

Russia's Relations with North Africa and the Middle East. Lavrov's Diplomatic Initiative

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Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, with a handbag full of unique message on Russia-Ukraine crisis and its geopolitical implications, has made a snapshot trip to North Africa and the Middle East, including visiting Algeria and Oman. Given what has been referred to as "special military operation" in Ukraine republic and the pressure of Western sanctions, and the fear of isolation, it is however important for Moscow to maintain several-years-old traditional ties with its partners in these two regions.

Within the Maghreb, Algeria remains one of the reliable partners for Moscow, and consequently Lavrov noting that Moscow and Algiers are united by strong and friendly relations, highlighted plans to boost military and technical cooperation, and also to ensure the renewal of a strategic agreement (treaty) that aims at scaling up bilateral relations. The Declaration on Strategic Partnership signed on April 4, 2001 promotes the development of political dialogue and stepping up cooperation between the two parties.

"All these years we have been actively developing trade and economic cooperation," Russia's top diplomat said at a meeting with his Algerian counterpart Ramtane Lamamra. According the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports, Lavrov noted that given "the rapidly developing friendly ties" it was necessary to maintain the high level of cooperation to sign "a new inter-state strategic document, which will reflect the new quality of our relations."

The two diplomats were together meeting early April, when Lamamra visited Moscow as part of an Arab League delegation for negotiations on Ukraine. On the other hand, Lavrov last visited Algeria in 2019. Reports indicate that Algeria is among Russia's three major trade partners in Africa. Besides economic cooperation, Moscow and Algiers claim fighting against terrorism. Algeria has been making its contributions to the International Counterterrorism Database established on Russia's initiative.

Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, on May 10, received Lavrov, both noted that

Algiers is in favour of building further and stronger a comprehensive partnership, especially with a long history and one which is founded on principles of friendship and trust, with the Russian Federation. During the meeting, he reiterated an invitation to President of Algeria Abdelmadjid Tebboune on behalf of President of Russia Vladimir Putin to pay an official visit to the Russian Federation.

These developments are of particular significance this year as Russia and Algeria mark 60 years of diplomatic ties. The fast-growing trade and economic ties between the two countries was also highlighted. Algeria is one of Russia's biggest trading partners on the African continent, with trade reaching \$3 billion in 2022. In addition, Russia and Algeria work together closely under OPEC+ and the Gas Exporting Countries Forum.

Reports highlighted the development of military-technical cooperation, which has firm roots and good prospects. Moscow appreciates the trust Algerian friends put in the matter of strengthening Algeria's defence capability. There are good prospects for continuing this trend. In addition, many Russian companies are interested in implementing joint projects with Algerian partners in energy, mineral resources, geological exploration, and pharmaceuticals.

Lavrov's trip was aimed at ensuring that there are no plans to violate their obligations to Russia, particularly in the field of oil and gas supplies. In addition, Moscow sought to demonstrate that it continued to have its attention focused on the Middle East, the local Russian media Kommersant writes in its assessment and analytical news report.

The countries of the region have not joined the West's sanctions against Moscow but they are concerned about the conflict's impact on economic stability. Middle Eastern nations are considering the benefits that could be derived from the situation.

Western politicians are visiting the region one after another, hoping to find alternatives to Russian oil and gas. Major gas exporters, Qatar and Algeria, have found themselves in the center of the spotlight. Doha is already in talks with European partners. As for Algeria, it "cannot – and, most importantly, has no desire to – offer additional amounts of gas to Europe," Director of the Center for African Studies at the Higher School of Economics Andrey Maslov noted.

In Oman located in the Middle East, Lavrov held meetings with Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said and Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers of Oman Fahd bin Mahmoud Al Said. Both separate discussions were based on the entire range of Russian-Omani relations.

The meetings appreciated Sultanate's balanced and objective position on regional situations like the Syrian settlement, and that of Syria's return to the League of Arab States. The Sultanate of Oman, which never closed its embassy in Damascus, can be instrumental in this regard.

Oman plays an important role in strengthening stability and security in the Gulf region. Muscat's balanced position makes it an important neutral platform for various diplomatic initiatives. This approach absolutely resonates with Russia's Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf.

"We noted Oman and Gulf Cooperation Council countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, positive role in advancing a Yemeni settlement," Lavrov noted in

remarks. “We are on the same page with the understanding that we must do everything we can to resume direct Palestinian-Israeli talks and to find ways to finally resolve this drawn-out conflict based on available internationally accepted legal solutions.”

Lavrov’s visit to Oman has a great significance as well.

“Oman has always sought to take a special position and have its own opinion on all issues. Oman is also an experienced mediator in regional affairs, including the Yemen issue and Iran’s nuclear program,” Russian International Affairs Council expert Kirill Semenov noted.

All in all, Lavrov’s tour of the Middle East turned out to be a timely one amid speculations in the regional media about Russia’s declining role in the Middle East and its diminishing presence in Syria.

“Russia is focused on maintaining its presence in the areas that it finds crucial, primarily near its military bases in Latakia and Tartus, as well as in the areas where the presence of Russian troops is envisaged by agreements, particularly with Turkey. In other places, it may be about a temporary presence,” Semenov explained.

The Arab world is also seeking peace in Ukraine. In early April, the Arab League said it was ready to contribute to a peaceful resolution between Russia and Ukraine, and a delegation led by Secretary General of the Arab League Ahmed Aboul Gheit was sent to Moscow from Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, the UAE and Sudan.

The Al Arabiya television channel reported citing its sources that the Arab League was prepared to offer its mediation to Russia and Ukraine and to host the negotiations. However, the group announced no specific initiatives a month after the report. As a member of the Arab League contact group, Algeria used this month’s negotiations to discuss some steps towards establishing peace in Ukraine republic.

In the meanwhile, as a direct result of the “special military operation” launched on February 24, Russia has come under a raft of stringent sanctions imposed by the United States and Canada, European Union, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and a host of other countries.

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