

## THE FUTURE OF RUSSIAN-ARAB RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE POLITICAL CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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The urgency of the problem is caused by the growing role of Russia in the context of the deteriorating political situation in the Middle East, which, in turn, reveals a fundamentally important issue. Is there a future for Russian-Arab relations and what is their international legal basis, especially in the context of the political crisis in Syria? The purpose of this article is to identify and study trends that indicate the growth of Russian influence in the Middle East, as well as analysis of the main areas of joint cooperation and legal framework of multilateral Russian-Arab relations. Leading approaches to the study of this problem are political modeling and forecasting in combination with the structure functional study of the object of cognition. As a result of the study, we came to the following main conclusions: 1) the "Arab view" in relation to Russia is ambiguous and directly depends on the political and economic goals of a particular state of the region; 2) legal framework of Russian-Arab relations is quite diverse and is conditioned by the main areas of Russia's cooperation with the countries of the Arab East (counter-terrorism, arms transfers, construction of energy facilities); 3) activation of Russia's position in Syria has formed a true balance of power in the region, having filled up the void of the failing pro-Western and, above all, pro-American influence on the political alignment of forces in a number of Arab states. Materials of this study may be useful for analysts, orientologists, international lawyers, as well as teaching staff of higher education institutions, specializing in teaching International relations and International law.

**Key words:** history, political crisis, Russian-Arab relations, Middle East, prospects, international law, Arab vector, counter-terrorism, source of arms, economic partner.

### INTRODUCTION

Historically, Russian-Arab relations are quite diverse. Some states traditionally refer to the so-called "hostile camp" from the ideological point of view. Meanwhile, Russia has partners in the region that support a steady interaction with it on the widest range of issues. Another group comprises countries that once were Moscow's main political partners, but later on got reoriented to strengthen ties with the USA, which lasted for several decades. However, today, under the influence of a rapidly changing political environment, or purely economic priorities, the way of renewing their relations with Russia has been chosen. Nevertheless, all of them, whatever their current arrangements and political preferences may be, are important for Russia from the position of their geopolitical goals and interests in the region. And this

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circumstance is extremely difficult to neglect, since this is what makes assessment of the “Arab vector” in relation to Russia a matter of extreme complexity.

## **METHODS**

First priority is given to the classical methods of scientific research, applied in the article, such as comparative historical method, analysis and synthesis, method of political modeling and forecasting, as well as a structure functional method that involves break down of a political phenomenon into component parts with their subsequent analysis. In the article, such methods as objectivity, historicism and socio-political approach are also applied.

## **RESULTS**

Following up succession of events, operation of Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria and Russian presence in the region as a whole, confirm a lack of opportunity to form an American international coalition capable of overthrowing the regime of Bashar al-Assad, as was the case with Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Main efforts of the so-called pro-American military coalition were aimed at supporting moderate anti-government factions and concentrating efforts to intensify Turkey’s attacks on the border areas, places of congestion of Kurdish paramilitary forces. With regard to creation of a no-fly zone on the Syrian-Turkish border, this matter became no longer relevant with the initiation of the Russian operation in Syria. Moreover, it should be noted that from the outset there was no international military coalition capable of defeating Shiite forces that stood up for protection of the current Syrian regime, and even more so, capable of stopping direct Iranian interference in the Syrian conflict.

Ultimately, despite apparent contradiction between Russian intervention in Syria and Saudi Arabia’s policy, indirectly this interference had a positive impact on Riyadh’s policy towards Damascus, namely:

- Indecision of the international position towards Syria was put to an end: Russian military operation in Syria stabilized political views of the international community, relieving them of indecisiveness and various kinds of hesitations that made bearers of such ideas incapable of making adequate resolutions. Despite the presence of economic and geopolitical motives in the Western foreign policy doctrine, Russian interference became an important factor that led to concentration of efforts of the entire international community towards political dialogue and comprehension of the need to find diplomatic ways to resolve Syrian crisis. And Saudi Arabia played a key role in this process. On the initiative of Riyadh on December 8 and December 9, 2015 conference of Syrian moderate opposition forces was convened, which evidenced clear interest of the Saudi Arabian leadership in a peaceful settlement of disputes (Salama, 2016).

- Iran’s single policy on the Syrian issue was interrupted: no matter to what extent consensus between Moscow and Tehran was achieved in regard of the Syrian problem, their views on the future of Syria were not deprived of contrasts. Perhaps this is the fact that the official Riyadh stakeson, considering that these contradictions will substantially bring Russia-Saudi Arabia positions on the Syrian crisis issue closer. From the strategic point of view, both Russia and Saudi Arabia are interested in preserving the unity of Syria as a sovereign state. Iranviews confessional future of Syria, seeking to control the so-called “Shiite Crescent”, not pursuing the goal of returning the country to the Arab unity and Arab nature of the state. However, whatever political contradictionsare, caused by the Russian presence in Syria, central component of the strategic doctrine of Saudi Arabia has been and still is struggle against the “Iranian axis” and prevention of turning Syria into second Iran (Neymatov, 2011).

Despite this, contradictions in future Russia-SaudiArabia relations will persist for numerous reasons, one of which is a lack of a common socio-cultural basis that could help in developing strategic bilateral relations, modeled on the Western and American cooperation, which accumulated rich experience of broad partnership in economic, political, military, cultural, scientific and other areas. (Zhdanov, 2006). And even if political leadership of Arabian monarchies of the Persian Gulf determines its political vector towards strengthening a strategic alliance with Russia, society and its social institutions will not lose their adherence to western values and western way of life. This will likely block a political line, especially due to the existing in the region view on Russia through the prism of the “Afghan” jihad era (Salama, 2016).

And in this regard, for the Persian Gulf states, it is important to work on the internal socio-cultural reorientation of society, adjust views and concepts on Russia, re-evaluate its policies, in the light of new interests of the statesin the region. It is necessary to reconsider the role of Russia, and its support in creating a new architecture of international relations, so that the policy of the Persian Gulf monarchies becomes balanced and meets the requirements of the region as a whole (Pechatkin, 2012).

## **DISCUSSION**

In view of the above mentioned considerations, we propose to analyze certain aspects of Russian-Arab relations at the present stage.

First. New aspects of Russian-Arab relations (2011-2016).

Progress quality and quantity fund in the framework of Russian-Arab relations, be it a scope of trade or a number of mutual visits of senior officials, or a nature of treaties and declarations of intentions for joint cooperation between Russia and countries of the Near and Middle East, points to tangible progress. At the same

time, this progress became the most evident after the collapse of the USSR and under pressure of the need to expand various forms of partnership, foreign investment, etc. It was at that time, against the background of cooling relations with the United States, that the Arab partners had a new incentive, aimed at gradual building up relations with Moscow. So, in November 2003, Saudi Prince Abdullah bin Abd Al-Aziz made his official visit to Russia. And in February 2007, the President of Russia, V.V. Putin, paid a return visit to Saudi Arabia. During these two visits, a number of contracts were signed in the oil, gas, and science areas, as well as in the field of high technology, air communications, double taxation of income and capital. Issues of culture, information exchange, banking sector, nuclear energy, and peaceful exploration of outer space were also considered (Pechatkin, 2012).

After several official visits from by the Saudi Arabia party in the period of 2007 - 2009, Crown Prince, Muhammad Ben Salman, visited Russia in June 2015, during which six treaties and strategic memorandums of cooperation between Russia and the Kingdom were signed. In addition, Saudi Arabia announced its intention to build 16 nuclear power packs and give Russia a key role in launching these units. Also, the leadership of two countries ratified an agreement in the military sphere and a memorandum of joint intentions in the area of space exploration. Finally, in November 2015, in Moscow, joint commission in the framework of the fourth session and the Russian-Saudi Arabian Forum on Entrepreneurship and Investment were held. As a result of joint work, 15 agreements and memorandums of cooperation in various fields were signed (Official website of the Russian Foreign Ministry, 2017).

As for Russian-Egyptian relations, there has been a steady growth over the past two years, as indicated by the level of visits of both, Russian delegations and Egyptian counterparts. Thus, Egyptian President Abdel Al-Fattah Al-Sisi has already made three official visits. One of them, during his tenure as defense minister in February 2014, and two others in August 2014 and in August 2015 correspondingly (Salama, 2016). During these two years, a number of intergovernmental agreements were signed. The most important of these are the contract on construction of a nuclear power plant in Daba, signed in November 2015 with the financial support of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, as well as a number of military transactions between Moscow and Cairo, aimed at equipping new strategic partner of the Persian Gulf monarchies. Apparently, for Arab monarchies, Egypt has become one of the key outposts in the region, capable of rebuffing extremism and international terrorism (Official Website of the Russian Foreign Ministry, 2017).

Equally important is the degree of Russia's cooperation with other Arab states, such as Jordan, UAE, Kuwait, and Bahrain. Russia's relations with these participants in the regional arena are experiencing similar shifts, what is also reflected in the

number of visits by officials of these states in recent years. Thus, the King of Jordan Abdullah II made three visits to Russia in April 2014, in October 2014 and in August 2015. Russian-Jordanian relations are manifested through the prism of cooperation on a number of joint projects in the field of high-precision technologies, including areas of nuclear power, military-technique, nuclear energy use, and Kingdom's strategy on expanding energy sources. In particular, Russian corporation "Rosatom" was elected as the most appropriate company that presented the project on construction of the first Jordanian nuclear power plant, consisting of two nuclear reactors (Salama, 2016).

In November 2015, the Prince of Kuwait Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad As-Sabah paid an official visit to Russia. And in October 2014, the visit of the King of Bahrain Hamad Ben Isa Al-Khalifa took place. As for Sheikh Muhammad Ben Zaid, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, he made visits to Russia in September 2013 and August 2015. Due to these visits, the leadership of the Persian Gulf states confirmed a strategic nature of relations with Russia, defining it as a main strategic partner that plays a significant role not only in the Middle East, but in the whole world (Official Website of the Russian Foreign Ministry, 2017).

It is also interesting to mention that constant areas of Russia's cooperation with the countries of the Middle East region are not limited to the military and nuclear sphere alone; even, when countries of the Persian Gulf are concerned. It is known, for example, that some Arab monarchies have already concluded a number of interstate agreements with Russia in the fields of education, science, technology, space, tourism, aircraft construction, and air transportation, not to mention various economic spheres. Attention is also drawn to the fact that these areas continue to develop, despite disagreements with Moscow over the Syrian crisis, as well as presence of the Russian military contingent on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic (Youssef, 2015). As for the Russian-Egyptian relations, they remain unshakable even in conditions of overcoming consequences of the tragedy in the sky over Sinai, when a Russian passenger plane was subjected to the terrorist aggression that took lives of 224 people. All this, undoubtedly, confirms comprehension by various "Arab players" of the need to build a new pattern of relations with Russia. Moscow, in turn, taking into account Arab mentality, has repeatedly stated its readiness to cooperate with all participants of the regional platform in order to overcome political differences and stabilize a situation in the region as a whole (Salama, 2016).

In addition, it is worth mentioning activities of the Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum, as its memorandum of the work was signed in Cairo (Egypt) on December 21, 2009. The document regulates cooperation between Russia and the League of Arab States (LAS) in the following areas:

- supporting efforts, aimed at establishing and strengthening international peace and security, ensuring sustainable development;

- interaction and promotion of initiatives, aimed at implementing the 1995 Resolution toward Middle East on the review and extension of the treaty on non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, including efforts to create a zone in the Middle East, free of all weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery;
- coordination of positions and steps in the UN within the framework of international conferences, where particularly environmental issues, climate change, preservation of cultural heritage, and dialogue of civilizations are discussed;
- assistance in the development of economic, commercial and financial cooperation, including implementation of joint projects;
- broad sharing of experience in the scientific and technological areas;
- cooperation in the field of information and communication technologies (Neymatov, 2011).

Second. Main areas that form Arab vision of Russia.

In the Arab world, different political views on benefits of cooperation with Russia, as well as its role in the region at present, have developed. In total, these considerations can be represented as follows:

1. Russia's support of a "national state". Russia does not cease to remind the international community of the need to comply with universally recognized principles and norms of international law, respect for national statehood and sovereignty, as well as inadmissibility of interference in the internal affairs of an independent state, on the basis of an official request of lawful authorities or bodies and institutions, representing such authority. Equally, Russia highly values the balance between democracy and human rights, defending the need to preserve a state and its ruling regime, condemning any actions that lead to the internal split of society under the slogans of establishing democracy. According to some Arab governments, Russia represents a great power and trustworthy state (Zhdanov, 2006).
2. Filling a strategic void. Within the framework of the Arab political line with respect to Russia, there is a point of view the latter is able to successfully fill a strategic void, created by the declining role of the United States. And here it is important to emphasize that Russian-Arab relations are characterized by the unanimity of views. And common ground is not limited to the military aspect only. As mentioned earlier, some Arab states have ratified intergovernmental agreements with Russia in the economic sphere, and in the fields of education, science, high technologies, culture, etc. However, despite this, Arab countries in general and the Persian Gulf states in particular are concerned about Russian policy, or rather its possible

beneficial impact with respect to the traditional allies of Russia - Iran and Syria (Salama, 2016).

3. Partner in the disputes settlement. Russia adheres to a political resolution of the Syrian crisis. Moscow views similar ways in settling military and political conflicts in Yemen, Iraq, Libya, as well as in the course of restoring statehood and political institutions, laying foundation of internal peace and national security. As noted by Dr. Moataz Salama, head of the Persian Gulf States study sector of **Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies**: “Among the goals of the Persian Gulf states is a tendency to fetch over the “Russian bear” to their point of view, which is manifested in the search for compromises with Moscow on the Syrian issue with the aim of strengthening Russia’s position regarding the need of the President’s Bashar Al-Assad resignation (Salama, 2016).

It is likely that the political leadership of the Persian Gulf states decided to keep such a vector for two reasons. First, because of the lower cost of such a plan. What is more profitable? Financing the so-called “moderate” weakening opposition or balancing between opposing parties without giving preference to any one? In addition, in this case, the right to take a step back is always reserved. Secondly, because of Washington’s ill-considered policy, the West exhausted its credit of trust in the eyes of progressive Arab monarchies, which naturally changed their political vector towards rapprochement with Russia. In this regard, it is possible that Saudi Arabia will try more actively to influence Russia in order to remove the latter from a close cooperation with its traditional partners in the region and prevent Moscow from falling under the full influence of Tehran.

4. Companion in the fight against terrorism. To date, Russia is one of the largest political forces, leading a genuine war on terrorism, “jihadism” and various manifestations of extremism. President of Russia V.V. Putin constantly repeated in his official statements that Russian intervention in Syria is nothing but protection of the borders of the Russian Federation from the threat of penetration of various paramilitary forces into its territory. This is the most important strategic interest of Moscow in the counter-terrorism in the Middle East. Such countries as Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, and Lebanon expressed their commitment to the Russian plan to combat terrorism. At the same time, there are disagreements on this issue, which impede efforts of allies with implementation of this program.

So, there is still no clear position on classification of organizations and factions that should definitely be referred as terrorist. Situation in Syria points to the difficulty of developing a unified Arab opinion on this problem. In view of purely political or economic interests, each state, one way or another, involved in the Syrian conflict,

differently estimates a degree of terrorist threat, emanating from this or that organization (Youssef, 2015).

New source of weapons. Results of analyzing a number and nature of military contracts and arms deals, concluded by the Arab states in the past two years, indicate that a significant part of these treaties is associated with purchasing various types of weapons from Russia. Among the agreements, approved by Russia and the Persian Gulf states, as well as Egypt, most of the contracts concern diversification of the sales list of individual units of firearms and military equipment, primarily military air complexes and aircraft. All this confirms intention of the Arab monarchies to reorient Russian foreign policy vector toward their side, thus relieving it of the Iranian influence with the possibility of changing political mood within Iran with respect to Russia.

In return, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates financed a preliminary contract between Russia and Egypt on purchasing military equipment, including 23 MIG-29 airplanes, missile systems of the BUK M2 and TOR M2 brands. According to a number of reports, the price of this transaction ranges from two to four billion dollars. In addition, Riyadh provided an irrevocable tranche of \$ 1 billion in support of the Lebanese Armed Forces in August 2014. It is also known that Russia supplied Bahrain with anti-tank missile systems of the CORNET-EM brand. In turn, the UAE and Saudi Arabia approved an independent military deal for private military purposes (Official Website of the Russian Foreign Ministry, 2017).

Russia as an economic partner. In addition to the military aspect of Russia's cooperation with the Arab world, trade and economic component of these relations plays an important role either. Russia today acts as an important economic player on the world financial platforms from a commercial and economic and investment points of view (Zhdanov, 2006). Thanks to this attractive position in 2014 and 2015, between Russia and the Persian Gulf states a number of promising contracts were concluded. In particular, most recently, intergovernmental commissions on trade and economic, and scientific and technical cooperation, as well as joint working groups were formed; investment forums were held either. For example, it was announced about ratification of the agreement on formation of an investment fund of up to four billion dollars to finance joint projects. According to some experts, this fund should make a significant contribution to the development of Russian-Saudi Arabian relations in various sectors of economy. This is in addition to another investment fund, creation of which, countries agreed in July 2015, with the level of about ten billion dollars. As for strengthening of cooperation between Russia and the UAE, it is worth recalling the fifth meeting of the joint intergovernmental commission, held in November 2015, during which agreements on increasing air services between the two countries, as well as on strengthening collaboration in the fields of tourism, transport and investment turnover were



reached (Salama, 2016). In addition, two memorandums of cooperation were signed. First one relates to cooperation in the field of sports, and the second concerns relations in the field of intellectual property. Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi made an official visit to Russia in September 2014, during which a memorandum of intent was signed to build a joint investment partnership between the Abu Dhabi Department of Finance and the Russian Direct Investment Fund to invest in Russian infrastructure projects. According to this agreement, Abu Dhabi government pledged to provide Russia with an investment portfolio of up to five billion dollars (Official Website of the Russian Foreign Ministry, 2017).

Relations between Russia and countries of the region did not always proceed in this manner. For example, after announcement of intention to visit Russia by Sheikh Tamim Ben Hamad Al-Sani, Prince of Qatar, in September 2015, the visit was suddenly canceled. Obviously, this happened due to the position of Qatar that disagreed with introduction of Russian troops into Syria and the nature of relations between Doha and Ankara (Youssef, 2015). In general, Russia-Qatar relations continue to be strained due to the support, provided by Qatar to the so-called moderate “anti-Assad” factions, which Russia unequivocally classifies as terrorist. In addition, Russia and Qatar do not cease to compete in international gas markets. Especially in the context of the fact that Russia has concluded a contract on the annual export of 38 billion cubic meters of natural gas for 30 years to China. The total amount of this largest transaction was about \$ 300 billion. Obviously, Doha counted on China as an important end market of Qatari gas (Official Website of the Russian Foreign Ministry, 2017).

Third. Russian intervention in Syria and relations with Saudi Arabia.

In spite of the fact that some Arab countries positively reacted on the entry of Russian Aerospace Forces into Syria, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were against such a turn of events, believing that direct participation of Russia would prolong President Assad’s power, thereby complicating the Syrian crisis. Therefore, certain social strata and political elite of Arab monarchies viewed Russian intervention as a dangerous aggression, which must be fought not only politically, but also with the help of weapons. At the same time, such an interpretation of the geopolitical situation in the region remains dominant in the eyes of Saudi Arabian officials, and social and religious authorities, whereas the official position of Riyadh stays invariable. Apparently, Russian presence in Syria influenced the line of bilateral Russian-Saudi Arabian relations and gave a new impetus to the political dialogue between the two countries, as evidenced by several meetings, held on the issue of the Syrian dispute settlement.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

As a result of the conducted research, we came to the following main conclusions:

- 1) “Arab vector” in relation to Russia is contradictory and is connected, first of all, with the political and economic goals of the Arab states;
- 2) Based on the Russian foreign policy doctrine, and considering activation in the international and regional arenas, most of the countries of the Near and Middle East view Russia in the following main contexts:
  - A) Guarantor of compliance with universally recognized principles and norms of international law; supporter of the national statehood and sovereignty; opponent of interference with the internal affairs of a state (Al-Atiyah, 2015), except if such an interference is due to the goals of protecting lives of its citizens, and based on the UN Security Council resolution only, or official request, initiated by the government of the state concerned;
  - B) One of the major actors of international relations, capable of ensuring a balance of power in the world arena, implementing a mechanism of checks and balances in contemporary global and regional policies;
  - C) Partner in the adjustment of international and regional conflicts, authoritative co-sponsor in a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Syrian multi-level confrontation, as well as situation in Iraq;
  - D) Strong ally in the fight against terrorism and traditional arms supplier to the countries of the Near and Middle East;
  - E) Reliable economic partner and strategic investor for a number of states in the region;
- 3) Activation of Russia’s position in Syria has formed a true balance of power in the Middle East region, filling the void of the weakening pro-Western and, primarily, pro-American influence on the political alignment of forces in a number of Arab states, thus serving as a kind of deterrent against the West in its geopolitical goals attainment;
- 4) Legal framework of Russian-Arab relations is quite diverse, either in form, or in its specific content. It includes both, separate bilateral contracts on counter-terrorism issues, arms transfers, investments, construction of energy facilities, and some international treaties and conventions, ratified by Russia and some countries of the Middle East region.

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