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# **GCC and Russia: A View from Moscow**

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*Gulf Yearbook*  
**2015 - 2016**

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First published 2016  
Gulf Research Center  
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

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ISBN: 978-603-90463-4-9

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## GCC and Russia: A View from Moscow

Vitaly Naumkin

In 2015, relations between the GCC states and Russia fluctuated considerably, showing both upswing and downswing tendencies. Though paramount importance continued to be attached to bilateral relations, the differences between the bilateral tracks were very evident and substantial. Any contacts with the GCC as a regional organization were accorded minor significance by Moscow; they were mainly confined to a dialogue on a limited range of issues. Relations between Russia and the GCC countries were heavily influenced by external factors, primarily relating to Iran and Syria. There is no doubt that the serious discord over the Syrian crisis and Iran's role in regional affairs triggered increased tension between Moscow and the GCC from time to time. As asserted by Omar Mahmood of the Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies (DERASAT): "The relations between Russia and Iran will always be a stumbling block for the GCC member-states, and if Russia wants to maintain friendly ties with all countries of the region, it has to make up its mind as to where it stands."<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the serious controversy over the Syrian issue grew even more intense when the Russian Air Force launched a military operation in Syria on October 30, 2015, that was viewed by the GCC member states as an action to support the Bashar Al-Assad regime.

At the same time, economic collaboration registered notable progress, especially in the field of trade. There was considerable political interaction between Russia and the GCC states over a number of key global issues, which was evidenced, in particular, by more frequent bilateral contacts. Overall, there seemed to be a tendency towards greater priority being attached to the other side's significance within the framework of their foreign policy objectives. The most compelling reason for this perhaps was the radical enhancement in Russia's role and presence in the Middle East.

Mention should be made of the background for developing a sustained dialogue between the GCC and Russia. The dialogue is based on contacts that were formed before and also by some common threats and challenges as well as some common interests and concerns. For example, the common threat of extremism and terrorism lends urgency to the need for cooperation to resolve ongoing conflicts and achieve regional security; besides, there is shared anxiety over the oil and gas market situation and a commonly felt need to boost cooperation in the energy sector. However, there are wide differences in the two sides' approaches to a whole array of regional

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<sup>1</sup> "Geopolitics", September 3, 2015, <http://geo-politica.info/iran--klin-v-otnosheniyakh-rossii-i-stran-ssagpz.html>



problems. Under such circumstances, the sides would be expected to, at least, listen to each other, if not try to convince each other.

Against this backdrop, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov participated in the Russia-GCC meeting in New York held at the level of Foreign Ministers on October 1, 2015, which was, de facto, a follow-up to the Third Ministerial Round of Strategic Dialogue between Russia and the GCC held in Kuwait in February 2014. At a press conference on February 19, 2014 with Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah and GCC Secretary General Abdul Latif Al Zayani, Lavrov said that the experience of both sides interacting with each other had proved fully viable in this format. He also underlined the "mutual interest in continuing to be engaged not only in a trustworthy and frank exchange of opinions, but also in searching for potential ways of joint action to be undertaken by Russia and the GCC as regards various international and regional issues, primarily, focusing on all matters related to the settlement of crisis situations in the Middle East and in North Africa..."<sup>2</sup> Lavrov further expressed the wish "that the idea of building up a security system in the Arab Gulf region designed to embrace all of the littoral states, through the planning and implementation of measures seeking to enhance trust, to increase transparency and promote contacts in diverse areas, would be endorsed as a critical target for common efforts aimed at normalizing the regional situation."<sup>3</sup> All of these tasks remain high on the agenda even today.

On November 10, 2015, at a joint press conference with Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah, Lavrov stated that "Russia would continue to develop a strategic partnership with the GCC."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, following talks conducted by the Russian Foreign Minister with his counterpart from Qatar Khalid bin Mohammad Al Attiyah, on December 25, 2015 in Moscow, it was decided that the Fourth Ministerial Round of Strategic Dialogue between Russia and the GCC would be held in Moscow in 2016.<sup>5</sup> The statement released by the Russian Foreign Ministry mentioned that the key problem addressed during the talks with Al Attiyah was that of "ensuring reliable security and lasting stability in the Arab Gulf area, including on the basis of an expedient Russian concept." It also said that the Russian Foreign Minister "had delivered to his counterpart from Qatar a version of this position paper adapted in the light of new realities prevailing in the sub-region."<sup>6</sup> However, the detailed content of the paper was not disclosed. It could be assumed that the document carried a reference to the well-known Russian project dealing with the setting up of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Weapons-free Zone in the Middle East. It is also likely that Russia and GCC states might consider the option of building up such a zone only in the Gulf area at present, in view of the breakthrough on the Iranian nuclear program issue. Incidentally,

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/75670](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/75670)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> RIA Novosti, November 10, 2015, <http://ria.ru/world/20151110/1318129380.html>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/qa/-/asset\\_publisher/629HlrvvPTwo/content/id/1996253](http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/qa/-/asset_publisher/629HlrvvPTwo/content/id/1996253)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



Moscow is well aware of the Arab Gulf nations' concern over Iran's growing missile potential, especially taking into account that the Obama Administration by the end of the year backed off from its planned response to Iranian missile tests and canceled additional sanctions whose details had leaked to the press.

As far as bilateral contacts are concerned, the year 2015 was remarkable for Moscow considering its efforts to develop closer relations with the new leadership of Saudi Arabia. It was hoped that there would be a dramatic improvement in Russia-Saudi relations as a result of the June 2015 visit to Russia made by Saudi Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Prince Mohammed bin Salman during which he had a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum to discuss cooperation opportunities between the two countries. A session of the Russian-Saudi Business Council held in Jeddah shortly before, which included a presentation of the opportunities offered by the Russian regions, did not lead to any breakthrough in the trade and economic domain between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Russia. The meetings between the Russian President's Special Representative for the Middle East and Africa, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, and King Salman bin Abdul Aziz and other high-ranking officials held concurrently with that event appeared to be more productive. Russian analysts paid special attention to the fact that the question regarding "a more consolidated approach and greater efforts on behalf of Moscow and Riyadh" to fight the IS widely featured in Bogdanov's talks.<sup>7</sup>

Most Russian and international analysts sought to link Riyadh's willingness to improve relations with Russia to its disappointment over US policies in the region, especially in relation to the "Iranian factor." The negative attitude of most of the GCC member states (though not all of them) towards the joint comprehensive plan of action executed in July 2015 by the P5 +1 group of nations with Iran in relation to its nuclear program, involving a gradual lifting of anti-Iranian sanctions, is well-known. According to the view most widely held by the Gulf States, this could prompt Teheran to resort to a more proactive policy in the region, which is viewed in the GCC as a serious security threat that could increase Iran's interference in the affairs of regional states.

In this connection, the Saudi establishment was apparently hopeful that by offering attractive proposals for trade and economic cooperation, as it had done before, it could exert pressure on Russia to change its political strategies in the region in relation to Iran and Syria. Secondly, Saudi Arabia hoped to diversify its foreign policy priorities. Though it did not seek to abandon its strategic partnership with the US, it wanted to make Washington aware that the Kingdom had other options to benefit from. On Russia's part, its readiness to deepen contacts with Saudi Arabia was

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<sup>7</sup> Press Release issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry,  
[http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp\\_4nsf/sps/EA78427E654AOB6E43257E520046A51B](http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4nsf/sps/EA78427E654AOB6E43257E520046A51B)



accounted for by the considerable weight of the Kingdom (a G-20 member state) as a key player in the global arena and also by the economic difficulties experienced by Moscow because of the falling oil and gas prices (which had adversely affected the Saudi economy as well) in addition to and sanctions imposed by a number of western nations on Russia.<sup>8</sup>

On June 18, 2015, Russia and Saudi Arabia signed six strategic agreements, inter alia on cooperation between the two nations in the use of atomic energy for peaceful purposes. The Russian side is keenly interested in participating in the construction of 16 nuclear power plants in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Other agreements included one on the formation of a joint committee focusing on military and aerospace cooperation and on joint ventures in the field of residential development, energy, and investment business. According to Yuri Ushakov, Assistant to the Russian President, Riyadh is planning to invest in the Russian agricultural sector by purchasing several agricultural enterprises with a view to resolving its food security issues.<sup>9</sup> It was further reported in the media that a \$10 billion investment agreement had been signed between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Russia.<sup>10</sup>

It is not yet clear whether the parties would bring to fruition their defense cooperation plans that were discussed at the meeting, including those related to the possibility for Riyadh to purchase Russian S-300 or S-400 advanced Air Defense Missile Systems, Mi-17 Transport Helicopters, T-90 Tanks, Armored Personnel Carriers (APC), Iskander-E Short Range Ballistic Missile System, the Tiger Frigate and other military equipment. Of course, it should be remembered that Saudi Arabia stated its intention to purchase some of the Russian weapon systems about ten years ago, but such intention never materialized. This time, a signal to Washington was communicated too.

The common agenda was carried forward on October 11, 2015, at a meeting between Prince Mohammed bin Salman and President Putin in Sochi. On the same day, the Russian President also had a meeting with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, Shaikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan.

The main topic addressed in those meetings was the situation in Syria. In response to a question whether Putin's interlocutors got his message, Ushakov said: "I think they did," and added that the Kremlin assessed those meetings "in a very positive way."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The role of the sanctions regime is analyzed, in particular, by Grigory Kosach in his commentary posted on the Russian International Affairs Council website on September 11, 2015. ([www.russiancouncil.ru](http://www.russiancouncil.ru)).

<sup>9</sup> [inosmi.ru/asia/20150717/229153937](http://inosmi.ru/asia/20150717/229153937)

<sup>10</sup> <http://wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-to-invest-up-to-10-billion--in-russia-1436198674?alg=y>

<sup>11</sup> TASS News Agency, October 12, 2015, <http://tass.ru/politika/2339490>



On November 10, 2015, Putin had a meeting with the Amir of Kuwait Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. At a joint press conference with First Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Kuwait Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov said that agreements had been signed “on the easing of visa restrictions, on the promotion of cultural and humanitarian cooperation, as well as on collaboration in the field of transportation and defense industry.”<sup>12</sup> The minister specifically mentioned the Memorandum on Cooperation in the oil and gas sector and an agreement on an additional \$1 billion investment platform through which the Kuwaiti counterparts can participate in all investment projects managed by the Russian Fund of Direct Investments.

The two sides agreed that the highest priority for them was carrying on an irreconcilable fight against IS and other terrorist groups, who jeopardize the security of nations, including the security of Kuwait.<sup>13</sup> The two sides expressed their readiness to pursue cooperation opportunities on a bilateral basis and also within the framework of a strategic partnership between Russia and the GCC. Lavrov suggested that the parties should contemplate the possibility of a Fourth Ministerial Strategic Dialogue Meeting between Russia and the GCC “to be focused, among other things, on comparing the mutual strategies and approaches to fighting terrorism with a view to developing the most effective joint trajectories.” It is not too difficult to see that the framework of Russian-Kuwaiti interaction is much more extensive and diverse than with the other Gulf nations – suffice to mention in this context that a Festival of Soviet and Russian War Films took place in Kuwait in May 2015, and a tour of the Russian Folk Dance Company was planned to be held in 2016.

In the course of intensive interactions, the representatives of the GCC countries voiced their concern over the growing cooperation between Moscow and Teheran, especially within the framework of the Syrian operation, and also their military and technological collaboration. Indeed, beginning in later half of 2015, Russia increased the level of military and political involvement in Syria in a radical manner within the scope of the Anti-Terrorist Coalition set up under Moscow’s auspices. As regards political interactions, diplomats of both Russia and Iran countries acknowledge that an unprecedented measure of trust has been attained. However, this does not mean that the political objectives for the region for Russia and Iran and their values are totally identical. For example, while pursuing its course in Syria, Russia did not follow any confessional agenda like Iran, which positioned itself as a protector of the interests of all Shiites. Importantly, Moscow, like many of its partners, considers it necessary to contribute to the protection of interests of all ethno-confessional minorities.

With regard to the situation in Bahrain and Yemen, Moscow and Teheran have widely diverging positions. For instance, the mere fact that Russia abstained in the vote at the

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/1930977](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/1930977)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



UN Security Council on Resolution No.2216 dated April 14, 2015 meant the implicit acknowledgement of Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi's legitimacy. This was received in the GCC capitals with great gratification. At the same time, Moscow, acting as in many other similar conflict situations, reserved the role of a mediator to itself, or, at a minimum, of a party maintaining contacts with all warring sides. This was testified, for instance, by the invitation to Moscow in early June 2015 of a Houthi delegation, which had a meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Bogdanov. The visit of President Putin to Teheran on November 23, 2015, where he held private discussions, *inter alia* with the Supreme Leader of Iran Ayatollah Khamenei, was a significant milestone in the development of Russian-Iranian interaction. It should be noted that Russia is deeply interested in the improvement of relations between the Arab Gulf nations and Iran, and for this purpose it could be instrumental in facilitating such process.

Russia has denied, most emphatically, all accusations made from time to time that it had been allegedly involved in building up an Orthodox-Shiite axis in the Middle East, saying that such accusations lacked any substance. It must be pointed out here that of the over 20 million Russian Muslims are predominantly Sunni, whereas four ancient Orthodox Patriarch's Offices in the Middle East – of Constantinople, Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria – are located in countries where the absolute majority of residents profess Sunni Islam.

As far as the Russian-Iranian military and technological cooperation is concerned, the most sensitive aspect for the GCC member states was the re-launch of the previously frozen contract for the delivery to Teheran of the Russian S-300 (also known by the NATO codename SA-20) Air Defense Systems. Media sources reported that those systems could be replaced by the brand new Antey-2500 (SA-23) Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems, whose range of operation could extend to all the key segments of the territory of the GCC countries.

Yet, Russia's progress in strengthening its relations with Bahrain provided a strong indication of its willingness to adopt policies targeting a more diversified "alignment" of relations with all the key players in the Gulf region. This was demonstrated in a most convincing manner during the meetings of the Foreign Ministers of Russia and Bahrain held in December 2015.<sup>14</sup> During the talks in Moscow on December 16, 2015, Khalid bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa informed Lavrov of the Islamic Anti-Terrorism Military Alliance set up by Riyadh, stressing that this testified to the role of Saudi Arabia as a country that sought to protect the Gulf region. Small wonder that the Russian diplomatic community, which had reviewed the Saudi initiative in great detail, asked questions regarding the format of this third consecutive Anti-Terrorism Alliance in view of the fact that the Russian and international press immediately published reports that the Alliance members were ready to send their special forces to

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<sup>14</sup> TASS, International Panorama, <http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/2532519>



Syria.<sup>15</sup> Having positively assessed the initiative, Lavrov noted that it was increasingly important that “an inseparable part of this initiative would be an ideological dimension designed to keep the young people from being fuddled by way of speculating on the greatest principles of Islam... I believe it is a matter of paramount importance, considering the role of Saudi Arabia and the role of King Salman, as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.”<sup>16</sup>

The Foreign Minister of Bahrain said: “It is necessary to find a political solution to the Syrian problem, which would be upheld by all of the parties concerned and would rely upon the Geneva-1 arrangements. We hold in high esteem Russia’s obligation, to which it has been committed throughout many years, to rescue Syria from collapse....”<sup>17</sup> The Bahraini side, along with the other Gulf member states, was presented with a new version of the Russian concept for security in the Gulf region that Russia has been sharing with the leaders of the Gulf states. Importantly, the Russian Foreign Minister expressed the wish that Riyadh’s initiative should be applied to all nations that are members of the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC). This would resonate well with the overall goal of Russian policy targeted at consolidating the efforts of all the states, which are determined to counter terrorism and extremism, to the maximum extent possible. Both Russia and Bahrain further voiced their interest in normalizing the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan and also in “taking the necessary steps for the purpose of leading the decades-old conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis out of deadlock.”

Despite serious differences, Russia and the GCC countries are also making joint efforts to find an acceptable solution to the Syrian problem in a constructive manner. This interaction helped, primarily, in reaching the Vienna agreements, where the participants managed to come to an understanding with each other. Moscow gave credit to “the efforts by Saudi Arabia seeking to ensure the implementation of the mandate issued to it by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG)<sup>18</sup> on November 14, 2015, in Vienna, for the purpose of convening a meeting in Riyadh embracing the most diverse spectrum of Syrian opposition feasible in order to work out a unified negotiating platform and compose a representative delegation for the subsequent negotiations with the SAR government” as was stated by the Russian Foreign Ministry.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the Kremlin’s attitude towards the outcome of the meeting that took place in Riyadh of the Syrian opposition on December 10, 2015, could not be uniquely defined and was therefore a reflection of the existing discrepancies. Undoubtedly, one positive result of the meeting for Moscow was that the Syrian

<sup>15</sup> TASS and International Panorama reported on the subject on December 15, 2015, referring to Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, <http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/2530660>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> The International Syria Support Group (ISSG) comprises the Arab League, China, Egypt, the EU, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United Nations, and the United States.

<sup>19</sup> Comment by the Russian Foreign Ministry, January 6, 2016,

[http://www.mid.ru/kommentarii/-asset\\_publisher/2MfVt3CzL5sw/content/id/1978280](http://www.mid.ru/kommentarii/-asset_publisher/2MfVt3CzL5sw/content/id/1978280)



opposition agreed unanimously to participate in the inter-Syrian political process on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué dated June 30, 2012, although with certain reservations. Later, on December 18, 2015, a UN Resolution confirmed that there was no other alternative to negotiations.

At the same time, Moscow considered the Riyadh meeting only as one of a series of such meetings held at various locations – in Moscow, Cairo, Astana, Al-Hasakah, and Damascus. The mandate for summarizing the results obtained at all of those platforms and for formulating a truly representative opposition delegation to be engaged in sustainable negotiations was transferred by the ISSG to UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura under the appropriate documents dated October 30, 2015 and November 14, 2015,<sup>20</sup> and pursuant to the Geneva Communiqué dated June 30, 2012. In other words, no one except the UN Special Envoy is authorized to constitute the delegation, though each government could offer its suggestions. Earlier, in this respect, Moscow submitted its list to the negotiating partners by way of a proposal but received no response from them. As stated by the Russian Foreign Ministry, the attempts made by the group that gathered in Riyadh to “arrogate to itself the right to speak on behalf of the entire Syrian opposition” were not acceptable.

Second, the Russian side proceeded from the concept of inclusiveness underlying the inter-Syrian dialogue, which was supposed to be attended, among others, by the representatives of the patriotically-minded Syrian opposition, who had already shown their constructive approach at other venues. However, as asserted by the Russian Foreign Ministry, “despite the efforts undertaken by the Saudi counterparts, the Syrian opposition was not fully represented at the Riyadh meeting at all, and this could not fail to have an impact on the content of the final statement adopted by the participants.”<sup>21</sup> The Russian Foreign Ministry, in particular, was referring to the absence of the Kurdish associations– the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and local administration authorities – at the meeting. Moscow was sure that they had not been invited by the Saudi organizers because of the rigid resistance put up by Turkey, who threatened to block the participation of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces based in Istanbul if its views were not taken into account.

Third, Moscow acknowledged that an influential part of the Syrian opposition members, particularly those who upheld the “Cairo platform,” had boycotted the vital event in Riyadh, as the attending participants included extremist group members, who were not considered to be suitable for negotiations by the Russian side. This refers to the representatives of groups such as Jaish al-Islam, who carried out multiple attacks on the Russian Embassy in Damascus, and Ahrar al-Sham, who had been fighting together with Jabhat al-Nusra within the framework of their common structure – Jaish

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<sup>20</sup> See the “Statement of the International Syria Support Group,” November 14, 2015, <http://www.gov.r/pa/prs/ps/2015/11/249511.htm>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



al-Fatah. All attempts made by the representatives from Saudi Arabia and other GCC member states to convince Moscow of the need to stop referring to these groups as being in the terrorist category, considering their heterogeneous composition, did not lead to any change in Russia's stance. Moreover, the Russian Air Force continued to strike against these groups, supporting the Syrian Armed Forces. A most painful blow for the Jaish al-Islam insurgent faction was the news about the killing of its head Zahran Alloush and several field commanders from his entourage as well as Ahrar al-Sham commanders, who were with them, by the Syrian Air Force on December 25, 2015.

So far, the positions held by Russia and the GCC member states on Syria, almost without exception, remained quite divergent were juxtaposed constantly. Although the visit to Russia by the Emir of Qatar Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani earlier planned for October 2015 was rescheduled for 2016, the Foreign Minister of Qatar, Khalid Bin Mohammed Al Attiyah visited Moscow and held talks with Foreign Minister Lavrov on December 25, 2015.

As had been expected, in terms of resolving the Syrian conflict, the ministers could not overcome the profound divergences in views in relation to this most crucial problem for the entire region. Specifically, the Russian side, being guided by its fundamental stance, did not find it appropriate to discuss the issue of President Bashar Assad's fate, as it believed that the matter should be decided by the Syrian people itself. It has to be reiterated that the question of legitimacy of the Syrian leadership remains one of the most important points of disagreement between Russia, on the one hand, and Qatar, alongside a whole group of nations, on the other hand. In response to questions posed by journalists, the Russian foreign minister stressed that Russia shared a common interest with Qatar: "it wants Syria to be a peaceful, independent, sovereign country, whose territorial integrity would be respected, likewise the rights of all its ethno-confessional and such other groups." The same principles are to be applied to Iraq and other countries of the region. While the regional agenda was addressed primarily within the context of the urgent need for resolving the multiple crises in the Middle East and North Africa and fighting terrorism, the foreign minister of Qatar advised his Russian counterpart of the Islamic Anti-Terrorism Alliance, whose formation had been announced by Saudi Arabia.

The fact that one of the GCC members – the Sultanate of Oman – didn't participate in the Alliance though it nevertheless supported its formation was noted in Moscow. Oman is well known for its independent outlook and political behavior which have earned its leadership a high international reputation. This is particularly evident in its attitude towards many regional initiatives, including those taken by the GCC. Moscow has positively assessed Oman's role and has scrupulously studied its experience related to diversifying its foreign policy and acting as a mediator between opposite parties involved in various conflicts, admitting that its efforts have borne fruit more often than not.



In his meeting with the foreign minister of Qatar, the Russian foreign minister shared the updated rationale of the Russian side regarding the security concept for the Arab Gulf region against the backdrop of recent developments, including the Iranian nuclear deal and the sharply aggravating terrorist threat. From the standpoint of Russia, the talks proved that its position on the promotion of a security concept in the Gulf region was close to that of Qatar.

In matters of economic and trade ties, Russia and Qatar agreed to use the available resources “to boost the trade and economic contracts and to increase the volume of bilateral trade.” With this end in view, a Joint Intergovernmental Commission for Trade, Economic and Technical Cooperation was formed, and its first meeting was held in Doha in March 2015. Both sides were in favor of the ongoing strengthening of contacts between the Russian Fund of Direct Investments and the Qatar Investment Agency, based on agreements reached in 2014. According to Lavrov, a promising area for further cooperation was the energy sector, especially the gas industry, in which collaboration is expected to be pursued on a bilateral basis and also within the framework of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), headquartered in Doha. A new element in economic cooperation was the launching of operations of the Bilateral Working Group for Cooperation in the Global Aluminum Market.<sup>22</sup>

Looking back at the year 2015, it is clear that relations between the GCC countries and Russia continued to face obstacles hindering the solution of specific outstanding problems; however, the year was also remarkable for some very impressive shifts that could pave the way to new vistas in cooperation. Issues related to energy especially the issue of oil prices will play a significant role in shaping this cooperation. Moscow hopes that new important steps can be made in 2016 to implement the agreements that it signed with the GCC states in 2015, and bring their positions on the most important regional issues closer.

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<sup>22</sup>[http://www.mid.ru/posledniye\\_dobavlenkiye/-/asset\\_publisher/MCZ7HQuMdgBY/content/id/1995907](http://www.mid.ru/posledniye_dobavlenkiye/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQuMdgBY/content/id/1995907)



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