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## Convergent Hopes, Divergent Realities: Russia and the Gulf in a Time of Troubles

Mark N. Katz

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# Convergent Hopes, Divergent Realities: Russia and the Gulf in a Time of Troubles

By Mark N. Katz

## Introduction

Since he first became president of Russia at the end of 1999, Vladimir Putin has sought to improve Russian relations with the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. A large part of his motivation has been economic: Putin and the powerful Russian economic interests that support him see great potential in the GCC states both as a market for Russian exports (including weapons, nuclear reactors, and railroads) and as a source of investment into the Russian economy. There has also been a geopolitical dimension to Putin's efforts to improve relations with the GCC states. While not expecting to displace the close ties between the GCC states and the United States, Moscow has long sought to take advantage of dissatisfaction among the countries of the GCC concerning U.S. foreign policies in order to bring them closer to Russia.

Putin's efforts have been met with some degree of success. Before the Gorbachev era, Moscow had normal relations with only Kuwait, because the other Gulf monarchies took a dim view of Moscow's support for their Arab Nationalist and Marxist-Leninist rivals in the region. Under former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, Moscow established diplomatic relations with the rest of the GCC states. During the 1990s (when Russia was experiencing internal political and economic turmoil), Moscow's foreign policy toward the GCC states was relatively inactive. Since Putin came to power, though, Moscow's relations with the Gulf monarchies have increased dramatically. Putin himself visited Saudi Arabia and Qatar in January 2007, and then the United Arab Emirates in September that year. Gulf leaders have met with him in Russia on numerous occasions. Economic relations between Russia and the GCC states have also grown.

Still, relations between Moscow and the GCC states have not improved to the extent that Putin was seeking. Moscow had hoped for a much greater degree of economic interaction with the GCC. Three issues – petroleum production, Iran, and Syria – have divided Russia and the GCC states most frequently. Underlying their differences on these issues is a highly negative Russian opinion of the GCC states, and especially Saudi Arabia, that arose during the Cold War and remained strong even after. This critical perspective appeared to go into remission after the 2003 U.S.-led intervention in Iraq, but has experienced a revival after "Arab Spring"

movements arose in the Russian-allied Arab countries of Libya and Syria in 2011. The Saudis, for their part, have been frustrated at Moscow's continued pursuit of policies at odds with their own.

Yet in mid-2015, a combination of factors arose that appeared to increase the prospects for greater cooperation between Russia and the GCC states. These included a sense that the decline in oil prices had given Moscow and the main GCC oil producers a common interest in reversing this trend; the rise in Syria and Iraq of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which could be seen as a threat to both countries; and the uneasiness on the part of most GCC states about the prospects of improved Iranian-U.S. relations, which appeared to increase Gulf Arab willingness to seek other partners, including Russia. By October, though, the prospects for GCC-Russian cooperation had clearly diminished. The common interests that appeared to arise between them regarding oil, Syria, and Iran all disappeared as their differences over these issues rose quite sharply – especially after Putin initiated direct Russian military intervention in Syria.

This paper will examine why the prospects for GCC-Russian cooperation over issues that had long divided them appeared to increase by mid-2015 but then diminished later in the year and will start by briefly reviewing Russian relations with each of the GCC states as there are important differences in each relationship that affect their current status.

## Russia and the GCC: Background

### Saudi Arabia

Saudi-Soviet relations were quite hostile during the Cold War. Riyadh played an instrumental role in frustrating Soviet efforts to pacify Afghanistan in the 1980s through its support for the mujahedeen. With the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, Gorbachev's support for U.N. Security Council resolutions against Iraq after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait, and Moscow's general pullback from the greater Middle East just before and after the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union, Saudi-Russian relations appeared set to improve.

Yet several issues still divided Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Union. Riyadh was displeased by Russian arms sales to Iran and Russia's agreement to complete the nuclear reactor at Bushehr, which the German firm Siemens stopped working on shortly after the 1979 revolution. Riyadh was also frustrated that Moscow would not join OPEC efforts to support oil prices by limiting oil exports. When conflict between Russia and Chechen separatists flared up in 1994-96, and again in 1999, Russian officials often accused Saudi Arabia of providing support to them, as well as to Muslim radicals elsewhere in Russia – just as they had earlier supported the Afghan mujahedeen.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to expressing support for the United States after the 9/11 attacks, Putin frequently referenced that 15 of the 19 terrorists were Saudi nationals. He appeared to be pursuing a strategy of exacerbating differences between the United States and Saudi Arabia in the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark N. Katz, "Saudi-Russian Relations in the Putin Era," *The Middle East Journal* 55, no. 4 (Autumn 2001): 603-22.

hope that Washington would see Moscow as an ally against a common Saudi threat. However, Russian-U.S. relations soon deteriorated over several issues – especially the Bush administration’s policy toward Iraq. With Riyadh also unhappy with President George W. Bush’s policy toward Iraq, Putin switched course in 2003 and pursued a strategy of exacerbating differences between the United States and Saudi Arabia in the hope that Riyadh would see Moscow as an ally against a common U.S. threat. Putin’s aspirations were not realized, but from 2003 until early 2011, relations between the Kremlin and the kingdom were friendlier than ever. Even so, Russian hopes for expanded economic ties with Saudi Arabia (which Moscow had also hoped for even when relations with Riyadh were strained before 2003) remained largely unfulfilled. Although Saudi officials frequently held talks with their Russian counterparts exploring the purchase of Russian weaponry, as well as other forms of economic cooperation, Riyadh’s reluctance to follow through on them appears to have been due to the continuation of Russian policies that the Saudis disapproved of, including continued Russian cooperation with Iran and its unwillingness to cooperate with OPEC on limiting oil production.<sup>2</sup>

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*From 1963 until the end of the Cold War, Moscow especially valued its ties to Kuwait and hoped to replicate them with the rest of the Gulf states.*

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Taken by surprise when the Arab Spring uprisings first broke out in Tunisia in late 2010, Moscow saw itself as being on the same page as Riyadh, not wanting to see Hosni Mubarak overthrown in Egypt and viewing the Obama administration as undermining him. But after Saudi Arabia supported the opposition to Moscow’s allies Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya and Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the older Russian discourse casting Saudi Arabia as the main source of jihadist threats against both Russian interests and the Russian motherland quickly re-emerged. Yet simultaneously – albeit rather contradictorily – Moscow also hoped that tension between Riyadh and the Obama administration would lead Saudi Arabia to be more willing to cooperate with Russia.<sup>3</sup>

## Kuwait

From the establishment of diplomatic relations between the USSR and Kuwait in 1963 until the end of the Cold War, Moscow especially valued its ties to Kuwait and hoped to replicate them with the rest of the Gulf states. Unlike the others, Kuwait responded to regional threats (Iraq during this entire period and Iran after 1979) not just by allying with the West, but also through buying arms from Moscow. In 1987, Kuwait responded to Iranian attacks on its oil shipping through reflagging some of its vessels as American and others as Soviet.<sup>4</sup> The Kuwaiti pursuit of good relations with Moscow in response to an ongoing threat from a Soviet ally, Iraq, was the sort of policy that Moscow hoped other states would adopt. The 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, however, demonstrated the limits of what Kuwait could expect from Moscow, and

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<sup>2</sup> Mark N. Katz, “Saudi-Russian Relations since the Abdullah-Putin Summit,” *Middle East Policy* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 113-20.

<sup>3</sup> Mark N. Katz, “The Impact of the Arab Spring on Saudi-Russian Relations,” *ORIENT* 53, no. 4 (2012): 27-31.

<sup>4</sup> Mark N. Katz, *Russia and Arabia: Soviet Foreign Policy toward the Arabian Peninsula* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 157-71, and Mark N. Katz, “Moscow and the Gulf War,” in Christopher C. Joyner, ed., *The Persian Gulf War: Lessons for Strategy, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 143.



Kuwait has relied almost entirely on the United States for protection ever since. Still, Moscow has valued its ties to Kuwait in recent years, especially since Kuwait has continued to purchase Russian arms and has not criticized its policies as strongly or openly as some other GCC states.<sup>5</sup>

## United Arab Emirates

Moscow has especially valued the UAE for its large purchases of Russian weaponry over many years, despite the UAE's discomfort with how close Moscow has been to Tehran. In this sense, the UAE's recent behavior resembles that of Kuwait during much of the Cold War: Its response to Moscow supporting a state regarded as a security concern has not been just to rely on the West, but also to cooperate with Russia. This is an approach that the Kremlin would like other GCC states to adopt. Moscow, of course, was not happy about the UAE's support for the opposition to Qaddafi and Assad. Moscow, though, has been content to downplay its disagreements with the UAE since overall relations have been positive. Moscow appreciates how, despite the Obama administration's disapproval of him, the UAE has backed the Egyptian military leader, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, who overthrew Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood-backed elected president, Mohammed Morsi, in 2013, and was then elected president in 2014.<sup>6</sup>

## Qatar

Moscow has a decidedly negative view of Qatar. Moscow does not approve of Doha's past efforts to support relatively moderate Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood, supposedly in order to undermine more extreme Islamists like al-Qaeda or ISIL. This is because Moscow does not believe that there are any moderate Islamists. Moscow has been unhappy about the active role Qatar played in supporting the opposition in Libya, and is currently playing in support of the opposition in Syria. Moscow also sees Qatar as supportive of Chechen and other Muslim opposition groups inside Russia.

There have been two especially damaging incidents to Russian-Qatari relations. First, Qatar arrested and convicted two Russians for the February 2014 assassination of former Chechen President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev in Doha. Second, Moscow accused Qatari officials of attacking three Russian diplomats (including the Russian ambassador to Qatar) at the Doha airport in November 2011. Additionally, while Qatar may not be a major competitor to Russia in the oil sector, Moscow sees Doha as a fierce competitor in the natural gas market.<sup>7</sup> Not only does it have enormous reserves of natural gas, but Qatar's ability to liquefy and export natural gas to Europe has allowed some countries there to reduce their dependence on gas supplies

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<sup>5</sup> "Russia Interested in Developing Cooperation with Kuwait," *TASS*, October 11, 2013, and "Russia Completes BMP-3 Infantry Fighting Vehicles Delivery to Kuwait—Manufacturer," *TASS*, September 30, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> "Russia, UAE Have Similar Approaches to Middle East Problems—Russian Foreign Minister," *TASS*, May 28, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> For more on this topic, see also David Roberts, "Assessing Qatar's Reaction to the Downturn in Energy Markets," forthcoming from the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.

via pipelines from Russia. What also seems to annoy Moscow about Qatar is that such a small country repeatedly defies Russia. Despite all this, however, Moscow has sought increased economic ties with Qatar.<sup>8</sup>

## Bahrain

Moscow has gone out of its way to develop correct, and even friendly, relations with the Bahraini monarchy since the renewed outbreak of protests in the early stages of the Arab Spring in 2011. At first glance, the situation in Bahrain would appear to be an opportunity for Moscow to “do unto America and Saudi Arabia what they have done unto Russia” in Syria, as well as another opportunity to work with Tehran against Washington and Riyadh.

But if there is any “principle” that Putin upholds, it is that of defending incumbent governments against attempts by their opponents to overthrow them through popular uprisings. Putin’s policy toward Bahrain may actually be an attempt to model “good behavior,” particularly for Washington and Riyadh. Just as Moscow does not support the opposition to the Bahraini government that is allied to the United States and Saudi Arabia, those two countries should not support the opposition to the Syrian government that is allied to Russia.<sup>9</sup>

## Oman

Russian-Omani relations are friendly but are also relatively limited. There simply is not very much interaction between Moscow and Muscat. Just as any discussion of GCC differences with Iran usually needs to be qualified to exclude Oman (which maintains good relations with Tehran), any discussion of GCC concerns about Russia usually ought to be similarly qualified to allow for the often underappreciated heterogeneity of views within its member states.

## Before Moscow’s Intervention: Convergent Hopes

Relations between Russia and the GCC states have run the gamut from bad to good, and from relatively unconcerned to highly concerned, over the years. What seems to affect their relations most is whether their interests and views converge or diverge regarding third countries or larger problems significant to both sides. And while there have been several important differences between Russia and most GCC states over the years, there have also been some issues in which they have found common ground.

One of these has been a common dislike of various U.S. foreign policies. Neither Russia nor the Gulf states approve of Washington’s support for Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians. Neither have been comfortable with U.S. democracy promotion efforts. Furthermore, neither Russia nor the Gulf states (except for Qatar) were happy about the Obama administration’s lack of support for Mubarak when opposition to him suddenly erupted in early 2011, the president’s support for Egypt’s elected president Morsi (whose Muslim Brotherhood ties were

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<sup>8</sup> Mark N. Katz, “Russia and Qatar,” *MERIA* 11, no. 4 (December 2007), and “Small Arab Country Slaps Russia in the Face,” *Pravda.ru*, December 6, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Mark N. Katz, “Your Syria Is My Bahrain,” *The Moscow Times*, January 29, 2012.



seen as especially suspect in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi), and his criticism of and reduction in military aid to the subsequent Sisi-led government. In response to Obama's cutback of military assistance to Egypt, Putin offered to sell weapons to Egypt and Saudi Arabia offered to pay for them.<sup>10</sup> Some commentators speculated at the time that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states were moving away from Washington and toward Moscow.<sup>11</sup> This impression was enhanced when the GCC states did not join the United States and other Western governments in imposing economic sanctions against Russia in response to Moscow's actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.<sup>12</sup>

Yet despite their common frustrations with various aspects of U.S. foreign policy, sharp differences between Russia and the GCC states over the conflict in Syria have intensified over whether Assad should be included in a negotiated settlement of the conflict. Moscow has steadfastly held that Assad must be part of the solution while the GCC states believe that he is the main problem in Syria and therefore cannot be part of the solution.

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*The Russian military intervention in support of the Assad regime came as an unwelcome surprise to the GCC states as much as it did to the West.*

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Underlying their differences over Syria are their differences over Iran. The GCC states fear Iran and see the Assad regime as firmly allied to Tehran. Thus Russian support for Assad is viewed as supporting Iran's regional ambitions, which they see as hostile to their interests. Further, the unhappiness of the GCC's oil exporting states with Russia's past unwillingness to cooperate with OPEC in holding back oil production in order to support prices has come into sharper focus as these prices have declined recently.

It was not surprising, then, that in one of his final public statements as Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, criticized a letter from Putin expressing support for Arab causes that Sisi (who appears to maintain an ambivalent attitude toward Assad) had read out loud to the participants at the Arab League Summit in Egypt in March 2015. "Putin speaks about the problems in the Middle East as though Russia is not influencing these problems," Faisal bluntly retorted. "They speak about tragedies in Syria while they are an essential part of the tragedies befalling the Syrian people, by arming the Syrian regime above and beyond what it needs to fight its own people."<sup>13</sup>

By June, however, the situation seemed to have changed entirely when Saudi Arabia's new deputy crown prince and defense minister, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, met with Putin and other top Russian leaders in Saint Petersburg. According to Gulf analyst Theodore Karasik, Mohammed bin Salman and Putin immediately developed a strong rapport.<sup>14</sup> Moscow

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<sup>10</sup> Mark N. Katz, "Putin's Visit to Egypt: Much Pomp but Little Circumstance," *EgyptSource*, *Atlantic Council*, February 11, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> "Knock, Knock, Knocking on Putin's Door: Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt Are Looking to Russia Instead of the U.S." *Sputnik*, October 18, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore Karasik, "Russia's Economic Rumble and the GCC: What's Next May Surprise You," *Al Arabiya*, December 28, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> "Prince Saud Slams Putin's Hypocrisy," *Arab News*, March 30, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Barthe, "Syrie: Comment l'Arabie saoudite réagira-t-elle à l'offensive russe?" *Le Monde*, October 17, 2015.

reportedly offered to sell the kingdom T-90 tanks, Iskander missiles, air defense systems, and helicopter gunships. In addition, the Saudis reportedly signed a framework agreement with the Russian nuclear reactor manufacturer, Rosatom, to build 16 nuclear power units worth \$100 billion for the kingdom.<sup>15</sup> Saudi and Russian oil ministers agreed to discuss broader energy cooperation.<sup>16</sup> In early July, the Russian Direct Investment Fund announced that Saudi Arabia had agreed to invest up to \$10 billion in Russia.<sup>17</sup> One Western analyst observed that while there were still obstacles to Saudi-Russian cooperation, “events are moving in interesting directions — and Assad should worry.”<sup>18</sup>

This budding rapprochement did not appear limited to Moscow and Riyadh. As Vitaly Naumkin, director of the Russian Academy of Science’s Oriental Institute and one of Moscow’s keenest observers of Russian-Middle Eastern relations, noted in August 2015, “The rulers of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar... and the crown prince of the United Arab Emirates, are expected to visit Russia before the end of 2015.”<sup>19</sup>

This “era of good feelings” in Russian-GCC relations appears to have been based on certain expectations in both Moscow and the GCC capitals (especially Riyadh) about each other’s motivations. Each side seemed to think that the other was in need of improved relations and thus, it would be willing to modify its behavior in order to obtain this goal.

Riyadh, in particular, reportedly held the view that Moscow could be persuaded to distance itself from Iran and Syria by economic inducements from Saudi Arabia (as well as the rest of the GCC). This, at least, is how Riyadh has approached Moscow on these two issues. According to Naumkin:

Riyadh has in the past tried to manipulate Russia’s interest to its own political advantage. In 2005, Saudi representatives began negotiations to buy up to \$4 billion worth of Russian weapons, subject to Russia discontinuing arms supplies to Iran.... In August 2013, during a confidential visit to Moscow, Bandar bin Sultan, chief of the Saudi intelligence agency, resumed discussion of a potential deal to buy Russian weapons systems, this time worth about \$15 billion, provided Moscow withdraw its support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and stop blocking UN resolutions against Syria. The offer was taken as a bad joke.<sup>20</sup>

Needless to say, these two efforts did not succeed. But by mid-2015, there was reason for Riyadh to think that another attempt might work. Western sanctions and low oil prices were severely hurting Russia’s economy. With Russia desperate for economic partners, and with Russian observers acknowledging that the prospect of improved Iranian-Western relations could mean Tehran trading more with the West and less

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<sup>15</sup> Vitaly Naumkin, “Did Moscow’s ‘Air Defense’ Diplomacy Land Saudi Deal?” *Al Monitor*, June 30, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> “Russia, Saudi Arabia to Discuss Broad Oil Cooperation Agreement,” *Reuters*, June 18, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Andrey Ostroukh, “Saudi Arabia to Invest Up to \$10 Billion in Russia,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 6, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Paul J. Saunders, “How Stronger Russia-Saudi Ties May Be Threat to Assad,” *Al Monitor*, June 29, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Vitaly Naumkin, “Moscow’s Revolving Door of Arab Monarchs, Syrian Opposition,” *Al Monitor*, August 17, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Vitaly Naumkin, “Did Moscow’s ‘Air Defense’ Diplomacy Land Saudi Deal?” *Al Monitor*, June 30, 2015.

with Russia, Moscow was clearly in need of the economic lifeline that the GCC states could provide, and which Riyadh had clearly offered in June through July. For Moscow to distance itself from an Iran that was moving toward the West, as well as to accept the fall of Assad, whose regime appeared to be on its last legs, was surely a small price for such great benefits.

In his first visit as Saudi foreign minister to Moscow where he met his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, Adel al-Jubeir made clear that Riyadh would not agree to Assad remaining in power. "There is no place for Assad in the future of Syria," Jubeir told reporters, adding, "Assad is part of the problem, not part of the solution."<sup>21</sup>

The logic prevailing in Moscow about how Russian relations with the GCC states would unfold was quite different. Gevorg Mirzayan, a journalist who publishes frequently in high-profile Russian foreign policy media outlets, explained in August 2015:

...with fears of Tehran growing, some Sunni states need a reliable weapons supplier. In the wake of the U.S.-Egyptian scandal (when the Americans refused to supply Egypt with weapons because of a coup), they are increasingly looking to Russia. The Saudi king is expected to visit Russia in the near future, bringing some serious proposals with him. Of course, in return, Moscow will be expected to make concessions (for instance, abandoning support for Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad). However, Russia is in a position where it can reject these conditions. Given the distribution of forces in the region, Riyadh needs to normalize relations with Moscow more than Moscow does. If the Kremlin manages to build working relationships with the Arab states as well as Iran, Russia would not only be able to make some serious money, but also act as mediator in resolving conflicts in the Middle East. This means it would be one of the main non-regional powers to benefit from Iran's emergence from isolation.<sup>22</sup>

Another possible reason for Russia to hope that Saudi Arabia and other GCC states could come around to seeing things Moscow's way is what it perceives as similarities between what it is doing in Syria and what Saudi Arabia and its allies are doing in Yemen. Intervention by the GCC (minus Oman) in Yemen in defense of the "legitimate government" in Sanaa, in this Russian view, should logically lead the GCC states to understand Russian intervention in Syria in defense of the "legitimate government" in Damascus.<sup>23</sup>

Further, each side seemed to expect that the other would act in the manner they hoped for regarding oil production. Saudi Arabia had long called for Russia to join OPEC in holding back production in order to bolster oil prices. As the "swing producer" in OPEC, Saudi Arabia has undertaken the main burden of reducing its production in support of this goal. Riyadh was therefore especially annoyed by Russia's penchant to "free ride" by benefiting from the higher prices produced by past OPEC production restraint but without itself reducing export

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<sup>21</sup> Sami Amara, "No Place for Assad in the Future of Syria: Saudi FM," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, August 12, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Gevorg Mirzayan, "The World after the Deal," *Ekspert*, (August 24, 2015): 41 [English translation published in *The Current Digest of the Russian Press* 67, no. 34-35 (August 17-30, 2015): 18.]

<sup>23</sup> Paul J. Saunders, "How Stronger Russia-Saudi Ties May Be Threat to Assad," *Al Monitor*, June 29, 2015.

volumes, as had Saudi Arabia. Moscow has always refused to do so, arguing that the Russian government has no control over Russian oil companies and that shutting down oil extraction equipment in frigid conditions would damage it.<sup>24</sup>

By summer 2015, Riyadh in particular appeared to think that the combination of Western economic sanctions, prolonged low oil prices, and a clear Saudi willingness to maintain high production levels would induce Moscow to coordinate oil production with OPEC. Russia, by contrast, appeared wedded to the notion that it did not need to cut back its own oil production since prices would soon return to “normal” as a result of several factors, including Saudi Arabia and OPEC working to bring this about in pursuit of their own economic interests without Moscow having to do anything.<sup>25</sup>

## After Moscow’s Intervention: Divergent Realities

The Russian military intervention in support of the Assad regime that began in late September 2015 came as an unwelcome surprise to the GCC states as much as it did to the West. Moscow claims that its bombing campaign is an international counterterrorism effort aimed at ISIL targets. However, there were widespread reports that Russia had been targeting non-ISIL forces that were a more immediate threat to the power of the regime in key areas such as Aleppo and Latakia. Saudi Arabia and Qatar joined Western states in calling for Moscow to desist immediately.<sup>26</sup> But the UAE (along with Egypt and Jordan) seems more willing to listen to Moscow’s claim that the groups Russia is actually attacking are also extremists and terrorists.<sup>27</sup>

There has been extensive media coverage and analysis of Russian military action in Syria since it began, so there is no need to repeat these details. But it clearly raises important questions for Moscow’s relations with Saudi Arabia and other GCC states – questions that cannot yet be answered fully.

One set of questions about the intervention relates to precisely when and why Putin decided to undertake direct military action in Syria. A Reuters article suggested that detailed planning for a previously agreed upon intervention was the subject of a visit by Major General Qassim Suleimani (commander of the Quds Force, an international vanguard wing of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard) to Moscow in July 2015. There appears to have been earlier high-level Russian-Iranian meetings that laid the groundwork for the coordinated counteroffensive, with Russian planes supporting Assad’s military along with Iranian and Lebanese Hizballah ground forces.

Reuters also noted that the Syrian foreign minister claimed in early October 2015 that the Russian airstrikes had been planned for months. If so, the Reuters article observed, “It means Tehran and Moscow had been discussing ways to prop up Assad by force even as Western

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<sup>24</sup> Alexander Mercouris, “Confirmed: Saudi Arabia Offered Russia Oil Alliance and OPEC Membership,” *Russia Insider*, September 9, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> “Russia Oil Output Could Fall 5-10 Percent If Prices Remain Low,” *The Moscow Times*, September 29, 2015, and Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, “Russia Flirts with Saudi Arabia as OPEC Pain Deepens,” *The Telegraph*, September 6, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Igor Delanoë, “Is a Russia-Saudi Deal on the Horizon?” *The Moscow Times*, October 12, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Aaron Mehta and Awad Mustafa, “Gulf Divides Threaten Anti-Assad Coalition,” *Defense News*, October 12, 2015.

officials were describing what they believed was new flexibility in Moscow's stance on his future."<sup>28</sup> Mohammed bin Salman and other Saudi officials also appear to have been convinced that Putin was sufficiently "flexible" on Assad's future to offer Moscow significant economic benefits when Moscow may have actually been planning its intervention in Syria with Tehran.

Putin might respond to insinuations that he led the Saudis to believe he was flexible on Assad while actually planning an intervention in Syria with Iran by noting that Saudi offers of cooperation with Moscow largely came after Riyadh, Doha, and Ankara had supplied large numbers of antitank weapons to Syrian rebel groups which allowed them to gravely weaken the Assad regime.<sup>29</sup> If Riyadh could employ forceful measures to shape the contours of conflict resolution diplomacy, then so could Moscow.

Some argue that, in fact, Russian intervention was decided more recently, in response to talk by the West and, in particular, Turkey about establishing "no-fly" or "safe" zones in Syria for the opposition. Especially bitter about how Russian and Chinese acquiescence to a U.N. Security Council resolution permitting a no-fly zone in Libya was soon followed by the Western and Arab military intervention against Qaddafi in 2011, Putin was said to be determined not to let a similar scenario unfold in Syria.<sup>30</sup>

While it is still unclear exactly when the Russian intervention in Syria was planned, there is no doubt that it began in September 2015 and that it will go on for quite some time. Moscow, though, may not have anticipated the degree of disapproval that intervention in Syria would elicit from Saudi Arabia in particular. As Naumkin observed, "It appears Moscow didn't expect Riyadh to react so negatively to the Russian military campaign against the jihadis in Syria, considering they threaten the security of the kingdom no less than Russia's."<sup>31</sup>

Three factors complicate the formulation of a GCC response. One is that the Obama administration and other Western governments have yet to formulate an unambiguous and unified response. A second is that the different countries of the GCC appear to have different degrees of willingness to challenge Russia in Syria. But third, and perhaps most important, is that within the most powerful GCC state – Saudi Arabia – there also appears to be a debate about how to respond.

According to *Le Monde*, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Jubeir advocate a more muscular response while Mohammed bin Salman is advocating a more accommodating one.<sup>32</sup> The UAE's Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan (crown prince of Abu Dhabi and deputy commander-in-chief of the UAE armed forces) also appears to advocate a more accommodating approach. Interestingly, all three were at a large conference in the Russian city of Sochi on October 11. Mohammed bin Salman and Nahyan each met with Putin and Jubeir met with

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<sup>28</sup> Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "How Iranian General Plotted Out Syrian Assault in Moscow," *Reuters*, October 6, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Hussein Ibish, "Confrontation or Cooperation? Russian-Saudi Relations Hinge on Syria," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, October 19, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Steven Lee Myers, "The Real Story Behind Putin's Syria Strikes," *Politico*, September 30, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Vitaly Naumkin, "Despite Airstrikes, Is Russia Still Working Toward Political Solution in Syria?" *Al Monitor*, October 12, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Barthe, "Syrie: Comment l'Arabie saoudite réagira-t-elle à l'offensive russe?" *Le Monde*, October 17, 2015.

Lavrov.<sup>33</sup> One well-informed source noted that, “Some reports suggest that the Putin and Mohammed bin Salman Sochi meeting was tense enough to be deemed ‘confrontational.’”<sup>34</sup> The Qatari foreign minister, Khalid al-Attiyah, has indicated that Doha also supports a more muscular approach.<sup>35</sup>

Bolstering the case for a more robust and assertive GCC response to Russian intervention in Syria are arguments that 1) the prospect of Saudi purchases of Russian arms and nuclear reactors as well as large-scale Saudi investment in Russia that was presented to Russian leaders in summer 2015 were clearly not sufficient to deter Putin from intervening in Syria, so the political efficacy of this economic inducements-based approach has been tested and found wanting ; 2) whatever discomfort Moscow might feel about the prospects for Iranian-Western rapprochement resulting from the achievement of the Iran deal, Moscow and Tehran are clearly united in backing the Assad regime, and therefore an understanding on Syria with Russia is simply not possible, at least at this stage; 3) Moscow’s focus on targeting the GCC-backed opposition movements in Syria and not ISIL raises the prospect that the former could be greatly weakened, thus leaving the Assad regime and ISIL as being seen as the only viable candidates for national-level power in Syria; and 4) many Western and other countries would reluctantly prefer to see Assad remain in power if the only alternative to him is ISIL.

Supporting the case for a more accommodationist GCC response to Russian intervention in Syria are arguments that 1) since the United States and the West are doing little to counter Russian intervention in Syria, Saudi Arabia and other GCC states cannot hope to do so by themselves, and they risk retaliation from Russia if they try; 2) the greater possibility that now exists of an Iranian-Western rapprochement makes it more important than ever for the GCC states to have other potential partners besides the United States and the West, and Russia is a key potential alternate source of international support; 3) rapprochement between Iran and the West could easily result in problems between Moscow and Tehran, and even to Moscow seeing any pro-Iranian regime in Syria as less useful to Russia than it does now; and 4) Saudi Arabia and the GCC really do not have to do anything to counter Russia in Syria anyway because even if Moscow (together with Tehran) succeeds both in propping up Assad as well as defeating his non-ISIL opponents, Putin could soon end up in a long, drawn-out conflict with ISIL not just in Syria, but in Russia itself.

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*If Riyadh could employ forceful measures to shape the contours of conflict resolution diplomacy, then so could Moscow.*

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What course of action Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states will take regarding Russia and Syria is unclear, and there is even the possibility of muscular and accommodationist policies being pursued alternately, or even simultaneously. In their competition over oil export markets, though, Riyadh has decided to get tough with Moscow. The Russian response to Western sanctions has been to sell more oil to the same Asian markets to which the Saudis have also been

<sup>33</sup> Igor Delanoë, “Is a Russia-Saudi Deal on the Horizon?” *The Moscow Times*, October 12, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Hussein Ibish, “Confrontation or Cooperation? Russian-Saudi Relations Hinge on Syria,” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, October 19, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> “Qatar Ready for Military Intervention in Syria,” *Arab News*, October 22, 2015.



exporting. The Saudi response to Russia doing this has been to sell oil to Europe at a discount, which has reduced the Russian share of the European oil market.<sup>36</sup> It is not at all clear, though, whether Russian policy toward Syria has led to Riyadh undercutting Russian oil in the European market, or whether this is something the Saudis would have done regardless of events in Syria.

## Policy Recommendations: Arab Gulf States

- Each GCC state has the right to buy as many Russian weapons, nuclear reactors, and other goods, as well as to invest as much money in Russia, as it wants. The GCC states should be under no illusion, though, that doing so will alter Russian behavior with regard to Syria, Iran, or the petroleum market.
- Those in the GCC states who are unhappy about the Obama administration's lack of response so far to Russian intervention in Syria should keep in mind that in the ongoing campaign to elect the next U.S. president, most of the likely Republican candidates as well as the most likely Democratic candidate say they would adopt a tougher stance than President Barack Obama, and that the new president will be taking office relatively soon, on January 20, 2017.

## Policy Recommendations: United States

- Although the GCC states were unwilling to join the United States and the West in imposing economic sanctions against Russia in response to its interventions in Ukraine, Washington should seize the opportunity provided by the Russian intervention in Syria – which is of much greater concern to the GCC states than Ukraine – to try to persuade them to do so.
- While the Obama administration may not be interested in the United States or the GCC states pursuing what it would view as an excessively aggressive response to Russia's intervention in Syria, it presumably does not want them to pursue what it sees as an excessively accommodationist one either. In order to avoid this, Washington should consult intensively with the GCC states about the various policy options facing both sides, their respective costs and benefits, and how to coordinate policies most effectively.

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<sup>36</sup> Leonid Bershidsky, "Saudi Arabia's Oil War with Russia," *BloombergView*, October 16, 2015.

