

Interview with Al Arabiya, Sky News Arabia and RT Arabic

In advance of his visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates Vladimir Putin answered questions from Al Arabiya senior presenter Mohammed Tomaihi, Sky News Arabia senior presenter Mohannad Khatib and RT Arabic Public and Political Programmes Department Head Salam Musafir.

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Mohammed Tomaihi (retranslated): Dear viewers, welcome to this unique interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin, which we are recording in Sochi.

With me here today are Mr. Mohannad Khatib, a reporter at Sky News Arabia and Salam Musafir, a reporter at RT Arabic.

Thank you very much for this unique opportunity, considering your upcoming visit to Saudi Arabia.

President of Russia Vladimir Putin: It is my pleasure. I think it is a good tradition to meet with a country's media before visiting it.

As for the visit to Saudi Arabia, we attach great importance to it. It is, in a sense, a return visit after the visit by King of Saudi Arabia, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, to Russia. It was the first, historic visit. We consider it historic, and it really is.

There is one more thing that I believe is important to note. In Soviet times, relations between Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Union were at a rather low level. In recent years, the quality of our relations has changed dramatically. We consider Saudi Arabia a friendly nation.

I have very good relations with both the King and the Crown Prince. We have been making good headway practically in all fields.

I will start with the economy. There is still a lot to be done, but we have set a good pace. Last year it was up 15%. In the first six months of 2019 growth was as high as 38%. We are considering some good joint projects. Our Russian Direct Investment Fund and the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia have jointly established a \$10 billion platform. \$2 billion have already been invested. Work is underway on other projects, and some promising and interesting projects have already been implemented.

We also consider it possible to operate on the territory of Saudi Arabia. One of our companies is exploring the possibility of building a petrochemical facility with investments of more than \$1 billion. It is SIBUR Holding, Russia's largest company in this sector.

We are fostering a partnership in the trust-based, sensitive area of military and defence cooperation. We have been negotiating for a long time.

Equally important are our joint efforts to resolve the regional crises. In this regard, I would like to emphasise the positive role Saudi Arabia has played in resolving the Syrian crisis. We are working especially closely with Turkey and Iran, as you all know. But I believe that without Saudi Arabia's contribution towards a Syrian settlement, it would have been impossible to achieve a positive trend. Therefore, I would like to express our gratitude to both the King and the Crown Prince for this constructive approach. I am confident that my visit will help to build up the momentum both in developing bilateral relations and enhancing cooperation in international organisations.

Mohannad Khatib (retranslated): Mr. President, thank you very much once again for giving us the opportunity to record this interview.

Your visit to the Middle East will possibly have an impact on the United Arab Emirates as well. What do you think about strategic cooperation between Russia and the UAE, and how will this cooperation evolve? Can this cooperation play a certain role in strengthening collective security, considering the Russian initiative to establish a collective security architecture in the Gulf region, especially in the area of the Strait of Hormuz?

Vladimir Putin: You have just mentioned the strategic nature of our cooperation. Indeed, we signed a strategic partnership memorandum last year, and we see the United Arab Emirates as one of our very close and promising partners. The signing of this document was not a coincidence, it demonstrated the quality and nature of relations between the United Arab Emirates and the Russian Federation.

I have to say that, as is the case with Saudi Arabia, our partnership is vigorously developing in all areas. Of all the Gulf countries, we have the highest level of trade, \$1.7 billion, but of course, this is not enough, we are well aware of that. So currently, we are working with the UAE's sovereign fund. The joint platform is worth approximately \$7 billion. \$2 billion have already been invested, work is underway on other projects. And of course, it is safe to say that the United Arab Emirates greatly contribute to resolving regional crises, and play a stabilising role in the region.

It is no great secret that we maintain regular contacts with the leadership of the United Arab Emirates. There is even an established tradition, a practice to compare notes regarding different topics. In my opinion, we are doing it for the benefit of both parties, and the region as a whole.

Salam Musafir (retranslated): Mr. President, in the more than 10 years of your presidency some harsh, dramatic developments have taken place in the Middle East, and the statehood of several countries has been undermined, namely Iraq,

Libya. We see that this could be the fate of other states as well.

We see what happened in the Syrian Arab Republic, what catastrophic events took place there. Now, many members of the Arab public think that Russia can really bolster its role in the region. You surely know that our network, RT Arabic, covers Russia's foreign policy as well.

Many of our viewers have been asking straightforwardly: why has Russia taken such a harsh stance in the case of Syria, but the position regarding Libya and Iraq was perhaps not as hard?

Vladimir Putin: First of all, during the crises in Iraq and Libya, I was not in office. But this is not the main reason. The thing is that, as is commonly known, in the case of Iraq, the United States circumvented the United Nations Security Council. The US had no mandate to use force against Iraq.

Actually, I was President at that moment. Anyway, Russia did not support the invasion. Russia, France and Germany did not support the US plans regarding Iraq. What is more, we warned about the potential adverse implications, and that is exactly what happened.

The initial euphoria of military victories soon gave way to despondency and pessimism about the consequences of the victory. Because all Iraqi government institutions were destroyed, but no new institutions were established, at least in the beginning. On the contrary, the radical forces got a boost, and terrorists groups became stronger.

Many former officers of Saddam Hussein's army and security service agents resurfaced and joined the ranks of what later evolved into ISIS. So, those who led and supported this campaign had not considered the ramifications.

We do expect that there will be some positive developments in Iraq, and despite some internal problems, the country will continue to move forward. Although there

are still a lot of problems to deal with, we are perfectly aware of that.

As for Libya, the chaos wrought by the military operations still prevails, but in this case, our Western partners played a trick on us, using the vernacular term (I do not know how this will be translated). Russia voted for the corresponding Security Council resolution. After all, what does this resolution say, if you read it carefully? The resolution prohibited Gaddafi to use aviation against the rebels. But there was nothing about allowing any air strikes on Libyan territory. But that was what actually happened. So, basically, what happened there was done circumventing the UN Security Council. And we are all aware of what happened next. There is still chaos and confusion; a flow of migrants went through Libya to Europe. Gaddafi had always warned about that, he said that he stopped African migrants from going to Europe. As soon as this 'wall' was gone, they started pouring into Europe. And now they have what they were warned about. But that is probably not even the main issue. Most importantly, it is destabilising the entire Middle East region.

As for Syria, we came to Syria to support the legitimate government, and I would like to emphasise the word 'legitimate.' It does not mean that they do not have internal problems; I am ready to talk about it in detail later. It does not mean that the current leadership is not responsible for what is going on there. They are, but it does not mean that we were to allow terrorist organisations to capture Syria and to establish a terrorist pseudo-state there. We could not allow militants to move to former Soviet republics. We do not have hard borders or a visa regime with them. We could not allow militants to infiltrate Russia from there. We already had such an experience and we know what this might lead to. We still remember what happened in Russia's North Caucasus region not that long ago. This is why we made a decision to support the legitimate government.

We have not just provided assistance to the legitimate government. We proceed from the premise that internal political contradictions must be and can be resolved by political methods only. That is why we were so adamant. I am glad to see it happening now as part of the political process, as a result of the establishment of the so-called Constitutional Committee.

This idea was conceived right here, in Sochi, at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress that brought together various political forces, including the opposition and the government. And here Syrians agreed among themselves to set up a constitutional committee that would work on changing the Syrian Constitution or drafting a new one.

We have trodden a hard, arduous, and long path to form this committee. Now it has finally been formed, on behalf of the government, on behalf of President Assad, and on behalf of the opposition. I expect that in the coming days, it will take its first steps in Geneva under the auspices of the UN.

Mohammed Tomaihi: Mr. President, you spoke earlier about the relations between Saudi Arabia and Russia. As you know, it is a strategic partner of the Russian Federation in terms of energy security. You must be aware of the two missile and bomb strikes on the oil refinery, and of the most recent developments.

There has been talk in Saudi Arabia about Iran playing a destabilising role in the region. You said that evidence had to be found to prove that Iran was really behind that. What is the official position of the Russian Federation regarding this incident?

Vladimir Putin: Our official position is as follows: we condemn any such actions, end of story. This is the official position. We said this at the very beginning, and I have recently reiterated it at the Russian Energy Week forum in Moscow. There should be no room for doubt here. Such actions never yield any results for anyone, including those who plot and execute them. Why? If someone may have wanted to deal a blow to the oil market, they failed. There were indeed some fluctuations in prices, but I do not think it was anything too serious, even though the initial response was quite strong. The prices went back to normal in the very first week, because the fundamental factors that the market depends on will never allow the prices to either skyrocket or take a nosedive.

Secondly, we – and I personally – maintain close contacts with the leadership of Saudi Arabia, including the Crown Prince. We discussed the incident, and I told

him that I thought it necessary to collect evidence, to find the perpetrators behind that incident. Mohammed bin Salman agreed with me in principle, and asked me a question: "Could Russia take part in the investigation?" I said yes, we are ready to share anything that might be necessary, everything we have for a thorough investigation. Our position remains unchanged. It is counter-productive to put the blame on someone before finding out exactly who was behind the incident.

Mohammed Tomaihi: Mr. President, can Russia give any assurances that if it is revealed that Iran masterminded the attack, Russia will join other countries in condemning it?

Vladimir Putin: I have just said it and I will repeat, regardless of who stood behind the incident, we condemn any such actions. That is exactly what I said before, and I really meant it. There is no other way to interpret this.

Mohannad Khatib: Let us now put these attacks on the oil facilities aside. I think you are well aware of the tension that has mounted in the region, and you must have been analysing this situation yourself. There is concern about Iran's role in not only these recent attacks, but also in what is happening in other countries – in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and some others.

Do you think Russia has the same concerns about Iran's activities, which we think are having a destabilising effect? Can Russia do anything to change Iran's behaviour?

Vladimir Putin: As I said, we have an unprecedented level of partnership, I would even say friendly relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. But Russia will never be friends with one country against another. We build bilateral relations that rely on positive trends generated by our contacts; we do not build alliances against anyone. This is my first point.

Secondly, you and your audience understand, I believe, that Russia and Iran are neighbours; this is a factor we always bear in mind.

Thirdly, Iran is a major regional power, an ancient country with a rich cultural legacy. If we want to build good relations with a country – and I believe every country in the region would want to have good relations with each other, no one seeks a standoff or, perish the thought, any conflict. No one does. I know that there is no one looking for a showdown and that is true for both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. If we want to set a positive agenda, we need to acknowledge that our partners have their own legitimate interests. I am not weighing in on what is legitimate and what is not. I just want to underscore that it is only natural that a big country like Iran, which has existed on its territory for thousands of years has its own interests. Persians and Iranians have lived here for centuries. And we should respect those interests.

Of course, it is debatable what is legitimate and what is not, which interests are legitimate and which cross the line. However, you need to have dialogue to understand each other, to puzzle out all the nuances, intricacies and issues. Without dialogue, you cannot solve any problem. That is why I think I can share the concerns of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, but in the case of bilateral issues, it is up to them to resolve them.

As for Russia, we will do everything in our power to create the right conditions for positive change. Russia has cordial relations with Iran and is on very good terms with our Arab friends. Back in the Soviet times, we did not have any particularly deep relations with Saudi Arabia, but we were truly close with almost all the Arab countries. The Soviet Union was on very good terms with the entire Arab world. Today we are back to the same level of partnership. Therefore, if we put to good use the cordial relations that we have with Iran, the Arab world, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, I think we can come up with something that would be of interest to everyone.

Previously, I mentioned the positive role that we play in Syria. It is true that we – Turkey, Iran, and Russia – work hard, shoulder to shoulder, to achieve positive results. However, it would have been impossible without support from Saudi Arabia, and we all understand that. And, of course, without assistance from the UAE as well. It means that, despite acute contradictions, there is still something that brings us together towards a common goal. You just need to find such a goal and then apply

concerted efforts to reach it. That can create the right setting for the normalisation of relations between the countries in the region.

Mohannad Khatib: Staying with Iran. Some say that the P5+1 talks should be resumed. Moreover, the common opinion is that the agreement should also cover the ballistic missile programme. What is Russia's position here regarding the call to revive that framework and possibly modify the agreement, extending it to some other issues?

Vladimir Putin: There is the JCPOA or the Iran nuclear deal, which specifies certain limits and commitments for Iran, and Iran has accepted them. Let us be frank here, otherwise the conversation will be too dull: the countries of the region do have some contradictions, and you have just mentioned them. There is disagreement between Iran and Israel, Iran and the US. I believe that attempts must be made to settle those disagreements, to seek a way out of the complicated situations that we observe today. However, if we agree that there are contradictions between regional powers and Iran, then who can take up the role of an arbitrator and decide whether Iran complies with the JCPOA or not? First and foremost, an arbitrator should be impartial, right? Second, an arbitrator should be a professional. Third, it should be someone respected by the international community. We have such an arbitrator, the IAEA, the International Atomic Energy Agency. And the IAEA has publicly, without any hesitation, said that Iran fully complies with all of its obligations.

What we are seeing is not quite productive. Not to mention that it is just unfair to blame Iran for failing to deliver on some commitments. It is counter-productive because when a person or a country is treated so unfairly, they start acting in a way different manner, not the way existing agreements require. When one party does not abide by its obligations, why would the other still honour them? Nevertheless, I believe that Iran should follow both the letter and spirit of the agreement. But that is a different question.

As for the missile programme, I suppose the issue can and should be part of the discussion too. In Russia, there is a saying, and I think Muslims would understand the meaning as well: "You should know the difference between God's

gift and fried eggs [dollars to doughnuts].” These are two different matters. The missile programme is one thing, and the nuclear programme is something different. It does not imply that the missile programme should not be part of the conversation, especially since it raises certain concerns. There is a place for discussion, but let us not mix apples and oranges here; otherwise, all the progress that has been made could be totally lost.

Therefore, I think that such a discussion can take place, but it should not cancel out all the achievements on the principle track, that is putting a cap on Iran’s nuclear activities.

Salam Musafir: I would like to ask you a question on the matter, namely security in the Gulf region. It has truly seen a lot of developments recently. There have been many dramatic incidents: detention of tankers, a missile and bomb attack on the Saudi Aramco refinery, and the aggression that continues around Yemen. The recent attacks on Saudi Aramco’s oil facilities strongly affected sentiment in the region, as we can see.

In your view, what will be the impact of all these high-profile incidents on cooperation under the OPEC+ agreement? So far, regional powers have not made any specific statements regarding Russia’s proposal for a collective security strategy in the region.

How do you plan to promote that collective security initiative? Do you think it will ever see the light of day?

Vladimir Putin: Your questions seem to be linked, but still deal with separate issues. Our cooperation within OPEC+ is one thing, while regional security and stability and our proposals is a different one.

First, if anyone thinks that seizing tankers and attacking oil infrastructure can in any way affect cooperation between Russia and our Arab friends, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, that they can undermine or break down our cooperation with OPEC+, then they are profoundly wrong. On the contrary, we will forge ever closer ties

because our main goal is to stabilise global energy markets. Technically, we need to cut global reserves to some sensible level, so that these reserves do not affect prices.

We have made some good strides and whatever we have managed to achieve has served not only oil producers, but also consumers. Neither producers nor consumers want high prices, rather we all want stability in the global market. Let me be straight with you, all that has been done under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Overall, those were his initiatives, and we just backed them. Now we see that we did the right thing.

We need to respond to any attempt to destabilise the market. Russia will certainly continue working with Saudi Arabia and other partners and friends in the Arab world to counter any attempts to wreak havoc in the market.

Now let us turn to Russia's initiative to stabilise the situation in the Gulf region. We put that initiative forward some time ago. We proposed to establish some sort of an organisation that would bring together the countries of the region as well as several other stakeholders, the US and the EU, to name just a few. This organisation would serve as a platform to discuss crises and all kinds of pressing problems. Some have already voiced their support; others say it is too early to launch such an initiative. And the reason for that, by the way, is the serious contradictions between regional powers. From my point of view, these deep contradictions call for such a platform, so that countries could at least sit at the negotiating table. As you may be aware, sometimes it is not the negotiations that matter, but a handshake. A handshake can mean a lot.

Salam Musafir: A follow-up question, if I may. Can we rely on Russia's efforts as a mediator between the Islamic Republic and Saudi Arabia, or on a larger scale in order to help relieve the tension in the Gulf region?

Vladimir Putin: The role of mediator is not a rewarding one. I believe that our partners in Iran and Saudi Arabia do not need any mediation.

Since we maintain very friendly relations with all the countries in the region, including Iran and the Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, we could certainly help relay some messages between the parties, so they could hear each other's position. But since I personally know the leaders of these countries, I am perfectly sure that they have no need for any advice or mediation. What you can do is maintain a friendly conversation with them and present some ideas from a friend's perspective. I am convinced that as highly intelligent people they listen and analyse everything they hear. From this point of view, yes, we could play a positive role in the process, to some extent.

Mohammed Tomaihi: Mr. President, if you allow me, I would like to ask a straightforward question. You have just said that all allegations against Iran in regard to these strikes are premature. You recently met with President Rouhani. Did he assure you in any way that Iran had nothing whatsoever to do with these strikes and was not involved in this in any way?

Vladimir Putin: Yes, that is exactly what he said. He said that Iran had nothing to do with this. We met "on the sidelines" of an international summit. It was the summit of the Eurasian Economic Union, an organisation we created with a number of ex-Soviet states. A few months ago, the Eurasian Economic Union and Iran signed an interim agreement on a free trade area. We have a free trade area agreement with Singapore and Vietnam, and we are also working on one with Israel and Egypt. The Eurasian Economic Union has enjoyed successful cooperation with many states across the globe. Iran is about to join this process, and we discussed these prospects just recently, on the sidelines of the summit in Yerevan, Armenia.

Mohammed Tomaihi: One more question, if I may, Mr. President.

Russia certainly plays a role in the Gulf region, and your intelligence agencies have a huge capacity. It is hard to believe that Russia does not know what really happened to those oil facilities. Is it possible?

Vladimir Putin: Believe it or not, we do not know. I asked the heads of the Foreign Intelligence Service and the Ministry of Defence the very next day. We do not know.

I will refrain from any further comments as to who should know in order not to hurt anyone's feelings, but I can say that we do not have any definitive information regarding the incident.

Mohannad Khatib: Can we move to Syria now, Mr. President?

You recently announced a suspension of large-scale combat operations in Syria, and everyone is now hopeful that political settlement will work. You spoke about it at the Valdai Forum here in Russia. You said that Syria could become a good example of how such conflicts must be approached and settled.

Do you think that we can talk about a political settlement while other countries' forces are still deployed in Syria? I mean the United States, Russia, Turkey and Iran? Is there hope to achieve stability in Syria amid these destabilising factors?

Vladimir Putin: There is always hope. Do not ever give it up. I can only agree with you that all the forces deployed illegitimately inside any sovereign state – in this case Syria – must leave. This is true for everyone. If Syria's new legitimate government chooses to say that they have no more need for Russia's military presence, this will be just as true for Russia. Right now, we are discussing this openly with all our partners, including Iran and Turkey. We spoke about it with our American partners many times. And I will be as open with you as I have been with my counterparts: Syria must be free from other states' military presence. And the territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic must be completely restored.

Mohannad Khatib: Do you have a vision for Syria's political future? And what role does Russia play in it?

Vladimir Putin: It is a difficult question, and it is a question that only Syrians can answer. I hope that they do so not by taking up arms and fighting a war against their own people, but through negotiations, in this case, as I said, in Geneva. The very first step along this path is to work on the country's Constitution, whether by amending the existing Constitution or drafting a new one. In either case, it must protect the interests of all the ethnic and religious groups. People need to know that

they live in their own country and that it protects them by law. This must be equally true for Sunnis and Shia, for Alawites and Christians, because Syria has always been a state with many religions, and it could pride itself on this. Only insane people could have started a deranged, purging campaign, killing other people, as these terrorists did in Syria.

Again, it will not be easy; it will be a difficult process, but I believe it can work. Do you know why I feel positive about it? People are returning home. We are talking thousands of people. They are returning from abroad and from other Syrian provinces. They are coming home. This is a sure sign of the trust they have in the situation we have today; they trust the government and its guarantees, and they trust the guarantor states.

I am happy to say that Syrians welcome and trust Russian troops and Russia's military police. The military police units deployed there are doing a good job. They are mostly Muslims from the North Caucasus. And the local residents trust them and feel free to ask them for help and protection. I have reports of such cases. I am happy to say all this, but in order to have long-term peace, people need to find a way to settle things between themselves. The worst peace is always better than the best of wars.

Salam Musafir: Let us leave the Middle East and the Gulf region for now.

You always say that Russian-American relations need to improve, because otherwise, if there is a 'fault' in these relations, this may change the situation for the worse globally.

Today, as you look at the Trump Administration, as you read Donald Trump's tweets, do you see any hope for any steps to improve relations between the two countries? You surely follow the US President's statements, don't you?

Vladimir Putin: I must say that I do not have any Twitter account or anything, so I do not follow anyone there. Of course, I get reports from my staff from time to time. The opinion of the President of the United States always matters; it is always very

important for many parties and for the world overall, but I do not follow him personally.

Salam Musafir: Let us assume President Trump is re-elected next year. Do you think he could be the more promising president, that he might have more courage to de-escalate tension between Washington and Moscow? And will Russia be willing to resume dialogue?

Vladimir Putin: You work for Russia Today, don't you? Well, it is because of people like you that Russia will be accused of meddling in the election, because you said just now that Trump could be re-elected. They will say, "Gotcha! This is Russia interfering with the election campaign".

Jokes aside, we all know what President Trump says about Russian-American relations and how he talks about them. We know that during his previous campaign, he called for relations to get back to normal, but unfortunately, nothing has been done. But we do not hold it against anyone because we can all see what is going on in the American domestic political scene these days. The domestic political agenda prevents the incumbent president from embarking on a drastic improvement of relations between our countries.

In any case, we will work with any administration to the extent it is willing to work with us. However, we cannot help but feel concern over overall global security and strategic balance. This is obvious.

In 2002 (and President Trump has nothing to do with it), the United States withdrew from the ABM treaty, which, I would like to reiterate, was the cornerstone of the entire global strategic security system, because it imposed limits on the missile defence systems of our countries. Do you see the point? The point was to make it clear that neither party can ever win a nuclear war, should it happen. That was the whole point. The United States withdrew from the treaty in order to secure some serious strategic advantage for themselves, thinking that they might shield themselves from a threat, unlike Russia. It would leave Russia in a very vulnerable position, while the US would be protected by an ABM system.

Back then, I told our US partners that there is no way of knowing how well such a system would work and so we will not waste tens of billions on it. But strategic balance must be maintained, which means that we will develop offensive weapons that will defeat any ABM system. And we have developed them, and everyone knows it by now. The ABM systems are designed to intercept ballistic missiles, i.e. missiles that follow a ballistic trajectory whereas what we did was we enhanced and improved ballistic missiles significantly and developed a new weapon that has no rivals in the world. We have hypersonic missiles that follow a low trajectory rather than a ballistic one. No one has hypersonic missiles today, except us. Of course, the world's leading powers will one day develop them, sooner or later. But we will be able to come up with something new by that time. I know what projects our scientists, researchers, designers and engineers are working on right now. Unfortunately, this has led to an arms race of sorts. But that is what has happened. It is a fact. Sadly, this is true.

Now, recently, the US also withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. I think it was a mistake, too, and that they could have gone a different path. I do understand the US concerns. While other countries are free to enhance their defences, Russia and the US have tied their own hands with this treaty. However, I still believe it was not worth ruining the deal; I believe there were other ways out of the situation.

The New START Treaty is actually the only treaty that we have to prevent us from falling back into a full-scale arms race. It serves to further reduce and limit strategic offensive arms, that is to limit the entire range of strategic weapons, the entire strategic triade: land, sea and air-based combat inter-continental ballistic missile launchers. This treaty expires in 2021. To make sure it is extended, we need to be working on it right now. We have already submitted our proposals; they are on the table of the US Administration. There has been no answer so far. Our understanding is that they have not made up their minds yet as to whether they need to extend the treaty or not. But if this treaty is not extended, the world will have no means of limiting the number of offensive weapons, and this is bad news. The situation will change, globally. It will become more precarious, and the world will be less safe and a much less predictable place than today.

Mohammed Tomaihi: Let us get back to disarmament. Mr. President, do you think that a new arms race could plunge us back into another cold war?

Vladimir Putin: I wish it does not happen. In any case, Russia will be the least affected party because, as I said, we already have the next generation of weapons, and these are unprecedented, with unmatched capabilities. In that sense, we have done our homework. We do not need to rush now and can calmly think of what could be done next.

Military spending also plays a role here. It may or may not come as a surprise to you but Russia ranks seventh in terms of defence spending. Saudi Arabia is third. The US military spending totals 716 billion, if I am not mistaken, and next year they asked for 750 billion. Next comes China with around 177 billion, followed by Saudi Arabia, with 59 billion, right? Trailing behind are the UK, France, Japan, with 48.1 billion, based on the data I have, and Russia is only seventh with 48 billion. However, we have unmatched military capabilities.

What has made it possible? It comes as a result of focused research on priority areas, and the credit here goes to our specialists, their ability to identify those areas, mobilise resources. It has been made possible thanks to research institutions, production know how, fundamental knowledge and competences.

Therefore, an arms race is a bad thing, and it will not be good for the world. However, we will not be dragged into exorbitant budget spending games.

Mohammed Tomaihi: Despite this, NATO continues to press forward. Do you feel that the alliance's march towards Russia's borders is a threat? How will you respond to it?

Vladimir Putin: We do feel it, certainly. We have always felt it and voiced our concerns. We were told, "Don't be afraid. You are not the target and there is nothing to fear. NATO is changing, it is no longer a military bloc, it does not have belligerent intentions", and stuff like that. In the meantime, the North Atlantic Treaty remains in place, in particular Article 5, if I am not wrong, that guarantees military support

to other members, etc. It is a military bloc. As its infrastructure is moving closer to our borders, we are not happy about it.

There is another trick. I think it is clear to everyone that NATO is just a US foreign policy tool. Europe is aware of it. Take the French president. I do not need to make anything up. Another trick is that once countries join NATO, they have no say over the arms that are installed on their territory. This was the case in Romania with missile defence. Poland will soon get it, too. It will be really close to our border. It is certainly a threat to us. We see it as an attempt to neutralise our strategic nuclear capabilities. However, it is clear their efforts are doomed to failure. I believe experts now see this as well. Now that we have the cutting edge systems that I mentioned earlier, these moves are no longer a threat to us. I do not want to say what we really think about it. Still, there is nothing positive about it. So yes, we do see this as destructive activities that escalate tension. There is nothing good about it.

Mohannad Khatib: Mr. President, another issue that used to be in the limelight. I am referring to the Palestinian-Israeli settlement. Like the Soviet Union, Russia has played an important role in resolving the issue. Take the Madrid conference, for instance. However, in recent years, Russia has not been very active on that track while the US is trumpeting a so-called deal of the century. In the meantime, the Israeli government is going ahead with its arbitrary authoritarian policy. What is Russia's role in resolving the issues that are so fundamental to the Middle East?

Vladimir Putin: This does not depend on us or our actions. It is up to all the stakeholders whether they want to see someone in the process or not.

Incidentally, we have very good relations with Israel as well. Almost 1.5 million Israelis come from the former Soviet Union. Israel is almost a Russian-speaking country. The Russian language is often heard in shops everywhere. We do care about what is happening in Israel. However, we have a principled position on the Israeli-Palestinian settlement: we are fully committed to all the UN decisions and believe that they must be executed.

Now on the 'deal of the century'. We will support any deal that will bring peace but

we need to know what it is about. The US has been pretty vague about the details of the deal. Washington has kept in the dark the global and domestic public, the Middle East, and Palestine.

We believe it is important to ensure a two-state solution and establish the State of Palestine. We suggested hosting direct talks in Moscow between the Israeli Prime Minister and the head of the Palestinian Authority, but the meeting never took place, unfortunately. We have been doing what we can: we have held several meetings between different Palestinian groups. Restoring Palestinian unity would be a major contribution to the process. Speaking with different voices undermines the united Palestinian stance. But we are working on it.

It does not mean that we have quit the process altogether, and are no longer interested in it. We are deeply committed primarily because we believe that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is key to resolving many other regional issues. Unless it is resolved, it will continue to feed radicalism and terrorism, among other things. When people feel they have no legal ways to uphold their rights, they take up arms. In this sense, I feel the Israelis are also interested in a long-term, ultimate solution, not just the Palestinians.

Mohammed Tomaihi: Mr. President, we are running out of time. We do not want to steal time from our colleagues.

You have made fairly positive comments about Saudi Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman. You seem to have close and good ties with him. Do you count on the positive role that he can play in fostering the Russian-Saudi relationship and in the Middle East agenda in general?

Vladimir Putin: That is exactly his role today, and he has been quite successful. Indeed, we have very good personal ties. He has been behind many of our initiatives, and these projects are being put into practice. As I said, he came up with OPEC+, he endorsed the joint platforms of our investment funds. Two billion worth of investment has been made by now. He raised the need for broader defence cooperation, and we have a good plan of joint activities in that area. This is already

happening. Hopefully, our collaboration will continue to expand going forward.

As for Saudi Arabia's role in the region, it is definitely one of the key countries there. It does have an impact based on its capabilities and its position in the energy market. Saudi Arabia can be safely called a global player since it has an impact on the world energy market, on world energy in general.

This is why cooperation with Saudi Arabia, its King and Crown Prince bin Salman is very important, and we will develop our relations going forward.

Salam Musafir: Before we came here, we did a poll on RT Arabic's website. We asked a simple question: "If you had a chance to meet the Russian President, what would you ask him?" It generated a lot of interest, and we picked the most popular questions. I will not list all of them, but one of the biggest concerns among our Arab audience is the future of Russian-Arab ties when you will no longer be the President of Russia. What will be the stance of your successor on the issue?

Vladimir Putin: It is not about the name of the Russian president, it is about our national interests. It is in the interests of the Russian and other nations of the Russian Federation to nurture relations with the Arab world. It has always appealed to Russia with its enigma, culture, opportunities and potential. I have no doubt that Russia is set to boost the pace of its interaction with the Arab world in the years to come.

Salam Musafir: Thank you.

Mohannad Khatib: I will try to be brief. The Arab world is following the recent developments, in both Russia and the Arab world, as part of the so-called Arab spring. The situation is rapidly changing in Sudan and Algeria; Tunisia just had an election. Do you see any positive signals? Do you think the region is entering a new phase that will culminate in a stable Middle East?

Vladimir Putin: Clearly, the region is not in a state of stability. We all understand it;

we can see it with our own eyes. But all things pass. I hope it will be over one day. It will not get better quickly on its own, if you just leave things as they are, without attempts to improve the situation. Russia will do all it can to make sure things get back to normal and as soon as possible.

We do not think you can and should handle the situation 'from above'. As I said, we have many friends in the Arab world. It is time to get Syria back into the Arab family, to re-instate it in the Arab League. We will work hard to bring it back to normal and to help our friends. However, the pace of improvements will ultimately depend on the people who are responsible for the situation in their countries. I am convinced stabilisation is inevitable and I wish it happens as soon as possible.

Remark: Thank you so much, Mr. President, for the productive interview.

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