

# Russia Makes Inroads in North Africa

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Brief Analysis

**While U.S. attention is focused on fires already raging in the Middle East, Russia is quietly expanding its presence in North Africa, to the detriment of U.S. interests.**

**S**ince officially coming to power in May 2000, President Vladimir Putin has sought to restore Russian influence in regions the Kremlin lost in the 1990s. Although his efforts have been more visible in the Middle East (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russia-in-the-middle-east>), he has also targeted North Africa, where Moscow has geostrategic, economic, and political interests.

The events of the Arab Spring, which originated in North Africa, undercut the influence Putin had labored to regain and reinforced the Kremlin's perception that the West is behind all protest movements aimed at dismantling authoritarianism. In Putin's estimation, Russia's ascendancy depends on countering the United States and its European allies. Expanded access to the Mediterranean serves this broader goal by establishing a foothold in a European sphere of influence and reducing the U.S. ability to maneuver militarily. In economic terms, North Africa presents an opportunity for Russia to sell arms, forge partnerships in the energy sector, and invest in infrastructure development. Moscow can also claim it is in the region to fight terrorism.

Russia's most robust relationships are in Libya and Algeria, former Cold War allies. But even in Morocco and Tunisia,

bilateral ties have grown in recent years.

## **LIBYA**

The 2011 Libyan uprising, the subsequent NATO intervention aimed at blocking Muammar Qadhafi's forces from committing a massacre in Benghazi, and the collapse of Qadhafi's regime not only ruptured the country's status quo - these events also upended a series of economic and military agreements Putin had forged with the Libyan dictator. Moscow has spent the last six years trying to salvage these deals. In July 2017, the Russian state-run oil and gas company Rosneft began purchasing oil from Libya's National Oil Corporation, and Putin is eyeing Tobruk and other ports for potential berthing agreements. The latter development would entail significant Russian investment, but a permanent naval presence in Libya would establish Russia as a regional power broker and should not be discounted. Politically, Moscow leans heavily toward Gen. Khalifa Haftar, leader of the Libyan National Army (LNA) in the oil-rich east. In Haftar, Russia sees an emerging strongman who proclaims a shared aversion to Islamist groups. (The reality is more complicated, as Haftar has worked closely with Salafists, and Putin will generally ally with any actor similarly inclined to reduce Western influence.) Haftar's LNA is allied with the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, which has not fully endorsed the internationally recognized, Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) under Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. Haftar visited Russia three times in 2016, and in January 2017 he boarded Russia's aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, then anchored off the coast of Tobruk. In March, Russian special forces were reportedly stationed in western Egypt to assist Haftar's troops across the border. Still, Moscow maintains contact with the GNA, partly to present itself as an alternative peacemaker to the United Nations and partly to hedge against Haftar. Ultimately, Moscow cares most about exerting influence in Libya, regardless of who is in charge. Among Libya's many strategic benefits, not least is an opportunity to influence Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi next door.

## **ALGERIA**

Since 2001, when Russia and Algeria signed a declaration of strategic partnership, bilateral relations have been strongest in the military sector. In 2006, Russia concluded a \$7.5 billion arms deal with Algeria -- its largest post-Soviet weapons sale -- which included a military modernization and training program, and cancellation of a \$4.7 billion Soviet-era debt to Moscow. Weapons sales in 2010, 2012, 2013, and 2015 brought Algeria additional military equipment, including helicopters, tanks, and submarines. In 2016, Algeria and Russia began sharing intelligence on terrorist groups' movement across North Africa and announced additional plans for deeper military cooperation.

Russia has also sought to carve out a larger presence in Algeria's substantial oil and gas sectors. However, as Europe's third-largest natural gas supplier after Norway and Russia, Algeria has viewed Russia as more of a competitor than a partner in the energy arena. Russia's Gazprom does have assets in Algeria, and the company has won contracts to explore and develop oil and gas, but Algeria's restrictive foreign investment laws limit the investment potential of such companies.

## **TUNISIA**

Moscow views the birthplace of the Arab Spring as a potential hub for Russian companies wishing to enter African markets, and since 2011 the bilateral relationship has focused on counterterrorism, nuclear energy, and tourism. In 2016, Moscow began sharing with Tunis satellite imagery of terrorist groups moving across the Maghreb, a gesture that Tunisian officials later credited with helping them thwart several attacks linked to smuggling networks along the Libyan border. That same year, the countries announced a nuclear energy cooperation agreement and Moscow pledged to provide Tunisia's armed forces with helicopters, night-vision goggles, and bulletproof vests, although it remains unclear whether these supplies have been delivered.

The most visible sign of Russia's growing presence in Tunisia has been in the tourism sector. Between 2012 and

early 2016, Tunisia was wracked by a series of high-casualty terrorist attacks, and revenues from its tourism industry plummeted as European travelers stayed away. Russians, by then prohibited from traveling to Egypt and Turkey over political disputes and security concerns, began filling the void. In 2016, roughly 600,000 Russian tourists visited Tunisia, a tenfold increase from the previous year and over 10 percent of the country's visitors that year. Tunisian retail businesses have welcomed Russians' presence, and the government has spoken positively of Russia's assistance in counterterrorism. Officials have also publicly acknowledged Russia's growing regional sway, including in Syria.

## **MOROCCO**

In 2016, Morocco's King Mohammed VI met with President Putin in Moscow, the monarch's first trip to Russia since 2002. The king sought strengthened economic relations through a renewal of the countries' free trade agreement and an expansion of Russian access to Moroccan fisheries on the Atlantic coast. His trip came against a backdrop of strained relations with the Obama administration, during which Moroccan officials grew frustrated with a perceived weakening of U.S. support for the kingdom's position concerning Western Sahara, and objected to the State Department's assessment of Morocco's human rights record.

Morocco-U.S. relations have begun to recover from these low points, but Morocco continues to strengthen its "strategic partnership" with Russia, evidenced by an announcement in October of eleven agreements in the agricultural, military, and energy sectors, including one by which Russia will begin supplying the kingdom with liquefied natural gas. As it does Tunisia, Russia views Morocco as an economic gateway to Africa; it also regards the kingdom as a model to emulate in countering Islamist extremism in its own vicinity.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY**

Absent an assertive posture on the part of the United States, Russia's growing encroachment across the Maghreb will likely continue. Such an outcome will pose a challenge for the U.S. strategic interests of maintaining stability for its NATO and non-NATO allies in the region, ensuring freedom of operation for the U.S. Navy throughout the Mediterranean, and supporting regional actors working toward political and economic reform. In cooperation with its European allies, policymakers should promote greater regional counterterrorism cooperation among the Maghreb states and expand the U.S. Navy's presence across the Mediterranean. Stationing more vessels out of Rota, Spain, for example, would help constrain Russian actions.

Additionally, policymakers would do well to consider relatively low-cost measures (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/strengthening-stability-in-northwest-africa>) to shore up the traditional alliances with Morocco and Tunisia, while also signaling the U.S. intention to engage with Algeria and Libya:

- In Morocco, the United States needs to continue restoring trust with a key counterterrorism ally. Appointing an ambassador would be an important step in this regard. Additionally, policymakers should deepen ties to the kingdom by expanding educational and cultural exchanges, while encouraging momentum in Morocco's political and economic reforms.
- In Tunisia, continued assistance will be crucial on border control, civilian police training, domestic counterterrorism, and programs strengthening the emerging democratic institutions and civil society organizations working to solidify them.
- In Algeria, traditional wariness of closer ties with the United States should not obscure the fact that the largest country in Africa remains a vital security partner, as Algiers's assistance following the recent deaths of four U.S. Special Forces in Niger made clear. Moreover, Algeria could be primed for an economic and political opening, given its ailing octogenarian president and no clear succession plan. The Trump administration should engage with

Algeria's business, energy, and military sectors to ensure the United States is well positioned in the event this opening occurs.

□ In Libya, the administration should weigh the risks of continued disengagement, given Russia's determination to fill the leadership void. Russia's involvement in Libya is unlikely to bring stability there, since Moscow has little interest in assisting the parties to address their underlying grievances.

In March 2017, the head of U.S. Africa Command, Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that Russia seeks to exert maximum leverage over the most likely victor in the Libyan civil war and that such leverage would not be in the U.S. interest. As such, the Trump administration should adopt clearer statements and actions in support of recent peacemaking initiatives by UN special envoy Ghassan Salamé, and consider even modest investments in governance and capacity-building programs for Libyan activists residing in Tunisia.

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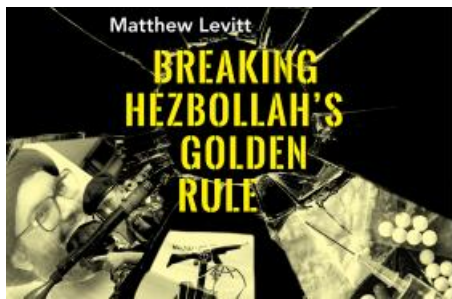
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