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## **Russian Nuclear Diplomacy in the Middle East**

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During a visit to Egypt by Russian President Vladimir Putin in February 2015, Egypt and Russia signed a memorandum of understanding to cooperate in building the first nuclear power station in El Dabaa in northwestern Egypt. On November 19, 2014, the two countries signed an agreement that Russia would build four nuclear power plants in Egypt with a capacity of 1,200 megawatts each. Indeed, the discovery of a substantial reservoir of natural gas in Egypt's economic waters will diminish the incentive to switch to nuclear energy production, as will the improved relations between Washington and Cairo; recently a rapprochement between the two countries occurred, with the removal of some of the American restrictions on arms sales that had been imposed on the el-Sisi regime. However, after the agreement with Russia was signed, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi declared in a speech recorded on Egyptian television that, "This was a long dream for Egypt, to have a peaceful nuclear program to produce electricity. This dream was there for many years and today, God willing, we are taking the first step to make it happen."

The main stumbling block in the way of the project is the question of financing. Egypt's economic situation does not enable it to carry out a venture of this size, and it is doubtful that Saudi Arabia, which economically supports the el-Sisi regime, can finance this ambitious project, given the considerable budgetary pressures it is experiencing due to the drop in oil prices. El-Sisi declared that Egypt would repay the loan by selling the electricity produced by the reactors after they begin operating in 2022. Moscow is supposed to lend Egypt the money needed to build the reactors as part of a comprehensive agreement, which includes the supply of fuel for the reactors, maintenance, training, and repairs.

Against this background, and in addition to Russia's efforts to end the war in Syria, it is imperative to look at the other Russian diplomatic track in the Middle East – plans to build civilian nuclear reactors. Russia is not a new player in the civilian nuclear market in the Middle East, but the desire of Moscow and countries in the region to

cooperate in this sphere clearly has become more acute, as reflected in growing Russian involvement in the sale of nuclear know-how and facilities in the region. This mode of action fits in with the overall Russian efforts to rehabilitate and strengthen its ties with countries in the region, following the freeze in relations during the “Arab Spring.” This effort is intended to serve Russia’s array of objectives in the region as well as in the global theater as they pertain to its rivalry with the United States. Russia’s military intervention in Syria is conducted within the framework of a coalition with Assad’s army and Iran and its satellites, as part of its efforts to preempt the West in establishing diplomatic and economic cooperation with Iran. Russia’s actions in Syria are designed to combat Islamic terrorism, especially the Islamic State, in order to reduce the threat of extremist Islamic groups that are attempting to expand their influence within Russia’s territory. Russia’s major objective, however, is within the international sphere, and this includes influencing the future of Syria and taking a leading role in shaping the region. Indeed, Russia is interested in engaging in dialogue with the West, *inter alia* by obtaining bargaining chips for promoting a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East (Syria first) and Eastern Europe.

For Egypt, and not only for her, the Russian nuclear option is attractive because it does not present the demands and restrictions that are attached to the nuclear cooperation with the West. Relations between the United States and several of its traditional allies in the region have soured in the past five years; it appears that these allies are signaling to the American administration that they have other options, including nuclear ones. Egypt’s desire to develop a nuclear program is also linked to its determination to find long-term solutions for growing energy needs, such as building a civilian nuclear capacity like the one Iran is building, following its nuclear agreement with the major powers. Nuclear cooperation with these countries is a vital interest for Russia, which seeks to use this cooperation to overcome its budgetary distress, which has been aggravated by plunging oil prices. Russia also may fear that the nuclear agreement signed between the major powers and Iran is liable to open up Iran for competition with other western players with relevant capabilities and drive Russia out of the Iranian market. Turning to alternative markets could be one of the Russian responses to the new conditions that are liable to emerge in the region with the ratification of the agreement with Iran.

Russia is therefore increasing its cooperation in this area not only with Egypt, but also with Iran. According to reports, Iran plans to build two more nuclear reactors in Bushehr with Moscow’s assistance, near the site’s existing reactor, which has been active since 2011. In addition to Iran, Russia has signed various agreements, some to build reactors and others to transfer know-how to US allies in the region. Rosatom, the Russian nuclear corporation, has already begun building four reactors with a capacity of 1,200 megawatts each in Akkuyu, Turkey, with the first reactor slated to hook up to the

electricity grid in 2023. The future of this project is uncertain, however, given the crisis that broke out between Russia and Turkey after Turkey took down a Russian plane.

Jordan is seeking to build civilian nuclear capacity, due to its growing demand for energy, the country's lack of oil reserves (90 percent of the energy sources Jordan consumes is imported), and the prolonged disruption in the oil supply from Iraq and gas from Egypt. In March 2015, Jordan signed an agreement with Rosatom for the construction of two reactors, the first of which is scheduled to begin operating in 2024, and the second in 2026. The cost of the transaction is approximately \$10 billion. Jordan will own 51 percent of the reactors, and the rest will be under Russian ownership. Jordan, which initially asked Washington for assistance, began negotiating with the Russians after rejecting an American demand that it not operate a nuclear fuel cycle on its territory. When this essay was written, the parties had not yet reached agreement on the particulars for financing the project.

Saudi Arabia has also launched a civilian nuclear program, which it claims is designed to meet its growing energy needs; at the present rate of consumption, Saudi Arabia is liable to find itself supplying most of the oil it produces for its own internal needs by the end of the next decade. Saudi Arabia is seeking external aid in order to obtain the same capability that the Iranians and others in the region are developing, or are about to develop. For this purpose, a number of ventures have been founded in the kingdom, and agreements have been signed – the most recent one with Russia. In June 2015, the two countries signed an agreement that Russia will build and support a civilian nuclear program in the kingdom. This is not the first agreement between the parties in the nuclear field, and it is not at all clear whether it will improve the relations between them, given the tension that has prevailed in recent years, mainly because of the conflicting positions of the two in the civil war in Syria and the Russian support for Assad. Saudi sources insist, however, that “Russia will play a key role in the kingdom's ambitious nuclear venture.”

Beyond the nuclear cooperation between Egypt and Russia, Egypt is procuring advanced warplanes from Russia, including the S-300 anti-aircraft defense system. Iran is also expected to arm itself with a system of this type, as well as advanced warplanes and other weapons systems. In addition to its nuclear cooperation with Russia, Saudi Arabia is also liable to expand its procurement of advanced Russian systems. Following Russian military intervention in Syria in a coalition with Iran, Israel recently has been faced with the combined forces of the Syrian army, the Iranian army, and Hizbollah, backed by the Russian military presence in Syria.

In testimony that has not received much media coverage, Ed Royce, a US congressman and the chairman of the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, asserted that the ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to the United States had told him that

his country “no longer felt bound” to refrain from enriching uranium, following the nuclear agreement signed with Iran. Indeed, it cannot be ruled out that the Iranian precedent will encourage other countries in the Middle East to develop a nuclear program below the nuclear military threshold. “He told me, ‘Your worst enemy has achieved this right to enrich. It’s a right to enrich now that your friends are going to want, too, and we won’t be the only country,’” Royce, said, elaborating on his testimony in a phone interview with the Associated Press.

Israel cannot ignore the procurement of advanced Russian weapons systems by its neighbors, or their accelerated entry into the nuclear field; these plans are liable to serve as a basis for obtaining greater know-how and as a cover for building nuclear weapons capability, certainly if the transfer of know-how includes enrichment capability. For its part, Russia is being careful to maintain positive relations with Israel, which it regards as an important regional player. Israel also regards Russia as a key player in the region, and the two countries are coordinating their moves in order to prevent a clash between their military forces in Syrian territory. At the same time, Israel expects Russia to take its security interests into consideration. The two countries seemingly are willing to engage in dialogue that will address their spheres of interest, but it is doubtful whether Israel will be able to convince Russia in its agreements with the countries in the region seeking nuclear reactors to include restrictive clauses. Furthermore, even if Israel is able to influence Moscow to some extent, it is highly doubtful whether some of these countries, which have hitherto rejected American demands that they accept conditions and restrictions, will accept such demands from Russia.