



Russian Policy towards the Largest States of North Africa

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Russia perceives North Africa as an area of rivalry with the United States and European Union countries. It is enhancing its political, economic and military presence in the largest countries in the southern Mediterranean and its position as an important player in the local oil and gas sectors and as a security partner could pose challenges to NATO and the EU.

Political Presence. Russia considers its cooperation with Egypt, Libya and Algeria crucial to strengthening its political, economic and military potential in the Mediterranean region. The Russian Federation has embassies in Algeria and Egypt and pursues its interests in Libya from its embassy in Tunisia because of the security situation. Moreover, major Russian companies have offices in Algeria and Egypt, especially those in the petrochemical and construction sectors. In Egypt, Russian concerns operate centres of science and culture and has a trade representative's office (for the Ministry of Economic Development). Their activity complements the diplomatic activities of the state.

Russian political contact with the authorities of Algeria and Egypt are regular (usually once every year or two). Its relations with Libya are specific. In the internal conflict in that country, Russia supports the commander of the Libyan National Army, Gen. Khalifa Haftar.¹ In November 2016, he visited Moscow and met with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. On 11 January, he visited the Russian aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov*, which was operating in the Mediterranean Sea. During these meetings, Haftar reportedly asked the Russians to supply military equipment for his troops. Moreover, his wounded soldiers are treated in Russia (the current agreement covers aid for 500). Officially, the Russians claim that this support stems from their willingness to help Haftar's units fighting Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL). However, Russia clearly wants to influence Libya's political and military future and counts on energy and military contracts.

Investments in the Energy Sector. Along with the Middle East, Libya and Egypt are target customers of Russian state oil company Rosneft. On 20 February 2016, the company signed an agreement with the Libyan National Oil Company covering the exploration, extraction and purchase of crude oil. Rosneft will become one of the most important investors in this sector in Libya. That the company was not present in Libya during the reign of Muammar Qaddafi helped finalise the deal. Russian state gas company Gazprom had worked previously in Libya with Italian energy firm ENI. Between 2013 and 2014, Russian oil firm Tatneft failed to conclude any business. Support from Russian companies in the production of hydrocarbons in Libya may be indispensable for its government. In 2017, the state plans to increase production from the current 700,000 barrels a day to 1.25 million barrels.

At the same time, Egypt has a special place in Rosneft's strategy. In 2016, the company delivered the first batch of LNG sold on the world market (three LNG carriers) and, according to a contract with the Egyptian EGAS Group, in 2017 it will send 10 more carriers. Even if Rosneft does not produce its own gas, like other Russian energy companies it is increasingly interested in being active in foreign LNG markets and signing

¹ For more, see: P. Sasnal, "Prospects for the Stabilisation of Libya," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 52 (992), 26 May 2017.

future agreements similar to those with its Egyptian customers should help this strategy. In Egypt, Rosneft actively cooperates with ENI to extract gas from the Zohr gas field. Exploration and drilling works in the country are also run by Russia's Lukoil and Poland's Novatek, both oil companies.

At the same time, Gazprom is active in Algeria. In 2006, the company signed a memorandum of cooperation with the Algerian state company Sonatrach, and then in 2008, it received a concession from the ALNAFT Energy Development Agency to extract gas from the El Assel field in cooperation with Sonatrach. Gazprom's aim is, among others, to expand into the gas markets of Southern European countries. Russia is also interested in providing Algeria with support for the development of its nuclear energy sector. The Algerian government plans to build its first nuclear power plant by 2029 and signed a memorandum with Russia's Rosatom on research on atomic energy.

Military Cooperation. Russia also actively cooperates with Algeria, Libya and Egypt in the military sphere. The Russian and Egyptian armed forces regularly conduct joint military exercises. The last one, *Defenders of Friendship*, took place in 2016 and included 500 airborne troops from both countries. The scenario involved finding and destroying illegal armed forces in desert conditions. Egypt also ordered 50 Ka-52K assault helicopters, which will be stationed on two Mistral-class ships originally built by France for Russia, then later sold to Egypt. Most likely, these ships will be equipped with Russian command-and-communication systems. Talks are also underway concerning Russia's participation in the restoration of Egyptian military bases in the Mediterranean Sea and the possibility of Russia renting the Sidi Barrani Air Base, located about 100 km from the Libyan border, for use by its Aerospace Forces.

Since the 1960s, the USSR then Russia have been Algeria's most important supplier of armaments. In 2006, in exchange for the remission of \$4.6 billion Algeria owed Russia, the states signed the first in a series of arms contracts worth a total of \$7.5 billion. It included tanks, anti-aircraft weapon systems (most likely the potent S-400) as well as equipment for fleet and land forces. In 2013, Algeria agreed to purchase 42 Mi-28 NE assault helicopters (the first were delivered in 2016) and plans to buy 12 Su-34 bombers. Moreover, in 2016–2017, Russia committed itself to supply 14 Su-30 fighters. In 2014, both countries also signed a contract for the delivery of 200 T-90 tanks (Algeria received the first of them in 2016), continuing from a 2006–2010 deal under which Algeria received more than 300 tanks of this type.

Russia counts on the possibility to sell arms to the Libyan army and would support a Libyan request to the United Nations to lift an arms embargo. Moreover, the Russians, after helping to stabilise the security situation in Libya, may exchange continued military and political support if Haftar for a military base in the country. Russian private military contractors (e.g., RSB Group) are already operating there, protecting hydrocarbon extraction and transmission infrastructure. Russian companies with energy contracts in the region are likely to employ such companies to ensure the security of their investments.

Conclusions. Russia's intensification of cooperation with Algeria, Libya and Egypt is part of its strategy to rebuild its superpower status. Traditionally, these states and their region are perceived by the Russians as an area of competition with the United States. By increasing its presence in Libya, but also in Algeria and Egypt, Russia wants to prove to the U.S. and EU states that stabilisation of the region, resolution of potential conflicts, and responses to humanitarian or mass-migration crises are not possible without it.

It is very probable that Russia will want to create a coalition of states (with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates) to support Haftar. If the general breaks an agreement concluded in May with Prime Minister Fayaz al-Sarraj (Government of National Accord), it will be a serious challenge for the U.S. and some of the EU countries that support al-Sarraj.

The Russians' entry into the oil and gas sectors of these countries also puts it in the energy markets of some EU countries. That will be an additional tool of influence over the authorities of Algeria, Libya and Egypt, given the importance of hydrocarbon production to their economies. This may lead to rising competition between Russian, European and American energy companies.

Russia's increasing military cooperation with North African states will affect the security situation in the Mediterranean Basin. After the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea, it is another area where Russia wants to strengthen its military presence (it currently uses a sea base in Tartus and an air base in Khmeimim, located in Syria), which will be an additional challenge to NATO countries. From the Alliance's point of view, a new Russian military base in Libya and rental of an air base in Egypt may be dangerous.