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## WORKING PAPERS

# RUSSIAN POLICIES TOWARDS THE MENA REGION

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## ABSTRACT

Russia wields its influence in pursuit of important state interests. As in the Soviet era, contemporary Russia declares ambitious goals and pursues them in a desperate effort to play a decisive role in world politics. The overall objective of Russian foreign policy is to become a world power, and gaining influence over the MENA region is a means to achieving that end. As is clearly expressed in strategic documents, Russia considers the MENA region a priority domain for extensive diplomatic activity. The Kremlin's MENA policy incorporates a critically important premise, non-interventionism, that is attractive to the region's autocratic regimes, which resist Western-style liberal "interventionist" democracy. Russia's influence on these countries is increasingly strong due to its (1) de-ideologized approach, (2) assistance (in the form of long-term loans) in the construction of nuclear power plants as well as arms supplies, and (3) anti-American stance, reflecting Arab and Iranian (Islamic) interests.

## INTRODUCTION

*Though this be madness, yet there is method in 't.*

This analysis attempts to illustrate the effectiveness of the instruments of influence Russia wields in pursuit of its most important state interests, among which becoming a great power in the world appears to be of ultimate importance.

Russian foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has a long history dating back to the imperial era and running through the decades of the bipolar international system. The Kremlin's policymaking towards the MENA has always been driven by officially declared and/or presupposed (non-declared) state or national interests (*raisons d'état*) related predominantly to security issues and economic considerations. Russia in the 21st century –revived and strengthened after the instability and indiscretions of the 1990s caused by the collapse of the bipolar system – is retracing its previous steps in terms of building policy based on "hard interest". In other words, it is showing unambiguous signs of continuity with its former ambitions to gain a leading role in the international system with the aim to secure its own existence, survival and development by extending its sphere of influence geographically, politically and economically. However, historical evidence as well as the current picture show that this "triad" of influence has never succeeded in maintaining an equal balance but has always proved to be "asymmetric", eventually preventing the success of such ambitions. This imbalance, however, has never disrupted the continuity in Russia's hard security interests and other international or domestic ambitions; in fact, they have always been closely interrelated and complementary: security considerations have always been granted primary importance, while the other two have mainly served to maintain security guarantees.

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While doing so, the Kremlin has prioritized the principle of balancing the relations among the great powers, thus following the logic of a certain kind of classic *realpolitik* thinking.

Despite the conviction among some academics that its approach to MENA has been *ad hoc* and bilateral (Schumacher and Nitoiu 2015), Russia has never lacked a strategy towards the region in question. In contrast to Western strategies, of course, the Kremlin may have lacked precisely elaborated and comprehensive future strategies; yet it has used certain capacities and tools consistently and often in a very effective way.

First and foremost, arms supply has always played a decisive role because it is the easiest and most convenient way to engage a regime. In a war-prone region such as MENA, where most parties strive to secure themselves with weapons and armies, arms trade has always been of crucial importance and thus an attractive opportunity for Russia as an arms producer. And the Kremlin has never failed to use its trading power in such terms.

The other important tool – or instrument of influence – used by Russia has been its nuclear capacity, more precisely its offer to build nuclear power plants (NPP) in the countries of the MENA on overwhelmingly favourable conditions. NPPs have often posed an irresistible temptation to countries lacking in natural energy resources, such as Egypt, and in such deals Russia has never agreed to less than its greatest possible benefit, as will be addressed in this analysis. Russia's use of this tool has attracted significant attention from Western governments, especially when applied to increasingly influential powers such as Iran, which has sought to secure itself by means of nuclear energy resources, raising suspicions among the international community that Iran is aspiring to expand its nuclear potential for more than just economic reasons. It is very important to examine the possible connections between the seemingly unconditional economic as well as diplomatic manoeuvres of Russia and the benefits it gains in return.

There is a temptation to see these tools used by the Kremlin as closely interrelated, and it is easy to presuppose the existence of certain forms of agreement in such manoeuvres, given that they provide such powerful mutual benefits to the parties concerned. From this it is possible to recognize the importance of another instrument of Russian influence that in fact belongs to the category of so-called soft power – the cultural or *ideational dimension* of mutual understanding and support. This is manifest in Russia's *toleration* for cultural and political coexistence, which can be interpreted as acceptance of the rightfulness of different political models and regimes. This conceptualization, of course, is more attractive to the non-Western world than the Western values of liberal democracy, which they perceive as a potential threat to their traditional values, deeply embedded in their highly religious societies. Therefore, on the basis of such similar approaches, the Kremlin succeeds in being more convincing in terms of ideational dimensions as well. Russia's cooperation is not dependent upon these countries' readiness and willingness to accept and adhere to the democratic and liberal traditions of Europe and America, and with no such strings attached, Russia has greater potential for engaging in cooperation in other important areas.

## 1. CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY: SOVIET AND RUSSIAN MENA POLICIES

The Soviet Union exerted a tremendous amount of influence over most MENA countries during the decades of the bipolar international system. Regimes such as Egypt, Syria and Algeria played a central role for Moscow and were granted unprecedented support in the military and economic spheres alike. Others were less important in the Kremlin's outlook.

During the Cold War several MENA countries, in particular those in North Africa, hesitated to engage with – or tactically alternated between – the Soviet Union and the West in terms of multidimensional cooperation or even strategic partnership. Many of these countries used the “Soviet card” as an asset to strengthen their position in negotiations with the West. The two main actors in the bipolar international system strived to achieve dominance and to establish a certain level of control over the region, including promoting their own economic and ideational core values; in addition, the Kremlin considered the region a strategically important market for its military-oriented industry.

While many examples point to the USSR's pro-Arab stance, it was not necessarily directly anti-Israel, because the ultimate target was never Israel itself. Moscow's decisions were mostly determined by the fact that Israel has been an actual American outpost and stronghold in the Middle East. The Kremlin's goal was always to counter American geopolitical ambitions. The comparatively weak Middle Eastern Arab states were not difficult to influence, and the USSR successfully utilized them for its own ends – at least up to a point.

The transition to a unipolar international system in the early 1990s brought major changes to the foreign policy of the Kremlin: the “splendid Soviet times” of the 1960s–1980s were over. Moscow's former military and political influence was reduced dramatically in the MENA region, reaching a low point in the early 1990s; even its annual trade volume with the Arab countries dropped below 1 per cent, rendering commercial relations with the entire region largely symbolic, especially in comparison with the annual 20–25 per cent trade volume of the previous decades (Gusarov 1997). The Soviet footprint of the Cold War period was mainly represented in the heritage of grandiose industrial constructions, such as the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, the hydropower stations built on the Euphrates in Syria and several large projects in other countries (Gusarov 1997).

Accordingly, the volume of weapons sales and transfers suffered greatly, dropping to historical lows especially in comparison with the 1980s, when the Arab countries imported Soviet weaponry worth a total of 55 billion dollars and the USSR supplied up to 80 per cent (Algeria) or even 100 per cent (Syria) of their arms needs. In return, the USSR imported crude oil from these states in quantities that fully covered Soviet needs (Gusarov 1997). The dissolution of the Soviet Union put an end to that as well.

As these transactions and the Soviet industrial projects were mainly carried out in a *barter* format or were given as long-term loans, these regimes were often discreetly obligated to compensate Moscow's generosity in political terms. Thus, the Kremlin used its military and industrial potential in MENA countries to expand its foreign political latitude. This eventually changed with the end of bipolarity, and Russia has not been able to regain the power it previously had during the Soviet era.

The first steps toward recovery were taken only in the mid-1990s (Mohammed 2015, Gusarov 1997) and intensified when Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000: the foreign policy of his presidency has been marked by increasing endeavours and economic initiatives in most MENA countries, only to reach its present peak in utilizing the opportunity of the Syrian armed conflict.

Russia, hoping to re-establish itself as one of the main external economic providers in the MENA region, was most visible in its arms exports and the sale of civilian nuclear infrastructure (nuclear power plants), and worked hard to resume the close economic ties that had flourished in the Soviet era. Muammar Gaddafi's Libya is an excellent illustration of Russian efforts and their failure, as the Kremlin's attempts to renew relations with the regime amid the turbulence of the revolutionary movements ended with limited or no success. Before the Arab Spring, in 2008, Putin made an official visit to Gaddafi, something that no Kremlin leader had ever done before, and agreed to forgive Libya's debts, worth billions of dollars, in return for a number of new economic contracts between the two countries, including technical and military cooperation agreements worth about 10 billion dollars (Schumacher and Nitou 2015: 99). But Gaddafi's fall made it all very difficult, if not impossible.

Similar tactical manoeuvring occurred with other countries as well. In 2001, Putin and Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika signed a strategic partnership agreement, and between 2003 and 2012 Rosoboronexport and the Russian military complex increased sales to Algeria by more than 10 per cent, making the country the third most important customer for Russian weapons (Schumacher and Nitou 2015: 103).

In Iran, one hundred years of Russian and Soviet domination (albeit shared with Great Britain) ended in 1946, when American and British influence was established and Iran became one of the main pillars of US containment efforts towards the Soviet Union. Following the Islamic revolution of 1979, however, in spite of the "neither east, nor west" policy doctrine of the Islamic Republic, Iran gradually drew closer to Russia, which succeeded in negotiating and building a nuclear power plant in recent years. This illustrated the Kremlin's geopolitical ambitions – in addition to its economic motives – to get a grip on the region's political balance by symbolically allying with a leading anti-Israeli, anti-US actor in the Middle East. Although Russian–Iranian cooperation in the civilian use of nuclear energy per se was not the subject of the international sanctions against Iran, it did play an indirect role: on the one hand, it made the passing of the sanctions more difficult, and on the other hand, it made the scope of the sanctions more limited, since Russia was protecting its own interests. This case clearly indicates the power of the nuclear instrument of influence in the Kremlin's hands, which is being increasingly applied to the regimes of the region.

Another example of the use of this nuclear instrument in the region is in the case of Egypt. For Russia, support for Egypt's nuclear energy ambitions has been strategically important in the post-revolutionary period (Schumacher and Nitou 2015: 100). The Kremlin expressed willingness to cooperate with President Mohamed Morsi, even if initially it was not in favour of his coming to power. However, following the military coup that ousted him, Russia went on to work with the new president, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, entering into a contractual obligation to build Egypt's first nuclear power station. This case is another example of the intensification of Russian diplomatic and economic activities in the region following the Arab uprisings (Schumacher and Nitou 2015: 100-1).

The most current and so far probably the biggest Russian *success* has been in Syria. This, however, is very different from the above-mentioned economic (nuclear) interests, since in Syria Russia has engaged in an extensive and well-choreographed military campaign for its own geopolitical purposes and not – as the rhetoric suggests – for the sake of preserving the Syrian regime, nor to protect Assad himself. The Assad regime’s survival is in fact an instrument in the hands of the Kremlin to counterbalance American influence and gain comparative political advantages in the region. In other words, for Russia Syria is about US–Russian relations and also a means to fight against Islamist radicalism. Thus, it follows the logic and foreign policy approach of the Soviet era, when unilateral intervention and proxy wars were in fact reflections of the global military-political race of the superpowers. Thus, it is not the actual fate of the individual crisis that is of primary importance, but the limitation of the other’s influence in a given region. In fact, neither side has ever practised any self-restraint or expressed moral considerations when a situation required either a reduction or an increase in the intensity of a military or other conflict. Both parties have acted to protect their geopolitical interests, and more or less the same logic is being applied to regional conflicts today. The case of Syria is no exception.

## 2. RUSSIAN STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO THE REGION

The *latitude* of Russian foreign policy in global terms has always been very wide, and apart from periodic fluctuations it has always proved to be strictly competitive with the main international players. Similar to during the Soviet era, contemporary Russia declares ambitious goals and consequently pursues them in a desperate effort to play a decisive role in world politics. As is clearly expressed in strategic documents and in speeches by Putin and his closest circle, Russia considers the MENA region a priority domain for extensive diplomatic activity. The latest foreign policy concept defines this high priority as serving the need for self-protection – *self-help* in neoclassical terms – in a world that is slowly but steadily becoming multipolar and that is increasingly dangerous and unpredictable (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016). Thus, in Russian political thinking the world and their approach to it appear to resemble the international chaos of *realpolitik* and the accordingly self-protective foreign policy behaviour of individual states.

As the concept argues, the above-mentioned self-protection refers to the extensive international expansion of Islamist terrorism and the inability of a single state to combat it. Given the difficult history of the Chechen wars in the 1990s, the rapidly growing Muslim population in the otherwise demographically shrinking Russia and the proximity of Muslim societies in Central Asia, these fears may well be justified. On such grounds, Russia’s assumption of an agile diplomatic role in the Middle East and North Africa is interpreted as a necessary means to ensure security guarantees against Islamist radicalism.

The critical need for active self-representation in the decisions of world politics was expressed already in 2006, when Vladislav Surkov introduced the much-debated political views set out in Putin’s concept of “sovereign democracy” (Surkov 2006). The image of an increasingly chaotic world order that provides the basis for the concept mentioned above is already present in his speech. In such circumstances, in an ever more globalizing world, Russia has no choice but to get involved in large international debates and decisions, otherwise those decisions would be

made contrary to its interests. A decade-long time interval could not weaken the direct linkage between this point of view and the statements of the foreign policy concept, thus it suggests a continuity between the speech and current policy. According to it this is imperative that Russia, for its own well-considered interests, becomes a decisive player in the most important international questions. This includes, of course, the Middle East, which has also become much more chaotic and multipolar. And although the Arab–Israeli conflict seems to have become an “outdated”, Cold War concept, Russia still tends to view the region through such a paradigm. As stated in the aforementioned concept, Moscow emphasizes a *comprehensive* solution, that is, one that would satisfy the claims of each party concerned in the Middle East in general, perhaps most importantly those of the great powers – including Russia. Such *comprehensiveness*, however, in the current context, is probably not an expression of a pro- or anti-Israeli stance, nor is it about the protection of certain Arab or Iranian interests: today it might rather be Russia’s *terminus technicus* to involve as many influential parties as possible in addressing the Middle East’s challenges – including, of course, Russia itself. The Kremlin’s inclusion is designed to happen by means of it supporting and protecting Syria, a country that has always been “key to the peace process” (Landis 2007).

Based on further statements of the concept, one may conclude that Russia’s current military campaign in Syria is a self-protective measure against the international expansion of radical Islamism as well as a catalyst for a comprehensive solution to the conflicts in the Middle East, starting with the Syrian war. Concerning Syria, the concept devotes an entire paragraph to emphasizing the exceptional strategic importance of Syria in Russian thinking and Moscow’s support for its territorial integrity. In other words, Russia does not agree to any territorial division of Syria (nor does anyone else), not even for the sake of the Kurdish separatist movement, which would not only weaken Syria, the Kremlin’s closest ally in MENA, but could easily lead to further escalation and a redistribution of the power balance in the region, which would serve the interests of American foreign policy. Russia, of course, cannot afford to let that happen.

According to Russia’s interpretation, the rapid expansion of Islamist radicalism in recent years is one of the negative consequences of the Arab uprisings. Russia perceives the Arab uprisings not as a step towards democracy, but rather as an attempt to establish a more Islamic identity and traditional values. Thus Russian thinkers refer to it primarily as “Islamization” and not democratization (Dannreuther 2015: 80). Given the numerous unfavourable outcomes of the Arab uprisings, Russian analysts are convinced that the chances of unpredictable and dangerous instability or even anarchy are increased by radical social and political changes, as opposed to state-led transformation in the light of Surkov’s “sovereign democracy” concept (Dannreuther 2015: 89-90).

In Russian analytical thinking, according to the “sovereign democracy” concept, any enhancement or change in a society must take place only and exclusively under the close control of central organs of power, even if such a process occurs at a slow and gradual pace. This decisively excludes any possible variations of society- or population-led transformation in the political and other structures of a country, let alone those driven by external factors or initiatives (Dannreuther 2015: 89-90). Viewed through this prism, the rather conservative Islamic regimes that are also hesitant about (and resistant to) structural transformation find justification and support for their rigid preservation of the religious values of their political and social architecture. Further, they

find it “more appropriate for promoting change in the Middle East rather than Western-supported regime change” (Dannreuther 2015: 79).

The Kremlin’s MENA policy, in the light of Surkov’s “sovereign democracy” paradigm, incorporates a critically important premise, *non-interventionism*, that is attractive in the eyes of the region’s autocratic regimes, which resist Western-style liberal “interventionist” democracy.

When observing and analysing Moscow’s motivations and instruments of manoeuvre, it is useful to consider Sergei Ivanov’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2008. Ivanov claimed that Russia was finished with *exporting ideologies*, which was a key factor in the times of bipolarity, and instead it would export only goods and capital and devote itself to the ultimate goal of economic modernization (Ivanov 2008). This fits well with the ideas of sovereign democracy, and this *deideologized* approach could easily be a key to the diplomatic successes recently achieved by Russia with the regimes of North Africa and the Middle East, in the Persian Gulf and Iran, and especially in the Arab uprising countries.

### 3. RUSSIAN STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE REGION

Russia’s core state interests, or *raisons d’état*, traditionally contain two main dimensions that closely correlate with and mutually depend upon each other: ensuring its own security and furthering the country’s economic prosperity. The former is first of all devoted to improving its self-defence (or *self-help*) capabilities, while the latter involves mainly the deepest possible economic cooperation with the rest of the world – with special attention to the highly developed regions and/or politically important ones. The dependency between the two dimensions is somewhat disproportionate, with priority given to security considerations, and thus economic prosperity is meant to serve the former and is mainly subordinate to it. This can be observed in the fact that the military industry and capacity are at a more advanced level than general economic development.

The above presumption is supported by the Russian national security strategy that is in effect until 2020 (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015). According to this document, the second of six national interests is to ensure the sustainable development of democracy and civil society in Russia, while other two relate directly to security: to guarantee Russia’s sovereignty and to become a *world power (mirovaya derzhava)*. The latter in particular deserves special attention if one is to understand the core intentions of Russian foreign policy. This is the *overall objective* of Russian foreign policy; therefore, it has primacy over everything else and all other particular purposes are determined to facilitate this primary objective. Russia’s pursuit of great power status is not motivated by a desire for prestige or honour, as many acclaimed constructivists suggest (Tsygankov 2012, Steele 2008). Academic efforts to present Russian foreign policy as based merely on *vanity* (honour), aimed at discrediting it, lack the capacity to understand the Kremlin’s pragmatic motivations and fail to discover the core essence of what Russian policy represents by itself. But above all, such presumptions are not simply *mistakes*: they commit one of the worst strategic errors possible – they underestimate the enemy. Theories that attribute Russia’s foreign policy to a desire for mere honour are misleading, therefore, and dangerous due to their limited capacity to understand Russian objectives.

It is in fact not honour that Russia is after, but something much more important, something that is imperative: its own survival in the face of a perceived deadly threat from the numerous external enemies Russia feels it is surrounded by, namely: NATO expansion, led by the USA; and the spread of radical Islamism, and the prospect that its proponents might obtain weapons of mass destruction.

In order to guarantee its safety, Russia is eager to participate in decisions on global policy, especially those dealing with international security issues. As a complementary argument to getting involved in such decisions, it can be added that Russia raises objections to the interventionist Western – American-led – international strategies towards certain key regions of the world and evaluates them negatively, arguing that the decision-makers tend to take the wrong decisions. On numerous occasions, key Russian politicians have expressed the opinion that certain Western powers simply do not fully understand what they are doing. Thus, from the Russian point of view, it is unacceptable to stay away and let others make the *wrong decisions* in questions concerning global security issues that may negatively influence Russia's security and national interests.

President Putin pointed out in his speech to the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly that some world leaders do not even understand what they are trying to accomplish (Putin 2015). As long as Russia considers others' decisions incorrect, it should take a bigger role in decision-making. Therefore, it is imperative that Russia is included in the circle of most influential states in order to gain access to the most important decisions of world politics and prevent others (who do not fully understand what they are doing) from taking the wrong decisions. Proximity to these decisions and direct influential involvement comes naturally to a state that is a *great power* in the world, and vice versa: effective influence in global questions is a substantive characteristic of any great power. Therefore, becoming a great power or "world state" is the number one priority among Russian strategic interests. Simple *honour*-related suppositions, as constructivist international relations theorists may claim, cannot compete with such pragmatic considerations and cannot be applied when deciphering the core essence of Russian foreign policy. Instead, hard security-related realpolitik pragmatism is the key to understanding the Kremlin's foreign policy outlook.

Other considerations, such as maintaining a mere *strategic* presence (Bakhtin 2013: 1) in certain key regions and acute conflicts in the world, cannot be Russia's motivation; rather, it is the *effective* presence that is an instrument of influence to shape decisions on strategic international issues.

Russia wants to be present, and participate directly or indirectly, in international issues in order to obtain a decisive vote in such international questions. If it does so, Russia can no longer be bypassed in negotiating processes. To be a *stakeholder* in a conflict is the best leverage to influence its final outcome for one's own benefit. Russia thinks it is better to sacrifice certain assets and become involved in strategic international questions, than to remain in the role of external observer in "splendid isolation" and let others take the *wrong decisions*, which might eventually be contrary to Russia's interest. This logic can be directly derived from Surkov's theory on Russian "sovereign democracy" as well as from other Russian key strategic documents discussed previously.

It is critical to recognize the instruments of influence Russia applies in international relations and by which the Kremlin seeks to realize state interests. The variety of these instruments is plentiful,

involving political and diplomatic, military and economic strategies and methods that apply more or less equally to each individual country or to an entire region – depending on their individual characteristics and/or the status quo. Based on such objective considerations, certain world regions are privileged in Moscow’s foreign policy outlook while others remain less important.

The countries of MENA belong to a region that is of vital importance for Russia and to which it has accordingly devoted an enormous amount of resources and efforts since the end of the Second World War. The Soviet Union, and now Russia, have focused many of their assets and instruments of influence on this region in the hope of building fruitful and lasting relations with both the key and the less influential local regimes. The mode of cooperation, concentrated in the economic and armament spheres, reflects Moscow’s primary state interests.

This approach is largely based upon *civilizational* and cultural constructive components (Mohammed 2015). Certain civilizational elements have always played key roles and provided these countries with an attractive counter-direction to neutralize Western political and ideational gravitation. In Soviet times it was manifested in support for the process of decolonization, as this converged well with the struggle of these regimes and their societies for independence and sovereignty. In recent times, a definite expression of toleration for cultural, ethnic and political diversity plays this role. However, the most attractive feature of this argument is the implication that it acknowledges the right to existence of variously restricted democratic, or directly non-democratic, regimes and societies – contrary to Western *democratizing* intentions, which in most MENA countries are met with hesitation or desperate resistance, especially after the lessons learnt from the Arab uprisings.

The Kremlin has described the overthrow of non-democratic yet stable regimes as a danger to lasting stability in the region (Schumacher and Nitoiu 2015: 99). The expression of such toleration has provided Moscow with a comparative advantage in influence and conviction. The representation of this (counter-) argument belongs to the set of political and diplomatic instruments of contemporary Russian foreign policy.

Based on such ideational fundamentals and having reached the necessary level of mutual understanding, the Kremlin has paved the way for further political and trade agreements with the regimes of the MENA countries. Any further steps may come more easily, including satisfying basic requirements for energy resources and military equipment as well as training of army officers and even holding joint military exercises.

Russia’s offers to build large industrial and infrastructural plants, and increasingly nuclear power plants, in Iran, Egypt, Algeria and even Turkey (see Table 1) seem to be irresistible to some of these countries. This is especially true when such projects are granted on unprecedentedly advantageous preconditions, as the Kremlin does not hesitate to provide know-how but also long-term loans while – in return – it discreetly counts on those countries to abstain from or vote in favour of international initiatives in the UN that are of critical importance to Russia. This *deideologized* cooperation based on the mutually advantageous – “win-win” – gratification of each other’s interests has paid off well for the Kremlin.

**Table 1** | Russian-built nuclear power plants in MENA countries

Country	No. of NPPs	Year	Dollars (bn)	Megawatts
Iran (Bushehr)	1 (2)	2011 (2016)	-	1,000
Egypt (El Dabaa)	1	2015–2024	30	4,800
Algeria	1	2025	-	-
Turkey	1	2018	-	-
Jordan	1	-	-	-

The supply of arms is and has always been another important instrument of influence for engaging a client/regime, and it is always a long-term project. Ideological and other explicit or implicit considerations or expectations by a supplier that might come as a necessary precondition to an agreement of such strategic importance play a decisive role. To the regimes of deeply religious societies, a partner actively advocating the values of secularism might appear less attractive or even threatening, especially in comparison with a contestant such as Russia that seeks no *exporting values* (Ivanov 2008) with few or no roots in an Islamic – or Islamist – country.

The Arab uprisings, somewhat surprisingly and quite contrary to initial expectations, helped Russia strengthen its position significantly in most of the MENA countries and weakened the influence and position of the democratic West. The former eventually opposed regime change when accompanied by violence, while the latter are seen as countries in favour of urgent regime change irrespective of the intense violence that characterized the later stages of the Arab uprisings (Dannreuther 2015: 81).

The above example may serve as an illustration of the ideational means by which Russia surpasses Western partners in the competition for cooperation with MENA countries, and how this provides it with opportunities for further trade and military cooperation that eventually opens the door to becoming a *direct stakeholder* in the most important issues of the region. Having become one, Russia has taken the first step to realizing its ultimate long-term interest – to become a great power. The case study outlined below may illustrate how Russia is manoeuvring to transform itself from a regional power into something more powerful.

#### 4. CASE STUDY: SYRIA

Russia’s recent engagement in Syria has the potential to significantly impact the balance of power in the region and beyond. This is the first conflict outside the former Soviet area in which Russia has become involved. Thus, Syria can be considered its first effort on a global scale. From the point of view of the neorealist theory of international relations, this intervention can be considered as an attempt to preserve and strengthen Russia’s *structural position* in the international system by means of protecting its closest ally in the MENA region. This consideration has become crucially important since Syria is now a partner in a countervailing coalition against common rivals. As Russia and Syria (as well as Iran) are bound together by a shared opposition to American hegemony, this self-protective logic – based on security considerations to preserve and expand the boundaries of its sphere of influence – can be applied to this military intervention.

While security is the most important consideration, Moscow also has economic interests in preserving Assad's rule, as Russia is an important supplier of arms to Syria and other countries in MENA. By 2012, Syrian contracts with the Russian defence industry exceeded 4 billion dollars (Mankoff 2012). Russia also has energy interests in Syria that it is prepared to defend (Orenstein and Romer 2015). Assad's overthrow would not be in Russia's geopolitical interest, most likely because it might be seen as a *menace* great enough to damage Russia's structural position in the international system. Russia may also factor in the possible extension of Islamist groups that could destabilize the predominantly Muslim North Caucasus.

In order to fully understand Russia's Syrian intervention and unconditional support to Assad, however, one must look to the overthrow of Libya's Gaddafi in the Arab uprisings and the impact of this development on Russia's Middle East policy. Moscow's hesitation – caused by the debate between Medvedev and Putin on whether to support or oppose the international intervention in Libya – led to consequences unfavourable to Russian interests in the region. Economic and political plans that had been painfully elaborated between Moscow and the Libyan regime just before the unrest broke out were cancelled, causing tremendous economic losses and potentially threatening Russia's international standing (Schumacher and Nitoiu 2015: 99-100), as the developments served Western and American interests rather than those of the Kremlin. Thus, Russia could not afford another similar defeat in Syria that would potentially lead to a loss of influence in the Middle East as a whole. The lessons learnt from the Libyan case meant that Russia had no choice but to intervene actively and effectively to protect Assad's regime and its own geostrategic interests. At the same time, from the Russian perspective Syria is a more important strategic ally than Libya, not only because of its previously close relations with the USSR, but also because Syria has been one of the key regional Arab powers, with a "direct stake" in the Arab-Israeli conflict (Dannreuther 2015). Through Damascus and Assad, Moscow found a way to gain influence in this conflict. This aspect deserves closer attention in the wider geopolitical context if one is to better understand Russia's initial motives.

The Kremlin's foreign policy strategists do not apply a well-defined and unified or standardized approach to the MENA region as a whole; rather, they tend to handle each country separately and in accordance with its individual characteristics and importance for Russia. Trying to maintain the friendliest possible ties with each, they pursue Russian interests in the region accordingly and proceed with discretion and caution so as not to hurt the national/state interests of these regimes, while offering mutual benefits to each. Israel, however, stands out as the only exception, since Russia, like the Soviet Union previously, finds it easier to establish a common language with the Arab states. This, in particular, is not surprising if one takes into consideration the fact that Moscow has always looked at and handled American allies as rivals. By means of maintaining closer cooperation with and providing support to Arab states – and the Islamic Republic of Iran – in North Africa and the Middle East, the Kremlin has always participated on one side in one of the most important conflicts in the world – the Arab-Israeli conflict. The extensive and complex nature of this conflict has had direct and indirect effects on recurrent mainstream tendencies in world politics. Russia, fuelled by its political ambitions to play a leading role in international affairs, could not afford to stay on the sidelines of a confrontation as important as the Middle East conflict. If one is to become a global player, one must be effectively involved in the Middle East, and this is exactly the role Russia so desperately strives to achieve. To be capable of influencing, directly or indirectly,

one of the world's most important and most difficult international problems can be considered as a characteristic of the most powerful. On this hypothetical battlefield of geopolitics, Moscow has almost always preferred – with a few exceptions – mutually advantageous cooperation with regimes and interests in opposition to Israel's, and hence those of the USA (Bourtman 2006). By providing support to Syria, Putin's Russia seems to be engaging with the bloc of states pursuing Arab/Palestinian interests in the Middle East, and it is devoting its assets primarily to supporting anti-Israeli – and, most recently, anti-Kurdish – and thus anti-American interests. In the eyes of some, counterbalancing US ambitions in such a way gives Russia the *grandeur* of a leading world political player, and recently there have been numerous signs that the MENA states are largely in favour of it.

In this overarching geopolitical endeavour by the Kremlin, Syria has proven to be the key element since it plays – and has always played – a central role in the anti-Israel bloc, and given the long-standing historical ties between Damascus and Moscow, cooperation between the two comes naturally. By effectively supporting the Assad regime, Russia has recently become an influential stakeholder in the Middle East and has gained access to one of the most important levers of control in the region. Syria's core interests are sufficiently rigid and deep-rooted to remain unchanged over an extended period, giving Russia a chance to embed itself in the Middle East. By preserving the Assad regime, which in 2015 seemed to be on the verge of complete collapse, Moscow has won the full and unconditional loyalty of Syria. This provides the Kremlin with additional benefits, including enhanced political, military and economic authority among like-minded states in the MENA region.

## CONCLUSION

The MENA region continues to play a central role in the Russian Federation's foreign policy, and its significance for the Kremlin has not changed since Soviet times: it is a proxy domain for manoeuvring in the global political contest to win a seat among the great powers, and thus a medium for pursuing its geostrategic interests. Despite the lack of a long-term holistic strategy towards the region, Russia's influence on these countries is increasing due to its (1) deideologized approach, (2) assistance (in the form of long-term loans) in the construction of nuclear power plants as well as arms supplies, and (3) anti-American stance, reflecting Arab and Iranian (Islamic) interests. The first element represents a departure from the Kremlin's extensively ideologized foreign policy in the Cold War period, while the latter two constitute a continuity with the foreign policy of the Soviet Union.

With the gradual *revitalization* of foreign affairs that has occurred since the beginning of the Putin era, Russia has intensified its diplomatic presence and economic initiatives in the MENA countries during and since the Arab uprisings. This intensification was further stimulated by the extensive economic sanctions imposed on Russia after its annexation of Crimea in 2014, which severed the financial and economic ties that Russia depended on for its industrial modernization. Moscow had no choice but to find alternatives to West European (EU) trading partners in other regions of the world, for instance, among the countries of the Middle East and Northern Africa, as well as Asia or even Latin America. It is a very complex and laborious task, but the Kremlin seems to have succeeded in establishing new relations and has already managed to achieve, in a surprisingly

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short amount of time, a few outstanding agreements. Russia has not turned away from Western developed countries: it has only started *alternating* economic and other relations between (1) highly developed Western democracies and (2) the rapidly growing – at least in economic and trading terms – countries with a lower level of democratic development. This has a serious potential to prove to be a completely viable strategy in the medium and long term. Nevertheless, while increasingly emphasizing on less democratic (or quasi-democratic) but economically very promising countries along – or at the expense of – the EU and other Western partners is not a mainstream trend (neither an *unorthodox* one) and at first glance may not seem to be the most intelligent choice, there is *method* in it.

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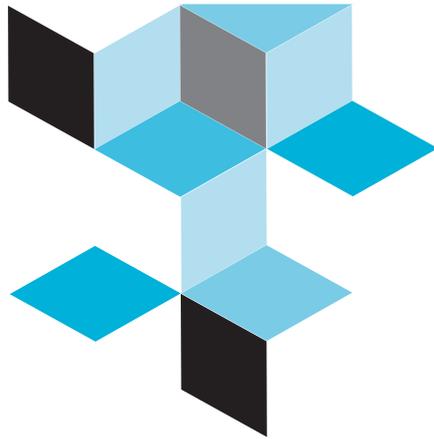
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**Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA)** is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

**MENARA** maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

**MENARA** is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.



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