

THE ROLE OF RUSSIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA REGION. STRATEGY OR OPPORTUNISM?

V. Talbot, C. Lovotti (Eds.), Z. Akl, Y. Cherif, Ch. Hartwell,
M. Milosevich, E. Tafuro Ambrosetti



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Foreword

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Over the last few years, the myth of a Russian “return” to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has captured increasing attention from policy-makers all over the area and beyond, as well as the academic community. This widespread narrative originated, in particular, in the Syrian crisis and the Russian military intervention that since September 2015 has engaged Moscow in a strenuous battle in defence of President Bashar al-Assad against his opposition. After a prolonged period of disengagement from the MENA region following the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which had relegated Moscow to a situation of great marginality in global politics, the Syrian crisis provided the Kremlin with a front door to return to a region that has always been of geostrategic relevance to its foreign projection. What appeared to be a sudden choice in the eyes of many observers, or rather an astute move by Moscow to seize an opportunity for revenge, actually has deeper roots that go well beyond the contingency of the Syrian crisis.

Historically, Russia's absence from MENA affairs for over a decade in the post-Soviet period was a geopolitical exception. For centuries, reaching and penetrating the region has represented one of the key geopolitical goals of Tsarist Russia through its control of the Caucasus, its prolonged offensive against the Ottoman Empire, its rivalry with London in Central Asia and its role as a protector of Christian minorities. It was, however, in the aftermath of World War II and in the framework of the Cold War in particular that Russia increased and consolidated its influence in the MENA region, when its countries emerged as crucial arenas of bipolar competition. On the one hand, countries such as Egypt, Libya and Algeria represented crucial markets for the Soviet arms exports and economy. On the other, countries like Syria and Iraq, in which major socialist-leaning parties had developed, although far from the ideological rigour of the Soviet Communist ideology, or even Sudan or South Yemen, where the respective Communist parties enjoyed broad consensus, met Soviet Russia's dream to expand the reach of the Communist camp and possibly surround itself with allied regimes, which would share Moscow's models of political, institutional and economic development. In these countries, the Soviet Union found a fundamental theatre for its strategic geopolitical and economic interests and rich opportunities to expand its area of influence, while Moscow became increasingly more skilful in adapting and contributing to the international equilibria of the MENA region.

However, the end of the Cold War and the dismantling of the Soviet Union officially marked a period of significant retreat of the “new Russia” from the area. The collapse of the Soviet architecture, the following phase of reconstruction and the harsh years of the perestroika of the 1990s, did in fact impose on the Kremlin political, institutional and economic priorities that were exclusively domestic or centred on the relations with the former Soviet Republics,

not least the crucial area of Northern Caucasus. The MENA region was not only no longer an area of possible prerogative for Moscow but was for the United States (US), which for a long time remained the only extra-regional actor able to intervene in Middle Eastern affairs and actually affect the course of events. But this would not have lasted long.

In the 2000s, well before the Syrian intervention, the new Russia under the guidance of President Vladimir Putin started to look for a window to return to a crucial region. Russian leaders made several visits, including Egypt, Israel and Palestine, Libya, Syria and Turkey, always looking for convergences with their counterparts and possible mutual interests in the security as much as the economic realm. The fear unleashed by the 9/11 attack, new economic opportunities or competing energy markets, for instance, were some of the elements that pushed Moscow to increase its cooperation with various and different regimes in the area.

It is only with the military intervention in Syria and the long wave of its consequences, however, that a consistent scientific debate arose over Russia's "return" to the MENA region. Russian actions in support of the Damascene regime have catalysed the attention of the international community and aroused suspicion and speculations about Moscow's intentions to exert its hegemonic rule over the broader Middle East, animated by a dream of restoring its Soviet posture. However, although we are inclined to believe that history repeats itself, it rather seems that the motivations, objectives and features of the Russian presence in the MENA region today are very different from those of the past. Today, Moscow seems interested in presenting itself as the mediator of all the MENA crises; its political engagement and the diplomatic stance it has gradually adopted have made the Kremlin emerge as one of the main external powers, able to dialogue and enjoy good relations with all the main regional and external players with a stake in MENA affairs. And yet, at odds with the Soviet stereotype of a hegemonic power, in contrast to the post-Soviet image of a marginalised actor, the new Russian projection has triggered a debate fed by the suspicion of Moscow's real intentions.

Against this background, understanding what the features and objectives of Russian presence in the MENA region are today is anything but a simple task. While many observers – from the policy-making or scientific community – have labelled the new "Russian moment" as mere opportunism, something extemporaneous and even unexpected, others have attributed its current interventionism to a proper and broader vision, a sort of "grand strategy" by the Kremlin for the MENA region. Both views, however, may be partial and incomplete. Is the growing Russian assertiveness in the region enough to speak of a proper Moscow "strategy"? Or is Russia limiting itself to grabbing opportunities offered by contexts of crisis,

from the Arab Levant to the North African coasts in order to regain prominence in the region and, through it, increase its influence in global politics? Or does the answer lie in between? Furthermore, does the Russian presence in this arena represent an extemporaneous phenomenon, or is it destined to last? In the end, how is the Russian presence influencing the balance of power and posture of other players in the region?

This Joint Policy Study was designed to answer these questions, trying to investigate the role that Russia has played, is playing and is likely to play in shaping future political alignments in the MENA region. The main purpose is to provide the scholarly and policy-making community with a much-needed study, attempting to explain current events by taking into consideration features of today's international scenario and providing, at the same time, an historical perspective. By benefiting from the analysis of authors with different backgrounds and experiences, this study will therefore unpack some of the key aspects that characterise the Russian presence in the area: historical ties, bilateral and international relations, economic cooperation, and so on. It appears to be increasingly clear, in fact, that features distinguishing relations between the Kremlin and MENA countries deserve more extensive and profound scrutiny as they shed light on the complexity of the current scenario of instability, not only in Syria but in the entire MENA region.

In the first chapter, Youssef Cherif analyses the most recent events from an historical perspective, focusing on a temporal framework that goes from the election of Vladimir Putin to the Presidency of Russia in 2000 up to the beginning of the Arab uprisings in late 2010. In the early 2000s, with the US enveloped in the Iraqi chaos and European players obliged to admit their inability to keep pace with the volatile MENA scenario, Putin's Russia has exploited the weakness of the West to fill a power vacuum and cultivate friends all over the region. At the same time, the author argues, the Kremlin's interests met with those of many Arab and non-Arab leaders in the region, who, affected by a general and widespread sentiment of malaise vis-à-vis Washington in particular, found in Moscow a listening ear and a possible alternative ally. This chapter sheds light on how this convergence of interests and opinions was at the very basis of increased synergy between Moscow and many MENA countries, which would have blossomed in the following decade.

In the second chapter of the study, Mira Milosevic frames the analysis since the 2010s onwards, a period of deep political transformations in many MENA countries, providing a critical view on the role Russia has been playing in these peculiar contexts. As the author explains, the Arab uprisings have had a great impact on Russia's foreign policy towards the region. The long wave of the Syrian crisis, in particular, has pushed Russia's "unexpected" assertiveness and gradually upgraded Moscow to one of the main leading players not only

in the Arab country but in the broader regional scenario. While most observers among the academic and policy-making communities have been divided between those arguing that Moscow has a strategy and those asserting that the Kremlin's actions are dictated by mere opportunism, this chapter is aimed at understanding how reasonable these expectations and speculations are and offers a "third perspective" to look at this complex question. The author, in fact, argues that Russia's strategy for the MENA region is part of a broader international strategy aimed at confronting the American and Chinese global power, and of which MENA countries are only a part.

In the third chapter, Ziad Akl focuses on post-revolutionary contexts prevailing over several countries in the MENA region, with a particular focus on Egypt, Libya and Syria, where the long wave of the Arab uprisings has created political opportunities for global powers to merge into these countries' internal affairs. Accordingly, the author investigates the relations that Russia has been establishing with these countries' political elites in the aftermath of the revolutions, which have either agreed or attempted to form an alliance with Russia, thus facilitating its return to the region. While great attention has been given to the political agenda of Putin's Russia, greater scrutiny is needed of the reasons why post-revolutionary elites in the region are so willing to cooperate with Moscow. As the author argues, analysing the Russian presence from inside the MENA region would indeed provide an interesting viewpoint and possible interpretation of what Moscow is up to there, shedding light on whether it is purely political opportunism or grounded in deeper connections with many regimes in the MENA countries.

In the fourth chapter, Chiara Lovotti and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti observe how Moscow's role in the area is perceived by another protagonist of Mediterranean politics: the European Union (EU). Russia's unique diplomatic stance – acquired through its decisive role in the Syrian war and the mediation of the Astana peace talks – has granted the Kremlin increasingly wider room for manoeuvre in many other contexts, from Libya to Yemen, from Lebanon to Israel and Iran. However, such developments have often triggered criticism from the international community of Moscow's possible intention to delineate a new "post-Western" order for the MENA region. Through the unpacking of EU official discourses and the analysis of semi-structured interviews with a large number of selected EU officials, the authors of this chapter endeavour to test the compatibility of the Russian presence with the interests of the EU, also in light of compromised relations following the Ukrainian crisis. By investigating the EU perceptions of Russia's military and diplomatic endeavours in the MENA region, the authors find that, despite a discreet degree of scepticism, a widespread desire exists within the EU to keep a dialogue open with Russia and achieve greater cooperation in an area where shared security and political stability are in the interests of both.

The fifth chapter by Christopher Hartwell moves beyond the military and diplomatic dimensions of Russia's engagement in the MENA region to provide an overview of its economic perspective, particularly by evaluating the nature and scope of Russian trade interests, as well as the sustainability of a prolonged Russian assertiveness in the region. Although the MENA region only represents a small portion of Russian trade and exports, it could indeed provide Moscow with rich opportunities to extend its presence and deepen its regional influence. Arms trade and oil production, in particular, provide significant markets for Russian investments and search for economic diversification. However, Moscow continues to underperform in its economic relations with MENA countries. As the author argues, government-driven trade investments and a scarce reliance on the private sector, in a sort of Soviet-fashion style, may be an explanatory element for this evidence. More importantly, economics seems to represent nothing but an adjunct to Russian military and political ambitions in the area. Therefore, according to the author, economic cooperation between Russia and various MENA countries will hardly flourish as long as Moscow continues to consider economics as an adjunct to politics.

In light of the complexity that characterises relations between Russia and the MENA countries, it seems difficult to give a clear answer to whether Russia has a proper strategy for the region or is rather acting as an opportunistic player. As well demonstrated by the contributions of the authors in this study, too many variables exist that prevent a simple answer to what Russia is up to in the region: historical legacies, the search for security in its own neighbourhood, a troubled relationship with the US, competition with the growing Chinese global power, and geostrategic and economic interests. In other words, the issue might be too multilayered to be framed under the "strategy" or "opportunism" dichotomy, and the answer might lie somewhere in between. On the one hand, a strategy seems to be somewhat visible through which Russia has managed to return to the MENA region; on the other, we also often observe the Russian leadership's ability to exploit contexts of crisis as opportunities to increase its influence. These two dimensions, in fact, are certainly not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, we could argue that they are complementary; Moscow proved capable of grabbing opportunities spontaneously emerging from the MENA region that seem to fit into the broader strategy of its foreign projection. However, one thing is for sure: in a few years, Moscow has become one of the main international actors with a stake in the area and is likely to remain active in the MENA region for the years to come. "The West", particularly the US and the EU, should therefore address the Russian presence in the region with realism and pragmatism, trying to foster a dialogue with Moscow aimed at finding room for dialogue and possible paths for cooperation rather than confrontation.

The Interests of Putin's Russia in the MENA Region in Historical Perspective

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Russian foreign policy-making remains statist and realist. For Moscow, Russia's place in the world is seen through the lenses of a grand strategy (Monaghan, 2017) on a global chessboard where it plays and defines itself through confrontations with its rivals, the United States (US) on top (Mankoff, 2009). The end of the Cold War was therefore perceived by Russian policy-makers as a defeat, but not a final one. Russia felt humiliated: it became weaker and was relegated to a marginal global role.

The first rulers of post-Soviet Russia – mostly outsiders and young reformers – accepted the new reality but the Russian establishment (bureaucrats, securocrats, etc.) did not. Vladimir Putin was one of these establishment men. Since becoming President of Russia in 2000, he coveted the goal of bringing Russia back to the concert of “Great Powers”. After a decade of economic and political decay, Russia wanted to reinstate its traditional place, although behind a facelift. Putin also wanted to be included in the Western hemisphere, but that dream soon evaporated (Mankoff, 2009). His revisionist approach went in three steps: first, consolidating the country internally (core Russia, Caucasus, etc.), then stepping up Moscow's presence in its traditional sphere of influence (the Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS]), before tackling the outer circle of this sphere in the 2010s (which includes the Middle East and North Africa region [MENA]).

Against this background, is Putin's current “MENA adventure” responding to strategic planning or opportunism? What are the motivations behind it? How long has it been in the making? And how did it materialise?

The first chapter of this study will attempt to answer these questions, focusing on the MENA region (including Turkey and Iran) in the period between Putin's election in 2000 and the beginning of the Arab uprisings in late 2010.

Historical Background

The MENA region is located right outside Russia's Regional Security Complex, on the borders of its neighbours (Buzan & Waever, 2003). Moscow has always had a foot there – especially ties with Iran and the Ottoman Empire – and there are numerous tales of Russian merchants, travellers, pilgrims and consuls in pre-colonial Arab literature. Similarly to the Great Powers of the 19th century, Russia provided substantial help to the Christian communities of the Middle East, a strategy that granted it some oversight and influence in the region (Kreutz, 2007). However, unlike the Europeans, Russia did not have colonies overseas. Thus, while its armies marched against the Ottoman Empire,

several times conquering lands and peoples in the immediate neighbourhood, Russia never built colonies in the Arab-speaking lands. This provided it with a less negative image in the region than the European powers, whose armies subjugated most of the Arab world, an aura it still benefits from.

The October Revolution (1917) shook the country's foundations. The internal front needed consolidation, and the efforts to export the Marxist-Leninist ideology concentrated on Eastern Europe and the Asian hinterland. Russian-Arab contacts decreased accordingly. The comeback to the Middle East waited until after the Second World War and the strengthening of the Soviet military and economy. Since then, Soviet weapons, goods and technicians, along with billions of rubles, flooded the MENA region. The trend would continue until the very end of the Cold War. But the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' (USSR) abrupt collapse pushed Russia to contract its deployment abroad and focus on its local political and economic priorities, similarly to what happened in 1917. Once again, Russia overlooked the Middle East.

Yeltsin and Kozyrev: Shrinking Russia

Boris Yeltsin's rule (1991-1999) is generally seen as an era of decline. His early years, moreover, were marked by attempts to move closer to the West and avoid confrontation. During the six year-tenure of Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev (1991-1996), it seemed as if Russia was leaving its oriental mantle towards a Euro-Atlantic integration. It was the period of the Atlanticist idealists who believed that Russia could integrate the West and give up its imperial, militaristic past (Mankoff, 2009). This was also the period of the Paris Charter for a New Europe, a founding document of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which tried to incorporate Russia and the Eastern Bloc states into a framework of free market, liberal democracy and international law, etc. However, as it is often the case in international relations, when a hegemon weakens, another one moves in to replace it. The US exploited the vacuum left by Moscow to establish a strong presence in geopolitical spaces that it formerly "shared" with the Russians.

In the Greater Middle East,¹ for instance, US forces began patrolling sea and space as if it was conquered territory. The Marxist government of Afghanistan was toppled by the US-armed Mujahedeen coalition. South Yemen, the only Marxist republic in the Arab world, was absorbed by its US-backed North. Lebanese and Palestinian Marxist guerrillas began to disband or disintegrate. Iraq and Libya, two major USSR clients in the region, survived the Soviet retreat with difficulty. The US encouraged the secession of Iraq's North, and the country's northern and southern airspace was put under Western

¹ This definition was popularised by the US, in the wake of the military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, to describe countries from Morocco to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

embargo. The politics of embargo was also applied to Libya. It was extremely harsh on Baghdad and Tripoli and it diminished the two regimes' capacities. Moscow, moreover, resumed diplomatic ties with Israel in 1991 and allowed around a million Russian Jews to emigrate there, much to the discontent of its former Arab allies. And while Russia was involved in the Madrid Process, its role was marginal and its defence of Arab interests limited (Nemeh, 2016; al-Amarah, 2009).

Yeltsin never visited the Middle East during his tenure, apart from a short trip to Jordan on the occasion of King Hussein's funeral in 1999, his final year in power, which was cut short due to his failing health. Minister Kozyrev, on the other hand, had little interest in the region and never considered it as a priority (Vassiliev, 2018). Moreover, Russia's economic difficulties led its foreign trade to collapse. It deserted the MENA region in consequence. In the early 1990s, for instance, trade with Arab countries was less than 1%, versus around 20 to 25% in the previous decades (Poti, 2018). Trade with Egypt shrank by two thirds between the late 1980s and the early 1990s (Vassiliev, 2018).

Still, and although Russia was clearly less involved in the MENA region, ties were not completely cut. In some aspects, there was even progress. While a new path opened in Russian-Israeli relations, the channels with the Arab world – with Egypt at the centre stage – remained in place. Kozyrev, even with his limited interest in the region, visited Cairo twice and toured a number of MENA countries including Iraq and the Gulf monarchies. Several high-level Russian officials also made the trip to the region. Furthermore, and due to the economic crisis in Russia, thousands of Russians emigrated in the 1990s to the richer countries of the Middle East. This human capital has provided Russia with an important tool of soft power in the area.² Moreover, the new Russia had an advantage it lacked during the Soviet Union: it abandoned the communist ideology, which put it at odds with Islam and, therefore, with many MENA regimes (Gresh, 1998).

Primakov: A Strongman for a Weak State

Yevgeny Primakov replaced Andrey Kozyrev as Foreign Minister in 1996 before ascending to the post of Prime Minister (between 1998 and 1999). His time in government almost overshadowed the ailing Yeltsin. Primakov was a Soviet apparatchik and a former head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) who was expected to rein in Kozyrev's excessive Atlanticist projects. He was additionally one of the most knowledgeable Arabists of his time. With Primakov, therefore, Russian foreign policy began to revert back to its pre-1991 principles, which included a strong interest in the Middle East. The logic of confrontation with the US, shelved under Kozyrev, was back.

² Author's discussions with a Russian diplomat, February 2017.

Primakov's first visit to the region as Foreign Minister, beginning with Egypt, took place only four months after his appointment. The first visit of an Egyptian President to post-Soviet Moscow took place in 1997, and the first visit of a Syrian President was in 1999 (Primakov was already out, but he worked on that visit when he was in the post). It should be noted that Primakov's three visits to the region as Foreign Minister have always included Syria, a country Moscow relied on. Primakov also tried to strengthen Russia's role in the Middle East Peace Process (both the Palestinian and the Syrian tracks), engaging in an extensive track II diplomacy with Israeli, Palestinian and Syrian officials (Vassiliev, 2018). Visits by Arab officials – especially Iraqis and Syrians – to Moscow increased under his tenure.

Rhetorically, at least, Russia has become more aggressive towards the US, especially on Iraq and Libya. The Middle East was the ideal spot to challenge Washington but Russia did not have the means to do it, as proven by its incapacity to stop the 1998 US-led strikes against Iraq. Moreover, many influential circles in Moscow were still hoping that better relationships with the West were possible. Primakov himself recognised that “at the time in general the Middle East turned out to be out of range of [Russia's] interests” (Vassiliev, 2018).

Putin: A Strongman for a Stronger State

The ascent of Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister in 1999 and President in 2000, coincided with notable developments in the MENA region. Islamic terrorism was increasing in intensity and that culminated with the 9/11 attacks in the US. Putin worried about repercussions on Russia, especially that he was facing unrest in Chechnya and the Muslim Caucasus. He also saw an opportunity for further rapprochement with Washington. He was consequently quick to offer support to the Bush administration, hence sanctioning the US invasion of Afghanistan and the deployment of US military forces inside the CIS. Between 2001 and 2002, Russia jumped on the bandwagon with the US (Mankoff, 2009).

Moreover, because of his limited interactions with the Arab world before his election as President – his career was limited to Western Russia and Europe – Putin did not express any special interest in the region. Furthermore, his first major encounter with Islam was the Chechen insurgency. It is therefore understandable to see him detached from the causes championed by the USSR and that Primakov tried to reawaken.

Then came the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Moscow expressed its opposition but Washington and its allies went on with their plans. Putin attempted mediation between Saddam and the West, sending Primakov to Baghdad three weeks before the war began, but Saddam

disregarded it (Primakov, 2009). The mediation in itself, which suggested that Saddam should relinquish power, showed Russia's weakness and inefficiency. Just as damaging to Russia's stature was the participation of Ukraine and Georgia – two countries that Russia considered under its influence – in the Iraq War, against Moscow's advice. Washington's decision to extend its presence in Afghanistan and expand its bases in the CIS area beyond the agreed timeline was another warning to the Russian leadership: Russian supremacy was fading even in the immediate neighbourhood. Putin, who dreamed of being treated both as a trusted Western partner and the leader of a Great Power, found out that he was considered a negligible player and an outsider.

Putin spent the first years of his term dealing with Russia's internal problems. He waged a war against the 1990s established oligarchy, which he could not control, and cracked down on what he considered as excessive political freedoms. The 1990s democratic opening was slowly closing down on the opposition. The anti-democratic, old regime apparatchiks were staging a comeback to politics. Chechnya, the rebellious Russian region, was "pacified" at the price of massive destruction and bloodshed. During the 2000s, moreover, energy prices increased, giving Moscow the means to claim the Great Power status its leaders wanted. Perhaps more importantly, the economic boom gave Putin legitimacy and popularity inside Russia, which in turn offered him more flexibility to project power abroad. Putin then turned on to the CIS countries. Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, where "colour revolutions" occurred, were a major source of concern. For an important segment of the Russian elite, "colour revolutions" are US-led conspiracies. Moreover, the new masters of Tbilisi, Kyiv and Bishkek did not shy from showing their pro-Western tendencies. Putin counterattacked via soft and hard power. Moscow made it clear to its former subjects: there is no path away from Russia's. It was likewise a message to the international community: Russia wanted back its place in the world.

In what is perhaps his most well-known speech, the Munich Speech, Putin addressed a stupefied crowd of world leaders during the 2007 Munich Security Conference, blaming the US for its "arrogance" in international affairs and calling for "a new world order without American supremacy" (Russia Today, 2017). And as a power reaffirming itself, Russia could not ignore the Middle East.

The Return of Russia

It was only in 2004 that Putin visited the Middle East, starting with Turkey, i.e. four years after his election to the presidency of Russia. And it was in 2005 that he first set foot in

the Arab-speaking Middle East. Due to the acceleration of events afterwards, the year 2005 can be seen as the beginning of Russia's return to the region. Igor Ivanov made a few trips to the region during his tenure as Foreign Minister (1998-2004) but his successor Sergey Lavrov (since 2004) became a frequent visitor. Russia was given the status of observer in the Saudi-led Organization of the Islamic Conference (later renamed Organization of Islamic Cooperation) in 2005. The post-2005 period was also marked by Putin's "divorce" from the West and his conviction that he will never be treated as a peer by US and European leaders. Anti-Western sentiments and rhetoric were strong among his new entourage, in which the pro-Western figures were gradually being sidelined.

Moreover, the fear of Islamic terrorism, which coincided with the rise of securocrats inside the Kremlin (Mankoff, 2009),³ pushed Moscow to increase its security cooperation with the different MENA regimes. Counter-terrorism helped Moscow to find a common cause with regimes as antagonistic as the ones in Rabat, Algiers, Tel Aviv or Damascus.

Putin, on the other hand, instrumentalised Islam to stage further rapprochement with the Islamic countries. Muslim leaders from various Russian republics and communities became a bridge between the former Communist stronghold and the heartland of Islam. Hence, the Presidents of Tatarstan or Chechnya became Putin's envoys to Muslim capitals. His image in the Arab world was damaged by the Chechen war, so Muslim leaders like Mintimer Shaimiev or Akhmad – and later Ramzan – Kadyrov would represent him better than people from his own government.

But that was not all. In fact, the circumstances of Putin's consolidation of power coincided with other events in the Middle East that favoured re-entering the region. Russia had several partners in the region that were recovering in the 2000s. Syria, the everlasting ally, undertook important economic reforms under the youthful leadership of Bashar al-Assad and called for Russia's help. Iraq was entering a phase of reconstruction. Libya was opening up to the world after the UN sanctions were lifted. Algeria, which was emerging from its Black Decade, was upgrading its strong army and buying mainly Russian weapons. Iran's growing economy and nuclear programme required substantial Russian help. Turkey was booming economically.

Generally, trade relations between Russia and the MENA region, outside of state-led initiatives, remained limited. They did improve (from around \$4.1 billion in 1995, to circa \$6.2 billion in 2000, to around \$10.2 billion in 2004, etc.). But most of the trade was monopolised by Turkey, and Russian goods could not compete with western ones. Yet

³ The *Siloviki*, former or current officers of Russia's security and military establishment, including Putin, Primakov, Sergey Ivanov, and other people close to the President.

Russian arms exports to the MENA region, for instance, reached \$9 billion in 2009 (from less than \$1.5 billion in 2000). This business is not only lucrative but is also an important aspect of Russian power projection (Borshchevskaya, 2017). Many MENA countries expressed interest in Russia's nuclear technology (although little transfer occurred in practice). Moreover, Russian oil and gas companies signed new contracts in different MENA countries, including those where European countries were traditionally influential. Here again, the economic gains went hand-in-hand with diplomatic victories because Russia was getting involved in controlling the energy sources that feed Europe's cities and industries. Moscow was also suggesting or participating in the construction of new oil and gas pipelines to Europe that would cross the Middle East and North Africa. In the 2000s, consequently, various MENA leaders – including the most pro-American ones – visited Moscow, thus marking a stark contrast with the 1990s. Russia's coming back was felt from North Africa to the Gulf.

Egypt

Putin's first Middle Eastern tour started in Cairo. Egypt, while an important country in the Arab world, has lost its central role during Mubarak's years. It was largely indebted and unable to move beyond its economic problems, it faced a demographic explosion and was taking cautious steps towards democratisation and further rapprochement with the West. That resulted in less control by the state but an unsatisfied and weak civil society. Its role in Arab affairs was usurped by more ambitious countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Cairo was therefore taken less seriously by its Western partners, who would spend more energy and investments in the richer Gulf countries.

Russian policy-makers, however, kept considering Egypt as the centre of the Middle East. It is telling that Primakov's first visit to the region started with Cairo, and so did Putin's. Moscow and Cairo signed a number of agreements during the 2000s, in different fields, ranging from cultural and religious affairs, to weaponry and nuclear energy, etc. Trade between the two countries increased from around \$400 million in 2000 to \$1.5 billion in 2004 (Kreutz, 2007) and \$2.5 billion in 2010 (Trenin, 2010), which made Egypt Russia's first trading partner in Northern Africa (without arms sales). Russian tourists constituted the second biggest national cohort in Egypt. Putin's successor Dmitry Medvedev (who served as President between May 2008 and May 2012) picked Egypt for one of his first visits abroad, in 2009. Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak visited Moscow three times, in 2001, 2004 and 2009. For Moscow, Egypt was a regional power to keep close by (Vassiliev, 2018). The leaders of two countries, furthermore, converged in opposing the 2003 Iraq War, felt uneasy with US hegemony and democracy promotion, and were on the same line on a number of geopolitical questions such as the Arab-Israeli conflict (Vassiliev, 2018).

Israel and Palestine

Another place that Putin visited in 2005 was Israel/Palestine, the first visit of a Russian Head of state in these territories. The Quartet for the Middle East, set up in 2002, includes Russia (along with the US, the United Nations [UN] and the European Union [EU]), and Putin understood that to be influential in the Middle East his country needed to have a say in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By visiting Jerusalem and Ramallah, while the Second Intifada was still raging, Putin wanted to ascertain his country's commitment to reaching an agreement and to stress Russia's ongoing role in the Peace Process. In fact, the Soviet Union's support to the Palestinians from the 1960s to the mid-1980s was gradually replaced by rather friendly policies towards Israel. These climaxed with the collapse of the USSR and the massive Russian Jewish migration to Israel, where they formed up to 20% of the population (and would prove to be important assets for Moscow's foreign policy, as many became prominent Israeli politicians and business people). Moscow's improved relations with the West, especially in the 1990s, and its quest for new business opportunities, encouraged these policies. Moreover, trade with Israel was increasing: from \$867 million in 1995 to \$2.769 billion in 2008 (Katz, 2010).

Russian-Israeli relations kept developing under Putin, even if the discourse of pro-Putin media and politicians – especially the ones directed towards the Arab world – attempted to portray a pro-Palestinian Russia. Israeli leaders became frequent guests in Moscow, trade increased, and military cooperation reached unprecedented levels. However, when Hamas won the Palestinian elections of 2006, the Russians were quick to invite Hamas' leaders to Moscow. Americans and Europeans, by contrast, refused to recognise Hamas's victory. By doing so, Putin was distancing himself from Washington and trying to position Russia as a mediator that can talk to all sides.

Syria

Putin's 2005 tour did not include Syria. The al-Assad regime, however, was Russia's most important partner in the region, especially in the 2000s. Syria hosts the only Russian naval base in the Mediterranean, its army officers are often sent to Russia for training, and many Russian instructors are embedded in the Syrian army. In contrast to Egypt, which willingly switched sides and left the Soviet orbit in the 1970s, Syria remained in the same camp all along (apart from the early 1990s, when Moscow was detaching itself). In private discussions, Russian officials often contrast Egypt's "betrayal" with Syria's "fidelity". Bashar al-Assad's first visit to Moscow happened in 2005 (25-26 January). Russia wrote off around two thirds of Syria's debt (\$13.4 billion) during the visit. Trade between the two countries increased from \$218 million in 2004 to \$1.36 billion in 2009. By 2010, Russia had sold Syria up to \$4.7 billion in weapons (Borshchevskaya, 2017).

However, a shock occurred in the middle of the decade: the assassination of Lebanon's Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, which happened three weeks after al-Assad's visit to Moscow (14 February). Damascus was suspected of launching the attack. International pressures were put on al-Assad to withdraw his army from Lebanon and to further democratise his regime. A popular movement in Lebanon, called the Cedar Revolution, contributed to pushing the Syrians out. The Syrian official line described the movement as a Western conspiracy, linking it to the colour revolutions, which were spreading in the former Soviet republics. Many Russian officials and intellectuals shared this assessment. Russia took a clear stance by opposing the international community on Syria, and seemed Damascus' last way of survival. Al-Assad returned to Moscow in 2006 and Medvedev visited Damascus as President in 2010. Russia was not willing to lose Syria.

Iraq

With the fall of Iraq's Saddam Hussein in 2003, Russia lost a strong client. Exports to Iraq accounted, until that year, for more than 50% of Russian exports to the MENA region and Russia was Iraq's first trade partner. When Saddam was toppled, some Russian experts estimated their losses in Iraq at around \$12 billion but others took the figure as high as \$60 billion (Kreutz, 2007). Still, Saddam rarely paid his debts, and by 2003 his country was a shadow of its past glory. Putin, aware of Russia's weakness and probably still hoping that bandwagoning with the US would bear fruit, quickly accepted the new reality and offered to cooperate with Washington and the new Iraqi authorities. He therefore invited Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi to Moscow in 2004, and later wrote off most of Iraq's debt, estimated at \$12.9 billion (Kreutz, 2007). Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki visited Moscow in 2009. Because large segments of the Iraqi energy and military infrastructure were built using Russian technology, the Iraqis were eager to keep Russia close by. So, when in 2008 Russia decided to delete Iraq's debt, contracts with Russian companies started to be signed one after the other, even though the country was under American semi-occupation.

Libya

The UN sanctions on Libya were lifted in 2003. Libya was diminished after years of embargo, and its market was small for Russia. Furthermore, Moscow barely supported Tripoli during the previous decade, abandoning Muammar Gaddafi. Still, the regime in place encouraged Russian companies, weapons, energy, infrastructure, etc., to return. Abdel Rahman Shalgham, the Libyan Foreign Minister, visited Moscow in 2000, and his Russian counterpart Igor Ivanov visited Tripoli in 2001 to mark the new start. By way of comparison, Russian-Libyan annual trade increased from around \$1 million in 1997 to \$232 million in 2007 (Katz, 2008). Putin himself visited the country in 2008 (the first visit ever by a Russian head of state), and so did Gaddafi when he returned to

Moscow for the first time in two decades. 2008 was the year when Libya's \$4.5 billion Soviet debt was cancelled, major contracts worth between \$5 and \$10 billion (sources diverge) were signed, and the cold related to the 1990s was fully dissipated. The Libyan army used essentially Russian weapons, and it needed serious revamping after the embargo: in 2010, for instance, Libya absorbed 12% of the market of Russian weapons (Anishchuk, 2011). Gazprom, Lukoil and other Russian oil and gas companies were given access to new fields. Russian Railways signed a lavish contract to start building Libya's railway network (but the contract never materialised because of the Arab Spring). Other contracts were signed in the fields of electric and nuclear energy.

Algeria

The Algerian case is more complicated. While the length and depth of the relationship could transform Algeria into Russia's prime ally in North Africa, the reality on the ground took a different shape. Economic relations are hence limited. In fact, the Algerian market remains closed to foreigners due to Algeria's isolationist policies. Therefore, trade between Russia and Algeria never flourished and rarely did Algeria take any position that openly backs Russia in the global scene. The two countries, moreover, disagree on gas production strategies (both being important gas producers) (Katz, 2007). Moscow keeps cordial relations with Rabat, Algiers' nemesis, which include mutual visits by the two countries' leaders, and Russian-Moroccan economic relations kept increasing during the 2000s (Sanchez Andres, 2006).

Moscow, however, was instrumental in the formation of the Algerian postcolonial state, and many Algerian institutions are modelled on the Russian ones (such as the secret service). Algeria, as North Africa's hegemon, relies almost exclusively on Russia for its weaponry. It is one of the top buyers of Russian arms, globally; in 2006 alone, Algeria signed a \$7.5 billion arms deal with Russia.⁴ Also, Algeria and Russia see eye to eye on oil production strategy and several global issues, such as opposing the US democracy promotion projects and the Iraq War, etc. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika visited Moscow in 2001 and signed a partnership agreement during Putin's first year in power, and Putin visited Algiers in 2006, when he wrote off Algeria's \$4.7 billion debt.

The GCC

Important economic ties started to develop with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in the 2000s as well; this is notable because the GCC was fully aligned with Washington during the Cold War. Of course, differences emerged regarding oil

4 For further information on Russia's arms sales, see Hartwell, Ch. "Russian Economic Policy in the MENA Region: A Means to Political Ends" in this volume.

production (usually played out at OPEC), Moscow's policy in Chechnya, and its ties with Iran. Besides, many Russian officials suspected the Gulf countries of funding the Chechen rebellion, linking this to their policies in Afghanistan in the 1980s and therefore to the suspected long-term American strategy of undermining Russia (Vassiliev, 2018). Moreover, Russian companies were marginal in exploiting the rich oil and gas reserves in comparison to European and American companies. But this did not break the relationship.

On the contrary, as Riyadh was feeling pressures by the US administration after 9/11 and disagreeing with Washington regarding the Iraq War, Russia was trying to benefit from the discord. Important energy and military contracts were signed between Russian firms and Saudi owned entities (by the end of the decade, trade between the two countries never went beyond \$500 million, but that was already ten times its volume in the year 2000). Saudi Arabia's crown prince, and de facto leader, Abdullah bin Abdelaziz al-Saud visited Moscow in 2003 (less than two years before becoming king) and his successor Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz al-Saud followed in 2007. Hence Putin's second Middle East tour, in 2007, began by Riyadh; it was the first visit ever by a Russian head of state to the country.

Trade relations were more important with Saudi Arabia's smaller neighbour, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), but remained limited with Qatar. But political ties were being reinforced with both. Putin visited the UAE during the 2007 tour. Emirati officials, including Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Zayed al-Nahyan and Dubai's ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, staged several visits to Moscow from 2009 onwards. Chechnya's Ramzan Kadyrov, who occasionally serves as Putin's hand in the region, forged strong ties with the ruling families of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The UAE became Russia's first economic partner in the Gulf, with trade estimated at close to \$1 billion by 2010 (vs. around \$650 million in 2006). It was also buying weapons from Moscow. Putin also called on Doha a few days later and discussed a possible partnership with Iran and Qatar in the production of gas; Russia, Iran and Qatar are together the largest producers of natural gas in the world (Cohen, 2007). Qatar's ruler Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani visited Moscow in 2001 and 2010, and a number of Qatari envoys made the trip to Moscow during the Putin and Medvedev years. But, in 2004, a Chechen leader exiled in Qatar was assassinated in Doha. The two Russian officers behind the operation were arrested (and liberated two years later). The move briefly impacted Qatari-Russian relations, although it also demonstrated Russia's reach. Doha avoided escalating and opted for a friendly relationship with the ascending Russia.

Iran

But one of Russia's most important post-Soviet partners in the MENA region is not an Arab country but Persian Iran. Iran and Russia have a century-old history of wars. The Shah regime was an American ally and a bulwark against Soviet expansion in the Middle East and Central Asia. The leaders of the Islamic Revolution who toppled him in 1979 did not see the atheist Soviet Union in a better light and continued to act with animosity towards Moscow. Russia delivered weapons to Saddam Hussein during his eight-year war with Iran, a war that left hundreds of thousands of Iranian civilians dead.

It was therefore against all the odds that a rapprochement between Moscow and Teheran occurred in the 1990s, not least with Russia engaging its engineers to develop Iran's nuclear programme. As a power in decline looking for economic prospects, Russia was interested in new business partners. Iran, on the other hand, was a rich country, shunned by the international community and recovering from a destructive war. Moreover, the ideological anti-religion component was removed from Moscow's guidebook. Trade between the two countries was estimated at around \$276 in 1995, \$700 million in 2000, and the figure went as high as \$3.5 billion in 2008 (Katz, 2010). By 2001, Iran was the third largest client of Russia's military industry (Borshchevskaya, 2017). The partnership never reached the level of an alliance, as exemplified by Russia's vehement opposition to Iran's development of nuclear military technology (including approving UN sanctions). Moreover, the international sanctions against Iran limited the level of trade between the two countries. But opportunities matched and that was a win-win game for both sides. Mutual visits by the two countries' leaders were arranged (Iran's President Mohammad Khatami visited Russia in 2001 and 2002, Putin visited Teheran in 2007, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad travelled to Moscow in 2009) and cooperation extended to different fields.

Turkey

Turkey is another non-Arab state in the region with which post-Soviet Russia forged good relations, becoming Russia's top trade partner in the MENA region. The country was, like Iran, a hereditary enemy of Russia. Turkey was also, like the Shah's Iran and even more so after his demise, America's outpost on the USSR's south-western borders. Yet, in the 1990s, Turkey was suffering from a deep economic crisis and growing inflation, just like Russia. The two countries found ways to increase their bilateral trade (Russia actually became Turkey's second trade partner in the late 2000s) and that paved the way for a series of political and economic agreements. Russia and Turkey built a pipeline that would transport Russian gas to Turkey (Blue Stream); they were also on the same line opposing the 2003 Iraq War; etc. Furthermore, when the economy recovered in both

countries in the 2000s, benefits maximised. Therefore, from less than \$2 billion exchanges in 1992, trade between the two countries was estimated at around \$4.5 billion in the year 2000. It was more than \$21 billion in 2010 (Simsek et al, 2017). Putin first visited Turkey in 2004, even before he went to the Arab-speaking Middle East. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, then Prime Minister but the country's most influential leader, visited Moscow a year later and then again in 2008. When Medvedev became President, he also visited Ankara (in 2010). Turkish President Abdullah Gul went to Russia the same year.

Cooperation with Turkey covered all fields, just as with Iran, including military and nuclear technology – in a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) country whose army is fully armed by the US and which hosts US military bases. Russian and Turkish navies organised occasional joint exercises, especially around the Black Sea, a Russian-Turkish shared pond. In fact, Russia needs Turkey because of the Bosphorus Straits and the Dardanelles from where its ships (commercial and military) can cross to the Mediterranean. As for Turkey, where Erdogan was trying to adopt a foreign and military policy independent from the NATO and the US, it found in Russia a partner to balance with against Ankara's stronger traditional allies.

Conclusion

Russia's return was also encouraged by America's problems. The US was stuck in the Iraqi whirlpool. Syria was participating in undermining America's presence in Iraq. Iran, Russia's partner, was expanding its reach in the Middle East (Iraq, Lebanon, Syria). Washington, which had plans to contain Iran, was itself contained in Iraq between Syria and Iran. It was that moment of weakness that Putin sought to exploit.

On the other hand, a general malaise was felt inside the Arab ruling elites in the 2000s vis-à-vis Washington. Most Arab countries (as well as Iran and Turkey) opposed the US war on Iraq, and that included the most pro-American ones among them. They were therefore on the same line as Moscow. The Bush administration's discourse about democracy and human rights, the destitution of Saddam Hussein and the introduction of democracy to Iraq, as well as the US-backed Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, all this had spread fear among the ruling autocrats. In the Kremlin, where conspiracy theories about US-led revolutions are rife, the Arab leaders found a listening ear and repeated it constantly to their US counterparts.⁵ This convergence in opinions created a synergy between Moscow and many Arabs that would blossom in the following decade. Whether

Putin meditated carefully on his current MENA strategy or if he is simply an opportunist will continue to be debated until more Russian archives are declassified. What is certain is that Moscow managed to cultivate friends in all of the MENA countries and to prove indispensable for some. By the end of the 2000s, Russia was an important player in the region, to be counted along with the US and the EU. It seems that Vladimir Putin has jumped on every single opportunity that presented itself, calculated the benefits Russia can make – be it economic or geopolitical – and threw the dice. So when the Arab Spring broke out in late 2010, he was in the right place. The moment was ripe to increase Russia's presence in the region, which he did. Today, Russia can engage with all sides, including sworn enemies who wage wars against each other, and is once again treated as a global power not to be neglected.

5 Author's discussion with a former US official, August 2018.

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The 2010s: “Grand Strategy” or Tactical Opportunism?

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The question of whether Russia has a strategy towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region¹ in general and the Middle East in particular has arisen after the impact of the Arab Spring on Russia's foreign policy in 2011, and especially after its successful mediation in the deal between the West and Syria on the destruction of the regime's chemical weapons stockpile (September 2013) and military intervention in the country, which began in September 2015. On this question, an analysis of Russian activity in the Middle East primarily comprises three schools of thought. The first is that Russia has a Middle Eastern strategy that is largely successful; the second is that Russia has a regional strategy but it is not working as Moscow had intended; and the third is that Russia lacks a Middle East strategy (Sladden, Wasser, Connable & Grand-Clement, 2017). This essay takes an intermediate position, arguing that Russia's strategy for the MENA region forms part of its broader international strategy.

To answer the question of whether Russia has a grand strategy or is simply being pragmatic and tactically opportunistic, it is necessary, first of all, to distinguish the concept of "grand strategy" from Russia's foreign and security policy goals and the instruments to fulfil them.

"Grand strategy" refers to the collection of plans and policies that comprise the state's deliberate effort to harness political, military, diplomatic and economic tools in order to advance its national interests; it is the art of reconciling ends and means. Russia does not have a grand strategy for the MENA region in the sense of a coherent, long-term plan for ordering national interests and devising realistic methods to achieve them. But, as a deeply opportunistic geopolitical player, Moscow has a clear view of its interests in specific situations within the region. This approach to regional policy acts as an "emergent strategy", which consists of the ability to improvise and adapt rapidly to changing circumstances.

Russia's diplomatic activity in the MENA region and its military intervention in Syria form part of a broader international vision, whose main goal is to achieve great power status by undermining the leading role of the United States (US) in the region and in the international world order, as well as to show that it is fit to compete with other major powers like China. Moscow's position in the MENA region is not so much about the region itself but about the global order. The Middle East is a part of the greater Eurasian neighbourhood, where Moscow seeks to build a system of international relations beyond the hegemony of the US and of China's shadow.

This chapter has five main objectives. First, to describe the impact of the Arab Spring on Russia's foreign-policy approach to the MENA region as a whole and to trace other

1 There are several definitions of the MENA region. Here we refer to it aware that there is no exclusive geographical, political or ethnic identity and that it includes states very different from each other that extend from Morocco to Iran, including all the countries of the Middle East and the Maghreb.

important components of the volatile context that has allowed Russia's reappearance as a player in the region in a different manner to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Second, to analyse opportunism as a strategy in the Syrian war, where Western hesitation has opened up the opportunity to intervene in support of Bashar al-Assad, as well as to maintain a more active role in Libya and Egypt. Third, to identify the Kremlin's objectives in the MENA region and the principal tools it has to fulfil them, with a special focus on diplomacy as an instrument to balance the playing field and allow the forging of alliances so that Russia can become a crisis mediator. An example of this policy analysed here is the evolution of its relationship with Turkey in the war in Syria. Another example is Russia's relations with Iran in the region. Fourth, to analyse the limits to Russian influence, focusing on the drivers of, and hindrances to, its cooperation with Iran and China. Finally, to assess Russia's action and answer a key question: can Russia consolidate its presence in the MENA region and convert its military foothold into long-term political influence there and on the global arena?

Changes and Continuity in Russia's Foreign Policy Approach to the MENA Region

Moscow's withdrawal from the Middle East under President Mikhail Gorbachev at the start of the first Gulf War (1990-91) marked the decline of the Soviet Union's superpower status and its withdrawal from a region that was a major battlefield of Soviet-US rivalry in the Cold War. In turn, it saw the beginning of Boris Yeltsin's "Liberal Westernism" foreign policy (1991-96), which considered that Russia's national interest was integration with the West. During the Cold War the USSR's key allies in the MENA region – Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Yemen and Libya – did indeed at various moments show an interest in the Soviet model and become military-political launch pads for the Soviet Union in its confrontation with the West. Between 1955 and 1985 the Soviet Union sent a total of 80,000 military advisers, technicians and troops to the region and trained 55,000 Arab officers in the USSR (Trenin, 2018).

During the 1990s, following the collapse of Communism and the USSR's disintegration, Russia did not even attempt to define its national interest in the MENA region, in stark contrast to the Soviet Union's global ambition to combat the West and fit the region into the confrontation paradigm between the two systems that characterised the Cold War era. It was not until after Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000 that Moscow started with a more active policy in the MENA region, motivated

by “a combination of nostalgia for the legacy of Soviet influence and strategic national interests” (Malashenko, 2013). However, the 2000s saw no visible results of Russia’s ambition in this direction (Tsygankov, 2013).

A broader framework of Russia’s policy in the MENA region is shaped by the principles of Yevgeny Primakov’s doctrine² of Great Power Balancing, which defines Russia’s national interest as the need to become a great power in a multipolar world. Russia’s policy orientation should thus be multilateral or “multi-vector”, aiming to develop balanced relations with both Western and non-Western countries. In Primakov’s words, “Russia is both Europe and Asia, and this geopolitical location continues to play a tremendous role in the formulation of its foreign policy. Its [geopolitical interests] include China, India, and Japan, and not just the United States and Europe. They also include the Middle East and the ‘Third World’. Without such a geopolitical scope, Russia cannot continue to be a great power and play the positive role it has been destined to play. In building relationships with all these countries, one must remember that geopolitical values are constant and cannot be abolished by historical developments” (Primakov, 2002).

On coming to power in 2000, Vladimir Putin began to try to promote a more active foreign policy in the MENA region³. However, his results were trivial. During the period, while the US insisted on its “war on terror” after the 11 September attacks, Russia called for an “inter-civilisational alliance” and “compromise” involving countries in the Middle East. The goal was to present the country as a mediator between the West and the Muslim world and impose a vision that Russia should regain its status as a great power at the global level. On 4 December 2014, addressing Russia’s Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin argued that cooperation with the Middle East was one of the priorities of Russia’s diplomacy. On 27 February 2017, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov argued that “the turn towards Asia” reflected its longstanding national interest in the 21st century (Kozhanov, 2018). It is worth explaining that Russia’s foreign policy has traditionally considered the Middle East as part of Asia, and its involvement in the Mashreq and Maghreb is part of the logic of seeing it as a geographical continuum. In addition, the Kremlin sees the Middle East as an extension of Russia’s borderlands in Central Asia, which previously formed part of the Soviet Union.

The Components that Shaped Russia’s Foreign Perspective in the 2010s

During the 2010s, Russia’s foreign perspective was shaped by three factors that have been changing the international and regional geopolitical context: the global financial crisis, the new relations between Russia and the US (marked by the Kremlin’s

2 Yevgeny Primakov was the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister between 1996 and 1999, during Boris Yeltsin’s presidential mandate of the Russian Federation (1991-99).

3 For a complete overview of the historical perspective of Russia’s presence in the MENA region, see Cherif, Y. “The Interests of Putin’s Russia in the MENA Region in Historical Perspective” in this volume.

disappointment with Russia's failure to integrate into the international institutions created, sustained and led by the US) and the Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in 2010 and later toppled dictatorial regimes in Egypt and Libya. To these three factors should be added the Kremlin's growing fear that the political turmoil in the MENA region had the potential to contribute to the radicalisation of Muslim populations and terrorist violence, including within Russia, because of its internal tensions and conflicts with the Islamic Republics of the North Caucasus.

During 2008, Russia's economy was hit by the global financial crisis. The crisis ended an era of unprecedented growth that lasted nine years (1999-2008) during which the economy grew at an annual rate of around 7%. The economic recovery and military intervention in Georgia in 2008 were pivotal moments for Russia and its foreign policy. Both marked its capacity to act autonomously on the global stage and the limits of its action. After years clamouring for recognition as a great power, the world could no longer afford to ignore Russian interests. The global economic crisis revealed the tenuous nature of Russia's recovery and the weakness of its power base. During the crisis, Russia, which is heavily dependent on energy, including exports, was hit particularly hard and its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell by around 9% in 2009 (Tsygankov, 2013). So a more active role in foreign policy could be seen as a way of distracting attention from the effects of the economic crisis at home.

As far as the new relationship between Russia and the US is concerned, currently (as well as during the Cold War) Moscow's interaction with other parts of the world, including the former Soviet states, is conditioned by the state of its relations with the West and especially the US. Yet even during the post-September 11 rapprochement between Russia and the US, and the "reset" in 2008, there were signs that the era of good feeling could not mask the fact that Putin's vision of foreign policy was an expansive one. In the MENA region, this translated into the Kremlin's intention to influence the behaviour of the US and the European Union (EU) through its military intervention and to demonstrate that the economic sanctions imposed by the West due to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 were neither isolating Russia nor preventing it from being a decisive actor in the MENA region.

As for the Arab Spring, it marked the definitive end to the chapter of Russia's Soviet-era legacy of absence in the MENA region and opened up to a new phase of Russian presence in the area. The Kremlin at first interpreted the Arab Spring as the result of planned Western intervention specifically designed to reduce Moscow's hold on the region. But Russia's Foreign Policy Concept of early 2013 moved away from the understanding of the events in the MENA region as a Western-orchestrated challenge to its place in the region, describing

the revolts as evidence that Arabs “desire to return to their civilisational roots, [and that] political and social-economic renewal of society is often taking place under the slogan of affirming Islamic values” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013). Russia’s decision to become more actively involved in the MENA region was influenced by four main implications of the Arab Spring on Moscow.

First, its negative effect on Russia’s economic and political relations with countries in the MENA region. The first person who officially highlighted it was President Putin in his speech on 27 February 2012: “In the countries that have gone through [the Arab Spring], Russian companies are losing the positions they built up over decades on local markets. Economic factors from the same countries that lent a hand to changing the ruling regimes are now stepping in to fill the niches that have been freed up” (“Putin ob arabskoy vesne”, 2012). Indeed, Russia had significant economic losses in Libya. The total cost is still to be determined. For example, the arms exporter Rosoboron estimates its financial losses in Libya after the fall of Gaddafi to have been at least US\$4 billion. The railway corporation RZD also lost around US\$2.2 billion there (Kozhanov, 2018). Given that RZD planned to work with Gaddafi’s government for many decades to come, the amount of potential profit forgone is even higher. Further economic opportunities were lost in the energy sector. In 2008, Russia forgave US\$4.5 billion of Libya’s debt to the USSR in exchange for the involvement of Russian companies in new joint projects in the country. Russian oil and gas companies, such as Gazprom, Lukoil Overseas and Tatneft, were either already involved or planned to invest in Libya’s energy sector (Kozhanov, 2018). The fall of Gaddafi and the potential fall of al-Assad questioned the future of Russia’s political relations with Libya and Syria and its potential influence in the region.

The second consequence of the Arab Spring was the Kremlin’s determination to prevent what it understood to be US policy in the region and, to a lesser extent, European policy: repeated military interventions that destabilised the region through “a global war on terror”, regime changes in Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011) and a so-called “promotion of democracy”. From Moscow’s perspective, these actions were deeply destructive and destabilising.

Thirdly, the events of the Arab Spring opened up new fronts in the sectarian conflict between the Sunni Gulf monarchies on the one hand and the Shi’a Iranian Republic on the other, especially in Syria and Yemen. The entire region is in a profound process of transformation in which regional actors, notably Iran, Qatar, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, have failed to build a security structure that can accommodate rival interests and the religious divide between Sunni and Shia. Several states (Libya, Iraq, Syria and Yemen) have decomposed, resulting in the appearance of “sub-states” whose legitimacy rests on

blood loyalties (tribal, ethnic/religious, clan or family) and the progress of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that seeks to recreate a caliphate. The Kremlin sees in this volatile context an opportunity to play a more active role as a mediator between the countries and among different groups while at the same time regaining its status as a great power, which it lost after the disintegration of the USSR.

Lastly, in the wake of the Arab Spring a great concern about possible radicalisation of Muslim populations and terrorist violence emerged in Moscow. Russia's current Muslim population is estimated at around 15 million, accounting for some 10% of the total population. This does not include around 4-5 million migrant workers, predominantly from Central Asia (Karimova, 2017). The Kremlin has always insisted that traditional Islam is an integral part of Russia's spiritual life, but a latent civil war is underway in the North Caucasus. During the 1990s and 2000s two Chechen wars (1994-96 and 2000-09) evoked a sense of religious solidarity and affected the sentiment and attitudes prevalent in the broader Muslim community in Russia, as well as among radical Islamic groups active in the North Caucasus. They demand support for their resistance movement and believe that the war they are waging should spread across Russia's entire territory. Migrants from the Caucasus have established dozens of underground groups, distributing leaflets, brochures and books promoting radical Islam and infiltrating religious communities in local mosques (Malashenko, 2011).

The Middle East is a strategic extension of Russia's periphery. After the breakup of the USSR, a group of Islamic countries emerged in the North Caucasus and Central Asia, and the geopolitical distance between Russia and the Middle East shrank at once. Hence, the unrest in the MENA region poses a political and security challenge to Russia itself. From Russia's perspective, the changes in the MENA region had the potential to destabilise it and contribute to growing terrorist violence, including within Russia. The possibility of the infiltration of ISIS fighters in Central Asia or Russia or the return of those who went to war in Syria or Yemen as volunteers is real. Moscow fears the spread of radical Sunni Jihadist ideology among Russia's Muslim communities.

“Emerging Strategy” or Opportunism as a Strategy

Between 2000 and 2015, Russia tried to assume the role of mediator in order to maintain its influence in the MENA region. The Kremlin had failed to prevent military interventions in Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011. The crisis in Libya determined its attitude to the developments in the Middle East, its general approach to relations with the US and its judgment on the EU. For Moscow, the West is not to be trusted for many reasons, but above

all because they lack strategic vision and fail to face the consequences of their actions (Trenin, 2018). These conclusions had an immediate effect in Syria, where a civilian uprising against the al-Assad regime started in March 2011 and turned into a civil war following the use of military force by the regime in order to interrupt the protests.

The military intervention in Syria has been a turning point in Russia's foreign policy in the MENA region. It was a clear sign of the Kremlin's adaptation to the new geopolitical realities of the Arab Spring, but especially of Russia's desire to return to the global stage as a great power. The adaptation to the new geopolitical reality meant taking advantage of the situation the region is undergoing, with a profound process of transformation, and attempting to try to fill the vacuum left by the gradual withdrawal and disengagement of the US (as a result of military, political and economic fatigue and President Obama's and Trump's geopolitical lack of interest in the region). This culminated with the US Congress refusal to intervene in Syria, even though President Obama had promised to do so if the regime resorted to chemical weaponry. The vacuum of power presented Russia with a great opportunity.

But to Russia, Syria was not just another Arab country. It was a Soviet ally and then a Russian arms client. Moscow has kept a naval resupply facility in Tartus (in Latakia, where Russia expanded its military presence by constructing the Hmeimim air base during the Syrian war), its only installation of the kind in the Mediterranean, and it has the Khmeimim air base to access the Black Sea through the Bosphorus. No less importantly, since the mid-1950s Syria has been the centre of Moscow's political influence and intelligence presence in the region.

The war in Syria is in many respects a new experience for Russia: it is fighting in a country with which it has no common border. It is predominantly an air war, fought alongside third countries' forces requiring a highly active diplomatic Russian engagement. Also, the war emphasised Russian military capabilities as argued by Dmitri Trenin: "At the cost of the equivalent of US\$4 million a day, the military intervention in Syria has been reasonably affordable to the Russian budget. The payoff from the war included powerful advertisements both for Russia's weapons systems and for Moscow's political backing" (Trenin, 2018). So it is not surprising that in 2016 Russian arms sales increased by 5%. Although it would be erroneous to generalise Russia's strategy in Syria given the diversity of countries in the region, Moscow's intervention in Syria is a paradigm of its "emerging strategy" and its tactics throughout the region, as well as its main objectives and instruments for achieving them.

Turning to North Africa, Libya has occupied a prominent place in Russia's geopolitical imaginary. In 2011, Russia was willing, in the name of its partnership with the West, not

to block the UN Security Council's imposition of a no-fly zone to protect civilians. After the destruction of Muammar Gaddafi's regime by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Libya became a failed state. Moscow supported Marshal Khalifa Haftar, the strongman in eastern Libya, deploying Russian Special Forces to bases in western Egypt, near the Libyan border, to back his forces, and dispatching combatants from Russian private security companies to areas under Haftar's control (Meddeb, 2018). But Russia also received in Moscow (in March 2017) the rival of Haftar, Fayeze al-Sarraj, who heads the UN-backed Presidential Council based in Tripoli and maintains relations with representatives of the city of Misrata in western Libya. Russia has benefited from the mistakes and contradictions of Europe and the US in Libya, especially from their failure to stabilise the country after the conflict in 2011, their erroneous identification between security (with a focus on terrorism and migration control) and stability and their continuing rivalries, mainly between France and Italy. The US' desire to avoid deep involvement in the country has only given Moscow more latitude to pursue its goals.

Egypt has supported Russia's role in Libya. It used to be Moscow's principal arms client from 1955 to 1974 (when President Sadat started to buy from the US arms industry). In the 2000s Russia supplied Egypt with Tor M1 and Buk air defence systems, Igla portable anti-aircraft missiles, and Mi-8 and Mi-17 helicopters. When Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took power in 2013, Egypt's arms relationship with Russia expanded considerably. The two countries began holding regular joint Defence and Foreign Minister meetings. The suspension of US military assistance to Cairo as a sign of Washington's disapproval of the military take-over by the Egyptian army further strengthened the relationship with Moscow. In June 2015, the first Russian-Egyptian joint naval exercise was held in the Mediterranean, and in 2016 special operations forces of the two countries trained together. In September 2016, the Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu called Egypt Russia's "most important strategic partner" in the MENA region. One of the main reasons for Moscow's focus on Egypt is that the latter is the key Sunni country in the Arab world, balancing the fact that Russia's main partners in Syria are Shia forces: the Alawite regime of al-Assad, Iran and its ally Hezbollah, and the majority government in Baghdad.

Russia's Objectives and Tools in the MENA Region

The main drivers of the Kremlin's policies in the MENA region are economic and geopolitical. Russia's objectives are manifold and operate on several levels. At the global level, its aim is to acquire global power status, indicating that it is returning to the global stage as a major independent geopolitical player and restoring its position as a major

outside power in one of the world's most volatile regions. The Kremlin, of course, is aware that it cannot replace the US as the principal actor or main security provider in the MENA region. However, what it can do and does is to undermine the US role by cooperating with its enemies and weakening its relations with its friends. The Kremlin is trying to demonstrate the failure of what it sees as the US strategy against terrorism – supporting “colour revolutions” and regime change. Also, intervention in Syria distracts the West from the conflict in Ukraine and counterbalances the eastern flank of NATO (Baltic Sea-Black Sea). It is in Russia's long-term interest to continue building up its military capabilities in the Mediterranean to support existing bases in Syria, linking its Northern and Black Sea Fleets' operations in the Atlantic, as well as gaining more leverage against NATO (Barmin, 2018).

In the regional context, Russia's main goal is: to shore-up the Bashar al-Assad regime; preserve internal security at home by maintaining security around its periphery; become a mediator between the West and the countries of the MENA region and among the countries in the region, and exercise “economic diplomacy”; use arms sales and energy agreements as instruments of geopolitical influence; and to attract investment to Russia, particularly from the countries of the Persian Gulf.

The intervention in Syria reflects Russia's long-term strategic goals in the MENA region. It supports what it considers legitimate institutions through extensive foreign aid programmes, including economic and security assistance, political support and, as seen in Syria, direct military intervention. The Kremlin's aim is to prevent the destabilisation of states and, in those that are already fractured, support certain minorities. Unlike the Westerners, who insist on creating democratic, rule-of-law non-sectarian states in the region, the Kremlin assumes that this has proved impossible and that the balance of power is not based on liberal values and foreign powers (the US), but on regional actors, according to their military and religious power. Their support for the Alawites in Syria, for the Kurds throughout the region and for the Shiites in Iraq are good examples. Behind its support for regional actors lies the aspiration of becoming the main arbiter of conflicts, in addition to challenging the West's strategy.

In the domestic sphere, Russian active involvement in the MENA region serves to emulate its former imperial greatness and nurtures nationalist as well as anti-Western sentiments. However, according to a survey conducted by the Levada Center among Russian citizens, only 30% of respondents argued that Russia should continue its military operations in Syria, while 49% considered that Russia should end its intervention there (Levada Center, 2017).

What are the tools at Moscow's disposal to implement its strategy? Russia's “emergent strategy” is the art of adapting to changing circumstances with limited means to fulfil its

goals. Russia's tools in the region are military, economic (first and foremost the sale of arms), political and diplomatic. The Russian military have proved to be an effective instrument of Moscow's foreign policy. While Western leaders tried to convince the world that there was no military solution to the civil war in Syria, Vladimir Putin showed that there would be no political solution without military force.

Russia's main interests in the MENA region are geopolitical and security-linked. However, since 2000 there has been a clear expansion in the economic exchanges between Russia and the MENA countries. Energy, arms and food (especially grain) have found ready markets in the region, and Russian imports are dominated by fruit, vegetables and textiles. Russia has a clear strategy for its geo-economy: the use of economic instruments, trade and finance to achieve geopolitical objectives. Considering that Russia is the second-largest arms exporter in the world, and one of the most important exporters of hydrocarbons, it can be expected to succeed in meeting its geopolitical objectives, but not its economic goals, as Christopher A. Hartwell underlines in Chapter 5.⁴

There is virtually no major player in the entire MENA region, Hamas and Hezbollah included, with which Moscow does not have an open line of communication and a lively dialogue. Befriending all nations, irrespective of their political orientation and ongoing conflicts, allows Moscow to play the role of mediator in regional conflicts. Some examples of this remarkable balancing act are how Russia handles its relationships with Israel and Syria, Iran and Israel, Iran and Turkey, Iran and the Gulf States, and Turkey and the Kurds. Russia has managed to deal with countries and groups that have often been inimical to one another, and even sometimes to bring them together as an instrument to fulfil its interests (Trenin, 2018). The driver of this policy is Moscow's support for incumbent governments and its non-ideological approach. It has neither all-out allies nor all-out adversaries anywhere in the region. It does not ignore the Middle East's divides: it knows that becoming tied down can be fatal and it instead seeks to straddle them, forming relationships with opposing parties on the basis of overlapping interests. Unlike the US, which publicly protects Israel and supports the Kurds against the al-Assad regime and the Gulf States against Iran, while disagreeing with Turkey, a fellow NATO member, Russia creates opportunistic alliances from which all actors involved can benefit. The latent anti-Americanism in the region's countries and this friendly approach, as well as Moscow's proven willingness to use military force (while the West hesitated in the Syrian case), have made Russia an essential player in the region.

Turkey is a paradigm of Russia's balancing act in the Middle East. Ankara's relationship with Moscow is historically fraught with suspicion and frictions. Since the end of the Cold War the two countries have established an important economic relationship and set a bold target

⁴ For a complete overview of Russia's use of the economy as a geopolitical tool, see Hartwell, Ch., "Russian Economic Policy in the MENA Region: A Means to Political Ends" in this volume.

of US\$100 billion in bilateral trade. Russia and Turkey have a significant economic partnership that not only spans a number of critical sectors but also makes Turkey increasingly dependent on Russia. Turkey derives 55% of its natural gas needs from Russia. However, at the same time Turkey is NATO's eastern flank and a partner of both the US and the EU in containing Russian influence in Eastern and Central Europe, as well as in the Caucasus. Nevertheless, since 2014 Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been at odds with the US for actively supporting the Kurdish rebels in Syria in their efforts to defeat the Islamic State (IS). Turkey considers the Kurdish rebels in Syria an offshoot of its own insurgent Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which it regards as a terrorist organisation, as do the US, NATO and the EU.

In 2015 Russia's entry into the Syrian war fatally undercut Turkey's policy in that country. Turkey's allies were being destroyed by Russian strikes and the two countries clearly had different interests in Syria. The downing of a Russian bomber by Turkish fighters in November 2015 was not an isolated incident and had more to do with Russia's policies in Syria than with any violation of Turkish airspace. Moscow refrained from hitting back militarily but placed Ankara under economic, political and informational pressure. In February 2016, it allowed the Syrian Kurdish Party (PYD) to establish an office in Moscow. It was not the first time that Russia used the Kurdish issue to pressure the Turks. In the mid-1990s, as it sought to counter Turkish interference in the North Caucasus, Moscow had allowed the PKK to open an office in Russia (Trenin, 2018).

Therefore, Turkey redefined its policies in mid-2016 and then began to work closely with Russia and Iran. Regarding the future of Syria there could be no question any longer of Turkey invading Syria, forming security areas there and declaring no-fly zones, not to speak of moving to topple Bashar al-Assad in Damascus. Ankara's main objective is to remove the Syrian Kurds from the Turkish southern border to prevent them from collaborating with Turkish Kurds in the creation of a Syrian Kurdistan. Moscow considers that preserving Syria's current borders is essential.

The Limits of Russian Influence in the MENA Region: The Drivers of, and Hindrances to, Cooperation with Iran and China

How Russia will use its influence in the region remains to be seen. An important factor will be the nature and reach of US influence. The withdrawal of US troops from Syria means that the Russians will decide on their military future in Syria with the Syrian government alone, and without meaningful US input, and the US position in any

negotiations over Syria's future has been inestimably weakened. Through its multi-vectored policy and consolidated military presence in the region, Russia aims to expand its political influence and economic opportunities. Leading Russian corporations are planning to develop energy, military-technical, agricultural and other types of cooperation in the MENA region (Mamedov, 2018). However, Russia's future role in the region will be marked by its relations with Iran and China, with whom it has achieved an unprecedented level of cooperation on Syria. The relations between them are close but complicated and their interests and instruments to achieve their strategic goals differ, which opens up the possibility of competing for influence.

The Drivers of Cooperation Between Russia, China and Iran

A common enemy. In the MENA region, the geopolitical and security interests of Russia, China and Iran converge most prominently in their mutual desire to serve as a counterbalance to a perceived dominant US influence, which they consider destructive. They have in common an interest in supporting the survival of Bashar al-Assad's regime, contrary to the plans of the Western countries – not wanting al-Assad to fall into the hands of the local opposition, the US or ISIS. The three have an ambition to challenge the principles of the US-led international system (the promotion of human rights and democracy) to which they share an aversion. The three regimes are generally comfortable with each other's political systems and geostrategic outlooks, with none of them seeking to transform the other.

All three seek greater dominance in their respective regions and perceive that the US is encroaching on areas of strategic interest. Iran wants to be the hegemonic regional power, while Russia and China seek to be great powers. Both Moscow and Beijing consider that the Chinese model of authoritarianism and development can be an alternative to the norms prevailing in the West (Weitz et al., 2017).

Revisionist powers. All three countries are revisionist powers trying to change the status quo of the liberal international order, albeit each in its own way. Iran has the structure of a post-modern military empire (non-imperialist in the classic sense of invading and occupying territories) that controls territories through proxy warfare by supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and different militias in the war in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Libya in order to recreate the old Persian and Shia influence in the area. China is an emerging power that intends to shape the world order through investments and bilateral trade relationships with a growing interest in economic penetration in all regions of the world and the ambition, which it shares with Russia, of building "new relations among the great powers," essentially a multipolar international order. Russia is a declining power that retains extraordinary military

capabilities that it uses, along with its natural resources, as its main instrument to re-acquire great-power status.

Cooperation. Cooperation between Russia, China and Iran includes industrial goods and arms sales, energy projects, defence dialogues and joint military intervention (in Syria, Russia and Iran) or joint exercises (Russia and China in the Mediterranean in 2015 and Vostok 2018, and China and Iran with naval exercises in the Persian Gulf in 2014). Iran remains one of Moscow's major customers for industrial goods as well as conventional weaponry. Russia and Iran (together with Saudi Arabia and Iraq) are China's main energy suppliers. In 2014, Russia's Gazprom and the China National Petroleum Corporation signed an agreement on a 30-year deal to use the Power of Siberia pipeline to export Russian gas to China. Iran exports to China between US\$1 million and US\$3 million in crude oil monthly (Slav, 2018).

Balancing cooperation. China's cooperation with Iran and Russia's cooperation with the latter are marked by their ambition to be great powers in the MENA region, and both countries are therefore trying not to commit themselves exclusively to the Shia country. China is strengthening its relationship with Saudi Arabia, while Russia, as part of a quasi-alliance with Turkey, is focusing on Egypt, the key Sunni country in the Arab world, which it sees as its central partner in the area. Russia has shown great pragmatism in its approach to Egypt: in 2012, Moscow supported Mohammed Morsi (the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood); in 2013 it supported the "forces of order" in the military coup of Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi; and in 2014 it again supported al-Sisi as a candidate for the Egyptian presidency. Putin and al-Sisi were united in seeing Islamist radicalism and extremism as their biggest security threat. In this respect, Egypt is the key to Russia's balance of power among the conflicting countries in the region.

The Hindrances to Cooperation Between Russia and Iran

Moscow's relations with Teheran are traditionally complex and often instrumental, depending on the state of Russia's relations with the US. At moments of particular US-Russian tension, Moscow deliberately seeks to develop closer ties with Teheran as a way of putting pressure on the US, and, as shown by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also by strengthening its relationship with the EU. There are two main hindrances to the cooperation between Russia and Iran in the MENA region, which could lead to an open clash for influence.

First, Moscow is not supportive of Teheran's regional policy, whether in Syria, the Gulf or in Yemen. Whereas Teheran sought to keep the Alawites in power in Damascus as

part of its drive for regional predominance, Moscow is aiming for a compromise deal involving power-sharing among different groups in Syria, as long as they recognise Russia's role as a power broker. The partnership with Iran gives Moscow access to two capabilities that increasingly deliver a strategic advantage in the region's conflicts: the ability to fight through proxies and the ability to use ballistic missiles to shape geopolitics. "Iran is the arch practitioner of both and is on Russia's team" (Raine, 2018).

Yet the biggest problem in the relations between Russia and Iran is that their bilateral interests do not usually coincide with the interests of Russia's other allies and partners in the region, especially Israel, and countries with Sunni majorities, such as Egypt, the Gulf States and Turkey. In the Syrian conflict, Iran and Turkey have clearly different interests. At the beginning of Russia's air campaign, Teheran was an ally of Moscow and Ankara was almost an enemy. Since mid-2016, Turkey has redefined its policies and begun to work closely with Russia and Teheran (in a bid to control the Kurdish question in Syria). For Russia, maintaining a balancing act by cooperating with Iran and with the Sunni countries is one of the main challenges and conditions of its influence in the MENA region.

Since 2016 Iran has provided credits to Syria totalling \$7.5 billion and has signed at least five cooperation deals with Damascus to invest in a port in Tartus (where there is a Russian naval base), use 5,000 hectares of agricultural lands, explore phosphate mines south of Palmyra and license mobile phone operators. There are some indications that Russia is trying to block Iran's economic expansion plans, which would explain why the phosphate mining and mobile phone deals have not been implemented yet (Sinjab, 2018). Moscow has increased arms and commercial trade with Iran's regional rivals, Saudi Arabia and Israel, and continues to tussle with Iran over rights to natural resources in the Caspian Sea (Rasmussen & Faucon, 2018). Syria's reconstruction will be the most competitive theatre between Russia and Iran.

The Hindrances to Cooperation Between Russia and China

Since the collapse of the USSR, Moscow and Beijing have transformed their relationship from being Cold War adversaries to forging a stable strategic partnership and by no means just a marriage of convenience (Ying, 2016). The MENA region, and in particular the Middle East, has become increasingly important to Beijing since the early 1990s, as China's growing energy demand and increasing economic stake have combined with enduring geostrategic interests. A geo-economic-oriented strategy has always been the cornerstone of China's diplomacy. In 2013, the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, also known as the One Belt-One Road (OBOR) initiative, launched by President Xi Jinping, became the priority from the logic of geo-economic development.

In June 2014, at the sixth ministerial Chinese-Arab cooperation meeting, Xi highlighted the 1+2+3 cooperation model between China and the 22 Arab states: China proposed taking energy cooperation as the main axis, with infrastructure construction and trade investment as two further wings, and nuclear power and the aerospace satellite and new energy areas as breakthroughs, all of which are based on the geo-economic strategy (Sun, 2018). In 2017 President Xi Jinping declared his intention to host a Belt and Road Summit for international cooperation, to which most countries from the MENA region were invited. Another key issue that highlights the intensifying relationship between China and the countries of the MENA region is the network of infrastructure projects across 60 countries (some of them in the MENA region) as a part of the OBOR initiative. Funds earmarked by China for these initiatives are indeed impressive. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a multilateral development bank established in late 2015 and headquartered in Beijing, has been endowed with US\$100 billion in funds. As of today, 10 out of 87 members of the AIIB are from the MENA region (Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) to which China has pledged to provide at least US\$20 billion in loans and US\$106 million in financial aid. Specifically, the aid includes outstanding pledges of US\$15 million for Palestine and a further US\$91 million for Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen. China invested US\$29.5 billion in MENA countries in 2016 (Dusek & Kairouz, 2017).

Having complementary interests in the fields of energy, renewables, infrastructure, trade and possibly technology, the cooperation between China and the MENA countries is only likely to deepen in the years to come. Still, with yet more room to grow, this burgeoning relationship has the potential to play a decisive role in the quest for economic transformation and diversification.

China's other objectives in the region are the same as Russia's: to be a great power, to expand its geostrategic influence beyond the immediate neighbourhood, to develop relationships with other major or regional powers and to ensure domestic tranquillity at home. Like Moscow with the North Caucasus, Beijing is especially vigilant in quietly lobbying to ensure that no Muslim country expresses official support for the Uighurs, the Muslim majority in Xinjiang that refuses to be assimilated in the same way that the other Chinese Muslim community was, the Hui (Dorsey, 2018).

There are three main hindrances to the relationship between Russia and China.

The first divergence concerns the relationship with the US. The US is a central driver of Russia's "emergent strategy" in the MENA region. While Beijing also seeks the gradual

erosion of the US-led international order, it does not want to be seen as an adversarial revisionist power and formally avoids an alliance with Moscow.

Furthermore, while Russia and China enjoy a symmetry of interests over the need to contain radical extremism, their approaches to securing stability in the region differ. Given the chaos that has broken out in the Middle East since 2011, both China and Russia fear the potential for political instability and popular protest in the region; both seek to preserve the political status quo in their countries. Both countries remain concerned about extremism moving from Afghanistan or the Middle East to Central Asia, which borders both China and Russia. However, Russia is more focused on hard power – weapons deals, military intervention and counterterrorism cooperation – while China concentrates its efforts on stabilising the region through economic power, not through military action or security operations. China's growing interest in the economic penetration of the Middle East requires a stability that is being challenged by Russia's assertiveness.

Yet Russia has a limited “tool kit” for exerting regional influence. The military power and energy diplomacy are constrained by large economic weakness and the absence of compelling soft power. China, meanwhile, wields a growing range of international security, economic and diplomatic tools. China's investments are the most significant in the region. Projects like OBOR suggest that Beijing has the desire to augment its growing economic and strategic influence with a “soft power” narrative that presents China as an alternative leader to the global hegemony of the US or the hard power of Russia.

Russia, Iran and China in the MENA region can be united by hostility towards the US, but in other matters they are much more competitors than allies, which does not exclude them from being partners. The relations between the three in the MENA region will not only be marked by competition for greater political and economic influence or by questions about Syria's reconstruction. It will be impossible to separate competitiveness between them in the MENA region and in Central Asia given their geographical proximity and the Kremlin's ambition to maintain this post-Soviet space as an exclusive zone of influence.

Conclusions

Can Russia convert its military foothold into a long-term political influence in the region and in the global arena?

The Kremlin has achieved some of its main goals in the MENA region: its military intervention in Syria has kept the regime of Bashar al-Assad on its feet and solidified its position in the region, and Russia became the main broker in the Syrian peace process and changed the geopolitical dynamics and old alliances in the region. However, its economic penetration in the region is limited by Iran, and above all by China. The main question for the Kremlin – will Russia regain its great-power status? – is difficult to answer: it is a great power in military terms, more or less equal to the US, but is economically a dwarf. Russia cannot replace the US as the guarantor of security in the MENA region but can maintain some political influence and undermine US power. In any case, to gain great-power status Russia would have to be able to compete with China and the US not only in the MENA region but above all in Eurasia and the Pacific Rim.

Therefore, there is space in the Middle East for legitimate Russian influence. But the hardness of the power it projects and the sanctions it is subject to for its annexation of Crimea are limiting the legitimatisation of its influence on the global level. Without ways to project political power in the Middle East, Russian military forces there could be irrelevant. Hard power is a crisis management tool but not an agenda-setting one. The Kremlin's military intervention guarantees Russia's presence in the MENA region but it does not guarantee its long-term political influence. Russia is too weak economically to cover the cost of rebuilding countries in the region, so it will have to adapt to China's growing economic power and its agenda.

On the regional level, Russia has to gain long-term political influence in the region by managing relations with competing regional powers (Turkey, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt) and strengthening its bilateral relations with North African countries, as well as competing with the US and China. In order to be a more important player in the region, Russia would need to be much more than an arms supplier to several countries. For now, with arms sales, economic deals and diplomatic manoeuvring, Russia has been effective in pulling Turkey and Egypt away from the US, though not completely, and closer to its own orbit.

However, Russia's contribution to strengthening state structures and promoting democracy building has still to be tested. The MENA region is in a profound process of political transformation due to the crisis of the political system of the authoritarian state. The road to democracy is difficult, but it is not clear that Russia's formula of supporting dictatorial regimes to ensure regional stability will be adequate to finding a long-term political solution for the countries in the region. Russia has helped al-Assad to remain in

power, but this does not mean that it has contributed to strengthening the structure of the Syrian state, let alone promoting democracy, which is a true pillar of the strength of state structures.

Russia is a strategic actor, which will remain in the MENA region for the foreseeable future. The EU and the US should engage with Russia on the basis of cooperation on issues of common interest such as fighting terrorism and ISIS, containing Iran's nuclear plans and making sure no country dominates the region. For a more ambitious agenda such as democracy building, it would be necessary to develop a strategy to avoid giving Russia free rein in the Middle East.

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Russia and Post-Arab Spring Political Elites in Egypt, Libya and Syria

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The post-revolutionary context prevailing over several countries in the region, such as Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Syria, has created new political opportunities for global powers. Meanwhile, Russia's recent expansionist policies signalled a political goal that Russia might be pursuing concerning its role in such a key yet vulnerable area. Perhaps the biggest and most frequently asked question is whether what Russia is doing is mere seizure of political opportunity due to changing regional contexts, or an actual change in Russian policy towards the region that will eventually lead to a shift in its long-term regional policies.

In order to answer this question, this chapter will examine the perspective of political elites and regimes in Egypt, Libya and Syria that have either accepted or sought an alliance with Russia and grant access to its presence in the region. The nature and practised patterns of those polities have a lot to do with allowing room for Russian presence. Simultaneously, there is a bundle of mutual interests between the Russian vision and that of post-revolutionary political elites in the region, particularly in Egypt, Syria and Libya. Analysing the nature of those elites in the context of their relationship with Russia will add a lot to the cumulative understanding of Russian presence. What we will try to shed light on in this chapter is how Russian presence was not only motivated by the directions of Russian foreign policy but also by the different motives that regional political elites had in relation to approaching Russia in a post-revolutionary context.

The Arab Spring or the political tensions witnessed in the Southern Mediterranean during 2011 started a revolutionary process of change within the region. Theoretically, revolutions are divided into three phases: revolutionary origins, revolutionary processes and revolutionary outcome (Goldstone, 2010). Each of the three phases is governed by different factors and enjoys a changing set of regional and international alliances. What we are witnessing at the current moment in the region is the phase of revolutionary outcome, whether in Egypt, Libya or Syria. In other words, in all those cases, revolutionary confrontations have taken place with varying degrees of intensity and aggression, which is the phase known as revolutionary processes. The factors that shape the outcome of revolutions include the nature, ideology and political ambitions of the post-revolutionary political elites. Different sets of elites make different pacts of alliance, and have different approaches towards activating this alliance.

It is precisely from this angle that this chapter attempts to tackle the issue of Russian presence in the region. While a lot of thought has been directed towards the political agendas of Putin's Russia, attention must be given to the reasons why post-revolutionary political elites are so willing to cooperate with Russia. Is there a specific pattern of

political elites with whom Russia prefers to deal? What are the mutual motivations and interests for such a cooperation and expansion of Russian influence? These questions are framed mainly in the post-Arab Spring context and the transformations that it brought about. Russian presence in the region has a tight connection with the change of political and business elites and networks there, in addition to the military conflict zones (Holmes, 2012). Perhaps Russian presence should be analysed from inside the region to discover more connections to how Moscow thinks.

Signs of Long-Term Russian Presence and Links to Political Elites

Russian presence in the region at the moment is based on mutual interest between ruling elites, and the visions of Moscow towards expanding its influence in the Southern Mediterranean. Understanding how those mutual interests were created needs a preliminary look at Russia's behaviour towards the region.

Whether instigated by Russian opportunism, Arab willingness or the mere fact of timing, Russian presence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region does not seem to be a passing phase, but rather a long-term strategy. The combination of military partnerships, infrastructure projects and selecting potential allies in zones of conflict demonstrates that Moscow is planning to link its presence to profound long-term fundamental interests (Cook, 2018). In Egypt, Russia signed several military agreements to provide weapons, bought significant percentages of Egypt's natural gas industry and contracted with the Egyptian government to build Egypt's first nuclear power plant to be used for energy purposes (Farouk, 2018).

In Libya, the faith in General Khalifa Haftar has more than one meaning. Haftar's value in Libya lies in his control over the most cohesive and at the same time politically legitimate military entity in Libya. Russia was quick to recognise Haftar's aspirations for political leadership and for building a strong army. Allying with Haftar demonstrates Russia's long-term interests in being the number one arms provider for the Libyan National Army (LNA) under the leadership of Haftar (Akl, 2017). Simultaneously, it signals Russia's support for the idea of an ascent to political power by military elites in order to settle conflicts, which in turn raises questions about the role Russia can play in the process of political settlement in Libya, whether positively or negatively.

Russian actions in Syria demonstrate that it is not intervening from a crisis management approach. The heavy military presence, the weight Russia throws in support of President

Bashar al-Assad within conflict settlement negotiations and the investments to further expand the Russian military base in the port of Tartus all demonstrate that Syria is being prepared to be the centre of the Russian presence and influence in the region.

These signs of long-term presence in the region were not only instigated by Russia's political opportunism but also by the new political elites that reached power in the region after 2011. It is important to note that there are a lot of common traits and similarities between the kind of political elites that cooperate and build alliances with Russia. It could be said that the presence of Russia in the region and its connection to political elites is built on three pillars: partnerships in infrastructure mega projects, investing in military projects, and involvement in post-conflict plans (Connable & Becca, 2018).

Patterns of Russia's Elite Partners

Current political elites in the region have made their way to power through a series of conflicts, either political ones that witnessed mild cases of violence as in Egypt and Tunisia or through unconcluded armed conflicts as in Syria and Libya. In all those cases, elites came to power after domestic political tension and a change in regional alliances. Egypt started a strong axis with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Syria relied heavily on Iran and Hizbullah, with almost no communication with Gulf countries and Libya shifted alliances according to the East-West division. Therefore, there were two factors that affected the post-Arab Spring political elites. The first was the state of domestic polarisation they witnessed after rising to power as a result of conflict, which meant in turn adopting new policies and strategies and actions. The second is how those policies and actions caused them to look for new international and regional alliances that are willing to support their current discourse without questioning its origins (Asseburg & Heiko, 2016).

As mentioned before, common traits do exist among the various political elites Russia cooperates with in the region. Since the political elites Russia is allied with and that sought alliance with Russia in Egypt, Syria and Libya came through polarised contentious confrontations with other domestic forces seeking change, the new political elites all show strong signs of conservatism. The idea of freedom of expression is much frowned upon in the three countries. It is sometimes seen as a conspiracy to make state institutions collapse, and at other times as acts of chaos that threaten the security of other citizens. Situating conservatism with new political elites in the region depends largely on the domestic context. For example, both al-Assad and al-Sisi are hardcore

conservatives, in the sense that they are both against open institutional democracy, collective action and civil society. However, the huge difference between the two cases allows each one of them a different set of tools to express and practise this conservatism. While al-Assad uses a military apparatus, al-Sisi relies on a heavily institutional state that allows this conservatism to be spread into society through state institutions.

Another common trait between political elites that Russia allies with in the region is the fact that they are all against progressive political transformation or, in other words, they are elites that would rather maintain the status quo than undergo a structural process of regime change (Shahin, 2015). This means the idea of change through an institutional political process is not prioritised, either on the Russian agenda or on the agendas of regional political elites.

Militarisation and seeking to bring back the pre-Arab Spring political order are also common traits shared by the political elites in the region that are allied with Russia. The Russians prefer to cooperate with political elites that have military backgrounds. This can be seen in the case of alliances with al-Sisi in Egypt, Khalifa Haftar in Libya and al-Assad in Syria. Although the Syrian President does not have a military background, he believes in the value of the military and practises strict control over his military institutions. All the three regimes believe that the events of 2011 were not popular revolutions originating from within domestic contexts but rather a conspiracy aided by foreign intelligence to bring down the state.

Hostility towards collective action is another important point to notice. Either in Syria, Egypt or Libya, political elites do not tolerate the idea of mass mobilisation or peaceful protest; collective action is always labelled as a chaotic act with potential of violence. In addition, all those countries, which are considered to be in close connection to Russia, have practised various forms of state repression against opposition forces. Perhaps Egypt, although in conflict, has used very similar tools with opposing forces, a mixture between crude violence and constitutional repression. In Syria and Libya, as zones of conflict, collective action is usually faced with military confrontation, which has in turn made the cost of political participation very high in both countries.

Political elites allied with Russia in the region also share another trait: hostility towards political Islam. Although Russia has allies that are governed through political Islam, such as Iran, in the Southern Mediterranean, it has preferred to ally with those who opposed the idea of Sunni political entities coming to power, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood. There

is a very unique context in each case over how opposition to political Islam is manifested, and how political Islam represents itself in each case (Kozhanov, 2011).

In the case of Egypt, the post-30 June regime builds its legitimacy over ridding the country of a possible civil war and a threat of mass terrorism that was about to happen due to the Islamic stream, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood. It is indeed true that opposition against the Mohamed Morsi and Muslim Brotherhood rule in 2012 and 2013 was paramount, and millions of Egyptians took to the streets in June 2013 to demand Morsi's ousting. However, the regime that came on the heels of those events found its enemy in political Islam on the grounds of violence and terrorism. Court rulings and legislation were issued, labelling the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist entity, and several security crackdowns were exercised on the group's leadership and activities. While some Western powers like Germany and the United States (US), for example, saw that criminalising the Muslim Brotherhood and excluding political Islam from the public sphere is a deviation from democracy, Russia was more than willing to open its arms to the post-30 June regime, which in turn looked for new allies within the international framework.

The case of Libya is different in how it materialised. Russia's preference for conservative, militarised elites that want to bring back the pre-Arab Spring order and combat progressive political change fitted General Khalifa Haftar. Haftar emerged as a leader of a cohesive military force in essence, combating extremism, terrorism and armed groups in the Libyan East. Here it is important to note that political Islam in the Libyan East after the division was not institutionalised and was a counterpart in many episodes of extremist violence. On the other hand, the Libyan West has seen a quasi-institutional presence of the Muslim Brotherhood through political parties and some control over various militias.

Concerning the international community, Haftar was for a long time excluded as a legitimate representative of the Libyan state. Several sessions of dialogue took place, specifically the ones leading to the signing of the Skhirat Agreement in December 2015, in which Haftar did not participate due to the lack of consensus over his legitimacy within the international community. This situation of tension with the international community was repeated with al-Assad and al-Sisi, which means that Russia uses the phase of "option reduction" (the phase where regimes have fewer options with regards to international alliances due to instability, violence and lack of security) experienced by regimes after domestic political tensions to build new alliances and partnerships on its own terms.

Al-Assad's approach towards political Islam is quite different from the models seen in Egypt and Libya. Syria had a special significance for political Islam due to the armed conflict that developed on a sectarian basis. The Syrian regime and its hostility to political Islam is more related to operational realities in an armed conflict rather than a politically contentious environment. Al-Assad's resistance to revolution and demands for change, specifically from the Sunni Islamic bloc and its military arms, has made the list of his international allies grow thin. Meanwhile, the military capacities of al-Assad's regime were becoming inefficient in the face of the US armed opposition. This situation made Russia closer to al-Assad in comparison to the US and the European Union (EU). Preventing the radical and violent consequences of terrorism in the name of political Islam was Russia's main justification for intervention in Syria. Moreover, combating the rise of Sunni Islamic powers in Syria is against the interests of Iran, and Iranian-Russian relations are very much valued in the Kremlin.

These examples seem to demonstrate that Russia has pre-requisite criteria for the elites with which it forms alliances in the Southern Mediterranean and, at the same time, Russia exhibits a set of behaviours that motivate new political elites in the region to cooperate with Russia. In general, opposing political Islam, being against progressive political change and having a military background or a stronghold over the army seem to be very crucial to the Russian decision-making process towards the region.

Russia's Flexible Approach

Directly related to the pattern of Russia's foreign policy towards the region is its flexibility towards policies concerning zones of conflict. Russia has successfully challenged the international community in the Syrian case and, at the same time, pledged its allegiance to al-Sisi while his legitimacy in the international community was still under question. Similarly, it has hosted Khalifa Haftar as a legitimate representative of the Libyan state while other international venues did not. Therefore, Russia uses the vulnerable legitimacies of post-conflict regimes to seize political opportunities and secure its presence. Russia's opportunism and the political willingness of regional elites are among the main pillars upon which Russia built its policy on its presence in the region in the post-Arab Spring context. Russia suspended its tourism activities with Egypt after a Russian passenger plane exploded after leaving Egypt's Sharm el Sheikh airport on account of a possible terrorist operation ("Russian Plane Crash: What We Know", 2015). Although tourism is an integral part of Egyptian-Russian relations, the political alliance was not affected. This is an example of Russian opportunism that uses multiple tools to

instil its power in the region. While opting for the existing political elites, Russia uses mutual interests as a card to pressure its partners, whereas, through this partnership, Russia does not tolerate any violation of its interests. In turn, this means that Russia constantly demonstrates its leadership in the connection between the region's political elites.

If we take Libya's case, for example, Russia has maintained interaction with both Fayez al-Sarraj and Khalifa Haftar and has received both in Moscow. All events indicate that Haftar is Russia's man in Libya but that does not mean aggressing against al-Sarraj or cutting relations and interactions with him. Therefore, Russia interacts in the region with political elites through choosing allies that get special support, like al-Sisi, Haftar and al-Assad, but at the same time it does not defy the will of the international community or the decisions of the UN Security Council, or the general balance of powers between political elites that witness times of conflict or transformations. In other words, maintaining equal communication with multiple parties is a demonstration of Russian opportunism, specifically in zones of conflict and political tension.

The complex relation between Russia and the West is another factor that evolves within the context of its relationship with political elites. During the Russian proximity with Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi's Egypt in the post-30 June phase, the Egyptian regime was under heavy attack from Western countries after the revolution. The coup/revolution dichotomy was very then active. In addition, the crackdown on several foreign funding organisations working in Egypt at the time, and stigmatising them, created more tensions within the scene. Russia then showed a lot of support for the Egyptian post-30 June regime, and Putin displayed a very friendly manner to the then Defence Minister Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi where the legitimacy of the post-revolutionary regime was being internationally questioned (The Guardian, 2015). In Syria, the very same approach was adopted by Russia, where utter support to al-Assad came during a mass attack on the regime's violations from the international community. In the midst of the conflict in Libya, Russia received Khalifa Haftar on one of its military ships crossing the Mediterranean through the coasts of Libya. On that occasion, Haftar had a videoconference call onboard of the ship with Russian Defence Minister Sergey Lavrov.

Finally, in post-revolutionary contexts, new political elites bring about and facilitate the rise of future elites, whether professional, bureaucratic or business. Business and economic cooperation with the Southern Mediterranean region is of paramount importance to the Russian state. This means that Russia is not only interested in forming alliances with political elites in the region but it also wants to secure domestic elite

alliances within the countries to ensure the realisation of Russian interests. The long-term projects that Russia is interested in throughout the region require business elites that will work in close collaboration with Russian investment representatives. For example, in Egypt, the military with its different branches will be partner in many infrastructure projects implemented by Russia. At the same time, new business elites in the region must be in accordance with political elites, which is a pre-condition that Russia seeks in its partnerships in the Southern Mediterranean.

Russia and Political Elites: A Post-Revolutionary Analysis

As mentioned before, the link between Russia and the ruling elites in the post-revolutionary phase in the region was a win-win situation. On the one hand, those elites were looking for the intervention of a strong international partner and, meanwhile, Russia was longing for allies within the region that met Russian criteria. Therefore, for the aforementioned reasons, Egypt, Syria and Libya became the main playground for Russian politics there.

There are similarities in the pattern of interaction that the Russian presence uses with the ruling elites in. Some specific interests and directions are common within all cases. Conservatism is pivotal in the choice of the manner with which Russia builds its alliances in the Southern Mediterranean. Russia's allies in the region are against progressive political transformations and, at the same time, pro-restoring an old political order that resets the results of the outcome of the Arab Spring. The interaction with Russia with the region's elites, specifically in Egypt, Syria and Libya, aims towards a dual purpose: bringing back the pre-Arab Spring political order and investing in political elites that will be political partners supporting Russian interests in the future.

Among the main dimensions that govern current Russian interests in the region is the clear hostility towards collective action and non-institutional political entities. In all cases, Russian support for ruling elites has been aligning with political directions and policies that tend to minimise the presence of non-institutional entities within public spheres. Any presence or even mere signs of collective action within public spheres in the three countries is fought by the political elites that Russia is allied with and clearly supports. In the three cases, there is a systematic process and a standard approach to deal with political opposition. It takes various forms depending on the context of each case but the purpose of the ruling elites of fighting the idea of political openness and collective action remains the same, albeit done differently in each case.

This is one of the points where joint political will plays an influential role in Russian presence in the region. Common interests contribute to that, of course, but by creating political willingness and policy decisions.

Within the course of analysis, these observations are very telling about the pattern of interaction that Russia adopts towards the region. First, Russia invests in countries that are facing transitions. The change in political elites and in the policy directions of regimes is one of the tools that Russia employs within its process of interaction with the area. At the same time, transition creates a political willingness to restore stability and pre-transition environments, which is one of the common grounds between the political elites and Russia: “the stability discourse”. Russia also uses the approach of flexibility within political tension to further instil its influence in the region.

Once more, the analysis of the Russian presence in the region has to have a combination of Russian interests and regional political will. Each of the three countries that interacted extensively with Russia has a very specific context for this interaction. Undoubtedly, no analysis can be made for the Russian role without pairing it with the directions of ruling elites and regional political wills.

Russia’s Repositioning in the Region and its Interactions with the West

Both motives and political will existed among elites in the Southern Mediterranean to approach Russia and expand their relations with it. Similarly, Russia had various motives and resilient political will to re-establish its position within a region where it was once much more influential. International relations literature on this matter argues that Putin wants to resurrect a Russia that seeks global hegemony in a post-Western context. However, through analysing motives and strategies of engagement on both sides, it appears that Russia’s expansion in relations in the Southern Mediterranean does not demonstrate a willingness for hegemonic power but rather an attempt to increase influence in a sensitive region in order to use that influence to bargain with other international powers. In other words, Russia’s presence in the region is a tool that Moscow uses to regain its position among other international powers, not to dominate them in a hierarchical manner. Russia does not possess the economic power to qualify as a hegemon but it certainly possesses a policy towards the region that guarantees its maximum interest in multiple fields.

Russia’s motives for re-engaging with the region included using its presence to expand its influence within the context of rising tensions with the US and the EU due to the

Ukraine issue. Conflicts in the region are of great importance to both the US and the EU; therefore, Russia's active involvement in those conflicts and its ability to impact on the ground, specifically in Syria, forced both parties to reconsider their tensions with Russia and include it as an essential power within conflict settlement processes.

Therefore, analysing Russian presence in the Mediterranean also requires taking into consideration the three levels of interaction that this presence creates: Russian motives and actions, Western responses and interventions, and approaches and policies adopted by actors within the region. Whether in Egypt, Syria or Libya, there are intertwined interests and multiple interventions from the West represented in the US, the EU and European states acting independently outside the framework of the union. The extent of Russian influence in the region will rely heavily on Russia's ability to reconcile those usually conflicting interests. On the other hand, the West is growing more aware of Russia's aspirations for expansion but until now there has been no clear collective policy on how to deal with those aspirations. Russia's presence in the region is one of the tools that Moscow is using to try and influence how the West will design its future policies towards Russia. Finally, in a region witnessing changes in political and military elites, international alliances are up for re-evaluation, and Moscow is capitalising on its presence to reintroduce itself to the new elites after this process of re-evaluation. But Western powers are equally aware of that fact and are also engaging with the new elites to reframe old alliances. Therefore, interactions on those three levels will be very demonstrative of how Russian presence is shaping new power equations within the region (Stepanova, 2018).

Russian economic interests, either in military armament or investments in the energy sector, are also among the motives that reshaped Russia's presence in the MENA region as a whole. Another factor for Russia to re-engage was the phase of shifting alliances after the outcome of the Arab Spring, which in turn created an abundance of political opportunities within a vacuum of active international alliances. However, the motives and the pattern of interaction vary significantly from one to the other of the four cases mentioned earlier.

It is remarkable that Moscow has used different ways to reposition itself in the region and to access each country it tried to exercise influence upon, specifically in zones of conflict. Domestic tension and transitional instability were among the main portals through which Russia entered the region in the past few years. The post-Arab Spring context has given Russia a platform in the region that it did not enjoy before. In Egypt, Russia gained access through the lack of international support and the promising partnerships with the Egyptian state in investments in the energy sector and the military

partnership and sale of arms. In Libya, Russian interests are concerned with the post-conflict phase. Therefore, Russia's choice to support Haftar in Libya has a lot to do with Russian aspirations to re-build and re-capacitate the Libyan National Army after the arms embargo is lifted as a result of political settlement. In addition, Russia is also looking for possible interests in Libya's energy sector. Syria is more of a political card (despite the fact that it acts as a zone of military influence) but the nexus between the Syrian case and the interests of Western countries in the region is much more significant than the military balances within zones of conflict.

Regional vulnerability is a main explanation that Russia uses to justify its presence within the Southern Mediterranean. In the cases of Egypt, Libya and Syria, Russia has capitalised on the notion of regional instability, and has filled spaces that other international powers have left vacant during that time. This means that Russian presence within the region is not a mere fact of visions related to Russian opportunism but is rather an efficient utilisation of domestic conditions and a mutual political will that reflects deeper interests. Hence, Russian presence in the region must be seen within the context of an overall political tension, and a vulnerable regional legitimacy that Russia did not have to do much to uphold.

Conclusion

Russian presence in the Southern Mediterranean was not only instigated by Russian opportunism to exercise a role within a politically changing scene, it was also motivated by desires of newly rising political elites to gain international allies. The Southern Mediterranean witnessed a regional scene that knew lots of shifting alliances in the post-2011 period. Currently, regional and international alliances are very different from what they were in the period before 2011. For example, the Libyan East, dominated by General Haftar and represented internationally through the Tobruk House of Representatives led by Aqila Saleh, is in a close alliance with both Egypt and the UAE, an alliance that is blessed and welcomed by Russia. The Libyan West, on the other hand, through the Presidential Council and al-Sarraj, is allied with Italy above all other international actors. Due to its fundamental interests in the Libyan West Italy gives the Presidential Council an umbrella of international support, which in turn makes the Presidential Council much more influential on the international level (specifically when it comes to the issue of legitimacy) compared to its actual on-the-ground influence in Tripoli. Russia still interacts with the Libyan West and has hosted Fayez al-Sarraj more than once, but the Russian attitude in the region is non-confrontational. In other words, Russia will not confront

another international power in a struggle for influence but would rather wait for a moment of consensus between its policies and rising political elites in the region.

For Russia, the Syrian case is very different from the Egyptian or the Libyan one. While Russia is expanding influence in the region through Egypt and Libya, it is using Syria and its role in it in a completely different manner. Syria is one of Russia's main cards that it plays in its relation with the EU or the US. Russia has put itself in an alliance with the al-Assad regime, on political and military levels, which makes it impossible to speak of political resolution or settlement without the inclusion of Russia. The Russian role in Syria is a tool to bring Russia back to its place in the region, and to possess influence that it could bargain with in its relations with the EU or the US.

However, these changes and that outcome are not a mere product of Russian strategy or foreign policy but a product of mutual interests between post-revolutionary political elites in the region and Russian aspirations for influence in the Southern Mediterranean.

The role of Russia in the region until this moment remains vague. Russia has signed agreements with Egypt and Syria, agreements that are supposed to extend the Russian presence through energy sector investments and military partnerships. Egypt might be an exception because of the structural nature of alliances of political elites but the post-conflict phase in both Syria and Libya may not necessarily serve Russian goals and ambitions. The role of Russia in the region is governed mainly by its interaction with political elites, and their offspring elites. But, at the same time, Russia knows how to intervene in the overall equation of regional and international alliances with various tools.

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How Does the European Union Perceive Russia's Role in the MENA Region?

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Introduction and Methodology

Russia has returned to the Middle East. While few can argue against this fact, different international actors assess Moscow's role in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region differently. This chapter looks specifically at one international actor, as it aims to unpack the perceptions of the European Union (EU) regarding Russia's presence, actions and strategy (or lack thereof) in the area. Following the Ukrainian crisis, relations between Russia and the EU have worsened, and room for cooperation has considerably shrunk. The MENA region also saw increasing frictions between Russia and the EU, mainly in the framework of the Syrian conflict. However, it also offers important possibilities for collaboration – again, chiefly in Syria. In order to highlight the fiercest divergences and the most promising cooperation avenues, we examine the following question: how does the EU perceive Russia's role in the MENA area? We focus on EU perceptions around two aspects of Russia's engagement in the region. First, we tackle Russian military engagement – thus focusing on the Syrian context, where the Russian intervention in late September 2015 changed the destiny of the conflict in favour of the Damascus regime. Second, we analyse the Kremlin's diplomatic agenda in various regional contexts, ranging from the Astana peace talks on Syria to the Libyan scenario.

Does the EU perceive Russia's actions in these domains as compatible with EU goals and interests? Answering this question may be challenging. "Perception" is an abstract and controversial concept in International Relations (IR) literature: operationalising and assessing perceptions is a demanding task. While in this chapter we cannot engage in the long-standing debate on the cognitive processes governing foreign policy decision-making, we do acknowledge that studying how EU officials construct reality through discourse is crucially important. Therefore, we propose a two-step assessment to analyse the discourse and images used by relevant EU officials. First, we selected a number of written texts, including transcriptions of official speeches, foreign policy documents, press releases and so on to show how Russia's actions in the broad MENA region are perceived at the EU official level. Second, we conducted semi-structured interviews with selected EU and national officials in order to go beyond the official view and gain insights into how the EU discourse comes into being, the key actors shaping it and major factors that might impact its evolution. Interviews were conducted in person, taking advantage of the numerous opportunities to meet high-ranking officials in the framework of the Rome MED – Mediterranean Dialogues conference co-organised by ISPI and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as via Skype. Particularly, we aimed to have the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Commission (EC) but also the European Parliament

(EP) and the European Council. Secondary sources, especially other think tank and academic studies, have complemented our analysis.

In the following sections, we aim to show the EU's views of Russia's military and diplomatic endeavours in the MENA region. In the concluding remarks, we shed light on the main points of friction, misunderstandings and conflicting interests, but also the possible areas of cooperation that the EU envisages with Russia in the area.

Russia's Military Engagement in the MENA Region

Russian military engagement in the MENA region over the last few years has been confined to Syria, the crown jewel of Russia's foreign policy in the area. Beyond current convergences, the special relationship that links Moscow to Damascus is rooted in a shared history, with the military element as one of its main drivers. A solid military collaboration was consolidated between Syria and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. On the one hand, at that time, Syria was a country in deep transformation and in search of a credible "patron state" to help it emerge from isolation at the regional level; on the other, the Soviets were looking for new zones of influence to confront the United States (US).¹ The military relationship between the two was particularly strengthened during the years of the Baath revolution and the following Hafez al-Assad's ascent to power (Karsh, 1988; Karsh, 1991). Internally, the "one-man rule" established by al-Assad somehow brought stability to the country; on the external level, under the new President, Syria managed to emerge from isolation.

The resources for this project derived, at least partially, from the ability of Syrian leaders to gain the protection of their Soviet patron; arms supply, in particular, proved to be crucial, as they bolstered the armed forces, which were perceived as the "backbone" of a strongly fragmented country (Hinnebusch, 2001). Military cooperation between Moscow and Damascus continued and further reinforced between the 1970s and mid-1980s, surviving the various phases that have characterised the two countries' history. With the dismantling of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation took a major step back from Syria; it was only in the mid-2000s, after over a decade of distance, that the two countries agreed to restore their privileged military and institutional relationship. More recently, as the Syrian crisis was rapidly escalating in 2015, President Bashar al-Assad, son of Hafez al-Assad, turned to his Russian counterpart for military support. Since late

¹ Studies by various Cold War scholars have highlighted how Syria represented a crucial theatre for the Soviet Union in which to face the US, as increased Soviet influence in the country would have allowed Moscow to extend its reach in the Mediterranean basin. The Soviet goal was to make Syria its favoured "client state", to push Damascus to adopt a foreign policy that would have been somewhat aligned with Moscow's objectives. At the same time, however, neither was Syria a "puppet" in the hands of the Soviets: Damascus' perception of its national interests also played a fundamental role in pushing Syria towards the Soviet orbit. By establishing a solid military and economic collaboration with Damascus, the Soviet Union was able to exert its influence over the Arab country. See for instance the studies of Robert Donaldson (1981), Moshe Efrat (1991), Galia Golan (1987; 1979; 1992), Robert Kanet (1987), Margot Light (1988; 1993), Efraim Karsh (1988; 1991); Audrey McInerney (1992), Itamar Rabinovich (1979), Matthieu Rey (2017; 2018) and Massimiliano Trentin (2012; 2015).

September 2015, the Russians made gradual decisive gains on the ground (first, Palmyra, then Aleppo, then Deir ez-Zor and other jihadist strongholds were soon liberated with the support of the Russian airforce and army), managed to fragment the opposition and, eventually, keep President al-Assad in power. Air strikes launched by Russian aviation forces (Vozdushno-Kosmicheskoye Sily Rossiyskoy Federatsii) from the Hmeimim base, nearby the military airport in the province of Latakia, in north-western Syria, alongside Russian Special Operation Forces on the ground, have indeed ensured that al-Assad regained control of the territories that he had lost at the hands of the various opposition groups. In December 2017, after having cleared the Euphrates area in the eastern part of Syria, the Russian Ministry of Defence claimed the defeat of the Islamic State in the country (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2017). A few days later, Putin declared the Russian mission in the Arab country “accomplished” and called for the partial withdrawal of Russian troops.

Today, over three years after the intervention in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Moscow has launched 39,000 air missions and deployed more than 63,000 troops, which have hit more than 121,000 objectives linked to the opposition and 86,000 militiamen (Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 2018). Did the Russians obtain the results they desired in Syria? Militarily, yes. From a broader perspective, Russian military activism in Syria has also had the effect of expanding Moscow’s global influence and served the broader political goal to confront the US (Stronski & Sokolsky, 2017). However, such a spectacular intervention and, most importantly, the political result it brought about polarised the debate amongst the international community. While different countries – including Middle Eastern and Arab countries – have supported Moscow’s initiative, western countries and the EU, in particular, have looked at it with suspicion when not disapproval. Through the analysis of official discourses released by EU officials and through the interviews we have conducted, we have tried to investigate the reasons behind this suspicion as well as the possible ways to overcome it.

Officially, the EU has shown its disapproval towards the Russian military campaign on the Syrian ground quite remarkably. Since Moscow launched the first strikes in late September 2015, the EU alongside various human rights organisations has condemned the frequent casualties and the flow of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) that the war caused, and Russia’s unconditional support for al-Assad’s brutal regime (European Council, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2016; Amnesty International, 2015). Over the following months and years, as the crisis did not show any sign of de-escalating, Brussels continued to be attentive towards Moscow’s military campaign, even if it kept playing a very marginal role in Syria also due to its own internal divisions. In May 2017,

during the second Astana meeting, the three aspiring guarantors of the Syrian peace agreed upon the creation of three de-escalation zones aimed at reducing conflict and allowing the return of refugees and IDPs (“Syria’s ‘De-escalation Zones’ Explained”, 2017). Albeit cautiously, the EU has initially welcomed this initiative, which was however largely contested and brought about only partial results. At the beginning on 2018, faced with the escalation of the crisis in eastern Ghouta, Idlib and Afrin, the EU severely condemned the risks for the civilian population under the Russian management of the crisis and cited UNSC resolution 2401, as quoted in the following declaration of the High Representative Federica Mogherini:

“UNSC resolution 2401 is the international community’s unanimous response to address the violence and deteriorating humanitarian situation throughout Syria, but it remains largely unobserved due to the continued ground offensive and aerial bombardment, as well as the deliberate targeting of civilians and medical infrastructures in Eastern Ghouta by the regime, supported by Russia and Iran. We also deplore the impeded access to humanitarian assistance due to the regime, and the consistent removal of medical items from humanitarian convoys” (European Council, 2018).

A clear condemnation of Russian military “aggressiveness” emerges from the official EU discourse, which suggests that Brussels perceives Moscow’s military presence on the ground as largely problematic. This perception appears to be confirmed by the analysis of the interviews we have conducted. To replicate the words of one of our interviewees’ working with the Turkey division at the EEAS, for instance, Russia is perceived by the EU to have a “hardcore idea of security, with little respect for human rights.” The unconditional support towards President al-Assad, the massive deployment of military resources on the ground in Syria, and the firm resolve against the opposition to the Damascus regime are the main reasons behind this sentiment. When asked to judge Russia’s broader involvement in the MENA region as either “positive/collaborative” or “problematic”, most of our interviewees had difficulties naming a few examples in which Russia has played a positive role in any country in the region. Syria, instead, frequently came up as the main context where Moscow has been playing the most problematic role. At the same time, according to many EU officials, this crisis also represented something on which the Europeans and the Russians could cooperate. In this case too, however, the net distinction between “positive/collaborative” and “problematic” does not seem to be the correct way to interpret Russia’s role in the area. As suggested by one of our interviewees working at the MENA division at the EEAS, “intensity” may be a more significant concept to use, meaning the degree of involvement of Russia in a specific context of crisis and, accordingly, to what extent Moscow is capable of finding solutions to it:

“Should we say that the influence of Russia is negative or positive in Syria? The bottom line is that Russia holds the keys with a couple of other players to a solution in Syria, but then it is pretty much up to us (the EU), including through probably more dialogue with them (the Russians), to manage to bring those crises to a positive end.”²

Even in Syria – the MENA country where Russia has invested the most both regarding economic resources and political efforts – the EU does not seem to perceive Moscow as a credible power broker. The leadership role that the Kremlin has acquired over the last few years does not necessarily translate into a full capacity to influence and solve situations. While Russia has gradually prepared to establish a long-term presence of its troops on Syrian ground, in reality it does not have the approval from its allies for such a strategy, nor could the Kremlin force them to accept it (Kofman & Rojansky, 2018). Such a sentiment also seems to be shared by the EU.

The leading role that Russia has been assuming in Syria, however, does not seem to represent an obstacle to increased dialogue between Brussels and Moscow. The EU's disregard towards the Russian intervention does not impede it from acknowledging Russia's relevance in Syria and, through it, the leverage that Moscow has acquired on the Middle Eastern chessboard. On the one hand, Russia is considered to play an undesirable role; on the other, it is widely acknowledged as a key player at the regional level, with whom it is necessary to establish a solid and continuous dialogue despite difficulties. Many of our interviewees confirmed this perception.

“There is little that the EU can do to counter Russian influence in Syria and the MENA region. We need to keep an eye open, but try to consult and engage with Russia more.”³

Therefore, we could argue that the EU has openly condemned the military posture of Russia in Syria and, at the same time, taken up a certain distance from it, with a view to move beyond the security realm. In addition to representing Syria's first aid provider, the EU has always insisted on the political rather than the military aspects of the crisis. As stated by Mogherini, the EU is convinced that there cannot be lasting peace in Syria without an inclusive political transition agreed by the Syrian parties under the United Nations (UN) framework to address the legitimate grievances and aspirations of all (European Council, 2016; European External Action Service, 2018a). Even in this regard, however, and despite believing that the future of Syria must be in the Syrians' hands, the EU is committed to putting pressure on Russia – and its key partners who have good ties with President al-Assad such as Iran – in order to leverage Damascus to move towards this

² Interview with EU official, MENA division at the EEAS, September 2018.

³ Interview with EU official, Russia division at the EEAS, October 2018.

political step. Indeed, while the greatness of Moscow's Syrian campaign has surely been impressive, the military engagement in Syria represents only one part of a wider strategy of the Kremlin for the Middle East, one that has a diplomatic and geopolitical rather than a military nature.

Most of our interviewees, however, regard Russia's diplomatic and geopolitical role and leadership ambitions in Syria with scepticism, as the next section shows. Since the Syrian military intervention, the EU has become more attentive to Russia, feeling that Moscow's increasing engagement in the country may be counterproductive. What seems to be emerging from our interviews is Russia's ambiguity in the Syrian crisis. Russia is perceived as being well aware of the fact that, despite having established itself as one of the main players on the ground (or "one of the parties in the conflict" as one of our interviewees working at the EEAS' Russia division has stated), its role and position will not be sufficient to help it achieve its final goals. Hence, being aware of its limited capacities, Moscow would eventually look for external support, not caring whether this support is in line with its objectives or principles. Many of our interviewees believe that the Russians are aware of the fact that if they want to draw benefits from their actions in Syria (which are to establish a lasting presence in the broader region through the restoration of ties with its historical ally) they need to push for a political transition. And it is with regards to this that the EU seems to see room for cooperation with Moscow; the Russians know very well that a political transition in Syria is not something that they can achieve on their own, but rather they need a backing actor that reaches beyond their actions.

"They come now with a more collaborative narrative because I think they understand that they have to a certain extent achieved what they wanted in Syria, but what happens next is very complicated, and they don't have any of the tools to influence what happens next in Syria. It's not things that necessarily the EU does, but the EU has money and soft power that the Russians certainly do not, and they (the Russians) are intelligent enough to understand this very well. If you eventually get into a discussion about reconstruction, it's going to be the international financial institutions that will play an important role, but the Russians don't play an important role. It will be with the IFI that we are going to invest in Syria. But if you look ahead, and the Russians are very smart at that, they understand the limits of what their reach is."⁴

The Russians are therefore believed to be attempting to act independently for as long as they can, but, at the same, to have a rather clear understanding of when they need to team up with others. In particular, the words above of an officer of the DG NEAR seem

4 Interview with EU official, Southern Neighbourhood division at the DG NEAR, Neighbourhood and Enlargements Negotiations, October 2018.

to reflect what happened in summer 2018 in terms of reconstruction of Syria. Claiming that the time has come to start the process of return of Syrian refugees and to rebuild the country, Russia referred to the EU for support and collaboration, even though EU and Russian lines on Syrian reconstruction are of a different nature, as the following section reveals.

Russia's Diplomatic Engagement in the MENA Region

We believe that Moscow's most prominent diplomatic endeavours in the wider MENA region are essentially three: the Astana Process in Syria, Russia's mediation in Libya and the preservation of the Iran Nuclear Deal. By far, Russia's activities in Syria receive most of the EU's attention. This is reflected by the structure of this section, which is mostly focused on EU perceptions of the Astana Process. EU officials are increasingly aware of the growing importance of Russia in solving other crises – from the Yemeni war to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict – as well as Moscow's growing economic and cultural activities in Lebanon, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Yet solving the conflict in Syria remains one of the most urgent matters on which the EU focuses its diplomatic resources.

Understandably, the EU regards Russia's diplomatic activities as less controversial compared to the military ones. Cooperating in the framework of global diplomatic crises also offers the most promising venue for mending ties between the EU and Russia. In April 2017, Mogherini declared:

"I had a long meeting with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to discuss our disagreements openly – starting with the conflict in eastern Ukraine – but also, and constructively, the many issues where Russia and the European Union can find fertile ground for cooperation: from Syria to Libya, from the Middle East to the nuclear deal with Iran, from Afghanistan to the de-nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, from the fight against terrorism to climate change, and our bilateral relations in many sectors" (Mogherini, 2017).

Russia mediation through the Astana Process – the joint Russian-Iranian-Turkish diplomatic initiative aiming to find a political solution to the conflict in Syria – features prominently in the EU discourse on Russia's diplomatic activities in the MENA region. While the intervention in the Syrian war is indeed considered the most visible sign of Moscow's "return" to the Middle East, the Astana Process has become one of the cornerstones of Russia's strategy in the whole region. By intervening in Syria, the Kremlin

has been trying to pursue several geopolitical objectives – from recovering the ancient status of a great power on a par with the US (Freire & Heller, 2018; Krickovic & Weber, 2018) to opening a new negotiating table with the West in light of the Ukrainian crisis (Nitoiu, 2017). However, it also aims to promote Russian commercial and energy interests (Stronski & Sokolsky, 2017), possibly converting political influence into economic returns.⁵ The Astana Process is instrumental in this regard. Achieving a shared political solution would allow Moscow to reduce its military commitment, which is increasingly costly in financial and human terms, and to establish its role as a mediating power, enhancing its international prestige. On the other hand, it would also allow Moscow to unblock the substantial reconstruction funds offered by various international actors – first and foremost, the EU.

Russian companies hope to benefit greatly from the reconstruction process. In April 2016, not even one year after Moscow's military involvement started (September 2015), Russian companies had already signed nearly a billion dollars worth of agreements to rebuild Syria, offered by the Syrian government on a priority base, with favourable terms ("Russia signs contracts worth \$950mn for Syria reconstruction", 2016; "Damascus gives Moscow priority in reconstruction contracts", 2016). In September 2018, almost 40 Russian companies participated in the Damascus International Fair aimed at reviving Russian trade with Syria (Charlton, 2018). These meetings, however, do not substantially change the fact that Russia needs to turn to other countries, namely the US, China and EU member states, for help in paying for reconstruction, whose cost is estimated to be about \$400 billion (Stratfor, 2018) – an amount that Russia cannot possibly afford. The October 2018 summit in Istanbul brought Russia, Germany, France and Turkey together to discuss Syria's peace process and reconstruction. Russia strived to use the summit to cement its role as a new "power broker" (Kortunov, 2018) in the Middle East and attract European funding for rebuilding Syria after the war. Indeed, the participation of the two EU countries could be seen as a partial success, given that it was the first time that German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron met Putin and Erdogan to discuss this matter. However, the two European leaders firmly reiterated their refusal to offer reconstruction money without a credible political transition, in line with the demands of the UN-backed Geneva peace process (Stein & Itani, 2018). A political solution to the conflict remains therefore crucial for Russia to turn its military victories in Syria into badly needed economic opportunities for its companies, as well as for achieving its geopolitical objectives in the MENA region and beyond.

Assessments on the efficacy of Russia's diplomatic activities in Syria vary according to the EU institution and the specific time of the speech. Indeed, the tones soured up when tensions over humanitarian issues reached their peak – for instance, during the siege of

⁵ For a more detailed overview of Russia's economic interests and activities in the MENA region, see Hartwell, C. "Russian Economic Policy in the MENA Region: A Means to Political Ends" in this volume.

Aleppo in December 2016 or when, in November 2017, a Russian veto in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) undermined efforts to investigate chemical weapons use in Syria (European Council, 2017). In general, though, the EU welcomes Russia's mediation efforts in the framework of the Astana Process – even if the latter shadowed the UN Geneva talks and, in fact, relegated the EU to an even smaller role. According to some, Russia's initiative to hold alternative talks outside of the Geneva process is only instrumental to advancing Moscow's, Teheran's and Ankara's interests rather than focusing on achieving a fair and long-lasting peace agreement. Furthermore, as Collin believes, it could “provide the Syrian regime with an opportunity to venue shop by playing the two processes off of one another, thereby undermining the multilateral process” (Collin, 2018). Conversely, others believe that, for as little it has achieved, the Astana Process is still the most viable peace effort compared to the Geneva talks, which al-Assad even defined as “irrelevant” (Wintour, 2017). Although Russia has always presented its peace efforts as complementary to the UN's, many believe that the Astana Process ended up undermining the Geneva talks. First, it diverted local, regional and international attention and energy to Astana; and, second, it overturned the transition roadmap agreed in Geneva by initiating the constitutional process without a transition government being in place first (Asseburg, 2018). All this notwithstanding, even Staffan de Mistura did not question the narrative of complementarity put forward by Moscow since he acknowledged that only the three Astana partners were capable of enforcing ceasefires on the ground (Asseburg, 2018).

In the statements of the EEAS and its chief Mogherini, a sense of acknowledgement of Russia's crucial relevance for the resolution of the conflict transpires from the bulk of the statements we have analysed. The EU maintains an important role in the humanitarian field, especially in providing reconstruction funds: in Mogherini's words, “the European Union is and will continue to be the first humanitarian donor for Syrians” (European External Action Service, 2017b). This role gives the EU certain leverage to put pressure on Russia and other actors to achieve a political solution. The EU has often declared that its funds will not be made available “unless there is a political process underway” (Ruptly, 2018; European External Action Service, 2018a). At the same time, it acknowledges that this political process cannot happen without Russia's crucial mediation; that is why Mogherini adds that “we count on Russian work, including through the Astana Process, to help to move forward also in this respect” (European External Action Service, 2017b). On several occasions, positive recognition of Moscow's diplomatic efforts is coupled with a stress on the moral responsibility that Russia and the other members of the Astana Process have in virtue of their role. For instance, in March 2018 Mogherini declared:

“We reiterate our call to all parties for the immediate and full implementation of UNSC Resolution 2401 demanding a ceasefire without delay and call again on Russia, Iran and Turkey, as the EU did in the HR’s letter to their respective Ministers after the 26 February Foreign Affairs Council, to fulfil their obligations and responsibilities as Astana guarantors” (European Council, 2018).

Later, in September 2018 – after Moscow and Ankara reached a deal to create a buffer zone around Syria’s last major rebel stronghold, Idlib, and avert an offensive – Mogherini said:

“We all took a sigh of relief when another massacre was avoided in Idlib after the deal between Turkey and Russia. I would like to thank their engagement in this respect. Yet, the risk of an offensive remains, and I believe the first objective we share today is to call on the Astana guarantors, who are present here, to safeguard the last remaining de-escalation zone” (European External Action Service, 2018b).

Russia’s crucial role is acknowledged both in the official discourse and, to an even larger extent, informally. An EU official working with the MENA division at the EEAS confirms that the EU cannot overlook Russia’s interests in Syria if it wants to achieve a political solution: “(Syria) is an issue where, by and large, (the Russians) call the shots – not alone of course, but with two or three other key players. That’s an area in which we have to work with them knowing that they are in a sort of leadership position.”⁶ At the same time, the official stresses how the Russians realise that they need the EU to harvest the economic and political fruits of their involvement in Syria:

“There is a need for some kind of political transition and [...] that is not something that the Russian MoD or MFA could achieve on their own. What I find interesting is that like many actors of powers, [the Russians] have a tendency to do it alone as far as they can, but at the same time they have a rather clear understanding of when they need to team up with others. (That is) the moment when they tend to turn to us.”⁷

The need to agree on a political solution that paves the way for the reconstruction in Syria leads Russia towards a more cooperative approach and the multiplication of its diplomatic efforts through the Astana Process. While the EU remains strongly anchored to its stance not to unblock the reconstruction funds before an inclusive solution is negotiated, it is also aware that this solution inevitably depends on Russia’s crucial mediation.

⁶ Face-to-face interview with EU official, Middle East and North Africa Division, EEAS. Moscow, September 2018.

⁷ Face-to-face interview with EU official, Middle East and North Africa Division, EEAS. Moscow, September 2018.

Other diplomatic activities that Russia undertakes in the region include efforts to uphold the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, or simply the “Iran Nuclear Deal”) and the mediation in Libya, although they feature less in the EU documents compared to the Astana Process. Both Moscow and Brussels look at the Iran Nuclear Deal as an outstanding achievement, which their diplomacies have long worked towards; and both seem determined to stand up to US President Donald Trump’s efforts to scrap the Deal. Trump’s decision to withdraw the US from the Deal indeed “put Europe between a rock and a hard place” (Serhan, 2018), spurring intense cooperation with Russia. The Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova declared her country’s willingness to join forces with the other parties to the agreement to save it: “Moscow can see that all participants in the Iran Nuclear Deal, except the US, are determined to maintain the agreement and will continue efforts to that end” (“Russia Vows to Continue Efforts to Maintain Iran Nuclear Deal”, 2018). The EU has shown the same decisiveness and praised Russia’s “constructive role” in both the negotiations and in the most recent developments (“EU’s Mogherini Hails Russia’s ‘Constructive Role’ in Iran Nuclear Talks”, 2015). When asked to name potential avenues for EU-Russia cooperation, our interviewees ranked the preservation of the Iran Deal among the most promising ones.

The EU also hails the significance of Russia’s role in Libya, indicating it as a promising cooperation area on various occasions (Mogherini, 2017; European External Action Service, 2017a). Moscow is becoming more and more involved in Libya; in particular, some EU officials are worried about Russia’s potential military involvement. An EEAS official reports an increased Russian navy presence around Libya and refers to rumours that Russia may establish a navy base there.⁸ At the same time, the EU lacks a cohesive action on the Libyan issue, where member states such as France or Italy play a more decisive role – also due to their historical links with the North African country. This situation is likely to push the EU to cooperate even more with Moscow by the principle of “selective engagement with Russia on foreign policy and other areas where there is a clear EU interest” (Von Der Burchard, 2016). Engaging Russia diplomatically could also avoid that Russia steps up its military presence in Libya, following the Syrian precedent. Libyan National Army Spokesperson Ahmed al-Mesmari said that “the Russian-Libyan military relationship goes back a long time,” adding that “the Libyan National Army is currently completely armed with Russian weapons and its military doctrine is Eastern. Therefore Libya’s need for Russia is increasing more and more as the war on terror continues” (O’Connor, 2018). While the prospects of Moscow’s military intervention in Libya remain low, dealing with Russia in Libya seems to be an unavoidable necessity that the EU does not fail to recognise – even more so given Brussels’ lack of a common Libya strategy.

⁸ Interview with EU official, Russia division at the EEAS, October 2018.

Conclusion

Our chapter delved into the EU's perceptions of Russia's presence in the MENA region, drawing upon official texts and semi-structured interviews with selected EU officials. The chapter considered two major areas of Russia's engagement, namely the military and the political-diplomatic realms. In both areas, the focus on Syria is inevitable. This is because the conflict is the most acute crisis in the region at the moment, both in terms of casualties and actual and potential consequences for the high number of actors involved. In particular, the negative spillovers for the neighbouring countries and the EU – especially, the so-called “refugee crisis” – make it all the more important for Brussels to try all possible ways to contribute to solve the conflict, including overcoming the present frictions and trying to cooperate with Russia.

A pragmatic, less normative-based dialogue with Russia appears to be a necessary endeavour and, at the same time, a difficult one. Overall, despite compromised relations following the Ukrainian crisis, Brussels still looks at Moscow as a crucial actor, with which further cooperation and engagement can still be achieved where European and Russian interests converge. Shared security and political stability in the Mediterranean region may still represent one of these. The EU sees itself as having a shared interest with Russia; that is, to put an end to the Syrian war and to work more closely on the political solution of other crises such as the ones in Libya and Yemen, if only because the EU acknowledges that its capacity to act is, often, very limited.

While most of our interviewees agreed on the necessity for the EU to keep an open dialogue with Russia on the future of Syria and other crises, a certain degree of scepticism has emerged concerning the viability – sometimes, even usefulness – of such a diplomatic effort. In our opinion, there are two relevant hurdles – apart from diverging interests. First, even if the EU managed to come up with a unified Russia policy, Russia keeps being a highly divisive issue, and there are huge differences between how member states perceive and deal with Russia. Individual EU officials are inevitably influenced by their personal background and their nation's history with Russia and, hence, they may have different approaches to it.

Second, the fact that Russia's reputation as a reliable partner in the MENA region is, in the eyes of Brussels, inevitably tainted by Moscow's action in its neighbourhood, especially in Ukraine. As an advisor to Mogherini declared: “Basically, everything is viewed (by the EU) through the lenses of what Russia does in general in the world and, more specifically, in Eastern Europe and Ukraine.”⁹ This cannot but impact the way the EU and Russia interact in the MENA region. As an EEAS official confessed: “We'd like

⁹ Interview with a political advisor to a high-ranking EU official at the EEAS, November 2018.

¹⁰ Interview with EU official, Turkey division at the EEAS, October 2018.

to have a more cooperative relationship with Russia, I think that we should talk more – no one is gaining from this escalation. But at the same time, there is so much scepticism surrounding Russia because of what we see elsewhere and its general attitude towards the EU.”¹⁰ Therefore, to restore a genuinely cooperative relationship between the EU and Russia, there is a need to invest in some trust-building measures; yet in the current situation, with the Ukrainian crisis escalating after the incident on the Kerch Strait, this prospect looks like wishful thinking rather than a plausible scenario. At the moment, even if several EU officials stated that the dialogue with Moscow often ends up being empty or unsuccessful, the very fact that it has happened still represents an outcome in itself.

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Russian Economic Policy in the MENA Region: A Means to Political Ends

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Introduction

The expansion of Russian economic influence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)¹ countries has seemingly lagged far behind its attempts to achieve political relevance in the region. For the most part, it appears that economic matters have been a lower priority for Russian authorities compared to achieving an increased military presence throughout the MENA region. However, the fact that Russia (under)performs economically in its relations with MENA is a puzzle, as there are few good reasons why the MENA countries and Russia have *not* made an economic love connection in goods and services. Indeed, this persistent state of affairs is not due to a lack of economic synergy between Russia and the MENA region, as Russian exports of grain and precious minerals have also been in high demand across North Africa and the Gulf (with the exact materials in demand differing across the heterogeneous countries of MENA). Admittedly, while the overwhelming reliance on oil as an economic driver in much of the MENA region (mainly the Gulf but also in North Africa) and Russia, and the concomitant lack of diversification in both sets of economies may mean there is little scope for trade, there is still room to grow for expanded investment, both in resource-extraction and other industries. Finally, although economic gravity models have shown that Russian trade is handicapped by distance (Kaukin & Idrisov, 2014), Russia continues to have productive trading relationships with countries farther away than the MENA region, and the relative proximity of the Gulf should make at least this part of the MENA region attractive to investors and traders alike.

The underperformance of economic relations between Russia and the MENA region is all the more striking when one considers that there has been no lack of political effort on Moscow's part to improve economic ties alongside political ones. The common reliance of many MENA states and Russia on commodities, coupled with sometimes converging political interests, has led to several pushes for closer economic cooperation (Charap, 2015), especially with other Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) nations (with whom Russia has had a more contentious political relationship). For example, in 2011 the Kremlin launched the Russia-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) dialogue, while in 2013 the Arab-Russian Cooperation Forum was formed with the explicit aim of improving economic relations. From the Russian side, several other factors have been at play behind this political push for economic ties: in particular, the post-Crimea reality of isolation from the West has led to an imperative to improve relations with other emerging markets and economic powers. Moreover, the difficulties seen in the Russian economy from 2014 to 2017 due to sanctions and (more importantly) the falling price of oil have meant that economic security is a crucial issue for the Kremlin.

1 In this chapter, we will hew closely to but not precisely overlap the World Bank's definition of MENA, encompassing Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, and the territories of West Bank and Gaza. Turkey is also included in this grouping but will be treated separately below. Finally, unlike the World Bank, we will not consider Djibouti or Malta as part of the greater MENA region.

But the re-engagement of the Trump administration in the region, coupled with the prospect of much stronger US involvement throughout the Gulf and in the extended region (i.e. with Iran), also threatens to vitiate Russia's economic links.

Thus, despite economic synergy and (or perhaps because of) political will, the economic relationships between Russia and the MENA region continue to underwhelm. This chapter aims to evaluate the nature and scope of Russian economic interests, as well as the economic sustainability of prolonged Russian assertiveness in the region. Are economic relations doomed to remain the last of all of Moscow's considerations in the MENA region, or is there a possibility that economic ties could follow or supplant political ones? Where will economic relations be heading in the coming years, and is there a chance that it will favour some countries (mainly the Gulf) at the expense of others? My main thesis is that economic cooperation will never flourish between the two partners as long as economics overall is treated as an adjunct to politics. In particular, the Russian approach to trade, using it as a weapon to force partners into submission, is highly inimical to the development of substantial and lasting trade links; moreover, given that investments have also been highly sensitive to political shifts, it is unlikely that Russia's expanded post-Syria influence in the region will result in sustainable economic cooperation. More likely, as has been seen in the Balkans, Russia will continue to project an oversized image of its economic clout, an image that is highly dependent on popular perceptions and specific victories rather than underlying fundamentals.

Russian Economic Ties to the MENA Region

Background

After decades of supporting Arab states reflexively (but not necessarily ideologically) during the Cold War, and opposing Turkey ideologically (but not necessarily reflexively), a key attribute of Russia's approach to the broader MENA region in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union was its "non-ideological nature", with Russia pursuing a national interest "marked by pragmatism, cynicism, and economic calculations occasionally mixed with an undertone of anti-Americanism" (Bourtman, 2006, p. 1). As Sezer (2000, p. 62) noted with regard to Turkey, this meant a "virtual rapprochement" where public statements and official stances became neutral, but a "hard kernel of mutual fear, mistrust, and suspicion remains in the minds of the decision makers and political elites." No longer driven in the short run by global geopolitical posturing, the Russia of the 1990s was ready to deal with anyone but with the caveat that these economic ties did not necessarily mean an increase in political ties.

The dire state of the Russian economy in its first decade of transition meant that these economic ties were crucial. Unfortunately, the immediate effect of the fall of the Soviet Union meant an initial large collapse in trade and investment ties with the MENA region, as a transitioning and chaotic Russia was unwilling and unable to forge economic links or was patently unable to sustain those which had been forged on solidarity alone during the Cold War. Coupled with the loss of Ukrainian ports for shipment and an overall decline in Russian economic activity accompanying transformation, by the late 1990s only 1% of Russia's trade was with the Arab countries of the Middle East (and far less with North Africa, see Kozhanov [2018]). Indeed, the only bright spot in Russia's external economic relations in the 1990s was its trade with Turkey, with exports growing by 176% from 1992 to 2000 (Şimşek et al., 2017).

Following the ruble crisis of 1998-99 and the subsequent stabilisation of the Russian economy, it appeared that Russia's domestic travails would finally allow for a resumption of economic relations in the MENA region. Indeed, coupled with its hopes of a post-9/11 entente with the United States (US) in the Middle East dashed by the American invasion of Iraq and other US policies, Russia strongly re-evaluated its policies in the region, including looking to expand its economic ties and protect Russian economic interests (Tsygankov, 2016). Putin's first terms in the early 2000s saw Russian re-engagement around the globe and a resumption of the rivalry with the US, but especially with regard to the MENA region: as Olikier et al. (2009, p.113) noted, "Russia's policies [in MENA] are driven by its quest for prestige... but aside from a general desire for stability in and trade with the region, this desire is motivated less by a particular vision for the Middle East and more by a belief that Russia, as a great power, should play a role in such an important region." This led to a renewed interest in economic activity as well, coupled with Russia's economic recovery, and trade between the two partners grew substantially: for example, data from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) shows that Egypt imported 149.68% more from Russia in 2007 than it did in 2000, while Russian imports from Jordan increased almost ten times over that same period (from an admittedly low base in both cases). The Russo-Turkish relationship also continued to grow, with Russian exports to Turkey increasing 425% in value from 2000 to 2015 and Turkish exports to Russia increasing 447% over the same period (Russia is Turkey's second-largest trade destination behind the European Union (EU), a trend that began in 2002, as noted by Flanagan [2013]).

This performance across the region has increased substantially post-global financial crisis, as the return of Vladimir Putin to power as President in 2012 was accompanied by shifting geopolitical winds and the threat of regional instability (Kozhanov, 2014). In

particular, Russia's loss of substantial investments in Iraq as a result of the American invasion and subsequent civil war, followed on by the ill-fated US policy in Libya in 2011 – which also led to the deposing of a major Russian client (Colonel Moammar Gaddafi) – prompted the Kremlin to attempt to play a more active role in preserving its own political and economic interests (Buckley, 2012). Similarly, the effect of the Arab Spring on Russian economic influence was enormous, given the economic uncertainty it engendered across the region and especially to established Russian export markets (Dannreuther, 2015), with Russian grain exports taking a large loss and Russian political influence waning as a new “Cold War” of opposed interests emerged (Martin, 2013). At the same time, the creeping authoritarianism of Turkish President Erdoğan has created a congruence of interests and push for a strategic partnership with Turkey that has led to an emphasis on economic ties (Flanagan, 2013). Finally, and perhaps in the largest example of Russian re-engagement, the threat of the loss of one of Russia's biggest clients in Bashar al-Assad, coupled with US President Barack Obama's weakness in dealing with the turmoil in Syria, led to the Kremlin actively intervening in Syria to counter the US politically (Kozhanov, 2018).

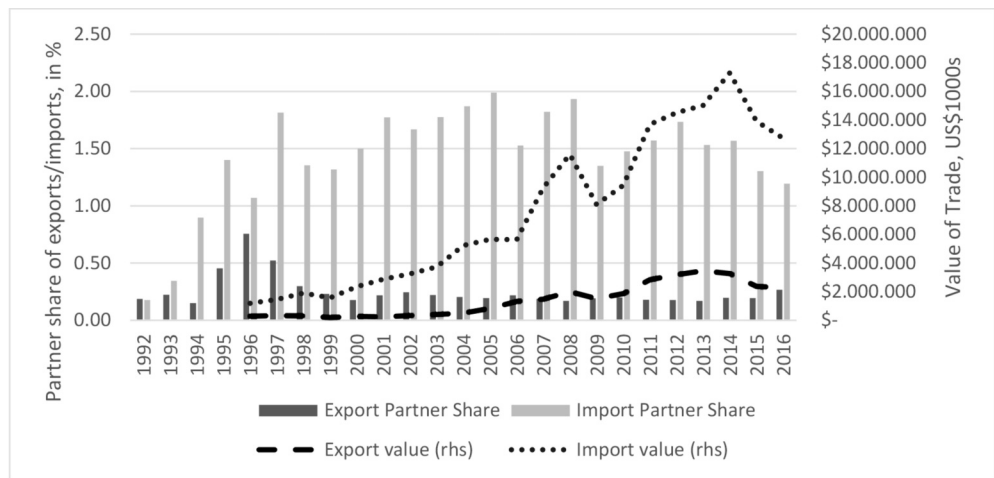
Trade in Goods, Services and Arms

While the pivot of Russia to the MENA region politically is undeniable, it has not necessarily translated into substantial flows of goods and services between the two (despite, as just noted, a trend upwards). According to statistics from the World Bank World Integrated Trade Solutions (WITS) database, (non-military) exports to the MENA countries (excluding Turkey) in 2016 accounted for just 6% of Russia's overall trade volume, while imports were an even less impressive 1.4% of Russian trade. Seen from a longer vantage point, the economic linkages between Russia and the MENA region have not only recently fallen into disrepair, in some cases it seems they were never built: as Figure 1 shows, the most that the MENA region ever imported from Russia was in 2005 at approximately 2% of all of its imports, and its high for exports came in 1996 at only 0.76% of all exports. Moreover, a quick glance at Russia's trading partners shows that Russia is particularly well-diversified, although this is a function of it not having a major trading partner: Russia appears to have some small volume of trade with most countries in North Africa and across the Middle East, with Algeria and Egypt seeing the largest amounts (1.4% and 1.3% respectively of Russian exports in 2016) and other countries having much smaller volumes.

As noted above, Turkey is the notable outlier to these trends, with Russian-Turkish trade eclipsing the trade from Russia to the rest of the MENA region combined by a substantial amount. For example, Turkish imports from Russia in 2015 were US\$20.33 billion,

greater than the US\$13 billion from the entire MENA region, while Turkish exports were US\$3.87 billion, significantly higher than the US\$2 billion for the rest of the MENA region (Şimşek et al., 2017). While trade has cooled considerably since 2015, driven largely by differing political goals in Syria and the downing by Turkish fighters of a Russian Su-24M jet (Öncel & Liapina, 2018), the overarching political goals of competition with the West has continued to keep trade flows at an elevated level compared to the rest of the MENA region (Öniş & Yılmaz, 2016). Perhaps more interestingly, there is evidence that, as the Russian economy has suffered through shocks and sanctions, each shock pushes it closer to Turkey economically (Kapusuzoglu & Ceylan, 2017).

Figure 1. MENA Imports from and Exports to Russia, value and as % of total trade, 1992-2016



Source: Compiled from World Bank WITS Database.

In terms of economic complexity, what trade there is between the two partners (including Turkey) tends to be simple and focused on raw materials and extraction. As an example, in 2016, the bulk of Russian imports from the MENA countries came in the form of vegetables and raw materials, while Russia primarily exported (in terms of non-energy goods) miscellaneous manufactures, consumer goods and intermediate goods. As the MENA region is diverse, the leading goods imported and exported tend to differ by country, with Egypt, Jordan and Libya importing primarily Russian wheat, Qatar importing copper wire, Turkey importing natural gas, and Morocco importing coal and petroleum. This does not mean that the raw goods exported from Russia do not have an eventual high-value end use: as Kozhanov (2018) notes, the importance of Russia's commodities to the high-technology sectors of the MENA region cannot be understated, with Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) purchasing up to 16% of Russia's entire export

stock of precious stones and metals (34% of Russian exports to the UAE are diamonds). However, despite this caveat, the composition of trade between Russia and the MENA region continues to remain based on what can be dug out of or pulled from the ground rather than being concentrated in complex manufactures.

Coupled with this emphasis on raw materials and commodities, Russian exports also have a common trait, in that Russia's main comparative advantage in the region appears to be trade in areas dominated by governments and not the market, namely energy and weaponry. Much ink has been spilled on the fact that Russia's economy is incredibly concentrated in oil and gas and has only become more dependent on these exports in recent years (US Senator John McCain famously noted that Russia was a "gas station masquerading as a country"), and it should not be surprising that energy remains a key economic element in Russia's relations with the MENA countries. However, unlike Europe or Asia, Russia exports comparatively less energy to the MENA region, mainly because they have their own highly successful energy-producing capabilities (according to OPEC, 65.5% of the world's crude oil reserves are located in the Middle East).² In fact, only natural gas stands out as a possible growth market for Russian exports in most of the MENA region, as natural gas exports already constitute the majority of exports from Russia to Turkey but there is a relatively small share of Russian gas in exports to the Gulf countries in particular, which means that this is probably an area that will expand in coming years, especially if tensions between the Gulf and Iran remain high (Kozhanov, 2018).

Realistically, Russia's energy interests in the region are to secure supplies in case of disruption, attract investment to replace that which was lost via Western sanctions, and work closely with other oil producers in order to stabilise prices (Mammadov, 2018). Using energy as a tool of foreign policy in addition to its role as an economic powerhouse and driver of the Russian economy (Newnham, 2011), the Kremlin has had some success in this field, with Lukoil working in Iraq (and Rosneft owning a controlling interest in a pipeline in Kurdistan, a reality that has become a political sticking point between Moscow and Ankara) and Gazprom and Rosneft promising to invest some US\$30 billion in Iran's oil and gas sector in 2017. Unfortunately, as Kropatcheva (2014) had noted, the shale revolution in the US has already taken and will continue to take its toll on the Russian energy industry, meaning that developments in shale may draw the Gulf and Moscow closer together but ultimately be harmful for their cooperation in energy in general. In the short term, however, the resiliency and sheer size of the Russian energy sector means that it will continue to play an outsized role in both Russian foreign policy and Russian economic policy towards the MENA region (Mitrova, 2016).

² OPEC web site: http://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/data_graphs/330.htm

Nor has this success been limited to Russia's traditional strengths, as Russia has expanded its links beyond oil and gas to nuclear energy, with official agency Rosatom signing agreements with Algeria, Jordan, Tunisia and Egypt for power plants to be built over the next five to ten years (Schumacher & Nitoiu, 2015; Nakhle, 2016) and continuing its work in Iran. Notably, Rosatom has also broken ground on the first Turkish nuclear power plant at Akkuyu, a major coup for the agency and a major investment of approximately US\$20 billion. The continued comparative Russian advantage in nuclear energy, coupled with a withdrawal by the West from nuclear power exports, means that this can continue to be a growth industry for Russia in the future.

Similarly, in the arms sector, Russia has claimed an exalted position atop the world tables for arms sales, trailing only the US in terms of its material scale of weapons sold (Connolly & Sendstad, 2017).³ As Borshchevskaya (2017) notes, the defence industry is an important one in Russia for employment and earnings, with an estimated 3.4% of GDP spent in 2016 alone on military output and a defence industrial complex conservatively estimated to employ 1.3 million people in 2014 (according to Frolov [2017], while Connolly and Sendstad [2017] estimate it closer to 2.5 million in 2016). However, Blank and Levitzky (2015) persuasively argue that the main impetus behind Russia's arm sales is not (and likely has never been) as a revenue generator but is instead a part of the Kremlin's drive to increase Russian prestige globally, making this economic interest more of a political one.

Regardless of the motivation, the MENA countries have been the second most important destination for Russian arms from 2000 to 2016, accounting for 17.8% of all Russian arms sales, with the biggest recipients in 2016 being Algeria and Iran (Connolly & Sendstad, 2017). Putin himself blazed the trail for Russian arms exporters back into the Middle East after the relative placidity of the Yeltsin years, leading a delegation of military exporters including MiG and Rosoboronexport to advance Russian economic and political interests (Bourtman, 2006). These active efforts have paid off, as since the mid-2000s, Russian arms have been sold to 11 countries in the region, including new customers such as Qatar and the UAE, and there has been an increase in sales to old customers as well (Iraq, in particular, has seen purchases of over US\$1 billion from 2014 to 2016 alone).⁴ Even Turkey, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member and main recipient of US arms, has expressed an interest in purchasing S-400 missiles from Russia as a way to spur on development of its own domestic arms industry (Wasilewski, 2017).

As with other political developments, however, the sale of Russian arms waxes and wanes in the region, with some countries (notably Saudi Arabia) not customers of

³ "Material scale", as used by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), refers to a metric used to compare the amount and types of weapons sold as distinguished from the mere monetary value of the transaction.

⁴ Based on data from the SIPRI arms transfer database

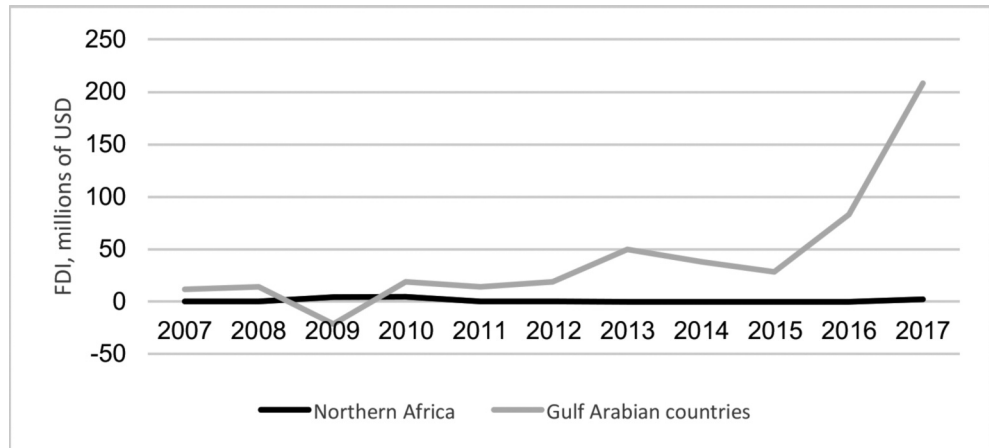
Russian weaponry at all and other countries (Iraq, Libya) purchasing relatively less than in previous years: Kozhanov (2018), relying on Russian sources, notes that arms exporter Rosoboronexport estimated its financial losses in Libya after the fall of Gaddafi to be at least US\$4 billion. Given the realities of Russia being more financially constrained than the Soviet Union, and more conscious of its economic imperatives, Russia has also eschewed the system of credit that dominated USSR arms sales, insisting for the most part on cash payment (Dannreuther, 2012), although old habits have continued in Libya and Syria. And, finally, given the more pragmatic and non-ideological approach that Russia has adopted in the region, economic imperatives have sometimes triumphed over pure military ones: in the first instance, this has meant a historical reluctance to sell certain “offensive” weapons to the MENA countries if it will negatively impact other potential clients, with Grigoreva and Litovkin [2008] relating how Putin purportedly intervened to prevent the sale of advanced missiles to Syria, as they were perceived negatively by Israel, another important Russian market. It should be noted that this rule is not hard and fast, however, and events at the end of September 2018 made such considerations fall by the wayside, as the downing of a Russian jet “indirectly” caused by Israel prompted the sale of S-300 air defence systems to Syria (Nikolskaya & Tétrault-Farber, 2018). But regardless of this specific example, the Russian approach has also meant that the country has tended to tie military sales to countries in need with economic concessions, namely to obtain extraction rights in areas rich with resources (Blank & Levitzky, 2015). In this manner, both energy and arms sales have become intertwined with Russia's desire to play a larger role in the MENA region.

Investment

While trade has been somewhat limited to arms and energy, investment linkages between Russia and its partners in the region have fared slightly better, but here too they have been tinged with politics. Over the past decade, Russia has successfully solicited investment mainly from the richer Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE), with investment from North Africa negligible (Figure 2) but Gulf investment increasing substantially since 2015. At the same time, Russian foreign investment in the MENA region has slowed considerably from its pre-global financial crisis highs (Figure 3), with the UAE the only destination of note according to official statistics. Despite upward trends, however, investment flows as a proportion of all investment remain tiny: for example, for 2016, the UAE's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows to Russia represented just 16% of the flows into Russia from Sweden and were less than Russia's geopolitical foe Poland. Other Gulf states saw even less investment heading to Russia over recent years, to say nothing of the non-existent flows from North Africa. Of course, Russian investment statistics should also be treated with caution, given the widespread use of offshore financial centres, meaning that some of the money routed to the British

Virgin Islands or Cyprus could eventually end up in the MENA region but even with this caveat it appears that economic difficulties in Russia have somewhat stunted capital movements and investment into it.

Figure 2. Foreign Direct Investment into Russia, 2007-2017



Source: Based on data from the Central Bank of Russia (CBR).

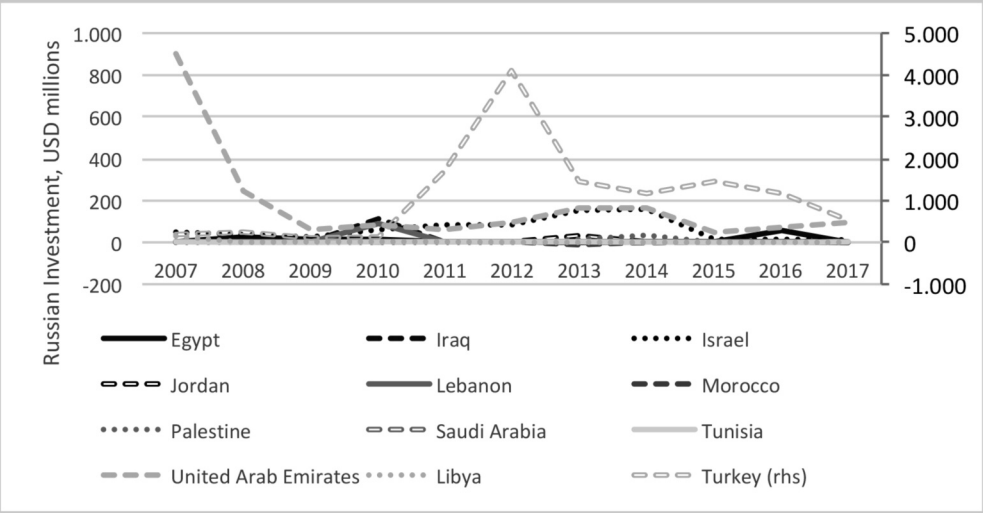
In fact, much as with trade, investment has been more successful in areas where the governments of the respective investors are involved, mainly concentrated in transfers from the Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWFs) of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, and Russia's own sovereign fund. Compared to private equity in the region, the SWFs across the MENA countries are vast, with the Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute estimating that there is nearly US\$3 trillion in various sovereign and investment funds across the region.⁵ Russia has actively courted these funds for investment in Russian industry, creating a "Russian Direct Investment Fund" (RDIF) in 2011 to solicit foreign investment: according to Nakhle (2018), the RDIF has attracted over US\$30 billion from MENA SWFs, with Kuwait's Investment Authority the first to invest in 2012 and Saudi Arabia and Qatar also committing substantial sums since 2014. Similarly, Turkey has also had its own sovereign wealth fund (now conveniently headed by the president) conclude a Russia-Turkey Investment Fund of approximately US\$500 million to direct Turkish money into Russian infrastructure and social projects (with the same anticipated to go from Russia to Turkey).

The GCC countries in particular have encouraged investment in the RDIF and Russia in general as a way of extending their own political influence with the Kremlin, especially

⁵ Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute, "Sovereign Wealth Fund Rankings", 2018, <https://www.swfinstitute.org/sovereign-wealth-fund-rankings/>, accessed 1 August 2018.

with regard to regional disputes with Iran (Shumilin & Shumilina, 2017). Von Soest (2015) notes somewhat pessimistically that such cooperation across autocratic SWFs should not be unexpected, as authoritarian regimes cooperate with each other to prevent democracy, with a key ingredient being economic and military entanglements. While both of these reasons are valid, the move towards Russia has also been spurred on by a need to find higher-yielding investments, and the risk associated with Russia has meant a higher return for the adventurous (and politically-connected) MENA investor (Nakhle, 2018).

Figure 3. Russian Foreign Direct Investment in the MENA Region, 2007-2017



Source: Based on data from the Central Bank of Russia (CBR). Countries shown are the only countries in MENA with data availability.

From the Russian side, the “National Wellbeing Fund” – the SWF for the Russian government, funded by oil revenues – decreased in value from 2014 to 2017 on the back of low oil prices, but has recovered somewhat in recent months and authorities are exploring ways in which the Fund can take on more risk for higher rewards. As of this writing, the Fund is limited by law to investments in sovereign debt (in Russia and abroad), deposits at state development lender Vnesheconombank (VEB), and investing in infrastructure projects; a proposed change would allow for assets above a certain threshold of GDP to be invested in riskier vehicles such as stocks or foreign property. As large amounts of liquidity controlled by the state, there is necessarily political pressure on these funds to invest beyond economic motives (Karasik, 2017) and, in line with Russia’s MENA strategies, there are plans for Russia’s SWF to invest in Saudi Aramco’s

initial public offering late in 2018 (if it even occurs, reports regarding its timing are contradictory). The scope of Russian investment in the MENA region from the SWF will necessarily be limited in the future by the price of oil but it is likely that this will continue to be the most important investment vehicle utilised by both sides in coming years.

Why Are Russian-MENA Economic Ties the Way They Are?

Domestic Considerations and a Suspicion of Trade

While many of the issues regarding the underperformance of economic relations between Russia and the MENA region have an economic explanation, not all of the problems the partners face have been exogenously generated. In reality, internal economic policies from both sides have contributed to lower trade and investment overall, a fact that has trickled down to the specific linkages between Russia and the MENA countries. For example, Russian policy in the post-Soviet era (apart for a brief lull in the mid-1990s) has never been interested in a general expansion of trade according to laissez-faire tenets; the Kremlin has viewed trade more as a means to an end, more concerned with expanding trade in “strategic” areas first and foremost (Hanson, 2007) and ignoring broader-based liberalisation. This lack of an underlying commitment to free trade has meant maintenance of undue trade barriers (both tariff and non-tariff) to all countries (including the MENA region), and even Russia’s decades-long accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) has not resulted in the removal of trade barriers (Van der Loo, 2013) or an explosion of trade as predicted (Babetskaia-Kukharchuk & Maurel, 2004).

As part of its view of trade as a strategic tool, Russian policy-makers have consistently and continuously exhibited a willingness to use trade and investment as a weapon in pursuit of short-term political gains. Citing health and safety concerns, Russia has at various points over the past 15 years banned imports from Georgia, Ukraine or Moldova when they did not support Russian political goals (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015), while also imposing blanket embargoes against Western foodstuffs in response to Western sanctions after the invasion of Ukraine (Pickett & Lux, 2015). Even its largest export, energy, an export on which the Russian government depends, has been used in a cavalier manner to bring other governments to heel (Stegen, 2011), most prominently in Belarus and Ukraine in 2006 and 2007 (Rutland, 2008) and again in Ukraine throughout 2014 and 2015 (Van de Graaf & Colgan, 2017). Depending upon the geopolitical objectives, the Russian state has not shown any hesitation to shutter trade flows, even if such a move harms Russian business, Russian consumers or even Russian health (Schierhorn et al., 2016).

Such an example of Russia's economic interests being subordinated to its political ones, and their unintended consequences, can be seen precisely in the MENA region. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine, sanctions and low oil prices made a massive dent in the short-term Russian economic outlook, with GDP contracting by 3% in 2015 and 0.2% in 2016. However, in order to counter Western sanctions, Putin happily embraced his own set of sanctions (a food embargo) against the EU and the US, preventing agricultural and agro-processors from exporting to Russia (the total volume of trade lost may have been as much as €13.32 billion, according to figures from Eurostat and the US Department of Commerce). While this series of needless sanctions created difficulties in Russia for consumers and for producers with markets in the EU, it also pushed European firms who used to have a ready market in Russia elsewhere. In fact, the Russian counter-sanctions, by pushing European firms towards the south and the MENA region, created more competition for Russian firms who also had their export markets squeezed. By voluntarily using trade as a political cudgel in one region, Putin created a situation that harmed Russian firms elsewhere, especially since the competitiveness of Russian agro-processors vis-à-vis European firms was far inferior (a point noted by Liefert [2002] and confirmed in Liefert and Liefert [2012]). In any case, any economic suffering was ignored in pursuit of anti-Western goals and compensated by distortions elsewhere, including subsidies and a weak ruble.

Of course, in some cases the political imperatives of the Russian government have aided economic relations with the MENA region, although these moves have been in (as to be expected) the energy sector. Bilgin (2011) relates how Gazprom, the largest quasi-state tool of Russian foreign policy, has adopted the state's interests to heart in its own investment, moving to secure gas reserves and create joint ventures in the MENA region rather than invest in domestic production or infrastructure. Moreover, Russia's attempts to counter the US in the MENA region will often lead to it diverting funding or other economic resources to actors in the area despite there being an underlying economic rationale (Mead, 2014). And while no one would say that Syria's future is assured, if al-Assad survives the break-up of his country due almost entirely to Russian military aid (as noted above), Russian businesses are poised to move into a post-war Syria and profit from reconstruction (Hille et al., 2018), although even here they may need to compete with Iran.

As a final interesting aside, the definition of what is a "strategic" interest in Russia's foreign economic relations, and thus how trade policy is made, has mainly been driven by the Kremlin's geopolitical worldview, but it also has been driven by the economic interests of the Russian oligarchy. While it is difficult to observe direct links between the

oligarchs and Russian trade policy, as early as 2005 it was noted that the oligarchs were attempting to delay Russian WTO accession while they completed their own acquisition of Russian firms (Guriev & Rachinsky, 2005). More recent work has documented how oligarchs have used political connections in Russian regions to restrain competition in exports and determine what trade is sent where in the former Soviet Union (Libman & Obydenkova, 2014). Langbein (2016) also detailed how policy-makers compromised Russia's trade linkages with Ukraine in order to protect the domestic automotive industry, a favourite industry of oligarchs such as Oleg Deripaska (who has suffered from Western sanctions). Thus, the political economy of trade policy in Russia is not just limited to political goals but the private economic interests of powerful oligarchs; this too is another factor that has discouraged trade with the Middle East, as much larger and easier gains can be made either in the post-Soviet space or with Western Europe.

Russia is not alone in its suspicion of unfettered trade, however, and the broader MENA region (including Turkey) has pursued a similar strategy to Russia, that of "statist globalisation" (Harris, 2009), but with a less overt focus on national interests. The MENA region's trade performance has not changed substantially since Behar and Freund (2011) noted that the MENA countries under-trade both globally and regionally; in fact, trade as a percentage of GDP for the entire region has regressed, going from a high of 89.35% in 2008 (just prior to the global financial crisis) to just 75.88% in 2017 (according to World Bank data), lower than the 87.13% for the EU in the same year and far below Central Europe and the Baltics (126.46%) or countries such as Hong Kong (375%) or Vietnam (200.31%). The region, as a diverse place, has naturally seen not every country fit under this rubric, as the smaller Gulf countries especially have a much higher tendency towards openness (UAE leads all countries with trade at 172.81% of GDP while data for Bahrain from 2016 shows trade at 139.55%). However, many countries such as Yemen (33.53%), Egypt (44.79%), Iran (46.07%), Turkey (54%) and Saudi Arabia (61.68%) trail the regional average and have seen consistently low volumes of trade since the Arab Spring in particular.

The underperformance of the MENA region in general has its roots in several economic and policy issues; from the economic side, as Bhattacharya and Wolde (2012) note, the region continues to lack appropriate trade infrastructure, while firm-level constraints such as access to finance prevent smaller firms from becoming exporters. More fundamentally, and much as with Russia, there is a severe lack of diversification of the economies of the region, even beyond the countries concentrated in natural resources (Diop et al., 2012), leading to necessarily limited export opportunities. In some sense, this lack of diversification (also as with Russia) is a policy issue as well, following from the reality

that the impressive liberalisation of the early 1990s was replaced in the late 2000s by a much slower process of trade opening. Since the global financial crisis, the trade openness in the MENA region has been dominated by political concerns, centred on trade deals rather than unilateral liberalisation (Freund & Portugal-Perez, 2012), and set back by repeated bouts of political uncertainty.

The emphasis on trade deals is especially noteworthy, as it has underpinned nearly all of the trade progress made by the MENA countries (excepting the Gulf countries) since the mid-2000s. Despite receiving assistance from the EU and other donors for continued broad-based liberalisation, the trade deal approach has led to specific agreements driving trade in that specific direction rather than boosting trade overall; Cie lik and Hagemeyer (2009), for example, provide evidence that the conclusion of agreements with the EU has led to an increase in MENA imports of EU goods but little increase in either exports to the EU or overall trade volumes. Freund and Portugal-Perez (2012) perform a broader-based look at the trade agreements in the region and come to much the same conclusion, namely that the agreement-based approach has had little effect on MENA trade and/or growth.

However, the literature examining these trade agreements has been unanimous in noting that these deals have not been structured in a manner that would necessarily lend itself to a large spike in trade, as the MENA region continued to rely on non-tariff barriers (NTBs) across the less-developed economies of the region (Augier et al., 2012). This use of NTBs is another trait that the MENA countries have in common with Russia, as, even as formal tariffs have come down in the context of multilateral trade agreements (Freund & Portugal-Perez, 2012), import restrictions, customs administration, and health and safety barriers have remained as onerous obstructions to trade (Iqbal, 2014). Indeed, Turkey is an instructive example, as even though it has been in a customs union with the EU since 1995, it has failed to eliminate all of its technical barriers to trade and several NTBs remain in place (Togan, 2015). Egypt is another country where such barriers have remained, mainly as a way to enrich cronies and entrench the elite (Eibl & Malik, 2016). Simply put, the somewhat shallow integration enshrined in the MENA region's current round of trade agreements (including regionally) has led to some gains in overall trade, but deeper integration (thus far not on the table) could have created much more (Freund & Portugal-Perez, 2012).

The Wildcard: The Eurasian Economic Union

The move from broad-based liberalisation and removal of trade-related distortions to shallow trade deals has also had a specific (and deleterious) effect on MENA-Russian relations, mainly because there is no trade agreement with Russia in place with any

of the countries of the Middle East or North Africa. Indeed, Russia has tended to eschew free trade agreements outside of its neighbourhood, exclusively moving towards free(er) trade with the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, the successor organisation to the Soviet Union). It is only in recent years that Russia has begun to move farther afield from its “near abroad” in search of external trade deals; however, it has utilised a vehicle that is still comprised exclusively of these same successor states of the Soviet Union, namely the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU).

Originally conceived of solely as an alternate way to re-integrate some of the former republics of the Soviet Union economically, the EaEU has made great strides in lowering barriers to transactions among its member states (Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus were the founding members, with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joining shortly after the Union became a reality) while simultaneously erecting higher barriers to those outside the Union (Hartwell, 2016). The EaEU has come into its own as the preferred tool of Russian foreign economic policy, increasing the reach of Russia’s economy but also providing an incentive for outsiders in that trade partners can reach a larger internal market than Russia alone. While the EaEU has its own issues in integration – including disagreements between Russia and Kazakhstan (Dragneva, 2017), a pervasive worry that Russia’s political dominance of the Union is hindering further integration (Kirkham, 2016), and lack of progress in reducing internal barriers (Tarr, 2016) –, the EaEU allows Russia its first institutional measure to attempt to formalise economic relations with the MENA countries. Moreover, the legitimacy that the EaEU craves can be somewhat obtained via the conclusion of external trade agreements, and here again the MENA region looks promising.

Given the shift in the MENA region towards trade agreements, it is quite possible that Russia may find a way to increase its economic presence in the region via the EaEU, using it as an effective tool of leverage for Russia’s MENA policies. Many caveats are in order before this can occur, however. In pure economic terms, if a country needed to choose between the EaEU and the EU, countries would be foolish not to choose the EU. In practice, countries on Russia’s borders have not had the luxury of choosing purely on economic terms, feeling intense political pressure, either covert or overt (or both) to choose the EaEU (one need only recall it was the Association Agreement with the EU, and Russia’s pressure on Kyiv, that sparked not only Euromaidan but the subsequent Russian invasion of Crimea and Donbas). But the MENA region, as a diverse region not geographically contiguous with Russia, has already had some countries flirting with trade deals with the EaEU, including most prominently Turkey, Iran, Egypt and (to a lesser extent) Israel. It is unlikely that the MENA countries will eschew

their access to EU markets in order to sign up to the EaEU, but remaining on the outside, with agreements with both sides, would suit many of the North African countries just fine. And in such a scenario, *ceteris paribus*, it is likely that trade and investment with Russia would increase.

Conclusion: Will Politics Continue to Triumph?

This chapter has examined the relationship between Russia and the MENA region from an economic perspective, trying to understand why Russia continues to underperform in its economic relations with the countries of the region. A theme (and explanator) that has emerged throughout this examination is that private commerce is scarce in the economic relationship between the two while government-inspired and -driven trade and investment rules the day. Whether in relation to energy, arms, sovereign wealth fund investments or regional trading vehicles, economic relations between the MENA countries and Russia tend to follow the pattern of Soviet trade, in that they are conducted state-to-state (or quasi-state company to quasi-state company) rather than business-to-business. More importantly, the volumes and values of this relationship are highly dependent upon geopolitical aims and political exigencies rather than market-based realities of comparative advantage. Given the resurgent rivalry between the US and Russia in the region, and Russia's re-emergence as a MENA power via Syria, it is unlikely that this situation will change in the near future.

Accepting this fact, an important point needs to be made about Russia's economic strategy towards the MENA region, related directly to Russia's continuous use of trade and investment to supplement its foreign policy goals: namely, does Russia have the economic depth outside of its MENA relations to be able to continue to support its geopolitical ambitions in the MENA countries? As the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent invasion of eastern Ukraine have shown, even relatively small geopolitical moves in the Kremlin's immediate neighbourhood can carry strong economic ramifications, especially if there is a concerted effort by others to vitiate Moscow's economic power. Thus far, however, this reality has not affected Russia's strategy in the MENA region. As Dmitri Trenin noted back in 2009, "the Kremlin leadership consciously ignores the relative modesty of Russia's economic potential, its dependency on raw materials, and its technological backwardness" (Trenin, 2009, p.72); little has changed since these words were written, and Putin appears to not be altering his tactics in the region in the least.

But there is a large measure of endogeneity present, as Russia's economic fragility can beget yet more fragility. Put another way, Russia's economy has been reliant on natural

resources, a reliance that has increased its power in the MENA region but that has also made the Russian economy more susceptible if it overplays its hand. With any major moves towards the MENA countries having much larger repercussions for the global economy, it is likely that responses from Russia's competitors in the region will be proportionally larger and inflict proportionally more damage. For example, the re-engagement of the Trump administration in the region, coupled with the prospect of much stronger US involvement throughout the Gulf and in the extended region (i.e. with Iran and Turkey) and/or an expansion of US oil and gas production, also threatens to vitiate Russia's economic links. And the emergence of China as a possible competitor in the region, bringing large amounts of liquidity and funding for infrastructure investment, can also challenge Russia in a game in which it has relatively little to offer.

At the same time, however, Russia's economic and political moves in the MENA region could be helping to build resilience as well. Russia was harmed by Western sanctions after the invasion of Ukraine due to the fact that these coincided with a global downturn in the price of oil. If Russia were to be more engaged in the Middle East and have more influence in ensuring that oil prices are kept stable, even very concerted efforts by Russia's global competitors could have less impact on the Russian economy. As usual in the world of oil politics, Russia could only maintain this shield with the willing participation of other Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) members, and at some point, it is likely that interests would diverge. But Russia could lessen reactions to its geopolitical moves via shrewd manoeuvring in the region, at least for a time.

Even with manipulation of commodity markets as a prophylactic against competition or sanctions, Russia would still need to reform its internal approach to economic relations or else the inevitable would be delayed, not denied. Russia's pursuit of political goals at the expense of economic ones has created a fragile economic edifice, a crony structure that Russia's political institutions explicitly support. As a result, Russia remains a comparatively weak economic power, one without the depth to sustain political moves which could be (at heart) inimical to its economic interests. The irony of this paradoxical situation is that, in order to successfully subordinate economic interests to political ones, Russia would need to be working from a position of economic strength. And the only way in which this could be attained would be for Russia to abandon its subordination of economic interests and instead pursue much more concerted efforts in pursuit of freer trade. Unshackling trade and allowing it to flow naturally will mean more Russian interest in the MENA region, as well as globally. Unfortunately, without an upgrade of internal institutions related to trade and investment, both Russia and many MENA countries will face a tough road in expanding economic cooperation in general but especially between each other.

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The objectives of the network are to foster influential quality analysis and reflection on Euro-Mediterranean politics and policies; to serve as a platform for dialogue between the members of the network and key stakeholders to discuss the key trends and challenges on the region's agenda; to increase the impact of think tanks and research institutes and to actively contribute to policy-making through dissemination of research outputs of the network to experts and national, European and international institutions linked to Euro-Mediterranean relations.

The EuroMeSCo work plan includes a research programme with five publication lines (Joint Policy Studies, Papers, Briefs, Spot-Ons and reports), as well as numerous activities, including annual conferences, seminars, workshops, presentations, formal and informal meetings with policy makers on the key political and security dynamics. It also includes communication and dissemination related activities (website, newsletter and targeted institutional dissemination) to raise awareness and promote the work of the network and to stimulate debate on Euro-Mediterranean affairs.

IEMed.

The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), founded in 1989, is a consortium comprising the Catalan Government, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation and Barcelona City Council. It incorporates civil society through its Board of Trustees and its Advisory Council formed by Mediterranean universities, companies, organisations and personalities of renowned prestige.

In accordance with the principles of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership's Barcelona Process, and today with the objectives of the Union for the Mediterranean the aim of the IEMed is to foster actions and projects which contribute to mutual understanding, Exchange and cooperation between the different Mediterranean countries, societies and cultures as well as to promote the progressive construction of a space of peace and stability, shared prosperity and dialogue between cultures and civilisations in the Mediterranean.

Adopting a clear role as a think tank specialised in Mediterranean relations based on a multidisciplinary and networking approach, the IEMed encourages analysis, understanding and cooperation through the organisation of seminars, research projects, debates, conferences and publications, in addition to a broad cultural programme.

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