Geopolitics Quarterly, Volume: 14, No 4, Winter 2019 Scopus

PP 84-103

Russian Arms Trade Approach in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA): Economic and Strategic Aspects

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Received: 10/07/2018 Accepted: 10/10/2018

Abstract

This article tries to analyse the goals Russia pursues by trying to develop arms trade with the MENA region and the implications of this approach for the region. The article argues that Russia's goals can be divided into two general categories of economic and strategic objectives. Although in the short term, the implications of this approach for MENA is fomenting arms race in the region and the increased possibility of proxy wars, this process can in the long term turn into a contributing factor in stabilizing the balance of power in the region between the US allies and anti-American governments. A qualitative method based on the description and analysis of trends has been adopted in this article. Although statistical data on Russia's arms sales is taken into consideration and analysed here as well, the nature of the study and the basis of final analysis remain qualitative. An inductive approach will have been used in this article and it is tried to take advantage of the collected data in order to achieve a proper pattern for analyzing the objectives and implications of Russia's arms trade approach in MENA.

Keywords: Russia, MENA, Arms race, Arms trade, Proxy wars.

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1. Introduction

Since the Cold War and the dominance of the bipolar system over international relations, the Soviet Union had defined the production of advanced arms as one of the main aspects of its strategy to counterbalance the United States in the global arena. In this era, Moscow had mainly focused on developing heavy weapons and advanced weapon technologies to maintain its position as one of the two global superpowers (Karsh, 1986: 48-54). However, this did not exactly mean the abandonment of the *arms trade approach*. Considering two interconnected economic and strategic aspects, Moscow put the arms trade, especially with the Third World countries, top on its foreign policy agenda (Schmidt, 1991).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought about a complex set of economic, political and social challenges for Moscow. However, the event did not have considerable impact on Russia's position as a major military power. At the same time, due to the widespread economic crisis in the Russian Federation and the weakening of its competitive power in other trade areas, the arms trade was considered by the Russians as a convenient way to earn money and economic benefits (Wezeman, 2017). Generally speaking, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian policy makers with different political orientations reached the conclusion that Russia's stability, authority and internal cohesion, as well as the revival of its status on the global scene, are heavily dependent on the efficiency and effectiveness of the state's role as the main source of economic interests (Mojtahedzadeh & Rashidinejad, 2011: 13).

However, following the gradual revival of political and economic stability in Russia, which was accompanied by a redefinition of its national interests and international standing, geopolitical aspects and objectives also started to influence Russia's arms trade strategy. According to the latest statistics, Russia was the second largest arms exporter in the world after the United States, with the global arms market share of 23% from 2012 to 2016. During the same period, the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region accounted for 29% of the global arms imports and has become one of the main markets in this field (SIPRI, 2017). Generally speaking, from the mid-2000s, the MENA region has always been one of the first targets of Russian arms trade. Since 2015, the Syrian Crisis and Russian military involvement in this country added a new aspect to the Russian arms policy in the region.

Russian arms exports to selected MENA countries

County/Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Total
Algeria	795	246	118	502	1553	795	4009
Egypt	68	27	70	6	178	1111	1459
Iran	15	22	4	4	398	4	447
Iraq	N/A	51	301	420	300	N/A	1072
Syria	341	341	2	16	N/A	22	720
UAE	90	90	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	180

Source: SIPRI

Given the above-mentioned points, this article tries to address the question as to what goals Russia pursues by trying to develop arms trade with the MENA region and what are the implications of this approach for the region. The article argues that Russia's goals can be divided into two general categories of economic and strategic objectives. Although in the short term, the implications of this approach for MENA is fomenting arms race in the region and the increased possibility of proxy wars, this process can in the long term turn into a contributing factor in stabilizing the balance of power in the region between the US allies and anti-American governments.

2. Research Methodology

Given the nature of the subject under discussion, a qualitative method based on the description and analysis of trends has been adopted. Although statistical data on Russia's arms sales is taken into consideration and analysed here as well, the nature of the study and the basis of final analysis remain qualitative. An inductive approach has been used in this article and it is tried to take advantage of the collected data in order to achieve a proper pattern for analysing the objectives and implications of Russia's arms trade approach in MENA.

3. Findings

3.1. The Place of Arms Trade in Russian Foreign Policy

Under the Soviet rule, the export of weapons was fundamentally a function of ideological and political considerations. The first obvious representation of exploiting the arms trade approach in Soviet foreign policy was supporting the leftist Jewish groups. On the other hand, empowering friendly states through the transfer of advanced arms, as well as trying to

maintain military balance in different regions of the world, were fundamental parts of the Soviet foreign policy (Parto, 2014, 21).

After the Soviet Union, various challenges facing the Russian Federation caused a shift in Moscow's arms trade policy. The most important factor behind this shift was the severe economic crisis in Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The crisis affected Russia's arms trade policy from two aspects. On the one hand, the economic crisis directly involved the Russian military industry as the main industrial sector of the country and prevented the development of new products. On the other hand, Moscow set aside ideological considerations of the Soviet era and started to carry out arms sales to a diverse range of countries in order to gain more economic benefits (Uhler, 1999: 193-194).

In this period, contrary to the general approach of the Russian government on the privatization of industrial, manufacturing and commercial sectors, the defence industry structure remained largely intact (Zisk, 1998: 66). In the same vein, the government also regained its control over the production and export of weapons. As a result, since the 1990s, Moscow's most important consideration in its arms exports was economic calculations and profit. Consequently, the Russian military industries became increasingly export-oriented (Uhler, 1999: 200).

As Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, the arms trade approach was influenced by new conditions, and new considerations were raised in this area. From this time onwards, considerations regarding Russia's power and standing in the international system, as well as its strategic interests, along with the principle of pragmatism were put on the agenda in the framework the *Normalized Modern Great Power* discourse (Nouri, 2010: 134-143). The main feature of Russian foreign policy during Vladimir Putin's first term in office can be referred to as the domination of realism as well as pragmatism. The first feature was apparent from many emphases by Putin and the other high-ranking Russian officials on national interests, state-centrism and the priority of hard power (Ghavam, 2008: 20). The second feature, i.e. pragmatism, was reflected in a new approach toward the relationship between the economy and power, strategic opportunism, de-ideologization of foreign policy, the preference of interests over values and active participation in regional and international institutions (Sakwa, 2004: 18). In this vein, although de-ideologization and the preference of interests on

values formed the basis of Russia's arms trade policy also during the Yeltsin era, the second aspect caused strategic and geopolitical considerations to play an important role in determining the transfer or non-transfer as well as destinations of Russian arms.

Trying to counterbalance the United States through arms sales to the states with tense relations with Washington was an aspect of Russia's new approach toward arms exports. In this vein, Putin withdrew from an agreement with the United States to stop selling arms to Iran and Syria. Extensive arms sales to the Venezuelan government despite the obvious opposition from the United States was another representation of this approach. Simultaneously, Russia established an arms trade channel with the US regional allies, especially in the Middle East. The third most striking feature of the new Russian arms trade approach was refusing to transfer advanced military technologies to the countries that could themselves turn into a challenge for Russia in the future. In this vein, Moscow showed a cautious stance against China's demands for some advanced Russian military equipment (Parto, 2014: 22-25).

During the four-year presidential term of Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012), the necessities of Moscow's modernisation policy, along with Medvedev's more favourable view toward the West, affected the Russian military industry, including its arms trade approach. As such, as modernization is closely connected to technology and innovation, Russia sought to establish closer ties with states that could provide Moscow with these necessities (Trenin, 2010). Barak Obama's coming to power as the president of the United States marked the beginning of a period of more friendly relations between Moscow and Washington. The main impact of this new trend on Russia's military sphere was Moscow's agreement to sign a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with the United States. Meanwhile, in order to address some of US considerations, Russia reviewed its arms sales to some countries, such as Iran (Petro, 2011: 14-15).

Russia's refusal to deliver the S-300 missile system to Iran can be referred to as the most important representation of Russia's arms trade approach in Medvedev era. Iran's desire to purchase this missile system was first raised in 2007 and a year later, it was announced that a contract worth $800 million had been signed between the two sides. However, in accordance with the Security Council Resolution No.1929, Medvedev

issued a presidential order in 2010, whereby selling any missile and other heavy weapons to Iran was banned (Roth, 2016).

Vladimir Putin came back to power in 2012 with a renewed emphasis on *great power* approach in Russian foreign policy. This was combined with a pessimist view toward Western policies and intentions. Russia's initial endorsement of NATO's military campaign in Libya, which quickly turned out to be against Moscow's basic interests in the North African country (Stewart, 2011), was among the factors exacerbating Russia's pessimism toward the West. However, maybe the most important development in this field was the Ukraine Crisis in 2014, when Russia's move to annex Crimea sparked a reaction from the United States and the European Union and led to an era of unprecedented tensions in Russia's relations with the West (Valizadeh Et. al., 2015). The Syrian Crisis and Russia's firm support for Bashar al-Assad government further exacerbated this trend.

Meanwhile, as an aspect of its approach to counterbalance the United States, Moscow began to develop military ties with regional centres of power around the world. Indeed, along with political and strategic factors, economic considerations also played a role in reactivating Russia's arms trade policy. In other words, the economic problems facing Russia as a result of the Western sanctions following the Ukraine Crisis, led Moscow to pay special attention to military industry as one of the most important aspects of its comparative business advantage. As a result, between 2012 and 2016, with 23 percent of the total volume of global arms trade, Russia ranked the second main global arms exporter after the United States (SIPRI, 2017).

3.2. MENA as a market for Russian weapons

According the Stockholm International Peace Institute, between 2012 and 2016 the share of the Middle East and Persian Gulf in the global arms trade increased from 17% to 29%. During the same period, the Middle East has experienced an overall 86% increase in terms of arms imports. In this vein, Saudi Arabia has become the second largest importer of weapons in the world with an increase of 212%. Meanwhile, Qatar's arms imports have increased by 245% (SIPRI, 2017).

As the second largest global arms exporter, Russia has naturally shown an interest to be actively present in this flourishing market. As a result,

between 2006 and 2009, MENA became the largest market for Russian weapons. In this period, Russian military industry companies sold a wide range of advanced arms to the countries of the region, including 50 supersonic fighter jets, 270 tanks and artillery weapons, 20 anti-ballistic missiles, 10 helicopters, 10 surface-to-surface missiles and more than 150 armoured vehicles. However, some reports indicate that the real number of surface-to-surface missiles sold by Russia to the region was 5500. From 2012 onwards, in addition to its own traditional partners, Moscow made efforts to sign arms contracts with traditional American allies like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain (Suchkov, 2015).

If we look at the country-specific statistics, Asian exports of Russian arms were limited to India (38%), Vietnam (11%) and China (11%); and Algeria (10%), as a country located in the MENA region, ranked immediately after these three countries (TACC, 2017). On the other hand, following the start of the Syrian Crisis and Russia's direct military involvement the Arab country, Damascus has become one of the main targets of Russian weapons. However, considering the difficulty of distinguishing between *sales* of Russian weapons to Syria and those Russia itself uses there in the battlefield, there is no accurate estimate of Moscow's arms trade with Damascus. Nonetheless, even before the start of the civil war in Syria, i.e. between 2007 and 2011, Syria's purchases of Russian weapons increased by 600% (Suchkov, 2015).

Russian ties with MENA in terms of arms trade, have led to the speculation that Moscow is attempting to regain the position it enjoyed in the region during the Soviet era. One of the most important manifestations of this issue is Russia's attempt to develop arms trade with Egypt, as one of the traditional regional partners of the Soviet Union. In this vein, it was announced in March 2017 that Russia plans to sell 50 MiG-29s and 46 Ka-50 helicopters to Egypt to become one of the main suppliers of arms to the North African country. Meanwhile, Algeria has become one of the main markets for Russian weapons so that Russia now holds 80% of its weapons market (Salacanin, 2017).

However, when it comes to attracting the traditional US allies in the region, Russia has been less successful to turn them into its own arms costumers. In 2010, UAE purchased some important weaponry items from Russia, including air defence systems. However, there has been no other

significant military contract between the two sides since then. Bahrain also commissioned 250 Kornet 9M133 anti-tank missiles to Russia in 2014 (Salacanin, 2017). Moreover, when the Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Saudi King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz met in early 2015 it was announced that Saudi Arabia is interested in buying weapons from Russia(Suchkov, 2015).

However, during King Salman's visit to Moscow in October 2017 the two sides signed a comprehensive memorandum of understanding (MOU) in the field of arms trade, worth three billion dollars, including the purchase of anti-aircraft defence systems, anti-tank systems, grenades and other types of heavy weapons by Riyadh. The most controversial part of the memorandum was Russia's agreement to sell advanced S-400 missile systems to Saudi Arabia (РИА Новости, 2017). Although, given the dependence of Saudi Arabia's military infrastructure on the United States and the European countries, there have been doubts about the implementation of MOU, it could be considered as a symbol of Moscow's desire to become more active in the traditional market of Western arms exporters.

The agreement between Russia and Turkey in September 2017 to deliver S-400 missile systems to Ankara is another example in this regard. In this case, Turkey's status as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) caused even more concerns among Ankara's Western partners. In fall 2016, it was reported that Ankara wanted to buy four S-400 missile systems from Russia worth $2.5 billion (Gall & Higgins, 2017). Although Washington has been trying to dissuade Ankara from actually acquiring the systems, Turkey's current multi-vector foreign policy means that chances are high for the agreement to be materialized.

Finally, it should be noted that Iran, as one of the traditional purchasers of Russian arms, has expanded its ties with Russia in this sphere. The 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and six word powers that resulted in lifting the UNSC sanctions against Iran, was an important milestone that paved the way for a more extensive Iran-Russia military cooperation. Russia's agreement with the delivery of the S-300 missile systems to Iran, which was formally approved by the Russian President in April 2015, could be considered as the beginning of a new chapter in military ties between the two countries (Salacanin, 2017).

3.3. Russia's Objectives in Arms Trade with the MENA Region

In discussing Russia's main goals of its arms trade with MENA, two categories of economic and strategic objectives can be identified:

3.3.1. Economic Objectives

Russia's approach toward the 2014 Ukraine Crisis sparked a sharp reaction from the West and led to a set of economic sanctions against Russia. The sanctions imposed by the EU and the United States over the Ukraine issue have had undeniable impacts on the Russian economy. At the same time, the fall in global oil prices on the one hand and the huge costs of Russia's military campaign in Syria on the other, have exacerbated the economic pressures on Moscow. As a result of the sanctions, the level of foreign investment in Russia has been decreasing and the value of the Russian Ruble has also fallen sharply (Ulansky, 2017). Sanctions imposed against Russia have had also other consequences, including a drop in exports, a decrease in GDP and an increase in inflation and capital flight (Schoen, 2017).

In these circumstances, by increasing the sales of weapons, Russia tries to compensate for income reduction and to prevail the current economic difficulties. Putting aside the hydrocarbon exports, the export of weapons has had a significant share in Russian foreign trade during the recent years. For example, while Russia's total non-crude exports (machinery and manufactured goods) amounted to $25 billion in 2015, export of military items alone made up $14.5 billion of Russian revenues (Conolly & Sendstad, 2017: 22).

When it comes to Russia's arms trade with MENA, this economic consideration can clearly explain why Moscow is interested in developing ties with all countries of the region, regardless of their foreign policy orientations or the regional and international alignments. In other words, economic calculations have to a great extent contributed to Russia's desire to manoeuvre among various arms purchasers in the MENA region.

3.3.2. Strategic Objectives

As mentioned in the first section, Russia under the leadership of President Putin has prioritized the revival of its international status as a *great power*. In this vein, Russia's policy toward MENA should be seen in line with its grand strategy of opposing unilateral trends in the international sphere and

to promote the idea of a multipolar world (Pashapoor, 2018). In this vein, without analysing Russia's strategic and political objectives, one cannot understand the real nature of Russia's arms trade approach in the MENA region. Russia's strategic objectives in this field are as follows.

- Counterbalancing the United States in the Region

In the aftermath of the Ukraine Crisis, one of Russia's main goals in its foreign policy has been to counterbalance the US by forming a set of Russian-oriented regional alignments. In this vein, Russia has been trying to establish close ties with regional powers in different regions of the world. Attempting to develop the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) by accepting new members, as well as promoting closer cooperation with the member-states, paying a special attention to its relations with the emerging world powers within the framework of BRICS, and concentrating on the idea of Eurasian integration in the form of Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) have been the most important representations of this approach in the institutional or *multilateral* form. However, when it comes to MENA, it seems that the highly-divided structure of the regional order in this part of the world, along with its competitive nature, have pushed Russia to pursue its general counterbalancing approach through cementing *bilateral* ties with the main regional powers. In this vein, the development of economic and commercial relations has been put on Russia's regional agenda along with the expansion of military ties with those powers. There trends are completely in line with Russia's general foreign policy approach, according to which Moscow pursues "strategic self-dependence" as a way to transit the unilateral American international order (Koolaee & Abedi, 2018: 14).

As a result, Russia has not only maintained its second place after the US in global arms trade, but also in a quite new development, has put on the agenda the development of military ties with the traditional US allies in the region. Russia's above-mentioned military agreement with Saudi Arabia can be explained in the same vein. That is why, as soon as the MOU was announced, the US administration reacted to the reports, announcing that the S-400 missile defence system is not compatible with the American military systems already stationed in Saudi Arabia (Donya-ye Eghtesad, 2017). In the same vein, shortly after the Moscow-Riyadh agreement, the White

House agreed to the implementation of a $15 billion deal on the delivery of THAAD missiles to Saudi Arabia (Detsch, 2017).

Russia's arms deal with Turkey also brought a similar reaction from the United States, which in this case, due to Turkey's membership in NATO, was even more serious. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States Joseph Dunford said at the time that 'If the agreement is finalized, it would be a serious concern for the United States' (Sputnik News, 2017). In addition to the US administration, NATO has warned Turkey that the use of the Russian system would have 'consequences' for Ankara (ISNA, 2017). It should be noted that at the same time as Russia has been expanding its military ties with Turkey, Washington's arms sales to Ankara have experienced a decreasing trend. As such, the total value of US arms sales to Turkey dropped from $1109 million in 2014 to $201 million in 2016 and $94 million in 2017 (SIPRI, 2017).

Another aspect of Russia's counterbalancing efforts against the United States in the field of arms trade is developing military ties with the states, with which the United States decides to reduce the level of its own military ties. The case of Moscow's military ties with Egypt is the best example in this regard. In 2013, in response to the military coup in Egypt, the United States decided to reconsider arms exports to Cairo. Shortly afterwards, the Russians put the development of military ties with Cairo on the agenda. The trend went on to the point that in March 2017, it was announced that Russia would export 50 MiG-29 and 46 Ka-50 helicopters to Egypt to become one of the main arms suppliers of the North African country (Salacanin, 2017).

The comparative increase of Russia's role in the Egyptian arms market

County/Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Russia	68	27	70	6	178	1111
US	177	494	182	593	256	189

Source: SIPRI

- Supporting the Regional Allies and Partners

Supporting the regional allies and partners in the MENA region could be named as another objective of Russia's arms trade approach. The most important manifestation of this policy has been Moscow's military support for Damascus in the Syrian civil war. In fact, the case of Syria is a clear indication of the existence of strong strategic calculations in Russia's arms

approach, because given the fact that the Syrian government has been struggling with a fierce civil war, which has drastically undermined the economic potential of the country, much of the Russian military equipment transferred to Syria, as well as Russia's direct military support for Assad, cannot bring any specific economic benefit for Moscow, at least in the short term.

Since the very beginning of the civil war in Syria and even before the start of Russia's military involvement in the Arab country, dozens of Russian Antonov-124 aircrafts continuously transferred items such as armoured vehicles, radar equipment, electronic warfare systems, spare parts for helicopters, and various types of weapons and ammunition for the Syrian government. In other words, the Syrian civil war has not been viewed by Russia merely as an opportunity to sell arms and earn economic benefits, but as an important strategic front that should be defended. In this vein, continued Russian military support for the Syrian government could guarantee Russia's regional influence in the future, i.e. after the end of the war in Syria (Blank & Levitzky, 2015: 71). The Syrian case is, in fact, a clear manifestation of the nature of Moscow's military approach; as Russia's federal laws also explicitly state that strengthening military and political positions abroad is one of the main objectives Russia's international military-industrial cooperation (Kozhanov, 2016). Between 2011 and 2017, Russia was Syria's first arms supplier with the total volume of arms exports in this period amounting to $922 million (SIPRI, 2017). This is apart from Moscow's military "assistance" to the Syrian government or the military facilities transferred to Syria for Russia's own use in its military campaign.

The development of Russia's military cooperation with Iran in recent years is another representation of the existence of a strategic aspect in Russia's arms trade approach. Although after the 1979 Islamic Revolution Russia has always been the main supplier of weapons to Iran, it seems that the development of cooperation between the two countries, especially in Syria, has become a factor for the further enhancement of military ties between the two countries. In this vein, especially since 2015 the military cooperation between Tehran and Moscow in Syria began to develop. Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran Ali Shamkhani believes that the fight against terrorism in Syria has been a factor

contributing to the development of military and defence cooperation between Tehran and Moscow (Iran Daily, 2017).

Iran's main arms suppliers

County/Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Total
Russia	15	22	4	4	398	4	447
China	31	9	9	9	N/A	N/A	59

Source: SIPRI

Meanwhile, some observers believe that one of Russia's main goals of arms sales to Iran and the continuation of this policy over time is to prevent Iran's weapons market from falling into the hands of the others – the Western rivals – which would threaten the interests of Moscow in the long term (Blank, 2017). Indeed, such a possibility seems highly unlikely considering the West's negative approach toward Iran's military plans. But if true, this would reflect Russia's desire to maintain its cooperation with the partners in order to prevent its regional influence from being challenged by the rivals.

Trying to Influence the Weak States in the Region

Another aspect of the strategic objectives of Russia's arms trade with MENA is trying to influence the weak or more fragile states in the region with the aim of bringing them into its own orbit and increasing its influence in those parts of the region. This issue has been especially the case over the past several years, as the rise of radical armed groups, most importantly ISIS and Nusra Front and their increasing activities in countries like Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Libya has pushed these countries toward civil and ethnic wars, contributing to the weakness of their states (Kazemi, 2017: 165). Iraq and Libya could be named as two relevant examples with the experience of Russian attempts to build upon the volatile situation and expand its influence.

In the case of Iraq, before the rise of the ISIS in 2014, losing Baghdad as an important market for the Russian weapons was considered by Moscow as a serious blow to its regional influence. However, immediately after the domination of the ISIS terrorist on parts of Iraq, Russian military company Rosoboronexport declared its readiness to send advanced military equipment to Iraq, to be used in fighting the terrorists (Blank & Levitzky, 2015: 71). As such, when Iraq was an urgent need for new military equipment the United States had adopted a cautious policy in arms transfers

to Baghdad, Moscow stepped in and showed that it's always ready to fill the US vacuum in the region (Эксперт Online, 2016).

Iraq's two main arms suppliers

County/Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Total
Russia	N/A	51	301	420	300	N/A	1072
US	340	255	285	791	898	506	3076

Source: SIPRI

In the case of Libya, the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 was another serious blow to the Russian arms exports, as it deprived Russia of the finalization of a $4 billion arms deal with Tripoli. Moreover, a number of Russian military infrastructure projects in Libya were also lost, the total value of which is estimated at tens of billions of dollars (Bodner, 2017). Now, with the aim of regaining its place in Libya, Russia has put direct support for Libyan military commander Khalifa Haftar on the agenda. It was announced in mid-2016 that during a meeting with senior Russian officials, Haftar had demanded the purchase of Russian weapons (IRNA, 2016). So far, the arms embargo imposed by the UN Security Council on Libya has been the main obstacle on the way of reviving Russia's arms trade with Libya. However, it was announced in August 2017 that Russia might send ground weapons as well as helicopters to Libya in order to aid the Libyan National Army led by Haftar. According to the Russians, armoured vehicles, helicopters, and drones were among the items that could be sent to Libya to be used in counterterrorism operations (Sputnik Persian, 2017). The last available statistics on Libya's arms purchases, which dates back to 2013, shows that with exporting $36 million of arms, Russia was the main arms exporter to the country, while the US had already stopped arms transfer to Libya at the time (SIPRI, 2017).

4. Implications of Russia's Arms Trade Approach in MENA

Although more than a quarter century has passed since the abolition of the bipolar system which were recognized by an arms race between the two global superpowers and the division of international actors into the two Eastern and Western blocs, the arms policies of the world great powers still affect regional alignments, as well as the security and stability in different regions of the world. Generally speaking, the Russian arms trade approach in MENA could lead to increased tensions and/or proxy wars in the region;

but in the long run, could also contribute to the establishment of a balance of power between the US allies and the anti-American camp.

First of all, Moscow's arms approach in MENA has not only placed Russia itself in a regional proxy war with the United States – specifically in Syria – but also intensified the pre-existing proxy wars and regional competitions, especially between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Although both Russia and the United States have introduced fighting against terrorism as the main purpose of their military campaigns in Syria, their support for competing fronts in the Syrian Crisis has actually put them in a state of proxy war with each other (Spiegel, 2016). In April 2017, when US President Donald Tramp ordered for attacking a Syrian military airbase in Shayrat in response to the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government in Khan Sheikhoun, Moscow and Washington even reached the verge of a direct military confrontation (Azizi, 2017).

On the other hand, Russia's willingness to establish favourable military relations with all parties in the MENA region bears the risk of exacerbating regional competitions. For example, Russia's agreement to deliver S-400 missile systems to Saudi Arabia was interpreted by some observers as an attempt by the Saudis to contain Iran; as, given the fact that Iran has been already delivered the S-300 system from Russia, Saudi Arabia might be trying to get an upgraded version of this system to create a deterrence against the Islamic Republic. On the other hand, simultaneously with King Salman's October 2017 visit to Moscow, some media outlets reported that Riyadh has conditioned the finalisation of arms deal with Moscow to a reduction in Russia's ties with Iran (Aljazeera, 2017).

However, Russia's arms trade policy could in the long run lead to the transformation of the balance of power in MENA and especially alter the balance between the US allies and the anti-American camp. After six years of war in Syria, as the country gradually moves toward post-ISIS period, there is now less insistence by the Western parties on the necessity of Assad's removal from power as a precondition for the political transition process. This means that following Russia's successes in maintaining the current Syrian government in power, Russia's influence on the future political process regarding Syria would prevent Damascus from turning to the United States. At the same time, the Iraqi government, which was successful in retaking the last ISIS strongholds in its territories in fall 2017

with an effective military help from Russia, will be more independent – from the US – in providing its defence needs. Russian military cooperation with Turkey and Egypt at a time that they've been experiencing a period of uneasy relations with the US, has also increased the potential for these two states to redefine their foreign policy orientation in favour of closer ties with Moscow. In addition, if Russia succeeds in establishing a meaningful level of military ties with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, this would provide it with an asset to influence – though in a very limited scope – the foreign policies of these states. Therefore, it could be said that the continuation of Russia's current military approach in MENA can in the long term help Russia to counterbalance the US in the region.

5. Conclusion

Although Moscow's attention to the MENA region as an arms market and a potential ground for the establishment of military ties is nothing new and dates back to the Soviet era, its goals of arms trade with this region have undergone a change over time. During the Soviet period, ideological considerations played a major role in determining the targets of Moscow's arms transfers and the bulk of Russian weapons were delivered to the leftist or Soviet-aligned governments in the MENA region. However, in the first years after the Cold War, economic considerations derived from the post-Soviet challenges were prioritized in Moscow's arms trade approach. Nonetheless, since the time Putin came to power in Russia, and especially over the past four years, political and strategic considerations regained their position in this approach. In this vein, Moscow is currently pursuing two sets of economic and strategic objectives at the same time in its arms trade with MENA.

Although such an active arms approach brings increased economic benefits as well as regional influence for Moscow, it will have a dual effect on the region. In this vein, by fomenting regional and trans-regional rivalries – between Russia and the United States as well as among the regional powers, especially Iran and Saudi Arabia – this approach will most probably exacerbate the instability in the MENA regional order in the short term. However, both through facilitating Moscow's influence on the traditional US allies in the region and by winning the loyalty of the weak states in the region, it would lead to a kind counterbalancing framework against the

United States. This, of course, could be realized only in a medium to long term perspective. In the same vein but from a different perspective, some experts argue that the considerable authority and leverage Russia has managed to gain as a result of the turbulence of the MENA region is likely to be used as a bargaining chip in dealing with the US in the international arena (Mossalanejad, 2018: 28).

In either case, when it comes to the anti-American vector in Russia's MENA policy, one has to take into account two important points. First, Moscow's total military export, and as a result, its exports to the region is still far below what Washington has achieved in terms of being the first arms exporter to the region. In this vein, although Russia is expected to be able to keep its current markets and to extend its reach to the countries where the US is showing less interest, its ability to take the US' place, especially in the arms markets of the Persian Gulf, is still to a great extent limited. Second, as Russia has always been known for over-emphasizing the military aspect in developing ties with other countries, while having limited economic potential to initiate a set of comprehensive relations, Moscow's influence in the region and thereby, its ability to counterbalance the US, will most probably remain restricted to the military and security aspects, while the overall economic sphere of MENA will still be dominated by the US and other Western powers.

6. Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the Institute for Regional Studies at Shahid Beheshti University for supporting the research project on Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East, parts of the results of which are reflected in the current article.

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