



Russia's "Victory Lap" in the Middle East

OE Watch Commentary: On 11 December, Russian President Putin paid a surprise visit to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at Russia's Air Base in Khmeimim; after which he flew to Egypt and then to Turkey, on the same day. The accompanying articles from Middle Eastern sources describe this as a 'diplomatic sprint' or a 'victory lap' for Russia. The passages focus on Russia's expanding military and economic ties with Egypt in particular, and point to this as the solidification of its presence in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean.

The first passage by Soli Özel, a Middle East expert from Turkey, discusses Putin's triple visit and claims that "by visiting Syria, Egypt and Turkey on the same day, Putin sent the message to friends and foes alike that 'I'm in charge of these areas.'" Özel points out that Russia is one of the most important players in the political future of Syria, and that it is the only actor able to conduct dialogue with all the parties to the Syrian conflict. In addition to this presence and influence in Syria, he points out that Russia has also been showing an increasing interest in Libya, and now with the increasing ties to Egypt, he claims that Russia is "really firming up its presence in the region." Özel makes the claim that "a pro-Soviet alliance block that resembles the Cold War is emerging." However, he notes that in contrast to that period, Russia now also has good relations with Saudi Arabia and Israel.

As the second passage notes, during his visit to Egypt, Putin and Egyptian President Sisi signed a contract for Russia to start building Egypt's first nuclear power plant under a \$30 billion contract with Russia's Rosatom. The Russian government will provide a \$25 billion loan for the project and supply the fuel for the plant. The author calls the deal the latest deal in Russia's "nuclear diplomacy" project, which includes plants in Iran, Turkey, Sudan and Jordan. The passage also claims that on 28 November, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev "approved an agreement with Egypt on use of the airspace and airport infrastructure of both countries, raising speculation that Russia plans to lease Egyptian air bases."

Russia's cooperation with Egypt has been expanding, particularly since Sisi was elected president in June 2014. In March 2015, Russia and Egypt held their first-ever joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean, which included the Black Sea fleet's flagship Moskva missile cruiser. In October 2016, the two countries held joint military drills involving airborne troops on Egyptian territory for the first time. In June 2017, the Egyptian Armed Forces received the first batch of missiles for the S-300VM Antey 2500 missile defense system (NATO code name: 'SA-23 Gladiator/Giant') as the culmination of a 2015 deal signed between Russia and Egypt.

Given Russia's presence in Syria and its deepening role in Libya, these relations with Egypt suggest further expansion of Russian influence in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. This is significant because it influences Russian access to the Suez Canal and signals Russia's intent to protect its future operations in the region. (Also see: "Egypt Starts Receiving Russian Air Defense Missiles," *OE Watch*, August 2017; "Syria, Egypt, Libya: A New Russia-Dominated Axis?" *OE Watch*, May 2017; and "Perspectives on Russian Motives in Libya," *OE Watch*, April 2017.) **End OE Watch Commentary (Kaya)**

"Russian President Putin... is continuing his visits, which could almost be described as a victory lap. By visiting Syria, Egypt and Turkey on the same day, Putin sent the message to friends and foes alike that 'I'm in charge of these areas.'"

Source: Soli Özel "Kudüs'ten Rusya-Türkiye ilişkisine (From Jerusalem to Russian-Turkish relations)," *Haberturk.com.tr*, 13 December 2017. <http://www.haberturk.com/yazarlar/soli-ozel/1752519-kudusten-rusya-turkiye-iliskisine>

Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin, who declared that he was going to run for president once again, is continuing his visits, which could almost be described as a victory lap. By visiting Syria, Egypt and Turkey on the same day, Putin sent the message to friends and foes alike that "I'm in charge of these areas." As he said before and then reneged, he declared that Russian troops would withdraw from Syria. By making this statement, he was basically declaring that he was one of the most important players in the political future of Syria, while celebrating his military's victory against "international terrorists..."

Currently, Russia is the only country who is in dialogue with every party in the Syrian conflict. The United States, who trained the YPG [People's Protection Forces]-heavy Syrian Democratic Forces, and who has 2000 troops [in Syria], along with having spent 14 billion dollars, has basically conceded that Bashar Assad will be in power until at least 2021. The second visit of Putin's tour was also noteworthy due to the balances in the Eastern Med and the US's general position in the Middle East.

In Egypt, where the US spends almost 1.5 billion dollars each year in military assistance, Putin ... [took] the first step in an agreement to build the country's first nuclear plant, and by providing the credit to do so. Thus, we can say that, following Syria in the Eastern Mediterranean, and in Libya where it has been showing an interest in the last few months, [Russia] has started to really firm up its presence in the region by getting closer to Egypt as well. In a way, a pro-Soviet alliance block that resembles the Cold War years is emerging. An important difference from that period is that Putin's Syria is improving its relations with Saudi Arabia while also having quite warm ties with Israel. Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu can almost "drop by" in Russia, while not facing any resistance from Moscow when it bombs Hezbollah and Iranian targets inside Syria.

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Continued: Russia's "Victory Lap" in the Middle East

“Putin and Sisi... discussed... construction of Egypt’s first nuclear power plant, under a \$30 billion contract with Russia’s Rosatom.... This deal is the latest deal in Russia’s ‘nuclear diplomacy’ project, which includes plants in Iran, Turkey, Sudan and Jordan.”

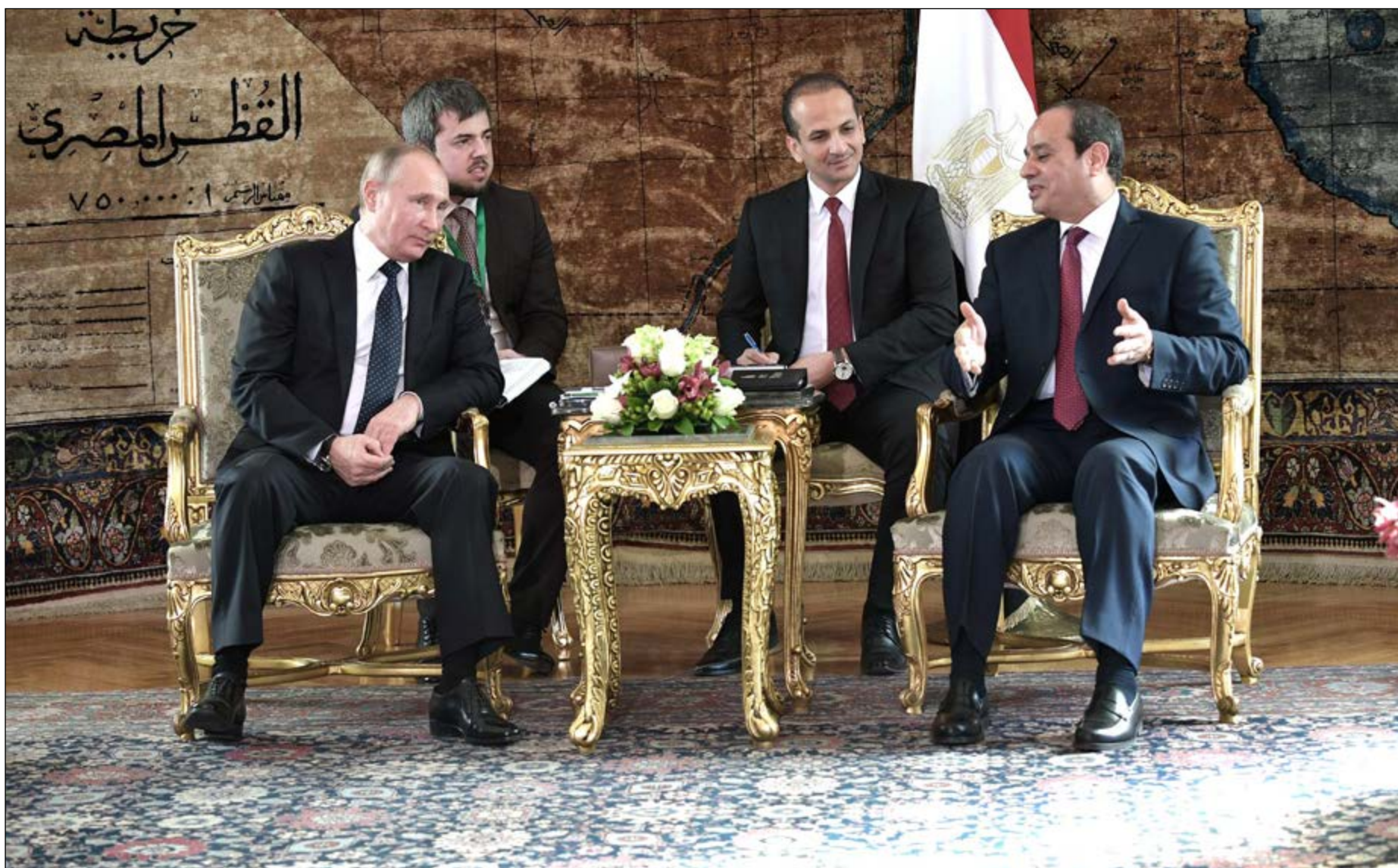
Source: Sergey Balmasov, “Putin’s visit to Egypt inspires hope for growth in Cairo,” *Al Monitor*, 12 December 2017. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/russia-egypt-putin-visit-sisi-syria-turkey.html>

On December 11, Russian President Vladimir Putin completed a diplomatic sprint, touring Syria, Egypt and Turkey in just one day.

... On November 28, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev had approved an agreement with Egypt on use of the airspace and airport infrastructure of both countries, raising speculation that Russia plans to lease Egyptian air bases.

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The first order of business when Putin arrived in Cairo and sat down with Sisi was the Syria settlement... Bilateral trade and economy came up second in their discussion. The annual trade turnover between Russia and Egypt stands at \$4 billion and Cairo is very interested in attracting new Russian investments. Putin and Sisi even discussed creating an industrial zone in Egypt with “favorable conditions for the Russian businesses.” The jewel in the crown of that part of the talks was a two-part agreement: construction of Egypt’s first nuclear power plant, under a \$30 billion contract with Russia’s Rosatom. The Russian government has offered a \$25 billion loan for the project. The second part of the agreement holds that Russia will supply the fuel for the plant. This deal is the latest deal in Russia’s “nuclear diplomacy” project, which includes plants in Iran, Turkey, Sudan and Jordan.



Russian President Vladimir Putin with President of Egypt Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, 11 December 2017.

Source: President of Russia Website, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56354>, CC 4.0.