Research Paper

Nikolay Kozhanov
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Russian Policy Across the Middle East
Motivations and Methods

CHATHAM HOUSE
The Royal Institute of International Affairs

Summary

- Recurring confrontations with the West are one of the main factors compelling Russia to intensify its activities in the Middle East.
- Tactical and more targeted contacts with the region have also been determined by President Vladimir Putin's diplomatic strategy, his perception of the Arab Spring and the domestic political situation in Russia.
- Russia considers better relations with Middle Eastern countries a means to avoid international isolation, to compensate for the negative effects of international sanctions and to put additional pressure on the West.
- The decision to increase Russia's presence in the Middle East was also determined by economic drivers. The region occupies a special role in Russia's strategy for strengthening its producers' presence in the international oil and gas markets.
- Although Russia's presence in the Middle East may periodically be considered a challenge to US and EU interests, on a limited number of issues their interests coincide and present opportunities for cooperation between Russia and the West.

Introduction

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian policy towards the Middle East has been marked by inconsistency and unexpected U-turns. This has made it hard for Western policymakers to understand whether Russia's presence in the Middle East represents a source of cooperation or of future conflict between Moscow and the West.

On the one hand, Russia's stance on Syria, its refusal to recognize the threat posed in the past by Iran's nuclear and missile programmes, and its frequent attempts to penetrate and, in some cases, to dominate the energy and arms markets of Middle Eastern countries have raised concerns among Western powers. On the other hand, over the same period, Russia's initial de facto support of Western involvement in the Libyan conflict in 2010–11, its cooperation to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue in 2012–15, its initiatives on conflict resolution in Yemen in 2011–12, and its refusal to export S-300 missile systems to Syria in 2013–14 offered hope that Moscow could play a positive role in the region.

The nature of Russia's interaction with the Middle East has shifted since 2012. After the re-election of Vladimir Putin for a third term in 2012, Moscow substantially increased its presence in the region. It became more deeply involved when, on 30 September 2015, Russia launched airstrikes against groups opposing the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. This set a new precedent. Before September 2015, Russia had tried to avoid any fully fledged involvement in military conflicts in the region. This was also the first time Russia focused on air power instead of ground forces – an approach often used by the US.

Under these circumstances, the current turmoil in the Middle East, which poses a political and security challenge to the EU and the US, makes it crucial to ascertain whether Russia could be a reliable partner to the West in its attempts to stabilize the region. Understanding the Kremlin's intentions is also relevant in light of Russia's increased presence in the Middle East as well as the existing tensions between Moscow and the West. In this context, this research paper addresses the following questions:

- What influence did Putin's re-election in 2012 have on Russian policy in the Middle East?
- How extensive are the changes in Russia's approach towards the region?
- To what extent were these changes brought about by the crisis in Russia's relations with the West?
- What are Russia's economic, political and security interests in the Middle East?
- Do Russian activities in the Middle East represent a challenge to the West?
- What are the means and limits of Russian influence in the region?

Russia's pivot to the Middle East after 2012

Starting in 2012, there has been a level of Russian diplomatic activity in the Middle East unprecedented since the fall of the Soviet Union. Moscow has attempted to cultivate deeper involvement in regional issues and to establish contacts with forces in the Middle East that it considers legitimate, as opposed to separatist or rebel groups. Before 2012, researchers argued that 'Russia's policies on the Middle East could be divided into two components: Iran and the rest of the region';[1] its relations with the region are now more complex.

Russia's historical presence in the Middle East

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, authorities had created a solid foundation for the development of fruitful cooperation with the Arab world and Iran. After 1991, however, Russia largely neglected the potential to develop these ties. Political and economic contacts were mostly curtailed, if not cut. This situation was determined by a mixture of material and ideological reasons. The domestic economic and political turmoil of the 1990s limited Russia's export capacities and diverted the attention of the authorities from foreign to domestic policy issues. The loss of Ukrainian ports – the main trade gateways of the Soviet Union to the Mediterranean – also hurt business contacts with the Middle East. By the mid-1990s, Arab countries made up just 1 per cent of Russia's annual trade.[2]

In addition, at that time, the active development of relations with Middle Eastern countries was against the ideology of the new Russian elite, which saw the country as a part of the Western world and was reluctant to develop those vectors of diplomacy that were either non-Western or actively developed under the Soviet regime. As a result, Russia did not pay much attention to the Middle East unless its ties there helped to develop relations with the West. The only exception was Israel, with which relations improved considerably during the 1990s, mainly due to the fact that the country was considered a Western island in the Middle East.

Consequently, Russia's relations with the US became the predominant factor determining the dynamics of Russia's dealings with Middle Eastern powers, which is best illustrated by the development of the Russia–Iran dialogue. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent improvement of US–Russia relations hampered the interaction between Russia and Iran. Their contacts intensified again after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which both Russia and Iran opposed. The US–Russia reset of 2009 affected the Russia–Iran relationship once again, compelling Russia to adopt a harsher stance on Iran and its nuclear programme.

The focus on the US caused Russia to view its stance on the Middle East as a tool that could be used in its policy towards Washington, through the intensification or cooling of relations as required. The US factor determined Russia's stance on the Libyan crisis in 2011, which Moscow decided to use as a bargaining chip to improve relations with the US. This was demonstrated in March 2011, when Russia did not veto the UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which formed the basis for US

[1] Oliker, O., Crane, K., Schwartz, L. H. and Yusupov, C. (2009), *Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications*, RAND Report, Santa Monica: RAND, P. 113.
[2] Ibid.

and EU intervention in the Libyan conflict. As well as imposing its own sanctions on Libya, Russia was the first country to stop arms exports to the Gaddafi regime.[3] However, Russian diplomats deny any responsibility for the fall of the Libyan regime by arguing that it was the US, the EU and their allies that illegally abused Resolution 1973 to topple Gaddafi.[4] That said, it is unlikely that Russia did not understand the scale of the potential implications of adopting the resolution.

Although Russia appeared to row back its efforts in the Middle East after the fall of the Soviet Union, it did make several attempts to establish closer relations with certain Middle Eastern countries between 1991 and 2012. However, in each case it was unable to build on initial success. The last attempt to improve relations was made in the mid-2000s. In 2003, Putin stated that Russia intended to cooperate more closely with the Islamic world.[5] Later, he declared that the Arab countries were one of the main vectors of Russian diplomacy.[6] In 2003–08, Putin supported this statement by official visits to Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Iran and some GCC countries. It was important that his administration concentrated not only on the re-establishment of contacts with the partners of the Soviet Union, but also to broaden the ties of Moscow with the region through active dialogue. Thus, in 2007, Putin visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE.[7] However, during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency (2008–12), Russia deprioritized its relations with the Middle East and only rebooted its efforts after 2012.

Russia's changing presence in the Middle East after 2012

Since 2012, Russia has not only ceased to see the Middle East as a region of secondary importance, but also stopped treating it as merely a playground for goading the West. Instead, it has developed its interests in the region as a goal in itself and its diplomacy has undergone a serious transformation that can be divided into three periods: 2012 to late 2013; late 2013 to 2015; and 2016 to the present.

From 2012 to late 2013

This two-year period demonstrated Russia's cautious return to the Middle East. Russia tested the ground for deeper involvement in regional affairs and expansion of ties with regional powers. Although this period was characterized by increased intensity in diplomatic contacts with regional players, Russia tried to abstain from direct involvement in the domestic affairs of the region, trying instead to portray itself as a neutral power in ongoing conflicts. This was enough to bring Russia–Iran relations to a new level and to create the foundation for improved political dialogue with Egypt.

[3] Voice of America (2011), 'Medvedev Podpisal Ukaz o Sanktsiyah protiv Livii' [Medvedev signs a Decree on Sanctions against Libya], 12 August 2011, http://www.golos-ameriki.ru/content/russia-lybia-medvedev-sanctions-2011-08-12-127578108/241893.html (accessed 5 Oct. 2013); *People's Daily* (2011), 'Rossiya Sklonyaetsya k Uzhestocheniyu Sanktsiy protiv Livii' [Russia Likely to Tighten Sanctions against Libya], 15 August 2011, http://russian.people.com.cn/31519/7568885.html (accessed 5 Oct. 2013); Nakanune (2013), 'Bastrykina Poprosili Proverit Deyatelnost Medvedeva na Fakt Izmeny' [Bastrykin Asked to Check Medvedev's Activity on Regime Change], 4 February 2013, http://www.nakanune.ru/news/2013/2/4/22299398/ (accessed 5 Oct. 2013).

[4] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2015), 'Vystupleniye i Otvety na Voprosy Studentov i Slushateley Diplomaticheskoy Akademii MID Rossii Ministra Inostrannikh Del Rossii S.V.Lavrova, 27 Fevralya 2015 goda' [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Speech and Q&A session with Students of the MFA Diplomatic Academy, 27 February 2015], http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/971662 (accessed 13 Jul. 2015).

[5] RBC (2003), 'V. Putin: Rossiya Khochet Vstupit v Organizatsiyu Islamskaya Conferentsiya' [Putin: Russia Wants to Join the Organization of Islamic Conference], *RBC*, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/05/08/2003/5703b5889a7947783a5a4a0d 5 Aug. 2003 (accessed 10 Dec. 2017).

[6] Putin, V. (2003), 'Interviyu Telekanalu Al-Jazeera' [Interview to Al Jazeera TV Channel], *Kremlin.Ru*, 16 Oct. 2003, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22162 (accessed 10 Dec. 2017).

[7] Potcerob, A. (2010), 'K Voprosu Obespecheniya Bezopasnosti v Zone Persidskogo Zaliva' [Ensuring Security in the Area of the Persian Gulf], http://www.iimes.ru/?p=11606 (accessed 19 Jan. 2018).

Although initially Russia concentrated on ramping up dialogue with those countries with which it had an established relationship (such as Iran, Syria, Egypt and Israel), it soon broadened its outreach to countries with which it had previously encountered difficulties developing a constructive dialogue. As an example, in November 2013, Russia appointed a new ambassador to Qatar despite not having received an official explanation for a prior diplomatic incident – a dispute over a diplomatic bag at Doha airport in 2011 – that had forced Moscow to withdraw its previous ambassador. Russia's decision to move on and not retaliate in any way gave a boost to Russia–Qatar relations. Qatar has since become one of the largest foreign investors in the Russian economy.

During the 2012–13 period, the Russian authorities welcomed talks with all regional players and tried to engage Middle Eastern powers in discussions on a wide range of issues (a strategy the Kremlin continues to pursue today). Thus, Moscow continued working with the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf within the framework of the Russia–GCC Strategic Dialogue, a series of ministerial meetings aimed at sustaining an all-encompassing discussion with the Gulf monarchies launched by Moscow in November 2011.[8] In February 2013, the government also launched the Arab–Russian Cooperation Forum, in which Russian officials and high-ranking representatives of Arab countries could discuss existing political and economic problems.[9] Special attention was paid to the development of contacts with regional organizations such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the League of Arab States (LAS).

Russia had several motivations. First, its intense contacts with the more dominant countries of the Middle East were a part of its strategy to avoid complete international isolation caused by growing tensions with the West. For instance, Moscow ensured Israel's neutral position on the Russian–Ukrainian confrontation through active dialogue with Tel Aviv and promises to guarantee that the issue of the Iranian nuclear programme would be settled in such a way as to eliminate any security threats to Israel.[10]

Second, the Kremlin was concerned by the attempts of some forces in the Middle East to paint Russia as an enemy of Islam and to provoke conservative political groups within the OIC and LAS countries to support radical Islamists in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The Russian leadership tried to engage with the Middle Eastern countries on topics of common interest in order to demonstrate to them that Russia is not an enemy of the Muslim world. Thus, Moscow continued to express its support for the idea of a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestine conflict and emphasized its interest in the peaceful settlement of all regional hostilities.

Third, through its Middle East policy Russia also sought to demonstrate to the US and the EU that it plays a crucial role in the settlement of existing international issues. Conflicts in the Middle East provided opportunities for Russia to prove this. Since 2012, Russia has actively worked to secure an effective dialogue between Iran and the West on the nuclear issue. This has, to an extent, persuaded the West of Russia's importance in the region. Moscow's role in the multilateral negotiations on the

[8] Aluwaisheg, A. (2014), 'GCC-Russia dialogue and the lost opportunities', The Arab News, 24 February 2014, http://www.arabnews.com/news/530266 (accessed 29 Jun. 2015).
[9] Russian-Arab Business Council, 'Vtoroye Zasedaniye Rossiysko-Arabskogo Foruma Sotrudnichestva' [The Second Meeting of the Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum], 3 December 2014, http://www.russarabbc.ru/about/news/index.php?ELEMENT_ID=34569 (accessed 13 Jul. 2015).
[10] RIA Novosti (2015), 'Lavrov: Yadernaya Programma Irana Ne Dolzhna Predstavlyat Ugrozy Regionu' [Lavrov: Iran's Nuclear Programme Should Not Present a Threat to the Region], 26 January 2015, http://ria.ru/world/20150126/1044312782.html (accessed 13 Jul. 2015).

Iranian nuclear issue is seen by some US analysts as one of the main factors that guaranteed the success of the process.[11] In July 2015, President Barack Obama even telephoned Putin to thank him for Russia's role in reaching the P5+1 agreement with Iran – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).[12] The suggestion by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Ryabkov, in March 2014, in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, that Russia could reconsider its participation in the P5+1 on Iran was sufficient to concern the US about this possibility for the rest of the year.[13]

From late 2013 to 2015

This period was marked by growing Russian involvement in the domestic affairs of the Middle East that went beyond diplomatic moves and culminated in the military intervention in Syria that started in September 2015. However, Russian policy in the Middle East was still largely reactive; in 2014–15, Russia still saw its main moves in the Middle East as a response to emerging challenges rather than as an attempt to shape the development of events in the region.

Initially, the growing confrontation with the West and Putin's plans to re-establish Russia as an influential world power were the key drivers behind the decision to support the Assad regime in its struggle. Russia saw itself as a defensive power and wanted to demonstrate to the US that it could stir up trouble if its opinion was not taken into account. Consequently, in late 2013, Russia managed to do what was previously believed to be impossible: it stopped what had appeared to be an inevitable military operation by the West against the Syrian regime. In August 2013, international media reported the use of a chemical weapon in a Damascus neighbourhood.[14] Neither side of the conflict took responsibility for this action. The Western powers and their Middle Eastern partners accused the Assad regime. Subsequently, they tried to use their suspicions as a pretext for military intervention in the conflict. However, the reluctance of the Obama administration and the failure of the British government to get the approval of parliament to participate in the intervention gave Russia the necessary time to offer its own solution.

This was the first time during the Syrian conflict that Russia demonstrated that it had the leverage to shape the development of the situation to suit its own needs. Russia's tough stance also had a positive influence on its relations in the Middle East. In the eyes of those regional states with a positive or neutral attitude to Russia, it proved that Moscow was capable of protecting its partners. It thus made them once again interested in Russia as a political counterbalance to the US, which was seen as an unreliable partner under Obama due to his decision to limit the US involvement in the Middle East in general and the Syrian civil war in particular. Russia's regional rivals, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, were in turn compelled to recognize it as an important player in the Middle East.

However, as the Syrian conflict continued, Russia started to consider deeper involvement. This was largely related to its growing concerns over the participation of Russian-speaking fighters on the

[11] Maloney, S. (2014), 'Three Reasons Why Russia Won't Wreck the Iran Nuclear Negotiations', *Markaz Blog*, Brookings Institution, 25 March 2014, http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2014/03/22-russia-us-tension-sabotage-iran-nuclear-deal (accessed 18 Jun. 2016); Interviews with US and UK diplomats and experts on Iran in London, June–August 2015, and Washington DC, January 2016.
[12] NBC News (2015), 'Obama Thanks Putin for Russia's Role in Iran Nuclear Deal', 16 July 2015, http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/iran-nuclear-talks/obama-thanks-putin-russias-role-iran-nuclear-deal-n392976 (accessed 18 Jun. 2016).
[13] Interview with a US State Department official, Washington DC, 31 October 2014.
[14] Al Arabiya (2013), 'Syrian Opposition: 1300 Killed in Chemical Attack on Ghouta Region', 21 August 2013, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/08/21/Syrian-activists-at-least-500-killed-in-chemical-attack-on-Eastern-Ghouta.html (accessed 2 Jan. 2018).

side of anti-Assad forces. The number of jihadists from Russia and other post-Soviet states joining the conflict in Syria and Iraq started growing from November 2013. Consequently, Russia's decision to send troops to Syria was determined not only by its intentions to thwart Western efforts to displace Assad but also by concerns that the fall of his regime could lead to the spread of instability and radical Islamism to the post-Soviet space.[15] Thus Moscow's deployment of military forces in Syria in late 2015 was the result of a choice between a 'bad' and a 'very bad' scenario: a costly military operation to support Assad, or doing nothing as his power – and Russian influence – crumbled. Russia's leadership was motivated by the events in Libya and Iraq, where – in their view – nothing good came of the complete destruction of the old regimes.[16]

From 2016 until now

Russia's military involvement in Syria made it overconfident in its ability to affect the behaviour of Western and regional powers in the Middle East and beyond. For instance, it recognizes that the Syrian conflict cannot be solved without negotiations and that no one country is currently strong enough to resolve it by force. Yet, Moscow believes that, with its allies on the ground, it will be able to force the international community to accept its vision for a diplomatic solution. This is why Russia is resolute in its continuing fight against the Syrian opposition with the objective of weakening Assad's adversaries on the battlefield. At the same time, the Kremlin is periodically asking the opposition's patrons in the Middle East and in the West to choose between peace on Russia's terms or further military onslaught. It is notable that Russia did not hesitate to intensify the bombings of besieged Aleppo in September and October 2016 when the implementation of the previous US–Russia ceasefire agreement failed. Russia believed that it needed to intensify its military efforts on the ground in order to make the US more inclined to accept Moscow's view of the situation.

Russia's military tactics were driven by the idea that saving the Assad regime from complete collapse was the only way to prevent Syria from going the way of Libya and Iraq. At least during the initial stage of the Russian military presence in Syria, Russia's air force did not primarily target Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Instead, it concentrated its firepower against the opposition groups that represented the greatest threat to the regime as Russia's military intervention was largely about keeping Assad in power and making the West look flat-footed.

The fall of Aleppo in December 2016 bolstered Russia's confidence in its ability to shape the development of events in the region. As a result, Russian policy in the Middle East has undergone another transformation: since 2016 it became more proactive rather than reactive. More recently, the Kremlin has tried its hand at engineering events. Its first major test has been in Libya where Moscow provided political support and military assistance to General Khalifa Haftar, one of the country's most influential warlords. The Kremlin helped him to sabotage the implementation of the UN-led Libyan agreement of 2015, aimed at launching a reconciliation process. By 2018, Haftar controlled the Eastern part of Libya and his fight against the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) has been relatively successful. Moscow's support of Haftar, combined with its

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[15] Interviews with Russian officials and decision-makers in Moscow, January and April 2016.
[16] RBC (2016), 'Putin Nazval Obamu "Poryadochnym Chelovekom" za Priznaniye Oshibok v Livii' ['Putin Called Obama an 'Honest Man' for the Recognition of the [US] Mistakes in Libya'], 14 April 2016, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/14/04/2016/570f957c9a79476cf67e7b3c (accessed 3 Jan. 2018)

activities in Syria, clearly demonstrates Russia's readiness to affect the domestic political dynamics in Middle Eastern countries, particularly those politically and geographically closer to the post-Soviet space.

Drivers of change

Why was 2012 a turning point?

Officially, the increased frequency of Russian contacts with the Middle East since 2012 is connected to the overall changes in diplomacy caused by disputes with the US and the EU, particularly regarding activity in Syria and Ukraine. As a result of these tensions and in an effort to maintain its international significance, Russia tried to shift its focus from the West to non-European countries, including those in the Middle East. Addressing Russia's Federal Assembly on 4 December 2014, Putin declared cooperation with the Middle East countries as one of the priorities of Russia's diplomacy. On 27 February 2015, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov argued that 'the turn to Asia' (which in Russia traditionally includes the Middle East) reflects longstanding national interests in the 21st century.[17]

In reality, the reasoning is more complicated. Russia's policy towards the Middle East and Asia, although ostensibly aimed at improving relations with these countries, aims to create leverage that can affect the behaviour of the US and EU, and mitigate the negative effects of ongoing confrontation between Moscow and the West on Russia's economy, security and international relations. There are considerable differences between the current situation and previous Russian attempts to build close relations with the Middle East. This difference is largely determined by the scale and intensity of Russia's disagreements with the EU and US, which is unprecedented since the fall of the Soviet Union.[18]

Another factor that determined the depth of the transformation of Russian policy in the Middle East was the personality of the Russian president. The current leadership believes that Russia, as a country that lies between Europe and Asia, should diversify its political and economic diplomacy that, in their mind, had been excessively concentrated on the West since 1991. This inevitably drags the Middle East into Russia's sphere of interests. Putin's vision contrasts with that of Boris Yeltsin (1991–99) and Dmitry Medvedev (2008–12), both of whom considered the region to be of secondary importance. This difference in view was clearly demonstrated by the controversy over the Libyan crisis of 2011: while Putin labelled the US and EU as 'new crusaders', Medvedev expressed his satisfaction at the capture of Libya's leader.[19] These differing reactions nearly led to a split in the Putin–Medvedev partnership. It was therefore no surprise that, immediately after his return to the

[17] Official Website of the President of Russia (2014), 'Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly', 4 December 2014, http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/23341 (accessed 16 Mar. 2015); Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2015), 'Vystupleniye i Otvety na Voprosy Studentov i Slushateley Diplomaticheskoy Akademii MID Rossii Ministra Inostrannikh Del Rossii S.V.Lavrova' [Sergey Lavrov's Speech and Answers to the Questions of the Students of the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Federation], 27 February 2015, http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/971662 (accessed 19 Jan. 2018).
[18] Connolly, R. (2015), *Troubled Times: Stagnation, Sanctions and the Prospects for Economic Reform in Russia*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/troubled-times-stagnation-sanctions-and-prospects-economic-reform-russia (accessed 15 Dec. 2017).
[19] Argumentyi Fakty [Arguments and Facts] (2011), 'Putin: Yeta Operatsiya – Bessovestniy Krestoviy Pokhod' [Putin: This Operation is an Unscrupulous Crusade], 21 March 2011, http://www.aif.ru/society/24194 (accessed 13 Jul. 2015).

presidency in 2012, Putin began restoring relations with the Middle East, which had been neglected and damaged under Medvedev. Only two months after his re-election as president, Putin met with his Iranian counterpart, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and stated his interest in developing relations with Iran, calling the country a 'traditional partner'.[20]

The Putin of 2012 was also different from the Putin of 2000 and 2004; recently he has been more authoritarian, more decisive, more anti-Western and extremely disappointed by the failure of the 'reset' in US–Russia relations. At least initially, the support provided to the Assad regime was, in fact, a form of revenge for Russia's political and economic losses in Libya and Iraq as a result of the fall of Moscow-friendly regimes due to Western pressure. Russia's domestic political climate also favoured changes in the country's Middle East policy. Public discontent with Medvedev's government and the controversy over Putin's re-election in 2012 compelled the leadership to shore up its domestic support. From 2012, official propaganda started to appeal to the nationalistic sentiments of the population more aggressively. This proved successful. A large proportion of the population wished to see Medvedev's successor actively protecting their country's perceived national interests and cementing relations with non-Western powers.[21] Putin gave them what they wanted. Support for Assad, closer relations with Iran and rapprochement with Egypt were supposed to symbolize a return to the traditional state of affairs for those missing the supposed 'imperial' glory of the Soviet Union.

At the same time, the Russian media periodically explained international realities through the prism of the Middle East. Thus, during the military actions in Donbas in 2014–15, Russian propaganda sought to portray Western military assistance to Ukraine as ineffective by referring to their failures in Iraq. In particular, the propaganda pointed out that US arms and instructors did not help the Iraqi army to stand up to ISIS.[22]

When talking about Middle Eastern issues to a domestic audience, Russian politicians and the media make bold and emotional statements with only rare attempts at restraint. That is largely determined by a need to keep the public in a certain political frame of mind: constantly oriented to a set of basic ideas such as patriotism, anti-Americanism and the vision of Russia as a fortress besieged by aggressive enemies. For instance, in an interview with the Russian media on 22 April 2015, Lavrov openly accused the US of being responsible for the creation of Al-Qaeda and ISIS by supporting the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan in the 1980s and invading Iraq in the 2000s.[23] Some pro-government analysts and journalists go even further. They exploit the traditional belief of the Russian population in conspiracy theories by spreading myths about Washington's deliberate

[20] Official website of the President of Russia (2012), 'Vstrecha s Prezidentom Irana Makhmudom Akhmadinezhadom' [Meeting with Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad], 7 June 2012, http://www.kremlin.ru/news/15590 (accessed 17 Feb. 2015).
[21] Interviews with experts on Russian domestic policy in St Petersburg, Moscow, London and Washington DC, in November 2014, and between January–July 2015.
[22] For more details see Kozhanov, N. (2015), 'Chaos in the Arab World Suits Russia's Domestic Propaganda', *The World Today*, July 2015, Vol. 71, Number 4.
[23] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2015), 'Intervyu Ministra Inostrannikh Del Rossiyskoy Federatcii S. V. Lavrova v Pryamom Efire Radiostantsiy "Sputnik", "Ekho Moskvy", "Govorit Moskva"' [Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Live Interview with Sputnik, Ekho Moskvy and Govorit Moskva Radio Stations], 22 April 2015, http://archive.mid.ru//brp_4.nsf/0/A5D21E41F0E773EF43257E2F005A8B5A (accessed 28 Mar. 2016).

destabilization of the Middle East after 9/11 and the absence of a real US interest in stopping the bloodshed in Syria and Iraq.[24]

Unfortunately, when fallacies are constantly repeated, particularly in government propaganda, they begin to ring true. The Kremlin's messaging has proven very successful. However, the government may come to regret this if its official discourse of Middle Eastern events creates unrealistic expectations. Russian officials have already started to believe in some of their own propaganda, which over-simplifies situations and leads to a misperception. For example, for a long time it was a prevalent view among them that all Syrian rebels using Islam to mobilize people were religious extremists (only in September 2015 did the authorities start to differentiate between moderate Islamists and radicals), and that ISIS is behind all terrorist activity in Russia or the post-Soviet space.

From this perspective, Moscow's own propaganda is a factor behind Russia's greater involvement in the Middle East. The authorities continue to believe that there was no alternative to military deployment in Syria. They are also confident that Russia can affect the development of events in the region and even challenge Western plans there. Thus, when presenting Obama's failure to organize a military operation against Assad in 2013 as the result of Russian diplomatic efforts rather than of US indecisiveness, the authorities began to imagine that they could offset any US and EU plans in the Middle East.[25]

Finally, Putin's intention to strengthen Russian relations with Middle Eastern countries was fortified by the results of the Arab Spring. Initially, Russia ignored the uprisings, considering them minor turmoil unlikely to bring structural change. Even the fall of the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak did not make the Russian authorities reconsider the situation. Russia 'woke up' only after the death of Gaddafi in October 2011. Trying to explain why Middle Eastern political systems that had seemed stable for decades were toppled by a chain of uprisings no one had predicted, the Kremlin turned to its traditional narrative of 'colour revolutions'. This theory accuses the West of attempting to destabilize the international system through manufactured revolutions and to impose its 'improper' democratic values on other countries. As it considered the Arab Spring, at least partially, a US and EU plot, the Russian government felt it had no choice but to become more deeply involved in the situation on the ground in order to balance the political situation and to prevent repercussions in Eurasia.

Beyond the conflict with the West

An additional factor affecting Moscow's strategic thinking towards the Middle East is the direct impact the Arab Spring has had on Russian interests.

In 2012, Russia realized that it was very close to losing its political and economic presence in the Middle East both due to the local uprisings and its treatment of the region as an area of secondary importance for geostrategic goals. During the Arab Spring, Russia sustained heavy economic losses,

[24] Evstratov, A. (2012), 'Soyuz SShA i Al-Kayedy Prevrashchayet Siriyu vo Vtoroy Afganistan' [USA and Al-Qaeda Are Turning Syria Into Another Afghanistan], Iran.RU, 28 September 2012, http://www.iran.ru/news/analytics/83243/Soyuz_SShA_i_Al_Kaidy_prevrashchaet_Siriyu_vo_vtoroy_Afganistan (accessed 28 Mar. 2016).
[25] Interviews with US experts on Russia in San Francisco and Washington DC, 22–28 January 2016.

the total cost of which is still to be determined. For example, the arms exporter Rosoboronexport estimates its financial losses in Libya after the fall of Gaddafi to be at least $4 billion.[26] The railway corporation RZD also lost around $2.2 billion there.[27] Given that RZD planned to work with Gaddafi's government for many decades to come, the amount of lost potential profit is even higher. Further economic opportunities were lost in the energy sector. In 2008, Russia forgave $4.5 billion of Libya's debt to the Soviet Union 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, either were involved or planned to invest in Libya's energy sector.[28]

Russian investments in Syria were also endangered by the civil war. In 2005, Russia agreed to restructure the Syrian government's debt to the Soviet Union ($14 billion), writing off about three-quarters (or half, according to some sources) of the sum in exchange for new contracts for Russian businesses.[29] This led to a substantial increase in Russian investments in the country (mostly in energy and infrastructure projects), estimated at $20 billion by 2008.[30] Sales of military equipment to Syria were significant; in 2006, the two governments signed military contracts worth $4 billion, and by 2010 this sum had reportedly increased to nearly $20 billion.[31] Although Libya and Syria represented the two most problematic cases for Russia, the outbreak of the Arab Spring undermined its economic position across the whole region. For example, political turmoil harmed Russian grain exporters that had considered the Middle East to be the main market for their products.[32]

Political losses from the Arab Spring were also remarkable. First, the fall of Gaddafi and the potential fall of Assad fundamentally questioned the future of Russian relations with Libya and Syria, and threatened to repeat the Russian experience in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.[33] Second, Russia's reaction to the Arab Spring hampered the development of relations with a number of Middle Eastern countries, such as the members of the GCC, which had previously expressed an interest in establishing closer political and economic ties with Moscow. Russian support for Assad put them off closer relations with Moscow. It took about two years after 2011 before effective discussions with Saudi Arabia and Qatar on bilateral, regional and international issues could resume. Third, Moscow's reaction to the Arab Spring presented a serious threat to the ongoing dialogue between Russian authorities and Muslim religious authorities in the Middle East. Russian support for Assad caused controversy and often a harsh reaction among the Sunni Muslim communities in the region. Maintaining friendly contacts with leaders of the Muslim religious communities in the Middle East had been seen by Moscow as one of the factors directly influencing

[26] Voznesenskiy, S. (2011), 'Poteri Rossii iz-za Revolutcii v Livii' [Russian Losses Caused by the revolution in Libya], *Voyennoye Obozreniye*, 27 June 2011, https://topwar.ru/5312-poteri-rossii-iz-za-revolyucii-v-livii.html (accessed 20 Dec. 2017).
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Evseev, V. (2008), 'Nekotoryie Aspekty Rossiysko-Siriyskogo Sotrudnichestva' [Some Aspects of Russian–Syrian Cooperation], Institut Blizhnego Vostoka, 4 March 2008, http://www.iimes.ru/?p=6879 (accessed 20 Dec. 2017).
[30] Ibid; Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation (2008), 'Torgovo-ekonomicheskiye Otnosheniya Rossiyskoy Federatscii i Siriyskoy Arabskoy Respubliki' [Trade and economic Relations Between Russian Federation and Syrian Arab Republic], 21 November 2008, http://economy.gov.ru/minec/press/news/doc1227277900147 (accessed 31 May 2013).
[31] Sarabyev, A. (2011), 'Rossiysko-Siriyskoye "nastoyaschee-budushchee": voenno-morskoy aspekt' [Russia and Syria, Present and Future: The Naval-Military Aspect], Russian Council on International Relations, 10 October 2011, http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=35#top (accessed 31 May 2013).
[32] Kats, E. (2011), 'Arabskiy Shchet' [The Arab Bill], *Kompaniya*, no. 33, http://ko.ru/articles/23468 (accessed 4 Oct. 2013).
[33] Shumilin, A. et al. (2013), *Rossiya i "Novye Elity" Stran "Arabskoy Vesny"* [Russia and the 'New Elites' of the 'Arab Spring'], Russian Council on International Relations, 19 February 2013, http://russiancouncil.ru/activity/workingpapers/rossiya-i-novye-elity-stran-arabskoy-vesny-vozmozhnosti-i-pe/ (accessed 15 Dec. 2017).

Russia's political stability. According to Kremlin strategists, being seen as opposing these authorities could lead to an increase in external encouragement of and financial assistance to radical Islamists in the south of Russia.[34]

These developments clearly demonstrated that events in the Middle East are important for Russia in their own right, and that it was time to stop using relations with the region merely as a bargaining chip in relations with the West. This understanding was confirmed in 2011 when Russia did not veto UN Security Council resolution 1973, which paved the way for the US and EU intervention in Libya. In the eyes of the pro-Western members of Russia's ruling elite, this step was worth taking: at that time, Moscow still hoped to reset relations with Washington, and military contracts with France also played a role. However, there were few direct benefits for Russia. Medvedev's decisions on Libya probably determined the outcome for Gaddafi. Consequently, Russia's image in the Middle East suffered heavy losses: Moscow was believed to have betrayed Gaddafi.[35] This 'treachery' was also considered a sign of Russian weakness. This in turn assured Russia's opponents in the region that the country could be side-lined on other issues. To avoid this it became imperative for the Kremlin to reconfigure its approach to the Middle East in a way that protects Russian economic interests and domestic security.

Russian security interests

Russian involvement in the Middle East is partly determined by the need to reduce potential security threats emerging near the borders of the post-Soviet space. This became crucial after the beginning of the Ukraine-related confrontation with the West. Tensions with the EU and US over Ukraine demand Russia's full attention and resources. As a result, it has become important not to be distracted by other external challenges. From the very beginning of the Euromaidan protests in late 2013, Russian officials were concerned that they would not be able to simultaneously cope with the crisis in Ukraine and the challenge posed by jihadists from Russia and Eurasia fighting in Syria and Iraq.

The authorities were concerned about Russian-speaking fighters involved on the side of the Syrian opposition and Islamist forces. According to the Russian security services, by early 2013, there were approximately 250 individuals suspected of fighting for the Syrian opposition and Islamist forces. By 2015, the number had grown to 2,000 (according to Russian independent experts, about 20 per cent of all foreigners fighting in Syria).[36] This number included about 1,800 natives of the North Caucasus (among which there were 1,500 Chechens and 200 Dagestanis).[37] By the beginning of

[34] Interviews with Russian Middle East experts in Moscow and St Petersburg. Russia, in January and December 2015.
[35] VoA *(2011)*, 'Medvedev Podpisal Ukaz o Sanktsiyah protiv Livii', 12 August 2011, http://www.golos-ameriki.ru/content/russia-lybia-medvedev-sanctions-2011-08-12-127578108/241893.html (accessed 5 Oct. 2013); *People's Daily (2011)*, 'Rossiya Sklonyaetsya k Uzhestocheniyu Sanktsiy protiv Livii', *People's Daily*, 15 August 2011, http://russian.people.com.cn/31519/7568885.html (accessed 5 Oct. 2013); *Nakanune (2013)*, 'Bastrykina Poprosili Proverit Deyatelnost Medvedeva na Fakt Izmeny', 4 February 2013 http://www.nakanune.ru/news/2013/2/4/22299398/ (accessed 5 Oct. 2013).
[36] Matlack, C. (2015), 'Why the Jihadi Threat to Russia is Getting Worse', Bloomberg, 30 March 2015, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-30/why-the-jihadi-threat-to-russia-is-getting-worse (accessed 17 Jun. 2016); Shcheglovin, Y. (2014), 'Uchastiye Vykhodtsev iz Chechni v Siriyskom Konflikte' [The Participation of Chechens in the Syrian Conflict], Institut Blizhnego Vostoka, 11 March 2014, http://www.iimes.ru/?p=20228 (accessed 13 Jul. 2015).
[37] Ibid.

2016, these figures had grown further still, and the number of Russian-speaking foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq was estimated to be between 3,000 and 5,000.[38]

Not all of the Russian-speaking fighters came directly from Russia. The majority of Chechens arrived from the EU, Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan, where they or their parents had found refuge from persecution by the Russian authorities for their participation in the first (1994–96) and second (1999–2001) Chechen wars. Many Chechen fighters came to Syria and Iraq from the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia (including one of their leaders, Tarkhan Batirashvili, also known as Abu Omar al-Shishani).[39] Other Chechens, however, were already in Syria at the beginning of the war, as they had been accorded refugee status by the Assad regime.

In some cases, Russian-speaking fighters were joined by the descendants of those Chechens and Circassians who fled Russia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to settle in various parts of the Ottoman Empire. According to a high-ranking member of the Chechen government, Yusup Zubayrayev, by the beginning of the civil war in Syria in 2011, there were about 6,000 ethnic Chechens living in the country. Not all of them were eager to join the Syrian opposition; according to Zubayrayev, 500 people enquired with the Russian authorities about repatriation to their historical homeland in 2012.[40] That said, it is not improbable that historical grievances were deep enough to make some join the Syrian insurgents to take revenge on Russia by fighting against its ally Assad.

Russian-speaking fighters were well represented in the al-Qaeda-affiliated group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and ISIS, and they had proved effective on the battlefield. Most experts agree that these fighters did not see these groups' causes in Syria and Iraq as their own. For them, the conflict represented preparation for their return to Russia to start their own battle. Russian policymakers were and still are concerned by the range of nationalities from Russia and the post-Soviet space joining the radical groups.[41] Apart from Chechens, by 2015, the Russian grouping of jihadists included representatives of different minorities from the North Caucasus and the Volga region. There was some evidence of Tatars from the extremist organization Jamaat Bulgar fighting in Syria.[42] This means that the Syrian conflict also affected Islamic radicals in regions closer to Moscow than the North Caucasus. As a result, Syria could become the ground for networking between different extremist groups with origins across the post-Soviet countries. The number of volunteers from Azerbaijan and Central Asian states such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan joining Islamists in Syria and Iraq was also high.[43] By 2015, several hundred individuals from those countries could be found among jihadists in Syria and Iraq.[44] According to the director of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, Erlan Karin, by 2015 there were up to 500 Uzbeks, 360

[38] *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (2016), 'Vykhodtsy s Kavkaza v Ryadakh IG (IGIL)' [Caucasus Natives in ISIS Ranks], 17 June 2016, http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251513/#cont_6 (accessed 17 Jun. 2016).
[39] Shcheglovin, Y. (2014), 'Uchastiye Vykhodtsev iz Chechni v Siriyskom Konflikte' [The Participation of Chechens in the Syrian Conflict].
[40] Kapayeva, A. (2012), 'Zubayrayev: Poryadka 500 Chechentcev iz Sirii Khotyat Vernutsya v Chechnyu' [Zubayrayev: Around 500 Chechens Want to Return to Chechnya from Syria], Kavkazskiy Uzel, 9 August 2012, http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/210970/ (accessed 26 Mar. 2016).
[41] Shcheglovin, Y. (2014) 'Uchastiye Vykhodtcev iz Chechni v Siriyskom Konflikte' [The Participation of Chechens in the Syrian Conflict].
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Shiriyev, Z. (2014), 'Who are Syria's Azerbaijani fighters?', *Today's Zaman*, 15 January 2014, http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist/zaur-shiriyev/who-are-syrias-azerbaijani-fighters-1_336708.html (accessed 26 Jun. 2015); Regnum (2014), 'Uzbekskiy Ekspert: Bolshinstvo Vikhodtsev iz Sredney Azii v Sirii – Byvshiye Trudoviye Migranty' [Uzbekistani Expert: The Majority of Central Asians in Syria Are Former Labour Migrants], 12 December 2014, http://www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1876259.html (accessed 26 Jun. 2015).

Turkmens, 100 Kyrgyz and 190 Tajiks fighting in Syria. He has also noted Kazakhs taking part in the Syrian war on the insurgents' side.[45]

Russian jihadists, previously separated and scattered, increasingly understand themselves as united by the same cause. Moreover, they are establishing ties with international terrorist organizations and becoming part of the global extremist network. Russian experts and officials believed that they would use their connections and battle experience against the authorities upon their return to Russia. By 2013, the leadership of the main North Caucasian radical grouping, Emarat Kavkaz, even began encouraging its members to fight in Syria, considering this useful practice for a future struggle against Moscow.[46] This, in turn, compelled the authorities to react.

The economy matters

By 2017, the Russian economy had sustained heavy losses mainly as a result of the drop in international oil prices. The annexation of Crimea, sanctions and broader structural problems put additional pressure on the state budget. Under these circumstances, reliable sources of income became paramount, which changed the Russian perceptions of business opportunities in the Middle East. As a result, the prioritization of economic benefit has led to a considerable increase in Russian activity in the Middle East and the volume of trade between Russia and the region between 2012 and 2017 (see Appendix, tables 1 and 2).

In the context of the challenges faced by the Russian economy, cooperation with Middle Eastern countries acquired greater importance for several reasons. First, since the early 2000s trade relations have enjoyed an upturn (see Appendix, tables 1 and 2). The fact that the trade balance was and still is in favour of Russia[47] makes the region an appealing market for Russian goods – arms and military equipment, machinery, oil and gas, petrochemical, metallurgical and agricultural products. Items exported by Russian corporations to the region have also diversified, opening up opportunities to involve a wide range of Russian producers in trade with the Middle East. For instance, exports to Iran consist mainly of ferrous metals and metallurgical products, wood, pulp and paper, fuel and energy resources, cereals and fertilizers.[48] In the case of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Russia exports precious metals, metallurgical products, machinery and transport vehicles, whereas Morocco mainly receives oil, petrochemical products, sulphur, coal and chemical products.[49] As such trade with the region is helpful for the implementation of the government's economic diversification strategy. Moreover, in spite of the fact that the share of oil and gas (as opposed to petrochemical products) in Russian exports to the Middle East is relatively small, Moscow sees potential in the Middle East region as a consumer market for its natural gas.

Although the proportion of overall Russian trade and investment in the Middle East remains small (see Appendix, tables 1 and 2), the region still holds great interest and, in some cases, even key

[45] Radiotochka (2014), 'Tsentralno-aziatskiye Boyeviki v Siriyskom Konflikte – Analiticheskiy Doklad Yerlana Karina' [Central Asian Fighters in the Syrian Conflict – Analytical Report by Yerlan Karin], 16 September 2014, http://radiotochka.kz/4113-.html (accessed 16 Jun. 2015).
[46] Ibid.
[47] Russia's exports to Middle Eastern countries with the largest economies often reaches 90 per cent of overall trade.
[48] Kozhanov, N. (2012), *Russia's Relations with Iran: Dialogue without Commitments*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, P. 20, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russian-relations-with-iran-dialogue-without-commitments, (accessed 15 Dec. 2017).
[49] Federal Customs Office, http://stat.customs.ru/ (accessed 13 Jul. 2015).

importance for certain sectors, including the agricultural and military-industrial complexes, and the petrochemical, space, and oil and gas industries. As such, Israel and the UAE buy up to 16 per cent of the precious stones and metals exported by Russia. The Middle East is the main destination for exports of Russian grain: by 2014, the largest buyers of Russian wheat, rye and barley were Egypt, Israel and Saudi Arabia, respectively.[50] The region is also an important market for some small and medium-sized enterprises, whose trade with the Middle East often represents the main (and, in some cases, only) export market for their products.[51]

Russian arms exports are of particular interest to Middle Eastern countries. Such weapons have a reputation for relative reliability and value for money. Although the exact share of Russian arms sales destined for the Middle East remains unknown and annual estimates range from 8.2 per cent to 37.5 per cent (equivalent to about $1.2–$5.5 billion dollars) of Russian total arms exports, customs officials confirm that the numbers are rising and that the volume of the arms trade is currently experiencing substantial growth.[52] Deals concluded in 2012–15 with Egypt and Algeria alone arguably outweighed the losses suffered by the Russian military-industrial complex in Libya.[53]

Russia also promotes its space industry in the Middle East, with products such as the GLONASS satellite navigation system.[54] In 2012–17, cooperation with Middle Eastern countries in the nuclear sphere became another priority of Russian business. In 2014, Russia signed a package of agreements for the construction of up to eight new nuclear reactors in Iran. The first two are expected to be built at the Bushehr power plant in Iran, in addition to the power-generating block previously constructed by Russian engineers and handed over to Iran in 2013.

Russian cooperation with the countries of the region also aims to offset the negative effects of the Russian sanctions war with the West. Thus, Middle Eastern countries have acquired additional importance as agricultural exporters whose produce may help to replace European products subject to Russian counter-sanctions. By 2016, Egypt, Iran, and Israel had increased their sales of food products to Russia.[55] Russian authorities and business leaders believe that active economic cooperation (as in the case of Israel) and joint projects (for instance, with the GCC countries and Iran) with Middle Eastern countries can also provide Russia with access to technologies and equipment in the oil and gas, petrochemical and hi-tech spheres whose availability is limited by Western sanctions.[56] In general, economic contacts with the Middle East may also help evade

[50] Ibid.
[51] Naumov, I. (2012), 'Rossiyskiye Ubytki ot Arabskoy Vesny' [Russian Losses from the Arab Spring], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta,* 29 February 2012, *http*://www.ng.ru/economics/2012-02-29/1_arab_vesna.html, (accessed 4 Oct. 2013).
[52] Interview with an expert on Russian arms sales, Moscow, 27 August 2017.
[53] Interview with an expert on Russian arms sales, London, 27 February 2015.
[54] Argumenty i Fakty [Arguments and Facts] (2015), 'OAE Pokupayut Rossiyskiy Plavuchiy Kosmodrom "Morskoy Start"' [UAE Purchase the Russian Mobile Maritime Spacecraft Launch Platform Sea Launch], 24 March 2015, http://www.aif.ru/society/science/1473836 (accessed 13 Jul. 2015).
[55] TASS (2015), 'Rosselkhoznadzor: Postavki Prodovolstviya v RF iz Irana Nachnutsya v Yanvare 2015 g' [Rosselkhoznadzor: Food Imports from Iran to the Russian Federation Will Begin in January 2015], 21 December 2014, http://tass.ru/ekonomika/1663181 (accessed 17 Feb. 2015); IZRUS (2014), 'Shamir: Rossiya Mozhet ne Volnovatsya, Izrail Nakormit' [Shamir: Russia Need Not Worry, Israel Will Feed It], 11 September 2014, http://izrus.co.il/dvuhstoronka/article/2014-09-11/25466.html (accessed 13 July 2015).
[56] Baliev, A. (2015), 'Iyerusalim Pomozhet' [Jerusalem Will Help], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 9 June 2015 http://rg.ru/2015/06/09/tovarooborot.html (accessed 17 Jul. 2016)]; Realexport (2015), 'ZST s Izrailem Pozvolit Predpriyatiyam Oboyti Sanktsii' [FTA With Israel Will Allow Companies to Bypass Sanctions], 10 June 2015, http://www.realexport.ru/news/zst-s-izrailem-pozvolit-predpriyatiyam-oboyti-sanktsii/ (accessed 17 Jul. 2016); Zrakhiya, T. (2015), 'Izrail i Rossya Blizki k Podpisaniyu Dogovora o Svobodnoy Torgovle s Tamozhennym Soyuzom' [Israel and Russia Are Close to Signing a Free Trade Agreement with the Customs Union], *The Marker*, 29 October 2015, http://inosmi.ru/world/20151103/231161637.html (accessed 17 Jul. 2016).

Western sanctions. Thus, during 2012–15, Russia had offered Egypt and Iran the opportunity to use their national currencies as legal tender in bilateral trade instead of euros and US dollars, and invited them (as well as Israel) to form a free trade zone with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

The financial and economic problems experienced by Russia in 2014–17 also determined its interest in the Middle East as a potential source of foreign investment in the country's economy and in the projects implemented by Russian companies abroad. By 2017, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) had signed contracts and memorandums of understanding on cooperation with the investment bodies of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE. For instance, in 2015, the RDIF signed an agreement with the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF). According to this document, the PIF is expected to invest up to $10 billion in the Russian economy.[57] In 2015, the RDIF also signed a cooperation agreement with the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority. In April 2017, the speaker of the upper chamber of the Russian parliament, Valentina Matvienko, stated that Saudi Arabia had already invested up to $600 million in the Russian economy as a result of these agreements.[58] She also stated that, by the beginning of 2018, the two countries will start implementing several important projects worth up to $3 billion.[59] Currently, the authorities would like to see Saudi Arabia participating in projects aimed at the development of Russian liquefied natural gas (LNG) producing capacities and forming joint ventures to research, design and produce oil and gas equipment. However, Qatar is the main Gulf investor in the Russian economy. By 2017, Qatari assets in Russia were estimated at $2.5 billion. Since 2013, Doha has made large investments in the Russian bank VTB, in Pulkovo airport in St Petersburg, and in Rosneft.[60]

The interests of Russia's oil and gas majors

Many analysts underestimate the influence of energy corporations in the decision-making process in Russia. The country's oil and gas resources are frequently presented as just another source of leverage through which Russia exercises its influence in the region. This is not quite true; the Russian authorities and the energy corporations are mutually dependent. The government has several times demonstrated that it can dictate its will to energy corporations. However, the government also knows that it must protect the interests of these corporations, which compel it to adjust foreign policy to their needs.

Shortly after the beginning of the civil war in 2011, Soyuzneftegaz signed an agreement with Syria that provided it with the rights to conduct exploration work along the Syrian coast, with the possibility to participate in the development of any oil and gas fields discovered. Some experts assume that the top management of Soyuzneftegaz is involved in the decision-making process

[57] RIA Novosti (2017), 'RFPI i saudovskiy fond do kontsa goda zapustyat proyekty na $3 milliarda' [Russian Direct Investment Fund and Saudi fund will launch projects worth $3 billion by the end of the year], *RIA Novosti*, 17 April 2017, https://ria.ru/economy/20170417/1492390102.html (accessed 25 Dec. 2017).
[58] Ibid.
[59] RIA Novosti (2017), 'RFPI i saudovskiy fond do kontsa goda zapustyat proyekty na $3 milliarda' [Russian Direct Investment Fund and Saudi fund will launch projects worth $3 billion by the end of the year], *RIA Novosti*, 17 April 2017, https://ria.ru/economy/20170417/1492390102.html (accessed 25 Dec. 2017); RIA Novosti (2017), 'RFPI i saudovskiy fond do kontsa goda zapustyat proyekty na $3 milliarda' [Russian Direct Investment Fund and Saudi fund will launch projects worth $3 billion by the end of the year], 17 April 2017, https://ria.ru/economy/20170417/1492390102.html (accessed 16 Nov. 2017).
[60] For more details see Kozhanov, N. (2017), 'Why Russia Seeks to Stay Neutral in Saudi-Qatar Rift', *Al-Monitor*, 1 September 2017, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/08/russia-neutral-saudi-arabia-qatar-rift-gcc-lavrov-kuwait.html (accessed 25 Dec. 2017).

regarding Syria.[61] Although the war has put the activities of this company on hold, its top management seems to hope to resume cooperation with the government as soon as the conflict is over. According to Russian media sources, Soyuzneftegaz is not the only Russian company that is keeping an eye on the Syrian oil fields. In mid-2017, Euro Polis, a company allegedly connected to Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin (who is among the 13 people indicted by Special Counsel Robert Mueller for interfering in the 2016 US elections),[62] was reported to have reached an agreement with Damascus to assist Assad by 'liberating' local oilfields from radical Islamists and opposition forces through the use of mercenaries from Russia. In exchange, Euro Polis is expected to get contracts in the Syrian oil sector (Russian media sources noted that Euro Polis might gain access to a quarter of the oil extracted from the 'liberated oil fields').[63]

Moreover, Syria is not the only theatre in which energy interests may affect foreign policy. The role of energy companies in Russia's recent involvement in Libya deserves further research, given the 2017 cooperation agreement signed between Rosneft and Libya's National Oil Corporation.

Russia's efforts in the Middle East oil and gas sectors can be seen as an attempt to mitigate the current low oil prices. If Russian companies obtain access to the region's resources, the additional supply would strengthen Russia's presence in the global energy market. These interests are among the primary determinants of Russian oil companies' activities in Iran and Iraq (including the Kurdish Regional Government-controlled areas). Russian oil and gas exporters were among the first companies to return to Iran after the lifting of sanctions in 2015–16. Russian experts close to the country's main oil producers argue that Iran can provide Russia with additional oil to export to China. According to some sources in the Iranian oil industry, by May 2016, Lukoil decided to take part in two hydrocarbon exploration projects in Khuzestan province. Furthermore, in February 2016, Swiss-based Litasco (a company owned by Lukoil) was one of the first European companies to buy Iranian oil after the nuclear deal was signed between Iran and the P5+1 group. By mid-2016 Lukoil was also negotiating the possibility of oil swaps that would allow it to trade Iranian oil in the Persian Gulf region. In exchange, Lukoil is supposed to supply Iran's northern provinces with oil from Russia.[64]

In November 2017, Russia launched the implementation of its 'oil-for-goods' programme that exchanges Iranian oil for Russian machinery and investments. This initiative has been discussed since the early-2010s. Initially, it was supposed to help Iran to evade the oil trade embargo imposed by the US, EU and their partners. After the adoption of the JCPOA, the discussion of this deal was postponed, but soon started up again. This time, the 'oil-for-goods' programme is expected to compensate for the lack of financial reserves in Iran by allowing Tehran to pay for the imports of Russian equipment with oil. This arrangement could help develop Russia–Iran economic relations, which had been hampered by Iran's budget deficit in the past few years. In November 2017, Moscow received 1 million barrels of oil from Iran as payment for railroad equipment. Russia plans

[61] Interviews with Russian and US experts on the Middle East in Moscow, St Petersburg and Washington in January 2016 and June 2017.
[62] BBC News (2018), 'Russia-Trump inquiry: Russians charged over US 2016 election tampering', 17 February 2018, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-43092085 (accessed 20 Feb. 2018).
[63] Sidorkova, I. and Demchenko, N. (2017), 'Struktury Prigozhina Zainteresovalis Razrabotkoy Mestorozhdeniy v Sirii' [Entities Connected to Prigozhin Got Interested in Developing Hydrocarbon Fields in Sirya], RBC, 27 June 2017, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/06/2017/59515c319a7947750bc7e0e4 (accessed 4 Jan. 2018).
[64] Kasaev, E. (2016), 'Iranskaya Neft i Interesy Rossii' [Iranial Oil and Russian Interests], Institut Blizhnego Vostoka, 22 April 2016, http://www.iimes.ru/?p=28132 (accessed 18 Jul. 2016).

to sell this oil internationally. It is expected that Moscow will annually acquire around 5 million tonnes of oil from Iran. In exchange, the Kremlin plans to supply Iran with $45 billion-worth of goods.

At the same time, Middle Eastern exporters of hydrocarbons are challenging Russia's positions in the global energy markets. Iran has never hidden its intention to compete with Russia as a gas supplier to the EU, and in 2015 Saudi Arabia tried to increase its presence in the East European oil market, which is traditionally considered one of the main destinations of Russian exports. In these circumstances, Russia is trying to create a plan of action to protect the interests of its corporations in the region.

It is notable that, even while the majority of Middle Eastern countries are seen as potential rivals in the energy markets, Russia still prefers cooperation to confrontation. It follows the judo (Putin's favourite sport) principle of staying in full contact with your opponent and keeping them close. Consequently, wherever possible, Russia tries to establish good relations with its regional opponents in order to ensure the flow of hydrocarbons in the direction that is useful for Moscow, or at least to make sure that it has a stake in existing energy projects. For example, in spite of the common perception of Qatar as its main rival in the gas market, Russia decided to approve the purchase of a stake in Rosneft by the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), even though this deal dangerously increased the influence of another country on the decision-making process in one of the key Russian energy giants. It was believed that this deal would help Russia gain access to a number of ambitious oil and gas projects planned by Qatar (in late November 2017, however, it was reported that the QIA was going to decrease its share in Rosneft to 4.7 per cent by selling 14.16 per cent of its share to a Chinese investor).[65]

It is also not clear to what extent Russian actions in the Middle East represent a challenge for the interests of Western business and for European energy security. Russia clearly supports those energy projects that allow it either to control or to divert the export flows of Middle Eastern gas from the EU in order to secure its interests in the European gas market. As a result, for instance, Russia has offered several times to assist Iran and Pakistan with the construction of the so-called Peace Pipeline. This project would guarantee that a huge share of Iranian natural gas will be sold to South Asia and further on to China but not to Europe. In 2016, during the Baku summit of the presidents of Azerbaijan, Russia and Iran, Putin called for closer cooperation and coordination in the oil and gas sphere, particularly over the shared use of existing pipeline infrastructure and joint development of Caspian hydrocarbon resources.[66] To achieve this, a plan was formulated to supply the northern provinces of Iran with natural gas via Azerbaijan in exchange for Iranian liquefied natural gas that the Russian companies would receive in the Persian Gulf. As in the case of the Peace Pipeline project, the implementation would also ensure that at least some Iranian gas will not reach Europe and instead will be channelled by Russian companies to other regions.

[65] Petlevoy, V. (2017), 'Skolko Glencore i Katarskiy Fond QIA Zarabotali na Rosnefti' [How much have Glencore and Qatari Fund QIA earned from Rosneft?], *Vedomosti*, 10 September 2017, https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2017/09/11/733154-glencore-katarskii-fond-rosnefti (accessed 4 Jan. 2018).
[66] RIA Novosti (2016), 'Putin, Aliev i Rouhani Obsudili v Baku konkretniye Proyekty Sotrudnichestva' [Putin, Aliev and Rouhani Discussed Concrete Projects for Cooperation], 8 August 2016, https://ria.ru/world/20160808/1473888913.html (accessed 25 Dec. 2017).

In addition, Russian companies remain interested in forming energy consortiums with foreign businesses to develop Middle Eastern hydrocarbon resources. In 2016, Gazprom Neft announced that it had successfully worked as part of an international consortium on the development of the Badra oilfield in Iraq. Based on this experience, its top managers argued that a consortium with other foreign companies might be a better way to enter the Iranian market. This, in turn, creates certain opportunities for cooperation between Russian firms and those Western and regional corporations that eye Iran as a potential destination for their investments. Furthermore, Russian energy companies can be ready to form development consortiums in other places. For instance, Russia perceives Egypt, Libya and post-war Syria as potential areas for its investments. It also targets Israel and the GCC countries. This was demonstrated through Russian investments of up to $1.5 billion in the development of Egypt's oil and gas sector between mid-2015 and early 2017. Lukoil is in the process of buying a stake in the development of the Shorouk block that contains the largest Egyptian gas field, Zohr, from Italian energy company Eni. Meanwhile, Gazprom and Tatneft became residents of the Russian industrial zone created near Port Said.

Flirting with OPEC

Following the drop in oil prices, Russia has actively attempted to coordinate with Middle Eastern producers (both bilaterally and within OPEC) in order to stabilize the market. After decades of negligence, Russia has now declared its intention to develop closer relations with OPEC and its Middle Eastern members. In December 2016, Moscow became a participant of the OPEC+ agreement, in which OPEC members and non-OPEC countries agreed to decrease their oil production in order to encourage the rise of prices on the international market.[67] The deal has been extended several times since, most recently in November 2017. It is due for renegotiation at the end of 2018. In spite of strong domestic opposition to the deal and the periodical attempts of Russian producers to break the limits set by the agreement, Russia (as of December 2017) has been relatively faithful to its principles. This is largely due to domestic political considerations.

First, Russia is due to have a presidential election in March 2018. This was probably one of the reasons Putin supported the extension of the OPEC+ deal. This action allows Russia to affect oil prices during the presidential race and the first year of office, removing a potential distraction from election preparations.

High oil prices also allow Putin to fund extended social programmes in order to win the support of the low-income sections of the population on the eve of the elections. For instance, in 2017, the Russian government started to talk about launching a food-coupon programme for low-income families that would potentially cover 15–16 million people. Although each person under this programme will receive less than $30 per month to buy additional foodstuffs, the annual budget of the programme is costly – about $4 billion. High oil prices are important to ensuring the viability of such social programmes.[68] Furthermore, in late 2017, the Russian authorities adopted a number of

[67] For more details see Kozhanov, N. (2017), 'Russia and OPEC: Will the Relations Last?', *TRENDS*, 26 October 2017, http://trendsinstitution.org/russia-and-opec-will-the-relation-last/ (accessed 25 Dec. 2017).
[68] Vesti Ekonomika (2017), 'Produktovyye kartochki: Rossiya i mirovoy opyt' [Ration Cards: Russia and Global Experience], 8 February 2017, http://www.vestifinance.ru/articles/81059 (accessed 16 Nov. 2017).

measures to increase the support for vulnerable sections of the population through the provision of additional financial help to low-income families.[69]

Fluctuations of the oil price immediately affect key Russian macroeconomic figures. In the run up to the 2018 election, it is important for the regime to demonstrate a strong economic performance and to show that Putin is able to deliver on his promises of economic growth. In December 2017, Russia's Ministry of Economic Development adjusted its 2018 economic forecast on the back of the extension of the OPEC+ deal.[70] The ministry now expects the average annual oil price in 2018 to be above $50 per barrel.[71] Whereas before the OPEC deal extension in November 2017 there were expectations that the value of the rouble would fall against the US dollar, Moscow now does not expect any serious depreciation of the rouble in 2018. On 15 November 2017, the Central Bank of Russia (CBR) cut its key rate to 7.75 per cent.[72] According to the CBR head, Elvira Nabiullina, the main reason for this is the growing predictability of the oil market as a result of the OPEC+ deal extension.[73] This, in turn, decreases inflation risks. In 2018–20, the CBR expects the rate of inflation will be around or slightly below 4 per cent.[74] The GDP growth expectations have also improved from a drop of 1–1.5 per cent to growth of 1.5–2 per cent.[75]

Finally, Russia remains interested in building up the economic integration of the post-Soviet republics, especially through the EAEU. To make membership in the union appealing for others, Russia needs to demonstrate that the EAEU's formation was a natural development following growth in the economies of its member states. Given that Russia is the locomotive of the EAEU's economic development (the ups and downs of its economy have a direct impact on the performance of other EAEU members), the higher oil prices that boost the development of the Russian economy are also seen in the Kremlin as a guarantee of the EAEU's future.

Nevertheless, Russia does not see the OPEC+ deal as something it wants to keep forever. If the oil price is stabilized at a relatively high level and unlikely to fall in the mid-term it seems improbable that Moscow would look to extend the deal beyond 2018. There are a number of factors that affect the country's approach. First of all, Russia needs to take into account the interests of its oil producers. They accepted the conditions of the OPEC+ deal, but it does not mean that they like it. On the contrary, Russian oil producers seem to have supported this deal only out of necessity and they will be happy to get rid of it as soon as possible. By the end of 2018, Russia will also have passed through the crucial election phase and the associated expensive campaign. The propaganda machine will require less money, and the Kremlin will be less concerned with the social situation and public opinion. Finally, by 2020, Russia expects to bring new oil projects online and the OPEC+ agreement might impede this.

[69] Lakhova, V. (2018), 'Demograficheskaya Perezagruzka: na chto Teper Mozhno Potratit Materinskiy Kapital?' [Demographic Reset: How can you Spend Maternity Capital now?], Vesti, 4 January 2018, https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2972735 (accessed 5 Jan. 2018).
[70] Voytenko, M. (2017), 'Prognozy i Reformy' [Forecasts and Reforms], *Politcom*, 5 December 2017, http://politcom.ru/22866.html (accessed 5 Jan. 2018).
[71] Moskva 24 (2017), 'Maksim Oreshkin Rasskazal o Kurse Rublya v 2018 Godu' [Maksim Oreshkin Told about Rouble's Exchange Rate in 2018], 7 December 2017, https://www.m24.ru/news/ehkonomika/07122017/18798 (accessed 5 Jan. 2018).
[72] Nabiullina, E. (2017), 'Zayavleniye Glavy TcBR Elviry Nabiullinoy po Itogam Zasedaniya Soveta Direktorov' [The Statement by the Head of the CBR, Elvira Nabiullina, on the Results of the Meeting of the Board of Directors], Investing.com, 15 December 2017, https://ru.investing.com/news/Новости-Форекс/article-523559 (accessed 5 Jan. 2018).
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.

However, as long as the OPEC+ deal is in force, Russia will retain a strong interest in talking to the Middle Eastern members of the organization, and it will demonstrate its willingness to work with them through policy adjustments if necessary. For instance, although in general Russia seems to be more pro-Qatar than pro-Saudi Arabia, particularly in regard to FDI, it has chosen to stay neutral in the conflict between the two Middle East countries in order to maintain good relations with Saudi Arabia.

Natural gas and Russia's plans

Another economic driver of Russia's post-2012 penetration of the Middle East is related to its ambitions in the international gas market. The region plays an important role in the implementation of 'The Energy Strategy of Russia until 2030', a government policy paper adopted by the Russian authorities in 2009.[76] The objective of this policy paper is not only the diversification of gas exports to decrease Russia's dependence on European consumers, but the creation of a Eurasian gas trading network under Russian control that trades globally.

Russia's aspiration to strengthen its presence in the Middle East gas sector has meant it has had to adapt its approach to regional issues. Thus, on the one hand, Moscow is trying to distance itself from the Saudi–Qatari rift to avoid picking sides. On the other hand, the authorities are trying to appease both sides in order to preserve oil and gas agreements. For instance, on 9 June 2017, Russia welcomed Mohammed al-Thani, Qatar's minister of foreign affairs, who came to discuss bilateral relations. However, a week before this trip, Saudi Arabia's Prince Mohammad bin Salman and Khalid al-Falih, minister of oil, also visited Russia to discuss cooperation in the oil and gas sphere. Apart from meeting with his Russian counterpart, Aleksandr Novak, Falih also met with the top management of Rosneft and Novatek.[77] He confirmed Saudi Arabia's interest in buying a share in Russia's Eurasia Drilling Company, an oil services firm that might soon carry out projects in the region. Falih also expressed interest in discussing options for Saudi investments in the development of Russia's Arctic LNG project.

Iran is another key country for Russia's gas sector. In May 2017, Gazprom reaffirmed its interest in helping the country build its first LNG plant.[78] Gazprom's management also expressed an interest in assisting in the construction of the Iran–Pakistan–India gas pipeline, which might imply involvement in the development of Iranian gas fields necessary to feed it.[79] Although the company's representatives are clear that Gazprom is merely discussing the prospects of its participation in these projects and the final decision will be taken only after the necessary technical and economic assessments, analysts have already raised questions regarding the feasibility of these projects.[80] The controversy is due to the volume of investments necessary to implement these projects, which critics do not believe is justified considering the existing political, economic and administrative risks to Russia. Furthermore, Gazprom might not have the purported technical expertise to help

[76] Ministry of Energy of the Russian Federation (2009), *Energeticheskaya strategiya Rossii na period do 2030 goda* [The Energy Strategy of Russia until 2030], https://minenergo.gov.ru/node/1026 (accessed 16 Nov. 2017).
[77] Novatek is the largest privately owned Russian gas company.
[78] Izvestia (2017), '«Gazprom» vozvrashchayetsya v Iran' [Gazprom returns to Iran], 30 May 2017, http://iz.ru/news/719372 (accessed 16 Nov. 2017).
[79] RBK (2017), '«Gazprom» podschital stoimost' gazoprovoda do Indii' [Gazprom has calculated the cost of a pipeline to India], 25 May 2017, http://www.rbc.ru/business/25/05/2017/592550f49a7947d162dfade6 (accessed 16 Nov. 2017).
[80] Izvestia (2017), '«Gazprom» vozvrashchayetsya v Iran' [Gazprom returns to Iran].

Iran; it has yet to master LNG technology and is still in its own research phase. In other words, there are doubts that, in the short-term, Gazprom will be able to accomplish the above-mentioned projects if it decides to participate in them.

However, neither Gazprom nor the Russian authorities plan for the short term. Their actions in the Middle East are determined by their long-term strategy for developing the oil and gas sector. Accordingly, Russia's foreign policy is relatively aggressive and expansionist to ensure the safety and profitability of Russian gas corporations.[81] Government documents state that Russia's ultimate goals should be the preservation of its gas corporations' presence in the European market and a manifold increase in gas exports to 'the East' (a term that, in Russian geopolitical thinking, includes Asia and the Middle East).[82] These aims are expected to be achieved not only by raising the output of domestic gas fields, but also through active intervention in the energy sectors of other countries (both hydrocarbon producers and consumers) and the establishment of Russian influence over most of Eurasia's gas-transportation infrastructure.

Within this strategy Russia has significant plans regarding the Middle East gas market, and Gazprom's declared intentions in Iran clearly play a role. Majors such as Lukoil and Rosneft are also present in the region. In late 2016, Rosneft announced the purchase from Italy's Eni of a 30 per cent share in Egypt's Zohr gas field and it signed a contract to supply LNG to Egypt. In 2017, Rosneft also started negotiations on the exports of LNG to Kuwait.

The Middle East's developing gas industry is of interest to Russia as it searches for markets for its gas and opportunities to invest in the local gas infrastructure. More specifically, Russian companies pay particular attention to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean (and above all to the GCC and to Iran). Russian interest in the GCC market is largely explained by the growing domestic demand for natural gas in the Gulf monarchies, partly boosted by their programmes of economic diversification that imply replacing oil with gas for domestic energy consumption. In April 2017, Russia intensified its contacts with Bahrain, which resulted in an invitation for Gazprom to join a number of oil and gas projects. In 2016, Gazprom and Bahrain's National Oil and Gas Authority agreed to strengthen their cooperation in LNG production and distribution. In April 2017, a delegation from Rosneft visited Bahrain, presumably to discuss possibilities for its participation in the construction of LNG-receiving infrastructure in the country.

Second, if Russian companies could gain access to Middle Eastern resources, this would strengthen Russia's presence in the gas markets elsewhere, either via swap deals with Middle Eastern producers or by providing Russian energy majors with additional gas resources for re-export. Consequently, Russia is extremely interested in regional projects aimed at the development of local LNG production, transport infrastructure and import/export capacities (specifically those in Iran, Oman and Bahrain). Russia obviously believes that, if involved in these projects, it can also use the regional infrastructure to reach the gas markets of India and Pakistan, as well as those of South and Southeast Asia.

[81] Ministry of Energy of the Russian Federation (2009), *Energeticheskaya strategiya Rossii na period do 2030 goda* [The Energy Strategy of Russia until 2030].
[82] Ibid.

It might not be a coincidence that, in 2017, Rostekh was negotiating its participation in the construction and subsequent management of the so-called 'North–South' gas pipeline in Pakistan, which will connect LNG-receiving facilities in Karachi and Gwadar with power plants and factories in Lahore. As of early December 2017, Rostekh had failed to reach an agreement with Pakistan on the tariffs due to the Russian company for the use of the pipeline. Hypothetically, the natural gas for this pipeline might be supplied by Russian traders via potential swap operations with Iran if Tehran builds the necessary infrastructure.

Finally, Middle Eastern exporters are challenging Russia's positions in the global energy market. Iran has never hidden its intention to compete with Russia as a gas supplier to the EU. In spite of the fact that, from a short-term perspective, Iran is unable to challenge Russia's interests in the energy market, Moscow is still preparing for the time when such a possibility becomes more real.[83]

Coordinating with gas producing countries such as Algeria, Qatar and Iran has been considered by the authorities for years. Russia tried to approach them at the bilateral level and by offering to establish regional OPEC-like organizations. Thus, in the late 2000s it promoted the idea of creating the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF, initially proposed by Iran), the Gas Troika (a regular trilateral consultation with Iran and Qatar),[84] and the International Alliance of National Non-governmental Gas Organizations.[85] In 2007–08, Russia managed to finalize the process of creating GECF's institutional base but lost its bid to establish its headquarters in St Petersburg, thereby failing to acquire the desired influence within the organization.

At the bilateral level, till recently, Russia managed to cooperate with Iran in order to prevent the construction of trans-Caspian gas pipelines that would have helped Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan sell their gas to Europe. Yet, in 2006–09, Russia missed the opportunity to divide the international gas market between itself and Iran when the latter was offering to do this. In 2014, it allegedly decided to return to this question, although Iran had lost interest.[86]

Russian influence in the Middle East

Explaining Russian strategy in the region

Russia's strategy in the region comprises several elements. First, Russia utilizes its established pragmatism in the region and is open about its intention to talk to every legitimate force in the region. Given the complexity of Middle Eastern realities, this strategy of balancing between all

[83] Kozhanov, N. (2017), 'Will Iran challenge Russian interests in European natural gas market?', Al-Monitor, 5 February 2017, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/02/iran-challenge-russia-interests-europe-natural-gas-market.html (accessed 20 Dec. 2017).
[84] Gas Troyka – an informal name given by the media and Russian government officials to the consultations between the energy ministers of Russia, Iran and Qatar that took place in 2008. Initially, these meetings were supposed to be conducted on a regular basis (three or four times a year). Yet, due to the difficulties in diplomatic relations between the three countries that emerged after 2008 this format ceased to exist.
[85] International Alliance of National Non-governmental Gas Organizations (Mezhdunarodniy Alyans Natsionalnikh Nepravitelstvennykh Gazovikh Organizatsiy, MANNGO) was intended to formally bring together gas market experts and lobbyists of gas producing corporations in different countries into an association. In the second half of the 2000s, its creation was promoted by Valery Yazev, a Gazprom lobbyist in the Russian parliament. First, this structure was supposed to be regional and function in the post-Soviet republics. Later on, Yazev tried to involve other international players, including Iran, in its creation. However, the organization never came into being. For more details see, Grib, D. (2006), 'Gazoobraznoye Protivostoyaniye' [Confrontation in the Form of Gas], *Kommersant*, 31 October 2006, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/717833 (accessed 25 Dec. 2017).
[86] Interview with a Russian expert on International Security in Moscow on 11 September 2014.

major players was initially not anticipated to be effective. However, it has defied that expectation. Russia has managed to persuade its political partners to concentrate on discussions of those areas where Russia and Middle Eastern countries can cooperate rather than trying to drag Russia into regional disagreements. The region's overall disappointment with the West also compels Middle Eastern countries to accept Russia as it is, in order for the region to have an alternative to dealing with the West. Russia's capacity to deal with all major players is also appealing. There are few countries that can simultaneously sustain positive relations with Iran, Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel, which makes Russia a perfect candidate to be a mediator in the region.

Second, while being flexible in its dialogue with the region, Russia is persistent in defending what it sees as its red lines. Thus, it is against any military intervention not approved by the UN Security Council (where it can use its veto) or that is not formally compliant with the UN regulations (in the case of Syria, Russia insists that it deployed its military forces there by the invitation of the 'legitimate government' of Bashar al-Assad, as demanded by the UN principles). It does not welcome forced regime change if it leads to the destruction of the state. Russia is also concerned about any change to borders in the Middle East, and it is firmly against any dialogue with radical Islamists. Moscow's stubbornness in defending its red lines is also respected by Syria's regional opponents, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Third, Russia is awkwardly trying to reclaim its Cold War role as a counterweight to the US in the region. From this point of view, the strong memory of the Soviet presence that still exists among Middle Eastern policymakers and populations is useful. Russia plays this card carefully. In contrast to the Soviet Union, it understands that it cannot compete with the US economically or politically. This has several ramifications. Russia does not directly oppose the US, but rather exploits the region's pre-existing disappointment with the latter through practical moves that contrast with US (and European) behaviour. In other words, Russia exploits the shortcomings of Western policies in the Middle East. Thus, the US reluctance to protect Mubarak compared with the support Moscow provided to Assad encourages regional powers to consider Russia a more reliable partner. The fast dispatch of weapons to the Iraqi authorities in 2014 when they badly needed new equipment to fight a rising ISIS (while the US-led Western states were only thinking about whether and how they should help the Iraqi army) served to demonstrate Russia's responsibility to an ally. The US and EU decision to limit weapons exports to Egypt in 2013 was one of the reasons behind the rise in sales of Russian arms in the region. Even the GCC countries expressed an interest in approaching Russia on this matter, none wanting to be dependent on just one side for weapons supplies.

Fourth, Russia avoids using ideological rhetoric in its official dialogue with Middle Eastern countries. Unlike in the post-Soviet space, Moscow tries to avoid imposing its views either by force or by economic coercion. In dialogue with the countries and political groupings of the region Russia tries to focus on commonalities rather than differences and contradictions. In most cases, Russia also remains extremely pragmatic. In Egypt, it has been equally interested in dealing with Mohamed Morsi and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Russia does not raise the question of political freedoms in Iran, and tries not to be critical of Israel's policies in Palestine and Gaza in spite of its support for a two-state solution. It tries to encourage a dialogue with all countries in the region without expressing obvious support for any particular state or coalition. So far, it has been successful. For instance, by the beginning of 2018, Russia had managed to maintain good relations with Iran, Israel, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, its relations with each of these countries are on the rise.

While avoiding discussion of ideological issues at the official level, Russia spreads its views indirectly through the media and other soft-power channels. During his February 2015 trip to Egypt, Putin gave an interview to the state-run *Al-Ahram* newspaper, touching on the situation in Ukraine and refusing to acknowledge Russia's responsibility for the destabilization of the country, while levelling accusations against the US and EU.[87] Given that *Al-Ahram* has a print run of 1 million and its web portal (in Arabic and English) is one of the most popular news outlets in the region, Putin's words reached a wide audience.

As early as 2007, the state television channel Russia Today (now RT) launched its Arabic service, which covers not only the Middle East but also Europe. Since its inception, Rusiya al-Yaum has attracted a lot of attention in Arab societies.[88] The efforts of Russia Today were supported by the Russian federal agency Rossotrudnichestvo, whose official aim is to develop Russia's cultural and humanitarian presence abroad. By 2014, it had created a network of missions in the capitals of Syria, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt.

Finally, in its economic efforts Russia focuses on those areas where it has market advantages: nuclear energy, oil and gas, petrochemicals, space, weapons and grain. At the same time, Russian business in the Middle East is based on the adage of 'Chinese price for European quality'. Low prices and reliability are the main reasons for interest from Middle Eastern countries in Russian nuclear technologies. In March 2015, Russia and Jordan signed a $10 billion agreement allowing Rosatom to build and operate two nuclear reactors with a total capacity of 2,000 megawatts.[89] During Putin's February 2015 visit to Egypt, Rosatom signed a contract for the construction of Egypt's first nuclear power plant.[90]

Since 2013, the government has also played an increasingly active role in promoting Russian business. It concentrates its attention on countries such as Israel, Iran, Egypt, the UAE, Jordan and Algeria where official contact yields practical results. In 2015, the Russian authorities decided to open a trade mission in the UAE to support the growth of bilateral economic ties. That this decision was taken despite the domestic strain on the Russian budget only serves to emphasize the growing importance of the region.

The limits of Russian influence

Russia is not omnipotent. Its success in the Middle East is more often than not determined by the policy mistakes made by the EU and US. This suggests that 'corrections' in Western approaches to regional issues would limit Russia's capacity for manoeuvre. From this point of view, the election of Donald Trump as US president presents opportunities and challenges for Russia in the region. While the Russian elite wanted him to win the presidential race, Hillary Clinton's victory would still

[87] Ahram Online (2015), 'Putin to Al-Ahram Daily: Discussions to Exclude US Dollar in Bilateral Trade with Egypt', 9 February 2015, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/122569/Egypt/Politics-/Putin-to-AlAhram-daily-Discussions-to-exclude-US-d.aspx (accessed 13 Jul. 2015).
[88] Mokhova, I. (2013), 'Obraz Rossii v Arabskom Mire: ot Sovetsko-Arabskoy Druzhby do Problemy Poiska Novogo Obraza' [Russia's Image in the Arab World: From Soviet–Arab Friendship to the Problems of Searching for a New Image], Institut Blizhnego Vostoka, 1 February 2013, http://www.iimes.ru/?p=16683 (accessed 13 Jul. 2015).
[89] Al-Khalidi, S. (2015), 'Jordan signs $10 billion nuclear power plant deal with Russia', Reuters, 24 March 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/24/us-jordan-nuclear-russia-idUSKBN0MK2QD20150324 (accessed 13 Jul. 2015).
[90] Bezushenko, E. (2015), 'K Vizitu Prezidenta Rossii V.V.Putina v Egipte' [On Russian President V. V. Putin's Visit to Egypt], Institut Blizhnego Vostoka, 13 February 2015, http://www.iimes.ru/?p=23524 (accessed 13 Jul. 2015).

have been a better outcome for Russia. Her willingness to confront Russia if necessary as well as her views on the US presence in the Middle East were more-or-less understood by the Kremlin. Trump's views on Russia and its presence in the region are not always clear and neither are the prospects of Russia–US interaction in Syria and beyond. The US airstrike against Syria's al-Shayarat airbase in April 2017 was an important move; it was a signal to Russia that Trump is much more decisive in using force than Obama was. The airstrike also showed Assad that Russian support does not guarantee full protection if he continues his aggressive moves against Syria's opposition and population. Yet, the al-Shayarat incident was not a game changer. Neither the regime, nor its Russian and Iranian allies changed their strategy. By putting military and political pressure on the anti-Assad forces, Russia is trying to persuade them and their foreign sponsors to adopt the Russian vision of a post-conflict Syria; one that implies the survival of the regime and a continuing Russian presence in the political and economic life of the country when the active phase of the war is over.

The main reason for Russia's reluctance to change its strategy after the al-Shayarat incident was the absence of any US follow-up after the airstrike. Initially Russia prepared itself for potential changes in the US approach to Syria, including the further increase in military pressure on Assad and no potential for dialogue with the West. However, nothing happened. Moreover, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson did not cancel his visit to Russia in April 2017 as his UK counterpart, Boris Johnson, had (which was probably what was expected by the Kremlin). This allayed Russia's concerns, making it believe that, while Trump is more prepared to use force, he, like his predecessor, does not want to get too involved in Syria. Consequently, Russia still sees itself as the main player in Syria.

Russia's financial and economic capabilities will never match those of the US and EU. It has a market advantage in a few areas, but this is gradually decreasing with the failure of economic diversification and the growing technological gap with the West. This has been demonstrated by the lack of substantive investment agreements between Russia and Iran, as of August 2017; the diplomatic exchanges between the two countries have not yielded tangible practical results for bilateral economic relations. Between 2011 and 2014, the volume of trade between them fell by more than 30 per cent annually, and by 2016 it had reached around $1.3 billion as opposed to $3.8 billion in 2011.[91] This fall in trade echoes not only the influence of the US sanctions on Iran's economic relations with the world but also the state of the Russian economy during this period.

The difficult economic situation, low oil prices and international sanctions limit Russia's capacity to exercise influence in the Middle East. As a result, the penetration of Russian energy companies into the region's gas sector will continue to be difficult. This, in turn, limits their ability to finance ambitious and long-term projects abroad. For instance, in May 2017, Lukoil announced its decision to pull out of Luksar, a joint venture that was established by Lukoil Overseas (a Lukoil subsidiary) and Saudi Aramco in 2004 to explore and develop gas reserves in the Rub el Khali desert in Saudi Arabia.[92] Experts close to Lukoil say that existing sanctions do not allow the company to access the cheap foreign loans necessary to finance its ambitious projects.[93] Consequently, Lukoil is

[91] Data from the website of the Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation, http://www.ved.gov.ru/exportcountries/ (accessed 17 Feb. 2015). In 2016, Russia–Iran trade was on the rise and reached $2.2 billion. However, Russian experts still disagree whether Moscow will manage to sustain trade relations at this level. They are concerned that a struggling Russian economy cannot provide the necessary volume of investments and technologies needed by Iran's oil, gas and petrochemical sectors. See Table 1 in the Appendix.
[92] Regnum (2017), '«Lukoyl» na rasput'ye: «Kompaniya vynuzhdena urezat' kolichestvo proyektov»' [Lukoil at a crossroads: 'Company forced to slash a number of projects'], 18 May 2017, https://regnum.ru/news/economy/2276178.html (accessed 16 Nov. 2017).
[93] Interviews with Russian experts on the oil and gas sector in Moscow between August–November 2017.

reconsidering its development strategy. The company is expected to cease its participation in several other overseas projects that are risky, financially demanding or not profitable enough. It is possible that Luksar's story will be just the first instance of international sanctions and low oil prices preventing a Russian company (and, therefore, the Kremlin) from strengthening its position in the Middle East. Consequently, the success of Russia's attempt to implement its plans stated in 'The Energy Strategy of Russia until 2030' may also be in doubt.

Russia's strategy of keeping a delicate balance between the different powers in the region is also fragile and Moscow already has troubles maintaining it when interactions go beyond surface-level diplomacy. The intensification of dialogue with Iran has raised expectations of closer cooperation. Yet, a formal alliance would harm Russia's dialogue with other states, including Israel and the GCC countries. Under these circumstances, the decision not to veto the UN Security Council Resolution N2216 on Yemen, adopted in April 2015 and imposing a ban on the export of weapons to Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in the country, was a stress-test for Russia–Iran relations.[94] Russia managed to avoid an overtly negative Iranian reaction in this instance, but it will not be able to repeat this trick.[95]

Russia's military successes in Syria boosted its belief that it could affect the foreign policy of other countries. However, this excessive confidence in its military and political capacities has already backfired more than once as it occasionally irritates even Russia's partners in the region. For example, in August 2016, the Russian ministry of defence reported that Moscow had deployed long-range bombers to an Iranian airbase in order to intensify air raids in Syria.[96] By recognizing the presence of its bombers in Iran, the Kremlin ignored the wish of the Iranian authorities not to draw attention to the arrangement, as the country's constitution strictly rules out handing over any part of its territory to foreign troops. Nevertheless, Russian propaganda stated that the Kremlin had effectively obtained a military base in Iran.[97] This seriously undermined the positions of those in Iran who had defended Russia's use of the airbase by saying that its planes were only refuelling there. Russia was so confident that its importance as an ally in Syria would make Iran's authorities go against the constitutional principles that its media sources even disclosed information about alleged agreements between the two countries that had not been discussed with the Iranian parliament, whose approval should have been sought.[98] The resulting scandal in Iran caused the authorities to ask the Russian air force to leave the base within days of arriving.[99]

Between 2012 and 2016, Russia's influence was also periodically challenged by other Middle Eastern countries. During this time, Saudi Arabia and Qatar occasionally took tangible political steps to counterbalance Russia's influence. The GCC countries were actively making moves to challenge Russia's propaganda narrative. Moreover, when accusing the Kremlin of stirring political

[94] TVC (2015), 'MID: SB OON Otvetstvenen za Mir v Yemene Posle Prinyatiya Rezolutcii' [MFA: The UN Security Council Responsible for Peace in Yemen After the Adoption of the Resolution], 16 April 2015, http://www.tvc.ru/news/show/id/66195 (accessed 13 Jul. 2015).
[95] Mehr News Agency (2015), 'Moscow Backs Iran's Yemen Proposal', 19 April 2015, http://en.mehrnews.com/news/106722/Moscow-backs-Iran-s-Yemen-proposal (accessed 13 Jul. 2015).
[96] Meduza (2016), 'Rossya Razmestila v Irane Bombardirovshchiki' [Russia has Deployed Bombers in Iran], 22 August 2016, https://meduza.io/feature/2016/08/22/rossiya-razmestila-v-irane-bombardirovschiki-i-tut-zhe-ih-zabrala (accessed 6 Jan. 2018); for more details see Kozhanov, N. (2016), 'Rossiyskaya Baza v Irane: Pochemu Tegeran Peredumal' [Russia's Base in Iran: Why Tehran Has Changed its Mind], Carnegie Moscow Center, 29 August 2016, http://carnegie.ru/commentary/64407 (accessed 6 Jan. 2018).
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.

turmoil in the region, the Saudi and Qatari media and officials were often more eloquent and persuasive than their Russian counterparts.[100] In early 2015, the joint efforts of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Jordan helped the Syrian opposition deal a serious blow to the Assad regime, demonstrating that Russian material and diplomatic support alone[101] could not guarantee the regime's survival on the battlefield (especially after the opposition's success in capturing Idlib in March 2015).

Several of Russia's partners in the region are proving to be unreliable. Some, such as Egypt and Israel, are using Russia's interest in closer interaction as leverage in their own relations with the US. By intensifying dialogue with Russia, countries can press Washington to be more flexible on sensitive bilateral issues. Other 'friends' of Russia do not hide the possibility that, in the future, they may be rivals. For instance, Russian interests in the EU gas market are challenged by frequent statements from Iranian officials regarding their country's supposed willingness to join European-backed projects that would decrease EU dependence on Russian natural gas. For now, this is mostly rhetoric used as a lever to affect the behaviour of the West and Russia. Iran cannot produce sufficient gas for economically viable exports to Europe, but this may change, and even the current improvement in Russia–Iran relations does not guarantee that Iran would take Russia's interests in the EU gas market into account.

Finally, it is unclear how substantial Russia's declared turn to non-Western countries is. There is a suspicion in the region that Russia may once again change its policy as soon as its conflict with the West is over. Although challenges to national security that come directly from the region have also become one of the main drivers of Russia's policy, so far its activities there are still largely determined by factors not directly related to the region, namely Moscow's relations with the West. Substantial change in US–Russia relations will inevitably affect Russia's stance on Middle Eastern issues, although a complete revision of its approach is unlikely. Even during the current fallout with the US and EU, the Kremlin is cautious about direct confrontation with the West over the Middle East unless this is determined by security interests (as happened in Syria). Thus, in April 2015, Putin decided to lift the 2010 ban on the export of S-300 missile systems to Iran. However, even this should be considered as part of Russia's message to the West rather than a real attempt to change the military balance in the region, given that the number of missile systems actually delivered to Iran was seen as too small to be significant.

Conclusion

Tensions with the US and EU have had unexpected effects on Russia's policy in the Middle East. If before 2012 its diplomacy in the region could be characterized as inconsistent and opportunistic, the growing conflict with the West became the main factor that drove Russia to intensify its activities in the region. Sustained good relations with Middle Eastern powers allowed Moscow to avoid full international isolation and partly compensated for the effects of the sanction war ongoing between Russia and the West. Through its contacts with Middle Eastern countries, Russia also

[100] Kosach, G. (2015), 'Saudovskiy Ministr Inostrannykh Del: Zaochniy Spor s Rossiyskim Prezidentom' [Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs: Indirect Discussion with the Russian President], http://www.iimes.ru/?p=24059#more-24059 (accessed 19 Jan. 2018).
[101] Russia deployed its military forces in Syria in the autumn of 2015.

widened its options to impose additional pressure on Western countries and potentially create rifts among them to prevent the prospect of a united front.

However, relations with the West are not the only factor that led to this situation. Closer contacts with the region are also determined by Putin's personality, his perception of the Arab Spring, Russia's global strategic thinking, and its domestic political situation. By 2017, economic drivers were just as important as political elements; the region has a special role in Russia's strategy to strengthen its presence in the international oil and gas markets.

As opposed to previous short-lived attempts to intensify relations with Middle Eastern countries, more recently Russia seems determined to establish long-term relationships in the region.

Since 2012, Russia defined three categories of goals to be pursued in the Middle East:

- Economic objectives that compensate for the pressure of sanctions on the Russian economy, secure sources of income, and protect the interests of energy companies and their share of different markets;
- Political objectives that help to avoid complete international isolation, create leverage to affect US and EU behaviour, promote Russia's concept of the 'right world order', and shape popular opinion in Russia; and
- Security objectives that reduce threats to Russia and the post-Soviet space posed by the situation in the Middle East.

A shift in the Russia–West tensions may impact the future implementation of Russia's priorities in the Middle East. Russia may once again change its policy as soon as its conflict with the West is over. Substantial changes in relations with the US will inevitably affect Russia's stance on Middle Eastern issues. But in the long-term, a complete revision of the Russian approach is unlikely.

There is also no consensus on the best approach for the West to take with regard to Russia in the Middle East. The interrelation between Russian diplomacy in the region and the dynamics of the Russia–West confrontation leaves no illusions: Russia will not hesitate to exploit the situation in the Middle East against US and EU interests by responding to Western policies elsewhere if it sees them as anti-Russian. It is also important for the West to keep in mind that, currently, Russia is confident in the success of its Middle Eastern strategy based on the principle of balancing between the different regional players. Success in Syria, rapprochement with Iran, the strengthening of ties with Egypt, and the development of dialogue with Israel and the GCC further cement its self-assurance. Consequently, any attempts to influence Russia's approaches towards the Middle East will be challenging.

On the other hand, Middle Eastern issues are not always considered by Russia solely through the lens of the Russia–West confrontation. Moscow understands that in order to get out of the Syrian conundrum it needs to talk to the international community, including the US. That is why the sluggish US–Russia dialogue on Syria has continued even after the US Senate adopted a new round of sanctions against Russia in 2017.

There are a number of areas of potential close cooperation with the West. First, Russia is interested in preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. It could be an effective partner in ensuring Iran's adherence to the nuclear agreement reached in 2015. Russia also wants to have a wider international discussion on the future of post-conflict Syria, and would like to broaden it in order to reduce instability in the wider region. As a result, Moscow's involvement in the discussions on the respective futures of Libya, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan may have benefits. Finally, there are opportunities for economic cooperation. For instance, Russian companies have expressed a desire to form energy consortiums with foreign companies to develop Middle Eastern hydrocarbon resources.

Consequently, it is important for the West to talk to Russia even if the outcomes are not always substantial or immediate. However, it will take time to build trust. Ultimately, Russia wants its voice to be heard and it has ambitions to secure its role as an international player whose opinions need to be taken into consideration. Asking Moscow for assistance could have an unexpectedly positive role in allaying existing tensions between Russia and the West. Otherwise, any attempts to isolate Russia run the risk of turning it into a serious and unpredictable troublemaker. However, a willingness to open dialogue with Russia needs to be accompanied by readiness in the West to defend its own red lines in the Middle East. Putin and his team respect strong counterparts and show disdain for weak ones. The West's previous failure to punish Russia for crossing its red lines was a significant factor in Russia's ongoing, brutal and decisive interventions in the region.

Appendix

Table 1: Russian trade with selected countries of the Middle East in 2010–16 ($ million)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Jan–Sep 2017 (↑/↓)
Algeria	1,337	2,486	2,785	1,589.6	863.2	1,997	3,974	2,899 (↑)
Bahrain	2.5	5	13.9	15.8	20.1	n/a	n/a	n/a
Egypt	2,191	2,820	3,555	2,946	5,400	4,089	4,156	4,002 (↑)
Iran	3,651	3,755	2,329	1,602	1,700	1,281	2,184	1,116 (↓)
Iraq	-	99.6	286	379	1,695	1,807	917	240 (↓)
Israel	2,588	2,857	2,917	3,578	3,400	2,345	2,189	1,870 (↑)
Jordan	148	350	426	181	529	259	175	97 (↓)
Kuwait	132	357	83	34	48.2	406	480	512 (↑)
Lebanon	239	406	202	530	801	640	539	464 (↑)
Libya	171	124	260	386	222.5	183	74	110 (↑)
Mauritania	37.8	54.4	33.1	31.7	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Morocco	932	1,810	1,848	1,426	1,525.6	1,014	1,291	918 (↑)
Oman	13.3	39.3	42.1	59.4	87.7	n/a	n/a	n/a
Qatar	14.6	54.6	40	41.4	53	31	59	47 (↑)
Saudi Arabia	366	852	1,359	1,078	1,133.1	926	492	667 (↑)
Sudan	-	172	154	129	189	139	232	289 (↑)
Syria	1,158	1,991	656	376	589.5	313	193	339 (↑)
Tunisia	530	1,155	594	361	521	367	466	400 (↑)
United Arab Emirates	1,019	1,489	1,487	2,516	1,970	1,246	1,244	1,067 (↓)
Yemen	168	163	234	218	260.8	208	156	217 (↑)
Algeria	1,337	2,486	2,785	1,589.6	863.2	1,997	3,974	2,899 (↑)
Bahrain	2.5	5	13.9	15.8	20.1	n/a	n/a	n/a
Egypt	2,191	2,820	3,555	2,946	5,400	4,089	4,156	4,002 (↑)

Source: Compiled by author using data from the Russian Customs website (customs.ru) and the Vneshnaya Torgovlya Rossii [Russian Foreign Trade] website (http://russian-trade.com/) (accessed 19 Jan. 2018).

Note: ↑ denotes bilateral trade increase on the same period of 2016; ↓ denotes bilateral trade decrease on the same period of 2016.

Table 2: Breakdown of Russian trade with main partners in the Middle East in 2016 ($ billion)

	Total trade volume	Exports	Imports	Share of Russian trade (%)
Algeria	3.974	3.966	0.008	0.8
Egypt	4.2	3.8	0.4	0.9
Israel	2.2	1.5	0.7	0.5
Iran	2.2	1.9	0.3	0.5
Morocco	1.3	0.7	0.6	0.3
Turkey	15.8	13.7	2.1	3
UAE	1.2	0.9	0.3	0.2

Source: Compiled by the author using data from the Russian Customs website (customs.ru) and the Vneshnaya Torgovlya Rossii [Russian Foreign Trade] website (http://russian-trade.com/) (accessed 19 Jan. 2018).

About the author

Nikolay Kozhanov was the 2015 Academy Robert Bosch Fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House. He is currently a visiting lecturer in the political economy of the Middle East at the European University at St Petersburg. He received a PhD in the economic security of the Middle East from St Petersburg State University in 2010. His research focuses on Russian policy in the Middle East and the Caspian region. He has been a visiting fellow at a number of leading international think-tanks including the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Carnegie Moscow Center.

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Cover image: Russian President Vladimir Putin and President of Syria Bashar al-Assad inspect a military parade during their visit to the Russian air base in Hmeimim in the northwestern Syrian province of Latakia on 11 December 2017.

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The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House
10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710
contact@chathamhouse.org www.chathamhouse.org

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