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WITH A MORE ENTERPRISING RUSSIA, CARDS ARE RESHUFFLED IN THE ARAB WORLD

Francis Ghilès, Senior Associate Research Fellow CIDOB

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A new power structure is emerging in the Middle East as Russia uses its intervention in Syria to position itself as an important partner for regional powers as diverse and opposed to each other as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Israel and Iran.

In North Africa, Algeria and Egypt are indulging in a form of heavy lifting that pushes the United States and the European Union to the sidelines. Some observers will welcome these changes, others will deplore them. Nobody can dispute that the European Union's and United States' capacity to shape policy in the region is declining fast.

Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt have a common interest in breaking the impasse in Libya as violence in the country since the death of Muammar Qaddafi risks spilling over the border. It already has in spectacular fashion in Tunisia with the attack on the southern town of Ben Guerdane last winter and on the attempt to torch the Algeria gas field of Tiguentourine four years ago.

Matters worsened when Tuaregs from northern Mali, who had long served Qaddafi, returned to their country armed with weapons stolen from Libyan arms dumps and nearly toppled the regime in Mali.

Whatever the goodwill of the UN special envoy to Libya and the European Union's backing of the Government of National Accord in the west, the fact that control of eastern Libya rests essentially with Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar means a confrontation between the two halves of Libya remains a major risk that the country's neighbours want to avoid. Nor do they wish to become hostage to power games initiated from outside the region and that they feel are not amicable to their interests.

Russia has entered the fray in Libya, where it had docking rights in the eastern port of Benghazi at the time of Qaddafi. Haftar twice visited Moscow last year and was recently invited on board the aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov, which was making its way back to Russia from Syria. While on the ship, Haftar had a videoconference with Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu.

Although Russia said it remains committed to the UN arms embargo on Libya, this show of support for Haftar comes when his enemies are weakening. It sends a rebuke to Western powers which, after brokering the fall of the former dictator, have been incapable of preventing Libya's slide into chaos

Algeria and Egypt, at least since Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took power, have no objection to the Russians playing a role in the region. Algeria was very upset in 2011 as its warnings to Paris, London and Washington about the likely outcome of their intervention in Libya were treated with contempt.

Further evidence of Russia's projecting itself as a major player came when the Qatar Investment Authority decided to invest \$5 billion in the Russian oil company Rosneft PJSC as part of a \$10.6 billion deal that included Glencore Plc.

A significant part of Qatar's investment portfolio remains in the United States where it is committed to investing \$35 billion over the next five years.

Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani has decided to hedge his bets. His decision to invest in Rosneft was taken as Russian warplanes bombarded Aleppo where the countries were on different sides of the Syria divide.

The strong Russian backing for Syrian President Bashar Assad has left the countries that had funded and armed the Islamist rebels -- Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia -- in the lurch. Turkey has moved much closer to its erstwhile enemy Russia recently and Qatar has followed in its footsteps.

Russia has long suspected Qatar of supporting militant Islamist groups in Syria, a suspicion shared by many Western observers, and in Chechnya. The emir no doubts remembers that Russian agents assassinated Chechen rebel leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev in the Qatari capital, Doha, in 2004.

Another sign that the times are changing is Qatar's backtracking on pledges made to clean up its act on human rights after it won the right to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. It hardly bothers to pay lip service to them today. Human Rights Watch recently pointed out that changes to the labour law that took effect in 2016 will not "protect migrant workers from the serious abuses that characterise Qatar's construction industry and other low paid sectors of its economy".

The rise of Russia and populist parties in the West and Donald Trump's accession to the White House -- have emboldened Qatar to discard any promises it made to reform its labour laws. It is also encouraging regional powers to play a stronger role in mediating in North African and Middle Eastern conflicts.

In view of the dismal Western record in the region in recent decades, the latter development might not be such a bad thing even if the former can only be deplored.