



# RUSSIAN ARMS DIPLOMACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

YURY BARMIN





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**Yury Barmin**

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Address: Yenibosna Merkez Disrict. 29 Ekim Street.  
Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Block Floor:6 No.:52 34197  
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey  
Telephone: +902126031815  
Fax: +902126031665  
Email: [info@sharqforum.org](mailto:info@sharqforum.org)



## **Contents**

<b>The Nexus of Soviet Arms Exports and its Political Role in the Middle East</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Russia’s Return to the Regional Arms Market</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Soviet Military Heritage and Russian Political Influence</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>About The Author</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>About Alsharq Forum</b>	<b>16</b>



**Abstract:** The Soviet Union emerged as one of the two leading powers in the Middle East in the 1950s, balancing out growing American influence in the region. The USSR's presence there was based on the idea that military aid to Arab regimes would create a lasting political partnership and prepare them for a proxy war. The post-Arab Spring return of Russia to the Middle East scene is no longer guided by the ideological principles of the Cold War, but largely became possible due to the ties created with Arab regimes during that period. Following in the footsteps of its predecessor, Russia is using its vast defense industry to revive old alliances, but it also has an ambition to tap into lucrative new markets that were off-limits to it during the Cold War.



### **The Nexus of Soviet Arms Exports and its Political Role in the Middle East**

Russia's emergence as a leading power in the Middle East may have come as a surprise to partners and opponents alike, but it was not in itself unexpected. The country's swift political blitzkrieg into the Middle East became possible in part due to the ties that have historically connected Russia to the region but remained dormant during the post-Soviet period. The fall of the Soviet Union resulted in the total reassessment of Russian foreign policy and a rapprochement with the West, which meant that costly alliances in the Middle East whose primary goal was to create a regional front of confrontation with the West were no longer needed.

Those were the alliances that the Soviet Union nurtured during the Cold War through diplomatic support, injections of cash via loans, and most importantly, massive deliveries of weapons to shield the regimes and back their military ambitions. By the time the USSR collapsed, the Middle East and North Africa accounted for 61 percent of Soviet arms sales, a necessary lifeline for regimes in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Algeria. Shifting policy priorities were accompanied by a sharp drop in arms exports, from \$22 billion a year in 1989 down to just \$2 billion in 1992<sup>1</sup>.

Soviet arms exports were a secretive affair. Mohamed Heikal, a close associate of Gamal Abdel Nasser, once said that the Soviet Union would not tolerate any violation of the secrecy surrounding Soviet arms exports to Egypt<sup>2</sup>. The secrecy surrounding Soviet military cooperation and weapons transfers to the Middle East was related to the fact that Moscow tried to hide the real scope of its support for proxy Arab regimes in an attempt to present their anti-West policies as an indigenous struggle. Suffice to say that Cold War assessments of Soviet military aid to Arab regimes in the West have continuously been off the mark.<sup>3</sup>

The secrecy enveloping the Soviet defense industry also affected the knowledge that existed in the West regarding the cost of Russian weapons. As studies show,<sup>4</sup> the asking price for Soviet arms was in most cases comparable with those set by its competitors in the United States and Europe. This contradicts the myth perpetuated during the Cold War that the sole reason why Soviet weapons were in demand in the Middle East was their low price.

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How then did the Soviet Union manage to win a share of the arms market in the Middle East while it could not compete with the United States in almost any other sector? The USSR recognized that it was no match to the U.S. in terms of its economic power, and hence it could not provide the same amount of financial aid to regional allies. However, with the huge leaps that the U.S. made in increasing its influence in the Middle East, a region of critical strategic importance to the Soviets, after the Second World War Moscow sought ways to achieve the same strategic parity with the U.S. there that they had managed to establish in Europe.

Achieving a parity based on military competition in the Middle East made perfect sense to the Soviet Union, as it fed into the arms race in Europe that was already in full swing in the 1950s when Moscow began cautiously approaching Arab regimes. The reason why the Soviet Union chose arms exports as a preferred buy-in into partnerships with regional powers was the perceived fusion between political and military elites in local authoritarian governments. Unlike the



Stalinist-era strategy of engaging communist states primarily in East Asia to balance U.S. influence in Eurasia, the Khrushchev era was marked by an outreach to non-aligned states in the Middle East and North Africa as a backbone of a potential alliance to counter “imperialist warmongers”.<sup>5</sup>

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The list of clients purchasing Soviet military hardware grew from 12 states in the 1950s to 50 states by 1991.<sup>6</sup> Its first major deal was with Egypt in 1955 (largely influenced by the humiliation of Cairo in the first Arab-Israeli war) and this was rapidly followed by similar agreements with Syria (1955), Afghanistan (1956) Yemen (1957) and Iraq (1958). In the late '80s, the USSR became the major arms supplier for five of the seven largest importers in the Third World (India, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Vietnam). At the same time over 70 percent of all Soviet arms sales to developing countries went to the Arab Middle East. The dominance of the USSR in the Middle Eastern arms market is explained by the fact that it was the major supplier of tanks, self-propelled guns, surface-to-air missile systems and fighter jets, the types of weapons most in demand in the region.<sup>7</sup> At times, Soviet weapons were used by both sides in regional conflicts, as occurred between Algeria and Morocco in 1963, Iraq and Iran between 1980–1988 as well as North Yemen and South Yemen in 1994, indicating just how much Moscow managed to penetrate the regional defense market.

Soviet weapons were inferior to those provided by competitors from France, the UK and the U.S. in their quality as well as the

type of servicing they received following the delivery of the products. The Soviet Union was confronted with tight competition even in the area of servicing its own equipment. Setting up servicing facilities in client-states was a red line for the Soviet Union in most cases, as the country feared that its technology would be stolen. Most clients had to send the equipment back the Soviet Union to have it upgraded, which also allowed Moscow to play a long game and make clients dependent on its services. The UK and Israel, however, were both willing to upgrade Soviet tanks on the spot, while several European powers offered to provide better avionics for Soviet fighter jets.

The Soviet Union, however, had several advantages in the competition with other arms exporters. First, it was able to produce and deliver equipment faster than competitors and thus undersell them. The USSR could tap into its large stocks of equipment and satisfy the needs of a client-state faster when it was involved in a military conflict. Second, Soviet equipment was easier to learn to operate, which was one of the most important factors for prospective clients whose armies were not qualified to use high-tech weapons. Third, Soviet equipment tended to outperform its Western competitors in harsh environments, which given the climate of the region was an added value proposition. In other words, the Soviet Union was losing in quality of its military equipment but was winning in quantities it could deliver and time required for it.

Most importantly, however, it was the tolerance of the Soviet towards authoritarian regimes and its loose payment policies that landed it the position of a go-to arms supplier in the Middle East. In order to maintain parity with the United States in the Middle East the Soviet Union developed what Robbin Laird called “a version of Henry Kissinger’s ‘regional influencers’ policy.”<sup>8</sup> That implied



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maintaining a network of loyal governments, those ambitious for regional leadership, regardless of their economic power, social structure and their attitudes towards Soviet ideology. Moscow was tolerant to regimes that were considered rogue in the West and felt the need to protect themselves from potential military campaigns against them. Egypt is a case in point: Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was looking to arm his military with American weapons, refused to accept the condition that American arms be used for defense purposes only,<sup>9</sup> which was a red line for Egypt's president due to his ambition to challenge Israel. U.S. failure to secure Nasser's loyalty drove him to extremes and threw him into the embrace of the Soviet Union. Despite the fact that during the Cold War, Moscow was in cahoots with authoritarian regimes and armed them, it remained in control of how its weapons are used. Just like the United States the USSR insisted that its equipment be used for defense purposes, but of course it had to give Arab regimes more leeway to win their hearts and minds. For instance, when the Syrian army entered Lebanon in 1976 Moscow suspended the supply of weapons to Damascus and reduced the number of military advisors, sending a signal that it did not support this intervention.

When Arab regimes had nowhere to go to purchase their weapons the Soviet Union readily lured them with deals that counterparts seemingly couldn't turn down. Poor economic conditions in Egypt, Iraq and Syria as well as a high standard price for equipment made these countries unlikely clients. The Soviet Union, however, put its geopolitical objectives above making a profit in the Middle East, which is why it

had to devise mechanisms of how to sell its weapons to partners without asking for cash upfront. Loans (that tended to get written off over time) and hefty discounts were offered to client-states, while in rare cases Moscow would resort to barter deals.

According to a study, Soviet military aid to Egypt amounted to \$7.8 billion between 1955 and 1973 (the Egyptian Ministry of War has an even higher estimate of around \$10 billion). On top of that, after the Six Day War, Egypt enjoyed a 50 percent discount on Soviet weapons. It appears that over almost twenty years, Cairo had to pay for only 15 percent of the military equipment that it had purchased from the Soviet Union<sup>10</sup>. In its dealings with Iraq, the Soviet Union utilized a similar logic, as a result of which the discounted price for its weapons was only two-thirds of the standard price. Under Saddam Hussein, one of Moscow's favorite arms buyers, Iraq accumulated \$12.9 billion in debt for Soviet weapons, which remained unpaid until Russia finally wrote it off in 2008.<sup>11</sup> Normally the USSR would reschedule accumulating debts and defer payments to keep Arab regimes dependent on its benevolence and motivate them to stay loyal. However, in the case of Egypt, the Soviet Union refused to reschedule a \$7 billion debt for arms purchases for Anwar Sadat when relations turned sour, marking a political break between the Soviet Union and Egypt<sup>12</sup>.

***A dependence on Soviet weapons prevented Arab states from rapidly switching to a new supplier and given the poor economic conditions in most former Soviet client-states in the Middle East, this transition was unlikely***

Not only did recipients import Soviet equipment, they often adopted Soviet fighting techniques and military doctrines. The militaries of the recipient countries were



unable, in most cases, to supply enough men capable of being trained to command, operate, and maintain much of the more sophisticated Soviet equipment within the necessary timeframes. Hence, an important dimension of the Soviet arms sales strategy was to provide its own professionals to assemble its equipment and military advisors to instruct military personnel in client states. Arms transfer agreements significantly expanded areas of cooperation between Moscow and its clients. Soviet advisors flocked to Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya as well as both North and South Yemen to advise their governments on political affairs, the economy and construction. In some rare cases, Soviet advisors took part in military action alongside its partners, as happened in Libya.<sup>13</sup> As a result of the imports of Soviet equipment, deeper political and economic ties emerged between Moscow and Arab states to manage payment, deliveries and other logistical issues. As Wynfred Joshua and Stephen P. Gilbert concluded in their book “Arms for the Third World: Soviet Military Aid Diplomacy,” as more countries became recipients of Soviet military aid programs, there was a tendency for these countries to become greater political allies of the Soviet Union in world politics.<sup>14</sup>

A dependence on Soviet weapons prevented Arab states from rapidly switching to a new supplier and given the poor economic conditions in most former Soviet client-states in the Middle East, this transition was unlikely. This is the reason why even after the collapse of the USSR and a complete state of chaos in the Russian defense industry, former clients would go back to the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union to purchase available spare parts and train their militaries.<sup>15</sup> This also helped Russia keep its dying defense industry afloat and allowed it to retain connections with respective governments in the region.

### Russia’s Return to the Regional Arms Market

Russia’s return to the Middle East scene was a painful and a lengthy process that was again aided by its ability to flood the region with its arms. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rationale for Russian arms exports to the Middle East significantly changed. The idea of using its defense industry in the ideological struggle against the West evaporated as soon as the USSR disintegrated and was replaced with the idea of making a profit for the cash-strapped budget. Throughout the 1990s, Moscow had almost no restrictions as to where it could transfer its weapons, whether they be allies or foes of the United States – the decisive factor was the client’s ability to pay. Russia started operating within the context of its Soviet legacy, but it could no longer afford the same approach to its arms exports, that of providing limitless military aid for the sake of enlisting proxies into its political camp. Moscow had to be more pragmatic and arguably more adventurous. This is reflected in the fact that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, traditional Soviet clients were no longer among the top destinations for Russian arms (see figure 1). Instead, Iran (which purchased \$2.7billion in Russian weapons between 1992–2000), Algeria (which purchased \$1.2 billion), Turkey (\$234million) and the UAE (\$1.4 billion) came to prominence in the ‘90s:<sup>16</sup> in other words, those who could pay cash upfront for the deliveries.

**Table 1**

Table 9. Russian Arms Exports to the Middle East, 1992-2003 (\$ million, 2003 prices)

	Total	Algeria	Egypt	Iran	Kuwait	PA*	Sudan	Syria	Turkey	UAE	Yemen
1992	408			248						160	
1993	936			725					20	191	
1994	588	194	7	96	8			6	271	6	
1995	987	406		58	188	1		55	279		
1996	681	72		312	103	10		153	51		
1997	614		190	288						136	
1998	495			302				28		165	
1999	636	189	66	290				28	65		
2000	1,440	312		402				591	60	75	
2001	1,202	544		450			188				20
2002	1,463	148		394			77	21	232	590	
2003	1,481	614		423				21	389	42	

\* Palestinian Authority

Source: Adapted from data supplied to the author by SIPRI, May 2004. Rows do not add up to totals because of rounding.

Source: The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies<sup>17</sup>



**Several private and state-owned defense companies were consolidated into what is known today as Rosoboronexport, a state giant in charge of arms exports, thus putting the country’s defense industry back at the service of its foreign policy**

The Russian military strategy was revised in 2000 when Vladimir Putin came to power and launched a reform of the country’s defense sector. Several private and state-owned defense companies were consolidated into what is known today as Rosoboronexport, a state giant in charge of arms exports, thus putting the country’s defense industry back at the service of its foreign policy. The government again began placing orders for weapons and using Rosoboronexport to market them abroad, including at defense shows in the Middle East. As a result of this new policy, between 2006 and 2009 the region was the largest market for Russian arms,<sup>18</sup> with Iran and Algeria as chief clients.

**Table 2: Russian arms exports by regions, 2006–2009 (in items)**

Weapon class	Asia	Middle East	Latin America	Africa
Tanks and self-propelled guns	150	270	0	0
Artillery	40	0	0	0
Armored vehicles	180	160	0	0
Large warships	2	0	0	0
Submarines	0	0	0	0
Supersonic combat aircraft	50	50	20	0
Helicopters	60	10	60	30
Anti-aircraft missiles	1440	5430	500	0
Surface-to-surface missiles	0	10	0	0
Anti-ship missiles	230	20	0	0

**Source: VPK news19**

A key development that would change Russia’s assessment of its role in the Middle East came with the beginning of the Arab Spring. Moscow arguably felt threatened by the revolutions spreading across the Middle East and North Africa, because to the Russian

leadership they looked a lot like a repeat of Color Revolutions that had plagued former Soviet states in the first half of the 2000s. With this in mind, the Kremlin developed new editions of its military and foreign policy doctrines<sup>20</sup> to reflect the need to adopt a more assertive policy towards the region and play a bigger role in the political processes taking place there. This is the point in time when the Middle East became part of Vladimir Putin’s national security calculus and thus called for stronger involvement of Moscow in regional affairs. As might be expected, the Cold War-era tactic of building partnerships with regional powers through giving them a share of Russian military might was revisited.

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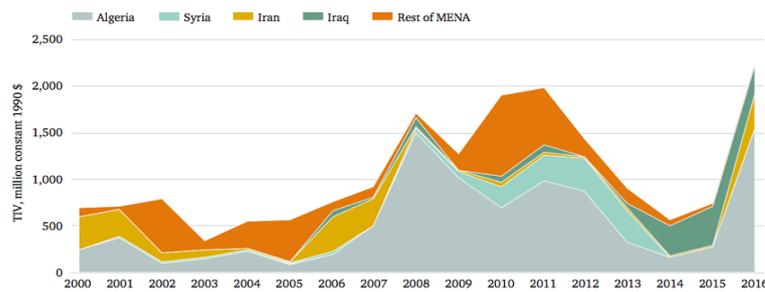
Just as in the 1950s, Egypt once again became the state that allowed Moscow to make a loud comeback to the regional arms market. General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi assumed the presidency in Egypt in 2014, which coincided with the United States freezing its aid to the country, and Russia intensified its efforts to reach out to Cairo. The arms transfer agreement worth \$3.5billion that Moscow and Cairo reached in September 2014 was the first deal of this nature that the two countries had signed since Soviet military personnel were expelled from Egypt by Anwar Sadat. The new relationship emerging against the backdrop of worsening relations of both countries with Washington looked very similar to the Soviet push to establish partnerships with Middle Eastern powers in the 1950s. According to recent estimates, up to 37 percent or \$5.5billion of Russian arms exports were destined for clients in the Middle East in 2015,<sup>22</sup> which according to SIPRI databases, is ten times more than all of Russian exports to the region for all of the ‘90s.

In order to insert itself back in regional affairs, among other things Russia decided to double down on supplying large quantities



**Figure 1**

**Figure 9: Major Middle East and North Africa importers of Russian arms, 2000–16 (TIV, million constant 1990 \$)**



Sources: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, 2017; authors' calculations.

*Source: Chatham House<sup>21</sup>*

of its weapons to local powers and tapping into the markets of “regional influencers”, a familiar Cold War-era tactic. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin reasserted the policy objective of building political ties through arms transfers by saying in 2013 that the exports of Russian weapons helped maintain the country’s relations with foreign states and dubbed the government’s commission on arms transfers “the second Ministry of Foreign Affairs.”<sup>23</sup>

Rogozin’s words indicated that military-technical cooperation was seen by Moscow as an effective entry point to the Middle East that could help it effectively build influence in the region. Russia opted to build upon military ties that had been cultivated by the USSR for decades and capitalize on the achievements of the Soviet defense industry in the Middle East.

Moscow has historically been Syria’s biggest arms supplier. Both during the Cold War and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow accounted for up to 78 percent of the country’s military equipment imports.<sup>24</sup> According to SIPRI, from the moment Hafez Al Assad came to power in Syria in 1971 until 1991, the country purchased over \$30 billion in military equipment from Moscow, making it the Soviet Union’s largest client-state in the Middle East. Import levels slightly dropped when Bashar Al Assad replaced his father as the President of Syria, but the full

dependence of Damascus on Russian services and training continued and deepened further with the beginning of the civil war in the country.

Expansion in the Gulf, a market that was closed off to Russian equipment during the Cold War, has been a remarkable breakthrough for the country’s defense industry. Iran and the UAE are currently Russia’s strongest defense partners in the Gulf, a pragmatic bid which Moscow made in the early nineties. What Moscow is looking to do, however, is to challenge traditional Gulf arms suppliers, the Americans and Europeans. In 2011, when the UK and France banned deliveries of military equipment to Bahrain following the kingdom’s crackdown on protesters, Moscow came to replace them by supplying anti-tank missiles and assault rifles, demonstrating to other potential clients in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) that it was a far more tolerant exporter and prepared to do business where European exporters backed down.

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In similar fashion, the UAE favored Russian BMP infantry combat vehicles and Pantsir S1 air-defense systems over their European rivals’ offerings. In February 2017, Abu Dhabi entered into military contracts with Russia worth \$1.9billion.<sup>25</sup> A significant development in the two countries’ military-technical cooperation was their intention to develop a light fighter jet based on the MiG-29 twin-engine aircraft as well as UAE’s interest in procuring Sukhoi SU-35 jets, which have been available for purchase only to China so far. With the GCC states’



massive procurement deals for fighter jets with European companies, this opens new opportunities for Moscow in a market that has been off-limits to Russia for many years. A real breakthrough may happen if Russia reaches a much-discussed agreement for the delivery of S-400 air defense systems to Saudi Arabia, which in political terms would mean the emergence of a strong partnership between the two countries. The deal under question, discussed during King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud's visit to Russia in October 2017, also includes the supply of Kornet-EM anti-tank systems, TOS-1A heavy flame systems, and grenade launchers as well as AK assault rifles. If the two governments reach a final agreement on the deal, it may mark the end of an unspoken alignment of the GCC states with the West in the area of defense procurement and serve as an invitation to Moscow to play a bigger role in the region.

***Russia's position vis-à-vis Iran deserves examination in the context of Moscow's expansion in the Gulf. Tehran has been a close ally of Russia through thick and thin, just as Moscow has thrown its lot in with Iran on many occasions, particularly in Syria and during the negotiations on the nuclear deal***

Russia's position vis-à-vis Iran deserves examination in the context of Moscow's expansion in the Gulf. Tehran has been a close ally of Russia through thick and thin, just as Moscow has thrown its lot in with Iran on many occasions, particularly in Syria and during the negotiations on the nuclear deal. It remains to be seen for how long this marriage of convenience will last, but both in terms of political alignment and market opportunities, Russia has seen Iran as an important ally since the 1990s and is not ready to sacrifice it for better relations with the GCC. Instead, what the Kremlin is attempting to pull off is taking an equidistant

position between Tehran and Riyadh, creating a balance based on military-technical and political ties.

### **Soviet Military Heritage and Russian Political Influence**

Exports of Russian arms to the Middle East bring with them a remarkable ability to exert political influence inside countries that sign up to military-technical cooperation with Moscow. Even a shared history of such cooperation has provided inroads into the Middle East for Russia. The basis for this is very primitive: Governments whose large militaries (including those presently at war) depend on an uninterrupted supply of arms tread carefully in their relations with Moscow, while those with a decades-long history of being supplied with Soviet arms enjoy solid military-to-military connections.

Just as in the times of the Soviet Union, Russia has resorted to the manipulation of arms deliveries to try to alter policy decisions made by its partners. In 2012, Russia suspended the delivery of S-300 air defense systems to Damascus against the backdrop of an ongoing crackdown on protests in Syria. The shooting down of a Turkish F-4 Phantom jet by the Syrian military in June 2012<sup>26</sup> was arguably one of the episodes that prompted Russia to review its military exports to Damascus. In the case of Iran, S-300 system deliveries were also used by Moscow as a lever to alter policies adopted by Tehran on several occasions. The transfer agreement signed in 2007 remained shelved under UN sanctions since 2010, but during the final stages of negotiations on the Iran nuclear deal, Moscow announced its intention to resume delivery of S-300 components to Iran<sup>27</sup> as an incentive for Tehran to stick to its commitments under the UN-backed agreement.

The examples of Egypt, Libya and Iraq, on the other hand, provide a graphic example of how military ties built during the Cold War



helped Russia insert itself back in the region in recent years. Technical co-operation to service and upgrade equipment, which was never frozen even after the collapse of the USSR, has been complemented with continuing military-to-military contacts. Army personnel from the Iraqi army under Saddam Hussein, from Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser and from Libya under Muammar Gaddafi, who undertook their studies in the Soviet Union essentially integrated the Soviet military doctrines into their respective armies, and in some form or another this has survived up to the present day. Mohammed Aly Fahmy, the Commander of Egyptian Air Defense between 1968–1975, studied air defense in the Soviet Union and essentially introduced this body of knowledge to Egypt upon his return. Long-time president Hosni Mubarak, who was ousted in 2011, had also undergone training in the Soviet Union at a military academy in the '60s, arguably allowing the two countries to maintain links throughout the Saddat era, when he served as the Vice-President.

The case of Libya, however, provides an insight into how the ties that Moscow built during the Cold War have helped it stay relevant in regional politics today. Up to the present day, the Libyan army almost entirely relies on Soviet and Russian equipment. 80 percent of its military personnel were trained in the Soviet Union during the Cold War, while up to 11,000 Soviet servicemen served as military advisors in Libya in the '70s and '80s<sup>28</sup> and up to 5,000 continued to work there as private contractors in the '90s.<sup>29</sup> Despite the fact that Russia does not currently export arms to Libya due to the UN arms embargo, it was flirting with the idea as far back as in 2015, immediately putting Moscow on the radar of Khalifa Haftar. In February 2015, the late Vladimir Churkin, then-head of Russia's mission to the UN, told journalists that Moscow was considering backing the official government in Tobruq with weapons.<sup>30</sup> Initial contact between Moscow and Khalifa Haftar dates back to 2015, when Russia stepped up its diplomatic engagement of the Libyan National Army and indicated its interest in playing a role

in the resolution of the crisis. General Khalifa Haftar, whom many consider Russia's point man in Libya, himself underwent military training in the USSR. Haftar's ties with Russia and military background both single him out as a likely interlocutor for Moscow and made him the first party to the Libyan conflict with whom the Russian government established a connection and who facilitated its return to Libyan politics.

***The Arab Spring had a profound impact on Russia's vision of its role in the Middle East. As a result, Moscow no longer saw itself as a mere observer of events unfolding there but as a game-changer. Today, Russia attempts to employ an updated version of the Soviet tactic to insert itself in regional affairs***

### Conclusion

Russia's re-emergence as a leading power in the Middle East as a result of the Syrian crisis was largely aided by its increasing focus on arms exports to the region, the Soviet Union's preferred tactic of engaging Arab regimes during the Cold War. Starting with the first large arms transfer agreement with Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1955, and later similar ones with Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan and Algeria, the USSR created a network of clients whose ability to defend themselves in a hostile environment to a large extent depended on Soviet military equipment as well as training provided to national military staff. The extent of military-technical cooperation had a direct correlation with the depth of political influence that the Soviet Union could project over a client-state. The USSR, however, had to continuously play catch-up with its Western counterparts, as its arms exports to the Middle East were a product of the ambition to counter the U.S. ideologically in the region, and this more often than not came at a great financial loss to Moscow.



The Arab Spring had a profound impact on Russia's vision of its role in the Middle East. As a result, Moscow no longer saw itself as a mere observer of events unfolding there but as a game-changer. Today, Russia attempts to employ an updated version of the Soviet tactic to insert itself in regional affairs. It revives military ties that once used to create strong political links between the USSR and Arab regimes in the Middle East. Symbolically, it was Egypt that once again facilitated Russia's return to the regional arms market and opened doors to more partnerships in the region. As Russian officials openly admit, Moscow has embraced arms deals a tool of building strong relations with regional powers.

At times the Russian strategy in the Middle East has more advantages than that of the U.S., as its arms exports come with no strings attached and no democratization agenda and has dropped the Cold War agenda of ideological struggle. This has allowed Russia to expand the number of markets that are open to military and political cooperation with Russia. Turkey, as well as the monarchies of the Gulf which cautiously approach Moscow with offers of cooperation, are notable examples of how Russia is steadily building up its political clout in the Middle East by employing military-technical cooperation as a tool of diplomacy.



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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yury Barmin is a risk consultant whose work focuses on issues related to the Middle East and Russia's positioning there. He is an Expert at the Russian International Affairs Council, covering the Middle East and North Africa and Moscow's policy towards the region as well as the conflict in Syria. Mr Barmin holds an MPhil in International Relations from the University of Cambridge; his dissertation looked into the failed Arab Spring protests in Bahrain and Kuwait. He is interested in the politics of the Gulf and the ties that exist between Russia's North Caucasus and the GCC monarchies.

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**Address:** Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6  
No.:68 34197 Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey  
**Telephone:** +902126031815  
**Fax:** +902126031665  
**Email:** info@sharqforum.org

**sharqforum.org**



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## RUSSIAN ARMS DIPLOMACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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The Soviet Union emerged as one of the two leading powers in the Middle East in the 1950s, balancing out growing American influence in the region. The USSR's presence there was based on the idea that military aid to Arab regimes would create a lasting political partnership and prepare them for a proxy war. The post-Arab Spring return of Russia to the Middle East scene is no longer guided by the ideological principles of the Cold War, but largely became possible due to the ties created with Arab regimes during that period. Following in the footsteps of its predecessor, Russia is using its vast defense industry to revive old alliances, but it also has an ambition to tap into lucrative new markets that were off-limits to it during the Cold War.



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