

## Russia's Growing Influence in North Africa

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Moscow casts itself as a reliable mediator and security partner, but in actuality it benefits from playing all sides of regional disputes and fostering perpetual low-level conflict.

While Moscow's Syria intervention has captured much of the world's attention, Russian President Vladimir Putin's vision in the region always spanned beyond Syria alone. Since coming to power, Putin prioritized restoration of Russia's image as a great power. This goal entailed, among others, a return to regions where Moscow used to be a key player. The Middle East and North Africa are both at the top of Russia's foreign policy agenda. That Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's most recent trip to the Maghreb in February [focused](#) among other issues on "the settlement of the problems existing in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the Sahara-Sahel region" shows the importance Moscow places on its own peacemaking role.

North Africa is increasingly part of these revived efforts in recent years. The fact that the [Arab Spring](#) originated in this region is one critical aspect towards regional strategy for Moscow. For policy makers in Moscow these events mattered for two reasons: First, Moscow saw them as a continuation of what it perceives as US-sponsored regime change, an extension of colour revolutions that occurred primarily in the post-Soviet space in the mid-2000s. For Moscow this trend also touched the Middle East, notably with Lebanon's Cedar Revolution. It appears that Russia does not believe it's possible for people to rise up against their ruler on their own, without US backing. In this vein, Putin accused the US of [sponsoring](#) protests against himself in late 2011-early 2012. Second, these events caused Putin to temporarily lose the influence he laboured to gain with the now-overthrown regimes. But beyond the Arab Spring, Moscow had political, economic, and geostrategic interests in this region. In recent years [Moscow's influence](#) has grown in the region, especially in Egypt, Libya and Algeria, and to a lesser extent in Morocco and Tunisia.

### MOSCOW'S VIEW OF THE REGION

Moscow covets access to the Mediterranean, and allies in North Africa offer just that. Moscow has attempted to gain naval access since the time of Catherine the Great, who believed the Mediterranean was a crucial component of making Russia a great power. In this sense, the Kremlin's aspirations remain relatively unchanged to this day. Moscow believes that access to the Mediterranean could turn Russia into a key player in the European sphere of influence and would also reduce US ability to maneuver militarily. This follows a pattern that could already be observed in the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea where Moscow is vying for influence. Moscow has positioned its military hardware in Syria in an attempt to create an anti-area access denial (A2AD), which partially succeeded. Moscow's military position complicates US ability to maneuver. Greater influence in North Africa can help further this goal by providing additional port access along the Mediterranean and thus extending an A2AD perimeter from air into water. The ultimate aim of A2AD bubbles is to deny freedom of action, in other words, to deter—and Moscow is working towards this aim in the region.

Economically, Moscow is vying for the role of an [arms exporter of choice](#) for the entire MENA region. The region is already the [second largest purchaser of Russia's arms](#), while Russia remains the world's top arms exporter after the US. Beyond arms, the region offers opportunities for partnerships in the energy sector and investments in infrastructure development. Meanwhile, Moscow justifies its presence in the region as it claims to continue the fight against terrorism there, and the need to solidify partnerships with regional allies. In addition, North Africa also offers a springboard deeper south into sub-Saharan Africa, where Moscow has been [increasingly active](#) in the last three years for economic and political reasons. This trend is unlikely to abate any time soon.

Finally, American retreat from the region that began under the Obama administration and continues under the Trump administration has created a vacuum that has made it easier for Putin to step in and assert his own influence—opportunities he would not have had in a context of a stronger American presence. Moscow, unlike the US, attaches no preconditions on its diplomacy. These preconditions, such as improvement of human rights, or prohibition of secondary arms sales, tend to also play into the preferences of regional rulers.

### EGYPT AND LIBYA

Since the Camp David accords, Egypt has been the cornerstone of American regional security policy. But Russia has also cultivated ties with Egypt in multiple ways in recent years: We have seen new bilateral ties in the political, military and economic spheres, taking advantage of Egypt's deteriorating relations with the Obama administration. Meanwhile, Cairo appears [genuinely interested](#) in diversifying away from the US, and policy makers shouldn't discount the possibility of a pivot towards Russia. Bilateral trade continues to grow, and the recent completion of an economic industrial zone further plays on Moscow's political interests in Egypt. The two countries signed an agreement for Moscow to build Egypt's first nuclear power plant, held joint naval drills and broader military exercises, and Egypt increasingly depends on Russian weapon imports to supply its military and defense apparatus. In this context, Egypt has come to accept Moscow's position on Syrian President Assad, and last year [declined](#) a US request to send Egyptian troops to Syria.

Moscow is active in Libya. It [leans more](#) towards cooperation with Khalifa Haftar, the head of the Libyan National Army who controls Libya's oil-rich east. But, Putin has also built strong ties with the Serraj government as part of Putin's "friends with everyone" approach to the region. Meanwhile, the US [remains largely absent](#) in Libya. Moscow is ideally positioned to exert influence there in America's absence. US Marine Corps Gen. Thomas D. Waldhauser [testified](#) in February this year that Moscow seeks economic and military contracts and to gain access to the Mediterranean coast. The latter would provide Russia greater access to Europe's southern border—critical for leveraging the issue of refugees over Europe. [According](#) to the European Commission, Libya "represents the departure point for 90% of those seeking to travel to Europe."

## ALGERIA, MOROCCO AND TUNISIA

Algeria has long remained in Moscow's camp of closer regional allies. Since 2001, the two countries have cooperated primarily in the military sector. In 2006 Putin cancelled a \$4.7 Soviet-era debt to Moscow and signed a \$7.5 billion arms deal that included a military modernization and training program. Over the years Moscow's arms sales and military equipment to Algeria continued and in 2016 military cooperation expanded to sharing intelligence on terrorist groups in North Africa. Traditional US allies Tunisia and Morocco have edged closer to Moscow in recent years. In Tunisia, Moscow's influence is especially visible in the tourism industry which is vital to the country's economy, and has slowly rebounded after the 2015 Sousse attacks in which 38 foreign tourists were killed. Indeed, it is very common to hear Tunisian shop keepers speak Russian to customers.

In 2016, Morocco's King Mohammed VI came to Moscow for the first time since 2002, and signed agreements on improving economic relations. Most recently, Moscow [began support](#) for Morocco's nuclear energy programme. Rabat's policy may be linked to Moroccan frustration with the perceived sympathy from both the Obama and Trump administration toward the Polisario Front and their lack of enthusiasm for Morocco's position on the Western Sahara conflict. That the Polisario Front was a Soviet Cold War proxy is ironic, but has not been an insurmountable obstacle in Moscow's outreach to Rabat.

## POLITICAL AND SECURITY RISK

Libya remains the primary candidate for Moscow's next strategic move in North Africa. The country itself encapsulates many of Moscow's foreign policy priorities: access to oil and arms markets, access to the Mediterranean and additional leverage over Europe through controlling the tap of refugee flows. US absence creates a vacuum for Moscow to assert its influence unchallenged. Moreover, Egypt and Libya are strategically vital because they provide access to the entire region. It is the perfect gateway to gain leverage over Europe and a springboard deeper into Africa, and Moscow already wields much influence in Egypt—a trend that is unlikely to decline. After Egypt and Libya, Moscow's influence in Morocco, the most important US regional ally after Egypt, is also worrisome.

Oleg Ozerov, the Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry's deputy director for Africa and ambassador to Saudi Arabia, [noted](#) recently that African countries requested Russian assistance after observing Russia's "success in counterterrorism operations in Syria." His comment shows the far reaching implications of Moscow's Syrian operations. The political risk of Moscow's growing influence is the continued loss of American, and more broadly, Western credibility in the Middle East and North Africa that becomes Russia's gain.

The security risk for the region is ultimately Moscow's inability and lack of desire to bring genuine security and conflict resolution to the MENA region. Moscow talks about peace and stability but benefits from low-level conflict. Through building relationships with all parties it aims to emerge as the ultimate arbiter as it manages rather than resolves conflict, and sells arms to all sides. Russia's growing influence in North Africa creates political and security risks for Europe, over whom Russia is poised to gain greater leverage. It also further opens doors for Russia's influence in the Middle East, and expansion into Africa, while Moscow's cynicism will reinforce anti-democratic trends rather than encourage reform. On a broader scale, these trends bode greater disunity among Western allies that can only complicate worldwide efforts to effectively counter Russia's activities.

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