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Yeghia Tashjian, MA.

Associate Fellow at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, AUB.

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The Great Game in the Levant: Russia's Interests in Lebanon

By Yeghia Tashjian

Like other regional powers, Russia has taken major steps to advance its geopolitical interests in the Levant. With the goals of expanding its influence and control the vast energy resources in the region. Although it only has a naval military base in Tartus (Syria) and no borders on the Mediterranean Sea, Russia has managed to exert its influence around nearby countries, including Lebanon¹.

The perception of Lebanon as part of its Syrian stake encourages Moscow to strive to capitalize on its influence in the region after intervening in the Syrian conflict. In the last few years, Russia started playing a larger role in Lebanon following the growing civil unrest in Syria and the defeat of ISIS. The international power particularly intervenes in finding solutions to the Syrian refugee crisis since Lebanon hosts around 1.5 million Syrian refugees.²

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¹ Yuras Karmanaue, “Russia plans to invest \$500 million in its only navy base outside the former Soviet Union — here's what it's like there”, *Associated Press*, December 18, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/base-in-syria-helps-russia-expand-presence-in-mediterranean-2019-9>, last accessed 15/5/2021.

² Mohanad Hage Ali, “Moscow Time?”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, September 7, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77192>, last accessed 5/8/2021.

In this regards, for some Lebanese, Russia is seen as a force that can provide stability. Moscow has also offered security and military coordination and investments in Lebanon's underdeveloped energy sector.³

Interestingly, Moscow has recently been showing greater interest in Lebanon's domestic affairs, specifically when it comes to government formation. During the past six months, Russian officials have held dozens of public official meetings with high-level and senior Lebanese officials.⁴ The details of these meetings touched on the formation of the Lebanese government, the Syrian crisis, regional issues, and investment proposals from the Russian side targeting Lebanon's energy sector and ports.

These activities hint that Russia has been playing an active role in Lebanon and views it as an extension of its regional policy towards Syria. Russia views Lebanon as a "window to the world" for Damascus, where the construction and reconstruction of vital Lebanese facilities will not only bring profit but will also create schemes to bypass the American "Caesar Act" sanctions for the Syrian side.

This paper will analyze the roots of Russia's pro-active diplomacy towards Lebanon. For this purpose, it will analyze Russia's energy security, security-military, and political relations with Lebanon, to explore whether Moscow has long-term interests in the country and what are the limitations.

It is important to note that Russia's interests in the region differ from interests the Soviet Union previously held. Unlike the USSR, whose foreign policy was driven by ideological motives and allied with leftist and nationalist movements, Kremlin employs pragmatic foreign policy towards the region.⁵ In particular, Russia has balanced relations with all Middle Eastern states including Israel, Turkey, and Iran. The Syrian example illustrates this policy. As stated in Angela Stent's *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest* (2019), Russia's foreign policy towards the Middle East is a reflection of its domestic concerns; mainly the rise of Islamic terrorism and control over energy resources.

Russia enters Lebanon through the energy market

Russia's soft and hard power goes hand-in-hand as Moscow's main interest in the eastern Mediterranean is not just related to having a military and naval presence, as seen in Syria and Libya, but also controlling the region's vast energy resources.⁶ Accordingly, Moscow considers the development of a "pipeline" across different Arab countries including Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, an opportunity to increase its influence in the region.⁷ In fact, President Michel Aoun's Russian Affairs advisor Former MP Amal Abou Zeid, who played a role in reviving Beirut's relations with Moscow, argued that Russians have completed a pipeline connecting Iraq to Syria.⁸ He also explained that Rosneft has stakes in oil fields in Iraq (Kirkuk and Iraqi Kurdistan) and Novatek has stakes in blocks in offshore Lebanon (block 4 and 9).

³ Mona Alami, "What's Moscow's game plan for Lebanon?", *Al-Monitor*, April 3, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/whats-moscows-game-plan-lebanon>, last accessed 5/8/2021.

⁴ Yeghia Tashjian, "Russia's Interests in Lebanon: Fulfilling a Middle Eastern Dream", *The Armenian Weekly*, June 22, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/06/02/russias-interests-in-lebanon-fulfilling-a-middle-eastern-dream/>, last accessed 5/8/2021.

⁵ Yeghia Tashjian, "Understanding Russia's Foreign Policy in the Age of Putin", *The Armenian Weekly*, May 6, 2021, <https://armenianweekly.com/2021/05/06/understanding-russias-foreign-policy-in-the-age-of-putin/>, last accessed 5/8/2021.

⁶ Interview with Laury Haytayan, an oil and gas expert in the East Mediterranean and the Middle East May 19, 2021.

⁷ Interview with Laury Haytayan, May 19, 2021.

⁸ Interview with Dr. Amal Abou Zeid, July 12, 2021.

Thus, to push for an increased influence, Russia has entered the energy market in Lebanon through state-owned oil companies. In 2018, Lebanon's Ministry of Energy and Water Resources signed an operations and service contract with the Russian state-owned oil company Rosneft to rehabilitate, expand, and operate oil storage facilities in the port city of Tripoli.⁹ For Lebanon, which is suffering from a severe financial crisis, this was a positive development as the country needs direct foreign investments in its underdeveloped energy sector and infrastructure.

It is worth mentioning that in 2020 Novatek, Russia's largest independent natural gas company, signed an offshore oil and gas exploration and production agreement with the Lebanese government.¹⁰ If Russian companies continue expanding in the region (especially in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, and maybe Iran), then we could envisage a forum similar to the Egypt-based East Mediterranean Gas Forum, but created and supported by Russia.¹¹ Hence, Russia could control the liquefied natural gas (LNG) resources in the region and help Turkey become a transit of LNG towards Europe. In this respect, Russia may cooperate with Turkey in Lebanon in order to contain the UAE-backed French-Egyptian-Cyptic-Greek-Israeli axis. In fact, Moscow is more collaborative with Ankara in building the pipelines and using Turkey as a hub for its gas. Thus, Lebanon will have to make a difficult choice by navigating between the two initiatives.¹²

In his recent visit to Moscow, Lebanon's Foreign Affairs Minister, MP Gebran Bassil mentioned the importance of founding a "Levantine market" comprising Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine.¹³ Moreover, with the start of negotiations between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) regarding Iran's possible membership in the Russian-led economic block in the future, other Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq, Syria, and eventually Lebanon may think to join or have a special relationship with the union that would facilitate trade and infrastructural development in the region.¹⁴

However, in addition to oil, gas, and investments, Russia has other plans for Lebanon when it comes to security and military coordination.

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⁹ “Rosneft enters into an agreement for operational management of an oil products terminal in Lebanon”, *Rosneft*, January 24, 2019, <https://www.rosneft.com/press/releases/item/193617/>, last accessed 1/6/2021.

¹⁰ Murat Temizer, “Novatek to participate in hydrocarbon tender in Lebanon”, *Anadolu Agency*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/general/novatek-to-participate-in-hydrocarbon-tender-in-lebanon/28164>, last accessed 5/8/2021.

¹¹ “East Mediterranean states formally establish Egypt-based gas forum”, *Arab News*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1738541/middle-east>, last accessed 1/6/2021

¹² Author interviews with Laury Haytayan, and Dr. Amal Abu Zeid.

¹³ “Bassil from Moscow: Russia Does not Interfere in Lebanon's Internal Affairs but Pushes for Reforms”, *National News Agency*, April 29, 2021, <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/127461/nna-leb.gov.lb/en>, last accessed 5/8/2021.

¹⁴ “Iran, Eurasian Economic Union Hold Free Trade Talks”, *Financial Tribune*, July 25, 2021, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/109567/iran-eurasian-economic-union-hold-free-trade-talks>, last accessed 16/7/2021.

Lebanese-Russian Security Relations

In February 2018, former Russian PM Dmitri Medvedev signed a Lebanese-Russian military agreement, which entails a \$1 billion credit line to provide the Lebanese Army with ammunition for free.¹⁵ However, under US pressure, the Lebanese government postponed and later transferred the ammunition to the Internal Security Forces. Not surprisingly, Russia continued deepening its security and military ties with Lebanon as the staff of the Russian embassy in Beirut has expanded over the past decade to include a relatively large military section.¹⁶

The issue of the return of the Syrian refugees is another space for coordination between both countries, as they both view this coordination from a security angle. Russia has facilitated the return of thousands of Syrian refugees from Lebanon back to Syria, after receiving guarantees from the Syrian side. Additionally, Russian military officials played a key role in exempting returnees from military service and security vetting. Moreover, for many Lebanese politicians who oppose the Syrian state, Russia is an influential mediator capable of providing a backchannel between Damascus and Beirut. Thus, some Lebanese oligarchs may seek Russian help to secure them a space in the expected fortune of Syria's reconstruction.

Additionally, from a Russian perspective, Hezbollah's success on the ground in Syria qualifies the Lebanese party to become a future partner in containing the US influence in these countries.¹⁷ In September 2015, when the Russian military entered the conflict in support of President Bashar al Assad - reversing the course of the war, it noticed that Hezbollah is a powerful non-state actor that could help in shaping Russia's policy in both Syria and Lebanon.¹⁸ The cooperation between Russia and Hezbollah has expanded the party's surveillance and reconnaissance skills, special operations tactics, and appropriate use of drones, according to Israeli experts.¹⁹ Surprisingly, Israelis viewed this cooperation positively, as the Israel Defense Forces estimate that Russia's interaction with Hezbollah decreases the latter's likelihood of war with Israel in the near future, figuring that Russia's influence on the party is likely to restrain its response to perceived Israeli airstrikes at a time when Hezbollah is playing a crucial role in the Syrian regime's advance.²⁰

Finally, and to further expand its geopolitical interests in the region and ensure Syria's political stability, which is a key factor in Moscow's strategic depth towards the Middle East, Russian officials

“Russia continued deepening its security and military ties with Lebanon as the staff of the Russian embassy in Beirut has expanded over the past decade to include a relatively large military section.”

¹⁵ Mohanad Hage Ali, “Our Comrades in Beirut”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, April 25, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/76164?lang=en>, last accessed 25/7/2021.

¹⁶ “Lebanon Accepts Russian Ammunition Deal, Hariri Denies Rejecting Aid Over U.S. Concerns”, *Haaretz*, November 27, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/lebanon-accepts-russian-ammunition-deal-hariri-denies-rejecting-military-aid-1.6695539>, last accessed 5/8/2021.

¹⁷ Elie Hanna, “First Official Meeting Between Hizbullah and Russian Officers in Aleppo”, (Arabic), *al-Akhbar*, November 24, 2016, <https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/222712>, last accessed 5/8/2021.

¹⁸ Mohanad Hage Ali, “Our Comrades in Beirut”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, April 25, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/76164?lang=en>, last accessed 25-7-2021.

¹⁹ Anna Borshchevskaya, “Russia Aims to Preserve the Status Quo in Lebanon”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russia-aims-preserve-status-quo-lebanon>, last accessed 5/8/2021.

²⁰ Brig. Gen. Muni Katz and Nadav Pollak, “Hezbollah's Russian Military Education in Syria”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 14, 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahs-russian-military-education-syria>, last accessed 5/8/2021.

started engaging in pro-active diplomacy with different factions in Lebanon. The main aim of this political relation was to increase Russia's influence in Lebanon and stabilize the country.

Russia's Pro-active Diplomacy

In the past few years, Russia was not taking pro-active steps towards Lebanon but was analyzing carefully the situation in the country and consulting with politicians regarding the developments in the region. However, Russia took serious steps after the October 17, 2019 uprising and the Beirut Port blast out of concern that any instability in Lebanon would have an impact on the stability in Syria and the reconstruction efforts that Russia has been pushing for over the past few years.

From a regional perspective, Moscow sees Lebanon as a vulnerability for Syria, given the social and economic interconnection between the two countries.²¹ Lebanon's financial crisis has been directly linked to a further devaluation of the Syrian currency and vice-versa, as Syria depends on US dollars, subsidized fuel, wheat, and basic food items smuggled from Lebanon. This means that Moscow (to save its geopolitical interests in Syria) must play a greater role in Lebanon as the situation worsens. In fact, Lebanon's importance is based on two elements: Lebanon is a potential Mediterranean oil and gas producer country, and it is a neighborhood country mainly to Syria, where the Russian military and economic presence in Syria is vital for the Russian strategic policy in the region. For example, Russian policymakers are worried that the socio-economic crisis in Lebanon may pave the way for the revival of Islamic militancy in North Lebanon and this would further destabilize the bordering province in Syria.²² In this context, to stabilize Lebanon, Russia may try to give a certain space for Syrian officials to engage with the Lebanese agenda.²³ This is because Russian officials believe that, in addition to Latakia, North Lebanon can play a logistic hub to supply their military bases in Syria.

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Moreover, Moscow has long viewed Lebanon as both a geopolitically crucial landmark on the eastern Mediterranean and a country where the Christian minority who are well represented in public institutions can be cultivated like nowhere else in the Middle East.²⁴ As seen in recent years, Russia's ties with Lebanon have deepened even further as an extension of its Syria policy, including on the military level. Immediately after the Beirut blast, President Putin sent condolences to his Lebanese counterpart, along with humanitarian aid. Moreover, Russia's political activism alongside cultural and educational exchange programs have increased in the country.

²¹ Mona Alami, "What's Moscow's game plan for Lebanon?", *Al-Monitor*, April 3, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/whats-moscows-game-plan-lebanon>, last accessed 5/8/2021.

²² Interview with Dr. Amal Abou Zeid.

²³ Interview with Dr. Milad Sebaali regional analyst August 2, 2021.

²⁴ Yaakov Lappin, "Israel believes Russia's intervention decreases chance of Israel-Hezbollah conflict", *Jerusalem Post*, January 26, 2016, <https://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Intel-believes-Russias-intervention-decreases-chance-of-Israel-Hezbollah-conflict-442839>, last accessed 5/8/2021.

It is important to note that Russia's pro-active diplomacy towards Lebanon intensified after the Hezbollah delegation visited Moscow in March 2020 and met Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. According to certain reports, the delegation asked Moscow to fill the political vacuum in Lebanon.²⁵ In addition to bridging with Hezbollah, Moscow is starting to strengthen its relations with the Greek Orthodox community. Starting in October 2017, meetings were held between representatives of the Lebanese Greek Orthodox community and church and political officials in Moscow.²⁶ As an outcome of these meetings, a statement was released stressing the "coordination of cooperation with different social and political associations of Lebanon, including the Orthodox Gathering."²⁷ Moscow considers that by building bridges with Levantine Orthodox Christians, is strengthening its support base.²⁸ It is worth mentioning that Moscow has developed relations with different factions within the Druze and Sunni community either by cooperating with Saudi Arabia or Turkey. Thus, Russian diplomacy towards Lebanon can be viewed as balanced and flexible.

ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- After its military intervention in Syria in 2015, and later in Libya in 2017 through its proxy, Moscow's sudden involvement in the oil and gas competition in the Eastern Mediterranean will make it a key player in any negotiations aimed at drawing the future geopolitical and energy map of the region. Hence, Lebanon's future will be bound to the outcome of the competition or cooperation of major regional actors. Russia has now become one of the tough regional players and Lebanon has to consider this as any confrontation between the Russian-Turkish and French-Greek-Egyptian-Israeli-Cypric axis will reflect negatively on Lebanon and limit its choices to maneuver.
- Many analysts doubt an assertive and more aggressive Russia can translate its control of Syria into a major influence in Lebanon because of two factors: First Syria's influence has eroded since it was forced to leave Lebanon in 2005 and the regime is still reeling from a destructive civil war; and second, Iran, through its strong ally Hezbollah in Lebanon, filled the vacuum left by Syria and became the main power broker in Lebanon. However, with the rise of Russian influence in Lebanon, we may witness a limited Syrian role in the future.
- In Damascus, Moscow has to share influence with Tehran, and for now they have managed to co-exist and avoid friction despite contradictions in their long-term goals. Tehran, may not be willing to share its growing influence in Lebanon with Russia and consequently will not welcome any Russian attempt to expand its influence into the country.²⁹ Despite occasional

²⁵ Ali Mantach, "Russia in Lebanon...with American Green Light?", (Arabic), *Lebanon 24*, June 28, 2021, https://www.lebanon24.com/news/lebanon/837532/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%B6%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%9F?fbclid=IwAROSWd8mX4IewJlQsgEeextEMP-RhzmujPVBclazTE2Q0zGuwZV2FE_Jk9w, last accessed 1/7/2021.

²⁶ Benas Gerdziunas, "The Kremlin's tie-up with Lebanon's Greek Orthodox community", *Deutsche Welle*, July 7, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/the-kremlins-tie-up-with-lebanons-greek-orthodox-community/a-44539394>, last accessed 21/6/2021.

²⁷ Benas Gerdziunas, "The Kremlin's tie-up with Lebanon's Greek Orthodox community", *Deutsche Welle*, July 7, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/the-kremlins-tie-up-with-lebanons-greek-orthodox-community/a-44539394>, last accessed 21/6/2021.

²⁸ Nasser Chararah, "In Lebanon, Moscow Supports Political Christian Orthodoxy", *Al-Monitor*, December 24, 2012, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2012/al-monitor/russia-orthodoxy-lebanon.html>, last accessed 7/5/2021.

flirting with Lebanese issues and political leaders, Moscow has failed to show it can influence the course of events in Lebanon as both Tehran and Washington closely monitor Russian diplomatic activities. Additionally, Saad Hariri's failure to form a cabinet, nine months after his designation in October 2020, exposed Russia's limits in influencing different Lebanese factions. Finally, what Lebanon needs at the moment is financial help, a service that Moscow can't deliver.

- For the moment, Russia needs both Iran and Hezbollah to secure its assets in Syria. However, in the long run, it is unclear whether Russia would like to see Iran's and Hezbollah's role expanded or limited in post-conflict Syria. Russia is not in a position to risk its relations with Israel. For this reason, any future conflict between Moscow and Tehran may have negative impacts on Moscow's pro-active engagement with Lebanon, thus, the Russians should engage in a balanced act to preserve their interests in Syria and Lebanon and avoid antagonizing Israel to prevent future Israeli invasion of Lebanon.
- Will the Russians confront the Americans in Lebanon or cooperate with them? Russians seem to be closely monitoring the situation in Lebanon. They are aware that this complex sectarian system is not functioning and are attempting to establish durable political, economic, and cultural influence in Lebanon to have a say in the new political system that would be established in the future. They also know that Washington has important allies in Lebanon. They are aware that the army is being financed and equipped by the Americans and other key European states and Russians are facing limitations to extend their cooperation with the army. In 2008, Russia expressed its readiness to provide Lebanon free ten MiG-29 Fulcrum fighter jets in a deal to boost defense cooperation.³⁰ However, the Lebanese government, under American pressure, canceled the deal and instead accepted ammunition. To preserve its image, Russia must continue its balanced approach while addressing the political and economic issues Lebanon is facing. For this, Moscow, instead of confronting the Americans, may seek to cooperate with them to find a feasible solution to Lebanon's political and economic problems.

²⁹ Mouafac Harb, "Tehran and Washington vs. Moscow in Lebanon and Syria", *The Daily Star*, June 21, 2021, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/2021/Jun-21/521152-tehran-and-washington-vs-moscow-in-lebanon-and-syria.ashx?fbclid=IwAR3-leKLdgpowX72bS9dftWNLZAWovg4UHK9SHCgQs1oDUE9JSHe6fTh8nw>. last accessed 5/8/2021.

³⁰ Tony Halpin, "Russia provides 10 MiG fighter jets to Lebanon for free", *The Times*, December 18, 2008, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russia-provides-10-mig-fighter-jets-to-lebanon-for-free-jbjkjhcfpx>, last accessed 19/8/2021.

➤Russia will further continue investing in Lebanon’s underdeveloped energy sector. Al-Akhbar newspaper mentioned that a high-ranking Russian delegation visited Lebanon on June 28.³¹ The newspaper claimed that the topic of the negotiations rotated around the Russian proposal for the construction of two power plants, the repair of two oil refineries (Tripoli and Zahrani), as well as the reconstruction of the ports of Beirut and Tripoli. There is a need to build new power plants in Lebanon to overcome its electricity shortage, and Russia may assist in this field. Of course, it is early to rejoice as the US may impose additional pressures on Lebanon to delay the implementation of the contracts. The success or the failure of these projects is dependent on the outcome of US-Russian negotiations or confrontations.

Yeghia Tashjian is a regional analyst and researcher. He has graduated from the American University of Beirut in Public Policy and International Affairs. He pursued his BA at Haigazian University in Political Science in 2013. He founded the New Eastern Politics forum/blog in 2010. He was a Research Assistant at the Armenian Diaspora Research Center at Haigazian University. Currently, he is the Regional Officer of Women in War, a gender-based think tank. He has participated in international conferences in Frankfurt, Vienna, Uppsala, New Delhi, Rome, and Yerevan, and presented various topics from minority rights to regional security issues. His thesis topic was on China’s geopolitical and energy security interests in Iran and the Persian Gulf. He is a contributor to the various local and regional newspapers, columnist for the Armenian Weekly, and presenter of the “Turkey Today” program in Radio Voice of Van. Lately, he has joined the European Geopolitical Forum as an affiliate expert on the Middle East and South Caucasus.

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Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB) Issam Fares Institute Building (Facing the Green Oval)

PO Box 11-0236, Riad El-Solh, Beirut 1107 2020, Lebanon

+961-1-350000 Ext. 4150

@ ifi.comms@aub.edu.lb

www.aub.edu.lb/ifi

aub.ifi

@ifi_aub

@ifi_aub



Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
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³¹ Firas al-Shoufi, “Moscow Makes her choice; We will be in Lebanon even with force”, (Arabic), *Al-Akhbar*, June 29, 2021, https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/309911?fbclid=IwAR1q0e-g12UZO5fDlJhPi7h3ABsJmXCa9LCbnnhyL8_tRpAEpW123NcQ4lo, last accessed 6/7/2021.