

---

Nº 201 - MAY 2015

# Conflicting aims, limited means: Russia in the Middle East

---

**Mark N. Katz**

»» In Ukraine in particular and Europe more generally, Russian President Vladimir Putin has been pursuing an activist foreign policy agenda that Europe and the United States (US) are having difficulty responding to. For example, Brussels and Washington have been unsuccessful in persuading or coercing Moscow to withdraw from eastern Ukraine, much less Crimea. Putin's success (so far) in Europe, though, has not been matched by success in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Like the US and Europe, Russia often finds itself thwarted in its efforts to protect, much less advance, its interests in the MENA. This is due to four factors: 1) the interests Russia pursues in the MENA region are often in conflict with one another; 2) the MENA environment has become more difficult for Russia (among others) since the outbreak of the Arab spring; 3) the means available to Moscow for pursuing Russian interests in the MENA are limited; and 4) the actions of other actors in the region – even those allied to Moscow – often serve to hinder rather than advance the achievement of Russian aims in the region.

## CONFLICTING INTERESTS

Moscow has several geopolitical interests in the MENA. One of these is, as in other regions (most notably Europe), to prevent what it sees as American and European efforts to deprive Moscow of its allies. In

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Russian interests in the Middle East include: countering Western influence; containing Sunni violent extremism; reversing lower global energy prices; and expanding exports.
- However, Russia often finds itself thwarted in its efforts to protect, much less advance, its interests in the Middle East.
- This is partly because Russian interests sometimes conflict, and partly because regional actors – including Russia's allies – often hinder the advancement of those interests.



turn, Moscow seeks to take advantage of MENA governments' unhappiness with American and European policy in the region. Competition with the West, though, is not Moscow's only geopolitical interest in the MENA. Another is to prevent the rise of radical Sunni forces which Moscow fears will, if they grow strong enough, not only engulf the MENA and reduce Russian influence, but also spread into the Muslim regions of Russia.

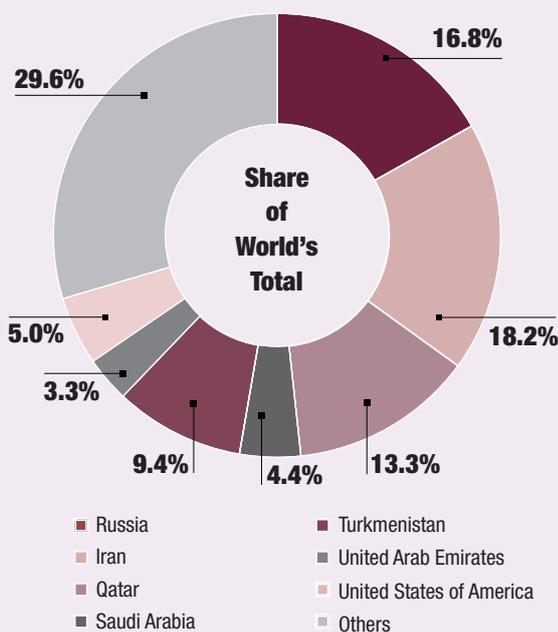
A third Russian geopolitical interest in the MENA derives from Moscow's strong dependence on oil and gas export revenue – not only to fund the government's budget but also to pay off key interest groups on whom Putin's rule depends and to support the Russian economy more generally. Since the Middle East is a key supplier of petroleum resources to the rest of the world, Moscow has a strong interest in seeking to prevent or reverse developments there that result in lower worldwide petroleum prices or European countries switching their reliance on Russia to MENA countries for gas supplies (see Figure 1).

A fourth Russian geopolitical interest in the MENA relates to Moscow's efforts to expand its exports of arms, nuclear reactors, and other goods produced by enterprises closely linked to the Kremlin, and exports to wealthy MENA countries help bolster these industries. But what makes this an important geopolitical (and not just commercial) interest for Russia is that these industries support key elites and interest groups that back Putin (see Figure 2).

These four Russian geopolitical interests in the MENA, it must be noted, are not always mutually compatible. Specifically, the goal of limiting the further expansion of Western influence in the region can be at odds with the aim of preventing the spread of radical Sunni forces. America and Europe, after all, share this latter goal with Russia, and a strong Western presence in the MENA can serve this aim – provided that the US and Europe focus on this goal. Similarly, while Moscow seeks to sell arms, nuclear reactors and other products to the petroleum rich MENA countries, Russia is often in competition with these same countries to export oil and gas to Western and other countries.

**Figure 1**  
Proved Natural Gas Reserves for Selected Countries (end of 2013)

Source: BP Statistical Review of World Energy, June 2014



**THE IMPACT OF THE ARAB SPRING**

Before the outbreak of the Arab spring in 2011, Putin sought to protect and advance Russia's geopolitical interests in the region by pursuing good relations with all governments and certain key political movements in the MENA. Putin not only rebuilt Russian relations with longstanding friends (including the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, the Assad regime in Syria, the Gaddafi regime in Libya, the military regime in Algeria, and the Islamic regime in Iran), he also sought to improve relations with America's friends there (including Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Cooperation Council states, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and even the post-Saddam government in Baghdad as well as the Kurdish Regional Government).

Especially noteworthy were Putin's efforts to improve relations with Saudi Arabia, with which Moscow had tense relations not only during the Cold War when Riyadh was aiding the Afghan Mujahedeen, but also

in the 1990s when Moscow believed the Saudis were assisting Chechen rebels. Putin also sought improved relations with Israel – a government that Moscow had long been at odds with. Russia – which, along with the US, the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN) is a member of the Quartet seeking an Israeli-Palestinian peace – has also had good relations with both Palestinian Fatah and rival Hamas and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Before the Arab spring, in short, Putin pursued good relations with all the major actors in the MENA (except al-Qaeda and its affiliates).

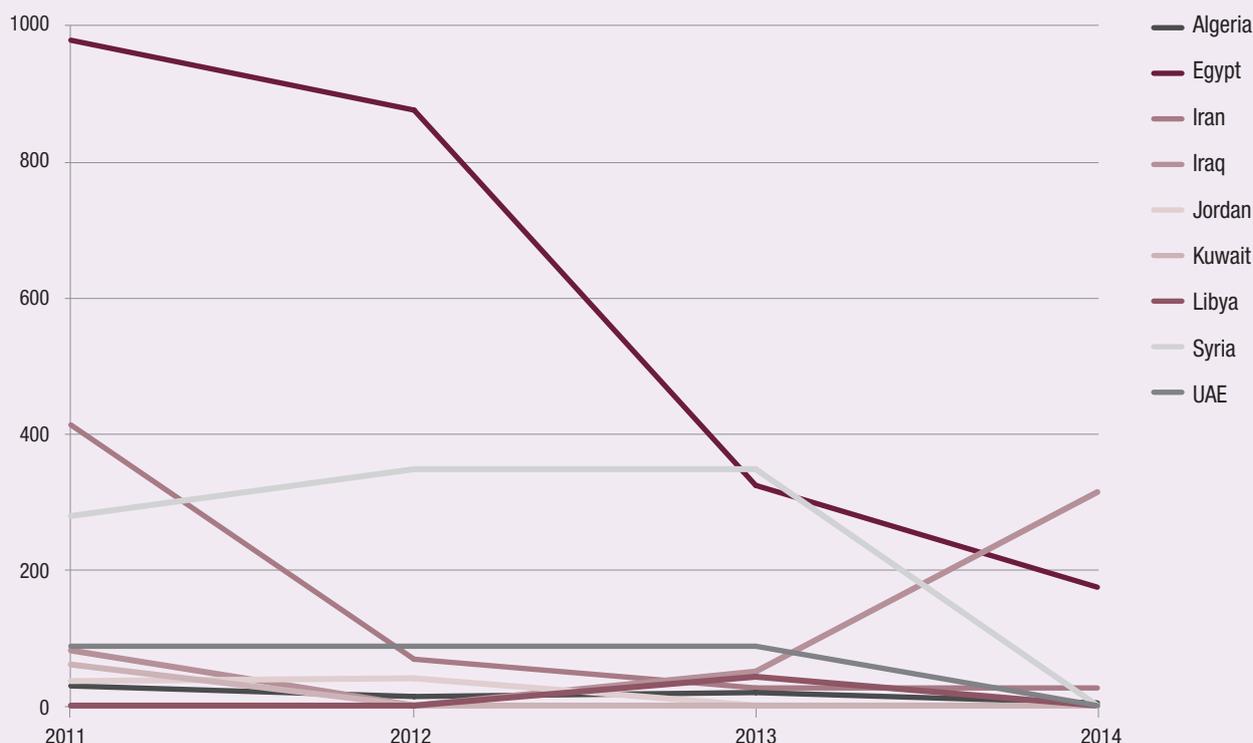
The 2011 Arab uprisings resulted in important changes to Moscow’s MENA strategy. Indifferent to the ouster of Tunisia’s Ben Ali, Moscow was uncomfortable with Mubarak’s downfall in Egypt but indicated its willingness to work with the forces seeking change in both countries. When, however, popular uprisings turned against Russia’s

long-time allies in Libya and Syria – and especially when Western and Arab countries intervened militarily to overthrow the Gaddafi regime – Putin came to view the Arab spring in a more sinister light. Just as he did in response to the ‘colour revolutions’ in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), Putin regarded the Arab spring as an orchestrated effort to replace governments allied to Moscow with ones allied to the West instead.

Many in Moscow saw Western (and their MENA allies’) support for the Arab spring as the first step in a plan to stimulate the rise of similar forces in the Muslim regions – or all – of Russia. In February 2011, then President Medvedev suggested that ‘foreign elements’ were fomenting these uprisings, and that their ultimate intention was to bring political change to Russia. Then Prime Minister Putin warned that ‘external interference’ could lead to the rise of Islamists, and that their rise in

**Figure 2**  
Russian Arms Exports to MENA (in million US\$ at constant 1990 prices)

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Arms Transfers Database (generated 10 April 2015)



**4**



North Africa could negatively affect other regions, including Russia's North Caucasus. In addition, the collapse of world petroleum prices in late 2014, as a result of increasing American shale production as well as Saudi refusal to reign in its oil production, was seen in Moscow as a deliberate Saudi-American effort to weaken Russia economically.

Russian strategy for dealing with the MENA region since the outbreak of the Arab spring, especially since the downfall of Gaddafi, has involved several elements. First, blocking all Western/Arab-backed efforts against Syria's Assad regime at the UN Security Council (Putin has indicated that then-President Medvedev's decision to abstain on the 2011 UN Security Council resolution, calling for the imposition of a no-fly zone in Libya, was the lever which certain Western and Arab governments used to engineer Gaddafi's downfall). Second, providing arms to the Assad regime to prevent its downfall. Third, collaborating with MENA actors that oppose the downfall of the Assad regime or at least fear that what will replace it will be worse (Iran, the Shi'a-dominated government in Iraq, Egypt under Sisi, Algeria, and Israel). Fourth, Russia has been cooperating with American and European anti-Weapons-of-Mass-Destruction efforts (especially regarding chemical weapons in Syria and Iran's nuclear programme) so that they perceive Russia as a partner in the MENA despite their differences over Ukraine. Finally, Moscow's MENA strategy has involved attempting to isolate Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab allies from the West in particular by trying to raise Western fears that they actually support Sunni jihadist forces such as *Daesh* (also called the Islamic State, IS).

**LIMITED MEANS**

While Russia has important geopolitical interests in the MENA, it has limited resources with which to pursue them. And Putin is unwilling to use some resources; for example, he has been unwilling to deploy the Russian military in support of MENA allies (Saddam Hussein in 2003, Gaddafi in 2011, or Assad since 2011). Nor does this seem likely to change even after the sharp deterioration of relations between Russia and the West over Ukraine. Indeed,

Putin's pursuit of forceful policies in Ukraine makes it less likely that he could engage Russian forces anywhere in the MENA simultaneously.

Like the Soviet Union, Putin's Russia can (and does) provide arms to its allies in the MENA. Unlike the Soviet Union – which essentially gave weapons away – Putin has insisted that clients actually pay for them. It does not seem that Russian arms sales to states that also receive Western arms gives Moscow much influence in them, despite some contrary perceptions in the West. Indeed, it is not clear how much Moscow can influence even those governments (including Iran and even Syria) which the West does not sell arms to.

Similarly, Russian trade relations with most MENA states are not especially large and do not provide Moscow with much influence. Russia has a significant trade relationship with Turkey, but this has not served to narrow their differences over Syria or Armenia/Azerbaijan. The nature of Russian-Israeli trade may actually give Israel a degree of influence over Moscow. Israel is one of the few sources of Western military technology for Moscow, and Putin does not want to jeopardise this (see Figure 3).

There are, however, some resources Moscow can draw upon to advance its geopolitical interests in the MENA. Many MENA states and actors differ with the US and Europe, and with each other. Each of these differences potentially allows Moscow to side with dissatisfied parties. Just like in Soviet times, Moscow exploits MENA unhappiness with American support for Israel, portrays itself as a supporter of the Palestinians, and hence a more desirable partner for Arab states than the US. Although the post-Saddam government in Iraq was initially annoyed with Moscow for having previously supported Saddam, Washington-Baghdad differences over the pace of democratisation and other issues contributed to Baghdad granting oil concessions to Russian firms and buying Russian arms. Similarly, when the Obama administration cut back on US arms shipments to Egypt due to concerns about the Sisi government's commitment to democratisation and human rights, Putin was quick to ex-

---

press Moscow’s willingness to sell (but not give) Russian arms to Cairo.

There is a limit, though, to how effectively Moscow is either willing or able to exploit differences between MENA actors, and between them and the West. Although Moscow has loudly proclaimed its support for the Palestinian cause, Arabs and Iranians know that Russia has close ties to Israel and is not willing to really upset Tel Aviv. While Moscow is willing to develop Iraq’s oil resources and provide it with arms for a price, Iraqis know that Moscow will not send Russian forces to protect Baghdad against *Daesh*. Similarly, while Moscow has expressed willingness to sell arms to Cairo, this has not yet happened because Egypt cannot pay for them and Saudi Arabia has not yet provided the necessary funds. Moscow also knows that Cairo is unwilling to rely primarily on Russia for weapon supplies, but uses Russian offers to convince Washington to resume arms supplies – which it now has done.

**FEW REAL ALLIES, MANY ADVERSARIES**

To counter Western influence in the MENA, Moscow’s main allies have been traditionally anti-American regimes: Iran, Syria and in the past, Saddam’s Iraq and Gaddafi’s Libya. Otherwise, most MENA governments willing to cooperate with Moscow (including Turkey) also seek to maintain cooperation with the US and Europe. And if there is sufficient progress on the Iranian nuclear issue, cooperation between Iran and the West may increase.

With regard to preventing the rise of Sunni violent extremism, Moscow sees Saudi Arabia and Qatar as its principal adversaries (with the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait playing a supporting role). Moscow perceives Syria, Hezbollah, Algeria, Sisi’s Egypt, Iran, and the Baghdad government in Iraq as allies in this endeavour, as are the US and Europe.

**Figure 3**  
Russian Trade with Selected MENA States in 2014 (in million US\$)

Source: International Trade Centre





To maintain relatively high oil prices, all MENA petroleum producers should be Russia's allies. But the fact that Saudi Arabia appears to be 'flooding the market' with cheap oil tells Moscow that not only is Riyadh not an ally, but that it is also determined to harm Russia even at great expense. For selling arms or other Russian goods, there is no MENA government that Moscow is unwilling to sell to. Unfortunately for Moscow, there are some wealthy MENA governments such as Saudi Arabia that could buy much from Russia, but have so far been unwilling to do so.

The problem for Moscow is that even when it is willing to compartmentalise its interests by cooperating with states in some areas even though it opposes them in others (i.e. Moscow still hopes to sell arms to Riyadh even though Russia and Saudi Arabia support opposing forces in Syria), not all MENA states are willing to do so. Saudi Arabia in particular seems to have linked whether or not it buys Russian arms to whether or not Moscow adjusts its Syria policy to Riyadh's liking.

### **RUSSIA AND DEMOCRACY IN THE MENA**

There is nothing in the way that Russia pursues its various geopolitical interests that promotes democracy or human rights in the MENA. Instead, Putin seeks to uphold what he considers a stable authoritarian order. Moscow, therefore, has opposed any Western support, vocal or practical, for democratisation efforts in the MENA.

There have been four strains of thought about the West and democratisation in the MENA among those supporting the Kremlin or tolerated by it. Those who want to preserve or rebuild Russian-Western cooperation believe that the West does not understand that only hostile Sunni Islamists will benefit from democratisation efforts in the MENA, not pro-Western liberals. Promoting democratisation in the region, then, can undercut reliable authoritarian rulers, but will not result in pro-Western democracies. Further, the rise of hostile Sunni Islamist forces will not only threaten Russian interests, but Western ones as

well. Accordingly, just as Western support for the downfall of Gaddafi resulted in chaos (not democratisation) in Libya, the downfall of Assad in Syria would only lead to a far worse outcome that would threaten Western as well as Russian interests. Moscow's support for Assad, therefore, so the argument runs, actually protects Western interests, even if the West does not understand this.

A more cynical Russian view, which was prevalent in the early days of the Arab spring, is that Western support for MENA democratisation was designed not to result in democracy but to topple pro-Russian governments and replace them with pro-Western ones. Some Russians contrast Western and Gulf states support to anti-Assad forces in Syria, while supporting (or acquiescing to) the suppression of opponents of the pro-Western authoritarian government in Bahrain.

There are also those in Russia who argue that the Arab spring, like the 'colour revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine, were an effort to promote the outbreak of similar opposition movements in the Muslim regions of Russia, or throughout Russia, with the aim of weakening or even toppling Putin.

And there is a truly conspiratorial Russian view that Saudi Arabia is not the conservative state that the West thinks it is, but a revolutionary regime promoting Sunni jihadism elsewhere to advance its own great power agenda. By supporting the downfall of Gaddafi – that has resulted in the rise of jihadist forces in Libya – as well as the Sunni jihadist opposition to Assad, and through interventions in Bahrain and Yemen against Shi'a opposition forces, Riyadh has revealed its true aims. Policy-makers in Washington and European capitals might be duped by this, according to this viewpoint, but some in Moscow

**The interests  
Russia pursues  
in the MENA  
region are often  
in conflict with  
one another**



are not. If Western policy-makers would finally realise that Saudi behaviour threatens Russia and the West alike, then both could cooperate against this common threat.

## CONCLUSION

Putin perceives Russia as having several important geopolitical interests in the MENA: countering Western influence; containing Sunni jihadist forces; reversing the drop in petroleum prices; and expanding Russian exports to the region. Successfully pursuing these Russian interests in the Middle East, though, is difficult since they often conflict, Russia has limited means, and different MENA actors – including Moscow-friendly regimes – sometimes thwart Russian ambitions. So long as Putin – or someone like him – is Russia's leader, it is doubtful that Moscow will see Russia's geopolitical interests in the MENA differently than it does now. Certainly, Putin or someone like him will never see the democratisation of the MENA to be a Russian interest, and will do nothing consciously to support it. Whether or not a more democratic Russia might have a

more positive view of democratisation efforts in the MENA is questionable, given that Western democratic governments have long supported authoritarian regimes there, and hypothetical since a democratic Russian government seems highly unlikely to emerge anytime soon.

*Mark N. Katz is Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University.*

*This Policy Brief belongs to the project 'Transitions and Geopolitics in the Arab World: links and implications for international actors', led by FRIDE and HIVOS. We acknowledge the generous support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway. For further information on this project, please contact: Kawa Hassan, Hivos ([k.hassan@hivos.nl](mailto:k.hassan@hivos.nl)) or Kristina Kausch, FRIDE ([kkausch@fride.org](mailto:kkausch@fride.org)).*

**e-mail: [fride@fride.org](mailto:fride@fride.org)**  
**[www.fride.org](http://www.fride.org)**