

# RUSSIA AND THE GULF: THE REVAMPING OF DIPLOMACY

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## **The Russian visit to Saudi Arabia**

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to the Gulf fell during a period of trials between the new United States administration and the GCC countries, primarily Saudi Arabia. Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's "golden age" came to an end when former President Donald Trump stepped down and was replaced by Democrat Joseph Biden. During the four years of the Donald Trump presidency, the Saudi Crown Prince had a completely free reign on regional issues. Neither the Royal Court's involvement in the assassination of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, nor the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen caused by the Saudi-led coalition, nor the Saudi escalation of regional tension (whether it be relations with Iran or the conflict with Qatar) led to a revision of US-Saudi relations. The previous US administration saw Muhammad bin Salman as one of the pillars of Washington's Middle East policy and, therefore, turned a blind eye to all of Riyadh's adventures. Moreover, Trump, during his 2017 visit to Riyadh, gave Saudi Arabia an "indulgence" in the form of a \$ 110 billion<sup>1</sup> arms contract even amid the repeated reports of the killings of civilians in Yemen by the Saudi-led Arab coalition<sup>2</sup>.

From the Democrats' positions in the American Congress during the second half of the 2010s, it became clear that a Biden win would result in a revision of American-Saudi relations. As it happened, Biden announced the end of American support for the Saudi-led coalition in early February 2021.<sup>3</sup> This was followed by a declassified US intelligence report which implicated Muhammad bin Salman as an accomplice in the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi.<sup>4</sup> In a subsequent telephone conversation with King Salman, Joseph Biden stated that "the rules are changing and we're going to be announcing significant changes"<sup>5</sup> in US-Saudi relations.

Not surprisingly, abrupt changes in relations between Washington and Riyadh leave no other option for the latter than to try to diversify its foreign policy contacts. In particular, on the eve of Lavrov's visit to the Gulf, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin instructed the defense and foreign policy ministries to negotiate with Saudi Arabia and sign an intergovernmental agreement on military cooperation. It is important to note that there is

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no talk of any serious delivery of Russian weapons to Saudi Arabia. The draft document, in particular, states that within the framework of the agreement, Russia and Saudi Arabia will exchange information on issues of mutual interest in the military sphere, cooperate in the fight against terrorism and piracy, and interact in the field of joint training of troops, military education and rescue on the sea.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the intensification of dialogue between Moscow and Riyadh in the field of military cooperation, as well as the reports in the Saudi press that the issue of Russian arms supplies would be raised during Lavrov's visit, are nothing more than an attempt to show the United States (US) Saudi Arabia's multi-vector policy by strengthening cooperation with other players such as Russia.

### **Old problems with a modern twist**

From the point of view of Russian foreign policy interests, it would be completely nonsensical to not try to take advantage of the discord between the old allies and push through their own regional initiatives. The agenda of Lavrov's talks with the leaders of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar did not contain anything fundamentally new, but the new realities in the region meant a chance for at least partial implementation of Russian initiatives.

The most important of these initiatives is Russia's security concept for the Gulf area proposed by Russian diplomacy in the summer of 2019.<sup>7</sup> The Russian leadership proposed a mechanism of collective security that would allow Russia to participate in making important decisions regarding the region, and would accordingly guarantee Moscow that its interests were taken into account. In this regard, Russia emphasizes the need to create a structure that would coordinate its decisions with the UN Security Council, in which it holds the status of a permanent member. Thus, the document states that "the main role in suppressing terrorist movements is proposed to be given to the anti-terrorist

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coalition, in which all interested forces would participate, and concrete actions must be coordinated with the UN Security Council.”<sup>8</sup> In the long term, the Foreign Ministry also proposes creating a structure that would include “key international powers (Russia, China, the United States, India and the EU).”<sup>9</sup> Thus, Russia is interested in creating just such a mechanism of collective security in the Gulf (and only if it is created), which would prevent Moscow’s isolation, but, on the contrary, would give the Russian leadership the opportunity to maintain a dialogue with both the countries of the region and the West.

The Russian Gulf Security initiative has already been repeatedly put on the agenda of Russia-Gulf negotiations. It was last discussed during a series of visits to Moscow by the foreign ministers of the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. However, the previous American administration’s<sup>10</sup> categorical rejection of the Russian initiative reduced its chances of success to zero. Furthermore, Trump’s strategy of uncompromising pressure on Tehran made it pointless to create any collective security mechanisms. According to the US Representative to the United Nations (UN) Kelly Craft, “the UN Security Council has all the tools at its disposal to hold Iran accountable, and we simply have to decide to do so.”<sup>11</sup> Similar sentiments were fully shared in both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.

However, Moscow’s chances of progress on at least some of the initiative’s provisions have significantly increased given the new American administration’s decision to not only revise its relations with Riyadh, but further re-establish dialogue with Tehran and return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), better known as the Iranian nuclear deal. It is unlikely that the Russian Gulf Security initiative will be capable of developing a new mechanism for ensuring regional security, but for Russia this is, rather, the maximum aim. It is enough for Moscow for the initiative to succeed as a platform for establishing contacts between Riyadh and Tehran, as well as other warring parties in the Middle East region.

Lavrov’s other initiatives during his Gulf visit look like an attempt to take advantage of the geopolitical vacuum in the Middle East caused by the transition of power in the United States and stake Russia as an “honest broker” in resolving regional conflicts. In particular,

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Russia is trying to seize the initiative in the Palestinian-Israeli settlement. It is no secret that the “deal of the century” actively lobbied by Donald Trump was perceived extremely negatively in Moscow. The official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, noted that “the deal of the century” cannot become the basis for solving the Palestinian-Israeli issue, since it does not take into account the main elements of the generally recognized international legal framework for the Middle East peace process, fixed in the resolutions of the Security Council and the UN General Assembly and the Arab Peace Initiative.”<sup>12</sup>

After Biden came to power, the chances that the “deal of the century” would remain relevant quickly dissipated. During talks with Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken emphasized “the Biden administration’s belief that the two-state solution is the best way to ensure Israel’s future as a Jewish and democratic state, living in peace alongside a viable and democratic Palestinian state.”<sup>13</sup> For Russia, this is a good signal as it is the “two states” solution that Moscow insisted on over the past years in opposition to Washington. Under the current conditions, the Russian leadership has every chance to declare itself as an important actor in the Middle East settlement and hold a meeting in Moscow in the 4 + 2 + 2 format (the countries of the “Middle East Quartet”, Egypt and Jordan, as well as the countries that signed the “Abraham Accords” - the UAE and Bahrain), with the participation of Saudi Arabia as the author of the Arab Initiative.

It should be noted, however, that the talks in Moscow are unlikely to end the oldest conflict in the region. Donald Trump had much better chances of resolving the conflict (albeit on conditions unacceptable for the Palestinians), since his “deal of the century” was backed not only by noticeably more significant resources, but also by the ability to exert real influence on regional actors. Moscow has neither sufficient resources to sponsor a new initiative, nor sufficient leverage over partners in the Middle East. However, in this case, Russia is not so much interested in resolving the Palestinian-Israeli problem, but in maintaining its position as one of the key powers involved in the Middle East settlement. This explains Moscow’s unchanging position on this problem over the past decades, based on the principle of “two states” and “peace in exchange for land.” In other words, the recognition of other bases for a settlement according to the Israeli scheme would mean a double loss for Russia. First, a departure from principles would decisively undermine the already diminished trust of Moscow in the Arab and



Muslim world. Second, “an unprincipled” settlement “would mean the dictate of the stronger side, Israel, and its” strategic ally”, the United States, and would throw the seeds of a deeper and more destructive conflict into the ground in the not too distant future.”<sup>14</sup>

### **The New triangle: Russia, Turkey and Qatar**

Most of the initiatives proposed by Sergei Lavrov during his visit to the Gulf (on security in the Gulf, the conference on Palestine, the reanimation of the JCPOA) have yet to be tested for their viability. However, Lavrov’s most fruitful meeting in terms of achieving practical results was his meeting in Doha on March 11, 2021 with the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Emir of Qatar Tamim Al Thani, which resulted in the formation of a new “triple alliance” for settling the Syrian conflict<sup>15</sup>.

The Syrian issue was also the leitmotif of Lavrov’s meeting with the leaders of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, however, no tangible results were achieved. This however shouldn’t be surprising. Russian-UAE relations are developing very progressively and neither Abu Dhabi, nor Moscow wants to burden them with contradictions on regional issues. The latest talks at the level of foreign ministers did demonstrate a similarity in the UAE’s rhetoric to Russia, for example, welcoming calls for the return of Syria to the Arab League, as well as condemning sanctions against Syria.<sup>16</sup> However, the UAE’s lack of real political weight in the region meant that their position did not change anything in the Syrian scenario. Even the restoration of relations between Abu Dhabi and Damascus did not give an impetus to financial flows from the Gulf for Syrian reconstruction. Furthermore, the “Caesar” law, which declared sanctions on individuals in Syria and secondary sanctions on any country trading with Syria and came into force in the summer of 2020, completely buried hopes for Emirati investments in Syria.

The Russian-Saudi dialogue on Syria also remains ineffective. First, the success of the Russian-Saudi rapprochement in the second half of the 2010s is largely due to the fact that the parties are trying to ignore problematic issues (including the Syrian one) and solely focus on those issues on which the two parties demonstrate similar views. Secondly, the Syrian issue is of much more fundamental importance for Saudi Arabia than for other Gulf monarchies.

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Therefore, for example, Moscow and Riyadh have failed over the past few years to agree on the restoration of Syria's membership in the Arab League. For Russia, this is now of fundamental importance in terms of finding resources for humanitarian aid and Syria's reconstruction under the conditions imposed by the Caesar Law. However, a compromise on this issue de facto means abandoning their previously held position regarding the Syrian regime and recognizing Bashar al-Assad as the victor. This is fraught with rehearsal costs for a Riyadh which does not hide its claims to regional leadership. Thirdly, in recent years, Saudi Arabia has lost any serious influence on the situation on the ground, which also affects the quality of the Russian-Saudi dialogue on Syria.

In this regard, the Doha alliance of Russia, Qatar and Turkey is largely devoid of all of the above disadvantages. On the one hand, Qatar has sufficient financial resources to implement humanitarian assistance and restore the Syrian infrastructure. On the other hand, Turkey is directly involved in the Syrian conflict and has direct influence on some of the Syrian opposition factions and controls the situation "on the ground".

The creation of a new negotiating format does not mean that the new troika will be able to resolve the Syrian crisis. It may turn out to be unviable, like many other attempts to solve the Syrian problem. However, taking into account that the Astana format has practically exhausted itself, the creation of a new negotiating platform has long been suggested.

In addition, the composition of this new "triple alliance" seems quite logical at first glance. First of all, it includes Russia and Turkey, whose efforts made de-escalation in the region possible and who demonstrate a tendency to compromise to a much greater extent than Iran or Saudi Arabia. For example, the latest agreements on Idlib or northeastern Syria were not adopted within the Astana framework, but thanks to the Russian-Turkish agreements. They are complemented by Qatar, which grew very close with Turkey during its isolation, but still maintains normal relations with Iran, which makes it a potential mediator between Iran, Turkey and the Gulf countries.<sup>17</sup>

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Thus, one can say that the new “Syrian triangle” in general accumulates the interests of each of these countries. For Qatar, this is an opportunity to once again declare itself as an important regional actor and capitalize on its foreign policy assets. For Turkey, this is undoubtedly a more comfortable format than Astana, where the voices of Iran and Syrian regime representatives are becoming louder. Iranian expansion in Syria, coupled with Tehran’s uncompromising position, also weighs on Russia. However, it is also an opportunity for Russian foreign ministry to create its own negotiating platform. Indeed, when viewed in terms of rivalry between various Russian decision-making centers on Syria, Astana actually remains outside the influence of Lavrov’s department given that Russia is represented there by the President’s special envoy Alexander Lavrentiev. Therefore, the new triangle will not replace Astana. However, it can be viewed as an attempt on the part of the Russian Foreign Ministry to take over part of the Syrian agenda, in particular, related to reconstruction or humanitarian issues.



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