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A Political History of Relations between Russia and the Gulf States

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Introduction

Russia's contemporary development of political relations with a number of players in the Gulf – namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and the UAE – is taking place as though a continuation of relations between these states and the former United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). Since Soviet contacts with these countries was unquestionably fragmented, this tactic seems an unstable one, and an inadvisable place to be (re) building political ties. Looking at the historic relationships between the USSR and these Gulf states, this paper will show how current Russian policy is building on a problematic past.

Soviet Attitude towards the Smaller Gulf States

During the peak of Soviet influence, the Gulf region was an arena of Soviet-American confrontation. The general atmosphere of the Cold War influenced the formation of Soviet strategic goals in the Gulf region. The USSR had traditionally considered its foremost task in the region as one of assisting governments predisposed to the path of “non-capitalist” development, with Iraq as a central ally.

This allegiance meant that the USSR gave Iraq unconditional support, something that was demonstrated during the 1961 Kuwaiti crisis when the Soviet Union took Iraq's side, even when its leader, Abdul Karim Qasim, demanded the annexation of Kuwait as an integral part of Iraq's territory. On two occasions, the Soviet Union used its veto power as a permanent member of the UN Security Council in favor of Iraq. The first instance was regarding the presence of British armed forces in Kuwait (deployed at the request of the Kuwaiti government to defend its independence), which Soviet officials saw as illegitimate. The issue was brought to the UN. In his speech to the Security Council, Soviet representative Valerian Zorin declared:

“Great Britain tried to justify the deployment of its forces on Kuwaiti territory and concentration of its fleet in this region as necessary measures to organize resistance against Iraqi aggression. But this explanation cannot be admitted because there are no Iraqi troops on the territory of Kuwait”.¹

The second time the USSR used its veto to block Kuwait’s admission to the United Nations was in November 1961, when Arab forces replaced Great Britain’s forces. Both instances illustrate Soviet strategy in the Gulf region, which was influenced by the bipolar system of international relations, which was in turn governed by the confrontation between two super powers. This political context not only influenced global-level politics, but regional policy as well.

Things changed, however, in 1963 when the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with Kuwait. This was a Kuwaiti initiative since the small Gulf state hoped to have Soviet support against Iraqi claims to annex its territory. In 1964, the two countries signed an agreement of technical cooperation, and one year later an agreement on cultural cooperation that also led to some trade development. Despite these engagements, however, the relationship between the two countries throughout the 60s remained limited.

At the time, Kuwait was the only country in the Gulf region that wanted closer relations with the USSR. Permanent danger from Iraq forced Kuwait to be particularly flexible in its foreign policy. Kuwaiti officials considered the Soviet Union as one of the superpowers playing an important role in international affairs; Moscow’s foreign policy was thought to play a significant role in resolving not only global issues, but also regional ones. The Middle East conflict was always a central issue of negotiations between Soviet and Kuwait representatives. Relations continued to develop through the

¹ Security Council. Official reports. Session N 958. July 4, 1961.

60s and into the 70s. Despite positive trends, however, when tensions on the Kuwait-Iraq border heated up in March 1973, the Soviet Union sided with Iraq. The second day after the occupation of Kuwait, Soviet officials leaked information that pointed the finger at Kuwait as the instigator of violence. While the Soviet position eventually softened, it refused to interfere. After the end of the conflict, a Kuwaiti parliamentary delegation visited Moscow. Then in October 1973, the Emir of Kuwait sent the Soviet government a telegram congratulating them on the Great October revolution. Kuwaiti leaders initiated renewed relations with the USSR with the view that they could be a counter-balance for close ties with the West. Kuwait saw the diversification of its military relations as a national interest. This explains the visit of Kuwait's military delegation to Moscow in January 1974.

The Soviets, however, were not ready to develop military cooperation with Kuwait, fearing it could undermine their relations with Iraq. Regardless, Kuwait persisted, and in 1975, another military delegation went to Moscow. Negotiations stalled, and it was only in March 1975 that a military agreement was concluded. According to this agreement, the Soviet Union would deliver missile's launchers and artillery valued at 50 million dollars.² Basic cooperation continued, and in 1981 a delegation headed by Kuwait's Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmed Al Jaber Al Sabah – the Minister of Foreign Affairs at that time—went to Moscow on an official visit. In a joint statement, the two sides affirmed a common view on Washington's efforts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, noting they both perceived Camp David as an obstacle to a settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict.³

In the 1980s, the relationship between the Soviet Union and Kuwait intensified. The shift in relations was connected to the start of the war between Iran and Iraq, along

² Central Intelligence Agency. *Communist Aid to the Less Developed Countries of the Free World*. 1976. 77-10296 (Washington, D.C.: CIA. August 1977). p. 33.

³ *Pravda*. Moscow, April 26, 1982.

with increased instability in the Gulf region, the decline of oil prices on the world market, and the economic difficulties for both countries that resulted. For example, in 1984 when the United States refused to deliver Stingers to Kuwait, the Kuwaiti government decided to enlarge military cooperation with the Soviet Union instead. Soviet leadership accepted Kuwait's request for help and signed a new contract estimated on the amount of 300 million dollars. According to the contract, the Soviet Union delivered the needed weapons and sent Soviet military specialists to help in training Kuwaiti troops.⁴ However, military ties between the two countries remained limited, and throughout the 1990s the number of Soviet military specialists working in Kuwait did not exceed 50 people.⁵ Yet, this period also saw an increase in industrial cooperation. A protocol was signed in 1986, which aimed at mutual participation in the foundation of oil industrial projects in Kuwait, the USSR, and other (principally Arab) countries. The cooperation sought to exploit the finances of Kuwait and Soviet technical experience, but did not see any results.

Instability in Kuwait, caused by escalation of the Iraq-Iran war, encouraged security cooperation between the two countries. In 1987 Kuwait tankers fell victim to a "Tanker's War," when Iran and Iraq attacked tankers of third-party countries aiming to internationalize the conflict and end it with the help of major powers. The government of Kuwait made requests to the United States and the USSR to defend its tanker fleet and help transport oil. The Soviet government responded by chartering three tankers for the transportation of Kuwaiti oil.

⁴ *The Washington Post*. April 25, 1984. p. A 11.

⁵ *Middle East International*. London. August 31, 1991. p.21.

In the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union proclaimed a new foreign policy: abstaining from ideological confrontations with the West, and prioritizing human values and principles of international law.

At the time of the communist party reformation, the Perestroika, Soviet leaders had understood the mistakes of Soviet policy in the Middle East. Among them was the position of cooperation with only part of the Arab world; the oil-producing countries of the Gulf region had been excluded from the sphere of Soviet influence.⁶ In 1985, the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with the Sultanate of Oman. This was enabled through the Soviet aid provided to leftist organizations, including the Dofar movement, based in the territory of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. Kuwait also initiated an expansion of contacts between the Soviet Union and its Arab Gulf partners in the GCC. In 1986 the United Arab Emirates and in 1988 Qatar were added to the number of the GCC members having diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. However, this was a formal act that did not stimulate any real achievements in bilateral relations.

Towards the end of 1987 and the beginning of 1988, a special Soviet envoy visited several Arab countries including the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. After this visit the representative wrote in his government report: "the rulers of Gulf states are very friendly to our country. They are eager to develop cooperation."⁷ This new Soviet strategy was demonstrated during the Gulf crisis, the result of Iraqi aggression against Kuwait. The Gulf crisis of 1990-91 was a watershed moment for the Soviet strategy in the Gulf region, and saw Moscow cooperate with the United States in condemning Iraq

⁶ Brutents K. *Thirty years in the Old Square*. Moscow, 1998. p.368.

⁷ Soviet Foreign Economic Relations in 1989. Statistical Yearbook. Moscow, 1990. p. 400.

and legitimating the use of force against the Iraqi army. As a result of the Soviet position during the Gulf crisis, it also established diplomatic relations with Bahrain.

Russia's Strategy in the Gulf Region

After the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 the Russian Federation, the successor to the Soviet Union, became less active in the Gulf region, with which it ceased to have common land borders. In this initial stage, when Russian strategic interests were not definite, Russia's leadership chose not to compete with the United States and European countries, particularly since they guaranteed regional security and had significant economic and political interests in the Gulf. Russia, like the Soviet Union, continued to consider stability and security of the Gulf region an important factor impacting the situation in Central Asia and Caucasus – the traditional sphere of Russian interests.

The Gulf region had lost its significance for Russian strategic interests in part because Russian strategy in the Gulf region was connected with Russia's general foreign policy goals, and its position in the global system of international relations. After the end of the Cold War Russia had lost status as superpower which meant its regional policy was dependent upon strong partners – specifically the USA and European countries. Consequently, in the Gulf region, Russia tried to avoid any action that might be interpreted as confrontational.

In 1992, the then Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Kozyrev visited all of the GCC countries on a series of official visits. It was the first official visit to the GCC states as a whole, and a sign of Russian willingness to develop full-fledged relations with the group. As one official noted at the time:

“We consider that the visit of our Minister was very significant. It reflected Russia’s plans to implement more balanced policy towards the states of this region and develop relations with these countries for the benefit of their peoples, contributing to the development of world civilization and in maintaining stability and security in the Gulf region, because their policy has always been moderate and reasonable”. The official also stressed, “Russia is ready to make its contribution into maintaining regional security on the bilateral or multilateral basis, using the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for this purpose.”⁸

It was the first time Russia’s leaders had expressed their interest to this regional organization. Nonetheless, developing relations with the GCC was not a top priority. Relations developed, however, with the November 1994 visit of then Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin. It was the first visit of a Russian Prime Minister to the GCC states. During his time in the region Chernomyrdin discussed bilateral relations with GCC leaders. Russia emphasized the mutual interests, in particular economic development.⁹ It was in this period that Russia and Kuwait created an intergovernmental commission on the mutual endowment of investments and cooperation in the field of information. They also signed a Protocol of Consultations between the ministries of foreign affairs and an operating plan of cultural cooperation for 1995-1996. At the same time, Russia and the Sultanate of Oman signed an agreement aimed at increasing cooperation in the fields of economy, trade, and technologies.¹⁰

⁸ *Diplomaticheskii Vestnik*, N 9-10, 15 May – 31 May 1992. p.18.

⁹ *Diplomaticheskii Vestnik*. N 23-24 December 1994. p. 9-10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The first years of the Russian Federation also marked the beginning of military cooperation with GCC states. A defense agreement between Russia and Kuwait was concluded in August 1993. It indicated that Russia was ready to deliver sophisticated weapons, provide opportunities for Kuwaiti officers to study in Russian military academies and participate in joint maneuvers. At the end of December 1993, the Russian Armed Forces undertook 12-day joint exercises with the Kuwaiti forces.¹¹ In the same period Russia delivered to Kuwait a Russian S-300V (SA-12 Gladiator Giant) ITBM system.¹² The agreement was later frozen due to Russia's weak financial capabilities and Kuwaiti passivity towards its further implementation. Besides Kuwait, only the United Arab Emirates developed contacts with Russia and purchased Russian weapons. The UAE ordered 187 Russian BMP-3 as the MICV to equip three battalions.¹³ All contracts between Russia and the UAE were concluded at military fairs in Dubai and Abu-Dhabi. Russia did not try to approach Qatar, Bahrain or Oman at this time, principally because these countries were not interested in contact. This was understandable since following the disintegration of the Soviet Union Russian economic and political power had weakened. By 1995 arms sales to the region had dropped to 2.6 billion dollars and have since declined even further.¹⁴

In 1996 internal opposition and criticism from different circles of Russian society focused on a perceived Russian dependence on Western policies. Russian foreign policy in the Gulf region was turning away from its initial Euro-Atlantic direction toward more of an independent orientation. In January 1996, Yevgeny Primakov was appointed as

¹¹ Defense and Foreign Affairs Handbook. L., 1996. p. 715.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Defense and Foreign Affairs Handbook. L., 1996. p. 1294.

Kanet, R. E. and A. V. Kozhemiakin. *The Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*. New York: St. Martin's 1997. p. 171-172.

Foreign Minister, and supported the diversification of Russian foreign policy. His first move was to activate a Russian role in the East, and reevaluate ties with traditional partners in the Gulf region, as well as create partnerships with all of the GCC members.

Russia's policy was soon shifted by the war in Chechnya, which negatively affected the relationship between Russia and the Gulf countries. This was principally because Russia believed these states were financial supporters of rebel groups in the Caucasus. More specifically, this was connected with an event that took place in Qatar where Chechen rebel leader Yandarbiev was killed in February 2004. Yandarbiev was sent to Arab countries to provide financial support to the Chechen insurgents. Two Russian citizens, representatives of Russia's intelligence services, were arrested. They were accused and jailed. In a reaction to their conviction, which was announced on July 30, 2004 by the Qatari court, the Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation issued a statement, where he denied the guilt of Russian citizens. He declared, "The Russian side was continuing its active efforts using political and diplomatic channels to defend the rights of its citizens and their return to their native country."¹⁵

The case was widely discussed by Russian and Qatari press and encouraged an official representative of the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs to criticize the situation in Chechnya. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation issued a declaration, which stated:

"In relation to the speech of an official representative of the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs concerning Chechnya, we should confirm that the appeal to stop military actions in Chechnya, where the fight against bandits and terrorists is ongoing, has been met

¹⁵ RBK March 1, 2004, <http://www.rbcdaily.ru/magazine>.

with astonishment. The realization of this request may encourage the international terrorists and will prevent their ultimate liquidation.”¹⁶

Though Qatar handed the two jailed Russians over to Moscow, the sharp tone of the declaration confirmed the tensions between the countries. This was not the only point of tension, however. Organized crime was also a point of apprehension.

In the late 90s and turn of the millennium, the Gulf region became a transit point for Russian organized crime after the end of the Cold War. The United Arab Emirates in particular became a major center for criminal activities. As a commercial crossroad between Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and Asia, the UAE, with its open business environment, emerged as an important focus for criminal activities. Russian criminal groups also participated in a drug transit. According to Russian press reports in 2004, three Russian citizens smuggling heroin were arrested in Dubai.¹⁷ Dubai also became a major center for financing illicit activities, in part because of the preference of many businesses to deal in large amounts of cash, which makes it difficult for banks to distinguish between legitimate and illegal transactions. Many Russian citizens were jailed for killings and robberies that took place on UAE soil, which made political relationships difficult. Russian criminal groups were organizing the transit of Russian prostitutes to the Arab countries of the Gulf region. Not surprisingly, Russian criminal activity became an obstacle to the improvement of the image of Russia and to the development of ties with the Gulf state.

¹⁶ Newsru.com February 26, 2004, <http://newsru.com/dossier/17842.html>.

¹⁷ Izvestia December 18, 2004, <http://main.izvestia.ru>.

New Tendencies in Russia–GCC States Relations

A new character of relations between Russia and the Gulf states marked the beginning of the 21st century. The new president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, proposed a transformation of foreign policy, one based on practical considerations. Several new features characterized Russian foreign policy during the first period of Putin's rule, foremost of which was pragmatism. According to the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, signed by President Putin on June 28, 2000, Russian policy would be independent and constructive, and the economic interests of the country have the priority.¹⁸ Policy under this new paradigm was articulated as follows:

"Russia will act to stabilize the situation in the Middle East, including the Gulf region and North Africa, taking into consideration the influence of the regional situation on the development of the world as a whole. In this context the primary task of Russia will be a return of its strong positions, especially economic, in this rich and important time for our interests in the region".¹⁹

To implement this task Russia planned to enhance its economic relations with regional states, specifically with the GCC states. In November 2000, President Putin sent letters via a special representative to Bahrain and Qatar, offering Russian support to help solve the ongoing challenges of conflict resolution in the region. The letters also expressed Putin's satisfaction with the nations' common approach with regards to the key problems at both a regional and international level. He also confirmed the readiness of his country to use more effectively the potential for cooperation between Russia and

¹⁸ Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russia Federation in *Diplomaticheskij vestnik*. Moscow, Aug. 2000. p. 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 14.

GCC states.²⁰ During the same period, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, after which both nations changed their stance and proclaimed the Chechen problem an internal Russian affair and opposed any international interference. Meetings between ministers of foreign affairs during sessions of the UN General Assembly became commonplace. In the beginning of 2000, Russia intensified links with Kuwait including contacts between the nations' parliaments. In August 2002, a session of the Russian-Kuwaiti Commission for Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation took place in Moscow. There, the two countries concluded an agreement of endowment and defense of investments, as well as an agreement prohibiting double taxation. Russia confirmed its interest in cooperating in the fields of energy, oil and gas, civil construction, irrigation, agriculture and infrastructure on Kuwaiti territory.²¹ During the visit to Moscow of Kuwaiti Minister of Defense Jaber Al Sabah, in September 2002, an agreement for further development of bilateral military cooperation was made. The Kuwaiti minister confirmed his nation's interest in Russian military technologies and new kinds of Russian weapons, saying that, "Kuwait is interested in Russian modern technology and modern weapons including tanks."²²

Relations were developing not just with Kuwait, however. In May 2003, the Qatari government proposed to Russian gas company Gazprom that they join a large-scale project to build a gas pipeline to the United Arab Emirates and Oman.²³ While in the end the project never materialized, it was an indication of increased mutual interest in cooperation. Indeed, economic relations between Russia and the United Arab Emirates in comparison with the other GCC countries reached a relatively high level. Many

²⁰ Russian-Arab Business Council, <http://www.russarabbc.ru/rusarab/detail.php?ID=1433>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Institute of the Middle East, <http://www.iimes.ru/rus/stat/2003/20-05-03.htm>

²³ ITAR-TASS, May 15, 2003.

Russians were living in the UAE and the majority of them were involved in small and medium-sized businesses, mostly in commerce, hotels, tourism, and cargo transferring. From 1994 to 2003 the volume of bilateral military-technical cooperation between Russia and the UAE exceeded one billion dollars.²⁴ In September 2006 Mohammed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Dubai and Vice-Head of the UAE forces, visited Russia, and Russia's president indicated the progress in the military cooperation between the two countries.²⁵ Relations between Russia and the UAE were developing not only on the federal, but also on the regional level. Representatives of business sectors of the Tatarstan Republic, the Moscow city government, the Chelyabinsk, and Moscow regions made regular visits to the UAE in order to establish direct economic contacts. Enterprises related to the mercantile marine fleet of Saint Petersburg started contacts with the authority of the UAE to use their ports for service and reparation of tankers and commercial ships. In September 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin and President of the UAE Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan negotiated the development of bilateral relations during the first official visit of a Russian Head of State in Abu-Dhabi.

The economic and political contacts between Russia and three states of the GCC – Bahrain, Qatar and Oman – also made some progress at the turn of the millennium. In May 2004, Russia and Oman signed a protocol on the completion of bilateral talks on Russia's admission to the World Trade Organization. The delegation from the Sultanate of Oman participated in the joint meetings of the Russian-Arab Business Council. Oman and Russia expressed their readiness to establish a bilateral Russian-Omani Commission in the framework of the Council. Not long after, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, King of Bahrain, visited Russia in December 2008 on his first official visit, which was described

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ The beginning of negotiations with Mohammed Al Nahyan – the Crown Prince of Dubai and Vice-Head of the UAE forces. President of Russian Federation.
<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23806>

in the Bahraini press as a “defining point in bilateral relations.”²⁶ Then, in February 2007 Vladimir Putin travelled to Qatar for a short working visit. During this visit, agreements concerning the development of consul relations and other protocol questions were signed. In 2008, Russia and the GCC states started preparations for strategic dialogue. In November 2011 a memorandum of understanding was signed during a meeting in Abu Dhabi, establishing a formal mechanism for consultations and cooperation between the GCC as a regional organization and the Russian Federation. It was an attempt to try a new path of cooperation after a long period of mutual neglect. Then, in February 2014 the third ministerial meeting for GCC - Russia strategic dialogue was held in Kuwait. Though meetings were few and far between, and very few tangible results were achieved during these years, they nonetheless can be seen as a significant turning point.

The first ten years of 2000 were marked by intense contacts between the Russian Federation and the smaller Gulf countries. Favorable conditions for this were created by two factors: amelioration of Russian-Saudi relations and the admission of Russia to OIC as an observer.

Russian Policy During and After the Arab Spring

During the political protests in Bahrain Russia kept a low profile. In late March 2011 the Russian Foreign Minister’s spokesman declared the protests “an internal matter” that should be solved through national dialogue.²⁷ Russia declared its readiness to sell weapons to Bahrain when the United Kingdom and France banned deliveries of security equipment because of the country’s crack-down on protesters. Bahrain was interested

²⁶ Bahrain reinforces ties with Russia – Gulf News. Bahrain. Apr 7, 2015, <http://gulfnewscom/news/gulf/bahrain//bahrain-reinforces-ties-with-russia-1.1447458>.

²⁷ “Moscow calls for Internal Dialogue in Bahrain”. Interfax, AUW, March 31, 2011.

in light arms. Rosoboronexport Chief Executive Officer Anatoly Isakin shortly thereafter announced that Bahrain had become a new customer of Russian armaments.²⁸

While there was Russian support for Bahrain against the uprisings, a political rift appeared when it came to Syria. Russian officials criticized the position of the Gulf States supporting the opposition, given Russia's support for Syrian leader Bashar Assad –a Russian ally. Moscow saw the main drive for bringing down the Assad regime as coming from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Some Russian media and political experts used the term the "Wahhabi tandem" to describe the two countries as sponsors of terrorist activity in Arab countries. The situation was aggravated by an incident with the Russian ambassador in Qatar. Ambassador Vladimir Titorenko suffered an assault at Doha Airport on November 29, 2011 on his return from Jordan. While passing through customs control he was attacked by customs security, who made an attempt to confiscate his diplomatic pouch. Titorenko resisted and was beaten. The next day the Russian Foreign Ministry filed a note of protest to Qatar, demanding an official apology from Doha.²⁹ On December 4, Russian Foreign Ministry Sergey Lavrov officially informed Qatari Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani that Moscow would be suspending diplomatic relations with Doha until an apology had been made.³⁰ Russia and Qatar officially downscaled the level of their diplomatic relations. The Arab Spring unfolded amid severe tensions on several fronts between Moscow and Doha; Russia officially criticized Qatar for its role in the Libyan uprising, which violated the arms embargo imposed on the country by the UN Security Council and participated in military operation in this country.

²⁸ Russian Arms Deal With Bahrain Shows Why We Need an Arms Trade Treaty – UN Dispatch August 17, 2011, <http://www.undispatch.com/russia-arms-deal-with-bahrain-shows-why-we-need-an-aarm>

²⁹ Russia breaks Qatar strings after envoy attack scandal. – RT Russian politics, <http://rt.com/politics/russia-qatar-diplomacy-downgrade-059>.

³⁰ Ibid.

The only country among the Gulf States that saw relations with Russia grow was Bahrain. In April 2014 the Crown Prince of Bahrain, deputy commander of the armed forces, and first deputy prime minister of the Kingdom of Bahrain sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa was in Russia on a working visit. During the visit, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) and the sovereign wealth fund, Mumtalakat, of the Kingdom of Bahrain signed a Memorandum on joint investment between the two countries. Then, in October 2014 Vladimir Putin met with King of Bahrain Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in Russia. Putin indicated in a speech made during the visit that the two countries have “regular and ongoing contacts.”³¹ The Russian newspaper *Kommersant* published an editorial during the visit, which said, “Bahrain hopes to activate with the help of Russia the dialogue with Shiite opposition supported by Iran.”³² The relationship between Russia and Bahrain continued to grow. In August 2015 King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa received the Commander in Chief of the Russian Air Forces Victor Bondarev for a return visit. The King of Bahrain affirmed Bahrain’s eagerness to booster bolster cooperation with Russia and to exchange experts in the military fields.³³ The two sides said that they consider the defense cooperation as very important for maintaining security and stability in the Gulf region.

Conclusion

While they have developed, stalled, frozen and re-grown, the relationship between Russia and the smaller Gulf countries cannot be said to have reached a high level of

³¹ President of Russia. Meeting with King of Bahrain Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. October 12, 2014, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/23080>.

³² King of Bahrain came to Formula-1 – *Kommersant-ru*, October 11, 2014, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2588190>.

³³ Bahrain reinforces ties with Russia – *Gulf News*. Bahrain. August 7, 2015, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-reinforce-ties-with-russia-1>.

development at any point in modern history. The initial period of the Russian Federation formation saw a surge in cooperation, but Russian authorities realized the country was not able to participate in the region's affairs on the same level as Western states, and preferred not to cause conflict. The beginning of the new millennium was marked by new attempts by Russian authorities to develop relations with the regional states, but the results were limited. The main achievement was the contracts on arms delivery to the UAE and Bahrain.

These limited gains were stalled by the nations' different positions toward the Syrian crisis, the military operations against ISIL and in Yemen, and some other regional issues. These contradictions are paralyzing the development of relations. Given the current state of regional politics, big changes cannot be expected. Thus, while Russia and the Gulf countries are interested in launching a serious strategic relationship, their efforts have not made much headway in the short or medium terms.

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