

Mediterranean Dialogue Series | No. 12

REGIONAL PROGRAM POLITICAL DIALOGUE SOUTH MEDITERRANEAN



RUSSIA IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: STRATEGIES AND ASPIRATIONS

The following report is based on points raised during a *Mediterranean Advisory Group* meeting on “Russia in the Mediterranean” held by the KAS Regional Program South Mediterranean in September 2017 in Tunis. The report includes additional analytical commentary by the authors.

Authors: Anna Borshchevskaya | Mohamed Eljarh

Introduction

Moscow’s sway in the Mediterranean region is growing and many actors increasingly consider Putin a key regional player. In the context of ambivalent positions of Western states towards the region, to many, Putin represents state sovereignty and stability, a non-Islamist agenda, and strong decisive leadership; and in a region plagued by conflict and instability perceptions often trump reality. Furthermore, many MENA countries are looking to diversify their economies and political relationships. Russia provides an important diversification opportunity to them, beyond simply signaling to the West that they have other options.

As the West still debates whether Putin has a strategy for the region, it has yet to come up with its own strategic response to counter Russia’s influence in the region. Meanwhile, Moscow’s goals in the region appear to span beyond Syria, with Moscow’s growing alliance with Iran and its expanding influence in North Africa. The paper at hand aims to shed light on Russia’s growing presence in the Mediterranean region and the shifts this presence has caused in the geopolitical balance of power.

Russia's posture: Syria and Iran

Moscow and Damascus: historic ties and continuing support

Moscow and Damascus have a history of close ties that goes back at least seventy years. The Soviet Union supported Syria's request for independence in the spring and summer of 1945 during the UN Security Council debates. Once Syria gained independence Moscow established relations with Damascus. Syria has been Moscow's most important foothold in the region and closest ally in the Arab world to whom it provided military aid. When Hafez al-Assad took Syria's presidency in November 1970 through a military coup, the two countries continued to cooperate and signed a number of important bilateral treaties, such as the 1972 peace and security pact and the November 8, 1980, USSR Friendship and Cooperation treaty. At least forty thousand Syrians studied in elite Soviet schools and many returned to Syria to occupy chief government posts. Half of those who set the general direction of the Syrian Ba'ath party spoke Russian.

When Putin assumed Russia's presidency in May 2000 he worked to regain positions Russia lost in the Middle East during the 1990s in a zero sum anti-Western approach to foreign policy to reduce Western influence. Syria's geostrategic position, especially at a time when Moscow lost its historical standing in the Black Sea, was especially important to Putin, in addition to the pre-existent close ties. From a geostrategic view point, Syria provides an entry into the region and access to the Mediterranean. Putin protected Bashar al-Assad from the very beginning diplomatically, politically, and economically. But the September 2015 intervention which occurred in the context of years of Western ambivalence and projected weakness was a game changer because it officially put Russia back on the Middle East map.

The Kremlin has several reasons for protecting Assad. First, Putin's priority is regime survival. He genuinely believes the West sponsors regime change against authoritarian leaders, be it in the peaceful color revolutions in the post-Soviet space, the Middle East, or protests against Putin himself. Indeed, Putin and other senior Russia officials have often said so directly. Putin, for instance, accused then-US State Secretary Hillary Clinton of giving the "signal" for anti-Putin protestors to come out in Russia in late 2011 and early 2012.¹ In this context Moscow perceived the NATO Libya campaign as just another Western-imposed regime change by other means. Second, historically Russia's foreign policy gets more aggressive abroad when things worsen at home, and the Kremlin seeks to distract the domestic audience.² Syria provided a great domestic distraction at a time when Russian economy was doing poorly, and the emotional wave of patriotic feelings the Kremlin had induced with its earlier Crimea annexation was also going down.³ Third, as a landlocked country Russia always sought warm water ports, and Tartus was Russia's only naval facility outside the former Soviet Union. Fourth, Russia had billions of investments in Syria which included energy deals that it seeks to protect.

Putin officially went into Syria to fight ISIS and thus prevent radicalized fighters from returning to Russia. Moscow however targeted virtually everyone but ISIS. These actions suggested that Moscow aimed to put the West in front of a choice: it is either ISIS or Assad. While the weaponry Russia brought to Syria was irrelevant to fighting ISIS, it served to project Russia's power in the region and to limit the ability of Western actors to maneuver militarily, as the next section outlines in more detail.

¹ For Putin's comment about giving "the signal" see:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/dec/08/vladimir-putin-hillary-clinton-russia>

These protests erupted Russia after an election many in Russia saw as fraudulent. Protestors asked for a "Russia without Putin." The protests were peaceful and the largest since the fall of the Soviet Union.

² An oft-cited example is the comment of tsarist advisor Vyacheslav von Plehve in 1904, who said Russia needs "a short victorious war" to prevent the flow of revolution in the country. Other examples followed. For instance, Boris Yeltsin's advisors thought in 1994 that a quick and easy victory with Chechnya would boost Yelssin's presidency. See for example Rajan Menon, "Russia's Quagmire: On ending the standoff in Chechnya," *Boston Review*, June 1, 2004 <http://bostonreview.net/rajan-menon-chechnya-russia>.

³ See for example Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Syria Propaganda," *Forbes*, November 11, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-syria-propaganda>.

Moscow's intervention also revealed a pro-Shia tilt in the region, while its expanded military presence in Syria, according to some experts, presents an alternative to the US bases in Spain and the Incirlik base in Turkey with implications for the military balance in the region. It also suggests that Moscow's game plan for the region is not limited to Syria. Indeed, as the North Africa section shows, Moscow has many interests in the MENA. Meanwhile, no matter what Moscow says about its military operations in Syria, Russia's military presence in Syria is now assured for at least the next 49 years, as Moscow signed an agreement to keep the Tartus naval base and Khmeimim air base there for this time period.

Moscow's military operations in Syria

Broadly speaking, from a military expert perspective, Syria is now an arena for defense competition with the West which Russia seems to be currently winning because of its non-linear understanding of the Syrian conflict. Moscow used Syria as a testing ground and advertisement for new weapons and the tactic is paying off. Russian arms exports received a substantial boost. Half of Russian arms sales abroad is combat aircraft, and this number is expected to grow. Russia overall is the world's second largest arms exporter after the US, but in emerging markets (excluding the pro-Western Gulf) it has certain advantages.

Russia's military affairs have undergone major changes especially after Moscow's 2008 Georgia invasion which revealed weaknesses in the Russian armed forces. Moscow has been boosting its capabilities ever since and while it did not succeed everywhere it can point to many serious improvements. Overall the Kremlin shows flexibility and learning from experience. This adds to reasons why the West should be careful to underestimate the Kremlin's military capabilities.

Amon other developments, Moscow is currently attempting to create anti-access/area denial (A2AD) bubbles, from Crimea to Syria through the deployment of S-400s and other operations in order to limit the West's ability to maneuver. Without Crimea these operations would not be possible, which suggests Moscow perhaps had more of a long-term plan than many in the West had realized.

A complete A2AD bubble would mean that the West cannot operate at all. While this is not the case, Moscow still succeeded partially. The West now must take Moscow into account when thinking through military actions in a way it did not have to before. For instance, some military experts believe the reason why the US used targeted cruise missile strikes against Assad's facilities in April 2017, following Assad's largest use of chemical weapons since 2013, is because the risk of using manned aircraft was too high given the Russian air presence; the US wanted to shield its pilots from unnecessary risk. Meanwhile, the cost of Russia's overall military operations, while ultimately cloaked in secrecy, appear relatively cheap.



Putin and Assad during Putin's visit at the Khmeimim Air Base in Syria
© Kremlin (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/56351/photos/51669>)

Additionally, Moscow used Syria to provide combat experience for Russian pilots, with impressive results. Russian submarine activity on the Mediterranean is the highest since the Cold War. The hard to detect submarines are an important part of Moscow's A2AD efforts and power projection capabilities.

From an operational perspective, one major failure for Moscow was the deployment of Russia's only aircraft carrier admiral *Kuznetsov* since the carrier had major accidents. This should have come as no surprise: at the time of deployment, the *Kuznetsov* was old, leaky, and prone to fires. Some described it as a bigger danger to its passengers than anyone else, or a floating coffin. It is thus hardly a match for at least ten American operational carriers. Yet the deployment matters a great deal symbolically and militarily since even a single ship can potentially create an important military advantage and an aircraft carrier is a symbol of military support for a country's interests. Simply by being there when the US was absent, Moscow was able to project power. To be sure, the Russian navy still has major problems and lags far behind the country's aviation capabilities, but in Syria it provides a clear example of how the Kremlin played a weak hand well, while the West had a strong hand but played it poorly.

Russia and Iran: A lasting alliance?

Another important issue is the relationship between Russia and Iran in Syria. From an Iranian perspective, Tehran has a strategic alliance in Syria with Moscow. This is a turning point in modern Russia-Iran history. Indeed, the improvement in relations between these historical rivals is unprecedented. Russia no longer opposes Iran joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and invited it to join the Eurasian Union or at least have a free trade zone with it. Whether any of this will happen remains to be seen, but the fact of the matter is, Moscow has not offered any Arab nation cooperation on such deep level, beyond a free trade zone. That these conversations took place alone is significant, even if they do not bear fruit.

For Iranian experts, the main question now is: what is next in the bilateral relationship in post-ISIS Syria? Some of these experts worry that Moscow will break with Iran if allowed to be an equal partner with the US in Syria. Some Iranians did not approve of the latest de-escalation zones agreement, which excluded Iran. Others worry about Russia's friendly relations with Israel. At the end of the day, will Moscow listen to Tehran's concerns?

Another key question for the alliance is Assad's future. Both Moscow and Tehran insist that Assad should continue to lead Syria, yet Moscow is willing to be more flexible. For Tehran, Assad's removal is a red line, because Tehran has invested heavily in the Assad family and has no plan B. Meanwhile, Russia has massive influence in the entire B'ath party beyond Assad. If Assad is to be replaced by someone close to Moscow but not Tehran, this risks undermining Iran's influence drastically. While these differences are real, it is difficult to imagine who other than Assad Moscow is currently prepared to back. Technically Tehran indeed has always been more wedded to Assad than Moscow, but this is also somewhat misleading. By constantly repeating that Moscow is not wedded to Assad himself, the Kremlin creates a perception of greater flexibility as compared to Iran, and signals it can be willing to negotiate with the West on this issue. Yet in practice, Moscow has yet to back anyone but Assad. This is another example of how Moscow gains advantages by displaying flexibility.

Experts tend to believe the Russia-Iran alliance will not break anytime soon, though at least some believe it will not develop further either. Some Iranian experts believe that Russia has many friends in Syria, but its only real ally in Iran; and Moscow knows this. Moscow, these experts say, knows the difference between friends and allies. Moscow is also aware of the deep distrust in Iran towards Russia, but tries not to let it affect the alliance.

The Kremlin also knows that a heavy presence in Syria is costly and wants an ally – Iran – to preserve this presence. Tehran for its part has grown more pragmatic in recent years and does not want to put Russia in a position of having to choose between Tehran and someone else. Both sides are aiming at finding pragmatic solutions in the current situation by postponing discussions about differences to a later point of time during which they depend less on the other than right now. While an unforeseen event in Syria may rupture the relationship, it is more likely that in the long run the relationship will continue despite the differences.

It is too early to tell if it might be possible for the West to exploit divisions in this relationship. Some experts report of rumors that there is a division in the Syrian armed forces high command between pro-Russian and pro-Iranian generals. In the long run it is possible that a division might emerge between high-tech oriented and ground forces. The Syrian high tech elites such as the Syrian air force are more pro-Russian. The forces currently clearing Damascus fight side by side with Shia militias and could be more inclined to be pro-Iranian. But this remains to be seen.

Syria's future

Looking ahead, several obstacles hinder reconciliation and reconstruction in Syria. The issue of the high numbers of refugees forced to leave their homes in Syria presents one of the central obstacles. While there is variation between different Western countries on the issue of refugees from Syria, by and large, the West is turning a blind eye to the depopulation in Syria, driven by Assad and Tehran, and with Putin's support. As long as Assad remains in power, the vast majority of refugees will not return to Syria, and if they do, they will not return to their original homes. With Assad in power Syria will not undergo genuine reconciliation, and thus will not attain genuine stability. This situation is perhaps the most significant obstacle to a true peaceful resolution to the Syrian conflict.

Experts also do not foresee genuine reconstruction in Syria. The security situation remains difficult, and development requires institutions which do not exist. In Europe at least, there is a sense that the winners should undertake reconstruction, and in Syria that is not the West. Yet Moscow, one clear winner who arguably should contribute to these efforts has neither the interest nor the ability to pay for reconstruction beyond ensuring its own narrow interests in limited areas. Indeed, according to one recent Valdai conference, Russian officials sent a strong message that they believe the West should pay for this. Regardless, the general mood in Europe and the US is that it will not be paying for reconstruction.

One possible outcome in Syria then is a frozen conflict similar to what Moscow has created in the post-Soviet space: it will ensure a degree of stability, but tensions will continue to simmer underneath and occasionally erupt. When it suits Moscow's interests, the Kremlin might also encourage these tensions. Such a scenario would ensure the need for Moscow's presence, but without incurring heavy costs. Tied to this uncertain future for Syria is the stability of the entire region, especially regarding Iran's growing regional influence.

North Africa: New Theatre for Russian Presence

Beyond Syria, the five North African countries on the southern Mediterranean create the perfect arena for the Kremlin's ambitions to expand and develop its economic, military and political power. Moscow is reinforcing its position in North Africa by consolidating and strengthening its traditional alliance with Algeria, and developing stronger relationships with Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia.

Libya: Russia's ambitions

Libya is increasingly a key target for Moscow's growing ambitions to influence the Middle East and North Africa, but it is unclear if the Kremlin has a strategic plan on how to handle the Libyan case. The conventional wisdom is that the Kremlin supports Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA) in Eastern Libya, against Islamist groups and the Western-backed Government of National Accord (GNA). However, experts disagree on the extent to which Moscow leans towards Haftar. Certainly the Kremlin is reaching out to other Libyan stakeholders. Putin is keeping his options open for Libya by widening Moscow's contact base in Libya to also include Haftar's opponents.

In June 2016, GNA deputy Ahmed Mitig visited Moscow and met with Russian officials to discuss cooperation opportunities and support for the Libyan Political Agreement as well as the UN-backed GNA. In March 2017, the head of the UN-backed GNA Faiez Serraj visited Moscow with the same agenda. Then in April 2017, Moscow

received a delegation from the powerful city of Misrata to get the perspective of Haftar's opposition on the ground. Meanwhile Moscow has limited engagement with Haftar on counter-terrorism issues which involves technical assistance and limited hardware support that is being channeled through Egypt.



Khalifa Haftar and Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu during their meeting Moscow, August 2017
© Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation

That said, Moscow did airlift in February 2017 approximately seventy of Haftar's wounded fighters and flew them to Moscow for treatment, something it had not done for any other actor in the country. Regardless of the true extent for Moscow's support for Haftar, these actions show that the Kremlin is comfortable operating in Libya militarily.

Moscow's strategy in Libya is likely to revolve around some key issues including economic interests, where Russia lost billions of dollars in contracts signed with the Qaddafi regime in the energy, construction,

infrastructure and weapons markets. The regime in Moscow will be looking to safeguard those economic interests going forward. On February 20, Russia's energy giant Rosneft signed a deal with Libya's state oil company for investments in Libya's energy sector. The move serves as an indication that Moscow could use Rosneft as one of its foreign policy tools in a geopolitically shaped southern Mediterranean region. After Moscow's military success in Syria, Putin might be interested in bolstering his diplomatic credentials and facilitating his role as a peace-maker in Libya as well as fixer of the West's perceived mistakes and failures. Needless to say that this presents an opportunity for constructive engagement with Russia. Russian officials expect to be involved in international discussions on Libya.

Moscow also has military and geopolitical interests in Libya and the Kremlin would like to have a naval base on the country's eastern coast. In 2008, Moscow discussed the possibility of setting up a naval base in Benghazi with the Qaddafi regime to counter-balance U.S. interests in Africa.⁴ In 2009, a Russian military official told media outlets that Russia had decided to establish naval bases in Libya, Syria and Yemen within a few years; a clear indication of Russia's interest and ambitions in projecting its power in the Middle East and North Africa region.⁵ However, given the current security situation and the ongoing struggle for power between various stakeholders in Libya, the idea of setting up a naval base in Libya right now is less attractive than it was in 2008.

Nevertheless, Libya presents a valuable geopolitical bargaining chip for Russia against the West in general and Europe in particular. In its standoff with the West, Moscow could opt for confrontation in Libya, and could use the insecurity inside the country and mass migration from Libya as leverage against Europe. Russia's game in this regard could be to just keep the country in the current unstable state in order to ensure a continuous flow of high numbers of migrants into Europe.

⁴ Parfitt, Tom. Gadafy offers Russia a naval base in Libya. 2008. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/nov/01/libya-russia-gadafy-united-states>.

⁵ Reuters. 2009. Russia plans navy bases in Libya, Syria, Yemen: report available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/ozatp-russia-navy-mideast-20090116-idAFJ0E50F0LQ20090116>.

Egypt: Russia's efforts for stronger relations

Egypt was a key ally for the Soviet Union until the late 1970s, when Cairo defected to the Western camp and became an important ally for the United States in the Middle East and received billions of dollars in military and development aid from Washington. However, following the 2013 coup led by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi that overthrew Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi and the subsequent crackdown on dissent accompanied by shrinking space for human rights, freedom of expression and political participation post 2013, the West and in particular the Obama Administration started to distance itself from Cairo.

On his part, el-Sisi turned to Putin and Russia to fill the void. In 2015, Putin visited Cairo and received a jubilant welcome from his host. El-Sisi visited Moscow four times from 2013 to 2015. During these visits, he signed various treaties including arms and energy deals. Additionally, various trade and cooperation agreements were signed including the establishment of a free trade zone between Egypt and the Eurasian Customs Union (EACU), which is in its final stages.⁶

In 2014, Russia and Egypt signed a USD 3.5 billion arms deal to supply Egypt with Russian arms and ammunition, as well as air defense systems and aviation, including 46 Ka-52 "Alligator" Attack Helicopters. In June 2017, the Russian defense and foreign ministers discussed the extension of their 10-year Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between Russia and Egypt in 2009 with their Egyptian counterparts. In addition, Moscow is discussing building a nuclear power plant for Egypt.

Moreover, Moscow is focused on the development of mutual trade and agricultural business with Cairo. Figures show that the trade exchange between Egypt and Russia exceeded USD 3.2 billion from January to August 2017, including Russian exports to Egypt recording USD 2.8 billion and USD 407 millions of Egyptian exports to Moscow. Russian investment in Egypt amounted to USD 3.1 billion by the end of 2016, 52 percent of which were in the oil and gas sector.⁷

However, Russia's and Egypt's economies are both stagnating, and there might be limits to what their economic cooperation can achieve. But military cooperation holds far more promise. Additionally, the Cairo regime under el-Sisi is aligning itself with Moscow on key regional issues. In October 2016, Egypt voted with Russia against a UN Security Council resolution that sought to end air strikes in Syria – a clear hint that Cairo was ready to go to great lengths to win favors with Moscow even if that came at the expense of its relationship with key Arab allies such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia which oppose the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. A few weeks after the UN Security Council vote, the two nations held their first-ever joint military drill.

Furthermore, Moscow and Cairo are cooperating closely on Libya. In October 2016, reports surfaced that Russia deployed a special forces unit to an Egyptian military base near the Libyan border. The purpose of this deployment was to increase Russia's cooperation with Haftar's LNA forces on counter-terrorism issues. This puts Russia in direct competition on the ground against Western countries such as France and the United Kingdom. Since 2015, both countries had special non-combat missions present in eastern Libya to coordinate counter-terrorism efforts with Haftar's LNA. A senior western military source confirmed that Russia currently has dozens of Special Forces personnel based in Benghazi to support the LNA with intelligence and technical expertise.

⁶ Russian official. 2017. Deal on establishing Russian industrial zone in Egypt in final stages. 4 Nov. 2017 Available at <http://sis.gov.eg/Story/119323?lang=en-us>.

⁷ Egypt Today. 2017. Russian trade minister visits Egypt for industrial zone. October 3. Available at: <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/25836/Russian-trade-minister-visits-Egypt-for-industrial-zone>.

Tunisia and Morocco: New opportunities

Morocco and Tunisia present new opportunities for Russia's economic and trade cooperation goals in the region. In addition to security and counter-terrorism cooperation, Russian officials are focused on the promotion of Tunisia and Morocco as new tourism destinations for Russian holidaymakers as well as technological and industrial business opportunities.

For example, Tunisia saw 30 percent tourism growth in 2017, with Russia as the top source of tourists with over 600,000 Russian tourists arriving in the first half of 2017. This is excellent news for Tunisia's struggling tourism sector that has been hit hard by two major attacks in 2015. The terrorist attacks that targeted the Bardo National Museum and a tourist beach in Sousse led several European tour companies and cruise operators to suspend operations.

In March and April 2016, Moscow hosted several meetings with high-level representatives from Tunisia including Foreign Minister Khemaies Jhinaoui, who previously served as the ambassador to Moscow from 2008 to 2011, and the Russian-Tunisian intergovernmental commission on cooperation in trade, economy, science and technology. In 2017, Russia was present in all of the events held at the international conference *Tunisia 2020*, supporting the economy and investment.

Additionally, in January 2016, Russia announced that it would lower tariffs on Tunisian exports by 25 percent - potentially reducing Tunisia's trade deficit with Russia. During the same month, Tunisia's Ministry of Transport announced that Tunisair would begin flying three weekly direct flights to Moscow as of May 2016. This is aiming to develop the Tunisian exports towards Russia, which currently stand at about USD 36 million comprising mostly agricultural products and food industry goods opposed to USD 1.7 billion worth of imports.⁸

Russia and Tunisia furthermore signed a nuclear energy cooperation agreement in September 2016. The deal would see Russia support Tunisia in the creation and improvement of its nuclear infrastructure in accordance with international recommendations, in the engineering and construction process of nuclear reactors for energy and research purposes, in the development of uranium deposits as well as exploration of Tunisia's mineral resources base to develop its nuclear sector.⁹

Morocco, a key Western ally in North Africa, is another focus of Russia's new shift in attention to the Southern Mediterranean region. In October 2017, Russian Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev, headed a delegation of high level officials and businessmen to Rabat. Since King Mohammed VI's visit to Moscow in March 2016, the two countries have expressed interest in boosting bilateral cooperation. Morocco is seeking to become Russia's major Arab and African economic partner.¹⁰

The trade exchanges between the two countries moved from USD 200 -500 million a year (depending on sources) in 2001 to USD 2.5 billion in 2015. In 2013, Rabat and Moscow signed an important maritime fishing agreement. Russia ranked in 2016 as Morocco's ninth supplier and 22nd client with 27 percentage increase in trade between the two countries in the same year.

In 2016, King Mohamed VI visited Moscow and signed a "deep strategic partnership declaration". During the King's visit agreements on energy and counter-terrorism were signed as well. At the same time, Morocco is aiming at a fivefold rise in Russian tourism over the coming years. Naturally, Morocco's foreign policy and

⁸ Tunisia-tn.com. 2016. Russia and Tunisia Continue to Improve Ties in 2016. February 17. Available at: <http://tunisia-tn.com/russia-and-tunisia-continue-to-improve-ties-in-2016/>.

⁹ Russia Beyond. 2016. Russia and Tunisia sign nuclear energy cooperation agreement. September 29. Available at: https://www.rbth.com/news/2016/09/26/russia-and-tunisia-sign-nuclear-energy-cooperation-agreement_633427.

¹⁰ Morocco World News. 2017. Bourita: Morocco Wants to Be Russia's Major Arab and African Economic Partner. July 14. Available at: <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2017/07/223125/morocco-aspires-russia-major-arab-and-african-economic-partner/>.

diplomacy is driven by a variety of issues to address and the issue of the Western Sahara takes prominence. Russia could thus be a promising choice regarding potential support for Morocco's stance on the issue.

In April 2017, in an interesting move, Moscow welcomed a delegation from the Polisario Front, the independence movement of the Sahrawi people of Western Sahara. Observers of Russia's "charm offensive" in North Africa noted that Russia's increasing interest and involvement in the Western Sahara conflict has been more evident since Morocco and Nigeria signed a pipeline deal, which was announced in December 2016.¹¹ One goal of that project is to provide Europe with an alternative to Russian gas, which Europe currently depends on heavily.

Algeria: strengthening a traditional alliance

Algeria has long been Russia's traditional partner and buyer of Russian weapons. This makes it a key growth market for Russia's economic, security and diplomatic efforts in the southern Mediterranean region. In 2014, the two sides signed an estimated USD 1 billion deal in which Algeria would use kits from Moscow's state arms supplier to build 200 tanks – an agreement that has been described as possibly the largest export contract for main battle tanks in the world.¹²

Currently Russia's engagement with Algeria is focused on the two key areas of security and military cooperation as well as closer cooperation in the energy sector: In 2016, Algeria began receiving an order of 14 Sukhoi SU-30 fighter jets. In 2017, Russia will have delivered two Tigr-class corvette ships armed with Russian cruise missiles to Algeria, and in 2018, Moscow will deliver two Black Hole submarines to Algiers. Moscow's arms sales to Algeria picked up after Russia decided to write off Algeria's debt to Russia in 2006. In 2015 and 2016, the trade value between Russia and Algeria stood at USD 2 billion.

Despite Europe's nervousness about the possibility of an Algerian-Russian deal to manipulate gas prices globally, such cooperation between both countries never materialized. This indicates that when it comes to energy, Algeria-Russia relations remain sensitive, since both view each other as energy competitors. That said, the West should not dismiss the energy factor entirely. Russian Gazprom managed to enter the Algerian oil and gas market in October 2014 when drilling at the El Assel oil and gas bloc, jointly developed by Gazprom and Sonatrach. The two companies also plan to cooperate on future projects.

Conclusion

As Moscow continues its advance across the Middle East and North Africa, the US and different European countries disagree on what approach to take towards Russia and the region. For the US under President Obama, the Iran deal with the backchannel through Oman became the administration's foreign policy lynchpin at the cost of other regional issues. President Trump now appears to be taking a limited and transactional approach to the region – though in Syria his approach differs little from Obama's. Trump's approach towards Russia also remains ambiguous. It is unclear if the current US retreat will be an exception or the norm in the future of American foreign policy in the coming years.

For Europe, a major challenge is to define the EU's regional interests. Simply put, different European countries have different interests. In order to craft a single approach to the region, Europe needs a single clear vision and strategic patience. Change takes a long time, enormous resources, and good will. Meanwhile, European

¹¹ Reuters 2016. Nigeria and Morocco sign gas pipeline deal to link Africa to Europe. December 4. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/nigeria-pipeline-morocco/nigeria-and-morocco-sign-gas-pipeline-deal-to-link-africa-to-europe-idUSL8N1DY007>.

¹² Zilberman, Boris. 2017. Russia's Charm Offensive in North Africa. April 3. Available at: <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/oren-kessler-russias-charm-offensive-in-north-africa/>.

borders are messy. As one European expert put it, the question European policymakers pose themselves is not what we want to see in the next decades, but what do we want to protect ourselves from? The answer is uncontrolled illegal migration. Europe's main strategic goal thus is defensive.

Despite far-reaching differences of opinion between European countries, they show a certain level of agreement in the area of defense and security. When it comes to Russia, there is a level of agreement between European countries on the matter that did not exist prior to Moscow's Crimea annexation in March 2014, based on a shared lack of confidence in Russia. Nonetheless, Europe has yet to formulate a single coherent approach towards the country.

Beyond Europe, the West as a whole has yet to come up with a clear and effective way of reacting to the growing Russian presence in the Mediterranean and the MENA region as a whole. Europe for its part has to be a player, not just a payer. To get there, it has to develop real strategic tools and goals that take into account the Russian strategy of seeking to preserve the status quo and maintain order – as Moscow defines it. The West more broadly has to find a way to deal with the semblance of stability this Russian approach creates in the region. Moscow has neither the desire nor the ability to help conflicting parties to peacefully resolve grievances. Quite to the contrary, Moscow is more likely to fan the flames of low-level conflict because it would justify Russia's presence in the region under the cloak of an indispensable partner, while simultaneously undermining the West. At the same time, Russia's own future remains uncertain. But until Western policymakers develop a better understanding of Moscow's true goals and consistently pursue a clear vision towards Putin's Russia, the Kremlin will find ways exploit weaknesses and divisions in the strategies of Western powers to bolster its influence – in the Middle East, and beyond.

Mediterranean Advisory Group

The KAS Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean has launched the *Mediterranean Advisory Group* (MAG) as a series of dialogue rounds to contribute to the strategic debate on the ongoing processes in Europe's Mediterranean neighborhood to help in better coping with the various changes and challenges. MAG is a network of experts and practitioners from both shores of the Mediterranean, which reviews and analyzes developments in the region connected to security, foreign policy and migration. The meetings take place on a bi-annual basis and are held alternately in Europe and in the southern Mediterranean region. The findings and recommendations of MAG are intended to inform decision-makers and are published regularly in the *Mediterranean Dialogue Series*.

About the authors

Anna Borshchevskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East. In addition, she is a fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy and was previously with the Peterson Institute for International Economics and the Atlantic Council. A former analyst for a U.S. military contractor in Afghanistan, she has also served as communications director at the American Islamic Congress. Her analysis is published widely in journals such as *The New Criterion*, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, and the *Middle East Quarterly*. She conducted translation and analysis for the U.S. Army's Foreign Military Studies Office and its flagship publication, *Operational Environment Watch*, and wrote a foreign affairs column for *Forbes*. She is also the author of the February 2016 monograph, *Russia in the Middle East*.

Mohamed Eljarh is Co-founder and Managing Director of Libya Outlook Research and Consultancy (LORC). He is also a nonresident fellow with the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East and an associate expert at the Sahel-Maghreb Research Platform hosted by the Danish Institute for International Studies in Copenhagen. He worked as political consultant to the Libyan Mission to the EU in Brussels in 2015. From 2014 to 2016, Eljarh served as the Libya consultant for the UK Special Envoy to Libya, Jonathan Powell. His writing has been published extensively in a number of outlets including *Foreign Policy*, the *New York Times*, and *CNN.com*. He is also a frequent expert commentator on international media outlets including *CNN*, *BBC*, *Aljazeera*, *Sky News*, and *al-Arabiya*.

Disclaimer

The information and views set out in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the KAS Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean. Reproduction is authorized provided the source is acknowledged.



Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean

Contact person:

Dr. Canan Atilgan

Director

Regional Office South Mediterranean

Phone: +216 70 029 460

E-Mail: canan.atilgan@kas.de

Cover page image:

© Kremlin / CC BY 4.0

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/trips/56365/photos>

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en>