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## Russia Non-Russian View on Current Russian Politics

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# CURRENT RUSSIAN POLICY TOWARD THE MENA REGION

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*The article studies current policy of the Russian Federation in the MENA region, which is becoming one of the pivots of the Kremlin's revisionist approach to the post-bipolar world order. It examines the main goals pursued by Moscow in the Middle East, conditions and factors that lead to the strengthening of Russian positions in the region, and threats and challenges that undermine the Kremlin's regional perspectives. It demonstrates that Moscow's recent successes were achieved not only by skilful activities but also because of the insufficient Western attention. In the future, Russia's prospects are uncertain in the face of natural limits and lack of resources.*

The MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region retains its strategic importance in contemporary international relations. Today, it remains a source of threats and instability, and at the same time, it becomes an arena of active confrontation in which influential regional actors compete for leadership. It is also exposed to the influence of external players, who seek to ensure their dominance in the global arena by strengthening their positions in the region. The Russian Federation is acting precisely in this direction. Moscow regards its Middle East policy as an influential tool for revising the existing world order and has thus stepped up its efforts in the region. Through a wide array of methods, it has capitalised on the balance of power in the Middle East, trying to turn it into long-term political capital. However, the results of its Middle East policy cause different assessments – from the optimistic proclamation of Russia as the new patron of the region to pessimistic statements about the trap into which the Kremlin has driven itself. The truth lies in between these extremes – and its identification requires an objective analysis of the factors and components that shape the potential and prospects of the Russian policy in the Middle East.

## The Goals of the Russian Middle East Policy

The Russian Federation primarily views the Middle East as a platform for implementing its geopolitical ambitions – retrieval of the superpower status. Increasing influence in the region aims to demonstrate the validity of Russian claims to the role of a centre of power in international relations.

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Involvement in solving urgent Middle East issues (such as civil conflicts in Syria and Libya) is used to strengthen the Russian position in relations with the West. It is becoming an important diplomacy tool for imposing Moscow's own agenda on the US

and Europe and creates prerequisites for intensive dialogue with the West in order to overcome the isolation in which Moscow found itself as a result of its aggression against Ukraine. The Kremlin tries to demonstrate itself as a useful partner capable of helping to solve the most pressing international problems. In this direction, it has managed to achieve some success – as evidenced by the compelled revival of the US-Russian contacts at the highest level and between military structures<sup>1</sup>.



***If these plans are successfully implemented, Russia will get an arc of military bases, starting in the temporarily occupied Crimea and continuing through the Levant to the Central Mediterranean***

While fighting for recognition of equality with the West, Russia is also trying to undermine Western positions in the global geopolitical game. The situation in the Middle East is being used as an element of the Russian campaign to weaken the United States and the EU. Moscow blames Washington for collaboration with the Islamists and the destructive tendencies that are ripping the region apart – and thus tries to show the US inability for global leadership. The promotion of a narrative about the radicalisation of the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring undermines the concept of the people's struggle against criminal regimes – which is one of the major elements of Western democratic values.

While proving its inconsistency, Russia proposes no alternative to the authoritarian model of government as a counterweight to the Islamists.

At the same time, Russia is striving to form a positive image of itself in the eyes of the population of Western states. By resorting to a widespread disinformation campaign about its activities in the Middle East (primarily by spreading false statements about the decisive contribution of the Russian Federation to the victory over ISIS in Syria<sup>2</sup>), Moscow wants to correct its image of an authoritarian revisionist state that threatens international stability. Also, Russia sends signals to its clients-partners on the world stage. The rescue of Bashar Assad's regime in Syria is intended to show that Moscow values its allies and is ready to protect them.

The Middle East is important not only for diplomatic but also for military provisions of the Kremlin's revisionist policy. Russian military presence in the region provides a foundation for encirclement of the southern flank of the Euro-Atlantic space. At the moment, it relies on infrastructure located in Syria, regarding which long-term agreements have been concluded with the Assad regime<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, Moscow is considering expanding its network of facilities in the region by returning to Egypt and ensuring a presence in Libya, where it is supporting the forces of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in the civil war. If these plans are successfully implemented, Russia will get an arc of military bases, starting in the temporarily occupied Crimea and continuing through the Levant to the

- 1 V. Socor, *The End of Russia's 'International Isolation': Potential Implications for Ukraine*, "Eurasia Daily Monitor", vol. 12, no. 221, 10 December 2015 [<https://jamestown.org/program/the-end-of-russias-international-isolation-potential-implications-for-ukraine/>; access: 30 November 2020].
- 2 F. Gaub, *Russia's Non-War on Daesh*, [in:] *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?*, "Chaillot Paper", no. 146, July 2018, pp. 57-58, 61-62.
- 3 A. V. Krylov, N. Z. Shuminov, *The Marine Strategy of Russia in the Middle East*, "Comparative Politics Russia", vol. 12, no. 1, 2020, p. 86.

Central Mediterranean. Its reinforcement with appropriate types of weapons opens up opportunities for creating a full-fledged “anti-access and area denial zone” for the Kremlin’s opponents in the region.

In addition to the traditional component of the projection of power, Russia seeks, by some elements of its MENA policy, to strengthen its own potential for the implementation of hybrid pressure on Europe. The use of the migration factor is becoming one of its promising tools. Ensuring the Russian presence in areas that are the source of migration flows to Europe (Syria), including their routes, opens up opportunities for Moscow to control this threat.

The defensive context of Russian interests in the Middle East is important as well. The Kremlin views radical Islam as an immediate threat to the internal stability of the Russian Federation – so the Russian authorities view the weakening of the influence of Islamists in the Middle East as an element of a campaign to defend its own borders, carried out far from them, on “enemy territory”.

The intensification of the Middle East policy also serves the internal political goals of the Putin regime. Strengthening positions in the region, illustrated by participation in solving key problems and an active dialogue with regional players (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran) and global competitors (the USA, the EU), shows the Russians a success in achieving the “sacred goal” of regaining geopolitical influence. The “small victorious war” in Syria is used to demonstrate the military power of the reformed Russian army. Declared participation in the fight against a global threat – Islamic terrorism<sup>4</sup> –

increases the self-esteem of Russian society. All this remains an element of strengthening the position of the regime.

Russia uses political and military instruments to ensure its economic interests in the region. They help to increase the competitiveness of Russian goods by non-market methods<sup>5</sup>. Arms exports remain a key dimension of Russian trade with the Middle East. Moscow seeks to secure lucrative contracts with the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf and North Africa, which bring replenishment to its state budget. Military operations in the region are considered as an advertising campaign for Russian weapons.

Energy diplomacy remains another important element of Russia’s Middle East policy. On the one hand, Russia is forced to take into account the region’s potential as an alternative source of energy supplies to world markets. It is interested in preventing the implementation of infrastructure transit projects that could threaten its positions (for example, Qatar’s plans to build a gas pipeline through Syria). On the other hand, common interests with the OPEC states regarding maintaining stable prices for energy resources intensify the need to develop an active dialogue with them and formulate a joint position on the issue.

### **Factors Contributing to the Growing Influence of the Russian Federation in the Middle East**

The strengthening of the Russian position in the MENA was primarily facilitated by the deep destabilisation of the region in the 21st century, which irrevocably changed the balance of power within its borders. After the

4 *Speech by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin at the Plenary Meeting of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly*, President of the Russian Federation official website, 28 September 2015 [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385> access: 15 December 2020].

5 O. Litvinenko (ed.), *Близький Схід і Північна Африка як сфера інтересів України (The Middle East and North Africa as a Sphere of Ukraine’s Interests)*, National Institute for Strategic Studies: Kyiv 2020, p. 21.

US military campaign in 2003, Iraq lost its status as a counterweight to Iranian regional expansionist ambitions. The Arab Spring has led to the destabilisation of important regional players, which at best have been weakened (Egypt) and at worst were torn apart by civil conflicts (Libya, Syria)<sup>6</sup>. The threat of Islamic terrorism, embodied by ISIS, actualised. The fight among influential actors (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) for the status of the regional leader intensified. Together, these tendencies exacerbated the regional situation, creating a platform for the implementation of the geopolitical ambitions of Moscow, which played on the existing threats and contradictions to ensure its return to the Middle East.



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***Unlike relations with the West and the post-Soviet states, where Russia demonstrates aggressiveness and toughness, its policy in the Middle East remains more moderate and patient***

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The implementation of this strategy was simplified by the power vacuum, created as a result of insufficient attention to the region from key Western actors. In the early 2010s, there was a visible loss of interest in the Middle East. Barack Obama's policy in Iraq and Syria demonstrated unwillingness to take tough measures in the implementation of regional policy. The change of administration in Washington did not improve the situation, as Donald Trump also declared his desire to abandon the expansionist foreign policy in the Middle East<sup>7</sup>.

Overall, the United States provided opportunities for its European allies to occupy the vacant niche in the regional balance of power, to assume part of the responsibility for shaping the Middle East policy of the collective West. However, Europe turned out to be unprepared for such a role, suffering from a lack of a collective vision and determination in promoting its views. As a result, the weakening of the West opened doors for other external forces, including the Russian Federation, to enhance their presence in the MENA.

Unlike relations with the West and the post-Soviet states, where Russia demonstrates aggressiveness and toughness, its policy in the Middle East remains more moderate and patient. Moscow is building its relations with the MENA players on the basis of political realism, common sense, and pragmatism. It does not build trusting stable alliances, nor does it display full-scale ideological intolerance toward any of the local players<sup>8</sup>. On the contrary, Russia is increasing its influence in the region by playing on the contradictions among Middle Eastern countries and at the same time not openly ruining relations with any of them. It recognises the right of local players for their own national interests and is ready for certain compromises on these issues. For example, the Kremlin is doing everything it can to stabilise the Assad regime in Syria. However, it recognises Turkey's right to form a security belt near the Turkish-Syrian border and to conduct counter-terrorism operations against the Syrian Kurds. It also tries to show that support for Assad does not mean an anti-Sunni direction of the Russian policy. After all, it is in the Russian interest to attract investments from the rich countries

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6 M. Yahya, *The Middle East's Lost Decades*, "Foreign Affairs", November/December 2019, p. 48.

7 G. Rachman, *End of the American Era in the Middle East*, "Financial Times", 30 December 2019 [https://www.ft.com/content/960b06d0-2a35-11ea-bc77-65e4aa615551 access: 29 November 2020].

8 D. Trenin, *What Drives Russia's Policy in the Middle East?*, [in:] *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building sandcastles?*, "Chaillot Paper", no. 146, July 2018, p. 21.



of the Persian Gulf, coordinate the pricing policy for energy resources, and develop cooperation in the field of arms exports with them.

In the inter-Arab conflict between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Russia does not take sides. Moscow and Tehran together help Assad to stay in power, while demonstrating a high level of interaction in the global arena (largely based on anti-Americanism). However, Russia remains on the sidelines of the Iranian-Israeli and Iranian-Arab confrontation, not supporting the Iranian expansionist concept of the Shia Crescent. For Israel, it remains not so much an ally of the hostile Assad regime as the only counterweight to the strengthening of Iran in Syria.

In promoting its interests in the Middle East, Moscow primarily relies on the traditional power element of politics. Its cornerstone is the conduct of military operations in support of friendly regimes and forces. But Russian authorities take into account the presence of a certain prejudice in Russian society against protracted military campaigns far from national borders, caused by the “Afghan syndrome”. The limited nature of official participation in the Middle East conflicts, which is accompanied by the active use of proxy forces, helps to settle this issue. Formally, Russia only maintains a relatively small contingent in Syria, which is trying to avoid direct participation in ground battles with hostile forces, concentrating on provision of air support to Assad’s forces. That is why Russian official casualties in this conflict still remain at an acceptable level for public opinion.

However, Russian mercenaries (the so-called “Wagner Group”) are actively operating in the region in parallel with the national armed forces. They play an important role in promoting Russian interests not only in Syria but also in Libya<sup>9</sup>. Legally unrelated to the Russian authorities, in practice they remain directly subordinate to the Kremlin. Acting under the patronage of the Russian special services and enjoying all-round support, they are becoming an important element of the Russian power projection in the region, which is carried out in a relatively covert mode. It allows Moscow to pretend not to be officially involved in their actions, while granting support to partners (as in the case of the transfer of modern combat aircraft without identification marks to Libya in May 2020<sup>10</sup>).

Other factors also help the implementation of Russia’s Middle East policy. Not least among them is the Russian claim to the Soviet legacy. The stable ties formed between the USSR and the Arab world are used by the Kremlin to increase its influence. During the Cold War, Arab nationalists considered Moscow a natural partner. Its anti-imperialist, anti-Western rhetoric was in line with the Soviet position then – and remains a useful deposit for Russia today. The traditional perception of Moscow as a friendly force is still widespread among a certain section of the Arab elite. The authoritarian nature of Putin’s regime in Russia makes it easier for him to find a common language with partners in the MENA. Personalisation of public policy is typical for the region – be it the monarchies of the Persian Gulf or military and hereditary dictatorships. The lack of attention to democracy and values

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9 *Russian Influence in the Mediterranean*, “Press Statement by Michael R. Pompeo, US Secretary of State”, US Department of State official website, 15 December 2020 [https://www.state.gov/russian-influence-in-the-mediterranean/?fbclid=IwAR3Ysl9cFetW6KgFu1pR7eFrE2IQ4v ih-UlwmGH47\_nGSYiRVuUBBnpAhww access: 16 December 2020].

10 *New Evidence of Russian Aircraft Active in Libyan Airspace*, “United States Africa Command Press Release”, 18 June 2020 [https://www.afcom.mil/pressrelease/32941/new-evidence-of-russian-aircraft-active-in-li access: 30 November 2020].

issues in Russian foreign policy naturally brings them closer to Moscow.

Russia's positions on the international arms market create another channel for projecting its influence in the Middle East. The supply of weapons is viewed by the Kremlin not as an end goal but as a tool designed to tie the MENA states to the Russian Federation and intensify partnership in other spheres<sup>11</sup>. Many states of the region represent exactly that market segment to which Russian export is oriented. The absence of moral and ideological restrictions on the development of military cooperation with non-democratic regimes also plays into the hands of Moscow. Today, Russia offers a wide range of military goods to the region. Cooperation in this field is being developed not only with long-term partners (Algeria) but also with states traditionally or situationally oriented toward the West (Egypt, Turkey, and Iraq)<sup>12</sup>.



***the West refuses to build its relations with the Russian Federation based on an integrated approach. It continues to consider the Middle East, Ukrainian, and energy issues separately, and not as a single problem, on which it is possible to reach compromises for a set of concessions on certain fronts***

Partnership in the field of nuclear energy remains an important tool for enhancing Russian influence in the Middle East. Russia is a key exporter of nuclear technologies due to the activities of the "Rosatom" company.

The desire of the Middle Eastern states to get nuclear energy at their disposal and Russia's readiness for partnership in this area create the basis for fruitful cooperation with many MENA countries (Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Morocco). This activity not only benefits the image of the Russian Federation but also brings direct income, providing a significant number of jobs within Russia and an inflow of revenues for companies involved in the implementation of projects<sup>13</sup>.

### **Threats and Challenges to Russia's Positions in the Middle East**

Despite the undoubted strengthening of Russia's presence in the region, its positions in the Middle East are not secure. They are threatened by many factors that undermine Moscow's potential to achieve the strategic goals of its Middle East policy.

From the point of view of ensuring Russian global interests, raising its status in relations with geopolitical opponents, they have not been achieved yet. Moscow managed to return to dialogue with the West – but the process stalled. It resulted neither in the final revision of the position of the United States and Europe in relation to Russian ambitions, nor in the division of spheres of influence and the formation of a new Yalta agreement, which Putin aspired to.

Contrary to some statements and initiatives, the West refuses to build its relations with the Russian Federation based on an integrated approach. It continues to consider the Middle East, Ukrainian, and energy issues separately, and not as a single problem, on which it is possible to reach

11 T. Borisov, *Russian Arms Exports in the Middle East*, [in:] *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?*, "Chaillot Paper", no. 146, July 2018, p. 42.

12 A. Khlebnikov, *Russia Looks to the Middle East to Boost Arms Exports*, "Middle East Institute", 08 April 2019 [https://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-looks-middle-east-boost-arms-exports access: 15 December 2020].

13 C. Nakhle, *Russia's Energy Diplomacy in the Middle East*, [in:] *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?*, "Chaillot Paper", no. 146, July 2018, p. 34.

compromises for a set of concessions on certain fronts. At the same time, Russia's activities in the Middle East raise concerns in the West. Moscow's expansion beyond the borders of the post-Soviet space, which has always been viewed as its natural zone of influence, is a clear sign of the danger of its ambitions to the interests of the democratic world. In the long term, this can help to increase the level of the Russian threat in the eyes of Western leaders and experts and initiate an appropriate reaction aimed at countering the Russian efforts.

Russian influence in the Middle East has natural frameworks. Moscow lacks economic resources for full leadership in the region. Russian positions in trade relations in the Middle East remain rather weak. Russian export is limited to several main categories and therefore cannot provide the country with sufficient economic leverage in the region. Its resource-based economy lacks the financial reserves to become an important investment player – rather, Russia itself is interested in attracting funds from the wealthy monarchies of the Persian Gulf. The available resources are insufficient to solve the most pressing economic problems of the region. For example, the role of the Russian Federation in the reconstruction of post-war Syria remains questionable. Despite the importance of Russia's military power in preserving the Assad regime, it is obvious that Russian economy will not be able to pull off the rebuilding of the war-torn country<sup>14</sup>. For now, the weakness of Russia's position in the global economy is being compensated by military successes and

active diplomacy – but in the end, it limits the state's capabilities and potential.

The projection of the Russian military force in the region also has natural limitations – primarily logistical. An analysis of the Russian operation in Syria shows that Moscow had to make significant efforts to supply a limited military contingent<sup>15</sup>. The dependence of the naval route on Turkey's position adds constraints to possible planning of military activities in the MENA. Under these conditions, Russia's ability to support significant expeditionary operations in the Middle East looks questionable. The readiness of Russian society for major military operations in the region also remains in question. The geographic remoteness of the MENA raises doubts in society about the advisability of active involvement in local conflicts.

Russian military export to the region also faces some problems. Obtaining political dividends through de facto gratuitous supplies of weapons to friendly actors (such as the Assad regime in Syria) contributes to the further waste of economic resources. The use of military operations in the region to demonstrate the developments of the Russian defence industry has not always been successful. For example, the performance of modern UAVs in Syria and Libya cast a shadow on the image of Russian air defence systems<sup>16</sup>. These failures call into question the rationality of buying them. Another threat is China, which is actively entering the regional market and can compete with the Russian Federation.

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14 M. Asseburg, *Reconstruction in Syria: Challenges and Policy Options for the EU and its Member States*, "Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (German Institute for International and Security Affairs) Research Paper", no. 11, July 2020, pp. 12-13.

15 A. Lavrov, *Russia in Syria: A Military Analysis*, [in:] *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?*, "Chaillot Paper", no. 146, July 2018, p. 55.

16 J. V. Parachini, P. A. Wilson, *Drone-Era Warfare Shows the Operational Limits of Air Defense Systems*, "The RAND Blog", 02 July 2020 [<https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/07/drone-era-warfare-shows-the-operational-limits-of-air.html> access: 30 November 2020].

The heterogeneity of the region complicates the field of work for Russian diplomatic activities. Russia finds it increasingly difficult to manoeuvre between the interests of local players. Turkey does not forget its regional ambitions and, continuing an active dialogue with the Russian Federation, does not neglect to weaken the position of the pro-Russian forces in the MENA. Iran and the United Arab Emirates entered the struggle for influence on Assad, pushing him to active military operations, which does not correspond to the current interests of the Kremlin. The OPEC countries in the Middle East have their views on the pricing policy regarding energy resources, which do not always coincide with Russian ones. At the end of 2016, they managed to work out a joint position with the Russian Federation regarding the reduction of production volume. But in 2020, the actions of Saudi Arabia and its allies in the market have caused a new fall in prices, which negatively affected Russia<sup>17</sup>.



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***The MENA remains primarily a tool, a factor that Moscow seeks to use to satisfy global ambitions***

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The perspectives of the Russian policy in the Middle East are also threatened by its perception by the population of the region. No matter how dominant the influence of authoritarian and leadership regimes on state policy may be, the opinion of the “Arab street” cannot be disregarded. Moscow tried to show itself as an adequate counterbalance to the United States. However, the barbaric bombing

of Syrian cities by Russian aircraft was the same example of external expansionism as the actions of Washington in the eyes of local population. Active intervention in conflicts did not contribute to the formation of a positive image of Russian policy among a significant part of the Arab world<sup>18</sup>.

## **Conclusions**

The Middle East remains one of the priority directions of the Russian foreign policy. However, it is not its goal. The MENA remains primarily a tool, a factor that Moscow seeks to use to satisfy global ambitions. Relying on the current situation in the region (permanent destabilisation and the resulting power vacuum), Russia uses a wide range of tools to strengthen its positions, considering them as an asset necessary to achieve the status of a superpower. Basically, it relies on the traditional power component of the projection of influence, using it to support friendly regimes and weaken geopolitical opponents. Through a diplomatic approach to the struggle of regional actors for leadership, it seeks to become a key mediator in solving Middle East problems, while at the same time ensuring its interests in the economic and energy spheres.

Such actions have brought success to Russia; however, the implementation of the strategic goals of its Middle East policy in terms of ensuring global influence and consolidating a new world order has not yet been achieved. In these conditions, attempts to reconsider the approach to the Middle East – in favour of turning it from an instrument into a goal of foreign policy – have run into a dead end. Russia’s influence in the region has objective limitations – primarily caused by its low

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17 G. Calhoun, *The Saudi/Russia Oil Price War: Historic Blunder #1*, “Forbes”, 03 June 2020 [<https://www.forbes.com/sites/georgecalhoun/2020/06/03/the-other-epidemic-a-cluster-of-historic-blunders---exhibit-1-the-saudirusia-oil-price-war/?sh=332f74cd4f7f> access: 30 November 2020].

18 *Arab Opinion Index 2017-2018. Main Results in Brief*, Arab Centre: Washington, DC 2020, pp. 14-16.

economic potential and the heterogeneity of the Middle East itself, where the interests of local players more often come into conflict with Moscow's plans.

An important factor that contributed to the strengthening of the Russian Federation in the Middle East was the passive position of the West. In fact, Russia's achievements were largely due not to its strength but to the neglect of the United States and Europe toward the region. In the context of the actualisation of the need to fight global Russian revisionism, the situation may change – and active steps from geopolitical

opponents will significantly shake Moscow's Middle East positions, which today seem relatively powerful.

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