

1(2) DECEMBER 2014

THE MidEast WORLD

JOURNAL



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INTERVIEW OF THE YEAR: THINKING OVER IRAQ

Bakhtiar Amin was interviewed by Maria Dubovikova (IMESClub President) in early September.

Maria DUBOVIKOVA: It is eleven years already since the American intervention in Iraq. What are its results for Iraq? And now, looking back into the past and looking into the future, how do you personally assess the US intervention in Iraq and U.S. policy in the following years in and towards the country? Has your attitude to it changed during the years? Were your hopes justified?

Bakhtiar AMIN: Saddam Hussein's regime imposed wars on his neighbours and his people over 35 years. While the dictator of Baghdad was slaughtering his own people many in the international community were silent. No one in the Cold War era was so privileged by both camps as the Saddam regime. This regime was the darling of the international community – supported by East to West, North to South while he was brutalizing his own people, gassing them as they did in Halabja and elsewhere as well as the Anfal campaigns against the Kurds in which 182000 people disappeared and draining the marshlands in the south, the brutalization and crushing of uprising in 1991 and burring hundreds of thousands of people in mass graves in the country. Every community (Kurds (Feyli Kurds, Barzanis, Yezidis, Shabak), Arabs (Shia and Sunni), Turkoman, Assyian, Chaldeans, Mandaian, Armenians) all paid a heavy price while the world community stood by.

This is IMESClub's Interview of the 2014 Year.



Bakhtiar Amin

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In 1991, the US, Britain and France changed their policies while some other countries along with Russia and China continued their support for the regime - putting out the red carpet to the butchers of Baghdad. Genocide, ethnic cleansing, apartheid policies were practiced in Iraq by the Saddam Hussein regime and the international community failed to bring the criminals to justice. The UN continued its business with the regime – Koffi Anan used to say Saddam was a man with whom he could do business. The oil for food program was the most scandal-ridden program in the history of the UN. The Iraqi opposition

were orphaned for a long time in their fighting of this regime prior to the 1990s. They were not able to crush Saddam Hussein's regime and the regime was not able to crush the opposition.

In the end America toppled the regime in 2003. Iraqi people and opposition forces wished to do this themselves but

hoped to see Iraq become a model for democracy in the region, to embrace diversity – I thought the new Iraq was capable to do that. The Americans should have convinced Iraqi Arabs in particular the Sunnis at that time of the benefits of a federal system for them right in 2003 and worked more forcefully in this direction so we did not

“In practice though the post-Saddam era was planned very poorly, sectarianism was enhanced and a balanced political system was never properly created, leading to a blueprint for a mess.”

unfortunately they couldn't. It was a great thing to remove this extraordinarily brutal dictator from power. Iraq changed from a one party system, one family rule, one media system where everything was monopolized by the dictator and his entourage - to a multiparty system, to a federal system with a diverse media and a parliamentary democracy, with a constitution which is one of the best bill of rights in the Middle East. In practice though the post-Saddam era was planned very poorly, sectarianism was enhanced and a balanced political system was never properly created, leading to a blueprint for a mess. The US and UK had their own elections and wanted a quick result to their invasion. Among the most damaging policies were the dissolution of institutions and the mishandled transitional justice system as well as the refusal to create a transitional government to fill the vacuum after toppling the regime. Amid all this, the US accepted calling themselves an occupying power and they acted as such.

get to this point. They should have been more strategic, inclusive and supporting liberal and democratic forces, not leaving Iraq in chaos and in turning Iraq to a battle ground for rival regional powers. They weakened the civic and secular democratic forces and empowered theocrats and non-democratic forces and elements. The roadmap and the timetable of the CPA ruler Ambassador Bremer presented in 2003 to the governing Council (2 national elections, a local election and a referendum on the constitution all in one year, while all our institutions were dissolved and borders open to neighbours), polarized the society, allowed more regional interference in Iraq's internal affairs, enhanced encouraged-sectarianism in the country. This was like a fast food program. Junk food creates junk system. We all paid heavy prices for this hasted and failed plan. Iraqis lost hundreds of thousands of people, many more wounded and disabled and Americans lost over 4500 people and 30000 wounded and a lot of resources wasted.

Were my hopes justified? I didn't expect to see my country become like this. I had

M.D.: Until now, until the ISIS upheaval, a decade of building democracy in Iraq — in your opinion, what are the successes and failures? What has been achieved, what has gone wrong? And why?

B.A.: Iraq is a rich country with natural resources and an educated population but unfortunately today six million people are illiterate. The most important success story in Iraq is the Kurdistan region. It re-emerged from the ashes of genocide, created scores of public and private universities, rebuilt most of its 4,500 destroyed villages and 36 towns and is undergoing an economic boom with thriving foreign investment. In the rest of the country, the average GDP has increased from \$350 in the 1990s to almost \$5,000 today but there is still a lack of essential public services, electricity and employment.

Iraq is now a multi-party system, it has elections and it has a constitution encompassing all communities. No one is fully happy or unhappy with the constitution. Iraq though has a problem in implementing the constitution. Selectiveness in implementing it has created a lot of problems — problems of sectarianism, imbalance, nepotism, corruption, incompetence and clientism. Lack of basic services is a major problem in the country today. Reforms and constitutional reforms are needed on all levels and important laws, including party political laws, oil and gas law and the federal council law creating a senate need to be passed rapidly. Almost 60 articles of the constitution need to be regulated by laws.

In practice people are better represented in the government than they were in Saddam's time but there are imbalances

in the security forces — that is the huge deficiency. It needs more balance in incorporating Sunnis, Kurds, minorities and more power given to the regions — a more inclusive policy needs to be adopted. Reorganization and restructuring and modernization of all our institutions are needed. Anti discriminatory legislations and independent commissions needs to be established. Election laws needs to be fairly reformed. Independent commissions must become truly independent, in particular the Independent Electoral Commission. Iraq in 2003 embarked on a democratic path but it became derailed — it needs to be put back on track.

M.D.: And how do you assess the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq? Was it deliberate and opportune, in terms of the consequences, given the situation in the country, and in the region as a whole? How the withdrawal was perceived in Iraq?

B.A.: As the invasion / liberation / occupation was perceived with mixed pro and con feelings. The withdrawal of American forces was also perceived as such. From excessive use of force to excessive isolationist policy was good neither for us nor the United States. But that is not just the fault of America. It is the fault of Iraqi political parties as well who did not want America to stay. Iraqis were divided — the only ones who clearly said yes to US forces staying were the Kurds. The Shiites were saying no, the Sunnis were saying publicly no but privately telling the Americans they wanted them to stay to protect them

from the Shi'a. If you look at Japan, Germany, South Korea – other countries where American forces have stayed – we could have benefitted from the presence of multi-national forces.

Nobody wants his or her country to be occupied but we should have more wisely dealt with the American presence. It is true that the Iraqis did not want to provide immunity to American forces to stay in Iraq. In the end they signed a strategic agreement but both Iraqis and Americans bear responsibility for the departure of US forces. This decision was taken by the Iraqi parliament but President Obama came to power as well on a promise to the American people to leave Iraq. They left Iraq in an irresponsible way fulfilling his promises to the American voters, but literally unfinished the mission they started.

The Americans on their side could have done more to win the hearts and minds of Iraqis and should have not acted as an occupying power. Americans are recognising that they have made thousands of mistakes in Iraq, but we ourselves are not recognizing our mistakes. We can build pyramids of mistakes and pyramids of all our fears – we build empires and pyramids of fear, which keep us from advancing. We have structural problems in Iraq and we have not dealt with these issues. Iraq was created by force by Britain and France – Sykes-Picot has failed and has to be adjusted. The international community as well as the people of the region need to review their positions and policies. We did not embrace our diversity – ethnic, religious, political and sectarian – and as long as we do not embrace this diversity we will remain captive of autocratic regimes and totalitarian dictatorships.

M.D.: In your opinion, which factors, both on in-country and regional levels, caused and led to the rise of ISIS? And to what the current upheaval would lead the country and the region?

B.A.: Afghanistan, Sudan, the Wahabi school of thought, the revolution in Iran, the American presence in the region, the non-solution of the Palestinian question all are contributing factors to radical Islam and the emergence of Jihadi forces in the region. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the setback of Communism and leftist ideology, the ideological vacuum as a result of this collapse have also contributed to the rise of radical Islam. The failure of the five major Veto powers of UN Security Council in their foreign policies, the failure of UN and regional powers and institutions, the failure of the West in their integration policy of migrants on their soil, the sectarian division, policies and conflicts in our region, the greed of merchants of blood and religion, the failure in fighting organised crime groups, the business nature of creating these kind of extremist groups, the absence of democracy, the unfair share of power and natural resources which are in the hands of no more than five per cent of the population, the enormous economic problems of the region – 30 per cent of the population below poverty level, 100 million unemployed, 90 million illiterates, 20 million people uprooted, over 15 million street children - miserable living conditions are all factors in the emergence of the IS and other radical and extremist groups. Wars, divisions between Shiite and Sunnis sharpened by the Syria conflict, deficient education systems and the lack of embracing diversity and the

pluralistic nature of our society along with human rights abuses have also played a role. As part of Iraq's decade-long brain drain, a significant number of doctors, lawyers, engineers, scientists and academics are now in the West and outside Iraq. Also to blame are the miscalculations of Western and Eastern powers policies which will one day backfire as radical Jihadists return to their own countries to fight there.

M.D.: To summarise our discussion, in your opinion, what are the prospects for the development of the crisis? What are the possible scenarios? What should be done by the Iraqi authorities and the international community to prevent the complete degradation (both on the regional and, of course, on in-country levels) of the situation? Or maybe the time is already lost?

B.A.: In reality, Iraq is now divided. Officially it is still a united entity. Either we move towards three enhanced federal states or confederal states – Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish – or we go back to live under the same umbrella of Iraq. If Iraq remains united the political system and process needs to be structurally and fundamentally corrected, reform and policies of inclusion adopted, regions need to be empowered parallel to federal government empowerment and we need to embark on a real reconciliation process. Iraq needs strong institutions to be empowered to become more functional, efficient and responsive to people. Power and resource sharing needs to be fairly distributed and long-

delayed legislation needs to be agreed on. Another scenario is that we try to solve this by force by bringing in more regional and international powers into this. That will lead to an even worse scenario – a war of proxies and an exhaustion war. Much depends on whether Iran will be incorporated through on-going 5+1 talks into the international community. *[Ed. note: The 5+1 talks failed again in spite of all efforts]*. Will we achieve a regional understanding on Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen in a regional package to solve these problems or will new fronts be opened? Those new fronts for conflict could include Lebanon and some of the Gulf countries in particular those who have multi and sectarian composition.

IS, although a Sunni international consortium type of organisation is a danger first to the Sunnis themselves, but also to the humanity. The brutal methods that they are using against the population in areas under their control whether they are Kurds, Shiite or Sunni Arabs, minorities including Christians, Yzedis and Shabak pose a colossal threat to international peace and security, including to moderate regional powers. The IS has forced non-Moslem minorities to convert, be killed or pay a tax as well as blown up shrines of the prophets (Yunis, Gergis, Sheet, and many other religious dignitaries) and imposed restrictive so-called Islamic codes and courts. The cruel inhuman treatment of Christians and minorities in Mosul is a an extremely serious and flagrant violation of human rights. Obliging people to change or abandon their religion and belief or be guillotined, moreover imposing genital mutilation on woman, and other degrading and brutal practices and

codes are tantamount to crimes against humanity. There perpetrators must be brought one day soon before international justice.

The wealth that this group has made through extortion, kidnapping, oil smuggling and other unlawful methods has made it one of the richest

terrorist groups in the world and the arms and money they have seized in Mosul and beyond also pose an enormous threat on regional and international peace and security. They are controlling 60% of Syrian oil including the largest oil field of Al Omar and other oil and gas fields of Deir Al Zour and Albu Kamal (such as Konko , Al Tiyaam, Tito, Al Ward), in addition to the oil fields of (Najma, Al Qayara, Tikrit, Al Ajil, Hamrin in Iraq).

The ambitions of IS stretch from the Caucasus to Andalusia. They do not hide their desire to raise their flag above 10 Downing Street and Buckingham palace

“The Iraqi problems cannot be solved through military might or pumping more arms into the country without major political reforms and the backing of the population and its political forces associated with a regional and international support.”

and Shiites threatened by the IS, regional and international powers are threatened by the growing hegemony of this growing organisation. In addition, the group now controls dozens of oil and gas fields in Iraq and Syria. We need a rapid international effort to fight these people.

The Iraqi problems cannot be solved through military

might or pumping more arms into the country without major political reforms and the backing of the population and its political forces associated with a regional and international support. We need to dissociate between legitimate rights of people and terrorism. Amalgamating between them is dangerous and unfair. In the name of fair and justifiable combat against terrorism we should not kill the aspiration of people and the democracy. Terrorism has no religion, no ethnicity and no boundary. We should all join forces in combating terrorism, which is a cancer in the body of the international community, which needs to be

“The wealth that this group [ISIS] has made through extortion, kidnapping, oil smuggling and other unlawful methods has made it one of the richest terrorist groups in the world and the arms and money they have seized in Mosul and beyond also pose an enormous threat on regional and international peace and security. “

– and perhaps one day above the White House or the Kremlin. I think a national, international and regional front needs to be built and forces joined to fight terrorism. Not only are Sunnis, Kurds

eradicated very rapidly. It's causes needs to be courageously and generously remedied.

Iraq needs to solve its problems politically and structurally to enhance its national unity through a sincere national reconciliation process, to repair the social disintegration of society and create social cohesion. An Army and security force which is considered by all political forces, including its government, to be widely corrupt and seen as sectarian by Sunnis and Kurds, security forces without a national doctrine, mixed with militias, infiltrated by armed and terrorist groups and military ranks distributed haphazardly and undeservedly or through fake officers

“Iraq needs to solve its problems politically and structurally to enhance its national unity through a sincere national reconciliation process, to repair the social disintegration of society and create social cohesion.”

its exhausted and wounded people. Iraq can not remain as such with an unknown future and it is unfair to oblige the Iraqi people to live in an unknown future. The situation is extremely dangerous for regional and international peace and stability. It is a security, moral and human imperative to assist Iraq and various Iraqi peoples and groups to live in peace with their dignity and rights respected. This country cannot afford to lose every month 4000-5000 killed and wounded. These atrocities have been on-going for the last six decades. No one feels the fatigue of what is going on in Iraq as much as

“The responsibility of how we have arrived to where we are today is shared by all Iraqi political groups without exception, the highest in the rank gets the highest share of blame and responsibility, along with America and regional and international powers.”

assigned or promoted due to political affiliation cannot fight in areas of countries where they are not welcomed or belong to. They need to restore their image and reputation to become professional and do their homework to become a professional army and security force, avoid and do not permit to be politicised and used out of its constitutional competencies and mandate in internal disputes. The responsibility of how we have arrived to where we are today is shared by all Iraqi political groups without exception, the highest in the rank gets the highest share of blame and responsibility, along with America and regional and international powers. These are accumulative responsibilities of allowing what has happened to this country and

Iraqis. The international community needs seriously to examine and solve the Iraqi crisis.

The European countries also must revise their integration policies towards migrants from Islamic countries where many of these fighters are coming from – many of North African origin. All countries of origin of these terrorists need to provide a package of solution to rehabilitate their outlawed citizens through educational, cultural, religious, economic, security programmes and measures. In line with civil and religious rights, they need to improve their surveillance of the activities of some Islamic elements and groups and provide a comprehensive multi-faceted economic, social cultural package to solve the problems of integration of

citizens from Islamic backgrounds.

M.D.: And the very last question I'd like to ask you in this interview is, in your opinion, which future is the most preferable for Iraq, which one you would wish it most? And which one is the most probable for it now?

B.A.: The major political challenge and most debated issue in today's Iraq is the third term of prime ministership of Mr. Al Maliki. He has been a Prime Minister for two terms from 2006-2014. He is the Senior leader of Al Daawa Islamic Party. His party got most of the seats in the last election in 2014 and hopes to become a PM again. His allies within Shia National Allies including most of the Sunnis and Kurds does not want him to become a PM for the third time. He benefited from full support of US and Iran during his two terms of ruling. Most of the political forces believe that the security situation will further deteriorate in the country and the total disintegration of Iraq will happen if he becomes a Prime Minister again. True or not Americans and Iranians seems not to be as eager as before to back him for the third term. Many others in Iraq and beyond sees that two terms of rule in democracy should be enough, but the Iraqi constitution permits more than two terms for the Prime Minister to become, but not for the President which has more ceremonial roles. The Iraqi Parliament voted against the Constitution for no more than two terms for the PM. These issues are still debated and cause a lot of division in the society. A new Sunni Speaker (Dr. Salim Al Jubouri) with two deputies a Shi'a and a Kurd was elected replacing the Speaker Al Nujaifi.

Also, a new Kurdish President (Dr. Fuad

Masoum) was elected by the Parliament to replace President Jalal Talabani, considered as the safety valve of the country respected by all sides, his hospitalisation in Germany since December 2012 as a result of a stroke, created a significant vacuum in the political life in the country.

The President needs to assign according to the constitution within two weeks the head of the biggest block within the Parliament to create the government. A conflict is on-going in this regard between, in one hand the PM led State of Law block, and on another hand the National Alliance (Al Hakim, Al Sadr, Dr. Chalabi, Al Fadhila group) and the Shi'a grand scholars led by Grand Ayatollah Sayid Ali al - Sistani who is opposing the third term. By August 7, a new PM needs to be assigned and to create his broad national unity government within a month. This issue in addition to IS are the major challenges of Iraq.

Sunnis – particularly moderate Sunnis - need to be empowered to be able to solve their problems and build their own federal region -which is a constitutional right. If you ask any Kurd today they will tell you they would like to see their own independent country but to be realistic an independent state needs international and regional support. At no time since the Sevres treaty in 1920 has a Kurdish state been discussed as much as it is today but whether it becomes a state or not, Kurdistan needs to live in peace and harmony with its neighbours. A con-federal solution with strengthened regions would be the best solution for Iraq. Swiss model of con-federalism or Canadian model are both providing and inspiring solutions, which

Iraq can benefit from. The world's borders have changed many times – when the UN was created there were 50 countries. Today there are about 193. From Westphalia to Versailles borders of Europe changed 367 times. What matters is to see people live in peace and prosperity with their dignity and rights respected – state or no state. The right to self-determination as an enshrined right in the UN charter and as a divine

right should not exclude any people as a matter of principle. In the last quarter of this year, we will see two referendums of independence, once with the approval of the British majority in Scotland, and the other against the wish of the Spanish majority in Catalonia, it remains to see whether Kurdistan will hold its referendum on its self determination right or not? ❖

OPINION: RUSSIA, THE FLY ON THE WALL OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

(Previously published on Al Arabiya English web-site: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/world/2014/07/13/Russia-the-fly-on-the-wall-of-the-Israeli-Palestinian-conflict.html>)

The eternal conflict between Israel and Palestine goes is going through a new bout of escalation. The international community has cynically got used to coexisting with this conflict during the ages of its existence. The escalations are regular and inevitable, taking into account the position of the Israeli government and the problem within Palestinian society and its governance which, according to skeptical experts, are unlikely to be eliminated. Numerous initiatives and promises of a breakthrough and of a final settlement of the conflict failed, including the most recent one undertaken by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry. The current instability in the region accompanied by constant bloodshed, extremist uprisings and geopolitical clashes is unlikely to encourage compromise between the conflicting parties. It is impossible to build peace in the middle of war, especially when the war between the conflicting parties has never really stopped.

The conflict itself does not directly threaten the security of Russia, however it does not mean, that it is beyond its foreign policy concerns. Russia is a Middle East Quartet member and is one of the key negotiators. It stands strong on the importance of conflict regulation on the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative, Madrid principles and many other agreements and decisions that have been taken. Thus, Moscow pursues with its counterparts just one goal - to settle the conflict on the basis of justice,



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equality and respect and to create two stable independent states. Russia itself has stable relations with Palestinian authorities, contacts with Hamas, and at the same time has friendly relations with Israel. This is a truly rare diplomatic combination which makes Russia an indispensable partner and mediator in the conflict.

Today's Russia-Israel ties still depend on its huge Russian speaking community of Soviet emigrants, who left the USSR for a better life but still sympathize with Russia and with their ex-compatriots or relatives who live in their ex-motherland. The two countries have diversified mutually profitable economic ties. Moreover, Israel turned into a sort of political ally if one

remembers the more than neutral position of Israel during the Ukrainian crisis. As for Russian-Palestinian relations, its key foundation is the peace process. Russia's stance on conflict regulation has not changed during years and it was always for the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Russia treats Palestinians as equal counterparts, as equal party in the peace process. So far, this seems to be very attractive for Palestinians.

Who is responsible

Yet, Russia sees both parties as responsible for the escalation in the current crisis, considering the kidnapping and the assassination of three Israeli teens as provocation committed to destabilizing the situation. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called on people not to give in to the attempts to hinder the peace process. Nevertheless, the calls from Moscow remained ignored, as well as of all those who raised their voices with the same appeal.

It might be curious to mention that the Russian expert community seriously assumes that Hamas is not responsible for the Israeli teens' kidnapping, as there are many other smaller groups and organizations in Palestine that are acting independently and are not controlled by any major force within Palestine.

Another point it considers important to focus on is the fact that the escalation came shortly after the Palestinians succeeded in forming a national unity government. Embraced even by the U.S., this was perceived with dissatisfaction by Israel, and most likely in the same way by the most radical Palestinians. The kidnapping of three Israeli teens was a nice pretext for Israel to tighten positions and to change rhetoric. Thus, it is about an approach that could not a priori stay unrequited. Most likely, Hamas fighters used this as a pretext too. This quest for a pretext by both conflicting parties does not score points either for Israel, or for Palestinians (and

especially for Hamas), as it questions their true intentions.

The rocket exchange between heavily armed and well-protected Israel on one hand and weak and poorly-armed Palestine on the other raises deep concerns. Firing rockets into densely populated Gaza causes the death of numerous civilians and of children, who are not responsible for the death of the Israeli teens or for the political decisions of Palestinian authorities, or for the air strikes which rarely hit Israeli cities. The Israeli airstrikes rarely find the guilty ones on the Palestinian side – those who fire rockets against peaceful Israelis. They sow panic, hatred and death, mostly among the innocent. Hamas' aggressive responses are inappropriate and counterproductive and show the Palestinian weakness, highlighted a total lack of any co-ordination between Fatah and Hamas, and unfortunately the mostly terrorist core of Hamas.

Sending warnings

It is for sure that the expected Israeli landing operation will certainly not improve the situation. The Russian authorities are sending warnings to Israel with other concerned members of the international community against further escalation and are calling for a cease-fire. Moscow even offers Egypt the chance to play a mediating role, as it had already done in the previous escalation of 2012. However, this could hardly work in this case. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has already said that the current situation is the biggest challenge the region has faced in recent years.

Despite the fact that Russia does not stop the attempts to move the peace process forward, to stop escalation and bring the parties to the negotiating table, its expert community is very skeptical about the future of the conflict. The Arab Peace Initiative, as suggested in order to settle the conflict, seems ideal and could work if all the parties are interested. But the recent developments show that this is not the case. The

contradictions within the Palestinian society play against Palestinians. Israel, being strong, feels free in its actions, as now even international pressure would hardly influence its decisions. The longer the escalation goes on, the less

chances for Palestinians remain to create their own stable state, equal to others. The chances for the peace process to work are quickly receding, meaning Palestine could stay in history only as a shattered dream. ❖

DOSSIER: RUSSIA AND ALGERIA. LOOKING THROUGH BILATERAL RELATIONS

Introduction

Russian and Algerian ties date back to the Algerian war of independence, when the support provided by the Soviet Union sustained the fight against French colonialism and helped accelerate Algeria's independence in 1962. Soon after its independence, Algeria aligned itself along the Soviet Union's ideology, philosophy and economy, becoming a strong ally of Moscow until the fall of the USSR. The collapse of the Soviet Union on one side and the civil war that ravaged Algeria in the 1990 on the other have frozen the Russian-Algerian relations during a decade, the two countries being turned inward and concentrated on different imposed struggles and necessary adjustments.

However, at the impulsion of Bouteflika who came to power in 1999, the Algerian-Russian relations resumed in the early 2000's and took a new turn with Putin. Indeed the relations that have been thriving since then have impacted various aspects of their respective political, economic, and military agendas. Strategic partnerships and agreements in the area of gas production and exportation have reinforced the links between the two countries, while Algeria has once again become a major purchaser of Russian arms.

The reuniting with Algeria has allowed Russia to regain footing in the Maghreb, a strategic region located at the



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crossroad of the African and European continents, and to gradually engage in a redefinition of its relationships with Algeria' neighbors, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia where Moscow's international stands and independent foreign policy are drawing more visibility and respect. Having succeeded in challenging the Western plans of power distribution, Russia has now secured its comeback to the Middle East where it has become a major player (Syria) and a crucial partner (Egypt) and intends to increase its involvement in the Mediterranean and to develop its relations with Africa.

The strategic importance of the relations between Russia and Algeria is emphasized by the international context where both countries' foreign policies appear to be once again in tune with each other, from their refusal to accept the Western attempts to create a unipolar world to their awareness of and suspicions about the Arab Spring revolutions, to their determination to fight the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. Furthermore, not only are both countries concerned about the growing instability in the Middle East and the increasing insecurity in North Africa and the Sahel, but they are also challenged, within their borders, by the expansion of Islamic extremism and jihadist terrorism.

1-Political relations: a convergence of views

From 1962 until the late 1980's, Algeria took its cues from the Soviet Union and relied heavily on Moscow for guidance and aide. When the Soviet Union collapsed and the newly formed Russian Federation stumbled out of the blocks, it coincided with another dark chapter in Algeria's history, in which nearly 200,000 people were killed during a decade-long civil war pitting Islamic fundamentalists against the regime. And yet, after nearly a decade of being consumed by their respective internal issues, with the election of President Bouteflika, who as Foreign Minister had made Algeria an important and respected member of world politics, a rapprochement of the two former allies took place and both countries engaged in developing their relations.¹

¹ Brett Schneider, "Russian Pragmatism in the Middle East: Success in Algeria" Muftah, 1 April, 2013, [http://muftah.org/russian-pragmatism-in-the-middle-](http://muftah.org/russian-pragmatism-in-the-middle-east-success-in-algeria/)

Soon after his rise to power, Bouteflika undertook to reinvigorate Algeria's foreign policy, after the country's decade of international isolation during the civil war and to develop diversified diplomatic and commercial relations. By turning to new partners and creating new ties beyond the "privileged" relationship with France and the traditional one with European countries, Bouteflika has reinforced the relations with the United States and has turned to other countries such as China, India, South Korea and Brazil. Moreover, he reactivated Russian-Algerian relations.²

Likewise, the framework of Russia's new foreign policy experienced a new turn in the early 2000 and has been consolidated since Putin's first presidency. Breaking the subordinate development paradigm of the first decade following the Soviet Union's break-up, and growing increasingly dissatisfied with the West's imposition of its geopolitical and economic interests, especially after the West's betrayals, with the NATO and EU enlargement to the East and the deployment of the European missile defense subsystem, Russia clearly intended to return to the world stage as a co-manager of the new world order.³ Moscow's initial purpose of integration into Western structures and the strategy of looking for compromises with Western leaders were soon replaced with the much-recognized need to turn towards partners in the East and the South. Thus,

[east-success-in-algeria/](http://muftah.org/russian-pragmatism-in-the-middle-east-success-in-algeria/)

² Hakim Darbouche and Susi Dennison, A "Reset with Algeria: The Russia of the EU's South", ECFR Policy Brief, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR46_ALGERIA_BRIEF_AW.pdf

³ Maxime Bratersky, "Transformation of Russia's Foreign Policy", 7 June 2014; <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Transformation-of-Russias-Foreign-Policy--16706>

acknowledging the growing importance of the non-Western world in terms of territory, population, economic opportunities and resources, Putin has expanded Russia's diplomatic relations, engaging his country East and South, working on new and renewed relationships with China and some African countries, even with those that once fell out of the Soviet Union's scope.

Bouteflika and Putin also share an incredibly important bond in that they are both regarded as their countries' saviours in dealing with the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. While Bouteflika is credited with guiding Algeria out of the civil war and Putin for dealing with the Chechen situation, both continue to enjoy support for the way they handle what is considered to be the greatest threat to both of their countries today.

The relations between the two countries are supported by the fact that as much as Putin, Bouteflika is wary of an international system that has been dominated by Western powers and both regard the Arab Spring similarly, as a series of disastrous events with extremely dangerous consequences. Bouteflika and Putin also share similar views regarding the Gulf countries and what they perceive to be their influence on the spread of radical Islam throughout the region. They both believe that outside forces have been staging the Arab Spring uprisings and helping transnational jihadist networks destabilize the Middle East and both are convinced that the same forces, mainly Qatar and Saudi Arabia, continue to attempt to destabilize Algeria whose leadership has managed to avoid the turmoil of the Arab Spring but has not yet succeeded in defeating the most

important and growing threat the country has been facing for the past decades: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and its activities inside Algeria and in the Sahel region. Visiting Algeria in June 2013, Lavrov stressed Russia's convergence of views with Algeria regarding the security issues in the Sahel and the fight against terrorism. He also reiterated Moscow's support for the Algerian leadership in its fight against terrorism as well as for the political and economic reforms carried out by the regime.

The Syrian crisis has also stressed the convergence of views between Algeria and Russia in their support for stability in the Middle East against terrorist destabilization attempts. Russia has since the start of the Syrian uprising in March 2011 supported the Syrian regime as the guarantor of the country's stability (and therefore of the region) and opposed any foreign interference. The principle of non-interference being at the core of its foreign policy⁴, Algeria supported Russia in its stand against Qatar's or France's calls for intervention in the Syrian conflict. Since its independence from France, Algeria has always been wary of Western interferences in the region and the African continent and considers itself as the standard bearer of the sovereign rights of nations. Thus it opposed the NATO intervention in Libya, and did not support the armed rebellion that aimed at a regime change even though Algiers was not Gaddafi's best friend or ally. And it was not surprising that Algeria supported Russia's exercise of its right of veto in the Syrian crisis because it appeared as the right move to ward off

⁴ The Algerian policy is a legacy of the country's colonial experience, (132 years of French occupation 1830-1962)

the risk of an armed intervention, which Moscow as well as Algiers saw as the worst case scenario even though it was clear since the beginning that neither the United States, nor Britain, nor France were all too eager to open a new battlefield in the very heart of the Middle East, with extremely risky implications. While Lavrov denounced in Algiers in June 2013 what Moscow saw as the West double-standard policy in tackling the Syrian crisis, noting that the western countries were supporting in Syria the exact same forces they went to fight in Mali, in reference to the French *Operation Serval* of January 2013. While it has constantly opposed the Saudi/Qatari calls for foreign intervention, Algeria has opposed the Arab League attempt (March 2014, at the Arab league summit in Koweit) to cede the Syrian seat to a representative of the Syrian opposition.

With such a convergence in their views on many international affairs, Russia has grown closer to Algeria, seen as the country that has managed to avoid the Arab Spring that destabilized the whole region from the Sahara to the Middle East. Then, it was not surprising that, according to Russian media reports, Bouteflika's reelection to a fourth mandate in April 2014, was hailed by Putin and the Russian leadership as a guarantee of the region's stability. In a statement praising the role of Bouteflika in maintaining and developing the Russian-Algerian relationships, Mikhail Margelov, Russia's presidential envoy on cooperation with African countries and a head of the Federation Council's international Committee, stressed again the Algerian stability: "The presidential election in Algeria has demonstrated the stable current political system in that country, and the biggest input in

support of that stability is made by the policies of Abdelaziz Bouteflika".⁵ While these elections have confirmed Bouteflika's popularity (as well as the strength of the regime he has put in place) Putin is enjoying the highest popularity rates following his dealing with the Crimea and Ukraine crisis.⁶

Russia's relations with Algeria have gained increasing importance since the early 2000's, they have become strategically crucial since the increasing destabilization of the Middle East and the rising insecurity in the Sahel.

2-The Algerian and Russian economies

Both economies are dependent on the hydrocarbons rent, both of them have reaped vast revenues as oil prices have risen, enabling them to pay off their debts and to amass impressive foreign-exchange reserves. Both of them are however facing looming challenges that have already impacted their growth.

- The Russian economy

During the past decade, Russia's economy benefiting from rising oil prices recorded a budget surplus and an upsurge of its domestic product experienced an upsurge that lowered considerably the country's foreign debt. Russia's economy is based on the rent provided by the hydrocarbons and dependent on Gazprom's strategy. Thanks to its hydrocarbons sector which represents today two-thirds of Russian

⁵ "Bouteflika's winning presidential term guarantees continuing Algeria-Russia relations" April 19, 2014, Itar Tass, <http://en.itar-tass.com/russia/728769>

⁶ According to the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion, Putin's approval rating is in June 2014 at 85 percent, up from 82 percent in April and 64 percent in May 2013. The only time Putin won higher domestic approval was after the 2008 war with Georgia, where his popularity reached 90 percent.

exports and 35-40 % of the GDP, Russia has become the eighth largest economy in the world. A long history of surpluses has enabled Russia to amass impressive foreign-exchange reserves, which stood at \$493 billion in March 2014. According to the IMF these reserves are four times as high as its external-financing requirement – the rollover of external debt minus the current-account balance – in 2014. In the decade until the financial crisis of 2008, Russian output raced ahead at an average 7% a year, boosted by surging oil and gas prices. But the recovery after the 2009 recession was marked by a the slowing of the growth averaging 4% in 2010-12 and falling to 1% in 2014 while inflation has stayed high. Economic experts are not expecting a return to the fast economic growth soon since the key negative trends which slowed Russia's economic growth in 2013 remain the same in 2014. The current negative growth of consumer demand is expected to aggravate the situation, pushing the economy from stagnation on the brink of recession especially since, for the past 10 years, the share of the industrial production in the Russian GDP barely amounts to about 17% and represents only 7% of the exports. Also, the crisis in Ukraine has already taken its toll on Russia's economy and financial markets: the stockmarket is down by 20% since the start of the year and the ruble has dropped 8% against the dollar. Worries about the devaluation feeding through to consumer prices have prompted the central bank to yank up interest rates, from 5.5% at the start of March to 7.5% and according to the IMF the Russian economy is in recession. However, Russia's public finances are much healthier than those of many EU Countries. The budget deficit was 1.3%

of GDP in 2013, whereas it stood at 3.3% for the EU. Government debt amounted to a 13% of GDP, compared with 87% in the EU; and according to experts' forecasts Russia will remain the first exporter of hydrocarbons until 2035, covering up to 4 percent of the worldwide energy demand.

- Algeria's economy

Since Bouteflika assumed power in 1999, Algeria has reaped vast revenues as oil prices have risen, enabling it to pay off its debts, amass \$200 billion (Dh734 billion) in foreign reserves, plough \$500 billion into social spending schemes. Being the region's richest country, Algeria has also recorded the highest per capita GDP: it rose from 2,500 euros in 1999 to 4,300 euros in 2013.

However, the Algerian economy is actually facing looming challenges that not only threaten to jeopardize this new prosperity but also to expose the regime to the genuine risk of economic disruption that would endanger the country's stability. The country's GDP growth rate, which reached a record 6.7% in 2003, has dropped since 2006 to an average of 3% and remains driven mainly by domestic demand, including public investment.⁷ Unemployment remains very high (as much as 21.5% among young people aged fifteen to twenty-four), corruption is rife⁸, and the mismanagement of big investment projects, as well as the many scandals

⁷ This growth performance was achieved with inflation slowing to 3.3% thanks to the government's efforts to control market liquidity, contain the expansion of demand for goods and services, and increase supply.

⁸ On Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, Algeria ranks 105 out of 176 in 2012 and 94 out of 177 in 2013 countries worldwide; see <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2013/results/>

that reached the inner circles of the *pouvoir*, have shed more light on the nepotism that plagues the country. For now, hydrocarbons account for 97% of Algeria's export revenues, 60% of its fiscal receipts and 40% of its GDP,⁹ and the regime spends a significant amount of these hydrocarbon revenues on subsidies. When demonstrations of discontent were sweeping the country in January 2011, the government took immediate measures and increased public spending and salaries by about 25%; Massive increase in state subsidies and public sector salaries have continued, In 2012 the government increased subsidies by approximately 60%, and public sector salaries by over 9%.¹⁰

Despite repeatedly announcing diversification plans, the country's dependence on energy exports and its reliance on hydrocarbons for sole income while no new sources of economic opportunity are being created, have become unsustainable especially since imports into the country remain extremely high, reaching \$60 billion in 2013 and social demands remain "elevated and could further increase."¹¹

⁹ Lowi Miriam « Oil Rents and Political breakdown in Patrimonial States: Algeria in Comparative Perspective », The Journal of North African Studies, vol. 9 (3), 2004, pp. 83-102.

¹⁰ Lahcen Achy, "The Price of Stability in Algeria", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 25 April 2013.

<http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/04/25/price-of-stability-in-algeria/g1ct#>; Yahia Zoubir, "Algeria's path to reforms: Authentic change?" Middle east Policy Council, summer 2012 Vol. XIX no2; <http://mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/algerias-path-reform-authentic-change>.

¹¹ According to IMF, "despite high levels of spending in 2011 and 2012, and additional wage increases in 2013, social demands remain elevated and could further increase". IMF, Staff report for the 2013 Article IV consultation, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2014/cr1432.pdf>

3- Russian-Algerian economic cooperation

While trade between the two countries remains quite insignificant, the economic relations are mostly in the military-technical cooperation and in the energy sector.

- The military-technical cooperation

Since establishing relations with the Soviet Union, Algeria has been a constant consumer of Soviet armament. Soon after gaining its independence from France, Algeria embarked into institutionalizing and equipping the troops and battalions that fought for independence and into building a powerful army, especially since the new independent state was confronted with a war with its neighbor, Morocco, in 1963 (*La Guerre des Sables*). Faced with the West's reluctance to provide the weapons and equipment that it wished to acquire, the Algerian leadership did not waste time in the context of the Cold war, before turning to the Soviet Union. With then Algeria's Defense Minister under Ahmed Ben Bella's Presidency, Houari Boumediene's visit to Moscow in 1963, the military cooperation with Russia took a new turn.

From 1962 until 1989, Algeria spent approximately US\$11 billion on Russian weapons, consisting of aircraft (MiG-21, MiG-23 and Su-24), tanks (T-55 and T-72), armoured vehicles and several ships (corvettes, frigates, patrol boats and submarines), as well as light weapons and munitions. During the 1990's, the arms trade between the two nations all but ceased, but since Bouteflika's first mandate, Russia has become again the primary provider of weapons to Algeria, far ahead of the other partners the

Algerian Military, *l'Armée Nationale Populaire* (ANP) buys weapons from.

During his official visit to Russia in 2001, President Bouteflika signed two important documents that reset and reinforced the cooperation between the two countries: the Agreement of Cooperation between the respective Ministries of Defense and the Declaration of Strategic Partnership, the first treaty of its kind signed by Russia with an Arab or African country.

Vladimir Putin's official visit to Algeria in 2006 was marked by the forgiving of Algeria's debt, estimated at \$4.7 billion, and followed by the signing of several treaties of economic cooperation. The two most important ones were the Economic-Financial Agreement of Cooperation and the Agreement on the regulation of Algerian debt. The forgiving of the Algerian debt Algeria was linked to the Algerian commitment to spend the equivalent amount in Russian armament acquisitions.

In fact, since the reactivation of the Moscow-Algiers political axis, Algerian purchases have not stopped growing and it has been evaluated that in 2013 Algeria imported 91% of its armament from Russia, spending \$1.9 billion in Russian weapons and military equipment. In acquiring 11% of the weapons that Russia sells abroad, Algeria is its third largest client after India and China, and recent reports (April 2014) indicate that Algeria currently ranks second among the Russian military products importers.¹²

Furthermore, Algeria will remain

¹² According to NOVOSTI agency quoting media reports on April 22, 2014.

Africa's top defense market as it continues to spend on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency capabilities while trying to keep pace with an ongoing North African arms race, especially with its rival, the Kingdom of Morocco. According to a report by the Strategic Defense Intelligence (SDI) market research group, "Algeria's defense spending capability is expected to increase [...] primarily owing to increased energy exports and an arms race in the North African region." The country's defense spending, which increased at a significant rate of 21.4% during the past three years, is expected to remain the most important sector of the Algerian budget, especially since Algiers, acting as the Maghreb leader, has increased its security operations at its borders with Mali, Tunisia and Libya. Similarly, with the Caucasus and even the Volga representing growing military threats to Russia, Moscow has raised its military expenditure by 44 percent in the past three years and should earmark around 72.4 billion euros each year to its armed forces by 2016, instead of 51 billion today. For the first time since 1991, the modernization of Russia's armed forces has become a priority under Putin. With a new law in late-December 2012, he introduced important changes to the organizational structure of the armed forces as well as a new Defense Plan in January 2013.¹³

During the Soviet era, Algeria depended

¹³Märta Carlsson, "The Structure of Power—An Insight into the Russian Ministry of Defence," Stockholm, Sweden: FOI, November 2012. Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's New Tip of the Spear," *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 8, May 2013, available from carnegie.ru/2013/05/08/russia-s-new-tip-of-spear/g2ti. Katri Pynnöniemi, "Russia's Defence Reform," Briefing Paper 126, Helsinki, Finland: Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), March 2013.

solely on the USSR for its weapons needs, and even though Russia remains Algeria's main military supplier, the monopoly that Russia held for three decades is being currently challenged with Algeria trying to diversify its arms purchases from other countries. In addition to its military cooperation with the Western countries, Algeria is looking at increasing its military cooperation with China, which has become Algeria's major supplier, a position constantly held by France until 2013. Indeed, Algeria has become China's largest export market in the Maghreb, representing over 40 percent of its total trade of nearly \$21 billion with the Maghreb in 2013. While the bilateral trade with China is estimated at over \$9 billion at the end of 2013, it has barely amounted to \$1437 millions with Russia.

The Algerian decision to introduce a certain degree of diversification in the supply, maintenance and repair of its armament will weaken Russia's predominant position in this sector; however, Russia's position will not be seriously endangered: even if Russia is not the sole supplier of armament to Algeria, as it used to be, it is nevertheless expected to remain Algeria's main military supplier and to maintain at least an 85% market share.

Modernization and upgrade of Russian-made weapons imported by Algeria is an important component of the military cooperation between the two countries. Despite a setback in 2008 related to the sale of what were deemed to be sub-par aircraft in the infamous "MiG-29 affair", following President Medvedev's visit to Algiers in 2010, the two countries agreed to move their traditional military co-operation out to a multiform one and

signed six memoranda of understanding to support the deal. Putting this last issue to bed was a crucial hurdle for the two countries to overcome because, with Russia originally claiming that the Algerian's backing out of the contract, despite debt forgiveness, was a politically motivated decision, it could have jeopardized their collaboration on even more financially lucrative energy deals, for energy co-operation is the other pillar of their relationship.

- A renewed Cooperation in the energy sector

Algeria is Africa's largest natural gas producer and second largest oil producer after Nigeria. Algeria joined the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries in 1969, where during the Boumediene era it played a major role in promoting OPEC policy and imposing it to the world. Like Russia, Algeria is heavily reliant on its hydrocarbon sector, which accounts for almost 70 percent of government budget revenue and grants and about 97 percent of export earnings. For the past decade, Algerian crude oil production has been stagnant and natural gas production has gradually declined, raising major concerns about Algeria's capabilities to fulfill its export commitments to Europe while meeting the surging domestic needs of a growing population and a richer middle class. Also, while no new production and infrastructure projects have been undertaken by the Algerian government, there has been a lack of interest from international investors to undertake new oil and gas projects under a strict and heavy legislation and a general discouraging business climate. After the last three licensing rounds marked by this lack of interest, Algeria's Parliament

decided to approve amendments to the current hydrocarbon law and introduce fiscal incentives to entice foreign companies to take on new ventures in the country's resources exploration. In an attempt to attract foreign investors to new projects the Parliament revised the hydrocarbon law and approved the new amendments in January 2013.¹⁴

The cooperation with Russia in the energy sector dates back to 2006 when Sonatrach, the Algerian giant which holds the state monopoly for natural gas exports, signed memorandums of understanding with Gazprom, Russia's oil and natural gas state monopoly, and with Lukoil, Russia's second largest oil company and its second largest producer of oil. In December 2008 Gazprom International received a tender for the exploration and exploitation of the onshore El Assel site in the east of the country and its overseas branch, Gazprom International, has been active in Algeria, developing al-Assel oil and gas field in cooperation with Sonatrach. After more than eight years of negotiations, in February 2014, Gazprom was offered joint venture exploration projects in Algeria. According to the new contract, Gazprom will participate in an international tender for the exploration and development of more than 30 prospective hydrocarbon deposits all over the country.

¹⁴ Algeria's oil and natural gas industry has been ruled by the Hydrocarbon Act of 2005, which replaced earlier legislation from 1986, established terms for the involvement of international oil companies in upstream exploration and production, midstream transportation, and the downstream sector. In 2006, the amendments to the bill reversing some of the favorable terms and granting Sonatrach a minimum equity stake of 51 percent in any hydrocarbon project, discouraged foreign investors and left Algeria with no international partners in its hydrocarbon sector.

4- Algeria in the Crisis between Russia and EU over Ukraine

Algeria is a crucial energy provider to the EU and its importance as a stable country and a reliable supplier is more loudly recognized in the environment of uncertainty that pervades the European gas market today. As its third largest supplier of natural gas after Russia and Norway, Algeria, which exports 80% of its gas to Europe, has found itself drawn in the crisis that has been pitting the EU and Russia over the Ukrainian situation.

The Ukraine crisis with Russia threatens to shut off the flow of gas to Ukraine, raising the specter of supply disruptions for Europe as well, has galvanized the EU into mapping out a new energy-security strategy. In addition to proposals to reducing the bloc's dependence on Russia, which supplies over 30% of the EU's gas, making it by far the largest single supplier, the Commission would also like to increase the resilience of Europe's energy market by exploring future gas ties with Mediterranean countries such as Israel, Greece and Cyprus and by identifying new sources of natural gas in the North Sea.

The EU has already been trying to decrease its imports of Russian gas – the dependence on Russian gas has almost been halved in less than two decades, declining from 61% in 1995 to 34% in 2012 – to diversify its sources of gas and to move towards renewable resources of energy.

While Europe was searching for alternative energy resources and partners to decrease its dependence on Russia, Russia found the alternative to Europe, its main energy market, by signing with China a \$400 billion gas deal on May 21st 2014, which now opens

to Moscow a huge mega-market. Under the deal, Gazprom will supply China National Petroleum Corp, China's largest oil company, with up to 38bn cubic metres of gas a year for 30 years, beginning in 2018. For Russia, being vilified by the West over its role in the crisis in Ukraine, this deal, reached after 10 years of negotiations, marks a major breakthrough: it provides Russia with a huge new export market, reinforces its ties with its eastern neighbor and strengthens its position in the bargaining with Europe.

European gas imports from North Africa have always relied on Algeria, Egypt and Libya but the regime changes in Egypt and Libya and the political and economic uncertainties that characterized their troubled transitions have propelled Algeria, which meets 15 to 20% of the EU gas needs, as the most reliable source from the region for its apparent stability, its huge reserves – 152 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually, 60 billion cubic meters of which are exported – and its good pipelines connexions. However, while energy experts expect that the EU's dependence on gas imports will maintain its increasing momentum, relying too much on Algeria as a gas pivot arouses considerable concerns since Algerian gas production has been decreasing since 2005; not only because underinvestment in the sector and the absence of discovered reserves have already reduced overall gas production, but due to the surge in domestic energy consumption, exports to Europe have been declining as well. The imbalance between production and growing domestic consumption has already reduced Algerian natural gas exports, with supplies to Europe falling 18.5

percent in 2013 to 37.9 billion cubic meters.

The share of domestic consumption of natural gas increased from 19 percent of production in 2005 to 29 percent in 2010 and with a continuing rise of 9% per year, experts are predicting that by 2030, in order to generate the 42000 megawatts of gas needed to power the country, Algeria will end up consuming everything it extracts. Without new investments in exploration and an important increase in its resource base and extraction, Algeria will soon be unable to meet its export obligations and could become a net hydrocarbon importer by 2026. The decision by the current government to allow and start the exploration of the shale gas resources is an acknowledgment of the risks that the country is facing.

Conclusions

- After having been of great assistance to the Algeria people in their struggle for independence, Russia was very helpful as well in the post independence establishment of national industries and in the education and training of thousands of Algerians who graduated from Soviet universities in the period of 1960-1980. Today, some of them still hold key positions in government and business.

- Since the renewal of their relations in the beginning of the 2000's, the relations between the two countries have been mutually beneficial. Moscow once again firmly entrenched in the affairs of the Arab World, could not afford to be absent from the Maghreb and cannot consider that its influence in the Middle East is sustainable without expanding its role as a major player in the Maghreb.

Recent trends of renewed relations with Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco indicate that Russia is following that path

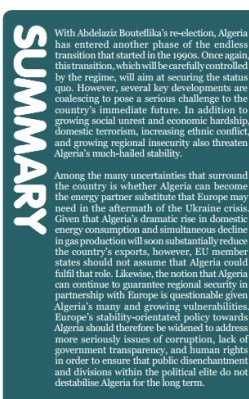
- Russia's renewed interest in Algeria has been translated in terms of increasing influence in the whole region, consecrating the role of world leader that Russia intends to be. Today, the Maghreb and Sahel countries take into consideration Moscow's stands and look for its points of view.

- For Algeria, its rapprochement with Moscow without being the alignment of the Cold War era, has strengthened its position on the regional and international spheres and vis-à-vis both old and new external players. Given the context of terrorism threats that have expanded through the whole region, the Algerian need in weapons will continue to grow, the defense budget which is

already quite substantial is likely to remain so, and Algeria's acquisition of arms is set to continue, as is the training of personnel and sharing of expertise.

- However the current cooperation based on the energy and the military sectors should expand to growing trade and more investments beyond the energy sector especially since Algeria, as a promising and fast growing market of 38 million, present alluring opportunities. The new areas of development which should include education, culture, training, and even tourism would strengthen the relations which are already marked by the convergence of views on many international dossiers and security threats. ♦

June 2014



Abdelaziz Bouteflika's re-election as president for a fourth term has left the majority of Algerians feeling deeply alienated from the system. The series of constitutional amendments proposed on 17 May and offered as reforms towards a consolidation of "Algeria's democratisation process" indicate that Bouteflika's re-election is considered to be a temporary and intermediate solution towards a transition within the regime, whose power largely sits with an elite group of decision makers around the National Liberation Front (FLN), the army, and the intelligence services, known to Algerians as *le pouvoir*. While working towards this inner transition, the 77-year-old Bouteflika will face growing vulnerabilities on the socio-economic and security fronts that not only pose many risks to national cohesion, but could ultimately provoke the country's economic and political dislocation if they remain unaddressed. While no rotation of power seems possible and no regime change is currently envisioned, public disenchantment and divisions within the political elite could potentially lead to an upheaval that could destabilise Algeria for the longer term.

This policy memo offers a brief analysis of the current situation in Algeria, using Bouteflika's re-election as a starting point. The political manoeuvring surrounding the election suggests that the regime has prioritised a continuation of the status quo at the expense of Algeria's domestic stability and possibly, in the medium term, its relationships with outside partners, especially the European Union. As one of the West's most important security partners in the region, Algeria is of tremendous value to the EU, but given Algeria's

- must-read piece of the same author.
Available here: http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR110_ALGERIA_MEMO.pdf

DOSSIER: AN OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS

Over the past several decades, Russian-Iranian relations have experienced challenges and a series of energetic rises and unexpected falls. The first significant test of bilateral relations was the Islamic Revolution of 1978-1979, which led to a cooling of relations between Moscow and Tehran. This cooling was clearly the result not only of Iranian actions, for instance the proclamation “Neither West nor East but an Islamic Republic” and the early policy of exporting the Islamic Revolution, but also of Soviet foreign policy, particularly the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and financial and technical support to Iraq during the war with Iran in 1980-1988.

Only towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war did relations with the Soviet Union begin to improve. The first meetings regarding economics and trade took place in 1986-1988, followed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's missive to Mikhail Gorbachev in which the Leader of Iranian State expressed his hope for future cooperation between two countries. The high point of Soviet-Iranian cooperation in 1980's was the visit of the Iranian Speaker of Parliament Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani to Moscow in 1989, when a long-term agreement on economic and technical cooperation (worth \$10 billion USD) was signed.¹⁵ This agreement included a



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framework for long term cooperation in trade and economics, science and technology, culture and athletics; an accord regarding the delivery of Iranian natural gas to the USSR and likewise the delivery of Soviet made equipment and automobiles to Iran; and assistance measures in the construction of industrial and agricultural complexes in Iran, promoting trade circulation and

¹⁵ *Karami J.* Iran-Russia Relations: Expectations and Realities // An Iranian

Quarterly. Vol. 9, Nos. 3-4, Fall 2010-Winter 2011.

the construction of a railroad between Tejen-Serakhs-Mashhad. Also included were provisions for cooperation in the field of radio and television, medicine, locust control and other programs.¹⁶

After the disintegration of the USSR, bilateral relations between Russia and Iran deepened with an increasing number of meetings between state officials of both countries and the enhanced economic presence of both countries on each others markets. It should be noted, however, that despite this, geopolitical interests prevailed over economic ones, Russia having lost a vast portion of its territories and geopolitical influence with the fall of the Soviet Union and in need of allies to be able to neutralize the influence of its rivals along its borders.

Iran was able to fulfill this role to a certain extent as it continues to exert influence on its neighboring countries in spite of its international isolation. Although Iran and Russia in the 1990s engaged in some geopolitical rivalry, particularly in Central Asia, this did not hinder their cooperation, especially when faced with external threats. Russia had abandoned the atheistic ideology of the Soviet Union and adopted a more pragmatic approach to foreign affairs, and was no longer seen as a potential threat to the territory and integrity of Iran. The two countries had ceased to share a common border, and Russia was preoccupied with its own internal problems.

Despite the improvement after the fall of

¹⁶ Арунова М.Р. Исламская революция и российско-иранские отношения // Ближний Восток и современность. № 21. М.: ИИИиБВ, 2004. С. 178.

the Soviet Union, relations developed unevenly over the next 23 years. On some matters, there was rapprochement and conciliation, while on others there was disagreement, with the latter being more frequent. A telling example is the Gore Chernomyrdin Protocols signed in 1995, in which Russia agreed to terminate technological and military cooperation with Iran by the year 2000; or in 1998 when, under pressure from Washington, Russia backed off its agreement to provide Iran with a research nuclear reactor.¹⁷ On the Iranian side, in July 1999 the Guardian Council vetoed a Russo-Iranian joint initiative between the law enforcement bodies of the two countries, although it had already been approved by the Iranian Parliament.¹⁸ In general, a complex array of internal and external (international and regional) factors influenced decision making in both countries, often preventing a fuller realization of their potential for cooperation.

An important catalyst for the deepening of relations was the fact that in the 1990's the two countries were facing similar problems, such as ethnic separatist movements which culminated in armed resistance to central authorities or terrorist acts; and the

¹⁷ Трофимов А. Анализ взглядов руководства Ирана на военно-техническое сотрудничество и перспективы России в регионе // Институт изучения Израиля и Ближнего Востока. 10.04.2003. URL: <http://www.iimes.ru/rus/stat/2003/10-04-03.htm>

¹⁸ Казеев К. Наблюдательный совет отклонил законопроект // Информационное телеграфное агентство России (ИТАР-ТАСС). Р-08 СК956. 22.07.1999.

almost simultaneous implementation of economic 'shock therapy' reforms in the early 1990', which led to increasing social tensions. These circumstances facilitated bilateral actions to counter these threats. Not only did Iran decline to support Chechen separatists during the first and second Chechen conflicts in the North Caucasus but also strove to soften the anti-Russian position of many countries throughout the Near and Middle East. An important milestone in the development of bilateral relations was Iran's mediating role in the Tajik civil conflict of the 1990s.¹⁹

The next milestone in Russian-Iranian relations was the official visit of the then Iranian President Mohammad Khatami to Moscow in March 2001. This visit resulted in signing of an agreement detailing the basis of cooperation and mutual relations between the two countries, entitled "Agreement Regarding the Foundations for Reciprocal Relations and the Principles for Cooperation" (*Договор об основах взаимоотношений и принципах сотрудничества*), and other important documents expanding ties between the two countries in the sphere of politics, economics, science and technology, and culture, among others. The agreement came into force on April 5, 2002. This was followed by three more meetings between Presidents Putin and Khatami, at the "Millenium Summit" (New York, September 2000), the Caspian Summit in Turkmenistan (23–24 April 2002) and during the Organization of the Islamic Conference

¹⁹ Арунова М.Р. Исламская революция и российско-иранские отношения // Ближний Восток и современность. № 21. М.: ИИИиБВ, 2004. С. 178.

Summit in Malaysia (16 October 2003).²⁰

Russo-Iranian relations were deeply affected by the onset of the Iranian nuclear crisis from 2002-2005, when Russia's cooperation with Iran attracted increasing criticism from the West. The election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad as Iranian President in 2005 further aggravated relations between the two countries.

The policies and rhetoric of President Ahmadinejad provoked increasingly negative reactions in the West and renewed attempts to pressure Russia into taking a tougher position vis-a-vis Iran. In late 2006, Said Shariati, one of Iran's foremost political thinkers, characterised the situation thus: "Russia cannot oppose the United States in the Middle East, and this is why Russia needs good relations with Iran so it can present a united front against the Americans. But Russia can play the Iranian card only for so long. Some here are of the opinion that if the West uses the Islamic Republic of Iran as a bargaining chip then Russia could change its attitude toward our country. I think this is what will happen, because relations with United States are more important to Russia than relations with Iran".²¹

²⁰ Там же. С. 179; Kozhanov N., Russia's Relations with Iran: Dialog without Commitments. Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2012. p. 2 – 5.

²¹ Интервью с Сеидом Шариати, членом политсовета партии «Машарекят», Тегеран, 27.12.2006 // Филин Н.А. Социально-историческое развитие Исламской Республики Иран (1979-2008): факторы устойчивости государственной власти. Приложение 1. М., 2012. С. 244.

Despite the pressures, Russia long blocked the attempts of the United States and its allies to impose harsh sanctions on Iran. Iran, however, failed to take significant steps to demonstrate its readiness to maintain a dialogue with the international community regarding its nuclear programme. While Russia was reassuring its western colleagues regarding the undeclared aspects of Iran's nuclear programme, Tehran was secretly working on the construction of the nuclear facility in Fordow. More than once, the Iranians scuttled a near deal in which would have supplied Iran with enriched uranium. Perhaps these factors ultimately pushed Russia in 2010 to support the UN Security Council resolution № 1929 on sanctions against Iran, and to refuse to supply Tehran with S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems. Since the S-300, a defensive weapon, is not formally covered by the sanctions, the international media was rife with speculation about the motives for Moscow's refusal to fulfill the agreement with Iran. One source claimed the Russian government made the decision at the personal request of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who in exchange promised to stop supplying Georgia with Israeli arms. There is an alternative view among some observers that Russia and the United States signed a secret agreement by which Washington promised not to interfere with Russia's WTO accession in exchange for Moscow's refusal to sell Tehran the S-300 missile systems.

It cannot be denied that Russia receives some benefits from the partial economic and political isolation of Iran. Notwithstanding the negative impact of sanctions on trade and economic relations between the two countries, the

absence of virtually all Western companies on the Iranian market has greatly reduced the level of competition for Russian companies there. Among Russian companies doing business in Iran after 2010 are Power Machines (Силовые Машины) holding company, Kamaz, GAZ Group and others.²²

Despite the complicated situation involving Russian acquiescence to sanctions against Iran, Moscow and Tehran adopted a common position on a number of regional issues in 2012. First and foremost, they both seek to maintain peace and stability in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, the Caucasus and Afghanistan. During the Russian-Georgian conflict in August 2008, Iran did not overtly denounce either side.

The primary obstacle in Russian-Iranian relations had been the question of determining the legal status of the Caspian Sea. Before 2000, Russia and Iran had had approximately the same stance on this question, which was based on the preservation of all marine resources falling under common ownership of the Caspian littoral states. But Moscow subsequently revised its approach in favor of dividing the Caspian Sea into national sectors, to which Iran objected. The Caspian question was not confined solely to territorial disputes, but includes a whole range of economic and geopolitical factors,²³ including mining and bio-resources, the construction of gas and oil pipelines, and the prevention of third parties from intruding into the region

²² Kozhanov N., Russian-Iranian Economic Relations: Opportunities and Challenges // *The Maghreb Review*, Vol. 37, № 3 – 4, 2012. p. 230.

(including militarily).

The final legal status of the Caspian Sea and its resources has still not been settled and continues to affect the development of Russian-Iranian relations. On 29 September 2014, however, the presidents of the five countries bordering on the Caspian were able to agree upon key principles for dividing up the territory: the national sovereignty of each country extends from the shore 15 nautical miles into the sea, and for a further 10 nautical miles each respective country is to have exclusive rights to the exploitation of natural resources. The remainder of the Caspian is given over to their joint use. Thus it would seem that in principle, at least, one of the major hurdles to an agreement has now been overcome.

In July 2005, Iran received observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The decisive factor was the full support of the Iranian proposal from Russia. However, the main goal of Tehran still remains full membership in the SCO. Iran tried but ultimately failed to gain full SCO membership at the Yekaterinburg summit in June 2009, when Russia was chairing the SCO. Iran's failure to obtain full membership was likely a result of the unstable situation and mass demonstrations in Iran following the disputed re-election of President Ahmadinejad.

Ahmadinejad's visit to the SCO summit in Yekaterinburg, which was portrayed by official Iranian media sources as an indication of support for him by SCO members (and in particular by Russia), provoked a flurry of criticism of Moscow from the Iranian opposition. The

opposition began to spread rumors that Russia helped the Iranian intelligence services to suppress opposition protests in the summer and autumn of 2009, which played a considerable role in tarnishing Russia's image among a certain segment of the Iranian middle class and intelligentsia and negatively affected relations between the two countries.

Many researchers refer to the negative image of Russia in Iranian society that has developed over the centuries. For example, the Iranian scholar Hamid Shirzad argues, "I think that the Iranian people have a generally negative attitude towards Russia. This is for two reasons - first, the errors of Stalin's policy in Iranian Azerbaijan, the second - the policy of the Soviet Union outside of Iran, which is also perceived negatively by Iranians".²⁴ In general, despite the positive changes in the relations between the two countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the historically negative attitude of the Iranian population vis-a-vis Russia has changed less than the policy of the Iranian government. This lingering popular negativity sometimes affects the policy decisions of the Iranian authorities vis-a-vis Russia. Interestingly, some Iranians we have spoken to informally cite the emphasis in Iranian education on the Qajar period, in which Iran was forced to give up territory after losing two major wars

²⁴ Интервью с Хамидом Резой Ширзадом, обладателем ученой степени Phd в области международных отношений. Тегеран. 24.12.2006 // Филин Н.А. Социально-историческое развитие Исламской Республики Иран (1979-2008): факторы устойчивости государственной власти. Приложение 2. М., 2012. С. 273.

with Russia.

There is currently an increasing amount of political contact and dialogue between Moscow and Tehran. Compared with 2010 and 2011, which witnessed the most significant decline in bilateral relations since the early 2000s, 2012-2013 were marked by numerous visits of Iranian and Russian officials to each others' countries, organised by their respective culture ministries. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Iran for the first time in four years. In February 2012, the Russian Minister of the Interior visited Iran. In January 2013 during a working visit to Iran, Minister of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation Vladimir Kolokoltsev signed an agreement on a "Legal Alliance" between the Ministries of Internal Affairs of Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is the first agreement, which defines the forms and methods of cooperation in the fight against crime. There have also been numerous mutual visits at the level of deputy ministers and ministers of Foreign Affairs.

These developments are likely due to the re-election of Vladimir Putin, who has always had a more balanced view on Iran than his predecessor, Dmitry Medvedev, as well as the recent deterioration of US-Russian relations. However, economic relations between the two countries are undergoing difficult times. There was a considerable decrease in the volume of Russo-Iranian bilateral trade in 2012 and 2013 compared with 2011, when it amounted to \$3.75 billion.²⁵ This is due to the

²⁵ Мамедова Н.М. Россия и Иран в конце первого десятилетия XXI века:

sanctions imposed on Iran by the U.S. and its Allies. The first difficulty to appear was connected to providing financial collateral for trading; the expulsion of Iran from SWIFT in 2012 has become a serious impediment for Russian banks working with Iran. Moreover, in 2012-2013, the negotiations of major Russian companies with Iranian officials on a variety of projects yielded no results. Gazprom Neft refused to develop the Azar oil field after two years of negotiations. This was likely due to the fact that public and private entities in Russia with financial stakes in the West fear losing their contracts if they continue operations in Iran. But now, with Gazprom Neft and other Russian companies already under sanctions, any stigma of developing business ties with Iran may disappear.

In spite of this, there have been a number of positive trends in trade and economic ties between Russia and Iran in 2012. In the first 6 months of 2012, Iran exported \$203.5 million USD worth of goods to Russia, 9.3% more than in the same period of 2011.²⁶ According to the Customs Administration of Iran, in the period from March 21, 2012 to August 21, 2012, more than 267 tons of various types of cement in excess of \$20 million USD were exported to Russia (for the Iranian fiscal year 21 March 2011 to 20 March 2012, the export of cement to Russia totaled only \$6 million USD). The absence of western

противоречия и взаимные интересы // Институт Ближнего Востока. 12.03.2012. URL: <http://www.iimes.ru/rus/stat/2012/21-03-12.htm>

²⁶ Министерство Экономического Развития Российской Федерации, <http://www.ved.gov.ru/articles/1197>

competition has provided new opportunities for Russian businesses. There has been a significant increase in the supply of chemical products from Russia to Iran, namely various kinds of catalysts for petroleum and petrochemical products. These products were first exported in 2012 and exports totaled \$4.35 million USD in the first half of the same year. The exhibition "Advanced Russian Technologies", held in Tehran in February 2012 with the participation of the Russian Trade Mission in Iran, to some extent contributed to establishing initial contacts between Russian producers of catalytic agents and Iranian consumers.²⁷ It remains unknown how the development of the market for special devices can offset the decline in trade volume due to sanctions against Iran, but it is obvious that there is great potential for the development of Russian-Iranian contacts in these new economic spheres. In particular, the contacts are being established at the level of small and medium-sized businesses. Thus, Russian companies from Astrakhan, Stavropol, Krasnodar Krai and the Republic of Tatarstan, which lack close contacts with Western businesses, perceive Iran as a receptive and lucrative market for their goods. Due to the lack of official data, however, the scale of cooperation is still difficult to judge.²⁸

With the election in 2013 of President Hassan Rouhani, Russo-Iranian Relations began to assume a new form. On September 13, 2013, the presidents

of the two countries met in Bishkek and expressed their intention to further increase bilateral contacts. Early in 2014, Russia and Iran held negotiations regarding the supply of Iranian oil to Russia in exchange for goods. The total volume of transactions should be about \$20 billion USD. Furthermore, stronger Western sanctions against Russia in light of the deteriorating military and political situation in Ukraine are pushing Russia towards closer ties with Iran and could result in the strengthening of various relationships, including in the field of military cooperation. Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif has already visited Moscow twice since the beginning of 2014.

Russo-Iranian relations have a long history, which includes episodes of both collaboration and antagonism. Frequent changes in strategic priorities have at times brought the two countries close together and at other times pushed them apart.

Cultural ties remain strong despite the upheavals in political and economic relations between Moscow and Tehran. Persian poetry evenings, Iranian film festivals and other cultural events are often held in Moscow, where there is an active Iranian Cultural Center, and in other Russian cities. Among the Iranian people, there is likewise a huge interest in Russian culture. Currently, however, the Cultural Office of the Embassy of the Russian Federation is solely responsible promoting cultural awareness. The opening of a Russian Cultural Center in Iran would greatly facilitate this goal. All of the factors outlined here, together with the existing prerequisites for political and economic dialogue, make

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Kozhanov N., Russian-Iranian Economic Relations: Opportunities and Challenges // *The Maghreb Review*, Vol. 37, № 3 – 4, 2012. pp. 215 – 246.

for a firm foundation on which to establish close co-operation between the two countries. Yet the interplay of internal and external factors that both drives and hinders cooperation may soon undergo another qualitative change. With sanctions imposed against Russia and US-Iranian relations enjoying a mild détente, Shariati's decade-old question as to whether Russia would abandon Iran under

pressure from the West might be tuned on its head and posed regarding Iran's position toward Russia: If the West uses Russia as a bargaining chip with Iran, will relations with the United States prove more important to Iran than those with Russia? ❖

TRIBUNE: RUSSIAN MILITARY-TECHNICAL COOPERATION WITH MIDDLE EASTERN COUNTRIES: CURRENT STATE AND TRENDS

Middle Eastern region and arms trade are almost synonymous. Due to the number of particular features the region represents one of the world biggest arms markets, with sufficient number of suppliers and customers who mostly poses enough funds to purchase expensive hi-tech armament systems. This is explained by the following peculiarities of the region: high levels of violence, authoritarianism and traditionalism as a prevailing form of government, disproportionally big armed forces, need of “security imports”, excess of financial resources and external financial influx.

The growth of arms purchasing by the countries of the region is a trend of recent years. It should be noted though, that despite this fact, the arms import in the region is volatile and depends on the regional and international situation and on more prosaic cyclical upgrade of weapons.

Currently the arms market is still under a certain though declining influence of the “regional map redrawing” – the change of power in several countries, the dissolution of the USSR with the following decline of imports of the Russian arms in the region, sanctions preventing full-scale arms shipments to the region, oil and natural gas prices fluctuation. All these factors have direct influence on Russian policy of arms shipments to the region.

Russia is an old and traditional arms supplier to the region. Back in the beginning of the 20th century Russia



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shipped arms to Persia, already in the 1920th the Soviets made several attempts to rebuild this cooperation but an adequate return of the USSR to this region happened after 1955, when large shipments of arms were delivered to Egypt through the intermediary of Czechoslovakia. From this moment till 1991 the Soviet Union was the one of biggest arms supplier to the region, due to many local regime's preference towards the ideas of Arab nationalism and “socialism” and to the conflict with Israel, which was traditionally supported by the US. As a result by the end of 1970-s a rather large group of

countries depending on the USSR in their military development has formed. These countries are Syria, Libya, Algeria, Iraq, and South Yemen. Shah's Iran, Jordan and Kuwait, pursuing tactical goals and implementing the policy of diversification, also made some purchases.

The USSR dissolution along with several negative factors has opened a number of possibilities to Russia, mainly thanks to the removal of the ideological element. This allowed restarting the cooperation with Iran (the first steps were made during the last years of the USSR), UAE and Kuwait – the last two were completely new markets for Russia. In the second half of the 2000-s the region has entered a new era, which was marked by the growth of arms acquisitions from Russia. During this period Russia signed big sets of contracts with Algeria, Iran, Syria and Libya, notably, Algeria for some time was Russia's top 4-5 exporter.

The recent events in the region make Russian prospects as an arms supplier to the region questionable. There are two ways out: exploiting the existing orders volume and using possible future projects.

As it was mentioned before, Algeria was one of the biggest importer of Russian arms. After a large set of contracts for 7,5 billion dollars, signed in 2005-2006, and several agreements made later, there is a slight slack in the military-technical cooperation – Russia is fulfilling its obligations according to the previously signed deals. However, there is a good reason to believe that Algeria may continue major purchases of Russian military equipment. The first signs appeared in the beginning of 2014, when the contract for two Project 06361 diesel-electric submarines and 6 heavy

transport helicopters Mi-26T2 had gone public. In the near future the purchases of Su-30MKI(A) (and possibly Su-35S), Mi-28NE attack helicopters, rocket and AA systems are also possible. All this may raise the total of the new set of agreements to several billion dollars, and the expectancy of signing at least a part of these contracts seems rather high.

In 2013 Iraq has suddenly burst into the list of big importers of Russian arms by finalizing the contract for 28 Mi-35M and 15 Mi-28NE attack helicopters, 40 Pantsir-S1 air defense missile-gun system for total of more than 4,2 billion dollars. Notably, the shipments of Mi-35M have already begun in 2013, and in August 2014 Iraq was the first to import Mi-28NE. The difficult situation on the combat grounds against the ISIS fighters followed by the mass losses of heavy weaponry made Iraq address Russia already in spring 2014 asking to immediately supply Su-25 close air support jets from stock and artillery and mortars for more than 1 billion dollars, and the first shipments took place already in May. In case the current Iraqi authorities manage to hold the ground, they are very likely to continue the purchases, particularly of surplus Su-27/30 fighters.

Cooperation with Egypt also has large-scale prospects. During the recent years this country purchased Russian AA systems (e.g. Tor-M1) and upgraded soviet AA systems (S-125 "Pechora-2M" and ZSU-23-4 "Shilka") and helicopters. But the arrival at power of the military and the intensification of cooperation with Saudi Arabia have allowed to return to the negotiations with Russia for supplies of more sophisticated and expensive systems like S-300PMU SA systems. Among other variants it was

even considered possible to ship to Egypt the S-300PMU-2 systems, previously destined to Syria. The purchases of Russian helicopters and MiG-29SMT fighters are also possible. Thus, it can be counted that the total for the contracts will reach at least 1 billion dollars.

Beginning from the second half of the 2000-s Syria has regained its status as a prominent regional customer for Russian arms. Though at first Syria aimed at upgrading of Soviet supplied systems (MiG-29S, MiG-23MLD fighters, Mi-25/Mi-17 helicopters, S-125 SAM, armored vehicles), in 2006-2011 they made an order for hi-tech Russian arms: 8 MiG-31E and 12 MiG-29M/M2 fighters, 36 Yak-130 trainer/light attack aircrafts, 2 “Bastion” coastal defense systems, 4 S-300PMU-2 SAM systems, 8 “Buk-M2E” SAM systems, 36 Pantsir-S1 system, and probably a number of other systems. However due to the outbreak of the civil war in this country and following embargo and Western sanctions dramatically decreased Syrian ability to purchase the required systems and the shipping costs for Russia have increased as well. That is why the systems were supplied partially and several deliveries were even suspended. Taking into consideration the obviously long-term conflict in the country, it is unlikely that Russia will be able to supply notable shipments of modern heavy weaponry to Syria, though it will evidently be able to continue repairs and upgrade of the already delivered systems and to supply ammunitions and spare parts.

Iran is a particular case. After rather big contracts of the end of the 1980-s –

beginning of the 1990-s, after Russian voluntary refusal to continue military cooperation with Iran, and later with the UN sanctions, the possibilities of a full-scale military cooperation between the two countries seem limited. It is possible to suggest that repair and upgrade of the Iranian Armed Forces Soviet systems can become the most prospective vector of cooperation. Moreover, the it is possible that the shipment of S-300PMU SAM already paid by Iran and blocked by the decision of President Dmitry Medvedev, will finally take place. The other countries of the region purchase specific products, e.g. BMP-3 APCs by UAE and Kuwait, “Smerch” multiple rocket launcher (Kuwait), and probably Russia will not be able to achieve solid and dominant positions on these markets. The military cooperation with Libya is particular in this case as it is impossible to speak about long-term cooperation in conditions of central power collapse, and the more or less realistic variant is only to fulfill the contracts paid by Qaddafi regime (Yak-130 trainer/light attack aircrafts, “Chrizantema-S” self-propelled anti-tank systems).

Therefore, it is possible to state that in the mid-term perspective Russian positions on the arms supplier to the region are assured by the already signed contracts. However the instability of political situation on the Middle East, the activation of China on the regional arms market, the political consideration may create several “Black Swans”, which may severely undermine Moscow’s position. ♦

YOUTH SPEAKS: HOW PUTIN SAVED OBAMA

This title may seem a little strange, considering the growing tension between USA and Russia about the crisis in Ukraine. But if we go back in time, not so long ago, it is crystal clear. In 2012, Obama used to warn again and again that a use of chemical weapons in Syria was the red line. He told that if this red line was crossed, he would not hesitate to launch airstrikes against the Assad regime. It was on 20 August 2012, during a press conference, when he was asked about using U.S. military in Syria: *«We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is if we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized.»*

However, when chemical weapons were used on 21 August (we still do not really know if it was by the rebels or by the Assad regime), Obama did not do anything. There are several reasons for it. First of all, on 29 August 2013, Cameron, who supported Obama and the idea of a military intervention, was forced to give up. Indeed, on that day UK parliament voted about a military intervention in Syria, and the 'no' won. It was the beginning of the end for this intervention.

On 4th September 2013 Obama began to retract, saying during a press conference with the Prime Minister of Sweden:

«First of all, I didn't set a red line; the world set a red line.»

On the same day, Pope Francis told in an open letter to Putin, as President of the G20:



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«It is clear that, for the world's peoples, armed conflicts are always a deliberate negation of international harmony, and create profound divisions and deep wounds which require many years to heal. Wars are a concrete refusal to pursue the great economic and social goals that the international community has set itself, as seen, for example, in the Millennium Development Goals. (...) It is regrettable that, from the very beginning of the conflict in Syria, one-sided interests have prevailed and in fact hindered the search for a solution that would have avoided the senseless massacre now unfolding. To the leaders

*present, to each and every one, I **make a heartfelt appeal** for them to help find ways to overcome the conflicting positions and to **lay aside the futile pursuit of a military solution.**»*

In USA, there are 78, 2 million of Catholics, it is 25% of the population, and the Pope's influence there is present. Obama was facing a problem of credibility and trying to find a solution that would keep his head high. Without the UK, with economic difficulties (followed in October by a governmental shutdown), with the strong opposition outspoken by Pope Francis and with the fact that the idea of a military intervention in Syria was not very popular in the Congress (thus a risk to face a 'no', as Cameron did), Obama was in an uncomfortable position. By doing nothing, he would lose a lot in credibility, and the scenario of a military intervention was escaping from the frame of possibilities.

When Lavrov came with his idea of the destruction of the chemical weapons from Syria, on September after the G20 held in Saint Petersburg, it was a perfect timing for Obama. France, like UK, was also supporting the idea of a military intervention. But in reaction to the proposition of Lavrov, Fabius, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, said on 9 September that it was a move in the right direction and that he agreed to cooperate with Russia for this solution, with some conditions. Putin even explains his position in an open letter written for the New York Times on 11 September, putting more pressure on USA. In this letter, he said:

«The potential strike by the United States against Syria, despite strong opposition from many countries and major political and religious leaders, including the pope, will result in more

innocent victims and escalation, potentially spreading the conflict far beyond Syria's borders. A strike would increase violence and unleash a new wave of terrorism. It could undermine multilateral efforts to resolve the Iranian nuclear problem and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and further destabilize the Middle East and North Africa. It could throw the entire system of international law and order out of balance.»

USA and UK also followed the proposition of Russia. The White House complimented Putin, saying that it was the best reaction. The USA was happy to have this solution

«He put this proposal forward and he's now invested in it. That's good. That's the best possible reaction. He's fully invested in Syria's CW disarmament and that's potentially better than a military strike — which would deter and degrade but wouldn't get rid of all the chemical weapons. He now owns this. He has fully asserted ownership of it and he needs to deliver.»

Obama even congratulated Putin, saying on 15 September:

«I congratulate him for being involved and for taking his responsibilities. We worked together on important issues, such as the fight against terrorism. It is not the Cold War. There is no competition between USA and Russia.»

This point is very important. I think the fight against terrorism is a good example, it is by definition a worldwide problem and when those two big countries bring their forces together in order to achieve clear results, usually it works pretty well. The last part of this is interesting. It was not so long ago, but yet today we can hardly imagine Obama saying the same thing. The Ukraine crisis shows that Obama want to put

pressure on Russia, to avoid an expansion of Russia's influence on its own neighborhood. In most of Western media, we can see people very concerned and scandalized that Russia has an opinion about what is going on in Ukraine, but we rarely see people wondering what are the USA doing there, so far away of their territory. It seems that when the USA do not agree with Russia on a topic, they forget all successful previous cooperation. When Russia is useful, they can say a lot of kind compliments and declarations about Putin, Medvedev or Lavrov, but suddenly when there is a disagreement, Russia becomes the enemy number one, and everything is made to discredit their ex-partner, even if they have to lie in front of everyone to achieve their objectives. The crisis in Ukraine is, unfortunately, a good example of this. The lies (MH17, invasion) or the absence of information and reactions to tragic events (such as what happened in Odessa, with more than 40 victims) illustrate this. Let us not forget that Putin really helped Obama at that time concerning the Syrian crisis. Who knows what would be the domestic situation of Obama if Russia did not come with this idea?

With this summary of events, we can see how Putin saved Obama. Obama can

keep his head high by showing to his citizens he is taking actions in order to solve this crisis, and without all the costs that a military intervention would have been bringing. More recently, with the rise of ISIS, a new dilemma has occurred for Obama. He is fighting ISIS with airstrikes in Iraq, and he thinks about doing the same in Syria, switching the initial target from Assad regime to ISIS. For now, ISIS is also an enemy of Assad. The Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs even said that Syria was ready to cooperate and coordinate actions with USA in order to fight ISIS. Will we see an adaption of the proverb *the enemy of my enemy is my friend*? Will USA finally *de facto* join the position of Russia concerning Syria? Russia wants to maintain stability in Syria and fears that if the jihadists win against Assad, it could destabilize the entire region including neighborhood countries. It is what we can already see with the ISIS's rise. If USA launches airstrikes in Syria against ISIS, will we see cooperation between USA and Russia? Would this hypothetical cooperation be a first step in better relations between those two countries? Would it have an impact on a positive ending of the Ukrainian crisis? Wait and see. ❖

