

Russia's Renaissance in the Arab World

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CHAPTER 4

Russia's Renaissance in the Arab World

Lisa Watanabe

In order to secure its status as a major external powerbroker in the region, Russia is reviving Soviet-era ties with a number of countries in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as forging new ones. Moscow lacks a clear strategy – its approach is pragmatic, engaging a variety of regimes and employing a range of policy instruments. Yet it lacks the economic clout and desire to take on great power responsibilities in the region. Russia is likely to boost its regional profile through economic and military cooperation, as well as through diplomacy, capitalizing on the West's absence or missteps.



Russian President Vladimir Putin welcomes Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during their meeting in Sochi, May 17, 2018. *Mikhail Klimentyev / Sputnik via Reuters*



Russia is returning to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Following a temporary absence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's presence in the MENA region has been steadily growing since 2000. Although the region does not have the same significance for Russia as the post-Soviet space, China or India, developments can negatively affect Russian national interests and security. Gaining influence in the region, as well as recognition of its status as one of its major international stakeholders, is consequently important. Moscow has accordingly sought to re-establish relations with traditional partners across the Arab world, as well as to develop ties with a number of other countries in the region. In the Arab world, relations have generally been forged or deepened through incrementally developing economic and military-security cooperation. However, since Russia's 2015 intervention in the Syrian conflict, Moscow has also been engaging militarily and using high-powered diplomacy as additional foreign policy instruments. Although there are many similarities with the Soviet form of engagement in the region, Moscow's current approach is distinctly non-ideological. This, as well as Moscow's emphasis on state-led transition to democracy, makes Russia an attractive partner for many regimes in the Middle East and North Africa.

Not surprisingly, much attention to-date has focused on Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict. The degree of Russian engagement in Syria, as well as the benefits Moscow has reaped from it, have been considerable. However, the Syrian case is, in many respects, exceptional. Given Moscow's already close relations with the Assad regime and Syria's importance for regional stability, the Kremlin was willing to become heavily involved militarily, and even risk confrontation with the US, in order to back Assad. However, Russia is less invested elsewhere in the Arab world and has thus far exercised caution in its actions. Its engagement takes a variety of forms, depending on the context. This chapter looks specifically at how Russia has succeeded in reviving relations with two of its traditional allies, Algeria and Egypt, and is seeking closer links to another Soviet-era ally, Libya. Together, these cases help to illustrate that, although Russia is seeking to gain a firmer foothold in the MENA region, its expanded presence has often been at the behest of local actors and frequently in response to a void left by the West.

Russia's Return to the MENA Region

Russia has a historical legacy in the region to build on. Soviet support for pan-Arabism led to strong ties with



several countries in the Arab world, particularly throughout the 1950s and 1960s. At this time, especially close ties with Algeria, Egypt, and Syria were forged. As Egypt moved closer to the United States in the early 1970s, Libya replaced it as a key Soviet ally in the MENA region. The collapse of the Soviet Union would cause relations with these states and other allies in the MENA region to come to a near standstill. The exception was Syria, with which Russia maintained fairly strong ties. Russia's relative absence from the region continued during the 1990s, as it grappled with its own internal challenges.

When President Vladimir Putin first took office in 2000, this trend was reversed. Ties with Soviet-era Arab allies have been revived and strengthened as part of a broader aim of increasing Russia's presence in the MENA region, and being recognized as one of its powerbrokers.¹ Moscow has also forged relations with a number of other Middle Eastern countries, including Israel, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. It has generally focused on incrementally building up relations by using a number of policy tools, including arms sales, broader trade relations, and cooperation in the military-security and energy spheres. Pragmatism has played an important

role in facilitating the development of Moscow's presence in the region. Russia is willing to work with existing regimes on all sides of regional divides. Russia also recognizes that many local regimes do not wish the United States to dominate the region, and has seized upon opportunities created by a desire on the part of some regimes to diversify their strategic partners. It has also typically stepped in when a lack of robust Western engagement has been evident.

Nothing has done more to consolidate Russia's return to the region than its intervention in the Syrian conflict. Moscow has employed a wider range of policy tools in the Syrian context than elsewhere. In the 2000s, as Moscow forgave three quarters of Syria's Soviet-era debt, Russian arms sales to Syria increased, and Damascus agreed that Russia could renovate its Soviet-era naval base at the port of Tartus.² Then, after the civil war began in 2011, Moscow used diplomacy to try to prevent United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions from being used to facilitate regime change, as had been the case in Libya in 2011. While Libya was not strategically important enough to risk confrontation with France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, Syria was different. Moscow's relations with the Assad regime were relatively



strong. Syria was also seen as central to stability in the Middle East and thus critical to a range of Russian economic interests. As a result, Moscow was ready to put its full weight behind the Assad regime.

Defense of the Assad regime moved from diplomatic to military support in September 2015, when Russia intervened in Syria. This was the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union that Russia had done so beyond its “near abroad”. No doubt there was a fear at this point that the Assad regime might collapse, spurring Moscow on. However, Western hesitancy, especially on the part of the United States, surely played a role in the Kremlin’s calculus. Whatever the precise calculations in Moscow, military intervention paid off. Moscow’s air support turned the balance on the battlefield in favor of regime forces. By 2018, the Assad regime controlled over half of Syrian territory, compared to a mere quarter prior to Russian military intervention.³ One of Moscow’s key objectives had thus been achieved.

Once the Assad regime was in control of strategically important areas of the country, Russia stepped up its high-powered diplomacy. Along with Turkey and Iran, Russia launched the Astana process in early 2017, which focused on establishing de-confliction

zones to reduce the level of violence and pave the way for political negotiations.⁴ By initiating an alternative mediation track to that of the United Nations, and one that excluded the United States, Moscow used high-powered diplomacy to shift peace talks away from discussions of regime change, as well as to boost Russia’s legitimacy as a major international stakeholder in the Middle East.

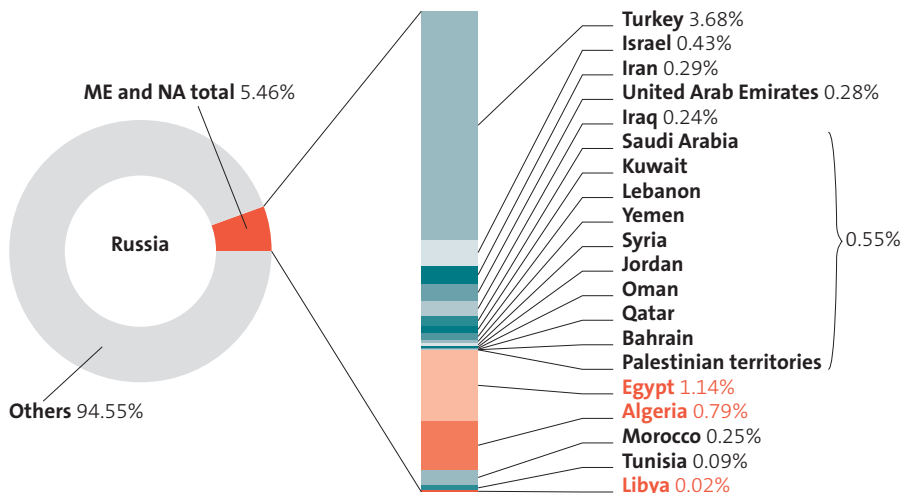
Intervention in the Syrian conflict is set to have a number of additional benefits for Russia. Substantial military cooperation between Russia and Syria is likely to continue over the longer term. Some of Russia’s armed forces will remain in Syria to help secure the Assad regime in a post-conflict scenario. The extent of Syrian dependence on Russian arms supplies means that Syrian armed forces will continue to rely on Russian weapons and materiel for some time to come. In addition, Damascus has agreed that Russia can expand its Tartus naval base and use it, as well as the Khmeimim airbase, for several decades. Although the Tartus facility is small, its expansion will help Russia increase its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.⁵

Moscow no doubt hopes that its companies will benefit from reconstruction efforts once the conflict



Russia's Trade Turnover with the MENA Region

As of 2017



Source: Federal Customs Service of Russia

ends. Russian companies are eager to win lucrative reconstruction contracts and are set to receive preferential treatment. Yet, so too are Iranian and Chinese companies. Reconstruction of Syria will also require a substantial amount of international aid and assistance, and Russia alone will be unable to finance this. The fact that Moscow has been attempting to secure European and US funding for reconstruction efforts is telling. Although Europeans and the United States are reluctant to do so as long as the prospect of free and fair elections are not part of a negotiated settlement, Beijing has already indicated a willingness to help finance reconstruction. Consequently,

the opportunities created by reconstruction will not be Russia's alone, but shared with a number of other international actors.⁶

Syria represents an example of Russian engagement in the Arab world that would be hard to replicate elsewhere, at least for the time being. The Arab world, and the MENA region specifically, is not a priority for Moscow. Beyond arms sales, Russian trade with the region remains fairly minimal. Outside of Syria, Russia has not invested enough to support a regime to the extent that it has the Assad regime, particularly if there is a risk of conflict with the West. Although



Russia has succeeded in reviving ties with other traditional allies, its level of engagement, as well as the benefits accrued from it, have been more modest. This is partly due to the extent of local demand for cooperation with Russia and the latter's own reluctance to take risks for regimes that are not deemed critical to Russian interests. That said, Russia has successfully carved out a place for itself alongside the United States and European states in Algeria and Egypt, and is attempting to do so in Libya by drawing on its experience in the Syrian conflict.

In Algeria, Algiers Sets the Terms

Algeria and the Soviet Union were allies during the Cold War. Yet, the extent of their cooperation was always limited by Algeria's policy of non-alignment. Relations with the Soviet Union were conceived in Algiers as a counterweight to those with France and the United States, rather than an attempt to align with the Soviet Union. A window of opportunity to deepen Algerian-Soviet relations came in 1963, as a result of the War of the Sands between Algeria and Morocco over disputed border areas. The perception in Algiers was that the United States had lent support to Morocco in the conflict, rendering Algeria open to overtures from the Soviets. From this point on, arms supplies, as well as the training of military officers and

personnel, formed a key part of Algerian-Soviet relationship. However, even in the area of military cooperation, Algeria began to try to diversify its relations during the mid-1980s, particularly as a result of improved relations with France. Economic relations between Algeria and the Soviet Union were never significant.⁷ In fact, trade with the United States would become far more important than that with the Soviet Union towards the end of the Cold War.

In the post-Cold War period, relations between Algiers and Moscow intensified in the 2000s, as Russia sought to capitalize on the previously close relations between the Soviet Union and Algeria. This came at a time when Algiers sought to end its international isolation following a decade of civil war. In 2001, the two countries signed a strategic partnership that catalyzed an intensification of relations. One of the main elements of the partnership focused on arms supplies. The Algerian army was largely equipped with Soviet materiel, which made Russia a logical supplier. Moscow provided an additional incentive by offering to cancel Soviet-era debt, which amounted to 29 percent of Algerian foreign debt at that time, in return for orders of arms for the equivalent amount.⁸ The value of arms purchases from Russia



subsequently rose, with a significant increase in the mid-2000s that coincided with Algeria's effort to modernize its army. Military training and sharing of experience, as well as intelligence sharing on terrorist-related topics increased. However, Russia failed in its bid to establish a naval base in Mers Al-Kabir. From the perspective of Algiers, this would have amounted to a violation of its independence.⁹

Energy cooperation formed another key aspect of the strategic partnership. In 2006, Algeria's state-owned hydrocarbon company, Sonatrach, signed a memorandum of understanding with the Russian state-owned oil and gas companies, Lukoil, Gazprom, and Souyouzgaznef to collaborate on oil and liquefied natural gas exploration. In 2008, Sonatrach also granted Gazprom exploration and exploitation rights in the El-Assel gas field. Several years later, in 2014, Sonatrach invited Gazprom to explore and develop 30 gas fields as part of the Algerian government's drive to discover new hydrocarbon resources. The same year also saw Russia's state agency in charge of nuclear energy, Rosatom, and the Algerian ministry of energy sign a bilateral agreement to construct, operate, and service nuclear power stations and research reactors across Algeria, with the first power plant set to be constructed by 2025.¹⁰

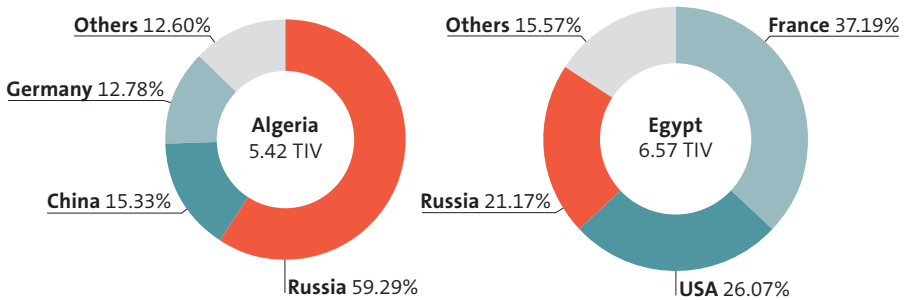
These developments notwithstanding, the extent of ties between Russia and Algeria is heavily circumscribed by Algeria's fierce independence and economic nationalism. Strengthened relations with Russia have always been counterbalanced by relations with other countries. Although arms purchases from Russia increased in the first decade of the 2000s, Algiers has consciously attempted to diversify arms supplies. From 2013 to 2017, Russian arms supplies accounted for only 59 percent of total arms purchases. The second and third largest suppliers were China (15%) and Germany (13%).¹¹ Algeria has also sought to develop its own defense industry with the aim of increasing its autonomy. As part of its aim to balance its strategic relations, Algeria has sought greater military cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) within the framework of the Mediterranean Dialogue, particularly in the area of counterterrorism. Counterterrorism cooperation between Algeria and the United States has also been strengthened since the 9/11 terrorist attacks.¹²

Apart from arms sales, Algeria's trade with Russia remains relatively modest. Even in the energy sphere, Russian investments are relatively insignificant compared to those of other countries. Despite the inroads that they



Russia as an Arms Supplier: Algeria and Egypt

As of 2017



TIV: Volume of arms exports – the SPIRI Trend Indicator Value (TIV) relates to actual deliveries of major conventional weapons based on the known unit production costs of a core set of weapons.
Source: SIPRI

have made in the hydrocarbon sector, 80 percent of the total hydrocarbon production is owned by Sonatrach, and the remaining 20 percent is dominated by Western companies, primarily American and British.¹³ Though intensified Algerian-Russian cooperation, particularly in the gas sector, has generated fears that the two countries could collude in setting gas prices and restricting supplies to Europe, which relies heavily on both countries for its gas, Algeria's energy interests do not always overlap with those of Russia. Algiers values its reputation as an autonomous actor in the energy sphere. The importance of Western investment in Algeria, as well as the role of Europe as its main gas customer, means that Algeria has little incentive to engage in price setting or the restriction of supplies with Russia.¹⁴

Entry Points in El-Sisi's Egypt

For several decades during the Cold War, Egypt was one of the Soviet Union's principal allies in the Arab world. Ties deepened in the 1950s, as relations with the West soured following the 1956 Suez Crisis. Egyptian-Russian ties were deepest in the military sphere – Egypt wished to strengthen its army and the Soviet Union was ready to supply arms on favorable terms, as well as train Egyptian military officers. Military cooperation reached unprecedented levels after Egypt (then known as the United Arab Republic) was defeated by Israel in the 1967 Six Day War, and the Soviet Union acquired access to Egyptian naval and air bases. Economic and technical assistance also formed part of the Egyptian-Soviet relationship. The Soviet Union helped finance and



provide expertise for domestic development projects, including the prestigious Aswan Dam.¹⁵ Despite the depth of their relations, Egypt's need for an ally that had influence in Israel, as well as one that would be ready to work for peace in the Middle East, led Cairo to turn to the United States after 1972.

During the first decade of the 2000s, Russia made some progress in rekindling ties with Egypt. US pressure to embark on political reforms rendered President Hosni Mubarak amenable to developing relations with Russia, particularly with regard to trade and energy cooperation.¹⁶ The relationship only really blossomed in the wake of President Mohammed Morsi's overthrow in July 2013. The coup and the subsequent crackdown on Morsi's supporters led the Obama administration to suspend a considerable amount of military aid to Egypt, as well as to block deliveries of military equipment. An opportunity for Moscow to strengthen its relations with Egypt thus presented itself, and Russia seized upon it. However, this was only possible due to a deliberate effort on the part of Morsi's successor, President Abdul Fatah El-Sisi, to pursue a multi-dimensional foreign policy, aimed at reducing dependence on any one international power.

When El-Sisi became president in 2014, Russia extended offers of un-

conditional cooperation, which led to a steady increase in ties. Much like during the early decades of the Cold War, relations have become densest in the military-security sphere. In 2014, an arms deal worth some 3.5 billion USD was signed by Egypt and Russia, which was reportedly financed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This was followed by the creation of a joint Commission for Military-Technical Cooperation, joint military and counter-terrorism exercises, and a 2017 agreement that grants Russia access to Egyptian airspace and the use of military bases and vice versa. Egypt has also allowed the deployment of Russian special forces to Egypt, near the Libyan border, in order to carry out missions in Libya and provide assistance to a Libyan militia engaged in counter-terrorism operations in the eastern part of the country.¹⁷

Economic cooperation has also increased, largely as a result of expanding trade relations and the creation of a Russian industrial zone in Port Said on the Mediterranean coast. This will enable Russian companies to benefit from agreements Egypt has with African countries, the European Union, Mercusor, and other Arab countries that grant preferential treatment for goods manufactured in Egypt.¹⁸ Cooperation in the energy sector has



also grown. In 2017, the Russian state-owned company, Rosneft, won additional rights to develop the Zohr gas field. Increased cooperation in the energy sector is largely due to a 2015 agreement in which Russia agreed to construct a nuclear power plant in Egypt, 85 percent of which is to be financed through a Russian loan. The plant will be maintained over a 60 year period by Rosatom.¹⁹

Closer ties with Egypt are also politically beneficial for Russia. In 2015, Egypt abstained from a UN General Assembly resolution calling on all UN members not to recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea. Egypt has also largely aligned its stance on Syria with that of Russia. In 2016, Egypt voted with Russia against a French draft UNSC resolution for a ceasefire in Aleppo that would have included the establishment of a no-fly zone. At the same meeting, Egypt voted in favor of a resolution tabled by Russia that would have enabled continued airstrikes and thus helped the Assad regime to re-take Aleppo. More recently, in 2018, Egypt was a vocal critic of US, UK and French airstrikes in Syria in response to the use of chemical weapons.²⁰

Relations between Egypt and Russia are set to develop further following a 2018 agreement on a comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation.

Russia can be expected to reap additional economic and political benefits from this. Even so, ties with Russia do not represent alternatives to those with other major international partners in the West, notably the United States, or key regional partners, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Even in the military sphere, where relations are densest, Russia's share of Egypt's arms market is still less than that of either France or the United States.²¹ This is not to say that Russia could not gain a larger share of the Egyptian arms market in the future. However, replacing major weapons systems could not realistically take place over the short term. Arms purchases from the United States are, moreover, part of the terms of the 1979 Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel, and thus need to be maintained.

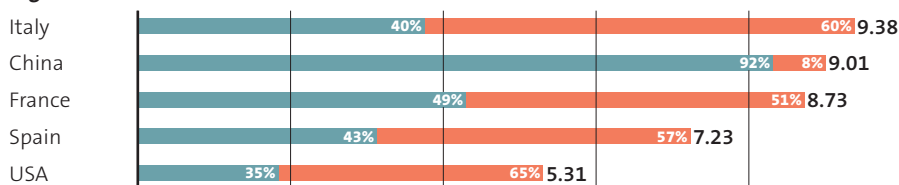
Russia's economic relations with Egypt remain fairly modest. Despite increased trade between the two countries, Egypt's trade with China, Saudi Arabia, the US, and several European countries is far more significant. Investment in Egypt is also dominated by companies from Europe, the United States, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia.²² Russia's presence in the natural gas sphere is similarly overshadowed by other investors, which means that cooperation in the energy sector, as in Algeria, is largely



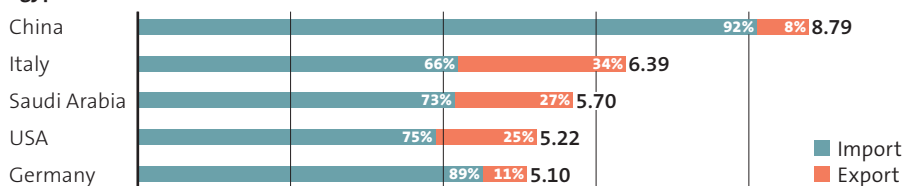
Top 5 Trading Partners of Algeria and Egypt

Turnover in billion USD in 2017

Algeria



Egypt



Source: World Bank

limited to development of Egypt's civilian nuclear energy program.

Expanding relations significantly beyond their current scope would prove difficult, particularly as long as the Egyptian regime continues to seek a balance in its relations with major international powers. Russia would not only have to compete with Europeans and the United States, but also with China. Beijing recently concluded a comprehensive strategic partnership with Cairo. Cooperation between the two countries has already led to Chinese investment in some of Egypt's major domestic economic projects, including the construction of a new administrative capital, and Cairo is

eager to attract further Chinese investment.²³ That said, Russia has made the most of an opportunity to increase export revenues, and to gain a firmer footing in one of Washington's traditional allies in the Arab world. This alone is an achievement.

Echoes of the Syrian 'Model' in Libya

As Egypt turned towards the United States in the early 1970s, and the Soviet Union lost a major ally in the southern Mediterranean, the Soviets took a greater interest in Libya, both as a source of revenue and a means of counterbalancing US influence in the MENA region. The Qaddafi regime was interested in Soviet arms,



and sought an ally that could protect it from US interference. As in the Algerian and Egyptian cases, Soviet-Libyan relations were strongest in the military sphere. The Soviet Union began supplying arms to Libya in 1975. Over the next decade, thousands of Russian soldiers were stationed there. Libya was, however, not important enough to the Soviets to risk confrontation with the United States. Soviet-Libyan relations cooled after the United States carried out airstrikes in Libya in retaliation for the 1986 bombing of a West Berlin nightclub, which was believed to have been planned by the Qaddafi regime.²⁴

Relations between the Qaddafi regime and the West improved after Western sanctions imposed in response to the bombing of the Pan Am flight 103 were suspended, in 1999, and then lifted, in 2004. However, in return for the surrender of Libyan intelligence officers implicated in the Pan Am 103 attack, and the regime's renouncement of its weapons of mass destruction programs, Qaddafi expected more than Libya received. As a result, he looked to revive relations with Russia. In 2008, Russia forgave Libya's 4.5 billion USD Soviet-era debt in return for contracts believed to be worth 5 to 10 billion USD. These deals included arms sales, the construction of a high-speed railway between Sirte and Benghazi by Russian Railways, and gas

transportation networks by Russia's Gazprom. The Qaddafi regime also granted Russia access to the port in Benghazi for its naval fleet.²⁵

When the rebellion began in early 2011, Russia took a pragmatic approach. It did not come to the aid of the Qaddafi regime, though it did abstain from voting on UNSC Resolution 1973, which called upon all UN member states to use all necessary means to protect civilians against regime forces. It did so partly because it believed that the mandate was too broad and could be used to try to bring about regime change, and partly because it was not invested enough in the Qaddafi regime to veto it. Although the regime had purchased arms from Russia, many of the other contracts it had agreed to in principle never materialized amid competition with US, French, and UK interests in Libya.²⁶

As the rebellion descended into a civil war, cooperation between Russia and Libya came to a virtual halt. As a result of the NATO-led 2011 intervention, mandated by UNSC Resolution 1973, Russia is thought to have lost some 4 to 4.5 billion USD. It also lost the right to use the Port of Benghazi. Although Russian firms attempted to resume contracts for arms purchases, the construction of the high-speed



railway, and natural gas development, they suffered from Russia's image as a counter-revolutionary force that had failed to support the rebels against the Qaddafi regime. As a result, Russian companies tended to lose out to US and European firms.²⁷

However, the outbreak of civil war in mid-2014 led to growing Russian interest in Libya. Moscow initially appeared to be trying to replicate in Libya what it has done in Syria. In the Syrian civil war, Russia stood firmly behind the Assad regime. As a result, it was able to use its influence with Assad to become an indispensable interlocutor in any negotiated settlement of the conflict. In recognition for its support, Russia has secured the long-term use of air and naval bases, and hopes that its firms will benefit from future arms deals and the reconstruction of the country's infrastructure, including in the energy sector.

In the early phase of the Libyan conflict, Russia put its weight behind a former Qaddafi-era general, Khalifa Haftar, who leads an eastern-based militia, which refuses to recognize the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. Haftar's anti-terrorism narrative provided a convenient guise for Russia to support his campaign in eastern Libya. Russian special forces and military advisors

are believed to have been assisting Haftar's forces either from eastern Libya or from across the border in Egypt. In addition, reports that personnel from Russian private security companies have also been deployed to areas under Haftar's control have emerged. Haftar has also been invited to Moscow, where he is believed to have lobbied for Russian arms supplies, and, in 2017, he was invited to board a Russian aircraft carrier on its way back from Syria, during which he was rumored to have promised Russia access to the port in Benghazi. Moscow has also printed 3 billion USD worth of banknotes for the GNA's rival, eastern-based government, much to the consternation of the Central Bank of Libya in Tripoli.²⁸

By providing Haftar with military assistance and promoting him as a potential future political leader, Russia has not only helped his militia to fight radical Islamist forces, but also to capture territory, including some of Libya's most important oil terminals. This has made him a necessary interlocutor in peace talks, even though he has sought to derail the 2015 UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) that aims to reconcile Libya's warring factions. Haftar's increased clout also reduced the likelihood that eastern politicians allied with him would compromise with



their rivals in Tripoli. Amid the subsequent stalemate in the UN peace process, Moscow came to be seen as one of the only countries, along with perhaps Egypt, capable of convincing Haftar to accept the LPA in principle and to reinvigorate the peace process. Attempting to replicate the Syria model seems to be paying off.

The ease with which Moscow was able to use high-powered diplomacy in the Libyan conflict was partly made possible by the relative absence of the United States in the peace process. The Obama administration chose to focus on counter-terrorism in Libya, and was loath to get any more involved to a country that appeared peripheral to its core security concerns. This stance has largely been maintained under the Trump administration. Europe, for its part, has been in disarray over Libya. Although the European Union imposed sanctions on several political figures in order to help broker the LPA, individual European states have failed to unite behind the LPA. France and Italy, in particular, have been working at cross purposes in Libya, supporting different local factions and competing as mediators in the conflict. Thus, a void was left for Moscow to fill.

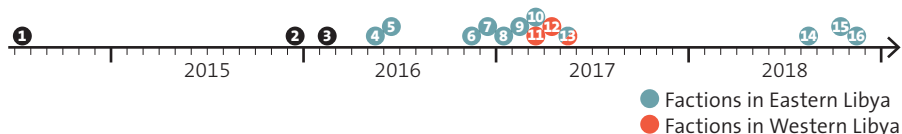
However, bringing Haftar on board the UN-backed political process proved more difficult than expected.

It also became evident that Haftar would be unable to conquer major population centers in Western Libya, including Tripoli and Misrata, where powerful militias nominally loyal to the GNA are based. Haftar's forces would have needed much more substantial military assistance from Russia to do so. While some observers expected Russia to more heavily intervene in Libya, Moscow has been reticent to do so. Libya does not have the same geostrategic significance as Syria. As a result, Russia altered its approach to Libya over the course of 2017. It began to reach out to the prime minister of the GNA in Tripoli, Fayez Al-Serraj, as well as representatives from Misrata. Moscow also began to stress that it was pursuing a policy of equidistance with regard to Libya's factions, and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Duma established a contact group charged with forging contacts to help Moscow engage with all relevant political factions in the country.²⁹

Russia's current approach to Libya is pragmatic and limited by the complexities of the Libyan conflict. Placing its weight behind Haftar helped Moscow consolidate its role as a key international stakeholder. However, Haftar is no Assad. He is not the head of a regime that can prevail over opposition groups, but rather the leader



Russia's Engagement in Libya: Mid-2014 to 2018



- 1 **July 2014** Outbreak of Libyan Civil War
- 2 **December 2015** Russia supports UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement
- 3 **February 2016** Russian state-energy company, Rosneft, signs a cooperation and investment agreement with Libya's National Oil Corporation
- 4 **May 2016** Haftar-allied Central Bank of Libya issues banknotes printed by Russia
- 5 **June 2016** Libyan militia leader Haftar visits Moscow for talks
- 6 **November 2016** Haftar visits Moscow for talks
- 7 **December 2016** Haftar visits Moscow for talks
- 8 **January 2017** Haftar boards a Russian aircraft carrier and video-conferences with Russian defence minister, Sergei Shoigu
- 9 **February 2017** Russian private security contractors sent to areas controlled by Haftar
- 10 **March 2017** Prime minister of the GNA, Fayez Al-Serraj, meets with Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov
- 11 **March 2017** US claims Russian Special Forces Operations unit deployed to western Egypt to assist Haftar
- 12 **April 2017** Misratan delegation received in Moscow for talks
- 13 **May 2017** Russian diplomacy helps bring about a meeting between Haftar and Al-Sarraj
- 14 **August 2018** Haftar visits Moscow for talks
- 15 **October 2018** British intelligence officials claim that Russia is moving troops and missiles into Libya
- 16 **November 2018** Haftar meets with Shoigu in Moscow ahead of Italian summit on Libya

Sources: Aljazeera; ECFR; Foreign Policy; Gulfnews; ISPI; Libya Herald; Libyan Express; Middle East Monitor; Reuters; The Arab Weekly; The Guardian; The New Arab

of a militia that has the capacity to control only parts of Libyan territory. With elections due to be held in 2019, Moscow appears to be looking toward the future. As in Syria, reconstruction is likely to imply large contracts for foreign companies, and Moscow will want Russian firms to benefit from these opportunities. In addition, Libya has large deposits of oil and gas that

could be explored and exploited in the future. Keeping its options open makes sense, particularly since Russian firms will have to compete with French and Italian ones that have a stronger foothold in Libya.³⁰

The Road Ahead

Russia is making inroads in several key states in the Arab world. The Arab



uprisings, and the uneven response of the West in responding to subsequent developments, have created openings that Russia has been able to fill, and to do so in a way that differs from European and US engagement.³¹ Moscow's acceptance of existing regimes and emphasis on state-led transition to democracy make it a comparatively easier partner than Europe or the United States, even if the latter have in reality often balanced concerns about stability with democracy promotion. As a result, Russian engagement offers more options to states that wish to reduce dependence on any one international actor or resist pressure from civil society or external actors for democratic reform.

Russian inroads in the Arab world also come at a time when the United States lacks a clear strategy towards the Middle East and North Africa, and the European Union still struggles to exert influence. The Obama administration underestimated the gains that Russia would reap from its military intervention in the Syrian conflict, as well as subsequent high-powered diplomacy. Largely thanks to Russian intervention, the Assad regime has survived, and now has no reason to accept a negotiated solution to the conflict that would threaten its survival. The Trump administration's recent equivocations on the future of US troops

in Syria casts additional doubt as to whether the United States is really a major stakeholder in the conflict, thereby boosting Russia's image as an alternative force for stability in the region.

Although Russia lacks the economic power to become an alternative to the West, it is likely to continue to strengthen its presence in the MENA region through its pragmatic and flexible approach. Russia has traditionally supplied arms to many countries in the region. Their militaries are thus familiar with Russian materiel and may prefer it, particularly since it is often sold on favorable terms. Russia's nuclear technological know-how is also of interest to many regimes in the region, and Moscow has proved ready to loan countries the funds to finance the construction of power plants and reactors. Arms sales and energy cooperation are thus likely to remain the main policy instruments employed by Moscow to engage regimes and to garner influence in the region.

However, these vectors of influence alone are not enough to secure Russia's status as a key powerbroker in the region and, thereby, enable it to influence decisions that are decisive to regional stability. As a result, Moscow may be expected to invest greater diplomatic resources in the region's



conflicts, taking advantage of opportunities to boost its profile where the West is absent or divided. This is likely to stop short of taking on the responsibilities of a major power in the region. As the Libyan case demonstrates, few states in the region are important enough for Moscow to put its full weight behind local regimes or conflict parties. Moscow is thus liable to proceed with caution. Over the near term, it may be content with carving out a greater role for itself alongside the West and, in particular, the United States.

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