

# Putin's "Make Russia Great Again" in the Middle East

Critical Review on the Fawaz Gerges' lecture:

*"The International Relations of the Middle East: The resilience of empire"*

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## ***Introduction***

One of the dates that most signalled Russia's return in the Middle East was 30 September 2015. “Russian airpower, in cooperation with Iranian boots on the ground, reversed the course of the war and saved Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s government from imminent collapse. Russian President Vladimir Putin used that victory to rekindle old partnerships and strike up new ones. He has convened conferences to decide the fate of post-civil war Syria, exchanged visits with long-standing U.S. allies in the Middle East, and signed deals to sell them weapons and nuclear power plants. Russia seems resurgent from the Persian Gulf to North Africa especially as the United States, worn out by nearly two decades of endless wars, appears eager to minimize its commitments in the region.”<sup>1</sup>

## ***An historical relationship***

Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war brought back old memories in international politics. Indeed, Russia/USSR links with Syria, but also with other countries in the Middle East region, have very deep and ancient roots since the Tsarist empire, where the latter made the struggle against the Ottoman Empire and the defence of the Orthodox Christian peoples its main objectives.

The Middle East remained central even during the Cold War. Especially in this period the USSR began to build up its own positive image towards the Middle Eastern countries. The struggle against the colonial regimes established by the Western powers led countries to look to the USSR as an ally, especially with Israel, Syria, and Egypt. But after the fall of the USSR, its influence suffered a setback.

However, this policy of 'disengagement' lasted until the arrival of Putin, who gave a strong boost to Russian international relations in the region. Relations have also been developed thanks to the presence of figures who wanted to establish relations with Putin, such as Bashar Al-Assad. The revival of this link has prompted many scholars to understand what Putin's new goals are in the region. As affirmed in one of the articles in Limes, “some analysts argue that Russia intends to exploit the Syrian crisis to renew its historical friendship with Damascus, recovering one of its clients in the North African-Middle Eastern quadrant. Still others read Russian interventionism - symbolised by the Astana peace process - as a way of renewing and consolidating old but dusty ties with long-standing partners such as Iran, Turkey, and Israel, as well as a means of establishing new relations with countries like Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies.”<sup>2</sup>

## ***Who goes and who stays?***

As also sustained by Fawaz Gerges, during the NAMEPES Summer School’s lecture “The International relations of the middle east: the resilience of empire”, Russia's reassertion in the region coincided with the withdrawal of the United States of America. Indeed, the latter event created the right basis for a consolidation of the Russian influence. Although all the countries in the Middle East recognise that Russia is not an economic power comparable to the US, at the same time they understand how Russia wants to be present in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> Rumer E., *Russia in the Middle East Jack of all Trades, Master of None*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2019

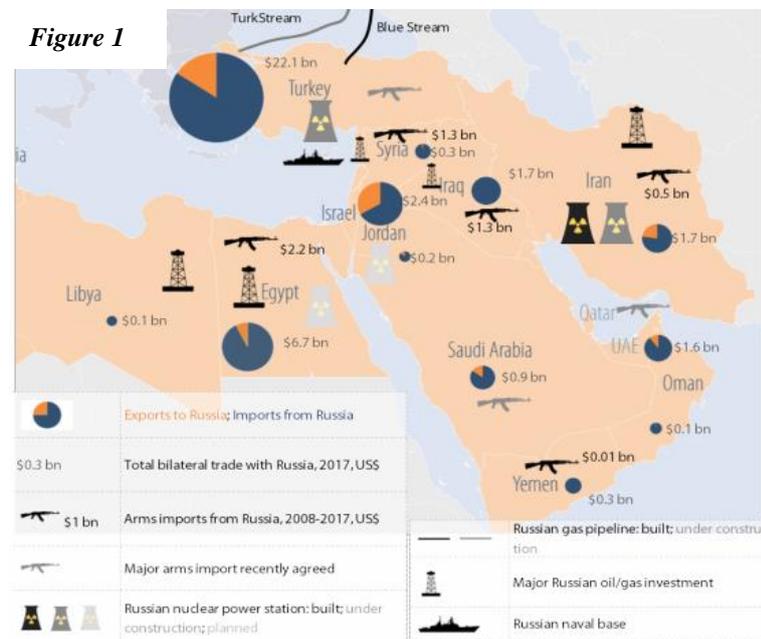
<sup>2</sup> Lovotti C, Sučkov M., *In Medio Oriente per tornare a contare*, published at Limes, June 10, 2020

Since Barack Obama's presidency, the presence of the US in the region started to decrease. Besides being pushed by the American public opinion, where Americans would have clearly preferred their tax dollars to be spent at home for their own direct benefit, the major event that began to worry the region's leaders and US allies was the refusing of president Obama to intervene in the Syrian civil war even as Iran expanded its operations there, or to help defend the Iraqi government from the growing menace of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). This represented the perfect occasion for Russia, which found the opportunity to intervene militarily in Syria to protect its client, the first time it sent forces into combat beyond the former Soviet frontiers since the invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

The hope of the region's leaders that a new American president would restore the country's role in the Middle East was dashed by Donald Trump's criticism of the war in Iraq: "It's one of the worst decisions in the history of the country", "We have totally destabilized the Middle East" he continued, "We spent two trillion dollars, we could have rebuilt our country". Furthermore, Trump has also welcomed Russian involvement in the region, saying that "now it is time to move forward in working constructively with Russia".<sup>4</sup> This "disengagement" will also be followed by the new president Joe Biden. Indeed, as also Fawaz Gerges affirmed during his lecture, Biden is trying to concentrate all his power on the fight against China.

### *The spread of Russian soft power*

The policy that Russia is using to assert its strategic influence in the Middle East is one of *soft power*. As Gerges has already pointed out, Russia is trying to forge as many relationships as possible with the countries in the region through the sale of arms and energy supplies, and,



moreover, taking today's context into consideration, the sale of the Sputnik vaccine.

Looking at the first point, the leaders of the Middle Eastern countries understand Russia's economy is not comparable to that of China or the United States. Nevertheless, Russia is one of the largest producers and exporters of gas and oil.

As the European Parliament briefing states (Figure 1), "Turkey is Russia's largest Middle Eastern energy export market (oil and gas exports worth US\$5.1 billion in 2017), followed by Israel (US\$0.6 billion), Morocco (US\$0.6

billion) and Egypt (US\$0.4 billion). However, Russia also cooperates closely with producer countries such as Saudi Arabia, playing a key part in OPEC+ agreements that have helped to regulate global oil oversupply and bring the price per barrel up from a January 2016 low of below US\$30 to over US\$70 in September 2018, a major boost to both countries' oil-dependent

<sup>3</sup> Wechsler W. F., Chapter one: *US withdrawal from the Middle East: Perceptions and Reality, The MENA region: a great power competition*, Ledizioni Ledipublishing, 2019

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem

economies.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, another strategic tool is the arms trade, with which Russia wants to deepen a strategic cooperation with the MENA region. Indeed, since 1999, Russian military trade has increased by 125%, making the region the second most important and growing foreign market for Russian arms sales after Asia and Oceania.<sup>6</sup>

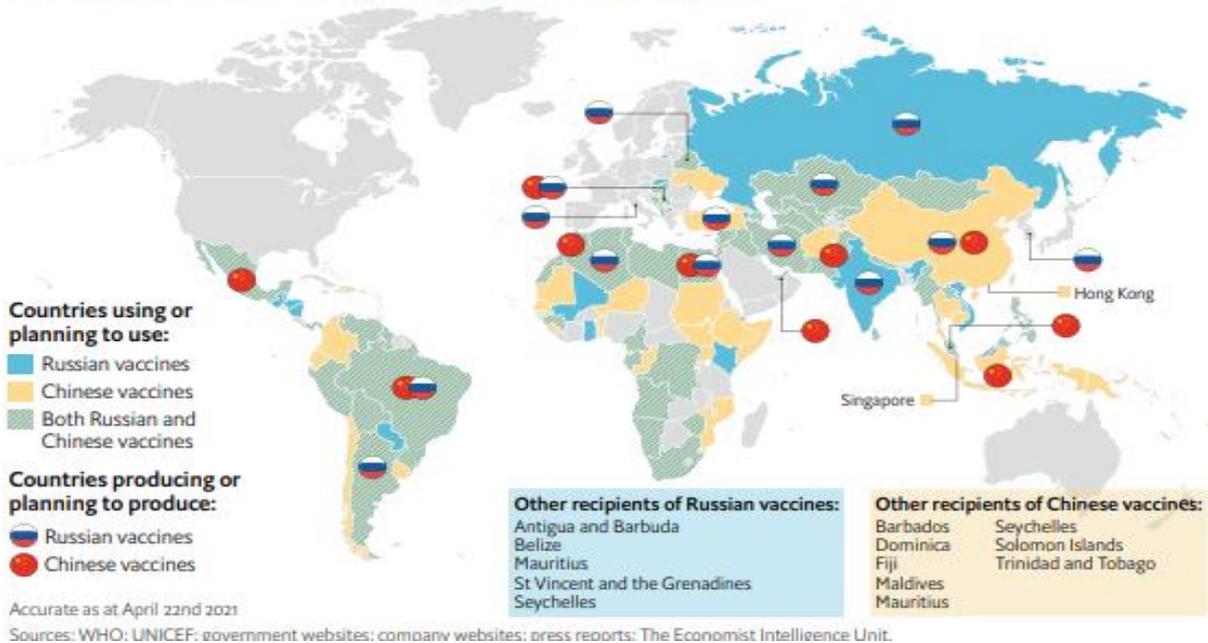
On the other side, a more recent diplomatic policy in the region is based on the Sputnik V vaccine. This could be yet another occasion for diversification and expansion of the Russian presence. In this regard, it is enough to think of the Iranian case. Tehran, in fact, has decided to adopt the Russian vaccine, certifying the solidity of a partnership that developed during the war in Syria and was built around a common anti-Americanism.

However, Saudi Arabia and Israel have also bought some stocks of vaccine doses. The quantities purchased are smaller than in Iran, as the two countries have based their campaign against and prevention of covid-19 on Moderna, AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccines. Moreover, the sale of Russian vaccines constitutes a further strengthening of relations between Moscow and the Saudi and Israeli chancelleries at a time when the Middle East situation still appears chaotic, polarised and lacking a hegemonic actor capable of establishing a new regional order on its own.

As demonstrated in the map (Figure 2), both Russia and China are taking advantage of the lack of response in the supply of vaccines by western countries. “China and Russia are using this situation to their own advantage by presenting themselves as the “saviours” of emerging countries. [...] However, China and Russia are not sending vaccines in equal numbers to all emerging countries”. Indeed, “especially in sub-Saharan Africa, will get only a few thousand vaccines, suggesting that this is more of a public relations exercise than a genuine attempt to fill an urgent need.”<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 2**

**China and Russia's vaccine diplomacy spans across the globe**



<sup>5</sup> European Parliament Briefing, *Russia in the Middle east. From sidelines to centre stage*, European Union, 2018, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630293/EPRS\\_BRI\(2018\)630293\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630293/EPRS_BRI(2018)630293_EN.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Kuimova A., *Russia's Arms exports to the MENA region: Trends and Drivers*, EuroMesco policy brief, No. 95, 1 April 2019

<sup>7</sup> The Economist Intelligence Unit report, *What next for vaccine diplomacy?*, London, 2021

## **Conclusion**

As stated earlier, relations with Russia and the Middle East go far beyond the short-medium period, but rather go back to the Tsarist empire, though a development and consolidation with the Soviet Union. After brutally scaling up his attentions to the region with the collapse of the Soviet Union between 1980 and 1990, Putin's foreign policy has sought to resuscitate those historic relationships with the countries' leaders, especially Assad after his intervention in the Syrian civil war.

“With the ideological baggage of Soviet communism gone and the United States proving itself to be a spent, feckless, incompetent force, Moscow has seemed to regional leaders not quite an alternative to Washington but at least a more constructive regional player. The contrast between the way former U.S. President Barack Obama is perceived to have abandoned Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak and Russian President Vladimir Putin’s intervention in Syria to save Bashar al-Assad made a big impression on Arab potentates. Added to the negative perception of the United States is the fact that Middle Eastern economies and political systems have more in common with Russia—their dependence on oil revenues, their authoritarianism—than with the United States.”<sup>8</sup>

Having arrived at this point, we should ask ourselves what the next developments in relations between Russia and the Middle East will be in the future. Will Russia be able to play the role of a permanent regional player, bringing stability?

From a first point of view, the economic relations between Russia and the Gulf nations are crucial for the stability of the global energy market, as they are the largest exporters of oil and gas in the world and are therefore regions to be monitored geopolitically. Furthermore, “oil and gas are critical to Russia’s economy, domestic political stability, and the ability to finance ongoing foreign policy and military ventures.”<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, unlike the dominant country policy adopted by the US in the region, as Rumer and Weiss state, Russia does not want to take on that same type of foreign policy. Rather, it wants to become competitive with other countries that aspire to have a dominant presence in the region. “It seems like a clever denial strategy that can accomplish a lot with relatively little up-front investment.”<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, as also Shay Attias sustained “Moscow has never managed to regain the level of influence it enjoyed prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Putin is doing his best to change this, largely through soft power. The number of public diplomacy projects to promote Russia’s global image in politics, sport, culture, economy, and science has dramatically increased. At the same time, the decrease in the US’s standing in the Middle East works to enhance Russia’s position as a regional peace broker. Putin has put Russia in a preeminent regional position through the classical hard power tool of fighting in Syria while simultaneously talking “peace” with the Taliban.”<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, the evolution, and consequently, a future stabilisation of Russian influence in the MENA region is yet to be examined. As, with the withdrawal of the US, the region will experience a new wave of influence from third countries, which in addition to Russia, also includes China. Especially, the latter aims to take its soft power both through

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<sup>8</sup> Cook, Stephen A., *Russia is Losing the Oil War—and the Middle East*, published at Foreign policy, April 9, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/09/russia-saudi-arabia-oil-price-war-middle-east/>

<sup>9</sup> Rumer E., Weiss A. S., *A brief guide to Russia’s return to the Middle East*, published at Carnegie endowment for International peace, October 24, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/24/brief-guide-to-russia-s-return-to-middle-east-pub-80134>

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem

<sup>11</sup> Attias S, *Russian Soft Power in the Middle East*, BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,238, July 26, 2019

vaccine diplomacy, but also, and more importantly, through the construction of the new Silk Road. In fact, the Belt and Road Initiative will include many North African and Middle Eastern countries (such as Iran).

One is talking about two states with an authoritarian identity that is very close to the characteristics of the MENA countries. The question is to what extent the development of this project will have an influence on Putin's strategic relations and whether his, quoting Fawaz Gerges, 'Russia is here to stay' will last.

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