

## Analysis

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Founder and Publisher  
**YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN**

Editor-in-Chief  
**ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN**

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432  
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FAX : 24835620/1  
CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 163  
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P.O.Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.  
Email: info@kuwaittimes.com  
Website: www.kuwaittimes.net

## After Saudi attacks, Russia makes its regional presence felt

In the two weeks since attacks blamed on missiles or drones shut down half of Saudi Arabia's oil output, the country that has arguably moved most deftly to position itself for any upside is Russia. Within hours of the attacks, Moscow's state arms exporter said it would hold talks with countries in the Middle East on selling their new anti-drone weapons systems, muscling in on a market long dominated by the United States.

Next month, President Vladimir Putin is set to visit Saudi and the Gulf, a chance to deepen cooperation on energy and oil, drum up investment and promote Russia's Pantsir group of anti-UAV weaponry, the arms systems the state export company will put on display at the Dubai Airshow in November. "Recent events in the world have shown that the effective fight against reconnaissance and strike UAVs, as well as other air attack weapons, is becoming increasingly important to ensure the protection of high-priority facilities," Rosoboronexport said in a press release issued days after the Saudi attacks.

To a large extent Moscow's maneuverings reflect opportunism - Putin seldom misses an opportunity to expose any perceived US shortcoming or to needle his rivals. But it also underscores his growing confidence in projecting influence in the region, building on the role Moscow has played in shoring up Bashar al-Assad in Syria, managing to deal with both Israel and Iran, and selling missile systems to NATO member Turkey despite US objections.

At a news conference in Ankara on Sept 16, where Putin attended a summit with the presidents of Turkey and Iran, his self-assurance was on full display, all but trolling the United States, which sells the Patriot missile-defence system to Saudi, in saying that Riyadh should buy from Moscow instead. "All the political leaders of Saudi Arabia have to do is take a wise decision, as Iran did by buying the S-300 missile system, and as President Erdogan did when he bought Russia's latest S-400 Triumph anti-aircraft system," he said, prompting chuckles from President Hassan Rouhani alongside him. To Moscow watchers, the intent is clear. "Russia is positioning itself as a systemic actor in the Middle East, which means no 'problem' big or small will be left unturned by the Kremlin," said Mathieu Boulegue, a research fellow in the Russia and Eurasia program at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London. "They want to be everywhere and meddle in everything to become an indispensable actor," he said, describing the ultimate ambition as becoming a 'rule shaper' for the region.

### Space to act

While that process has been under way since Putin went all-in by sending troops to Syria in 2015, it has gained strength as the United States has pulled back, first after President Barack Obama sidestepped deeper engagement in Syria despite evidence of Assad's use of chemical weapons, and then as Donald Trump has talked tough but mostly avoided action in the region.

The latest example of that is the Saudi attacks, which Trump has blamed on Iran. After initially saying Washington was "locked and loaded" to retaliate, he has held back from a punchy response, instead tightening sanctions on Tehran further. That leaves open the question of whether the United States is ready to use its military might to defend Riyadh, its closest Arab ally, a gap in commitment that may play to Russia's hand.

"If I were the Saudis, I'd be beating a path to Moscow, beating a path to Beijing, to find somebody more reliable than the United States," said Kori Schake, deputy director-general of the International Institute for Strategic Studies and a former director for defense strategy at the National Security Council. "There are opportunities that Russia will harvest from their investment in Syria," she said. "Showing that they are willing to run risks that countries in the West will not... may be comforting to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia right now."

Schake and others emphasize that this is far from Putin attempting to replace the United States as the overall security guarantor in the Gulf, a role the US has played since the 1950s. It's also the case that Putin is not without problems at home, where he is under pressure to raise living standards, diversify the economy away from oil and improve growth. But it does remind the world that Russia retains geopolitical reach and a readiness to act. Even in Europe, where a cold shoulder has been turned to Moscow since its annexation of Crimea in 2014, there are signs of a shift.

In recent weeks, French President Emmanuel Macron has led calls for Europe and Russia to work more closely together, although he has underlined that EU sanctions, imposed after Crimea's seizure, should not be lifted until Russia takes steps to resolve its disputes with Ukraine. — Reuters

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A picture taken during a guided tour with the Russian army shows damaged buildings in Aleppo on Sept 27, 2019. — AFP

## In Aleppo, reconstruction makes slow start

Among the destroyed buildings of Syria's Aleppo, a battered sign between two army checkpoints welcomes visitors to an area earmarked to become a beacon of post-war reconstruction. "The industrial city of Aleppo thanks you for your visit," it reads. Once the country's powerhouse, Aleppo was devastated by Syria's ongoing civil war before Russia-backed government forces expelled the last rebels in late 2016 after a devastating siege.

As some of the city is slowly rebuilt, the Russian army this week showed reporters around, as Moscow seeks to highlight its role in reconstruction of the war-torn country. Several factories have reopened in the almost three years since the fighting ended in Aleppo, large parts of which were flattened. At Katerji Engineering and Mechanical Industries, 1,000 people are employed in metalworking jobs. About a fifth of the workers recently returned to Aleppo.

"We started work again a year ago and today we have four operational warehouses," said Salah Mitar, the engineer in charge. "We hope to expand to 11 by 2020," he told AFP, as employees bustled around him in one huge warehouse. But Mitar said international sanctions against President Bashar al-Assad's government and associated businessmen meant the factory cannot import sophisticated machinery.

The two main shareholders of Katerji Engineering and

Mechanical Industries - Hussam and Baraa Katerji - are targeted by European Union and US sanctions respectively. The factory was under rebel control until Aleppo's recapture and production ground to a halt during fighting. For the past eight months since the factory re-opened, employee Khaled said he had received a good salary. But "very high prices in town" still make life difficult for him and his family, said the 38-year-old father of five. After fuel shortages the government blames on sanctions, the value of the Syrian pound fell to its lowest level ever on the black market earlier this month.

### 'Customers will return'

Aleppo's UNESCO-listed historic centre and its centuries-old covered markets are also returning to life. The frontline once ran through the old souqs, but today large parts of the historical trading centre have been restored. Workers still shovel rubble in some alleys, as coffee shops and stalls - most still empty - prepare to receive merchandise. Among them, 59-year-old Abdel Rahman Mahmud could not wait to see shoppers back in his two-decade-old shop, where he will resume selling soap and spice. "Customers will return. I'm sure of it. We just need to wait a bit," said the trader, who lost a son in the war.

The civil war has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions since starting in 2011 with the repression of anti-government protests. But, Mahmud said, "our

lives have changed a lot these past few years. Things are a lot better - we have electricity, water."

### Russian pipes and cables

Assad's government has won back large parts of the country from rebels and militants since Russia intervened militarily on its side in 2015. After blistering military campaigns and Russia-brokered surrender deals, Damascus now controls more than 60 percent of Syria and is looking to rebuild with Russian support. Moscow says it has delivered thousands of tonnes of water pipe and hundreds of kilometres of high-tension cable to improve water and power supplies. Its military police on the ground have deterred looters, Russia says.

Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, a longtime Kremlin protegee with vast resources, has offered to fund the restoration of Aleppo's centuries-old Umayyad Mosque after it was damaged in the fighting. But in the east of the city, residential neighborhoods once under rebel control still largely lie in ruin. Flattened apartment blocks lie on either side of deserted streets, dotted only by army checkpoints. And just 10 km away, fighting has continued. The city lies east of the jihadist-run region of Idlib, where a Russia-announced ceasefire has largely held in recent weeks, despite sporadic bombardment. The governor of Aleppo province, Hussein Diab, said fighting wounded 123 people in the province in September. — AFP

## Day of employee of diplomatic service of Tajikistan

In the historical process of formation and development of Tajikistan as a sovereign and independent state, its foreign policy occupies pride of place. The specific historical conditions of the development of the Republic of Tajikistan, the features and content of international transformation over the past quarter century have determined the special importance of the external factor in the life of our society and the close connection of the country's internal development with international reality.

In the controversial situation of the first years of independence, the establishment of external relations and a worthy representation of the newest state in the international arena was one of the most important areas of state building. From this point of view, Sept 29, 1993 is considered a really important date in the modern history of the foreign policy of the Republic of Tajikistan.

On this memorable day from the highly esteemed res-

trum of the United Nations, the entire world community was first presented with creative plans, peace goals and good intentions of the young independent state of Tajikistan as an equal subject of international relations. From the point of view of content, ideas and political aspects, this event has historical significance not only for diplomatic workers of the country, but also for independent Tajikistan.

September 29 in the Republic of Tajikistan is celebrated as "Day of the Workers of the Diplomatic Service of the Republic of Tajikistan". Currently, more than 30 Tajik diplomatic missions outside the country daily seek to protect the rights and interests of citizens and in general to protect the national interests of the Republic of Tajikistan. The activity of the ministry of foreign affairs in recent years to implement innovations in the public service system is commendable and is constantly supported by the Government.

Some time ago, an electronic visa system was introduced in the country, which is one of the first experiments in the Commonwealth of Independent States space and creates favorable opportunities for each foreign citizen to obtain a corresponding visa through consular authorities inside Tajikistan and beyond. It is indisputable that during independence, the ministry of foreign affairs of Tajikistan has done a lot of work to promote the for-

eign policy of the government. It should be noted that before the period of independence, Tajikistan had some experience in various spheres of governance, however there was no experience in foreign policy. The ministry of foreign affairs of Tajikistan, formed in 1944, carried out only some protocol and representative issues. Under the conditions of independence, the structure of the ministry of foreign affairs and the framework of its activity as a government body have significantly changed.

The basis of foreign policy, along with the promotion and protection of national and state interests, is a worthy representation of the country to the world community. Undoubtedly, knowledge, experience, diligent behavior, communication ethics, knowledge of foreign languages, especially the language of the host country, high patriotic feeling and honesty of Tajik diplomats play an important role in fulfilling this task.

One of the key tasks of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic missions is to promote real knowledge of Tajik society, the development processes of its socio-political and socio-economic life abroad. It is no secret that the history of Tajik statehood has rich diplomatic experience, dozens of books and monographs have been written about the features and qualities of envoys or, as the ancestors of Tajiks said, "firistodagon". — Embassy of Tajikistan

## Brotherhood sidelined in Egypt protests

Outlawed and repressed, the Muslim Brotherhood was not behind the recent protests in Egypt, but has sought to capitalize on a new wave of dissent, analysts say. The protests first erupted on Sept 20 after an exiled Egyptian businessman in a series of online videos called for people to demonstrate against President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, accusing him of wasting taxpayers' money on vanity building projects.

The videos by contractor and actor Mohammed Aly tapped into simmering anger against the country's economic woes and went viral, stirring rare political debate across the media and social networks. Analysts in Egypt rule out any link between the Muslim Brotherhood and Mohamed Aly, who has so far refused AFP requests to comment on the situation.

But "the Brotherhood certainly benefited from his videos and their channels exploited what he was saying to portray a negative image of Sisi's leadership," said Mustafa Kamel Al-Sayyed, a political science professor at the American University in Cairo, told AFP.

In the mercurial Aly, the Brotherhood saw an opening for renewed resistance rallying its supporters online. The Islamist group, which has been banned since 2013 with thousands of its members jailed in a crackdown, quickly threw its support behind the demonstrations calling for

Sisi's removal. Many pro-Brotherhood figures have bombarded social networks with hashtags proclaiming anti-Sisi messages and slickly produced videos, highlighting the shortcomings of his rule.

And Islamist-leaning television channels, such as Al Jazeera, and their social media influencers have battled against pro-government loyalists and bombastic hosts broadcasting daily on Egyptian satellite channels.

### 'Idea based on Islam'

Sayyed believes the Brotherhood still holds sway with a sizeable part of the overall religiously conservative population, amid the backdrop of the dire economic situation for millions of Egyptians. "The Brotherhood is an idea before it is an organization and with the deteriorating economic situation for Egyptian society, this idea based on Islam will continue to attract many," he explained.

Founded by Egyptian scholar and schoolteacher Hassan Al-Banna in 1928 as an Islamic charity and political movement, the Brotherhood grew rapidly, spawning offshoots from Morocco to Turkey, many of which remain active today. But in Egypt its political currency ran out after its leader Mohamed Morsi became the country's first elected president in mid-2012 but remained in office for just one tumultuous year after the 2011 revolution that toppled long-time autocrat Hosni Mubarak.

Morsi was toppled by the military in 2013 and Egyptian troops killed some 800 Muslim Brotherhood supporters in a single day in August that year in what became one of the worst atrocities in the country's modern history. Morsi, who only briefly held the reins of power, died earlier this year collapsing in a Cairo courtroom while on trial. "The Brotherhood is hiding behind Mohammed Aly's appeal

because they do not have the capacity to call for a rally," said Amr El-Shobaki, a former parliamentarian and analyst at the state-supportive Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies. "Their capacity to recruit new members has been weakened," he added. Thousands of Muslim Brotherhood supporters have been jailed since Morsi's ouster, dozens executed and many have gone into exile finding safe havens in Turkey and Qatar.

Despite being chased from the political landscape, the Egyptian media often dwells on conspiracy theories that the Islamist group can easily organise and move supporters in from overseas. But Shobaki argued "the Brotherhood wasn't behind or even participated in the small-scale protests on 20 September". "Rather, it was everyday youth, those economically marginalized, that went down" to the streets, he said. Nearly one in three Egyptians live below the poverty line, according to official figures, as the government has imposed harsh austerity measures since 2016 causing prices to considerably soar.

### 'Vying for power'

Seizing the moment however, Sisi himself appeared to blame the Muslim Brotherhood for the protests in a meeting with US President Donald Trump in New York earlier this month. Asked about the small-scale protests, Sisi replied: "The region will remain in a state of instability as long as there's political Islam vying for power". Shobaki maintains if the Brotherhood has any hope of being re-integrated into the political scene in the future, they must shed their "cultish" legacy. "They can reorganise themselves as a political party again like Ennahda in Tunisia or the PJD in Morocco. The idea of this 'divine' group is why they have consistently failed for 91 years". — AFP