



# YEMEN'S ROLE IN MOSCOW'S MIDEAST COMEBACK

By:  
Mustafa Naji

June 28, 2019

---

# YEMEN'S ROLE IN MOSCOW'S MIDEAST COMEBACK

By:  
Mustafa Naji

---

June 28, 2019

Cover photo: Russian Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia addresses the United Nations Security Council on February 2018, 26, during a session in which Russia vetoed a UK resolution that would have condemned Iran for violating the arms embargo on Yemen // Photo Credit: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Yemen’s Historical Relationship with Moscow</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>A Cold War Opportunity</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Russian Influence Fades as Western Militaries Sail In</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Russia Enacts a New Strategy</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Begin with Old Friends</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Court Regional Players</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Inside Yemen: Talk to All, Rely on None</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Work Through through the United Nations</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Russia’s Steady Rise</b>	<b>14</b>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia, unlike many Western countries, is in direct contact with all parties to the Yemen war. It accepts the internationally recognized Yemeni government, yet does not condemn the armed Houthi movement. Russian diplomats affirm support for a unified Yemen but are willing to meet with southern separatists. Moscow rejects Saudi accusations that Iran is arming Houthi forces. At the same time, it is increasingly courting Gulf Arab monarchies, deepening its economic and defense partnerships with the Saudis and their key ally in the Yemen war, the United Arab Emirates.

Russia's approach reflects a pragmatic shift away from the ideology-based strategies of the Soviet era that once defined its relationship with Yemen. What was once guided by communist aspirations is now based on political realities and opportunism in the hands of President Vladimir Putin. Russia's reemergence also is an acknowledgement that stepping back from the region in the post-Soviet era left Russia poorly positioned to protect its inherited strategic and economic interests when revolutionary protests of the 2011 Arab Spring shook the geopolitical balance across the Middle East and North Africa. By engaging with all of Yemen's internal and regional players, Moscow attempts to cast itself as a strong international mediator.

Claiming that role remains a challenge. Russian offers to mediate Yemen's war so far have been ignored by the key player, Saudi Arabia. The kingdom, like its United States ally, is wary of Russia's long-standing close relationship with Iran. The United Nations is among the means Russia employs to pursue its strategic interests relating to Yemen, but Moscow is frustrated by what it views as US efforts outside that framework to craft a solution suited to American strategic interests.

Still, if it is effective, Russia stands to gain economically and, most importantly to Moscow, geopolitically. Being able to claim credit for bringing peace to Yemen could help it regain influence along a key shipping route through the Middle East to the Horn of Africa. Considering Russia's Yemen strategy through the lens of its broader foreign policy approach to the Arabian Peninsula, Middle East and North Africa clarifies what Moscow has to offer, and gain.

# YEMEN'S HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP WITH MOSCOW

## A Cold War Opportunity

The modern Yemeni-Russian relationship dates back to a 1928 friendship and cooperation agreement signed by northern Yemen's governing Mutawakkilite kingdom and the Soviet Union. Even so, it took another three decades before the relationship — including the first Soviet arms shipment in 1956 — had developed enough to merit opening a Soviet diplomatic mission in Taiz. Soviet economic development projects of the time included building a modern deep-water commercial port along the Red Sea, at Hudaydah. By the end of 1962, the royalists were out of power in North Yemen, and the Soviet Union had full diplomatic relations with the North's newly installed republican regime. Moscow opened an embassy in Sana'a, and the two countries exchanged their first ambassadors. First with the royalists and then with the republicans, Moscow continued to contribute in the 1960s to vital health, education and infrastructure projects in the North.<sup>(1)</sup>

By 1967, when Britain pulled out of South Yemen after more than a century of colonial rule, Moscow was perfectly positioned to take on the role of elder brother to the new, ideologically compatible Marxist government in South Yemen. Agreements between the two granted the Soviet military rights to base warships in Aden and off Socotra, securing its position and giving Moscow a platform to expand its sphere of influence in the Horn of Africa. The Soviet Embassy in Aden became the Cold War superpower's largest embassy in the Middle East,<sup>(2)</sup> and South Yemen became the Arab world's only Marxist-ruled country.

Moscow provided military support early on to the emerging Republican government of the North, including sending fighter planes and some Russian pilots to help break the 70-day royalist siege of Sana'a.<sup>(3)</sup> However, its affiliation with the South eclipsed that of the North, and North Yemen began to rely more on Saudi Arabia and the West. By the end of the 1980s, in the waning years of the Soviet Union, cooperation between Moscow and Sana'a was negligible. South Yemen, however, continued to receive significant Soviet support through development projects, arms sales and other economic aid, with 50 percent of its foreign loans coming from Moscow prior to Yemen's 1990 reunification.<sup>(4)</sup>

---

1) Asher Orkaby, *Beyond the Arab Cold War: The International History of the Yemen Civil War, 1962-68*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 46-47.

2) Vladimir Dadushkin, "The 90th Anniversary of the Establishment of Russian-Yemeni Relations is a Long Road of Friendship and Bilateral, Friendly Cooperation," *Al-Masdar Online*, October 23, 2018, <https://almasdaronline1.com/article/>. Accessed June 25, 2019.

3) Hasan Maki, *Days and Memories*, (Sana'a: Abadi Center for Studies and Publishing, 2008), 206-211.

4) "About the Russian-Yemeni Relations," RT Online, October 19, 2015, <https://arabic.rt.com/info/796278>. Accessed June 25, 2019.

## Russian Influence Fades as Western Militaries Sail In

The early 1990s witnessed many changes as the Soviet Union imploded, leaving a smaller, geopolitically weaker Russian Federation as its heir. Yemen united under the northern government in Sana'a, ending the Arab world's experiment with Marxism. By virtue of folding in South Yemen, the unified Yemen Arab Republic and Russia carried on a version of the old relationship. Russia formally cancelled 80 percent of Yemen's US\$6.4 billion in debt in 1999; cultural exchanges and economic cooperation expanded in the 2000s, with arms sales remaining critical. Trade volume, driven by Russian exports, reached US\$178.9 million in 2007, increasing from US\$94.8 million in 2006.<sup>(5)</sup> Moscow's geopolitical influence, however, dissipated as it retreated militarily, abandoning Soviet naval outposts including those in Aden and off Socotra.

Meanwhile, the US-Saudi relationship had been strengthening based on oil needs and arms sales, despite vastly differing ideologies, in the decades since US President Franklin D. Roosevelt met with Saudi King Abdul Aziz in 1945. Deadly attacks in 1996 on US military housing in Khobar, Saudi Arabia, and in 2000 on the USS Cole navy ship in Aden forced the two allies to address Islamic militancy. By the time al-Qaeda struck the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, the US-Saudi alliance was important and strong enough for Riyadh to avoid retaliation despite key roles some Saudis had in planning, funding and executing the attack. The United States, in return, faced little Saudi resistance to further expanding its regional military presence and carrying out its "War on Terror" on its terms.

Washington established a military base in Djibouti soon after the September 11 attacks, positioning itself along one of the most important maritime routes, the Bab al-Mandab Strait between Djibouti and Yemen. Washington has vastly expanded and developed Camp Lemonnier in the years since, where about 3,000 American and allied coalition forces are based.<sup>(6)</sup> Responding to a surge in Somali piracy, Western navies began patrolling the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean. They effectively shut down Somali pirates between 2008 and 2012, and then stayed on, ensuring safe passage for commercial shipping.<sup>(7)</sup> The Horn of Africa access prized by the Soviets was now secured by the West.

For Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and later the so-called 'Islamic State' group, or Daesh, have invited two decades of direct American involvement in Yemeni affairs, including diplomatic pressure and drone strikes. Although Russia kept up and even expanded economic and cultural relations with Yemen, geopolitically it was no longer a player.

---

5) Ibid.

6) "Camp Lemonnier," Naval Technology, Undated, <https://www.naval-technology.com/projects/camp-lemonnier/>. Accessed June 13, 2019.

7) "Counter-piracy operations (Archived)," NATO, December 19, 2016, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_48815.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_48815.htm). Accessed June 3, 2019.

## RUSSIA ENACTS A NEW STRATEGY

Moscow was not alone in being caught off guard by the intensity of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. Revolutionary protests were upending the internal geopolitical balance in many countries, shaking autocrats who had been in power since the Soviet era. Moscow's old allies were falling or struggling to hang on in Syria, Yemen, Egypt and Libya. A new strategy evolved to address this changing political reality, one that if successful could restore enough global clout for Moscow to influence the new era.

Russia's approach today is pragmatic and opportunistic, keeping long-term strategic interests at the forefront. Economic and military agreements of recent years further geopolitical goals. New partnerships — in energy, manufacturing, agriculture, weapons and other areas — are being made with nations along the shipping route through the Mediterranean and Red seas to the Indian Ocean, where many countries are US allies or have been affected by the expanded US influence of the post-Soviet era. Russia has shifted away from a one-camp policy in favor of a same-distance approach to regional partners: it may ally with its traditional partner Iran in Syria, for example, but it would attempt to balance that with overtures to Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. Yemen, as an Indian Ocean outpost on one of the world's most important waterways, is just one point to solidify.

### Begin with Old Friends

Russia's 2015 military intervention in Syria marked a fresh beginning for Moscow as a power-broker in the Middle East. Russia launched airstrikes targeting opposition forces in Syria in September 2015 after receiving a request for military help from President Bashar al-Assad, who had been under heavy pressure politically and on the battlefield.<sup>(8)</sup> Once actively involved in the war, Russia established itself at Hemeimeem air base in Latakia. An old Soviet naval base at Tartus, which Russia had kept active at a low level as a naval supply facility, began seeing more activity.<sup>(9)</sup> In 2017, Moscow announced it was extending its lease and upgrading the facility to a permanent base that would be able to host 11 warships, up from just one. The agreement with Damascus also granted Moscow indefinite access to Hemeimeem air base.<sup>(10)</sup> Russia also is guiding the diplomacy in Syria,

---

8) Anne Barnard, Hwaida Saad and Eric Schmitt, "An Eroding Syrian Army Points to Strain," *The New York Times*, April 28, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/29/world/middleeast/an-eroding-syrian-army-points-to-strain.html>. Accessed June 14, 2019.

9) Shirin Jaafari, "Russia's Naval Base in Syria has Decades of History," *Public Radio International*, October 6, 2015, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-10-06/russias-naval-base-syria-has-decades-history>. Accessed June 15, 2019.

10) "Russia to extend Tartus and Hmeimim Military Bases in Syria," *Deutsche Welle*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-to-extend-tartus-and-hmeimim-military-bases-in-syria/a-41938949>. Accessed June 15, 2019.

quieting the battlefield, trying to reintegrate al-Assad back into the Arab fold,<sup>(11)</sup> while furthering its investment in Syria with deals to rebuild its oil and gas industry.<sup>(12)</sup>

As it worked to stabilize the Assad regime and secure its military presence in Syria, Moscow also sought to negotiate the right for Russian military jets to use Egyptian air space and bases.<sup>(13)</sup> More deals surrounded the 2017 Russian-Egyptian military cooperation agreement that granted Russia use of Egyptian airspace and bases for five years. Russian companies signed on to build and fuel Egypt's first nuclear reactor, furthering its North Africa energy interests, and Cairo agreed to a Russian industrial zone at Port Said, along the Suez Canal, where agricultural machinery and other products will be manufactured for African, European and Middle Eastern markets.<sup>(14)</sup> Twenty Russian companies are expected to move in by 2023, producing US\$3.6 billion annually in goods by 2026; projections including later stages estimate US\$7 billion in investments.<sup>(15)</sup>

Egypt and Russia also share an interest in the civil war along Egypt's western border, in Libya. Both countries – and the UAE – support Libyan militia leader Khalifa Hifter, whose forces control eastern Libya, although Moscow is officially neutral and maintains high-level contacts with the UN-backed government in Tripoli.<sup>(16)</sup> At stake for Russia is long-term energy contracts, which it has been discussing with the Tripoli-based Libya National Oil Corp., as well as possible future military bases along the Mediterranean.<sup>(17)</sup> Reports are mounting that Russian military personnel provide training for Hifter's forces, and have participated in some operations.<sup>(18)</sup> Russian military planes also have been tracked to a Libyan airfield in territory controlled by Hifter that UAE military aircraft had used in 2016.<sup>(19)</sup>

As it reasserts itself across North Africa, Moscow also may be moving toward a base agreement with Sudan after the two countries reached an understanding in January on navy port visits.<sup>(20)</sup> A scramble for military bases began nearby, along the Bab al-Mandab Strait, after the piracy threat was largely neutralized. In Djibouti alone, Spain and

11) Jamie Dettmer, "Russia Lobbies for Syria to Rejoin Arab League," *Voice of America*, February 8, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/russia-lobbies-syria-rejoin-arab-league>. Accessed June 15, 2019.

12) "Russia Takes over Syria's Oil and Gas Production," *Russia Business Today*, February 15, 2018, <https://russiabusinesstoday.com/energy/russia-takes-syrias-oil-gas-production/>. Accessed June 15, 2019.

13) Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia Negotiates Deal for its Warplanes to use Egypt Bases," *DefenseNews/The Associated Press*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2017/11/30/russia-negotiates-deal-for-its-warplanes-to-use-egypt-bases/>. Accessed June 15, 2019.

14) "Defense Minister Visits Russia," *Egypt Independent*, August 20, 2018, <https://ww.egyptindependent.com/defense-minister-visits-russia/>, Accessed June 15, 2019.

15) "Russia's Industrial Zone in Egypt's Suez Canal to be Launched by End of 2020-Early 2021," *RT*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/business/452047-russia-industrial-zone-egypt/>. Accessed June 17, 2019.

16) Grzegorz Kuczynski, "Civil War in Libya – Russian Goals and Policy," *Warsaw Institute*, April 30, 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/civil-war-libya-russian-goals-policy/>. Accessed June 15, 2019.

17) Henry Meyer, Samer Al-Atrush and Stepan Kravchenko, "Russia Has a Plan for Libya – Another Qaddafi," *Bloomberg*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-12-20/russia-has-a-plan-for-libya-another-qaddafi>. Accessed June 15, 2019.

18) *Ibid.*

19) Tim Ripley, "Russian Air Force using Libyan Airfield," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, October 25, 2018, <https://www.janes.com/article/84044/russian-air-force-using-libyan-airfield>. Accessed June 25, 2019.

20) "Russia May Set Up Red Sea Naval Base after Deal on Port Calls – Senior Sudan MP," *Sputnik News*, January 12, 2019, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201901121071422796-russia-naval-base/>. Accessed June 25, 2019.



Germany established facilities at French bases. Japan, which assisted in the anti-piracy effort from Camp Lemonnier, ultimately opened its first permanent overseas military base since World War II in 2011 on land adjacent to the US base. Italy set up a base in 2013. Most recently, China established its own base in 2017.<sup>(21)</sup>

Djibouti reportedly rejected a 2016 Russian request to lease land for a base on its territory.<sup>(22)</sup> Russia, however, did sign a strategic economic agreement with Eritrea in September 2018 to establish a logistics center at the port of South Eritrea, which should allow Russian military ships to be received as part of cooperation agreements in mining, agriculture and education.<sup>(23)</sup>

## Court Regional Players

Fresh off its military and diplomatic achievements in Syria, Russia's Foreign Ministry repeatedly has issued statements saying the only path to peace in Yemen will be through dialogue with all of the key parties to the conflict, and it has offered to facilitate such talks.<sup>(24)</sup> That requires approval from Saudi Arabia, which is wary of Russia's relationship with Iran and is inclined to defer to US wishes. Riyadh has not responded to repeated Russian mediation offers.

Russia has a great deal of common ground to build on with Saudi Arabia and the kingdom's key coalition partner in the Yemen war, the United Arab Emirates. Unlike the United States, Moscow's distaste for values that fueled the popular uprisings made it naturally sympathetic to the Arab regimes in 2011. Russian discourse is not about democracy, human rights or economic accountability and transparency. Rather, it is about preserving national identity, geographical unity and the national order, precisely Russia's justification for intervening in Syria.<sup>(25)</sup> Unlike the United States, which abandoned Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during the Arab Spring, Russia has stood by al-Assad in Syria – a message not lost on Gulf states.

Russia also has been affected by Islamic extremism in ways similar to several Arab regimes. Moscow watched as the popular uprisings created the sort of chaos that can allow Islamic militants space to maneuver, prompting ever more US intervention to fight

21) Neil Melvin, "The Foreign Military Presence in the Horn of Africa Region," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), April 2019, <https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/sipribp1904.pdf>. Accessed June 13, 2019.

22) Sahwqi al-Rayyes, "Djibouti on the Rise as Hub for Foreign Military Bases in Africa," *Asharq al-Awsat*, September 10, 2018, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1390991/djibouti-rise-hub-foreign-military-bases-africa>. Accessed June 16, 2019.

23) "Eritrea Announces Port Project Agreement with Russia," *RFI*, September 3, 2018, <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20180903-erythree-annonce-accord-projet-portuaire-russie>. Accessed June 25, 2019.

24) "Situation in Yemen Shows US Reluctance to End Conflict – Russian Foreign Ministry," TASS, November 10, 2018, <http://tass.com/politics/1030197>; "Russia Concerned over Clashes in Yemen – Foreign Ministry," TASS, January 29, 2018, <http://tass.com/world/9874231>. Accessed June 12, 2019; "Russia Reveals the Role it Plays in Yemen," RT Online, October 5, 2018, <https://arabic.rt.com/russia/974369>. Accessed June 25, 2019.

25) Clément Therme, "La puissance Russe en Moyen-Orient: Retour ou déclin inéluctable," Institut des études stratégiques de l'école militaire, N° 33, Paris, 2014.

them. Russia long has been concerned about the threat militants could be to its internal security as well as to the security of its vital interests in the rest of the former Soviet states. Since the fall of the Soviet Union alone, Moscow has fought Muslim insurgents in Chechnya and the North Caucasus region. Many fighters traveled to join Islamic militant groups in Syria and Iraq, sometimes aided by Russian security.<sup>(26)</sup> A pretext Russia gave for entering the war was to fight Islamic militancy.<sup>(27)</sup> Putin said in February 2017 that Russian military intelligence believed as many as 4,000 Russians were fighting alongside Islamic militants in Syria and another 5,000 more from other former Soviet states.<sup>(28)</sup> Like Arab regimes, a primary Russian concern is dealing with the fighters that return home from Syria.

These are commonalities Moscow can build on whenever Washington leaves an opening for it to chip away at Saudi and Emirati deference to US wishes. Russia stepped in, for example, at Saudi Arabia's October 2018 "Davos in the Desert" investment forum when numerous US and European executives pulled out over the killing of Saudi journalist and Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Russia quickly expanded its original business delegation and signed contracts in what was more a show of its willingness to stand by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman than a desire for deals.<sup>(29)</sup>

Saudi Arabia clearly makes the key decisions on Yemen, but Russia's push has not overlooked the No. 2 partner in Saudi's war coalition. The Emirates and Russia signed a US\$2 billion defense agreement in February 2017 followed by a June 2018 strategic partnership declaration,<sup>(30)</sup> expanding their economic ties in energy and technology. The Emirates already has proven valuable to Russia's goals. It was the Emirates that brokered Eritrea and Ethiopia's July 2018 reconciliation, prompting Russia's investment in Eritrea and plans for expanding into Ethiopia.<sup>(31)</sup> The Emirates also quickly reopened its embassy in Damascus in December 2018 after nearly seven years of following an Arab diplomatic boycott, affirming Russia's steps toward the regional reintegration of al-Assad.<sup>(32)</sup>

26) Neil Hauer, "Chechen and North Caucasian Militants in Syria," Atlantic Council, January 18, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/chechen-and-north-caucasian-militants-in-syria>. Accessed June 18, 2019.

27) Andrew Osborn and Phil Stewart, "Russia Begins Syria Air Strikes in its Biggest Mideast Intervention in Decades," *Reuters*, September 30, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia/russia-begins-syria-air-strikes-in-its-biggest-mideast-intervention-in-decades-idUSKCN0RU0MG20150930>. Accessed June 18, 2019.

28) "4,000 Russians Now Fighting in Syrian Insurgency, Says Putin," *The Moscow Times*, February 23, 2017, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/02/23/4000-russians-now-fighting-in-syrian-insurgency-says-putin-a57259>. Accessed June 18, 2019.

29) Henry Foy, "Russia-Saudi Arabia rapprochement Reshapes more than the Oil Market," *Financial Times*, October 30, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/aa39b74c-4f0c-11e8-ac41-759eee1efb74>. Accessed June 6, 2019.

30) "UAE, Russia Forge Strategic Partnership," WAM via *Gulf News*, June 1, 2018, <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/uae-russia-forge-strategic-partnership-1.2230246>. Accessed June 6, 2019.

31) Andrew Korybko, "Russia's Pivoting to the Horn of Africa via Eritrea & the UAE," *Oriental Review.org*, September 10, 2018, <https://orientalreview.org/2018/09/10/russias-pivoting-to-the-horn-of-africa-via-eritrea-the-uae/>. Accessed June 25, 2019.

32) "UAE Reopens Syria Embassy in Boost for Assad," *Reuters*, December 27, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-emirates/uae-reopens-syria-embassy-in-boost-for-assad-idUSKCN1OQ0QV>. Accessed June 16, 2019.

## Inside Yemen: Talk to All, Rely on None

The armed Houthi movement, aided by troops loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, expanded its territory in 2014, taking over the capital of Sana'a. By early 2015 it had placed President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi and members of his government under house arrest. When many foreign embassies packed up and left, the Russians stayed. They met repeatedly with Houthi authorities and members of Saleh's General People's Congress party, who shared power at the time. Saleh was the Houthi-Saleh alliance's primary contact with Russian officials until Houthi forces killed him in December 2017 for siding with the Saudi-led coalition. Moscow closed its Sana'a embassy about a week later.

Russia, however, has proven adept at maintaining some degree of relations with almost all regional and local parties to the conflict. With Yemen's political fate uncertain, it is in Russia's interest to do so. It deals institutionally with the Yemeni government, but receives representatives of other Yemeni groups such as Houthi authorities, the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) or the GPC at lower levels of protocol.<sup>(33)</sup> Moscow aims to protect and advance its economic and strategic interests in Yemen just as it does in the broader region. A Russian-Yemeni economic committee in 2014 laid out new project priorities in oil and gas extraction, oil production, mining, agriculture and the construction of power plants in Aden and Mokha.<sup>(34)</sup> Russian Ambassador Vladimir Dedushkin, noting that Russian geologists had found oil, gas, gold and iron in Yemen, said that the projects laid out have been unable to begin because of the fallout from the 2011 uprising and the current war.<sup>(35)</sup>

Moscow does not rely much on the internationally recognized Yemeni government to help protect its prospective economic interests in the country. Hadi's government is incapable of doing so. It conducts little diplomacy of its own. The war has forced diplomatic contact such as overtures to world leaders from Russia or China to pass more than ever through Saudi gatekeepers. Since 2012, Hadi has visited Russia only once. At that time, in 2013, he had a greater margin to maneuver in foreign policy than he does today. Now, Hadi may want to involve Russia more in the Yemeni scene, but he is unable to act.

---

33) Dedushkin appeared on television from Aden in March 2019 affirming Moscow's support for the internationally recognized Yemeni government and a united and stable Yemen. At the same time, STC president Aiderous al-Zubaidi was in Moscow. An STC honor guard also received Dedushkin in Aden.

34) Vladimir Dadushkin, "The 90th Anniversary of the Establishment of Russian-Yemeni Relations is a Long Road of Friendship and Bilateral, Friendly Cooperation," *Al-Masdar Online*, October 23, 2018, <https://almasdaronline1.com/article/>. Accessed June 25, 2019.

35) Ibid.

## Work Through through the United Nations

At the moment, lacking Saudi approval to directly mediate, the UN Security Council remains one place where Russia can influence Yemen's political outcome on the international level. In April 2015, nearly three weeks after the Saudi-led coalition's military intervention in Yemen began, Russia reluctantly allowed UN Security Council Resolution 2216 to pass. It abstained from voting on the resolution, which demanded Houthi forces disarm and retreat, rather than vetoing it only after considerable Saudi pressure. Vitaly Churkin, the late Russian ambassador to the UN, criticized the resolution as unbalanced after it passed, noting among other criticisms that the sponsors had refused to include Russia's view that all parties to the conflict should swiftly halt fire and begin peace talks.<sup>(36)</sup>

Despite discussions about updating or building on the resolution, the Russians are not in a hurry to do so. They are not looking for a confrontation with the Saudis over Yemen and, like others on the Security Council, prefer to wait for UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths to give them something to build on by securing solid progress on the ground and then advising on what is needed. Griffiths is working to get the parties to fulfill even the modest requirements of the December 2018 Stockholm Agreement, reporting to the Security Council that the Hudaydah ceasefire agreed to in the deal has resulted in 68 percent fewer civilian casualties in the five months after it was implemented compared to the five months before, down from more than 1,300 to around 400.<sup>(37)</sup> Griffiths has reported little other tangible progress.

Russia's diplomatic approach relating to Yemen at the United Nations appeared to shift after King Salman bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud's October 2017 visit to Moscow, the first by a Saudi monarch. Prior to the visit, Russia was vocal about amending any Security Council products, from press statements to resolutions, to ensure they were not dominated by the US-UK-Saudi narrative. When Washington sought briefings on the humanitarian situation in Syria, which would have opened al-Assad's regime to criticism, Russia called for similar briefings on Yemen as a way to deflect attention from Syria and refocus it on Yemen, where Saudi coalition actions would be scrutinized. Since the 2017 visit, Russia has been quieter, leaving the job of balancing Security Council statements to other willing member states, such as Sweden and the Netherlands.<sup>(38)</sup>

One red line remains, however, Iran. By working through the UN Security Council, Moscow is better positioned to look out for the interests of its traditional regional ally, even while Moscow has also courted closer ties with Iran's arch-rival Israel.<sup>(39)</sup> In

---

36) "Resolution 2216 and Debate (Yemen), Voltaire Network, April 14, 2015, <https://www.voltairenet.org/article187360.html>. Accessed June 28, 2019.

37) Martin Griffiths, "Briefing of the UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen to the open session of the UN Security Council, 17 June 2019 (As delivered)," [https://osesgy.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/190617\\_se\\_security\\_council\\_open\\_-\\_as\\_delivered\\_0.pdf](https://osesgy.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/190617_se_security_council_open_-_as_delivered_0.pdf). Accessed June 18, 2019.

38) Confidential source close to the UN Security Council, interviewed by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 21, 2019.

39) Raphael Ahren, "Netanyahu heads to Moscow for fourth Putin parley in a year", *Times of Israel*, June 6, 2016, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-heads-to-moscow-for-fourth-putin-parley-in-a-year/>. Accessed June 28, 2019.

2018, Russia objected to a British draft of UNSC Resolution 2402, which was meant to be a routine extension of sanctions on individuals obstructing the political process. However, it came at a time when the United States was trying to build a case against Iran – by linking it to weapons smuggling to the armed Houthi movement – ahead of Washington's withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.<sup>(40)</sup> The draft resolution included accusations Iran was supplying the Houthis with weapons. Russia vetoed it and proposed a version that restored the resolution to a technical extension, without the Iran language, that passed.<sup>(41)</sup>

Moscow adamantly objects to US efforts to create a multilateral position on Yemen outside the UN framework, where Washington can exclude Russia. In 2016, Washington formed the Quad, composed of the United States, Britain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to apply diplomatic pressure to end the war. A Quad meeting at the February 2019 Warsaw peace and security conference concluded that Iran was having a destabilizing effect on Yemen by providing money, ballistic missiles and advanced weaponry to Houthi forces<sup>(42)</sup> – a view Russia thus far has been able to keep out of UN resolutions. Russia objected more broadly, calling the event an effort to advance a “unilateral vision” outside the United Nations as a way to impose the United States’ geostrategic will in the region.<sup>(43)</sup>

---

40) John Ismay and Helene Cooper, “U.S. Accuses Iran of U.N. Violation, but Evidence Falls Short,” *The New York Times*, December 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/14/world/middleeast/nikki-haley-iran-weapons-yemen.html>. Accessed June 18, 2019.

41) “The Security Council Unanimously Approves a Russian Draft Resolution on Yemen,” *Sputnik*, February 26, 2018, <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/world/20180226>. Accessed June 25, 2019.

42) “Yemen Quad Meeting in Warsaw – Joint Declaration,” press release, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, February 13, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-declaration-on-yemen>. Accessed June 4, 2019.

43) “Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova Responded to a Media Question about Russian Assessments of the Outcome of the ‘Ministerial Conference on a Peaceful and Secure Future in the Middle East,’” press release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, February 18, 2019, <http://ar.mid.ru/1620>. Accessed June 25, 2019.

## RUSSIA'S STEADY RISE

Russia inherited the map of Soviet interests, but not its predecessor's ideological spirit. Moscow is not, however, looking for an ideological partner; doing so would be futile anyway given the political forces in today's Yemen.<sup>(44)</sup> Rather, Russia's foreign policy in regard to Yemen is merely a piece of Moscow's broader, more pragmatic geopolitical strategy to regain influence in the region. Only then can Russia ensure the long-term protection of its inherited Soviet-era strategic interests and its expanding economic interests in the Middle East and North Africa. The fragility of its position became obvious when the 2011 popular uprisings ended in chaos in Syria, Yemen, Egypt and Libya.

Russia's approach to Yemeni affairs differs from its total involvement in Syria, where it stood against the West and Gulf Arab monarchies. On Syria, it thwarted UN Security Council resolutions against al-Assad's regime and intervened militarily to help him prevail. Moscow recognizes, however, that Yemen is regionally a Saudi file par excellence, regardless of how much other countries may intervene. In line with its respect for sustaining national order, it also considers the US- and Saudi-backed Yemeni government as legitimate, whether Russia is engaging at the United Nations or regionally. In moves that could further raise its standing as a force in the region, Russia carefully maintains interactions with the various Yemeni parties.

Russia's desire to regain influence as well as the deepening Russian-Emirati relationship could influence its future steps with the various Yemeni factions. Russia's position has been that Yemen should remain united. However, the Emirates supports STC separatists. One option for Russia could be to help the Emirates by strengthening the status of the STC and the GPC,<sup>(45)</sup> and ignoring other components such as the Islamist and tribalist Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Al-Islah).

Russia also has unfinished business in Syria. Russia and Iran both want a large share in the reconstruction of Syria. Saudi Arabia wants to put an end to the Houthi security threat. Russia has not made any initiative in Yemen, but theoretically it could grant a significant economic interest to Iran in Syria if Iran secures a softer Houthi position and engages Houthi authorities in a peace process that satisfies Saudi security concerns. For the Saudis, the only security guarantee is the disarmament of Houthi forces.

Russia will find it hard to claim the mediating role it desires as long as Saudi Arabia considers Iran an existential threat and sticks with the US. Still, Moscow will continue watching for American missteps to exploit in the hope of softening Saudi resistance. In the meantime, it is engaged at the United Nations, regionally and inside Yemen. Success

---

44) Some academics argue that the secessionist STC is the heir to the socialist ideology, an argument that stumbles on the fact that many of its active members are Salafist.

45) "Deputy Foreign Minister Meets Saleh's Son in UAE," *Sputnik*, April 15, 2018, <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/russia/20180415>. Accessed June 25, 2019.

could position Moscow to reestablish military bases on the Yemeni mainland or islands. That and close cooperation with the Emiratis would move it steadily toward its broader goal, securing footholds along the strategic shipping route through the Mediterranean, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Russia's accomplishments in Syria, its expanded permanent military presence there as well as its growing presence in Egypt, Libya and Eritrea are a start. More possibilities are being pursued in Sudan and Ethiopia. With each step, anchored by economic investment and military might, Moscow moves closer to restoring its global influence and ensuring it can protect its Soviet legacy.

**Mustafa Naji** is a Yemeni diplomat and researcher. He focuses on Russian geopolitical interests and multilateral cooperation in the Red Sea.

*This paper is an edited version of an article that first appeared in As-Safir Al-Arabi.*





[WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG](http://WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG)