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Russian Moves in the Gulf and Africa Have a Common Goal

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Brief Analysis

A recent spate of high-level regional visits may pave the way for Moscow to entrench itself from the East Mediterranean to the Gulf of Aden, with help from the Gulf states.

Russia has long courted the Persian Gulf states, and in recent years has expanded its presence in the Horn of Africa as well. But now a common thread is emerging between these seemingly disconnected activities: Moscow's quest for influence and access in the Red Sea region, with the goal of furthering its great-power ambitions at the West's expense.

In early March, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov toured the Gulf states, meeting with senior officials in the capitals of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. The discussions touched on everything from trade and football to Syria, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and regional security. Russian daily *Kommersant* suggested that the trip was a prelude to a potential Gulf tour by President Vladimir Putin later this year.

Days after Lavrov's trip, Moscow dispatched its special presidential envoy for the Middle East and North Africa, Mikhail Bogdanov, to meet with Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir, a wanted war criminal in the West. Once there, Bogdanov invited Bashir to participate in the upcoming Russia-Africa summit—the first of its kind, slated for October. The envoy then headed to the neighboring Central African Republic to confirm Moscow's support on security issues and enhanced bilateral ties.

Bogdanov and Lavrov's tours sandwiched the Red Sea, whose importance cannot be overstated. Because the region

lies at multiple maritime crossroads, wielding influence there allows power projection into the Middle East, Africa, and the East Mediterranean—and therefore NATO’s southern flank. Over time, this may entail expanded Russian activities in the Suez Canal, Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean.

This month’s diplomatic tours were only the latest instance of Moscow seeking to engage and connect the Horn of Africa and the Gulf states. Last September, the Kremlin announced plans to build a logistics center in Eritrea, and the United Arab Emirates helped facilitate this move by playing an important role in a peace deal between Ethiopia and Eritrea, effectively ending the latter’s decade-long isolation. Not coincidentally, Eritrea’s two main ports, Assab and Massawa, are located at strategic points on the Red Sea. The logistics center move came on the heels of Moscow’s announcement that it had signed a military cooperation agreement with the Central African Republic.

As for Sudan, Russia began warming its ties with the troubled country in late 2017 (if not earlier), with Bashir reaching out to Putin for “protection” from the United States and expressing support for Moscow’s efforts in Syria. Russian sources now suggest that the Kremlin is working to obtain a base in Sudan.

Meanwhile, against the backdrop of Russia pushing regional governments to restore relations with the Syrian regime, Sudan’s president visited Bashar al-Assad in December, making him the first Arab leader to do so. The meeting fulfilled both Assad’s need for recognition and Bashir’s own aspirations for support from the Gulf states, building on his 2017 trips to Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.

For their part, the Gulf states have asserted themselves across the Horn of Africa in the past few years, establishing military and commercial outposts across the region. In the UAE’s case, many of these commercial opportunities have occurred in areas of especial interest to Russia. Although some might wonder if this means the Gulf states are competing with Russia for local influence, cooperation prevails instead. Moscow has expanded its own presence in Africa over the same period and signed a strategic partnership agreement with Abu Dhabi last June. Putin built momentum toward such accords over the course of many years, ever since he visited Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE in 2007—an unprecedented move for a Russian head of state.

His keen interest in cultivating formal and informal ties with the region stems in part from a need to secure Gulf investment and thereby salvage Russia’s stumbling economy. This includes getting Gulf leaders more interested in Russian weaponry, encouraging sovereign wealth fund agreements that further Moscow’s agenda, and organizing business councils and traveling exhibits that create forums for Russian-Arab commercial deals.

Ironically, Putin’s Syria intervention has earned him grudging respect among Gulf leaders as well—despite their initially vociferous opposition to the Assad regime’s war effort, and despite the fact that Russia has essentially aligned itself with the Iran-Shia axis that they fear so much. While the West wavered for years in Syria, Putin stuck to its guns and kept Assad in power. Now that the United States has seemingly accelerated its withdrawal from the region, the Gulf states seem to believe they have no choice but to deal with Assad and Putin. Indeed, the UAE and Bahrain have already reopened their embassies in Damascus, and leaders are watching Moscow’s activities in Syria with an eye toward cooperation rather than confrontation.

Unlike the Levant, the Red Sea region is still crowded with great powers, so Russia’s ascent there is by no means inevitable. For example, Djibouti hosts American, Chinese, French, Italian, and Japanese military outposts; Moscow is not guaranteed a base there despite recent talks toward that end. Even so, its position in Syria has served as a springboard for widening its regional activities, from collecting intelligence and running general interference to launching specific initiatives such as last August’s counterpiracy training exercises in the Gulf of Aden. It is no accident that the shadowy Russian mercenary group Wagner reportedly appeared in the Central African Republic in late 2017 after previously operating in Syria.

Washington’s pattern of disengagement from the region is only making it easier for Putin to step in. Continuing this

approach is especially risky today, since Bogdanov and Lavrov’s March trips may usher in the next stage of Russia’s regional ambitions: namely, entrenching its position from the East Mediterranean down to the Gulf of Aden and creating a pathway deeper into Africa, with help from the Gulf.

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and coauthor of its recent study “[Russia’s Arabic Propaganda: What It Is, Why It Matters.](#)” ❖



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