states viewed their policies as supporting insurrection and regime changes in the name of democratization.³⁷⁴

Different outlooks on the Syrian war determined the position of individual Gulf states towards possible engagement with Moscow in other spheres of interests. While Moscow continued to support the Syrian regime even at the cost of military intervention in September 2015, Gulf states actively partook in efforts to topple Assad's regime. Russian operations targeted in particular against opposition forces,³⁷⁵

many of whom received substantial financial support from Saudi Arabia, UAE, or Qatar.³⁷⁶ On the other hand, standing behind Assad was a message for the Gulf states that Russia supports its allies even when

costly, preserves order, geographic and political unity of the country and does not induce regime changes in the name of democratization.³⁷⁷

6.1 Saudi Arabia

The EU's position in the KSA is chiefly determined by strong bilateral relationships with London and Paris. Both France and the UK stand behind Riyadh on critical regional issues, such as the war in Yemen. Nevertheless, the Saudi relationship with the rest of the EU countries and the EU itself is not especially deep as Brussel sharply criticizes the KSA's human rights records.³⁷⁸ After the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey on October 2018 the mutual ties have grown even colder. There is no official bilateral relation between the EU and the KSA. Regardless, Europe is a significant arms exporter to the Saudis and Europe is a substantial buyer of Riyadh's.³⁷⁹

Nevertheless, in February 2019 the European Commission attempted to blacklist the KSA as a country with individuals or organizations with a risk of terrorism financing and money laundering. However, the UK, France³⁸⁰ and Germany blocked the decision.³⁸¹ Another essential European ally of the KSA is Germany since it represents the largest EU exporter to Saudi Arabia and the third-biggest buyer of Saudi goods.³⁸² While the EU itself regularly voices concerns over Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, particular member states maintain a more pragmatic

stance. The UK and France remain silent about high civilian casualties resulting from Saudi military operations. Another dimension is that both countries have considerable defense contracts with the KSA, including €2 billion in equipment supplied by France in 2015 and €1.25 billion in arms exports from the UK in 2017.³⁸³

The Russian involvement in the Arabian Peninsula started in 1932 after the USSR officially recognized Saudi Arabia and laid the foundation for mutual ties on the diplomatic level. Apart from the privileged relationship of the KSA with the US, the Moscow-Riyadh partnership was negatively affected by several events. For example, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and Saudi backing of the separatist tendencies in Chechnya (Saudis supported Chechen separatists and other Muslim anti-Russian groups in the Northern Caucasus³⁸⁴) and Kosovo in 1990.³⁸⁵

While the KSA does not fully trust the US and the EU, especially since the JCPOA, it does not mean that the Saudis would choose to drift towards Russia strategically.³⁸⁶ Chiefly, the KSA is standing against Russia on various regional issues, notably on Syria, where Saudis invested in toppling Assad's regime,

364 Andrej Kreutz, "Russia and the Arabian Peninsula," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2004), <https://jms.org/article/view/57765/43440>.

365 Frank Gardner, "Saudi Arabia warms to Russia's embrace," *BBC News*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50054546>.

366 Mark N. Katz and Nikolay Kozhanov, "What Do They See in Him? How the Middle East Views Putin and Russia," *ETH Zurich Research Collection* (May 2018), <https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/bitstream/handle/20.500.11850/262301/4/RAD219.pdf>.

367 Gardner, "Saudi Arabia warms."

368 Richard J. Schmierer, James F. Jeffrey, Alireza Nader, and Fahad Nazer, "The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Obama Doctrine," *Middle East Policy Council* 23, no. 2 (2016), <https://mepc.org/saudi-iranian-rivalry-and-obama-doctrine-0>.

369 Jonathan Fenton Harvey, "Russia and the UAE Seek Greater Mutual Benefits," *Inside Arabia*, November 8, 2019, <https://insidearabia.com/russia-and-the-uae-look-for-greater-mutual-benefits/>.

370 Bianco, "A Gulf apart: How Europe."

371 Steven A. Cock, "Russia Is Losing the Oil War—and the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, April 9, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/09/russia-saudi-arabia-oil-price-war-middle-east/>.

372 However, France and Great Britain continued in selling weapons and equipment to Bahrain, which finally used against the protesters. Adhrb Staff, "Dispatch on French Arm Sales to the Gulf Region," *Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.adhrb.org/2020/05/dispatch-on-french-arm-sales-to-the-gulf-region/>. Paul Gallagher, "British arms sales to Bahrain total £45m since Arab Spring - while claims of torture and oppression continue," February 13, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/bahrain-protesters-tortured-while-britain-signs-45m-arms-deal-a6872166.html>.

373 Giorgio Cafiero, "Can Bahrain count on Moscow to fill Washington's shoes?," *Al-Monitor*, July 8, 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/bahrain-russia-replace-washington-influence-iran.html>.

374 Almqabali Mazin Said Musabah, "Russia's relations with Gulf states and their effect on regional balance in the Middle East," *RUDN Journal of Political Science* 20, no. 4 (2018), <http://journals.rudn.ru/political-science/article/view/20397/16567>.

375 Martin Russell, "Russia in the Middle East From sidelines to centre stage," *EPRS* (November 2018), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630293/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)630293_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630293/EPRS_BRI(2018)630293_EN.pdf).

376 Musabah, "Russia's relations with Gulf states."

377 Naji, "Yemen's role in Moscow's."

378 Faisal Abu al-Hassan, "Mapping European leverage in the MENA region – Saudi Arabia," *ECFR* (December 2019), https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/mapping_eu_leverage_mena/saudi_arabia.

379 In 2017, it reached about €4.1 billion of potential arms export licences, dominated by France, the UK and Spain. Beth Oppenheim, "You never listen to me: The European-Saudi relationship after Khashoggi," *CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM* (May 2019), <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2019/you-never-listen-me-european-saudi-relationship-after>.

380 Saudis invested in French counter-terrorism initiative in the five Sahel countries (G5 – Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) with €100 million promised to come. Oppenheim, "You never listen to me."

381 Jim Brunson, Mehreen Khan, and Michael Peel, "EU blocked on dirty money blacklist that angered Saudis, US," *Financial Times*, March 1, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/527fe170-3b79-11e9-b72b-2c7f526ca5d0>.

382 Oppenheim, "You never listen to me."

383 Andrew Rettman, "EU voices mixed emotions about Yemen revolution," *EUOBSERVER*, June 6, 2011, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/32442>.

384 Kreutz, "Russia and the Arabian Peninsula."

385 Musabah, "Russia's relations with Gulf states."

386 Gardner, "Saudi Arabia warms."

or cordial Moscow-Tehran ties.³⁸⁷ Russia's task is to reduce Saudi ambivalence in Syria and accept Assad's regime. On the other hand, Saudis, together with other Gulf states try to diversify their alliances to become less dependent on the West, which in turn views this possible partnership with worries. An example may be the ongoing discussion about the Saudi purchase of Russia's S-400 air defense system.³⁸⁸ Should Riyadh agree, the US can react by banning the country from procuring Lockheed Martin's F-35 stealth fighter jets as it did in the case of Turkey.

Moscow's attempts to seize windows of opportunity to make inroads in the KSA were illustrated by its presence in the 'Davos in the Desert' investment forum held in October 2018 despite many foreign companies from the US and Europe withdrawing their participation. The last-minute boycott expressed the condemnation of Riyadh's murder of a Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate general in Istanbul on October 2, 2018.³⁸⁹

June 2015 marked a milestone for mutual relations as the Saudi delegation visited St. Petersburg and both sides inked substantial agreements. Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and President Putin agreed on deals concerning infrastructural development, investments, and peaceful nuclear cooperation. The most significant was the investment funds agreement between the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) on one side and Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) and Saudi Arabia General Investment Authority (SAGIA) on the other. The PIF committed to investing up to \$10 billion to Russia.³⁹⁰

In April 2017, the MBS visited Moscow which was historically the first high-level visit of such a high Saudi official to Russia. Building upon ties between the RDIF and the PIF, an additional \$2.1 billion investment in Russian infrastructure was agreed upon. Moreover, agreements between Saudi Aramco and Russian Sibur and Gazprom were also signed.³⁹¹ In June 2018, the RDIF announced that Saudi state oil company Aramco would obtain a 30.76% share of the Russian oil equipment supplier Novomet from Russia state-owned company Rusnano. Aramco is sharing Novomet's stake through the PIF-RDIF deal.³⁹² The statement also included a \$600 million investment deal into Russian aircraft leasing business and opened possible cooperation between Saudis natural gas companies and Gazprom.³⁹³ Deepening cooperation between energy companies also continued in 2019.³⁹⁴

Russia also joined OPEC+, an alliance of oil-producing countries created in 2016, to regulate oil prices to remain at a favourable level.³⁹⁵ Warm relations were at their peak in December 2019. Then their relationship deteriorated as the two countries engaged in conflict over regulating oil output within the OPEC+. On March 6, 2020 the KSA came with a proposal to cut the oil outputs by 1.5 million barrels per day. The global oil prices sharply declined due to the corona pandemic when there was a decline in industry and transport³⁹⁶ and the KSA wished to increase the oil prices. Russia rejected the proposal. Thus, the cooperation turned into disagreements that escalated to the point of 'the oil-price war' between these two oil giants. Saudis tried to push Putin to accede to their decision by increasing its oil exports to the oil market even at a low price.³⁹⁷ The competition also impacted the US

shale industry which requires a cost of about \$50 per barrel in the market to remain profitable.³⁹⁸ To compare, due to the oil-price war, the price per barrel was briefly less than \$10 in April 2020. Affected by the Moscow-Riyadh rivalry, the US was pushing on the agreement between Putin and MBS.³⁹⁹ Consequently, in April 2020, members of the OPEC and the OPEC+ agreed to cut output by 9.7 million barrels per day in May-June 2020. Another decrease should come in July-December 2020 with the daily production reduced by another 7.7 million barrels.⁴⁰⁰

Russian interests in the KSA have their limitations, from geopolitical to economic ones. The major hurdle proves to be the membership of both countries in

the OPEC+ creating obstacles which are preventing deepening of cooperation. Thus globally, the US is remaining the Saudis most significant ally, regionally they hold opposite approaches towards the Syrian civil war and position regarding Iran. At the same time, Russia's growing demands in strengthening ties politically, militarily and its economic relations with the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman are showing efforts of building a block which would compete with Saudi hegemony in the region.⁴⁰¹ Nevertheless, Russian diplomacy in the KSA focuses on a diplomatic solution to the Syrian case, building consensus on stabilizing the oil prices on the global market and upholding the possible Saudi investments into Russian infrastructure and involvement in the Saudi gas market.⁴⁰²

6.2 The United Arab Emirates

The EU has a little foothold in the UAE which in turn views Brussels as an insignificant player in the region. Emirati foreign policy orientation (as it is by KSA) focuses on several key European players – France, the UK and Germany. The first mentioned actor, France, also shares a common ground with the UAE in the Libyan civil war by supporting Khalifa Haftar. The UAE strengthens GCC's position by taking advantage of divided European policies on regional issues. For example, in Libya, France and Italy support opposing sides of the conflict. Furthermore, France together with the UK refused to criticize the UAE (and Saudis) policies in Yemen.⁴⁰³

While regional conflicts negatively affect relations between Moscow and Riyadh, on the other hand, they create room for cooperation between Russia and the UAE. Although Abu Dhabi is often considered a close Saudi ally it does not necessarily follow Riyadh's regional policies. Firstly, the UAE re-established connections with the Syrian regime, opening the

embassy in Damascus in December 2018, seeing Assad as a guarantor of anti-democracy and anti-Islamism principles and policies in the region.⁴⁰⁴ Secondly, both Russia and the UAE provided support to Haftar's LNA against the Tripoli-based GNA. Thirdly, Russia expressed its interest in having a stake in the post-war arrangements in Yemen, maintaining ties with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) assisted by the UAE.

For Russia, the oil-rich UAE is a source of significant investments. In 2014, the Emirati companies invested into a major port in St. Petersburg, Winter Sochi Olympics, and into Rosneft projects.⁴⁰⁵ The UAE is also closely involved in the Northern Caucasus, organizing anti-extremist Islamic conferences, or having warm ties with Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, an important ally of Putin. The common approach towards promoting moderate versions of Sunni Islam was highlighted at the Grozny Conference in 2016 where Wahhabism, Salafism and

387 Mark N. Katz, and Nikolay Kozhanov, "What Do They See in Him? How the Middle East Views Putin and Russia," *ETH Zurich Research collection* (May 2018), <https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/bitstream/handle/20.500.11850/262301/4/RAD219.pdf>.

388 Steven A. Cock, "Russia Is Losing the Oil War—and the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, April 9, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/09/russia-saudi-arabia-oil-price-war-middle-east/>.

389 Naji, "Yemen's role in Moscow's."

390 Katz, and Kozhanov, "What Do They See in Him?."

391 Ibid.

392 Russian Direct Investment Fund, "RDIF, Saudi Aramco and PIF agree to acquire shareholding in Novomet," (October 2019), https://rdif.ru/Eng_fullNews/4441/.

393 Gardner, "Saudi Arabia warms."

394 "Saudi Aramco signs 1 SPA and 9 MOUs with Russian companies at the Saudi-Russian CEO Forum," *Aramco*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.aramco.com/en/news-media/news/2019/saudi-aramco-signs-1-spa-and-9-mous-with-russian-companies-at-the-saudi-russian-ceo-forum>.

395 Ali Hussein Bakeer, "ANALYSIS - Saudi Arabia losing the oil war; might lose its only Western ally too," *Anadolu Agency*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-saudi-arabia-losing-the-oil-war-might-lose-its-only-western-ally-too/1802756>.

396 Jackie Northam, "Trump Urges Saudi Arabia And Russia To End Oil War," *NPR: National Public Radio*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/07/828688400/trump-urges-saudi-arabia-and-russia-to-end-oil-war?t=1590262196163>.

397 Bakeer, "ANALYSIS - Saudi Arabia."

398 Joshua Yaffa, "How the Russian-Saudi Oil War Went Awry—for Putin Most of All," *The New Yorker*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/how-the-russian-saudi-oil-war-went-awry-for-putin-most-of-all>.

399 Northam, "Trump Urges Saudi Arabia And Russia To End Oil War."

400 "Saudi-Russia OPEC+ Alliance Extends Oil Cuts," *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, June 7, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/saudi-russia-opec-alliance-oil-cuts/30657082.html>.

401 Musabah, "Russia's relations with Gulf states."

402 Katz, and Kozhanov, "What Do They See in Him?."

403 Bianco, "A Gulf apart: How Europe."

404 Jonathan Fenton Harvey, "Russia and the UAE Seek Greater Mutual Benefits" *Inside Arabia*, November 8, 2019, <https://insidearabia.com/russia-and-the-uae-seek-greater-mutual-benefits/>.

405 Musabah, "Russia's relations with Gulf states."

the Muslim Brotherhood were labeled as ‘misguided’ interpretations of Islam. Abu Dhabi’s interests in Chechnya are underlined by major investments in Grozny Mall or the MFC Akhmat Tower.⁴⁰⁶

On the other hand, both sides diverge on their view of Shiite non-state actors like Hezbollah and its presence in Syria which the UAE naturally strongly opposes.⁴⁰⁷ In June 2018, both sides signed the Russia–UAE Declaration of Strategic Partnership.⁴⁰⁸ Apart from cooperation on promoting regional security and stability the deal laid the groundwork for the trade deals set in October 2019 with more than \$1.3 billion bilateral investments. Trade turnover was almost \$2.1 billion in 2018. Most importantly, the UAE’s sovereign wealth fund acquired a 44% stake in Russian oil and gas giant Gazprom’s subsidiary Gazprom Neft-Vostok.⁴⁰⁹ The geographic position of the UAE represents a possible export and business hub through which

Russia can boost its leverage not only to the Middle East but also to whole East Asia and Africa. While Russia is exporting mainly commodities, for example, machinery, types of equipment and vehicles. The UAE invests in the Russian oil and gas sector, infrastructure, and logistics.⁴¹⁰ The UAE expressed interest in purchasing Russian Su-35 fighters, which is, however, unlikely to materialize due to the US objections.⁴¹¹

Whereas the UAE bolsters its partnership with Russia, it remains one of the key partners of the US in the Middle East.⁴¹² Abu Dhabi hosts around 5,000 US troops, procures advanced US weaponry, such as the discussed purchase of F-35 jets.⁴¹³ The US also mediated normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel on August 13, 2020.⁴¹⁴ There are no indicators that the UAE would shift its strategic ties with the US towards Russia.

2011-15. Yet, the US remains a key partner for Bahrain, hosting an American naval base where the US Navy’s 5th Fleet is headquartered.⁴¹⁶

In 2013 the European Parliament endorsed a resolution discussing human rights violations in Bahrain, criticizing insufficient EU’s response.⁴¹⁷ The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) and National Dialogue play an important role in Bahrain-Brussels relations. The EU considers both

initiatives as ‘proof of progress’ in Bahraini stance on human rights. However, both of these organizations are primarily cosmetic instruments of the Bahraini strategy to improve its image.⁴¹⁸

The official recognition between Bahrain and Russia is dated to 1990 when Manama built diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union. One year later, Bahrain accepted the Russian Federation as the official heritor of the collapsed Soviet Union.⁴¹⁹ The significant milestone of Russian-Bahrain relations was the reaction from the US, UK and France that halted arms delivery to Bahrain in 2011. Russia seized the opportunity and signed an agreement with Manama on delivering AK-103 assault rifles and permitting training of the Bahraini army.⁴²⁰ Bahrain and Rosoboronexport struck a deal in August 2011, six months after the UK and France halted their deliveries.⁴²¹ Moreover, Bahrain is interested in the purchase of the Russian helicopters (the Mi-8/17 and Mi-26) and also hold the attention of establishing the regional helicopter service center⁴²² or the possible provision of the Kornet anti-tank complexes from Russia.⁴²³ Military deals were followed by an April 2014 investment agreement at the height of EU- and US-imposed sanctions over invasion to Ukraine.

Russian Gazprom proceeded with its strategy of investing in MENA and signed a memorandum of

understanding with Bahrain’s National Oil and Gas Authority’s (NOGA) to increase cooperation in the gas sector in April 2012. In 2016 another deal was signed between the two companies expanding collaboration in the energy sector. Russian state-owned firm Rosgeologiya together with NOGA also agreed on explorations of Bahrain’s offshore blocks since 2017.⁴²⁴ Besides, both countries agreed to establish the bilateral intergovernmental commission on trade-economic and scientific-technical cooperation.⁴²⁵ A specific example of expanding cooperation is Moscow’s involvement in the launching of the Bahrain satellite into space in 2018.⁴²⁶ Besides, Bahrain invested more than \$50 million in mining, logistics and other sectors in Russia.⁴²⁷

From a geopolitical standpoint, Russia sees Manama as a possible mediator in Russian negotiations between the GCC countries and Tehran.⁴²⁸ Nevertheless, their position diverges on Syria, where Bahraini officials along with the Saudis stand against Assad’s regime, Moscow’s most important ally in MENA.⁴²⁹ Moreover, a strong US presence in the form of a navy base precludes any significant collaboration with Moscow in the security sector. As a result of US-mediated efforts, Bahrain, in parallel to the UAE, also normalized diplomatic ties with Israel on September 11, 2020.

Kuwait together with Oman, represents a more neutral actor inside the GCC, supporting the intra-

GCC mediation since the disputes between the KSA, the UAE, Bahrain (and Egypt) on one side and Qatar

6.3 Bahrain

Besides the GCC, Bahrain maintains cordial ties with the KSA and the UAE. For example at the request of Bahrain, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi sent 2,000 soldiers to assist with suppressing anti-government demonstrations in 2011. Although the EU (and the US) criticized the harsh measures against the protestors in February and March 2011, no significant practical steps followed.⁴¹⁵ The UK’s ban on arms export licenses lasted only one year and the trade restarted in 2012. The US in turn, interrupted arms exports to Bahrain in

⁴⁰⁶ Galeeva, “Balancing Adversaries.”

⁴⁰⁷ Samuel Ramani, “Russia and the UAE: An Ideational Partnership,” *Middle East Policy* 27, no. 1 (April 2020), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/mepo.12479>.

⁴⁰⁸ Li-Chen Sim, “Russia–Gulf Relations: A Case Study of North-South Relations within West Asia,” *Middle East Insight*, no. 202 (March 2019), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3359103>.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Giorgio Cafiero, “Understanding Russia And The UAE’s Special Partnership” in *LobeLog*, October 19, (2016), <https://lobelog.com/understanding-russia-and-the-uaes-special-partnership/>.

⁴¹¹ Petr Iskanderov, “Rossiya i Persidskij zaliv: okna vozmozhnostej”, Strategic Culture Foundation (1999), <https://www.fondsk.ru/news/2017/09/06/rossiya-i-persidskij-zaliv-okna-vozmozhnostej-44604.html>.

⁴¹² Ramani, “Russia and the UAE.”

⁴¹³ Clayton Thomas, “Arms Sales in the Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy,” *CRS Report* (October 2017), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44984.pdf>.

⁴¹⁴ Frank Gardner, “With UAE deal, Israel opens tentative new chapter with Gulf Arabs,” *BBC News*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53805828>.

⁴¹⁵ Toby Matthiesen, “EU foreign policy towards Bahrain in the aftermath of the uprising,” in *The Gulf states and the Arab uprisings*, ed. Ana Echagüe (FRIDE and the Gulf Research Center, 2013), 77-86, <http://www.tobymatthiesen.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/FRIDE-TOBY-MATTHIESEN.pdf>.

⁴¹⁶ Nikita Smagin, “Middle East pressure point: Why Russia needs Bahrain,” *Russia Beyond*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.rbth.com/international/2017/03/10/middle-east-russia-bahrain-716863>.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Habib Toumi, “Bahrain reinforces ties with Russia,” *Gulf News*, January 27, 2015, <https://gulfnnews.com/world/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-reinforces-ties-with-russia-1.1447458>.

⁴²⁰ Smagin, “Middle East pressure point.”

⁴²¹ Cafiero, “Can Bahrain count on Moscow to fill Washington’s shoes?.”

⁴²² Maria Dubovikova, “Why Russia sees Bahrain as a partner in the Middle East,” *Al Arabiya*, September 5, 2016, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2016/09/05/Why-Russia-sees-Bahrain-as-a-partner-in-the-Middle-East>.

⁴²³ Smagin, “Middle East pressure point.”

⁴²⁴ Indrajit Sen, “Russia considers LNG supplies to Bahrain: Report,” *Oil and Gas*, September 8, 2016, <https://www.oilandgasmiddleeast.com/article-16106-russia-considers-lng-supplies-to-bahrain-report>.

⁴²⁵ “Russian News Agency, “Putin says Bahraini king’s visit to Russia is ‘important and timely’,” *TASS*, September 6, 2016, <https://tass.com/politics/898256>.

⁴²⁶ “Bahrain-Russian partnership discussed,” *Bahrain News Agency*, October 31, 2018, <https://www.bna.bh/en/Bahrain-Russian-partnership-discussed.aspx?cms=q8FmFJgiscL2fwizON1%2BDm7NdAmCImciPdZfiUcswck%3D>.

⁴²⁷ Smagin, “Middle East pressure point.”

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Cafiero, “Can Bahrain count on Moscow to fill Washington’s shoes?.”

on the other.⁴³⁰ In July 2019, the EU opened a new mission in Kuwait – third in the Gulf after the KSA and the UAE.⁴³¹ Besides mediating the intra-GCC crisis, Kuwait is a potential dialogue facilitator between Iran and the GCC or Iran and Saudi Arabia and in Yemen. Armed with a neutral reputation and balanced foreign policy, Kuwait can be a vital asset for the EU.⁴³² Besides proximity to Iraq prompted Kuwait to take strategic interests in maintaining the stability of Iraq which the EU also considers its policy goal.⁴³³ Kuwait along with other Gulf financial heavyweights is also a significant investor in European infrastructure such as London's airports. Kuwait, together with Qatar, invested €1bn and €500m in Italy's sovereign wealth fund Fondo Strategico Italiano in 2014.⁴³⁴

Kuwait was the first GCC country to sign a Cooperation Arrangement with the European External Action Service (EEAS) in July 2016, aiming at collaboration in political and economic sectors. The EU also supported Kuwait's Vision 2035 with its ambition to transform Kuwait into a regional and international financial hub to attract more foreign investors.⁴³⁵ Another dimension of cooperation between the EU and Kuwait is to coordinate humanitarian aid (together with economic development) as a peacekeeping tool in the region.⁴³⁶

Historically, Kuwait was the first Arab country that recognized the USSR.⁴³⁷ However, the USSR was

using leverage in the UN Security Council against foreign, (namely British), military presence in Kuwait in the 1950s and 60s. Moscow viewed the presence of foreign militaries as an illegal act.⁴³⁸ In 1963, as Moscow opened a diplomatic mission in the country, Kuwait saw the USSR as a guarantor of its independence against Iraq, claiming Kuwaiti territory.

In June 2012, Kuwait through the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), invested more than \$500 million in the Russian transportation sector as one of the first Arab countries.⁴³⁹ In November 2015 the KIA expanded their foothold with another \$500 million investment in Russian infrastructure.⁴⁴⁰ Utilizing its state-owned energy companies to bolster its presence in Kuwait, Gazprom signed a memorandum of understanding with the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation in November 2015 to secure mutual energy interests in 2015.⁴⁴¹ In 2018, another MoU was signed between Gazpromneft-Lubricants Ltd and Kuwait Petroleum International (KPI), focusing on the cooperation in development in lubricant production. According to this memorandum, the KPI will give access to high-technology production facilities at a blending plant in Belgium to Gazpromneft-Lubricants Ltd.⁴⁴²

Kuwait at first backed the rebel forces in Syria, providing them with financial support. That included funding of al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, the al-Nusra Front.⁴⁴³ On the other hand, since the beginning

of the Syrian civil war, Kuwait tries to pose itself as a mediator between Russia and Saudi Arabia. It has been more cautious about isolating Assad's government.⁴⁴⁴ Kuwaiti officials also criticized Riyadh for its hostility towards Assad.⁴⁴⁵ Having ambivalent policies, Kuwait closed its embassy in Syria in 2012.

Nevertheless, the Syrian embassy in Kuwait City remained open. Vice versa, the GCC consensus

6.4 Oman

In parallel to Kuwait, Oman also strives to maintain a neutral position on regional issues by supporting the intra-GCC mediation and balancing between two regional rivals of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Oman views any escalation of the dispute as a threat to its stability. Standing between Sunnism and Shiism, following the Ibadi school of Abd-Allah ibn Ibadh, allows Oman more flexible regional policies. Thus, Oman can use the GCC membership to reduce the Iranian impact in the country and at the same time, maintain ties with Tehran to counter Saudi influence. Standing neutral like it was during the Qatar crisis, is Oman becoming 'Arabian Switzerland' with its strategy of non-alignment policies.⁴⁴⁷ In September 2018, the EU and Oman signed an agreement discussing mutual political dialogue, economy, trade and regional cooperation. The EU also expressed support for Oman's Vision 2040 in transportation, energy and tourism.⁴⁴⁸

Omani ambition to become a regional negotiator can be utilized by the EU as Brussels can assist Oman with its diplomatic efforts and tracks to prevent any escalation in the region. After the death of Sultan

proclaimed that Assad is unable to stand at the head of the country due to his massive repression of the civilians.⁴⁴⁶ However, as opposed to mutual economic investments and the (mostly untapped) prospect of cooperation on mediating regional issues, once again, Kuwait falls under a strong US influence, which maintains about 13,000 troops in the country as of June 2020.

Qaboos bin Sa'id al-Sa'id, his successor Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al-Sa'id vowed to keep the course of diplomatic negotiation in regional politics.⁴⁴⁹ Omani diplomatic potential showed during the JCPOA talks and once again following the US withdrawal from the deal. The EU could fill the gap left by the US and support negotiations between Tehran the GCC and other regional actors.⁴⁵⁰

Oman established diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union in 1985,⁴⁵¹ but since then, there were several obstacles preventing deepening bilateral relations. For example, the USSR used its expansionist policy and supported the Marxist Dhofar Liberation Front, hoping it will gain power in Oman.⁴⁵² Standing opposite the GCC consensus (with the partial exception of Kuwait), Oman kept its embassy in Syria after 2011. Having closer relations with Qatar and Iran, Oman partially converges with Russian policies in the region. Mutual alignment is underlined by Moscow's and Muscat's opposition to the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen⁴⁵³ when Oman refused to participate in the armed intrusion against the Houthi alliance.⁴⁵⁴ Russian FM Lavrov and Omani FM Yusuf bin Alawi

430 Bianco, "A Gulf apart: How Europe."

431 Matteo Arisci, "European Union opens a new Delegation in Kuwait City," *European Union External Action*, July 14, 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/65425/european-union-opens-new-delegation-kuwait-city_en.

432 Oppenheim, "You never listen to me."

433 Bianco, "A Gulf apart: How Europe."

434 Ibid.

435 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State of Kuwait, "Kuwait Vision 2035 "New Kuwait", (2020), <https://www.mofa.gov.kw/en/kuwait-state/kuwait-vision-2035/>.

436 Cinzia Bianco, "What the EU's New Delegation to Kuwait is all About," *The Euro-Gulf Information Centre*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.egic.info/eu-delegation-kuwait>.

437 Nicolai Due-Gundersen, "The Emir and the Tsar: Kuwait Turns to Russia as Trump Clashes with Iran," *Albawaba News*, May 19, 2019, <https://www.albawaba.com/news/emir-and-tsar-kuwait-turns-russia-trump-clashes-iran-1286787>.

438 Elena Melkumyan, "A Political History of Relations between Russia and the Gulf States," *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies* (December 2015), https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/A_Political_History_of_Relations_between_Russia_and_the_Gulf_States_Elena_Melkumyan.pdf.

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442 "Gazpromneft-Lubricants signs cooperation agreement with Kuwait Petroleum International," *Gazprom Neft*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.gazprom-neft.com/press-center/news/gazpromneft-lubricants-signs-cooperation-agreement-with-kuwait-petroleum-international/>.

443 Musabah, "Russia's relations with Gulf states."

444 Samuel Ramani, "Russia, Kuwait discuss common ground in regional conflicts," *Al-Monitor*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/05/russia-kuwait-gulf-syria.html>.

445 Musabah, "Russia's relations with Gulf states."

446 Ramani, "Russia and the UAE."

447 Kirill Semenov, "Russia, Oman size each other up as potential Mideast allies," *Al-Monitor*, November 8, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/russia-oman-policies-middle-east-technical-economic.html>.

448 Michele d'Urso Cervone, "Oman-EU relations expanding to gain newer dimensions," *Times of Oman*, May 11, 2019, <https://timesofoman.com/article/1276831/opinion/oman-eu-relations-expanding-to-gain-newer-dimensions>.

449 Bianco, "A Gulf apart: How Europe."

450 Ibid.

451 Samuel Ramani, "The growing strength of Russian-Omani ties," *Middle East Institute* (March 2020), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/growing-strength-russian-omani-ties>.

452 Semenov, "Russia, Oman size each other up."

453 Ramani, "The growing strength of Russian-Omani ties."

454 Semenov, "Russia, Oman size each other up."

maintained in February 2019 that both countries also share a joint stance on Syria.⁴⁵⁵ In the economic sector, the countries established a Russia-Oman Business Forum to stimulate future economic growth in 2016. In 2018, the trade volume between these two

6.5 Qatar

Qatar's standing in the region is highly influenced by positions of individual states towards the Qatar crisis, characterized by the economic embargo and political boycott from the KSA, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt since June 2017.⁴⁵⁷ Both the EU and European countries refrained from blockading Qatar.⁴⁵⁸ Germany was the first EU country openly standing with Qatar during the crisis. Unluckily for Doha, Germany cannot match the UK's or France's level of involvement in MENA and lacks a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.⁴⁵⁹

The Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) is a substantial investor to the individual European countries. For example, in March 2011 the QIA provided €300 million to troubled Spanish savings banks. In the past, the QIA often joined forces with the UAE, financing European projects. To be The QIA with Abu Dhabi's Mubadala Investment Company made a partnership with the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations to invest in French SMEs €800 million in April 2013.⁴⁶⁰ Another example can be the foundation of a joint fund to invest in Italian tourism and luxury industries by Qatar Holding Company LLC and QIA.⁴⁶¹ Despite these massive investments the EU itself has little diplomatic

countries reached \$143.3 million, a relatively modest amount.⁴⁵⁶ Although Oman is apparently interested in diversifying its foreign relations, major obstacles remain traditional Omani ties with the US and the UK.

or political engagement with Qatar.

Instead, Doha's foreign policy notably steers towards Ankara, Tehran (and partially Moscow) - countries assisting Qatar to cope with isolation after the Saudi-led blockade and boycott.⁴⁶² The EU lacks leverage and instruments to engage in resolving the intra-GCC crisis meaningfully. In March 2018, Qatar and the European External Action Service signed a Cooperation Agreement, discussing partnership in development, private sector, research and innovation, including support for the Qatar National Vision 2030.⁴⁶³

Despite the troubled past, when both sides resorted to assassinations and attacks on the representatives of the other state as in 2004-11,⁴⁶⁴ the current relation between Qatar and Russia took a positive turn. After Qatar's Emirate gained a new leader, Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani in 2013, the country started to warm up relations with Moscow.⁴⁶⁵ In March of the same year, the QIA, sheikdom's sovereign wealth fund, made significant investments in Russian infrastructure, including a \$500 million stake in the

VTB, a Russian bank under Western sanctions.⁴⁶⁶ In October 2016, the QIA acquired a 24.99% stake in the Pulkovo Airport in St. Petersburg.⁴⁶⁷ Qatar holds the same share in Moscow's Vnukovo Airport.⁴⁶⁸

Additionally, in December 2016, Qatar invested \$11.3 billion in Rosneft,⁴⁶⁹ together with the Swiss trader company Glencore.⁴⁷⁰ Russia, hungry for foreign investment, bolstered mutual economic ties with a string of high-level visits in 2016-18, showing Moscow's support for embattled Doha. Since 2014, Qatar also invested in Ingushetia and helped to build an Islamic complex in Magas, the republic capital.⁴⁷¹ Moscow wants to secure investment flow into the Russian infrastructure and ensure finances, that itself does not have, especially with the EU- and US-imposed sanctions.

Qatar, having 25 trillion m³ in gas reserves, the most after Russia and Iran is a major LNG producer, instrumental in establishing the so-called 'Gas OPEC' with Moscow and Tehran. Since the institutionalization

of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) in December 2008, its headquarters are based in Doha. Despite lacking cohesiveness and actionability of the OPEC, the GECF project, now containing eleven countries, represents the embodiment of Russian gas strategy aiming at controlling production levels and prices. Some of the regional (the KSA and the UAE) and global (the US) actors oppose the 'gas coalition'.⁴⁷²

Russia pursued a pragmatic policy of balancing between different actors during the Qatar crisis. Moscow took a neutral stance after the 'quartet' of Bahrain, Egypt, the KSA, and the UAE accused Qatar of supporting terrorism, and thus destabilizing the region and suspended economic and diplomatic ties with Doha.⁴⁷³ Moscow, transmitting signals of enthusiasm by playing the role of mediator maintaining contact with both sides and Iran and Turkey, the two countries alleviating blockade of Qatar.⁴⁷⁴

6.6 Yemen

The EU signed its first cooperation agreement with Yemen already in 1997. Brussels maintains it represents a neutral partner to all Yemeni groups,⁴⁷⁵ supporting a constructive negotiation process between key actors, with its promises of financial aid to post-war Yemen. EU peacebuilding tools are utilized on the ground in Yemen, such as the Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace and Peace Process Support for Yemen is responsible for the solution of the conflicts and crises. The EU has

been committing financial aid to promote a political solution, humanitarian assistance and development tools since 2015 which has totaled \$484 million, in which (\$230 million is allocated for 2019-20).⁴⁷⁶

The EU does not recognize the declaration of the UAE-backed self-rule administrative by Southern Transitional Council (STC) which is active in southern Yemen. EU diplomacy argued that the autonomy of southern Yemen would deepen

455 Kirill Semenov, "Russia eyes Oman as mediator for regional crises," *Al-Monitor*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/02/russia-oman-mediation-syria-palestine-yemen.html>.

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461 Colombo, "Bridging the Gulf: EU - GCC Relations at a Crossroads."

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463 Lauranne Deville, "EU and Qatar sign a Cooperation Arrangement," *European Union External Action*, March 7, 2018, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/40967/eu-and-qatar-sign-cooperation-arrangement_en.

464 In 2004, there was an assassination of Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev (the former acting president of the breakaway Chechen Republic of Ichkeria) from which Qatar accused Russian agents. In 2011, after the assault on the Russian Ambassador Vladimir Titorenko at Doha International Airport, the mutual relations were at their low point. Dmitry Frolovskiy, "Russia and Qatar: The Middle East's newest pragmatic friendship?," *The Jerusalem Post*, April 1, 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/russia-and-qatar-the-middle-east-s-newest-pragmatic-friendship-585461>.

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466 Sergei Zamascikov, "Russia and Qatar: Official and Unofficial Relations," *Bulgaria Analytica*, July 12, 2017, <https://bulgariaanalytica.org/2017/07/12/russia-and-qatar-official-and-unofficial-relations/>.

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469 Elena Mazneva, and Ilya Arkhipov, "Russia Sells \$11 Billion Stake in Rosneft to Glencore, Qatar," *Bloomberg*, December 7, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-12-07/glencore-qatar-fund-buy-russia-s-rosneft-stake-for-11-billion>.

470 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>.

471 Galeeva, "Balancing Adversaries."

472 Issaev, "Russia and the GCC crisis."

473 Giorgio Cafiero, and Theodore Karasik, "Qatar and Russia: What Do They See in Each Other?," *Middle East Policy Council*, October 11, 2017, <https://mepc.org/commentary/qatar-and-russia-what-do-they-see-each-other>.

474 Issaev, "Russia and the GCC crisis."

475 Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Yemen, "Political & economic relations," (2020), http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/yemen/eu_yemen/political_and_economic_relation/index_en.htm.

476 Przemysław Osiewicz, "The EU steps up its engagement in Yemen, but is it enough?," *Middle East Institute* (2020), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/eu-steps-its-engagement-yemen-it-enough>.

instability in the country and further divert from UN-backed solution attempts.⁴⁷⁷ Individual EU countries have a comparably more significant impact in the country, namely the UK and France. Both are selling arms to the KSA and do little to prevent Saudis from their military campaign inflicting excessive civilian casualties. For example, a report dated April 2016 asserts that Saudis airstrikes caused more than 60% of the deaths in the Yemen war.⁴⁷⁸ Thus, the EU should find common ground and exert pressure on the countries which export weapons to the KSA and its allies as well as assume a more critical position towards Iran, supporting Houthi rebels in Yemen and adding to escalations of the conflict.⁴⁷⁹

Apart from Syria and Libya, Russian engagement in Yemen also (albeit to a lesser extent) affects Moscow's relations with countries of the Arabian Peninsula.⁴⁸⁰ Another potential apple of discord with the Gulf actors is Russian cooperation with Iran. In contrast to the GCC, Russian inroads to Yemen are motivated by different factors. While in the case of the GCC states, economic ties, including attracting foreign direct investment, appear to be a hallmark of Russian policies, Yemen is in turn, a lower-income country.⁴⁸¹ Russian diplomacy, not unlike in Libya, tries to play an equidistant role to the sides of the conflict and keep the communications channels open with all actors. On one side, it recognizes the Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi government and the other is willing to talk with Houthis, which repeatedly discussed allowing Russians to use military installations under their control.⁴⁸² Moreover, Russia supports the STC, which is backed by the UAE and sees itself as a significant

stakeholder in Yemen. The STC controls the old Soviet base in Aden.⁴⁸³

Historically, Yemen used to be a closer Cold War ally to Moscow as it backed the communist government in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY).⁴⁸⁴ The Soviets naval and aerial military facilities in Aden.⁴⁸⁵ Moreover, during the Cold war, Yemen was a country with the largest Soviet embassy in the Middle East.⁴⁸⁶ Despite these circumstances, the USSR never "controlled" the country as its satellite as it did with Central European states as Czechoslovakia for example.⁴⁸⁷ Even in the Cold War era, Moscow diversified its relations in Yemen while also having cordial ties with the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in the north, which also hosted a Soviet base in Socotra.

In the 1990s, several territorial changes happened on both sides. Firstly, Yemen was unified into a single state, the Republic of Yemen, after the YAR and the PDRY merged in 1990. Secondly, following the collapse of the USSR, Russia effectively retreated from its Yemeni bases in the 1990s. However, it still preserved and cultivated diplomatic ties between two countries, albeit at that time no longer sharing communist ideological outlooks.⁴⁸⁸ After 2000, Yemen and Russia re-established military-technical cooperation, when Russia delivered T-90 tanks and MiG-29 fighter-bombers.⁴⁸⁹ Besides, from 2006-07, Russian exports increased from \$94.8 million to \$178.9 million.⁴⁹⁰ To compare, Yemeni imports from Russia have reached \$147.05 million during 2019.⁴⁹¹ In 2014, both sides agreed on the priority of investments in oil and gas extraction, oil production and mining during

the Russian-Yemeni economic committee.⁴⁹²

Russia, seeing Yemen's strategic geographic position, continues to utilize its Soviet-era ties and strategies. Moscow is using its non-alignment policy and thus can balance between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Russia sees an opportunity in the geopolitical location of Aden and Socotra island, a possible place for Russian military bases once again, which would open access to the strategic Strait of Bab al-Mandab, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean. It would match up with other countries, having a military presence in the Horn of Africa.⁴⁹³ Interestingly, in Yemen, Russia pragmatically abandons its 'usual' policy of supporting unity and stability in MENA states. For example, Moscow supports secessionist movements as the STC, ignoring other local actors like Islamist and tribalist Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Al-Islah).⁴⁹⁴ Russia was in turn, the only country to abstain from the UN Security Council Resolution 2216 in April 2015 imposing sanctions on Houthi militias and calling for their withdrawal and negotiations.⁴⁹⁵

However even in Yemen, Russian balancing between various actors has proved to be hard to maintain. The ties between Houthis and Russian worsened as militias murdered former Yemeni President (and Moscow's ally) Ali Abdullah Saleh on December 4, 2017. Moscow withdrew its diplomats from Sana'a, and its ties between both sides remained strained. Despite Iranian mediation efforts, the Russian stance towards Houthis remains relatively cold and Moscow prefers the STC. On the other hand, it is unlikely that Russia would support the independence of southern Yemen directly, maintaining its position of maintaining regional balance in active neutrality. The 'making friends with everybody' approach is underlined by the fact that Russia recognizes the legitimacy of President Hadi.⁴⁹⁶ Yet, Russia will most likely continue to actively work on re-establishing its military bases in Yemen, in Aden in particular. On the regional level Russia criticizes the US support of Saudi military intervention in the country.⁴⁹⁷

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489 Ibid.

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497 Ramani, "Can Russia play role."

RUSSIAN POLICIES TOWARDS ARAB MENA COUNTRIES IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EU

Russian attempts to return to the MENA region intensified since the 2000s and culminated in the post-2011 period. Russian absence from the region was a deviation from systematic historical engagement with the Muslim world predating even the Soviet era. In the 1990s, the Kremlin's MENA policy was effectively limited to Syria, Iran and partially Turkey. On the other hand, it abandoned its garrisons in Yemen, somewhat disengaged from Algeria, and effectively lost Iraq and Libya, once significant allies in the region. Moscow intensified its diplomatic efforts to rejuvenate its diplomatic ties already in the mid-2000s, as indicated by frequent high-level visits and attempts to re-engage with former Soviet allies. It simultaneously established contact with more Western-oriented states in North Africa, the Gulf, or Iraq.

Russia's 'full-blown' return, albeit not as a superpower being able in any way able to compete with the US was marked by the post-2011 developments, specifically with Russian decisive diplomatic efforts in the Syrian war to save Assad's regime, its crucial ally. Russia effectively managed to at least return to the table on essential issues in MENA, such as conflicts in Syria, Libya, or Yemen. Moscow tries to position itself as an alternative partner to the US and the EU, presenting itself as a non-ideological pragmatic partner for those states who wish to diversify dependencies on the West. Moscow asserts that, in contrast to the US and the EU, it offers 'no strings attached.' Russia claims that when it comes

to conditioning ties and support as the West with interference in internal affairs, pushing for regime changes in the name of democratization and inciting instability (as it did by initially supporting changes during Arab insurrections after 2011).

Russia tries to 'sell' its policy as a form of 'positive neutrality' or balancing between various actors that allow for maintaining friendships and communication channels to remain open with all sides. Essentially, it strives to compartmentalize its relations and policies, which often puts them at odds against each other and arguably overstretched. The 'compartmentalization' is notable in particular in issues such as the war in Yemen, Qatari crisis, the war in Libya, maintaining ties with Algeria and Morocco while at the same time inserting itself into the sensitive conflict in Western Sahara.

It appears that even traditional Western allies among MENA countries are eager (or at least declare so) to diversify their relations, looking chiefly towards Russia and China. However, in the case of countries closely aligned with the US or European countries as the GCC members, Morocco, Tunisia, or Jordan, Russia was able to make only minor advances. One could argue with Baev that *"Russia's capacity for projecting power and channelling resources towards the Middle East has been limited for a long time, so its policy was focused on identifying and exploiting opportunities for making a difference 'on the cheap.'"*⁴⁹⁸

498 Pavel K. Baev, "Russia as Opportunist of Spoiler in the Middle East?," *The International Spectator* 50, no. 2 (2015): 8-21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2015.1019250>, 9.

Consequently, it appears that actors like Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, or Iraqi Kurdistan, deliberately use the ‘Russian card’ in order to show its Western partners they can look for friends elsewhere should. To sum up, Arab MENA countries are eager to diversify their ties. However, they realize that Russia can hardly replace the US with its guarantee, nor can it or is willing to offer substantial economic investments. For example, while Jordan was eager to collaborate with Russia to stabilize southern Syria and Moscow could deliver, Russia itself can hardly ensure the return of Syrian refugees from Lebanon.

In general, Russia is more successful in revitalizing its Cold War alliances, such as in Egypt and Iraq. However, there it is unable to transform it into a genuine alliance or to advance some of its strategic goals, chiefly the desire to have naval and military bases in the MENA apart from Syrian Tartus. One of the main reasons is Russia’s relative economic and political weakness combined US countermeasures, including the threat of sanctions. Russia is more successful in maintaining deeper relations in countries that do not have cordial strategic ties with the US or European countries, such as in Algeria, Sudan, Yemen, or Syria.

From the security-political perspective, Russian policy towards Arab MENA countries is primarily aimed at actually coming back to the ‘regional table’ and have at least a certain level of discretion on regional issues. Russia arguably attained this limited goal, as proved by Russian interference in conflicts and turmoil in Syria, Libya, Yemen, or Sudan. In other words, while Russian foothold in MENA remains relatively weak, it is there and should be accounted for and possibly countered.

In the economic sector, Russia focuses on ‘traditional’ spheres of their sales and exports – namely the energy sector, defense industry. Moscow managed to sell over \$60 billion worth of arms to MENA Arab countries in 2011-20, representing 24% of its total arms exports.⁴⁹⁹ While there are many nuclear cooperation agreements between Rosatom and MENA Arab countries, it appears that the only project likely

to come to life anytime soon is the Egyptian nuclear plant in al-Dabaa.

Sales of advanced weapon systems usually also follow lively Russian defense diplomacy focused on training or drills and ultimately enhanced Russian leverage over the country. Nevertheless, the procurement of specific advanced systems, such as S-400, or the Su-35 next-gen jets brings constraints from the US and the CAATSA sanction regime. Should a country buy such a Russian system, it risks coming under sanctions and losing substantial US financial and military aid. Russia is also active in the hydrocarbon sector, in particular in gas. Moscow, utilizing its state-owned companies systematically tries to have stakes in any meaningful gas project across the region, including in Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq (Kurdistan Region in particular), and the Gulf. As Mammadov asserts, “(...) *Russia has embarked on a pivot to the energy industry of the MENA region.*”⁵⁰⁰ He further adds that “*An overarching goal is to maintain or expand its energy markets in neighboring Western Europe and China, the two of the world’s largest oil and gas consumers.*”⁵⁰¹ The Russian economy, mostly dependent on selling its oil and gas, must secure its markets and the ability to affect oil and gas supply in order to maintain the leading supplier of gas in particular, to Europe.

As Wasser notes, “*Russia is likely to remain reliant on opportunities created by regional states and Western missteps.*”⁵⁰² This assessment is especially valid as long as the US still plays a decisive role in the region with an extensive military presence and political, economic, and security leverage, which Washington at times uses to prevent allied Arab MENA states from drifting strategically towards Russia. At the moment, the US plays this role proactively, including with an overarching system of sanctions. However, Washington, for example, does not try to counter Russian inroads into the regional energy sector, natural gas projects in particular. The US has and enforces ‘red lines’ on its partners not to engage with Russia in particular manners – mainly in terms of arms procurements and security cooperation. The EU in turn, lacks unity and similar ‘red lines’

effectively free-riding on Washington’s decisiveness in countering Russian influence in Arab MENA countries.

Especially when it comes to Russian attempts to make inroads in North Africa, a region of great strategic importance for the EU, Brussels appears to lack any cohesion. Its members are divided by pursuing autonomous and often contradicting policies (such as in Libya, where France and Italy support opposing sides of the conflict). Moreover, Russian policies towards existing regimes in the region preclude any attempts to support democratization or transition, contrary to the EU’s vision of more democratic, liberal, and thus, in the long-term, more stable neighborhood. Yet another evidence of the EU’s inability to execute common policies represents growing Russian influence over alternative gas supplies to Europe to which there has been no consistent response. From the security perspective, prospects of advanced

military cooperation between Russia, or even permanent military and naval bases, which Moscow continuously struggles to secure, are a significant security threat.

To conclude, while Russia remains relatively weak in the Arab MENA region, it proved that with little resources, it is able to secure influence in countries and over conflicts, primarily in Libya where it effectively retreated from long ago. The EU in turn, was not able to react cohesively to Russian return to the MENA, and that includes North Africa, a region of utmost strategic importance for Europe. As long as the US remains intensely engaged in the region, it effectively prevents further Russian encroachment, primarily in the security sector. Should the US divert its attention elsewhere, the EU must even more acutely assume a more decisive role in countering Russian influence, in particular in North Africa, Lebanon, and Syria.

499 Figures are extracted from “SIPRI Arms Transfers Database,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

500 Mammadov, “Russia in the Middle East,” 212.

501 Ibid., 216.

502 Wasser, “The Limits of Russian Strategy,” 11.

8

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EUROPEAN POLICY

Recommendations on policies towards Arab MENA countries:

- The EU should take a more proactive coherent and robust stance and policy towards MENA countries with its goal to secure security and stability in the EU's immediate neighborhood. At the moment, the EU policy towards MENA remains incoherent and consequently lacks leverage in the region. The EU appears to be relatively impotent in its attempts to play a significant role in the most pressing regional issues such as the war in Syria, or Libya.
- The European states should realize that with significant European players in the MENA region such as France, the UK, Germany, or Italy pursuing incoherent policies, the EU cannot hope to be taken seriously in the MENA region as an actionable actor. This is even more acute with Brexit. The EU lost an important asset and should maintain cooperation and coordination with London on MENA policies.
- The EU should further work on deepening economic interdependencies and integration with North Africa. Pro-actively work on deepening ties with the GCC states, in particular, renew efforts to negotiate a free trade agreement. Economic integration is a major asset for the EU to create dependencies with Arab MENA countries and increase its leverage.
- The EU should continue to be pragmatic in supporting stability and do not necessarily push for rapid regime changes in the name of liberal democratic values. On the other hand, gradual political change from authoritarianism by spreading the EU's values through soft power tools and when necessary, strictly condition financial assistance and economic ties should be pursued.
- Recommendations to counter Russian influence in Arab MENA countries:
- The EU should realize that North Africa is a region of strategic importance, especially since it is relatively firmly integrated with the EU economically. Russian attempts to gain economic, political, and security leverage pose a threat to European interests. Russia simply should play no significant political and military role in Europe's underbelly.
- The EU should clearly articulate to its partners 'red lines' for countering Russian influence, in particular in North Africa. The red lines should primarily include the procurement of advanced Russian weapons systems, hosting of Russian bases and expanded military and intelligence cooperation.
- The EU should introduce a toolkit to counter Russian influence. The primary tools should be a clarified sanctions regime against Russian actors. Furthermore, the EU has enough economic leverage, especially in North Africa, to convince its partners to respect the 'red lines.'
- The EU should closely watch and consider countering Russian systematic effort to have stakes in most major energy, in particular, natural gas projects in the region. Russian inroads in the energy sector threaten the EU's declared goal – diversify its gas supply to lower dependency on Russia.

Recommendations on contemporary regional issues:

- An absolute priority must be a unified stance on Libya, where for example, France has been supporting Egypt- and Russia-backed LNA and Italy, in turn, the GNA along with Turkey. The EU's decisive action is even more acutely needed as it is impotent in preventing escalation between Turkish and Russian proxies in Libya or enforcing the UN-induced arms embargo. At a minimum, the ineffective March 2020 EU naval mission IRINI must be bolstered and stand against breaches of the embargo. The need for concerted EU's action, including military steps is even more acute with an escalation of conflict in the East Mediterranean between Turkey and other regional actors.
- The EU should seize the opportunity provided by the ongoing political transition in Algeria to deepen both political and economic ties seriously. The current situation provides an opening to bolster the EU's position and thus counter Russian influence in the country.
- The EU should play a proactive mediator role between the US, the KSA and its allies, and Iran and its allies. Preserving the JCPOA as a guarantee of de-escalation and stabilization should be a primary interest. However, the de-escalation of Iran should not be supported unconditionally, as Iran, through allied non-state actors, plays a destabilizing role in the region. Should Iran continue its unconstructive course, the EU must exert adequate pressure, including expanded sanctions regime.
- The EU should support Kuwait's and Oman's specific regional position, which gives them a posture allowing for a possible mediator role of the Saudi-Iranian conflict. The EU should boost ties with Kuwait and Oman and support their mediation efforts in order to decrease regional tensions between the KSA-led and Iran-led blocs within the Middle Eastern security complex.
- The EU should continue to play a neutral role in the intra-GCC crisis, supporting reconciliation between Qatar and the KSA. Brussels should play a similar role in offering a mediator role for the warring sides in the Yemen conflict.



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