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Russia's quest for influence in North Africa and the Middle East

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2017, Moscow received Prime Minister Netanyahu (for his fifth visit in ten months). Alongside the visits of Turkish president Erdogan and the Iranian president Rouhani, Moscow has found a new role for itself in the Middle East where it intends to remain for a long time. Its involvement in Libya and in particular its support for “Marshal” Haftar further strengthen this assessment.

This new geopolitical structure marks a stark contrast with that of the 1990s, characterised by a considerable weakening of Russia’s influence across the broader region. As Russian political scientist Aleksei Mlachenko explains, Russia had then “abstained from independent endeavours in Near Eastern politics, giving the initiative entirely to its American and European partners.”¹ On the one hand, the profound financial and economic crisis that Russia has faced has stopped its diplomatic system from having effective means of action, thus forcing it to prioritise certain areas outside of North Africa/the Middle East. (These included ex-Soviet republics, the Euro-Atlantic world and China). This marked a considerable break with the Soviet posture during the Cold War when the Soviet Union was actively involved in the region. From the mid-1950s, it actively promoted itself and extended its influence in economic, military and ideological terms. The area was of particular importance to the Soviet Union due to the proximity of the region to its borders. Indeed, the disappearance of the ideological dimension in the conduct of Russian foreign policy undoubtedly reduced the importance of certain traditional partnerships in the Middle East. The new importance given to the development of a “strategic partnership” with Western countries prescribed “*an extreme prudence, if not a distance, with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict amongst other sources of tension in the Middle East.*”²

Around the middle of the 2000s, when Russia recovered to relative economic health, it was able to work at a renewal of its regional presence.³ This set a new tone in its foreign policy with declarations of a Russian agenda concerning the main international security issues. This was driven by a desire to distinctly mark its independence from Washington (whom the Russians believed had tarnished its image following the Iraq war and its spillovers). Moreover, it was characterised by an active promotion of its commercial

¹ “Faktor islama v rossiïskoï vnechnei politike” [The Islamic factor in Russian foreign policy], *Ros-siia v global’noi politike*, n° 2, March-April 2007 (www.globalaffairs.ru).

² Andrej Kreutz, “Russia in the Middle East, Friend or Foe?”, *Praeger Security International*, 2007, p. 4.

³ For certain countries such as Algeria, Libya and Tunisia, the first contacts were made starting in the late 1990s. Indeed, the leadership of the ministry of Foreign Affairs was taken up by Yevgeny Primakov in 1996. Trained as an orientalist which clearly influenced the direction of Russian diplomacy away from Western political alignment and a worry of diversification of vectors even if the lack of means continued to weigh heavily on the main dynamics.

interests (the “economisation” of Russian foreign policy) alongside the implementation of an “energy diplomacy.” Finally, support for armament exports was a unique opportunity to showcase Russian technological advances. If Russian activism is more visible on the Middle Eastern front, Moscow has also redeployed its interests in the Maghreb. This entrance into the Maghreb and Mashrek should be seen as part of a logic of geographical continuum.⁴ In 2005, it obtained observer state status in the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation.

The Arab Spring firmly “shook” the process of Russian reengagement in the North African/Middle Eastern zone. Despite a willingness to act, Russian involvement has been extremely gradual (and devoid of any spectacular successes). Moscow was relatively reserved in its reaction to revolutions and demonstrated a preference for the maintenance of the status quo and the “legitimate” powers prioritising stability (independent of the nature of said regimes). This attitude marks a certain continuity in Moscow’s rejection to what it sees as the inclination of Western countries to support regime change. This has been the case in certain countries (Serbia 1999, Iraq 2003, the Rose Revolution in Georgia 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine 2004) and occasionally through the use of force. This explains the recurrence of calls by the Russian authorities to stop intervening in Arab revolutions. The Russian reaction can also be explained through fear of an expansion of Middle Eastern political instability. Indeed, from the outset, the Russian authorities have voiced their concern at the possibility that revolution might principally benefit Islamists. The conservative posture of Russia on the Arab Spring will have been received differently at the regional level. On the one hand, according to certain experts, the Algerian regime appreciated the Russian contribution to the development of cooperation projects of Sonatrach-Gazprom.⁵ On the other, the support of key figures in the Russian government to Muammar Gaddafi will take a long time to be forgotten in Tripoli.

In any case, after the erosion of its positions in Iraq and in the 2003 war, Russia is determined to prevent the repetition of scenarios of regime change. This is clearly the case in Libya and Syria, two countries it considers as important stepping stones in its return strategy to the Middle East. The UN intervention in Libya and the elimination of Muammar Ghaddafi explain to a large extent the subsequent obstruction of Moscow on the Syrian question.⁶ When several Western powers argue that there cannot be a political solution to the intra-Syrian conflict with the maintenance of President Assad,

⁴ Abdallah Saaf, “La Russie et le Maghreb”, Research Paper, *OCP Policy Center*, June 2016, p. 7.

⁵ Tobias Schumacher, Cristian Nitoiu, “Russia’s Foreign Policy towards North Africa in the Wake of the Arab Spring”, *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 20, n° 1, 2015.

See also: <http://www.gazprom-international.com/en/operations/country/algeria>.

⁶ Russia, then under the leadership of Medvedev, made the choice of abstaining during a vote of the Security Council on resolution 1973 on the 17 March 2011 authorising a UN operation. Prime Minister Putin had main known his disagreement with the decision.

Russia concludes that Syria will be the next country on the list of *regime change*. This threatens to deny it one of its most stable, if not main allies in the region. In turn, this allows Russian experts to state that the rescue of the Syrian regime is the most important of considerations that underpins the Kremlin line on Syria. When Moscow justifies its military intervention in Syria through issues touching at the stability of the region “*it is a lie. Russia, first and foremost supports Bashar Al-Assad!*”⁷

Another parameter through which to analyse Russia's desire for regional influence can be found in an element of context. Moscow estimates that the world is witnessing the collapse of the old regional order and that this constitutes evidence of what it identifies, correctly or not, as the end of the “Western moment” in international relations. For the Kremlin, this new configuration constitutes an opportunity allowing an acceleration of Russia's reinsertion of Russia in the region. Such a reintroduction is also seen by Moscow as a necessity in the context of conflict with Ukraine as it has to be demonstrated by any means that Russia is not as isolated as the West argues. However, this endeavour also contains certain risks, notably due to the fragility of the situation and the volatility of political equilibriums prevalent in the region.

I – The return of Russia into North Africa and the Middle East: Multiple motivations.

I.1 – *Russia as a power seeking global hegemony in a “post-Western” international context*⁸

Through the assertion that Russia is “no more” than a regional power (2014), in an interview given to *The Economist*, President Barack Obama undeniably “provoked” the Russian authorities. Indeed, Russia under Putin has incessantly gone back on its diplomacy of the 1990s to demonstrate its intent to weigh in on major international issues. This is particularly shown in its activity on key issues such as its role as a nuclear power and as a permanent member of the Security Council. In its vision of the world, this is evidence of its capacity to play a role in Middle Eastern affairs, an area that strongly mobilises the attention of the international community. “*Those who are in a strong position in this region will have strong positions in the world*” argues Fyodor Lukyanov, a Russian

⁷ Alexey Malashenko, senior researcher at the Carnegie Center of Moscow, cited by Manon-Nour Tannous, *Le projet de règlement russe en Syrie*, seminar n° 4, Observatoire Arc de crise DGRIS/FRS, 27 July 2016, p. 6. During this seminar another Russian participant, Yury Barmin, explained that “by bombing moderate rebels, Moscow wants to demonstrate where its priorities lie. If you are not willing to dialogue with Assad, you are extremists even if you are secular.”

⁸ In the words of Sergey Lavrov in his intervention at the Munich Security Conference, 18 February 2017.

political scientist known to be close to the seat of power.⁹ In this context, Russia did not hesitate to use rhetoric that denounced the West's moral responsibility in bringing about the current Middle Eastern predicament (this is perfectly reflected by Vladimir Putin's speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2015).¹⁰ This speech aimed to strengthen his own role at the forefront of the resolution of crises in the Middle East. In any case, the post-Arab Spring situation has offered new ground which is particularly favourable to the realisation of Russian ambitions. Indeed, the United States is advocating less involvement whereas Europe seems to be confused if not predominantly because of the EU's internal travails. An additional factor which is related to Russia's "Middle Eastern activism" can be found in its internal dynamics. Through foreign success, the Kremlin is actively seeking to respond to domestic issues. This is particularly notable in the economic sphere, where the projection of an image of a strong Russia at the heart of international issues serves as a solution to internal impediments.¹¹

Before the Arab Spring, many of the antiquated relationships established during the Soviet Union era were far from having recovered to their previous level. Indeed, even the strongest ties (Syria, Libya, Egypt and Algeria) were far from a complete return to the Cold War paradigm. Moreover, successive revolutions had compromised some of the advances that Moscow had managed to achieve since the start of the 2000s. Thus, the war in Syria represented a real opportunity for Russia to demonstrate its renewed regional importance. Besides, there seems to have been a certain vengeful dimension to the motivations of the Russian Federation at the expense of Western countries. Indeed, from a Russian point of view, the military interventionism of Western states deprived Moscow of traditional (Saddam Hussein) or potential allies (Muammar Gadhafi). Today, Russia seeks to compensate for such perceived or actual geopolitical losses through a return in the area, expedited through its involvement in the Syrian question. This is certainly not unrelated to the Russian official line on Libya where Moscow holds a very similar discourse to that which it has developed in Syria since 2011. "*Undoubtedly, it is only up to the Libyans themselves to determine who runs the country. This should not and cannot be envisaged or imposed by external actors*" explains Vladimir Chizhov, Russian ambassador to the European Union.¹²

Moscow's ambition to impose itself as a central power in the Middle East had manifested itself in several ways before and since the start of the intervention by Russian forces in Syria in September 2015. Moreover, it expressed itself far beyond the Syrian question with Russian contributions to the Iranian nuclear debate and agreements with the United

⁹ "In the Middle East, Russia is Reasserting Its Power", *The Economist*, 25 March 2017.

¹⁰ Full speech on <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>.

¹¹ Alexey Malashenko, in M.-N. Tannous, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹² Jacopo Barigazzi, David M. Herszenhorn, "Russia's 'Crescent of Instability' Spreads West", www.politico.eu, 2 April 2017.

States on chemical weapons in Syria (September 2013). This is further highlighted by both the self-promotion undertaken by Moscow at the heart of the Quartet and initiatives pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. (The aim is to remove the idea that an exclusively American process of negotiations is still an option, following changes in Washington.)¹³

In any case, the Syrian question has allowed Russia to interact with Washington on a more level playing field – a key objective of Russian diplomacy in the Middle East and the wider world. Thus, the main aim of Russia's military campaign in Syria is to impose itself as “co-leader” with the United States on intra-Syrian negotiations and to draw up of a peace initiative backed by both countries.¹⁴ This comes alongside saving Bashar Al-Assad who is in increasingly dire straits. At the time, the last step of Moscow's “Syria plan” aimed at forming a vast coalition of Russia/the US/European countries/regional powers (Iran, Iraq, Syria) against the so-called Islamic State. It was thought that this would help thaw the relationships between Russia and Western countries putting them on an “equal footing” that the Kremlin never ceases to aspire to and make claims to. Thus, it isn't rare to hear Russian officials or political experts close to power underline that Russia and the United States have common interests “*in many regional crises and zones of instability.*” Such areas include Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (which the Russian government links to the zone under consideration.)¹⁵ In the same way, when Russia is attempting to strengthen its presence in North Africa, it is with the calculation that this may open opportunities of interaction and dialogue with a certain number of European countries that are interested in the evolution of the regional situation. Undoubtedly, this is one of the key agendas of its current position on Libya.

More broadly, Russian policy in Northern Africa and the Middle East is undeniably reactionary. It marks a response to an international environment which it perceives as undergoing profound changes relating to the perceived or imagined decline of Western global leadership that is undoubtedly desired by Russia. The Kremlin enjoys luring regional powers to the organisations which it promotes in a bid to strengthen its vision of an increasingly multipolar global order. Such a reading of global geopolitics highlights Russia's importance in achieving such goals. From this point of view, the interest shown

¹³ See Shlomi Eldar, “The Putin-Trump Era of Middle East Negotiations”, *Al Monitor*, 7 March 2017. In mid-January 2017, Russia organized a reunion in Moscow amongst Palestinian factions. A researcher of the French Institute in the Middle East, Xavier Guignard, stated that regardless of whether this initiative mattered, there has been “*a profound change in the region. The different actors believe that something can be done with the Russians and hence we are no longer forced to work with the others.*” (cited in Nicolas Falez, Guilhem Delteil, “A Moscou, le Hamas et le Fatah relancent la reconciliation,” RFI, 18 January 2017).

¹⁴ Dmitri Trenin, “Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers”, *Task Force on U.S. Policy toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia project*, White Paper, 5 April 2016.

¹⁵ “Igor Ivanov: Russia-U.S. Cooperation: If Not Today, It Will Come Tomorrow”, Russian International Affairs Council, 24 March 2017. Igor Ivanov was Foreign Minister before Sergey Lavrov.

by Turkey in joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation¹⁶ or the possibility of Iran (observing member) fully joining said organisation are useful stepping stones.¹⁷ The same can be said regarding the anticipated alignment of Egypt's Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and the Eurasian Economic Union. Besides, Russia is certainly aware of the inherent weaknesses hindering it weighing in as a global power. Thus, Russia is constantly searching for new partnerships with regional powers that would increase its international visibility and credibility throughout the Middle East and elsewhere. This is the case in such countries as Iran, Israel, Egypt and Morocco.

1.2 – Concerns on security and stability

Through its military intervention in Syria, Russia wished to give credence to the strength of its engagement in international terrorism. This is an important factor as according to the Kremlin's calculations this is a unifying theme at the global level. According to its reasoning, fighting international terrorism can help improve its international image on the one hand and constitute an issue on which divergences with the West can be erased. In any case it should provide a bedrock from where it will be possible to develop new partnerships in different regions of the world.

However, this tendency to manipulate must not mask another main motivation for reengagement of Russia in the North Africa/Middle East zone. This refers to Moscow's will to have an influence in an area where according to its own readings, intrinsic instability has exploded through the collapse of state structures in many countries (Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Syria). From a Russian perspective, strong state structures are the only frameworks capable of containing the challenges to stability in the region and in particular the rise in strength of militant Islam. Seen from Moscow, Western experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan should be taken into consideration as they demonstrated the vanity of "attempts to impose democracy on Islamic countries." Such attempts have led to "failed states rather than democracy."¹⁸ It is from this that stems Russian preference for the maintenance of the status quo expressed at the time of the Arab Spring which Moscow predicted would greatly benefit Islamist forces. In brief, "for Putin, Saddam Hussein,

¹⁶ "Ankara pourrait adhérer à l'organisation de Shanghai", *Le Figaro/AFP*, 20 novembre 2016. Turkey is currently a "dialogue partner" of the OCS.

¹⁷ The Russian specialist in the Middle East, Yury Barmin states that Iran desired that Russia become involved in Syria. In the days following the Iranian nuclear deal, Iran apparently insisted that Russia implicate itself in exchange for an engagement "not to operate a turn that would be too radical towards the West." (M.-N. Tannous, *op. cit.*, p. 7).

¹⁸ Statement of Mikhail Margelov, president of the foreign policy commission of the Duma, transcript of his conference at Chatham House, "Russia's Vision for the Middle East and North Africa", 10 December 2013. M. Margelov served as a mediator in the intra-libyan conflict between Benghazi and Tripoli, and was a special representative to V. Putin overseeing cooperation with African countries.

Muammar Gadhafi, Bashar Al-Assad was worth more [...] than radical Islam.”¹⁹ The Russian authorities (including Putin himself) expressed their preoccupation at the arrival of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt which gave rise to a rejection of an Egyptian request for over two billion dollars.²⁰ Today the Kremlin is betting on General Sisi whom it considers capable of bringing stability to Egypt and to challenge the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood.²¹ Furthermore, Russia “*is at the forefront of the anti-Islamist obsession. For good and bad reasons which draw from its heritage (the hard-won empire established in the Caucasus, which translates in the presence of 25 million Muslims within the Federation), and from its present (the last wars in the Northern Caucasus, terrorism in several Russian towns).*”²²

The problem as seen by Russia is that the regional instability is likely to spill-over outside the region. Thus, for Moscow, “*Russia sees the Middle East as rather close.*”²³ It perceives that there exists a continuum of security between the situation in the Near and Middle East as well as that of its “south”, whether that relates to its own southern territories or to the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia. The allegiance demonstrated by militant Islamists from Northern Caucasus to the so-called Islamic State²⁴ and the presence of Central Asian and Russian nationals in the midst of its ranks evidently increase this preoccupation. Moreover, Saudi support to groups in the Northern Caucasus and in Central Asia is seen by Moscow and Central Asian republics to carry with it a risk of Wahhabi ideological expansion. By intervening forcefully in Syria in favour of President Assad, Russia aims to give credit to authoritarian regimes in Central Asia that are equally concerned at the Islamist threat. This is a means like any other to keep them within their sphere of influence.

In particular, since the Iraq war, Russia has been looking to obtain greater capacities of comprehension but also of influence on phenomenon that is likely to have an impact on its southern neighbours as well as its own territory. This has been through a more “assertive” diplomacy in the Middle East. Moscow’s stable but complicated dialogue with Saudi Arabia fits into this perspective. Its approach shows its care when thinking about “*the excessive development of the role of Gulf monarchies in the Middle East which is disproportionate when regional history and demography are taken into account.*”²⁵ This sparked the collapse of the Arab republics (Iraq, Syria, Egypt).

¹⁹ A. Malashenko, in M.-N. Tannous, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²⁰ T. Schumacher, C. Nitoiu, *op. cit.*

²¹ D. Trenin, *op. cit.*

²² Dominique David, “Vivre avec la Russie,” *Politique étrangère*, n° 1, 2017, p. 63.

²³ Dmitriï Trenin cited in “In the Middle East, Russia is Reasserting Its Power,” *op. cit.*

²⁴ D. Trenin, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Igor Delanoë, statement during the conference “Les relations extérieures de la Russie”, Université Nice-Sophia Antipolis, 16 March 2017.

The current activity of Russia in Libya can be partly explained by its desire to avoid the fragmentation of the country which it anticipates would benefit Islamists. (Libya must not become “a breeding ground for the terrorist plankton” declared Vladimir Putin’s spokesperson).²⁶ This is one of the reasons why Russia, whilst officially recognising the authority of a government of a weakened national unity government, supports “Marshal” Khalifa Haftar. The Kremlin judges that he has proven himself in the fight against jihadists. (This is only one of the reasons, as it is obviously important for Russia to emerge in the best position in the future, notably with regard to oil, and to benefit from an additional point of influence in the Mediterranean. All of this whilst highlighting the weakness of Western countries to weigh in on the situation and to gain manoeuvrability and means of pressure on the European powers, see below).²⁷

In general, the relations of Russia with many countries of the region integrate cooperation that is more or less developed in terms of the fight against terrorism on which we have relatively little information. These are mentioned, notably in such countries as Algeria (support in anti-terrorist formation), Tunisia, Israel, Egypt and Iran.

It is difficult to say to what extent Russia integrates the existence of a large Muslim community (25 – 30 million people) in its regional agenda. This consideration explains in part its desire to avoid being identified as an integral participant to a real or imagined Shiite, anti-Sunni axis, which its links to Iran, Hezbollah could contribute to. In this context, any dialogue with Saudi Arabia, Turkey or even the Egyptian government (and arms sales to the latter, see below) despite being difficult, acts as a useful veil. On this subject, Russian specialist positions do not converge fully. Some underline that citizens of the Caucasus go to the Middle East to fight against “*Shiite aggression supported by Russia*” whilst others take a different angle stating that Russia is not very exposed to Sunni-Shiite divisions and that any perceived alignment of Russia with Shiites does not have any real impact.²⁸

1.3 – The North African zone/the Middle East and the economisation of Russian foreign policy

From the start of the 2000s, the Kremlin has strived to strengthen the links between its diplomatic efforts and economy so that the two are mutually beneficial. Russia’s efforts to develop its economic interests in the North African/Middle Eastern region are just as much a result of the “economisation” of its foreign policy as a means of strengthening

²⁶ “Libye : la Russie a-t-elle déployé des forces spéciales en Égypte ?,” RFI, 15 March 2017.

²⁷ Sergeï Lavrov thus stated that “*the Italians are too weak to do anything, France also*” (Isabelle Mandraud, Frédéric Bobin, “La Russie joue un rôle croissant en Libye”, *Le Monde*, 21 January 2017). See also, on the preoccupation that Europe arouses, this “growing role” of Russia: J. Barigazzi, D. M. Herszenhorn, *op. cit.*

²⁸ M.-N. Tannous, *op. cit.*, p. 14, p. 16.

its regional political influence via its economy. In any case, no official high-level visit in the Arab-Muslim world would have neglected the economic and commercial dimension in the 2000s.²⁹ A Russo-Arab business council³⁰ was constituted from 2002 at the behest of the Chamber of commerce and Russian industry and of the General Union of Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture for Arab Countries. Bilateral councils have been established under these auspices. In North Africa in particular, Russian reengagement has been principally dictated by economic interests (primarily through the penetration of energy sectors and arms sales).

The total or partial wiping of debts inherited from the Soviet Union (by such countries as Syria, Libya, Algeria and Iraq) stemmed from the aforementioned twin factors: the strengthening of the economy as a tool through which to conduct foreign policy as well as the reassertion of Russia's regional influence through economic penetration. It aimed on the one hand to avoid a considerable obstacle in the reassertion or development of political relations with countries of the region. Besides, such methods of partial compensation fed the hope that concerned countries would become Russia's economic partners. This can be seen in the participation of Russian firms in petroleum or infrastructure projects as well as sales promises made by the Russian industrial defence complex (see *below*).

The progression of trade is very relative. In 2004, Russia made 6.6% from its external trade with the Middle East. In 2015, this figure was at 7% (37 billion dollars).³¹ In the Middle East, 80% of commercial relations are revolve around three countries, Turkey, Iran and Israel. The economic dimension remains important in Russia's reassertion of its regional role as it actively searches for any opportunities. Russia intends, for example, to lift its sanctions against Iran to serve its own interests. During the meeting between Putin and Rouhani in March 2017, the two countries, whose trade increased by more than 70% in 2016, signed agreements and protocols on different areas of cooperation, be they in energy or railway electrification.³² It is equally likely that Russia hopes that its firms are well placed in the list of those that will be invited to participate in the reconstruction of Iraq, Syria and Libya once stability is recovered.

A fortiori in the context of Western sanctions, Moscow is attempting to find investments and foreign financing coming from the greatest number of possible sources. From this angle, Russia may be betting on Gulf monarchies,³³ even if expectations are not

²⁹ See Igor Delanoë, *Russie. Les enjeux du retour au Moyen-Orient*, Les carnets de l'Observatoire, L'Inventaire, pp. 25-26.

³⁰ Voir le site du Conseil : <http://www.russarabbc.ru/>

³¹ I. Delanoë, *Russie. Les enjeux du retour au Moyen-Orient*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

³² "Poutine reçoit Rohani : une rencontre et de vrais enjeux", *L'Orient-Le-Jour*, 30 March 2017.

³³ D. Trenin, *Ibid.*

disproportionately high. In December 2016, Rosneft announced the sale of 19.5% of its capital stock to the Glencore group and to Qatari sovereign fund. Other investment projects are also being considered.³⁴ Russia is looking for technological cooperation to help it modernise its industrial fabric industry. Here, Israel could well be deemed a potential partner. Especially relevant are past cooperative efforts in the development of drones. Russian weapons experts hold that technological blockages in Russian industry could be overcome or diminished through greater cooperation with Israel. The government's effort and that of Russian political actors has been particularly evident in tow of the most important sectors of the Russian economy – energy (including nuclear) and armament.

1.3.1 – Energy: political rather than economic ambitions?

Moscow's bid to reassert itself in the Middle East is linked to its ambitions regarding the "diplomacy of energy", an area regularly commented on in the 2000s. In this framework, the game is evidently complicated by the competition Russia faces from most countries in the region, which doesn't stop it from looking to integrate the oil sector of a number of these countries through exploitation and/or exploration contracts. From 2005, many such contracts were signed with Syria. The important Russo-Algerian arms sales of 2006 (see below) were made up of cooperation projects between Loukoil, Gazprom and Sonatrach (GNL, petroleum exploration). Although these projects did not immediately have an important impact, it seems that things evolved in 2014 when Sonatrach invited Gazprom to participate in a tender for the exploration and development of around thirty oil deposits in Algeria.³⁵ Russia made cooperation offers to a large number of other countries in the region, including Egypt, Iran and Libya.

This aspect of the political economy of Russia in Northern Africa/the Middle East has a strong political dimension due to the growing tensions with the European Union on the issue of gas interdependence since the mid-2000s (cf. in particular the "gas crises with Ukraine.") Russia is now looking to tie down new partnerships to reinforce its main energy relationship with the European Union. For example, the agreements signed between Gazprom and Libya before the fall of Gaddafi were interpreted as potentially "creating difficulties for the European Union relating to its provision of gas [as this] could weigh heavily on one of the alternative sources of gas, that is Libya."³⁶ It is also about lending credibility to the idea that greater coordination is possible between countries which produce petrol and gas. Russia has thus shown itself to be particularly willing to lend its weight to the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (founded in 2001), which includes,

³⁴ For more details, see I. Delanoë, *Russie. Les enjeux du retour au Moyen-Orient*, op. cit., pp. 98-100.

³⁵ T. Schumacher, C. Nitoiu, op. cit.

³⁶ A. Saaf, op. cit., p. 16. Rosneft signed in February 2017 a memorandum of cooperation with the National Oil Corporation (Sanalla).

besides Russia, many countries of the Middle East/North Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iran; Iraq and Oman are observers).

Although to a lesser extent, the same trends are present in the relations with petrol-producing countries. Moscow has every interest in demonstrating to the rest of the world that, despite objectively competing on the global market, Russia and Saudi Arabia are able to overcome their differences (including political differences, for example on Syria) to weigh in on global petroleum prices. The year of 2016 was marked by the efforts of Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar (and Venezuela) to reach an understanding on levels of production. By the end of November 2016, Russia had committed to progressively lower its production to 300 000 barrels per day to the OPEC on a time frame of six months (COFACE). Be that as it may, the situation regarding this remains very delicate and fragile, highlighting the limited extent to which Russia is able to influence its competitors' policies. In this way, the crisis tied to the fall of the price of petrol that Russia is currently experiencing was a result of the war of prices triggered in the autumn of 2014 by Saudi Arabia. This was in part as a response to the intention shown by Iran to restore its production of petrol to pre-sanction levels.³⁷ However, for Russia, rapprochement with the OPEC also extends beyond economic aspects to “*fix a new framework of cooperation with the petro monarchies*” of the Gulf.³⁸

The Russian authorities are also very active in their promotion of civilian nuclear technology in North Africa/the Middle East. Favourable financial conditions show their determination to develop such cooperation in an area that has significant symbolic and political importance. The aim is to put in the spotlight one of the domains of excellence of Russian industry and thus compensate the cash economy reputation that Russia has whilst also securing a regional Russian footprint over a longer period. Memorandums and project agreements have been signed with nearly all countries in the area.³⁹ Moscow is discounting new contracts with Iran with two new reactors being already under construction since September 2016 on the site of Bushehr and two others that should rapidly follow. An intergovernmental agreement has been signed between Russia and Egypt in 2014 on the construction of the El-Dabaa power station (on a Russian loan of \$25 billion, with advantageous conditions for the Egyptian party.) Rosatom, that has signed a memorandum of mutual aid with the Algerian authority in charge of atomic energy (2014), is working on projects in Turkey (2010 agreement on the Akkuyu power station) and in Jordan (Qasr Amra power station, 49% financed by Rosatom).⁴⁰ An

³⁷ “Russia’s Nuclear Energy Diplomacy in the Middle East: Why the EU Should Take Notice”, *European Policy Centre Policy Briefs*, 21 February 2017, p. 2.

³⁸ I. Delanoë, *Russie. Les enjeux du retour au Moyen-Orient*, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

³⁹ For more details, see M. Giuli, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 2.

agreement (2015) should lead to nuclear cooperation with Saudi Arabia, the UAE (2012) and Tunisia (2016).

1.3.2 – Weaponry: the tireless effort of recovery

The Soviet Union has imposed itself as the main supplier of weaponry to many countries in the region – in particular Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Iraq, Syria and Yemen.⁴¹ In 2007, the person in charge of the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation (arms sales and arms cooperation) announced: “Moscow is returning to the Arab region, to which have have paid no attention since the 1990s.”⁴² Since the 2000s, Russia has sought to reconquer or develop its position in its old markets. According to the same Russian official, the region should become similar in terms of volumes of sales of Russian weaponry to India and China.⁴³ Russia's wish to return to the North African/Middle Eastern region in fact coincided with its desire to diversify its markets for the exportation of weaponry (80% of arms sales being sent to China and India, with the aim of offsetting a predicted contraction of both markets.)⁴⁴ Russia carried out its commercial “offensive” on the whole of the region, from old partners to countries traditionally more used to obtaining goods from Western industries.

The Syrian and Algerian debt (the former having been discounted by 73% of the total debt in 2005, the later adding up to \$4.5bn) have been partially compensated through the acquisition of Russian weaponry. The cancellation of the Libyan debt in 2008 (\$4bn at the time of Putin's visit to Tripoli) should also have been followed by the renewal of Russian armament exports to the country. Cooperation agreements in different areas were signed during this same visit amounting to \$10bn, \$4bn of which was destined for arms contracts. Although the ideological dimension that was prevalent during the Cold War made Russia make donations or sell weaponry at discounted prices to its regional relays has disappeared, the promotion of weaponry retains a political dimension. The ties in this domain allow for hope for the establishment of more dependable political relations in the long run.⁴⁵

The main objectives have been more or less achieved on the global scale, since today the Middle East/North Africa zone is the second exporting region (17.8% of the total of

⁴¹ Between 1983 and 1990, arms sales from the Soviet Union reached a total sum of \$55bn (Vladimir Frolov, “The Benefits of Multilateralism”, *Russia Profile*, n° 8, vol. 3 October 2006, p. 40).

⁴² “Russia ‘Regaining Positions’ on Mideast Arms Markets – Official”, RIA Novosti, 19 February 2007.

⁴³ “Russia's Portfolio of Orders for Arms Exports Reaches \$30Bln – Official”, Interfax-AVN, 27 February 2007.

⁴⁴ In parallel, Russia was equally looking for commercial opportunities in South America and in South-East Asia.

⁴⁵ Isabelle Facon, “La Russie et les redéfinitions du monde arabo-musulman. Perceptions, intérêts et risques”, *Annuaire français de relations internationales*, 2014, p. 628.

exportations on the 2000-2016 period) after Asia.⁴⁶ Yet the Soviet Union's old partners have been somewhat less difficult to convince that the markets that have traditionally been dominated by Western suppliers. Between 2000 and 2016, Algeria accounted for more than half of Russian exports in the region. Indeed, as early as 2006, it became the third importer of Russian weapons behind China and India. This came after three months of negotiating, with the signing in March of an arms contract amounting to around \$7.5bn (during the Cold War, the Soviet Union provided 80% of the Algerian army's equipment.) Egypt also appears relatively high on the list of important clients of the Russian armament industry, especially since the arrival of General Sisi in 2013. All, or most of the agreements concluded (in such areas as military helicopters, MiG-29 and anti-tank missiles) will be financed by Saudi and Emirati money. Agreements of a lesser importance had been signed before, since early 2005. Russia has provided helicopters, anti-air missiles, second hand Su-25 fighters to Iraq and is counting on a development of this weapons-dominated relationship. According to a report made by Chatham House, arms sales to the region have been distributed as follows: Iraq, Syria, Egypt each receive 1.4% of Russia's weapons exports, Yemen 1.2%, Algeria 9.1%, Iran 2%,⁴⁷ the UAE 0.7%.⁴⁸

Political considerations force Russia to proceed with a certain amount of care. Its armament relationship with Iran and Syria must take into question the Israeli sensitivities. The importance of the links between Moscow and Tehran theoretically constitutes, an (additional) braking force to potential arms cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Russia. Nevertheless, according to Russian specialists, "*Moscow could show itself to be more open to arming the smaller Gulf States that, alone, can only be identified as a threat to Iran.*"⁴⁹ In this regard, potential and existent transactions between Russian industrialists and the UAE are worth mentioning.⁵⁰

To give itself credibility as an arms supplier that is hardly affected by international pressure, Russia has not reneged on weapons contracts made with Syria before the start of the civil war. Besides, its military engagement in Syria was not devoid of commercial ulterior motives since Russian forces operated a certain amount of equipment that is likely to interest countries in a region where Russian arms already make up 18.3% of total arms sales.⁵¹ This amounts to a sign that Russia considers that new opportunities

⁴⁶ Richard Connolly, Cecilie Sendstad, *Russia's Role as an Arms Exporter. The Strategic Importance of Arms Exports for Russia*, Russia and Eurasia Programme, RIIA, March 2017, p. 17.

⁴⁷ For more details on Russo-Iranian technical and military cooperation, see I. Delanoë, *Russie. Les enjeux du retour au Moyen-Orient*, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-41.

⁴⁸ R. Connolly, C. Sendstad, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁴⁹ D. Trenin, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ "From Moscow with Weapons: UAE-Russia Sign Anti-Armour Missile Deal", www.alaraby.co.uk, 21 February 2017.

⁵¹ R. Connolly, C. Sendstad, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

could materialise as regional geopolitical equilibriums are subject to significant fluctuations.

2 – Russia's new capabilities

“Russia will continue making a meaningful contribution to stabilizing the situation in the Middle East and North Africa, supporting collective efforts aimed at neutralizing threats that emanate from international terrorist groups, consistently promotes political and diplomatic settlement of conflicts in regional States,” states the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (November 2016).⁵² The use of the term “collective” underlines Russia's realist approach, which takes into consideration the complexity of regional relations, their volatility, and is utterly unable to impose itself as a hegemonic power in the zone. However, it seems clear that the intensity of military and diplomatic engagement in the region as has taken occurred in Syria against the background of the United States' – possibly temporary – withdrawal from the region. While active diplomatic efforts remain this approach's central pillar, it now depends on whether Russia demonstrates a willingness to use military force.

2.1 – *The measured mobilisation of military tools*

In Vladimir Putin's vision, the possession of a credible conventional military force and the demonstration of a determination to use it to defend Russia's central interests constitute the most important component of the state's international authority. In the region in question before the military intervention in Syria, this approach has materialised through the decision to renew a military presence in the Mediterranean (in action since 2013). The extent of this presence (around ten vessels, under the responsibility of the Black Sea fleet, with the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea and the horn of Africa as its zone of action) pales in comparison to Soviet deployments from the Cold War. The deployment of the aircraft carriers Admiral Kuznetsov in the eastern Mediterranean, in October 2016, has nonetheless had a certain impact.

If the military intervention in Syria aimed to relieve Bashar Al-Assad of his military and strategic difficulties, it was also made according to other considerations. Amongst them, the will of Moscow to “*demonstrate the extent to which it has developed its military*

⁵² The document underlines that Moscow will follow “*Russia intends to further expand its bilateral relations with the States in the Middle East and North Africa, including through such actions as relying on the ministerial meeting of the Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum as well as continuing strategic dialogue with the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf,*” as well as the fact that “*Russia will take advantage of its participation as an observer to the work of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.*”

capacities.”⁵³ This is not only aimed at sending a message to Western countries, with whom relations are at their lowest since 2014, but also to comfort its reputation with regional states. Indeed, it seems that the Russian authorities believe that Russia can gain credibility amongst countries that respect the “strong man” image that this operation has bestowed upon President Putin.⁵⁴ Taking into account the importance of these cumulated objectives, the Kremlin’s intervention is remarkably cost-effective. Furthermore, one must bear in mind the publicity for Russian weaponry and an “extra” in terms of training for the armed forces in view of meeting such objectives. At the same time, the Russian military implication has been weighed in such a way as to avoid the Russian stalemate that many are predicting. Thus, the air-strikes constitute a central pillar of Russian military intervention. On the ground, Russia has satisfied itself with a small special forces presence (probably around several hundred men) who train the Syrian forces and protect sensitive infrastructure such as pipelines.⁵⁵

In the long term, Russia will develop its military presence in Syria in the aim of making it a central point of the Russian geopolitical influence in a region that is of particular significance. This area is even more essential as Russia approaches it with the intention of forging a Black Sea/Mediterranean continuum. This signals its intention to continue to weigh in a “measured” but permanent way in a region that is undergoing a thorough reorganisation. “You see their activities in the Port of Tartus and you understand that this isn’t the activity of someone who is planning to pack their bags and leave tomorrow morning,” argues the Israeli Navy’s Chief of Staff.⁵⁶ He goes on to argue this is reminiscent of the way Russia is already operating in the region. The installations in Tartus, at the end of a Russo-Syrian treaty extending the Russian presence for 49 years, will be extended to allow the hosting of more Russian ships. This will allow it to become a fully-fledged naval base (with 11 vessels simultaneously, even if the Russian authorities judge that such a deployment is unnecessary). Besides, Moscow has announced its intention to sustain the presence of aerospace forces on the Hmeimim airbase.⁵⁷ Through this reinforcement and the “coverage” of S-300 (Tartus) and S-400 (Hmeimim) systems, Russia is announcing its intention for a long-term military presence in Syria. Thus, Moscow is forcing regional countries and powers who have interests to integrate the “Russian factor” into their calculations.

⁵³ Statement by Thomas Gomart, director of the IFRI, cited in Isabelle Lasserre, “Quel est le bilan de l’intervention russe en Syrie ?”, *Le Figaro*, 19th of March 2017.

⁵⁴ Igor Delanoë, statement during the conference “Les relations extérieures de la Russie”, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ Y. Barmin, cited in M.-N. Tannous, *op. cit.*, p. 9. The latter argues that Russia is equally present on the ground via members of societies and private security companies employed by the Russian government or the Syrian government to protect VIPs or critical infrastructure.

⁵⁶ “Israel Navy Official: Russia is Here to Stay in the Region”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 20 March 2017.

⁵⁷ “Russia to Transform Syria Airbase into ‘Permanent Military Facility’”, *The New Arab*, 11 August 2016.

In the current state of things, Russia, whilst searching for a diplomatic role at the forefront of the world stage, does not seem to be willing to engage in the same (military) directness in Libya as in Syria. This might stem from several factors. Uneasiness concerning the evolution of the relationship with the Trump administration, logistical constraints, Egyptian “preference,”⁵⁸ should all be taken into consideration. Moreover, it is difficult to envisage a new military intervention given the context of economic crisis that Russia is experiencing. The polls show that Russians are bored by the “warrior sequence” that they have been living since 2014. Nonetheless, it is impossible to rule out that Russia wants to provide more comprehensive military aid to “Marshal” Haftar. From early 2017, following the meeting between the latter and a military delegation in Tobruk, talk was of the imminent drafting of a military cooperation agreement providing for the training of the “Marshal’s” forces by Russian troops (in Tobruk, Benghazi and in Russian vessels)⁵⁹ Later, in March, questions arose as to the participation of Russian special forces (and drones) in Egypt, on the border with Libya (refuted by both Russians and Egyptians).⁶⁰ In other words, Russia, who had already received members of the ANL for medical treatment, seems to be looking to raise the UN embargo on weapons sales to Libya.⁶¹ In March, the Russian Foreign Minister did not exclude the possibility of training the Libyan army if such a request were made to him.⁶² Moreover, certain European experts do not exclude the fact that Moscow might have greater ambitions in Libya, set on bringing about “*the Russian dream [...] to have bases in the Mediterranean.*”⁶³ (There has thus been some talk about the “Tobruk option”⁶⁴).

2.2 – *Russia’s multi-vector game*

Beyond the military operations in Syria starting from September 2015, Russia surprised the international community through its capacity to talk with several major players about

⁵⁸ Moscow does indeed seem to be willing to shelve its initiatives for Egyptian mediation for intra-Libyan reconciliation (Igor Delanoë, statement during the conference “Les relations extérieures de la Russie”, *op. cit.*).

⁵⁹ “Libye : l’accord entre Moscou et le maréchal Haftar bientôt en vigueur”, RFI, 13th of January 2017 ; “Is Russia Set to Train Libyan Strongman Haftar’s Troops?”, *The New Arab*, 16th of January. Among other types of action granted to Russia – reparation services and services of military material maintenance, mine-clearing, etc. But some attribute it to private security companies (Wolfgang Puzstai, “The Haftar- Russia Link and the Military Plan of the LNA”, www.ispionline.it, 2 February 2017).

⁶⁰ See notably Alec Luhn/Reuters, “Russian Special Forces Sent to Back Renegade Libyan General – Reports”, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2017.

⁶¹ According to certain observers, Russian equipment through third party states (W. Puzstai, *op. cit.*).

⁶² “Russia to Consider Possibility of Helping Train Libyan Military in Case of Receiving such Request – Russian Foreign Ministry”, Interfax-AVN, 16 March 2017.

⁶³ Jacopo Barigazzi, David M. Herszenhorn, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ W. Puzstai, *op. cit.* It should be reminded that Cyprus allows the docking of Russian warships in the port of Limassol.

the Syrian issue, including non-state actors, such as the Kurds.⁶⁵ This significantly contributed to the fact that it managed to impose itself as a vital mediator. This approach reflects the strategy pursued more generally in the Northern Africa/Middle East region. No relation is excluded, including those with Fatah or the Iraqi Kurds. Such an approach aims at widening Russian room for manoeuvre. If the legacy of the Soviet era favours the development of certain relations, it does not render them exclusive. Thus, from 2001, President Putin signed a strategic partnership agreement with his Algerian counterpart. However, this did not stop Moscow from engaging with Morocco with whom the Kremlin had always maintained relations, and conversely with Tunisia. In the Middle East, the partnership with Iran has reached an unprecedented level. In four years (2013 – 2017), Presidents Putin and Rouhani have met on eight separate occasions. The last meeting being the first bilateral meeting between the two men. Tehran has authorised Russia to temporarily use the base of Nojeh for its air strikes in Syria. This increased Russo-Iranian proximity has not stopped the links between Russia and Israel from becoming an important paradigm of the Kremlin's regional policy. The demographic weight of Israeli citizens of Soviet origin undoubtedly contributed to this development. Communication between the two countries became particularly during the Russian military intervention in Syria.⁶⁶ The Russian government is showing itself to be particularly attentive to Israel's concerns regarding the presence of Hezbollah and the military influence of Iran in Syria.⁶⁷ Considering that dialogue is preferable to tension and recriminations, Russia has actively sought to establish workable relations with Saudi Arabia. The two countries show themselves inclined to compartmentalise the issues that characterise their bilateral relations.

Thus Russia has shown itself to be faithful to a new foreign policy that seeks to diversify its relations in all regions. In the region concerned, this effort must take into consideration the fact that the inherited networks of the Soviet era have been significantly eroded since the 1990s. Moreover, the growing instability in the zone, especially since the Arab Spring, has forced the Kremlin to demonstrate its flexibility so as to not remove any options in the event that political relations were to evolve.

In this context, Moscow has also managed to appreciate the opportunity that was presented by the perception spread at the regional level of a "confusion" of Western

⁶⁵ Russians want to have the political branch of the YPG take part in the next round of discussions in Geneva, the Democratic Union Party ("Ankara's Syrian Plan Falters as Moscow Sets Up in Afrin", *Al Monitor*, 22 mars 2017). In February 2016, the Syrian Kurds opened an office in Moscow.

⁶⁶ Thus, Israel has not openly critiqued Russian military operations and has kept a staunch silence on the provision of light Russian weaponry to Hezbollah in Syria, whilst Moscow has at more than one instance "allowed" aerial strikes against Hezbollah targets in Syria. (dépôts or arms convoys; Jonathan Marcus, "Putin and Netanyahu: A Complex Diplomatic Dance", www.bbc.com, 9 March 2017) – All the while, it seems that there is close coordination between Russian forces and Hezbollah in Syria (Y. Barmin, cited in M.-N. Tannous, *op. cit.*, p. 11).

⁶⁷ Igor Delanoë, "Moscou, ville d'Orient", obsfr.ru, 20 March 2017.

powers (caused by such factors as the “abandonment” of Mubarak, red lines not followed in Syria and the United States’ regional disengagement). Thus, Moscow did not hesitate to manipulate the disappointments left by Western political leaders to its advantage. This partly explains the development of relations with Egypt, which, after the military coup d’état of 2013, is looking to establish a more independent foreign policy.⁶⁸ Despite the strong ambiguities that will lastingly encumber the Russo-Turkish relationship (starting with the Kurdish question),⁶⁹ Turkey and Russia continue to share a strong disdain for the West. After the coup attempt in Turkey, the immediate support offered by Moscow to the “legitimate authorities” help to repair the damage left by the crisis of the Su-24 shot down by Turkish forces. This marked a stark contrast with Western capitals which voiced their concerns about the repression carried out by the Turkish regime. Russia also knows that its link with Tehran indirectly benefits from the suspicion Iran harbours for the Western powers. The pragmatism observed in the Saudi Arabia/Russia relationship is tied to Riyadh’s desire to diversify its foreign policy in a context where its relationship with Washington has undergone a restructuring in recent years. The arms deals made with Iraq underline Baghdad’s desire to strengthen its political independence from Washington.⁷⁰ In the Maghreb, even the situation is less “severe” for the West, “the Russian project finds a favourable environment due to these countries’ belief in the necessity for a better balanced, bipolar world”⁷¹ (against a highly fluid backdrop, a rapprochement with Moscow can now be used to put pressure on EU countries and the US⁷²). These circumstances have notably favoured the recent development of Russo-Moroccan relations and, to a lesser extent, Russo-Tunisian relations. In general, Russia plays a sensitive game in the entirety of the region. This is demonstrated when Moscow states that its policy in the Middle East and North Africa will always be led on a basis of “respecting their [states’] sovereignty and territorial integrity and the right to self-determination without outside interference” (Foreign Policy Concept).

⁶⁸ President Sisi has reserved his first international visit outside of the region for Moscow, not Washington (August 2014). The cooperation between the two countries now covers a wide array of areas such as armaments, anti-terrorism, joint military exercises (with in 2015 the first joint naval exercise in the post-Soviet era), welcoming Egyptian officers in Russian military schools, the fight against maritime piracy, nuclear cooperation and energy.

⁶⁹ Amongst the recent developments, it should be noted that the Russian ministry of defense has announced that it deployed its troops in Afrine (around a hundred according to the Syrian observatory of human rights) to avoid conflicts with Kurdish and pro-Turkish forces. (“The Russian Defense Ministry Rejects Reports that Moscow is Setting up Military Base to Train Kurds in North-Western Syria,” Interfax-AVN, 20th of March 2017; “Russian Military, Kurds Plan to Open New Centers in Northern Syria – Kurdistan National Congress,” Interfax-AVN, 21st of March 2017).

⁷⁰ I. Delanoë, *Russie. Les enjeux du retour au Moyen-Orient*, op. cit., p. 37.

⁷¹ A. Saaf, op. cit., p. 6.

⁷² T. Schumacher, C. Nitou, op. cit.

2.3 – *Assessment and perspectives from the start of 2017*

Over the last several years, Russian policy in the Middle East and in North Africa years has been characterised by an ability to successfully seize opportunities. Whilst Russia's return since the start of the 2000s has been rather slow and some of its potential successes were compromised by the Arab Spring (notably in Libya), Moscow has been able to impose itself in a regional landscape that is undergoing rapid change by acting quickly in many different directions of the diplomatic spectrum. This, whilst upholding its "political activism" through the modest but still visible deployment of its military equipment. Its motivations in doing so are numerous. The will to interrupt what Moscow sees as a succession of *regime changes* inimical to its geopolitical and economic interests, such as those after the Iraq war and Gaddafi's death in 2011, should not be understated. Another key motivation is Russia's will to appear stronger than its economy would suggest. Russian experts thus do not hide their satisfaction when faced with "*a new reality, a reality in which the United States and the European Union are now behind Russia, Turkey and Iran.*"⁷³ The Russian authorities clearly wish to pressure the European Union by working to obtain gains from its southern neighbours and in particular through its position in Libya. In this regard, a certain vengeful motivation must certainly not be excluded (following the NATO mission in Libya in 2014, described as a "betrayal" by Russian leaders, who cited what they saw as the geopolitical calculations of the European Union in the countries neighbouring Russia). These motivations exist in conjunction with Moscow's willingness to develop ties with all the actors in the region so as to obtain information and means of actions in a region that it considers can impact both its security and that of its allies, notably in Central Asia. These goals have been set by the Kremlin, which will work towards realising them in the long term. In such a context, Syria, chosen as the site for a permanent Russian military presence, seems to remain one of Russia's main entry points in the regional politics of the region.

Whilst Russia's presence at all levels is striking and contrasts with Moscow's quasi-absence from the region in the fifteen years that followed the end of the Cold War, Russia does not make any claim to regional *leadership*. The North Africa/Middle East region seems to exist on the margins of Russia's foreign policy objectives. This is suggested by the order of regional priorities demonstrated in the new, remodelled Foreign Policy Concept of November 2016. Thus "the situation in the Middle East and in North Africa" arrives after the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the "Euro-Atlantic region" (including NATO, the EU, the European Council, the OSCE, the United States, Canada), as well as such regions as the Arctic, Antarctic and the Asia-Pacific)⁷⁴ Only two states (Syria and Iran) are recipients of individual

⁷³ Alexey Khlebnikov, "Changing Dynamics in the Syrian Crisis", *Tel Aviv Notes*, vol. 11, n° 6, 30th of March 2017.

⁷⁴ And before South America and Africa that are only the object of a single paragraph each.

development in a manner that is less based on a bilateral relationship with Russia than on the multilateral process that concerns them (reaching a political resolution in Syria and implementing the Iranian Nuclear deal.)

This confirms that Russia's regional politics remain above all an instrument working towards the realisation of larger ambitions in its foreign policy and security agenda. This is shown perhaps by what is left of its, still modest, economic footprint. The regional powers are aware of this whilst taking into account the calculations of a strengthened Russia. Indeed, said powers are often at the origin of such rapprochements. Thus, the heating up of links with Algeria would not have been possible if the Algerian regime had not needed international legitimisation at the end of the period of violence that it emerged from at the end of the 1990s. In the case of Egypt, the rapprochement can also be explained by Cairo's will to play Russia and America off against one another so as to draw the greatest profits. This is in a context where it is necessary to find a solution to the very reserved stance of Western countries towards President Sisi's regime. Indeed, regional actors maintain their independence as, despite Russia's new found political and military credibility, they are still seen as "*strangers in the Middle East*."⁷⁵ To explain this, several examples are cited by an expert including the constitutional project proposed by Moscow for Syria following the Astana⁷⁶ format which is unpopular in the region (for example in Turkey). The same specialist also evokes the traces left in the region by Russia and their contribution to the creation of memories of "Russian wars against Islam" (Afghanistan, Chechnya and Aleppo).⁷⁷

The multi-faceted game which Moscow employs – at times both a strength and a means of safeguarding its influence in a particularly unstable and conflictual area – contributes to the blurring of its image. In Syria, how should Russia develop relations with Tehran when the Gulf monarchies and especially Israel aim to extract concessions from Moscow in order to contain Iranian influence? There are many in Iran who believe, as put by the old spokesperson of the Iranian ex-president Mohamed Khatami, that Russians are untrustworthy and likely "*to stab you in the back*."⁷⁸ Many of these new regional relations, whether with Turkey or Saudi Arabia, lie on shaky foundations and are far from being based on complete trust. Success is not always straightforward or clear, a conclusion demonstrated by the mixed result of the Astana Conference held in March 2017.

An important parameter of the Russian growth in regional influence lies in the possibility that the region becomes the object of a "deal" between Moscow and the Trump

⁷⁵ Igor Delanoë, statement during the conference "Les relations extérieures de la Russie", *op. cit.*

⁷⁶ The Russian Foreign Policy Concept indicates that "*Russia supports the unity, independence and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as a secular, democratic and pluralistic State with all ethnic and religious groups living in peace and security and enjoying equal rights and opportunities.*"

⁷⁷ Igor Delanoë, statement during the conference "Les relations extérieures de la Russie", *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ "Poutine reçoit Rohani : une rencontre et de vrais enjeux", *L'Orient-Le-Jour*, 30 March 2017.

administration. This would be under the name of the struggle against international terrorism. As of March 2017, too many uncertain variables are in play to proffer a definitive answer to this question. For now, political circumstances in Washington are preventing progress from being made, given Russia's place at the heart of issues questioning the legitimacy of Donald Trump. In any case, scepticism abounds in Moscow as Trump's new security advisor, H. R. McMaster *is not the zealous proponent of total war against radical Islam that Flynn was*" and that "*this limits room for détente.*"⁷⁹ The Trump administration's position on Iran (the president will doubtless be keen to limit Iran's influence in Syria) could complicate things, especially as Russia is attached to the JCPOA that Trump has criticised at several instances.⁸⁰

In any case, Russia's future power projection in Russia will be equally stalled by the fact that it isn't economically equipped to take a stand against what it considers the real strategic issue in the region, the weakness of state structures. Indeed, Russia will not be able to cover a large part of the cost of reconstruction of the countries in the region, a factor which will constrain its overall influence.

⁷⁹ Matthew Bodner, "Trump's New National Security Adviser Is No Friend of Russia's", *Moscow Times*, 21 February 2017.

⁸⁰ American military leaders expressed their concerns regarding Russian's presence in Libya (A. Luhn/Reuters, op. cit.).