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Russian Energy Cooperation with North African Countries

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With the first Russia-Africa Summit in 2019, Moscow announced its historic comeback to Africa after almost 30 years of a limited presence. In fact, however, throughout this period, Russia had been active across North Africa, and energy politics were at the core of Russian cooperation with the local powers. Conceptualizing the Russian energy landscape in regional energy politics, the article contends that despite the dominant perception of Russia as a power-seeking geopolitical expansion through its energy projects in North Africa—primarily, in the oil and gas sector and in nuclear energy—Moscow aims to deepen its cooperation with the local powers mainly for economic benefits. At the same time, energy policy is undeniably an element of Russia's foreign policy strategy. Such policy has limited influence on Israel, but Russia's engagement across North Africa will interface with Israeli interests to the extent this engagement contributes to regional growth and stability through economic development projects, even as it challenges Israel's ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Keywords: Russia, energy, cooperation, competition, North Africa

Introduction

In 2019, when Sochi hosted the first Russia-Africa Forum, global media and Western think tanks predicted Moscow's historic comeback on the continent. CNN announced, "Putin just took a victory lap in the Middle East. Now he's turning to Africa"; Fox News: "Russia building new empire in Africa: 'The United States should be hugely concerned'"; Carnegie: "Late to the Party: Russia's return to Africa" (Ilyushina & McKenzie, 2019; Tilsley, 2019; Stronski, 2019, respectively). The United States and China, as well as a number of European and Arab states, enjoy relative advantages in Africa—from strong cultural connections to significant financial resources—but Russia has its own reasons to believe it has the potential to establish a sustainable presence in the region.

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At the same time that outside observers emphasize Russia's security expansion with the growing arms trade and corresponding agreements with African partners, energy has emerged as a vital element of its foreign policy. In July 2020, following talks with Egypt, South Africa, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov pointed out the importance of Russian cooperation with African colleagues and Moscow's role in facilitating energy security against the backdrop of the growing demand in the continent ("Lavrov Discussed Energy Security," 2020). Lavrov emphasized the role of hydrocarbons and nuclear energy in this cooperation. The latter attracts particular interest: Moscow has opened a number of nuclear research centers in various parts of the continent, contributes financially to their operation, educates specialists in the field, and

generally implements the build-own-operate scheme.¹ Coal and oil extraction and production facilities, along with hydroelectric power plants built in the Soviet period, are currently Russia's most significant contributions to African energy security, but there is potential for growing cooperation and its diversification.

An examination of Russian energy policy in Africa, which in 2018 created the biggest free trade zone in the world and finds itself in process of intense regional integration, must start with the north of the continent, where Moscow seems to have retained some influence despite the evident deceleration in cooperation after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This includes the Egypt-Sudan sub-region and Maghreb which, simultaneously, belong to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

This paper asks: What form has Russian cooperation with North African countries in the realm of energy taken since the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit? It then addresses the implications of Russia's evolving energy ties on the continent for Israeli interests. The main argument is that despite the dominant perception of the Kremlin aiming for expanded geopolitical influence through its energy policy, its projects in North Africa largely reflect Russia's aim to remain an established economic and political actor in the region and pursue energy projects for commercial gain. Moscow works to deepen and diversify cooperation with the local powers through its oil and gas industry as well as nuclear projects, relying on the existing partnership network, with Egypt and Sudan constituting key partners for Russia. While its policy does not have a direct impact on Israel, Russia's engagement across North Africa will interface with Israeli interests to the extent this engagement contributes to the regional growth and stability through economic development projects on the one hand, and challenges Israel's ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean on the other.

The paper first addresses the theoretical framework of Russian energy policy in North

Africa, and then reviews the Russian energy landscape and assesses the priorities of the national energy policy and cooperation in this field. It defines the trends in the current Russian energy policy in the region examined, and finally, determines the potential implications of Russia's activity in the energy sector in the region for Israeli interests.

Theoretical Framework

The dominant theoretical approach for the contemporary analysis of Russia's energy policy appears to be the broad framework of geoeconomics. At its core lies the idea that economy serves as an instrument "to promote and defend...national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results" (Blackwill & Harris, 2016, p. 20). Such a perception is applied to the research of various aspects of Russian foreign policy, from activity in Syria to Russia's presence in the world ocean (Abdi, 2021; Druzhinin & Lachininski, 2021). However, the geoeconomic lens has recently become especially popular considering the highly politicized discussion around the 2021 developments in the Nord Stream 2 project in Europe: some analysts, for instance, from the Atlantic Council, *Foreign Policy*, or Bloomberg, view this project primarily as a Russian geopolitical tool (Makogon, 2021; Chausovsky, 2021; Clark & Millan, 2021, respectively).

An understanding that economic policy of the states claiming the status of great powers aims primarily for geopolitical expansion and extra-regional domination is a continuation of the Cold War mentality in academia. Yet while such a realist approach provides scholars with a working methodology, it is also fair to analyze states' economic policies as their way to gain economic benefits and reach political goals. Based on classic liberal economic theory, this idea has been in the academic library since the establishment of liberal international relations theory, and it remains relevant today as informing the major international economic organizations. Moreover, the idea

is reflected in various theoretical approaches: for instance, interdependency theory basically claims that economic cooperation increases nations' benefits from economic activity while strengthening their political connections and international stability (Marlin-Bennett & Johnson, 2021).

Such a perception seems equally relevant in the case of the Russian energy policy in North Africa. As Wehrey and Weiss point out, "The challenge for Western policymakers is to avoid viewing Russian activism in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa through an exclusively zero-sum lens. The region's political disarray, complexities, and especially the unpredictability of local rulers all present built-in buffers to Russian influence—as they do to all external players" (2021, p. 1). These Carnegie experts also develop an idea that "Russian economic penetration is driven mainly by short-term objectives and a search for outsized financial rewards"—and argue that Moscow neither tends to nor can afford to execute energy projects without commercial interest therein (Wehrey & Weiss, p. 4). Moreover, if Russia's oil and gas industry's capabilities appear to be insufficient in a project, its companies do not ignore the benefits of cooperation with foreign companies. Indeed, there are multiple cases when Western energy companies, including oil giants, are invited to participate in the Russian internal projects. Thus, this paper represents an effort to contest the mainstream understanding of the Russian energy policy as primarily a tool for geopolitical competition, and argues that Moscow itself does not view energy policy exclusively through this prism.

Russia's Energy Landscape

Energy policy, part of Russia's broader international strategy, fulfills more functions than guaranteeing direct income. It is a major element allowing Moscow to balance the Sino-Russian dynamic, elevate its relations with European actors, and find common ground with some Arab states (Trenin, 2019).

As demonstrated below, Russia manages to promote its energy projects globally, which is one of the ways the Kremlin maintains its competitiveness with key rivals.

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Russia's leading industry is the oil and gas sector, constituting almost half of national exports in financial terms and occupying a central role in national business expansion (Energoseti Rossii, 2020). The proven oil reserves of the Russian Federation constitute 6.4 percent of the world reserves; as to gas—24.23 percent. According to Natural Resources Minister Alexander Kozlov, the country has enough oil to extract at the current pace for 59 years and natural gas for 103 years (Energoseti Rossii, 2020; "Head of the Ministry of Natural Resources," 2021). Moreover, there are still unexplored fields: for instance, the Bazhenov shale formation is estimated to hold "74.6 billion of technically recoverable shale oil resources," which would give Russia the largest shale oil resources in the world (Fitch Solutions, 2021, p. 7). Note that some shale projects on Russian territory are realized in collaboration with foreign companies: for example, Sakhalin-1 is executed by an international consortium with Exxon Mobil's subsidiary Exxon Neftegas Limited holding the biggest share, 30 percent (Exxon Neftegas Limited, 2021). This project illustrates that Moscow does not see energy exclusively as a field of competition with the Western companies, and in cases when it is economically beneficial, it welcomes cooperation with foreign actors.

Ninety-five percent of the sector is controlled by eleven major players, which collectively represent the bulk of Russian oil and gas industries around the globe. While currently international attention is drawn toward Nord

Stream 2, Russian companies are also deeply involved in Latin America and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, experts see the Middle East as the most promising area of the Russian oil and gas business expansion, considering the scale of the previous projects in states like Iraq (Pravosudov, 2021; "Russian Oil and Gas Projects," 2018). Russian energy companies have potential for future expansion abroad as well: in the top four of the latest rating of global energy companies by S&P Global Platts (2020) are the Russian Lukoil, Rosneft, and Gazprom—at the second, third, and fourth places, respectively. In the meantime, opportunities are still limited by the sanctions regime imposed after 2014, while the organization of the energy business in Russia limits "access of foreign investments to the vast onshore reserves" (Fitch Solutions, 2021, p. 7).

The coal industry is the oldest energy source in Russia. The state is the sixth largest coal mining power in the world, being one of the most significant Asian and European exporters. Moreover, in 2021, the Russian government spent over \$10 billion on railroad upgrades, which would allow boosting exports to Asia (Energoseti Rossii, 2020; Fedorinova & Quinn, 2021). Other noteworthy fossil fuels are peat and oil shales, and thermal energy constitutes one-third of the energy produced in Russia.

The nation has a well-developed hydropower network responsible for one-fifth of the electricity produced. This infrastructure also serves as an element of water supply, irrigation, protection of nearby objects from flooding, and shipping (Energoseti Rossii, 2020). Modernization and general development of such infrastructure appears to be among the domestic energy policy's priorities, according to the Ministry of Energy (2019). The country also has the competencies and experience allowing it to export the hydropower infrastructure projects: among them, the Vietnamese Lai Châu Dam (in operation since 2016) was designed by the Hydroproject Institute, a Russian hydrotechnical design firm ("Structural Design," 2021); and in 2014, RusHydro, a Russian hydroelectricity

company, signed contracts with two Chinese enterprises agreeing to construct 370 billion ruble (slightly more than \$5 billion) hydropower energy projects in Russia and abroad (Fadeeva, 2014).

The third source of electric power in the state is nuclear energy. Russia has a full range of technological expertise and tools in the field of nuclear power, which allows export operations for nuclear power generation to other countries. For example, in May 2021, “over 20 nuclear power reactors were confirmed or planned for export construction. Foreign orders totaled \$133 billion in late 2017” (World Nuclear Association, 2021). The state Atomic Energy Corporation Rosatom is a confident player in the nuclear power market offering full cycle energy production, as was recently agreed with Hungary (Zalan, 2021). Moreover, Russia is an advanced element in developing its capabilities to build smaller-scale reactors—a promising substitute for a cheaper and safer form of nuclear power (Parshley, 2020). Thus, the nation finds itself as the leading power in nuclear construction abroad: Rosatom holds two nuclear reactor construction projects in Russia and 35 outside of the country at various implementation stages (IAEA).

Renewable energy sources, albeit underdeveloped, appear to be the most promising realm in Russia. In 2019, they provided less than 0.2 percent of the total energy produced in Russia (Energoseti Rossii, 2020). According to the national policy Five Gigawatts, Russia aims to build 5.5 GW of renewable energy by 2024, doubling the production by 2050 (Vavina, 2019). The Five Gigawatts strategy is estimated to cost 752 billion rubles (almost \$10 billion) (Vavina, 2019). Already in 2019, solar energy production grew by 69.4 percent and wind energy by 47.3 percent in comparison to the previous year, although the absolute numbers stay relatively low as the total of renewable energy constitutes 3.6 percent share of the nation’s energy mix (Energoseti Rossii, 2020; Lo, 2021).

The oil and gas industry have been critical elements of Russian foreign policy for years. Some analysts view the many contracts signed with Syria in 2005 as Moscow’s effort to maintain its influence over a traditional partner in the region; likewise, the 2006 arms sales to Algeria “were made up of cooperation projects between Lukoil, Gazprom, and Sonatrach” as forms of the Russian energy diplomacy (Facon, 2017, p. 12). This notion is still present in the Western perspective regarding Russia: for instance, in 2017, the European Policy Center published a policy brief for the EU, “Russia’s nuclear energy diplomacy in the Middle East: Why the EU should take notice” (Marco, 2017).

What seems to drive Russian projects inside the country and abroad is climate change and the need for decarbonization. The major national energy players appear to be aware of this factor: in Russia, companies from the sectors that are hard pressed to reduce emissions—energy as well as transportation and aluminum—like Tatneft or En+ Group are the nation’s leaders to announce net-zero climate ambitions.

Nevertheless, the industry’s interests lie on the one hand in exporting its products, and on the other hand, in investment into fields exploration and creation of such projects abroad. Meanwhile, the coal industry still plays a substantial role in Russian energy exports. The nuclear power plants projects appear to be another significant asset in the Kremlin’s set of offers to other countries (and a source of growing competition with US, French, Japanese, Korean, and even Chinese companies), as well as the hydropower energy segment, albeit to a lesser degree. Finally, the nation is not yet a serious green energy player, so it is doubtful that Moscow can offer its technologies for the projects abroad at a considerable scale.

Russian Energy Projects in North Africa

There are two lenses for the North Africa analysis and hence its place in Russian foreign

and more specifically energy policy. On the one hand, it is the MENA region, where the Kremlin primarily seeks an image of security provider, especially after the success of the Syrian campaign (Mamedov, 2019a). Russia's most significant leverage here appears to be its comprehensive dialogue with very different actors, maintenance of traditional alliances, and development of pragmatic cooperation with the partners normally leaning toward other extra-regional actors. On the other hand, Moscow's current projects in North Africa are a part of Russia's return to Africa. Many African countries share the memory of Soviet assistance in their anti-colonial struggles and ensuing state-building efforts, as well as educational and professional exchanges and ideological connections. Moscow's contemporary international image appears to be another asset for the Kremlin: protesters in Mali and Ethiopia, for example, have been observed in the streets holding Vladimir Putin's portraits, and many evidently admire the Russian leader's ability to conduct foreign policy independent from the West (Letterman, 2018; Kato, 2021). Finally, pragmatism and satisfactory price-quality ratio of the technologies and services provided, along with the lack of a preference for democracy that Western partners often show in business, make Moscow an attractive partner in various spheres. In both dimensions, Russian energy policy is a component of its broader regional strategy that includes many elements, including security, diplomatic, financial, and humanitarian aspects.

Egypt-Sudan Sub-Region

Egypt constitutes one of Russia's key partners in the region, with the Suez economic zone appearing to be Moscow's entrance to the African free trade zone. For instance, in October 2020, three Russian companies—the most significant of them the oil enterprise Gazpromneft—were included in the zone, allowing them to enjoy tax benefits (TASS, 2021). Oil and gas can still be fairly called one of the most significant

directions of energy cooperation between Egypt and Russia. In 2019, gas extraction from Zohr rose to \$23 billion cubic meters, almost doubling the previous year's numbers ("Project Zohr, Egypt," 2021). Another key Russian oil company, Rosneft, owns 30 percent in the still-expanding project in the Shorouk block ("Project Zohr, Egypt" 2021). In this sense, it may seem contradictory that the growth of the Zohr gas extraction will soon allow Cairo to enter the European market—today, Egypt is fourth in liquefied natural gas production in Africa after Nigeria, Algeria, and Angola. This trend appears to clash with the interests of Gazprom and Novatek, major Russian energy players. However, on the one hand, such investments into a competing foreign project can serve as a safeguard against potential new sanctions and limitations imposed by the United States and Europe since 2014. On the other hand, there is an expectation that investment in such projects and construction of gas distribution systems and power stations with the involvement of Russian experts, contractors, and technologies would provide more dividends in the long term. It also serves as an illustration that when considering a foreign project, each Russian energy company considers its own business interest.

In the aftermath of the 2019 Russia-Africa Forum, Zarubezhneft signed an agreement with Egypt, and by October 2020, it was one of a few contracts out of the eleven general agreements signed with various partners in Sochi. According to the terms of the agreement, the Russian company is to be involved in drilling and construction at the Egyptian offshore blocks of Sereu and EGZ (TASS, 2019). In addition, in December 2020, in cooperation with the Italian ENI, Lukoil, another major Russian company, discovered a new oil field at the Meleilha concession in Egypt (TASS, 2020). As ENI estimates its potential, the new field could add 10,000 barrels to the daily production in the area (TASS, 2020). These examples demonstrate that Moscow relies confidently on its traditionally well-developed means of

intensifying cooperation with Egypt, while also managing to collaborate with other extra-regional actors. The case of the ENI and Lukoil cooperation in Egypt, Russia's key regional partner, illustrates the idea presented above: for Moscow, energy policy is not exclusively a field of strict competition, especially with the Western actors, as such collaboration brings evident economic benefits.

Meanwhile, the most promising Russian-Egyptian energy project deals with the El Dabaa nuclear power plant. According to the Chairman of the Egyptian Nuclear Plants Agency, Amgad al-Wakil, the license for Rosatom is expected to be issued in the second half of 2022, but the project started years prior ("Egypt Postpones," 2020; "Egypt Plans," 2021). In 1980, El Dabaa was chosen by the nuclear energy commission as the best location for the future power plant ("Egyptian Nuclear Power Plant," 2010). Having signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Egypt expected external support for its peaceful nuclear energy projects. However, after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, Cairo closed the program until 2007 when the government relaunched the national nuclear projects, and joint Russian-Egyptian work on it officially started in 2015 (Bertell, 2008; Shay, 2018). The major part of investments for the \$25 billion project comes from Russia. Moreover, the project is partially funded with the loans that Moscow provided to Cairo—and Russia expects to be repaid by 2045, according to the most optimistic assessments. Such a long-term basis for mutual work will ultimately dwarf the largest achievement of the Russian-Egyptian cooperation to date—the High Aswan Dam, which still produces 5 percent of national electricity supplies (El-Marqaby & Mustafa, 2020).

Moving southward from Egypt, prospective Russian energy cooperation is evident in significant infrastructure projects such as the planned Russian naval facility in Sudan. The project has been frozen since late May 2021, as the new Sudanese government intended

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to reconsider it, but two months later the parties reconfirmed that the ratification of the agreement is (still) expected shortly (Foreign Affairs Ministry of the Russian Federation, 2021). Energy provision for a project of this scale is vital, considering the dislocation of air defense and electronic warfare systems as well as repair shops and numerous social infrastructure projects, such as medical or desalination facilities for 300 soldiers. Moreover, the area in question is located close to Port Sudan with a population of 600,000 and existing challenges related to energy provision. There is evident demand for energy that would presumably be met by diesel generators (with fuel most likely supplied directly from Russia) as had been the practice on Soviet military bases abroad—and in some instances continues to be, for example at the Khmeimim air base. However, some Russian analysts see this kind of project as an opportunity for experiments with green energy, following the global trend—the United States is already installing solar batteries at bases located in a similar climate (Tingley, 2021). Hence, the potential growth of large-scale infrastructure projects in areas lacking energy provision creates more demand for Russian energy products. Meanwhile, there are two factors that could prevent the project from materializing: on the one hand, it is Washington's resistance that caused the freeze of the deal in May 2021; on the other hand, the current regime's instability, which, for instance, was demonstrated by the October 2021 Khartoum protests, threatens any long-term projects (Africanews, 2021).

This goes hand in hand with the media reports, however rare, on Moscow's intentions to increase its extraction activity in the area, for instance, by signing an agreement for natural gas exploration in the Red Sea in 2018

(“Sudan, Russia Ink Agreement,” 2018). As for the oil companies, in July 2018, Rosgeology, the national holding responsible for all the state exploration enterprises, and the Ministry of Oil and Gas of Sudan agreed on the exploration and development of Block 15 on the shelf of the Red Sea (“Gazprom Neft,” 2018). As for the Russian-Sudanese plan of a nuclear power plant construction, such an agreement was signed in 2017, but since then no real action was taken in this direction, as the transit period in Khartoum does not allow realization of such large-scale projects (AFP, 2017).

Energy cooperation with Ethiopia bears noting, especially regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) on the Blue Nile as one of the most resonant energy field-related projects in the region. Russia has consistently called on the parties to negotiate, offering itself as a mediator in this process, while not explicitly supporting any one country. It may become a relative advantage in Moscow’s dialogue with Addis Ababa in comparison to Washington, which cannot help but react to the violence in Tigray: by May 2021, the United States limited its economic and military aid to Ethiopia and imposed visa restrictions for Ethiopian and Eritrean officials (Gebre & Marks, 2021). At the same time, it is hard to overestimate the value for Russia of sustainable dialogue with Egypt, and thus, the need to balance its rhetoric in this regard: in August 2021, Moscow explicitly denied taking Ethiopia’s side in the conflict over the GERD. Previously, Vasily Nebenzya, Russia’s Ambassador to the United Nations, emphasized the importance to avoid the use of force by Cairo, which some Egyptian officials interpreted as a betrayal in the GERD dispute; in this context, some note that in 2019, Russia supplied Ethiopia with its Pantsir-S1 air defense combat vehicles (“Russia has Delivered,” 2019).

While Russia normally does not resort to the issue of human rights in its foreign policy rhetoric and business projects, there is another factor affecting its non-confrontation with any of the parties of the tensions in question.

Following the trend of the previously signed agreements, in April 2021, Rosatom and the Ethiopian Ministry of Innovation and Technology signed a new memorandum of understanding to enhance the parties’ cooperation in the field of nuclear energy (“ROSATOM and Ethiopia,” 2021). The second most populated African country could potentially have a significant source of renewable energy that would stimulate the economy and contribute to the “basic and applied research related to the peaceful use of nuclear energy, production of radioisotopes and their use in industries, medicine, and agriculture” (Kassa, 2019, p. 3). However, considering the foreign aid cuts and financial prioritization of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project, this cooperation must only be seen in the long-term perspective.

Therefore, Egypt remains at the heart of Russia’s energy cooperation not only in the sub-region in question but in North Africa in general. Diversified forms of cooperation in the sector—from the developing oil and gas projects to the multilevel contributions to the long-term civil nuclear energy program—reflect the pattern Moscow would want to apply to other countries. The example of the intensifying civil nuclear energy cooperation with Addis Ababa illustrates this point. While the internal political changes in Sudan and Khartoum’s search for more beneficial partners may affect the previously reached agreement on the naval facility, this kind of infrastructure project appears to hold promising opportunities for growing cooperation in the energy field.

Maghreb

Although Russia’s presence in the Maghreb seems less dominant than in the more eastern parts of the Middle East, the Kremlin and a number of Russian companies are active in various energy fields in the region. The proliferation of civilian nuclear projects faces more challenges in the Maghreb in comparison to the Egyptian-Sudanese sub-region, although the low carbon footprint, and in general, green

energy orientation is the inevitable trend North Africa must prioritize sooner or later. Russia retains its traditionally pragmatic and intense cooperation with Algeria, despite a certain ambiguity regarding this partnership and the evolution of its energy projects. Meanwhile, Moscow manages to maintain its mild connections with Morocco and Tunisia in the field. Finally, the new Libyan government promises more stable opportunities for all interested parties, and Moscow, although not the leading actor, can still carve out a claim in Libyan energy projects.

Algeria

Algiers is traditionally the most robust partner for Moscow in the region, partially due to the historic similarities in political orientations, and the parties' cooperation in the energy field is no exception. Thus, one of the key participants of the 2016 economic forum "Russia-Algeria: effective strategic cooperation" was Alexander Novak, Russia's Minister of Energy (2012-2020) ("Alexander Novak," 2016). Representatives of the Russian major energy giants such as Gazprom, Rosneft, Rosatom, and Lukoil visited Algiers as a part of the delegation of then-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, as they did in 2017 (Balmasov, 2017).

Since the 2000s the Russian Ministry of Energy has raised the idea of creating a mutual civil nuclear energy project in Algeria—a country evidently struggling due to a dependency on oil and gas (Balmasov, 2017). Today they represent 90 percent of the national exports, which damages the hard currency reserves that dropped from \$180 billion in 2014 to \$50 billion in 2021 (AFP, 2021). There does not seem to be intensive growth of cooperation: most recently, in 2020, Algeria's Sonatrach signed a memorandum of understanding with Lukoil on possible partnerships and extraction as well as joint investment abroad (Reuters, 2020a). Simultaneously, there is not much competition between Russia and other potential providers of low carbon footprint energy in Algeria, so it does

not come as a surprise that in 2017, the parties signed a memorandum on civil nuclear energy expert education by Rosatom (Rosatom, 2017). The Russian-Algerian partnership is considered flexible and pragmatic (Mohammedi, 2021); still, the parties' cooperation in the energy sector remains ambiguous.

Libya

Libya is gradually restarting legal natural resources extraction. The industry has sustained massive damage since 2011, at first, by the insecurity created by the expanding armed conflict and growing violence in general; later, through the rivals of the new power actors claiming control over the resources (Barltrop, 2019). Currently, the nation is becoming a more relevant point of interest and competition among the players in North Africa, especially among companies previously operating in the country. The general perception of Moscow's role in the Libyan civil war is that the Kremlin supported Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) through both unofficial channels like the Wagner Group fighters, and official ones, especially in 2016-2018; exemplifying the approach was the meeting between Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu and Haftar, in November 2018 (Murtazin, 2018). Nevertheless, Moscow managed to maintain its dialogue with Haftar's main opponent, Fayez al-Sarraj, who later became the prime minister of the Government of National Accord (currently replaced by Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh). In 2017, the Libyan Oil Company signed an agreement with Rosneft, and in 2019 Tatneft resumed its work in the Hamada basin, following several agreements on field exploration and electrification signed at the Russian-African forum. Finally, in October 2020, Gazprom restarted its joint project with Wintershall Dea in the Sirte Basin (Mamedov, 2019b; "Libya," 2020).

While Moscow stays conscious of the oil-associated business in Libya, the already-established connections with this North African country and the Libyan Oil Company, as well

as the complicated regional dynamics of the Western parties and Turkish involvement, do not allow Russia to ignore the inevitable risks. If during the state of dual power in Libya, with the two central banks, investments appeared unreliable, now, in the aftermaths of the 2020 Berlin Conference, as well as the relative stability of the current regime, one may expect a new wave of interest in this North African state. Developing economic projects and securing the already existing investments appear to be among the current Russian interests in the country. Moreover, from a strategic point of view it is important for the Kremlin to make sure that Libya is not won over solely by one party involved in one of the most internationalized conflicts of nowadays, especially the West countries or Turkey (Arnold, 2020).

Morocco and Tunisia

For better or worse, examining Russian cooperation with its partners anywhere in the world is still impossible without the context of the 20th-century bipolar confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States, and North Africa is no exception. As such, one should address Moscow's dialogue with the parties that traditionally favor aligning themselves with Washington. When it comes to Morocco, Russia's share in the kingdom's energy sector has increased significantly in recent years. In 2020, for example, the Russian share in Moroccan coal import was 87 percent, showing significant growth compared to the previous year (57 percent) (Preston, 2021). In this field, Russia—namely, companies like Siberian Coal Energy Company and Kuzbassrazrezugol—managed to outrun the previous leader, the US, which Argus explains is due to exporters' coal price spreads. As in the case with Algeria, 2017 was the year Moscow articulated its intentions to boost cooperation with the kingdom in other energy sectors: the parties examined not only renovation and expansion of coal-fired power plants, but also Russian enterprises' potential participation in gas projects, installation of

Russian power lines, and establishment of new power stations ("Morocco, Russia," 2017). The same year, Rosatom and the Moroccan Energy Ministry signed a cooperation agreement ("Rosatom Signs Agreements," 2017). However, other than a number of meetings emphasizing the importance of cooperation in various fields, including energy, not much seems to have followed the 2017 agreements (Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation, 2021).

As for Tunisia, the most significant achievement in cooperation was reached in 2016, when the parties signed an intergovernmental agreement on peaceful uses of atomic energy (Theron, 2016). Moreover, while Russia barely entered the top ten Tunisian import sources, trade with the country is dominated by petroleum products (Trend Economy, 2021).

A number of political contradictions limit expansion of Russian cooperation with the states discussed. First, in the Maghreb's Cold War between Morocco and Algeria, Russia undoubtedly aligns with Algiers—not only due to the energy cooperation, but also thanks to the arm sales: Algeria is the third main recipient of Russian arms, constituting 15 percent of the Russian arm exports in 2016-2020 (Wezeman et al., 2021). Thus, the growing tensions between Rabat and Algiers in the context of the Western Sahara dispute may indirectly distance Moscow from the kingdom. The fact that Morocco is traditionally aligned with the West contributes to such limitations. Moreover, there are great hopes for the Kingdom's energy transition as Rabat seeks to export solar and green hydrogen energy to Europe in the future, promising potential competition for this energy market with Moscow (Baumann, 2021). Meanwhile, Tunis appears concerned about the Russian involvement in Libya: Washington is Tunisia's primary partner in building its army's operational capability, while Moscow is seen as a destabilizer of the situation in the neighboring country ("US Eyes Use of Security Brigade," 2020).

Implications for Israeli Foreign Policy in North Africa

Russia's activity in the region raises some questions for Israeli policymakers. First, despite Russia's often tense relations with Israel's key ally, the United States, its strong presence in the existing supply chains in North Africa and its energy cooperation and projects with the local powers ostensibly have a positive influence on regional stability. This corresponds with Israel's priorities, as Jerusalem seeks recognition and expansion of cooperation networks in the area. More specifically, Russian regional energy policy contributes to local stabilization through economic means and sustainable development in the form of bigger employment provision and an increase in the quality of life, which presumably reduces the drivers of radicalization. Russian companies traditionally rely on the local labor force: for instance, the Rosatom nuclear power plant project in Egypt will not only provide an affordable and long-term source of electricity, but is also estimated to create about 3,000 new jobs and 10,000 indirect working places ("ROSATOM and NPAA," 2021). Moreover, during the construction works, the El Dabaa project expects "the total number of construction and installation personnel to be about 25,000 people, including more than 11,000 skilled workers. At the same time, 70 percent of workers at the construction stage is planned to be the local population of Egypt" ("ROSATOM and NPAA," 2021). Therefore, Russian energy involvement in the region appears to benefit Israel to the extent it reinforces stability and sustainable development in its neighbor and strategic partners, which is especially relevant in the context of the Abraham Accords and Israel's normalization of its bilateral relations with Sudan and Morocco.

Second, the El Dabaa nuclear project raises concerns dealing with the climate change. The facility is planned for coastal areas, and thus the issue of the rising sea level may affect its safety and the ecological state of the neighboring area (Rezzonico & Parthemore, 2019). Rising

sea level along with sinking landmass threaten Egypt's most ambitious energy project, and in this context, safety of the facility's operation and nuclear materials storage falls within Israel's interests in its ecological security.

Finally, in the context of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, Russia plays an ambiguous role for Israel. On the one hand, Moscow seems to demonstrate non-alignment with any specific camp and to balance its cooperation with different parties. Moreover, its presence fulfills the function of any extra-regional actor in the area: it is beneficial for all the participants of the Forum, including Israel, as international actors deter Turkey and its expansionist intentions. The areas not exposed to the large foreign companies' activity experience the risks of Turkish involvement, as regularly happens in the disputed Mediterranean waters off Cyprus (Reuters, 2020).

Russian companies traditionally rely on the local labor force: for instance, the Rosatom nuclear power plant project in Egypt will not only provide an affordable and long-term source of electricity, but is also estimated to create about 3,000 new jobs and 10,000 indirect working places.

On the other hand, one may see a potential clash of Russian and Forum participants interests: growth of gas production in the area and, thus, the potential diversification of the gas supplies in the Middle East and to Europe. The European market is vital for Moscow seeking to overcome the economic pressure created by the sanctions after 2014. Rosneft remains a significant stakeholder in Egypt with its Zohr gas field—a competitor of Israel's Leviathan and Tamar fields. Meanwhile, there is an understanding that the Forum's parties question Russian companies' "activism" and its impact for the regional stability in the area exposed to "long-standing conflicts, the absence of maritime border demarcation," and regional competition (Mamedov, 2021, p.

7). External influence is another factor as the US views East Mediterranean gas as a tool to outbalance Russia's influence in Europe: that is why at the Rome Mediterranean Dialogues (MED) 2020 international conference, Minister Lavrov pointed out that Russia stands for the implementation of energy projects "diversifying gas supply routes to Europe," but does not accept "political bias in cooperation in this sphere" (Russian Foreign Ministry, 2020, p. 16). Therefore, Russian involvement in the East Mediterranean gas cooperation and supply chains can be ambiguous for Israel and creates opportunities for cooperation and mutual projects as well as tensions stemming from competition around the gas exports.

Russian energy cooperation with North African states provides populations with more affordable electricity power, contributing to greater quality of life in the area.

Conclusion

While geoeconomics remains the dominant theoretical approach to Russian energy policy, this article contests this framework and argues that for Moscow, energy is not just a field of strict competition, and national energy policy is not a primarily geopolitical tool. Rather, while energy is an element of Russian foreign strategy, Moscow cannot afford to execute cooperation without commercial interest in it. In addition, Russia does not avoid cooperation with other Western energy players when the national industry's resources prove insufficient. The article agrees with the authors calling for Western policymakers to free the perception of the Russian energy policy from the Cold War paradigm and to approach it as a policy aiming primarily for economic benefit.

The paper's central research question considers how one can characterize Russian energy cooperation with North African states. Russia's energy landscape demonstrates that the nation has a diversified set of energy tools to

employ in its foreign policy strategy. Introducing them to North Africa, Russia feels the most confident in the Egypt-Sudan sub-region, deepening oil and gas extraction cooperation, diplomatically balancing among its partners in the question of the conflict around the GERD, and promoting civil nuclear projects. It counts on the most ambitious projects of the El Dabaa nuclear power plant on the territory of its key ally, Egypt—even though in the Egypt-Sudan sub-region Moscow faces obstacles in its energy policy, from political instability to external pressure, for example, Khartoum freezing the naval facility project pushed by Washington. Meanwhile, in the Maghreb, Russia maintains its traditional yet ambiguous ties with Algeria, participates in the competition for the Libyan market, and makes a noteworthy effort in promoting its energy cooperation with the traditional US allies such as Morocco and Tunis. Meanwhile, the Moroccan-Algerian tensions, Tunis' concerns about the Russian involvement in Libya, and the powers' growing orientation on green energy limit Moscow's energy cooperation expansion in the Maghreb.

As for the potential realms of cooperation and clash of interests between Russia and Israel in the context of Moscow's activity in North Africa, Russian involvement in gas affairs across the Mediterranean indirectly affects Israel's investment in the Eastern Mediterranean gas fields and its plans to expand its markets. As any other extra-regional power, Russia legitimizes the negotiations process around the Eastern Mediterranean that excludes Turkey, while maintaining an ambiguous agenda toward Ankara. Moreover, Russian companies appear to be significant actors in the area and elements of the existing supply chains in gas trade. Israel is interested in sustainable development across the region, especially in countries considered allies and partners. Russian energy cooperation with North African states provides populations with more affordable electricity power, contributing to the growth of the quality of life in the area. Finally, economic projects of the

scale Russia is currently developing in the area, especially in the Egypt-Sudanese sub-region, provide the local population with employment, as Russian companies tend to hire locals. Such a contribution is significant in countries like Egypt where unemployment appears to be one of the major factors contributing to radicalization.

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Note

- 1 According to Thomson Reuters Practical Law Glossary (2021), this is a build-own-operate (BOO) project delivery mechanism that does not imply transfer of a project to a government entity, or in this context, Russian stakeholders, at the end of the term.