

Report

# Russia's Mission in Cultural and Scientific Diplomacy in the Middle East

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## **The Evgeny Primakov Center for International Cooperation**

### **Report**

### **Russia's Mission in Cultural and Scientific Diplomacy in the Middle East**

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## Summary

1. The development of Russia's relations with countries in the Middle East and North Africa, along with the emergence of new areas of cooperation, will require broadening the agenda to provide scientific support to these relationships.
2. Energy, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, space, and digital governance tools are obvious areas for developing scientific and technological cooperation. The main obstacles to this are the low level of mutual knowledge; significant imbalances in the scientific and technological development of the countries in the region and the divergence of their development strategies; global and regional political conflicts; and the securitization of science and technology.
3. The structure of activities within specialized academic institutes will shift toward increasing expert and analytical support for the interests of Russian businesses in the Middle East.
4. Existing Russian field research programs in the region could be expanded to include projects in cultural anthropology and sociology. Significant coordination of field research by the Russian Academy of Sciences is necessary.
5. Another promising area of activity is a broader use of digital technologies and platforms to strengthen inter-academia cooperation in national languages.
6. A lack of awareness remains a problem for both Russian and Middle Eastern societies regarding the achievements of field research conducted in the Middle East and North Africa. This situation can be improved by strengthening information support and developing science journalism; by organizing educational events at universities in the region and in Russian cultural centers; and, finally, by supporting popular science publications and their translations.

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7. One of the key ways to overcome mistrust in scientific and cultural cooperation is through the joint implementation of projects. It is worth noting Russia's experience with various bilateral commissions of historians, which work to find compromise interpretations of contentious historical events.
  8. It is extremely important to foster and maintain personal emotional connections between representatives of the creative intelligentsia of Russia and the Middle Eastern countries. A truly significant initiative to strengthen our cultural diplomacy could be a large, regular Middle Eastern festival featuring historical and ethnological discussions on the unity of a diverse world. Other effective tools could include specialized internships, joint creative workshops, seasonal schools, and similar projects.

# Russia's Mission in Cultural and Scientific Diplomacy in the Middle East

## Introduction

When discussing Russian policy in the Middle East, the focus is typically placed on political, military-political, or economic issues. Public diplomacy is discussed somewhat less frequently, and humanitarian cooperation, particularly aspects related to science and culture, is rarely addressed. In this report, we would like to focus specifically on these areas. The reasons for that are not only because they receive less attention (although there is much to say!), and not because the authors of this report, have dedicated decades of their lives to working in these fields, but also because we believe that, in today's fractured world, science and culture can and already do play a crucial role in preventing the humanity from sliding into barbarism. They can serve as tools for building peace when other means no longer work.

We do not aim to describe everything that Russia is doing in the fields of science or culture in the Middle East as far as we are constrained by the frames of a brief analytical report. Our goal is more modest: to reflect on the role that science and culture play in bringing Russia closer to the countries of the Middle East and what role they could potentially play.



the two countries are experiencing perhaps the deepest crisis in their history. At the same time, it is precisely exhibition and theatrical exchanges, as well as collaboration among scientists, that often serve as markers of anticipated improvement. It is enough to mention that at a time there were guarantees for foreign exhibitions in the U.S. adopted to exhibit Scythian gold from the USSR.

The other model of cultural and scientific diplomacy is based on the metaphor of soft power. Until recently, associating science and culture with this category of power was a very well accepted notion. Today, however, the term has almost suddenly been deemed hostile to the supposed neutrality of culture and science. Sometimes, it is even considered unacceptable, which seems incorrect. In the relationships between elements of space, including human interactions, various powers and forces are at play, including culture and science, at least when they are put in the context of dynamically shifting relations. As the soft power of a particular country or people, they serve as the foundations of cultural and intellectual sovereignty, sources of pride, and the basis for respect from partners in international relations. Therefore, cultural competition is a part of shaping the world's cultural heritage, just like a scientific rivalry among states is a crucial driver of scientific and technological development. At the same time, it does not contradict the idea of the universal nature of scientific knowledge.

## Origins

Historically, it has been quite challenging to separate cultural and scientific presence of Russia in the Middle East. Russian pilgrims and travelers who recorded their impressions of distant lands served to both expand the cultural horizons of the inhabitants of Rus', and later the Russian Empire, and enrich the scientific knowledge of the time. This tradition persisted for quite some time, even when its bearers became less about pilgrims and more about travelers and diplomats, such as Konstantin Bazili<sup>2</sup>, who combined diplomatic and scientific tasks in their work.

**It is notable that Russia's cultural presence in the Middle East in the 19th century, as well as earlier, was based on a distinctly expressed set of moral and ethical beliefs related to the desire to support Orthodox fellow believers, often without sufficient consideration of the colonial realities. Most outstanding examples of this include the "Eastern Question" and the Crimean War, or a more positive example, the still-memorable history of the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society with its cultural and educational agenda. Other manifestations of a value-driven relationship with the region, but without a religious component, can be seen in the works of Russian Orientalists such as Ignaty Kratchkovsky<sup>3</sup>, Ahatanhel Krymsky<sup>4</sup>, and others, who welcomed the emergence of modern Arab culture — the so-called an-Nahda. Finally, we must not forget that after Russia established itself as a multi-confessional state, in which Muslims constituted the second-largest religious community, Islamic connections also became important channels for mutual cultural recognition.**

During the Soviet era, a new ethic and pragmatic foundation for scientific and cultural diplomacy in the region emerged, driven by the desire of young

2 Konstantin Bazili (1809–1884) was a Russian diplomat, traveler, and Orientalist, who served as the Consul General in Syria and Palestine from 1844 to 1853. His most famous works include: *Essays on Constantinople; The Bosphorus and New Essays on Constantinople* (Moscow: Indrik, 2006 — 463 pages); *Syria and Palestine under Turkish Rule in Historical and Political Relations* (Moscow: Bridges of Culture; Jerusalem: Gesharim). 2007. — 607 pages).

3 Ignaty Krachkovsky (1883–1951) was an Arabist, one of the founders of the Russian school of Arab studies, a translator of the Quran, and the author of numerous works on classical Arabic history and literature. His most famous works include: *Arabic Geographical Literature* (Moscow: Vostochnaya Literatura, 2004 — 919 pages); *Over Arabic Manuscripts* (Moscow: Librokom, 2019 — 168 pages).

4 Ahatanhel Krymsky (1871–1942) was a Russian, Ukrainian, and Soviet Orientalist, writer, translator, and author of many works on the history of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian literature, as well as Islam and Sufism. His most notable works include: *History of Modern Arabic Literature (19th – Early 20th Century)* (Moscow: Main Editorial Office of Oriental Literature, 1971); *History of Turkey and Its Literature* (in 2 volumes — Moscow: 1910–1916); *Letters from Lebanon (1896–1898)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975 — 344 pages).

Soviet Russia to make friends with the culturally independent Arab world. Unique episodes of establishing cultural ties with Yemen and Saudi Arabia are preserved in cultural memory; notable examples include the famous film by Vladimir Shneiderov, “El Yemen” (1930)<sup>5</sup>, and the legacies of Karim Khakimov<sup>6</sup> and Nazir Tyuryakulov<sup>7</sup>. The support of the USSR for progressive anti-colonial regimes after World War II was also marked by a rhetoric of friendship that often overshadowed the geopolitical interests at play.

Everywhere, especially in countries like Egypt, Algeria, and Syria, there remains a strong sentiment tied to extending of assistance at critical moments, as well as some negative feelings that have at times clouded the history of bilateral relations. This largely positive memory is sometimes put on a show. For example, Al-Ahram newspaper regularly publishes information about events at the Russian Cultural Center, even though these events are not nearly as large-scale as they used to be. In Egypt, people remember the role of the USSR in establishing ballet and a classical music performance system in the country. Similarly, in Algeria and Syria, they recall not only the assistance provided by the USSR in the struggle for independence or military-political cooperation, but also the scientific collaboration between the countries. It is important to preserve this legacy, both by renewing awareness of it and by fostering its new manifestations.

5 URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zt3eYr7TLQY>

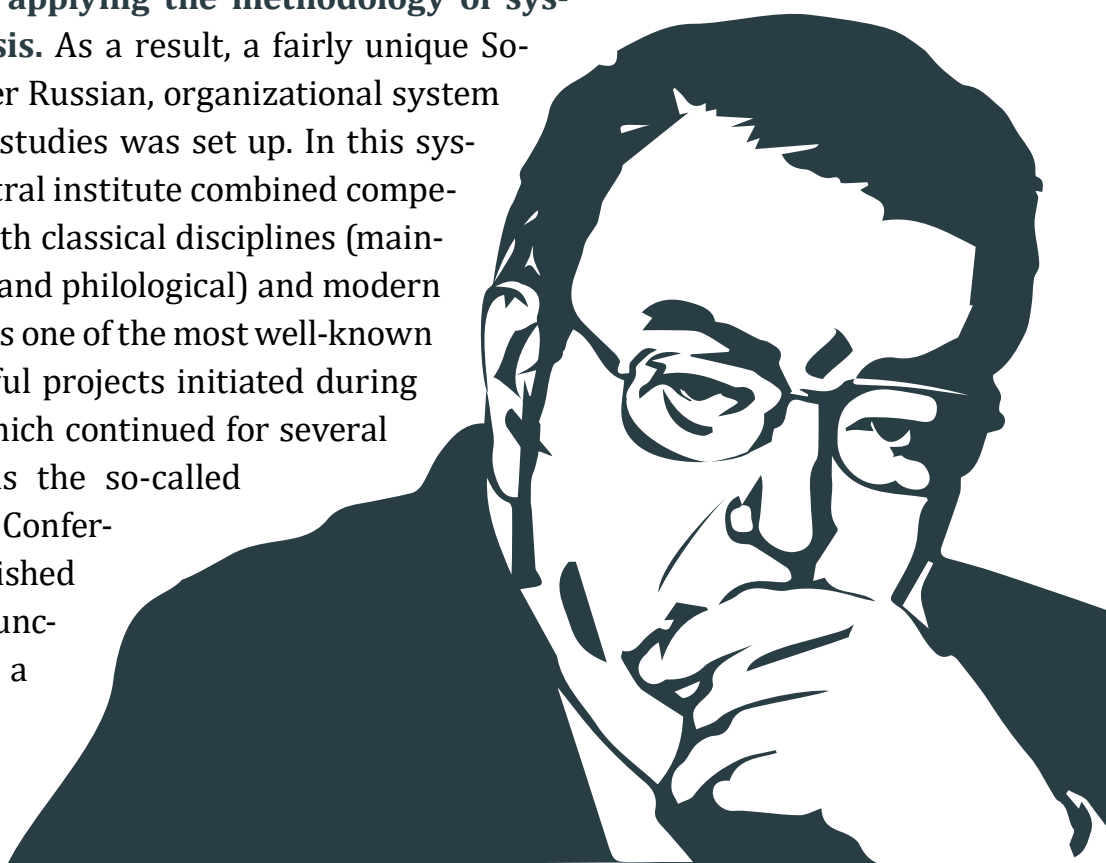
6 Karim Hakimov (1890/1892 – 1938) was a Soviet diplomat, plenipotentiary representative of the RSFSR to the Bukharan People’s Republic, and later the Consul General of the RSFSR/USSR in Mashhad and Rasht. He also served as Consul General and then plenipotentiary representative of the USSR to the Kingdom of Hejaz, Nejd, and the annexed territories (1926–1928), to the Kingdom of Yemen (1929–1931), and to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (1935–1937).

7 Nazir Tyuryakulov (1892–1937) was a Soviet party official, diplomat, People’s Commissar of Education of the Turkestan ASSR, Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the Turkestan ASSR, and from 1922 to 1928, Chairman of the Central Publishing House of the Peoples of the East and Deputy Rector of the Institute of the Peoples of the East. He served as plenipotentiary representative of the USSR to the Kingdom of Hejaz, Nejd, and the annexed territories (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) from 1928 to 1935.

# Two Faces of Scientific Diplomacy

## Science in Diplomacy

During the Soviet era, there was a gradual differentiation between cultural and scientific diplomacy. In the latter, scientific support for foreign policy activities began to play an increasingly important role, exemplified by the heated debates within the Academy of Sciences regarding the Asian mode of production, which were related to the need to develop approaches to national liberation movements in Eastern countries. As a systematic practice, scientific, or more precisely, expert-analytical support for foreign policy began to take shape in the second half of the 20th century, that epitomized by the establishment of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations in 1956, which became a key institution in this area. **In the 1970s, a system of scientific support specifically for Middle Eastern policy began to take shape. Significant contributions were made by the reforms implemented by Evgeny Primakov, when he was the director of the Institute of Oriental Studies (1977–1985). Under his leadership, the institute that had traditionally been focused on classic academic research began actively engaging with contemporary issues, developing and widely applying the methodology of systems analysis.** As a result, a fairly unique Soviet, and later Russian, organizational system for Oriental studies was set up. In this system, the central institute combined competencies in both classical disciplines (mainly historical and philological) and modern ones. Perhaps one of the most well-known and successful projects initiated during this time, which continued for several decades, was the so-called Dartmouth Conference. Established in 1960, it functioned as a



public communication channel between the USSR, later Russia, and the United States for six decades. The regional conflict group within the Conference played a significant role in resolving the conflict in Tajikistan as well as in the negotiation process over Nagorno-Karabakh.

In modern Russia, this academic tradition has been followed by the emergence of new institutions, particularly in the civil society sector. Among them are the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), the Valdai International Discussion Club (Valdai Club), the Primakov Center for International Cooperation, the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, the “Russia — Islamic World” Strategic Vision Group, the Khakimov Club, and others.

In recent years, scientific support for Middle Eastern policy has become both more diverse and more systematic. Notably, the participation of Russian representatives in major regional expert events, such as the annual Sir Bani Yas Forum in the UAE, has intensified.

At the same time, several more or less public track II formats have emerged in Russia. The most well-known of these are the Middle East Dialogues of the Valdai Club, which have been held for fourteen years, organized annually by the club in cooperation with the Institute of Oriental Studies. The analytical reports published for each session over the years provide a useful way to trace how the Russian expert community’s approaches to the region’s current situation have evolved.

Another format that has become a regular event is the International Expert Forum Russia —the Middle East, which the Primakov Center holds annually in partnership with the Institute of Oriental Studies. Unlike the Valdai meetings, these forums are held behind closed doors.

In addition to these two long-running projects, it’s worth noting various more specialized and less public events organized by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), as well as the activities of the Russia — Islamic World Strategic Vision Group. The latter is particularly interesting as it combines elements of scientific, public, and religious diplomacy (it’s no coincidence that high-ranking religious leaders regularly participate in the group’s meetings). At the same time, it also incorporates elements of public and regional paradiplomacy, as the group is led by the President of Tatarstan, Rustam Minnikhanov. In fact, in recent years, regional paradiplomacy has played an increasingly significant role in advancing Russian interests in the region.

Finally, various Track II diplomacy initiatives independently undertaken by the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences

in recent years remain highly significant. Among these are two rounds of intra-Syrian negotiations in the spring of 2015; four rounds of intra-Palestinian consultations (2010, 2017, 2019, 2024), which culminated this year in a joint statement by 14 Palestinian organizations; and three sessions of International Expert Meetings on Security Issues in the Persian Gulf (2019, 2021, 2023), the last of which also concluded with a joint document. As can be seen from this list, these initiatives are largely aimed at reducing tensions between Russia's friendly players (evidenced by the Persian Gulf meetings) and de-escalating and resolving conflicts. Moreover, the importance of these initiatives lies in their ability to maintain contact with regional actors, who may be hard to deal with through official diplomatic channels for various reasons in other venues.

**It can be stated that, as of today, a unique situation of close cooperation between public figures, academic scholars, and diplomats has developed in the scientific support of Russia's Middle East policy.** This is partly due to the accumulated experience over the years and partly to the still-preserved characteristics of the Russian school of Oriental studies. In this tradition, a close-knit community of professionals is established since early in their student years, and these connections are maintained for many years, regardless of whether they pursue academic science or practical work.

**The further development of "science in diplomacy" is likely to move towards more complex organizational forms and a deeper understanding of the essence of this activity.**

Firstly, **development of Russia's relations with the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the emergence of new areas of cooperation, will require a bigger agenda for the scientific support of these relationships.** Until now, the primary focus has been placed on bilateral political ties, conflict resolution, the transformation of the regional subsystem of relations, and the fight against extremism. Discussions on economics or energy have been less frequent, and topics like food security or scientific and technological cooperation have been even rarer. However, in recent years, all these issues have begun coming afore at major multilateral conferences, such as the Valdai Club's Middle East Dialogues, the Russia– the Middle East Forum, the Primakov Readings organized annually by IMEMO, and various international forums.

It seems likely that the time is approaching when work in these areas may necessitate the creation of specialized formats. We may draw a good example



*III International Scientific and Expert Forum «Russia - Middle East» (Saint Petersburg, 2023)*

in this regard: the First International Workshop Technological Sustainability of BRICS+: University-Industry Partnerships held on September 19, 2024, at Skoltech and HSE, which brought together leaders in the scientific and technological fields from most BRICS countries. Additionally, it can be anticipated that multilateral initiatives and collaborations, possibly within BRICS, will play an increasingly important role in addressing global issues relevant to the Middle East.

Secondly, **the structure of activities within academic institutions is changing and will continue to evolve. More and more often, these institutions are combining purely academic and expert and analytical tasks with the implementation of educational and outreach projects.** This shift toward the creation of scientific-educational ecosystems around the institutes enhances the quality of analytical work and establishes new channels for interaction between science, the state, and civil society. **Expert and analytical support for the interests of Russian businesses is also becoming a priority on the agenda.**

Thirdly, **the institutional structures involved in providing scientific support for foreign policy are becoming more diversified.** Classic Western-style think tanks have not gained significant traction in Russia—large academic institutes have taken their place. However, such think tanks may emerge due to the growing need for consulting support for businesses. Additionally, expert work in major universities (such as MGIMO, HSE, KFU, and others) is likely to expand, where active and highly interesting research departments have already been established. This trend may be particularly relevant for regions actively entering international markets or engaging in paradiplomacy, where, in the next 10–15 years, major universities could become the leading expert centers.

## Science for Diplomacy

While scientific and analytical support for Middle Eastern policy is fairly well developed, the situation is somewhat less favorable when it comes to scientific diplomacy related to science and technology cooperation (STC).

Over the past few decades, science and technology cooperation (STC) has remained a marginal topic in the development of Russia's relations with Middle Eastern and North African countries. The reasons are fairly clear. In most cases, the level of scientific and technological development in these countries suggested only the possibility of asymmetric relations in a donor-recipient model. Among all Middle Eastern nations, only Israel, and to a lesser extent Turkey, had any significant level of STC with Russia during the post-Soviet period, and even with them, it was much smaller compared to STC with Western countries or post-Soviet states. For example, according to the Web of Science database, as of 2022, Israel ranked 24th (0.74% of publications in collaborations) and Turkey 30th (0.62%) out of 40 in terms of scientific collaborations with Russian researchers, while other countries in the region were not significant partners. This included none of the countries that joined BRICS in 2024<sup>8</sup>.

At the same time, the countries in the region, that could afford Russian technologies were primarily oriented towards Western nations. However, after 2022, the situation began to change.

8 Fiala D., Maltseva D. Russian Publications in Web of Science: A Bibliometric Study // COLLNET Journal of Scientometrics and Information Management. 2023. № 17 (2). P. 217–245. DOI: 10.47974/CJSIM-2022-0006

Russia's shift towards strengthening its technological sovereignty, combined with its pivot of political and economic ties to the East and South, along with the growing desire of leading Middle Eastern states to enhance their positions on the global stage and in the world economy by diversifying their scientific and technological connections, is driving them towards intensifying cooperation. Today, several projects are already underway in the region involving Rosatom and Roscosmos, Egypt's participation in the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research (JINR), and increased collaboration within BRICS, where 13 working groups are focused on various aspects of STC (science and technology cooperation).

**Among factors that hinder cooperation today, several key issues can be highlighted.**

**The first is the low level of knowledge about each other.** Nearly zero experience in joint scientific activities, evident in the negligible number of joint publications and registered patents, as well as the absence of shared scientific schools, leads to a situation where Russian and Middle Eastern scientists simply don't know how they might be of interest to each other. This is why successful Russia-Middle East scientific and technological cooperation (STC) projects almost always proceed from either intergovernmental agreements or actions by major state corporations. At the same time, there are very few significant success stories in inter-university cooperation (aside from the opening of some university branches, though these are focused solely on education, not science) or collaboration between scientific laboratories.

**Another problem lies in the significant imbalances in the scientific and technological development of the countries in the region and the divergent strategies for this development.** Alongside countries that are among the world's technological leaders (like Israel) or aspire to be (such as the UAE and Turkey), there are also countries in the Middle East for which this area is not a priority at all. It is clear that different approaches are needed when working with them. At the same time, the approaches to international scientific and technological cooperation among the countries in the region also vary. For Iran, as for Russia, promoting the agenda of technological sovereignty is characteristic. However, how to combine the sovereignty of knowledge with international cooperation is a serious issue for both countries. Meanwhile, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are more focused on international integration: their ties with Western science have a long tradition. The possibilities and limits of their rapprochement with Russia, in this case, remain in question.



*Ceremony of the first nuclear fuel delivery to Akkuyu NPP in Turkey. Alexey Likhachev, Director General of Rosatom State Corporation, and Fatih Dönmez, Minister of Energy and Natural Resources of Turkey*

Finally, **the third set of problems involves political contradictions.** First, there are the tensions between Russia and Iran on one side and the West on the other: this includes the issue of sanctions, including secondary ones. Second, there are various conflicts within the Middle East itself—between a number of Arab states and Iran, between Iran and Israel, and so on. Despite a reduction in political tension, in some of these areas, there is no trust in relationships, while in other cases, events are evolving towards a quite rapid escalation. Meanwhile, establishing scientific and technological cooperation requires trust, and this must be built for the long term.

This problem is also linked to what can be termed **the securitization of scientific and technological cooperation**, which is viewed by all parties largely through the prism of security issues. This situation objectively complicates the launching of large projects.

None of this means that collaboration is impossible. **Sectors such as energy, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, space, and digital governance tools are**

**clear areas for potential cooperation.** However, the time for this collaboration is still ahead—today, the focus should be on exploring possible projects and establishing ongoing working relationships between scientific communities. A natural way to advance on this path could be joint conferences, grant programs, and programs for scientific internships and academic exchanges.

## Cultural Diplomacy

### Between Science and Culture

A special area of cooperation, somewhere on the border between scientific and cultural diplomacy, concerns the interaction between Russian and Middle Eastern humanities scholars.

Unlike the fields of natural sciences and technology, there have been numerous achievements in this area, and cooperation is more active.

One traditionally significant and undoubtedly unique area of work for humanities scholars is the study of Soqotra, which began over 40 years ago and continues today amidst the ongoing conflict in Yemen. Several important results have emerged from this research. Academically, the study of previously unknown Semitic languages (not only Soqotri but also other living South Arabian languages), the creation of the Soqotri writing system, as well as the introduction of a substantial body of folklore material are of great significance. In terms of world culture, these studies contribute new fragments to the mosaic of Middle Eastern cultures, revealing a much larger scope than previously thought. Finally, in terms of Russian scientific and cultural diplomacy, this work strengthens Russia's presence on the Arabian Peninsula and reaffirms the country's important role in global science. It is no coincidence that the results of these studies are now being published by E. J. Brill<sup>9</sup>, one of the most prestigious international publishers for oriental studies.

9 Naumkin V., Kogan L., al-Dafrhi I., al-Dafrhi A., Cherkashin D., Bulakh M., Vizirova E. Corpus of Soqotri Oral Literature. Volume 1. Leiden — Boston: Brill, 2014;

Naumkin V., Kogan L., al-Dafrhi I., al-Dafrhi A., al-Dafrhi M., Cherkashin D., Bulakh M., Vizirova E. Corpus of Soqotri Oral Literature. Volume 2. Leiden — Boston: Brill, 2018;  
Bulakh M. The T-Stems in Soqotri. Leiden: Brill, 2024.

Continuing work in this area entails expanding the scope of research. It is worth mentioning that since 1983, a Soviet and later a Russian integrated expedition operated in southern Yemen, one of the largest foreign humanitarian scientific missions in the entire history of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, both in terms of funding and the number of specialists involved. This expedition conducted not only folkloric and linguistic studies but also archaeological and ethnographic research. Among the results produced by paleontologists alone were the discovery and study of over 100 archaeological sites, which has proved that Hadhramaut was one of the earliest regions of human civilization. Particularly significant were the excavations at the settlement in the Oasis of Raybun, which provided evidence for the emergence of the first agricultural settlements in Inner Hadhramaut no later than the last quarter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.

This expedition made a significant contribution to the study of the history of the Arabian Peninsula from ancient times to the present and helped train several generations of Russian scholars and Yemeni specialists. It remains memorable, despite all the changes in Yemen, as an example of cultural interaction and friendship. Not long ago, the government of Yemen officially awarded certificates to a group of Russian researchers. Reflecting on the remarkable legacy of that work, we can now discuss supplementing the existing research program with new areas, both those that have previously existed (such as archaeology and ethnology) and others, primarily sociology.

Another area of work for Orientalists in the field of scientific diplomacy



*Socotra Island (Yemen), folklore and linguistic expedition led by Academician Vitaly Naumkin (December, 2021)*

over the past five years has been collaboration with partners from Arab countries to expand the use of the Russian language beyond Russia and, correspondingly, the Arabic language outside the Arab world, as well as to enhance the status and popularity of both languages. One of the instruments used for this purpose was participation in the so-called Advisory Council on the Arabic Language under the Ministry of Culture of the UAE, which unites prominent scholars, writers, and professors from major Arab universities, along with representatives from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. This involvement has provided us the opportunity to promote the use of the Russian language in these universities, foster cultural exchanges, and facilitate the translation of Arabic literary and socio-political works into Russian and vice versa while actively sharing experiences. Among other activities organized by the Council, we may note the compilation of the One Hundred and One Books list, which features the most significant and renowned works of Arabic literature, which translation into major world languages is supported by both governments and businesses, as well as the organization of literary contests, exhibitions, and two translator conferences in Moscow (2022, 2023), among others.

Work in this area today is hindered by a certain asymmetry in interest regarding the cultural heritage of partners in Russia and the Arab countries. Overall, Arab translators, publishers, and readers show greater interest in Russian literature than Russians do in Arabic literature. For instance, not only classic works by Russian writers (including complex authors like Andrey Platonov) are regularly translated into Arabic, but also contemporary literature. A notable example is the brilliant Iraqi translator Munzir Kazim, who translated Alexey Salnikov's novel *The Petrovs in and Around the Flu* (*Al Pitruv wa-l-influwanza wa hawlaha*, Abu Dhabi, Thaqafa Publishing and Distribution L.L.C., 2022).

**A promising direction in the field of philology is the wider use of digital technologies and platforms to enhance inter-academic collaboration in national languages. This could include, for example, a broader implementation of search programs and machine translation for academic publications, as well as the integration of national databases of academic journals.**

A separate topic is the Russian archaeological expeditions operating in the Middle Eastern countries: Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, and Syria.

Traditionally, the largest number of such expeditions are in Egypt. There

are at least five of them: three led by the Center for Egyptian Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (in Memphis, Deir el-Banat, and Luxor<sup>10</sup>) and two by the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (in Gebel el-Nur, Central Egypt, and in the Eastern Necropolis of Giza). In Gebel el-Nur<sup>11</sup> the focus is on excavating a Greco-Roman settlement that includes a temple area, residential quarters, and administrative buildings. The main temple was dedicated to the goddess Isis and was constructed during the reign of Ptolemy II around 270 BC.

The uniqueness of this site for Russian science lies in the fact that it is the first settlement in Egypt available for study by domestic specialists within its natural boundaries, complete with its surrounding infrastructure, including two necropolises, quarries, agricultural areas, and caravan routes. In Giza, archaeologists are investigating burials from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC and tombs from the Late Period. This work sheds light on issues related to the structure of royal administration and burial practices, while the imported artifacts discovered serve as important evidence of Egypt's external connections.

Two Sudanese expeditions are working in Abu Erteila and in Western Draga, located three hundred meters north of the royal city of Meroë. In Abu Erteila, Russian archaeologists discovered the remains of two temples dating back to the reign of King Natakamani (1st century AD), altars, and stands for the sacred barques of the gods inscribed with Egyptian hieroglyphs. They also found lion statues, a water supply system, gargoyles, approximately 90 burials, a heating system, and a large number of column fragments with relief images. In Western Draga, a temple with protective structures and columns was uncovered, along with burials of sacred birds containing bronze statuettes of Osiris and unique lion statues.

While the Egyptian expeditions play a significant role in maintaining Russian-Egyptian cultural and scientific ties and in positioning Russia within the global field of archaeology, the importance of the Sudanese expeditions lies

10 Website of the Center for Egyptological Studies. Activities. URL: <http://www.cesras.ru/services/polevye-issled/>

11 Lebedev M. A. Cultural and Natural Context of the Ancient Settlement of Gebel el-Nour at the Mouth of Wadi Ghayada (Middle Egypt): Main Issues and Prospects for Study // *Vostok (Oriens). Afro-Asian Societies: History and Modernity*. 2023. No. 6. pages. 14–28. DOI: 10.31857/S086919080027503-0

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Vetokhov S. V. Dimensions and Proportions of the Ptolemaic Temple at Gebel el-Nour // *Oriental Courier*. 2023. No. 2. pages. 93–107. DOI: 10.18254/S268684310025618-7



*Amjad Neama, Representative of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage of Iraq, and Shakhmardan Amirov, Leading Research Fellow of the Institute of Archaeology, Russian Academy of Sciences*

also in their contribution to strengthening the identity of the unique Sudanese culture. These expeditions allow for the recognition of indigenous traits while also identifying Egyptian borrowings and the influences of Hellenism.

Very interesting research is being conducted in Iraq, where, during the Soviet era, the Iraqi expedition of the Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences, led by Rauf Munchaev, operated for many decades. Today, the Russian-Iraqi joint expedition (comprising the Institute of Oriental Studies and the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, with the participation of the Institute of Caucasian and Central Asian Studies of the National Research University Higher School of Economics and the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts<sup>12</sup>) is conducting archaeological research at

Yankovsky-Dyakonov A. I., Amirov Sh. N., Menshikov M. Yu., Joteri J. The Second Season of the Russian-Iraqi Expedition at Tell Dehailah-1 (2021) // Brief Communications of the Institute of Archaeology RAS. Issue 267. pages. 44–58. DOI: 10.25681/IARAS.0130-2620.267.44-58

Yankovsky-Dyakonov A. I., Calderbank D., Gusak L. Ceramics from Tell Dehailah-1 Based on Field Research from 2018–2021 // Vostok (Oriens). Afro-Asian Societies: History and Modernity. 2023. Issue 6. pages 230–245. DOI: 10.31857/S086919080025585-0

Yankovsky-Dyakonov A. I., Gusak L. Aṭ-ṭāriq aṭ-ṭawīl: The Long Road to the New Russian-Iraqi Expedition //

two sites in southern Iraq. Previously, our specialists did not have access to this region.

At Tell Wajef, near the Iranian border, they have uncovered layers containing Khazeen-Meymeh and Ubaid 2-3 pottery (circa 5200 BC), making this settlement the oldest in the Maysan Governorate and one of the oldest sites in all of Iraq. Additionally, Tell Wajef is key to studying the system of contacts between the South Ubaid and Zagros cultures, which is important for understanding the prehistory of the emergence of human civilization as a whole.

At the same time, Tell Deheila, located 30 km from ancient Ur, is the only large, unlooted, single-period city from the Late Larsa period (19th–18th centuries BC) that has not previously undergone scientific excavation. It is possible that this urban center survived the onset of the de-urbanization crisis in the Mesopotamian plain during the 18th century BC, or it may have even been founded during this crisis. Therefore, its significance extends beyond the region, acquiring importance for the theory of history as a whole. To date, in addition to confirming the dating, extensive information has been gathered regarding landscape archaeology, painting a dramatic picture of the struggle of the city's inhabitants for survival.

In addition, in 2023, Russian scientists conducted a survey at the ancient site of Tell Jidr in collaboration with their Iraqi colleagues from the University of Diwaniya. This site is identified with the well-known city of Karkar, which existed from the 4th millennium BC to the 1st millennium AD, as recorded in written sources. The use of drones allowed researchers to uncover the urban structure and trace its evolution, while findings and analysis of the recovered pottery provided evidence that Karkar was inhabited during both the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods (5<sup>th</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC).

The work of Russian scientists in Iraq takes on special significance considering that, after 2003, scientific contacts with the country were minimized for a period. Collaborative scientific efforts are already becoming a means of restoring once-powerful connections and developing them towards the implementation of joint programs not only in archaeology but also in history, the study of manuscript traditions, anthropology, ecology, and more. Additionally, the issue of intensifying cooperation between universities is now on the agenda.

The work of our archaeologists in Syria deserves special mention, as the



to the extensive use of cutting-edge measurement techniques and the integration of artificial intelligence. It has been developed in full compliance with international regulations and has therefore received official approval from UNESCO, which typically boycotts Syrian and Russian initiatives. Various stages of the work are regularly discussed at international meetings. The implementation depends on the organizational steps taken by the Russian side, but even now, the project stands out as one of the most prominent examples of collaboration in a complex military and political environment. It is essential not to miss this opportunity and to see the project through to completion.



Finally, in 2021-2022, the Russian Expedition Volunteer Corps NGO in collaboration with the Directorate of Antiquities and Museums of the Ministry of Culture of Syria, developed a project for the survey and restoration of the ancient water source Efka in Palmyra<sup>14</sup>. In 2023, with the participation of the Corps, as well as the Directorate of Antiquities and Museums of the Syrian Ministry of Culture, the Nizhny Novgorod Regional Pharmacy company and the Russian Center for Culture and Science in Syria, a Russian-Syrian archaeological expedition was established in Latakia<sup>15</sup>.

Overall, if we summarize the scientific and expeditionary activities of domestic researchers, it appears that there are several main directions for its further development.

Firstly, this involves expanding the scope. **In addition to archaeology, there should also be a focus on contemporary cultural-anthropological and sociological studies, which can be conducted alongside the work of archaeologists.** This will not only enrich our scientific knowledge and increase our understanding of the Middle Eastern region in particular, and the functioning of human communities in general, but also will help to address practical tasks related to the development of humanitarian connections.

Secondly, **it is important to consider how to communicate the results of these efforts to both Russian and local communities.** It must be acknowledged that the current situation in this regard remains completely unsatisfactory: few people in Russia or in Arab countries are aware not only of the results of the mentioned expeditions but even of their existence. Improving this situation could involve several strategies: **enhancing informational support and developing scientific journalism; organizing educational events both in universities within the region and in active Russian cultural centers; and finally, supporting popular science publications, which are currently in high demand among the reading public.**

Finally, thirdly, **an important task is to leverage existing research projects to develop other areas of collaboration. In this context, not only**

14 Nab'a Efka at-Tadmori. Historical and Archaeological Study — Restoration and Rehabilitation. Damascus, 2022. (The Efka Spring of Palmyra. A Historical and Archaeological Study, Restoration, and Rehabilitation. Damascus, 2022. — 165 pages).

15 Karmov T. M., Butorin D. A. Management of World Heritage Sites in Conditions of Armed Conflict and Terrorist Threat (Based on the Example of the Ancient Villages of Northern Syria) // Cultural Studies Journal. 2019. No. 1 (35).

Karmov T. M., Butorin D. A. International Organizations in the Field of Preserving World Cultural Heritage in Conditions of Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic from 2011 to 2017 // Journal of the Institute of Heritage. 2019. No. 1 (16).

**strengthening educational ties, which is significant in itself, but also expanding the use of natural science methods in research can lead to intensified cooperation in other scientific and technological fields, as well as to increased academic exchanges.** In this regard, both the Palmyra project and the emerging collaboration between Middle Eastern archaeologists from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and specialists from the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research deserve attention.

When intensifying field research in the Middle East, it is important to consider that, in today's world, foreign expeditions and cooperation with foreign museums are perceived with a grain of controversy. On one hand, they are seen as a source of income, and on the other hand, they are viewed as a manifestation of a colonialist approach to heritage. These trends are strong and growing globally. **One important means of overcoming mistrust and decolonization rhetoric is collaboration.** The mechanisms for such work are known and are being applied, but they must be emphasized in agreements, titles, and informative materials.

Finally, the last point. While the abundance of independent cultural initiatives by Russian scholars in the Middle East is certainly encouraging, it also carries several risks. Some of these initiatives have a rather adventurous nature; they may lack sufficient logistical planning, their implementation can involve interaction with unreliable partners, and at times they rely on insufficiently transparent financial practices. **To avoid the negative consequences of all this and to enhance the effectiveness of the work, serious coordination is needed, primarily from the Academy of Sciences.**

## Tasks for Tomorrow

Having outlined the current state of scientific and humanitarian relations between Russia and the countries of the Middle East, it is now time to reflect on the challenges facing our cultural diplomacy.

Paradoxically, there are many tangible manifestations of this diplomacy today, yet they remain completely insufficient. Thanks to the diligent efforts of Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russian Houses in the Middle East and North Africa have become important channels for Russian cultural influence. However, it is important to note that staff in these Houses must navigate through vastly different conditions in each country, which requires significant adjustments to the content of their activities each time. For instance, the Egyptian intelligentsia traditionally harbors a keen interest in Russia. In Syria, however, post-conflict recovery has resulted in a general shortage of cultural events, which has contributed to the popularity of the initiatives offered by the Russian House in Damascus. Notably, some of these initiatives aim to strengthen Syrian culture itself, such as the Bedouin Poetry Festival organized in 2023.

At the same time, in countries like Morocco and Tunisia, Russian Houses operate in a very rich cultural environment, where local communities are traditionally more oriented towards European partners. This raises the demands for the competitiveness of Russian cultural offerings.

Another, often non-institutionalized, channel for Russia's cultural diplomacy is represented by Russian-speaking communities in the region, which have formed through several waves of emigration since the 1920s. Additionally, there are influential networks of graduates from Soviet and Russian universities, many of whom are treating our culture with warmth. Engaging with these groups through Rossotrudnichestvo and other initiatives remains a top priority. It is encouraging to witness a steady increase in the number of educational quotas provided by Russia to countries in the Middle East and North Africa. This policy instills hope that the significance of these groups in fostering inter-civilizational understanding will continue to grow.

Finally, a third highly influential instrument of cultural rapprochement today is the activities of religious organizations, both Muslim and Christian. Various initiatives undertaken by the Russian Orthodox Church in terms of inter-church relations, the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, the Spiritual Administrations of Muslims, heads of Muslim entities in the Russian Federation, and various foundations allow for the demonstration of the shared val-



*Vitaly Naumkin with Socotri people during the folklore and linguistic expedition (December, 2021)*

ues between the peoples of Russia and the countries of the Middle East. These efforts help overcome some negative perceptions that have developed during the period when atheism dominated in our country. Notably, the activities of religious and related organizations have recently addressed not only religious matters per se. For instance, we may note inter-church relations that helped to provide humanitarian aid to Syrians, as well as the various cultural initiatives undertaken by Russian Muslims, including exhibitions dedicated to Russian Islam that were held in Saudi Arabia, numerous international conferences, publishing projects, and more.

In addition to these three channels for achieving the goals of cultural diplomacy, it is important to also mention the activities of other, more traditional institutions. These include the Arabic edition of RT, which delivers news about Russia's cultural life to Arab viewers, as well as Russian cultural institutions—primarily large museums organizing exhibitions in the region, touring theater companies, and so on.

**Thus, at first glance, the range of involved actors seems quite broad. However, given the vast territory of the Middle Eastern region and the scale of the tasks at hand, it appears insufficient.** For instance, translations of contemporary (as well as classical) Russian literature into the languages of the region are mostly carried out by local enthusiasts with minimal support from Russia. Museum and exhibition collaboration, film distribution, promotion of Russian music, and so on. All of these areas could be developed more actively. Unfortunately, there are no easy solutions to this. The lack of cultural interaction seems to stem primarily from the fact that for several decades, neither Russia has been a priority partner for the countries of the Middle East, nor have these countries been priority partners for Russia. As a result, new generations of citizens know too little about one another. This is essentially the same problem we face in scientific connections. **It can be assumed that as humanitarian, political, and economic interactions intensify, the demand for knowledge about each other's cultures will grow. Therefore, it will be crucial for us to recognize this demand in a timely manner and respond appropriately.**

At the same time, it is important to think about the general principles of future interaction.

The current international situation compels us to rethink these methods and principles, but without getting too carried away with innovations. Today, the entire world, including Russia, is focused on sovereignty, which, however, does not rule out solidarity. The relevance of sovereignty in the international cultural sphere is manifested, among other things, in a new surge of emotions and actions related to decolonization processes. The decolonized peoples now raise strong demands for cultural restitution from Western museums. The same process could be traced to the labeling war regarding the attribution of certain objects to different cultures, and to the politicizing the issue of cultural heritage. While this problem was previously viewed primarily in the context of disputes between colonizers and the decolonized (that can be exemplified by a still unresolved issue of the Algerian archives), today it has become an element of competition among regional powers themselves. A notable example of this is the well-known scandal over the zellige ornament that erupted between Moroccans and Algerians during the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

In the context of rising of cultural memory, special attention is given to the connections between history and contemporary events, specifically, how



*UAE Cultural Days in Moscow (July, 2024)*

historical allusions and references to cultural myths become crucial elements of both propaganda and political debates. Radicals on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict frequently invoke biblical images to justify their actions. For instance, Hamas emotionally depicts its struggle for Palestine as a righteous act, akin to the campaign of Joshua (as evidenced by references to verses from Surah Al-Maida in relation to the attacks on October 7, 2023, and various slogans such as “A worldwide flood for Al-Aqsa”). Meanwhile, Israeli ultranationalists draw upon the sacred history of the Jewish people to support their claims.

In this context, Russian culture can serve as an example of steadfast stability and the preservation of values, regardless of any political turmoil. The current emphasis on decolonization makes it appropriate to resort to Russia’s domestic experience and remind of it. Soviet Russia, while acknowledging the Russian Empire as a colonial power (with some reservations), launched

an ambitious program of positive decolonization, studying and elevating the sovereign cultures of the peoples within the empire. The series of cultural events dedicated to the art and literature of Eastern peoples have yielded significant results even today: the development of national consciousness and the memory of the international recognition of great epics such as the *Shahnameh*, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, and *David of Sassoun*, along with the works of great poets like Navoi, Nizami, and Ferdowsi. This memory endures. Notably, the Hermitage's collections commemorating Navoi and Nizami in besieged Leningrad, the establishment of the Department of the East in the museum, the brilliant educational initiatives of Joseph Orbeli, and the discovery of Urartu counter-balance anti-Russian cultural propaganda in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The Russian and Soviet experiences, both positive and negative, gain new significance in the broader cultural effort to preserve traditional values and set them as the foundation for dialogue between cultures. A related issue is historical memory, which forms part of cultural sovereignty and varies across different peoples, much like traditions do. Conflicts can be resolved through joint discussions that focus on artistic works reflecting historical events from multiple perspectives, ranging from the narratives of Konstantin Leontiev to the thrillers of contemporary Russian journalists specializing in Arab studies. Moreover, *Russia's experience with various bilateral commissions of historians, which seek compromise interpretations of contentious historical events, warrants special attention.*

**In light of the above, the objectives of Russian cultural diplomacy today should be clear and straightforward: to foster an understanding of the cultural rationale underpinning Russia's policies and to propose cultural cooperation projects as a basis for political mutual understanding and reciprocal cultural enrichment.**

The tools for achieving these objectives are diverse. Festivals, national culture days, and weeks are all effective; however, they are not enough. *It is crucial to strengthen, among other things, personal emotional connections between representatives of the creative intelligentsia in Russia and the countries of the Middle East. One effective approach could be to attract young cultural figures for internships and to conduct joint creative workshops, among other initiatives.* These activities may take different specific forms and should focus on the **principle of collaboration** mentioned earlier. This principle is very appealing and allows for a lasting positive impact. Exhibitions in

museums and the archaeological expeditions described above should be collaborative. Otherwise, they can easily be perceived as instruments of neocolonialism. Joint publications of historical materials, artistic works, etc., are also beneficial. Despite the logistical, organizational, and psychological challenges of organizing such collaborative efforts, it is important to remember that collaboration is crucial to ensure the **solidarity**, needed to prevent the widespread focus on strengthening sovereignty from turning into antagonism among partners.

**Russia's place in cultural relations in the Middle East today is less than it should be. There is an opportunity to change this by focusing on two areas.**

One area is Egypt and Syria, with their rich traditions of cultural life. A significant partner for collaboration here is the Grand Egyptian Museum, which aims to be recognized as the best museum in the world.

The other area is the Arabian Peninsula, where new types of cultural institutions are emerging and flourishing, adept at utilizing Western experience while remaining emotionally open to other distinctive traditions. Special attention should be paid to

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*Islamic Arts Biennale website  
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engagement with contemporary art in Arab countries, which is actively and qualitatively developing; the Islamic Arts Biennale in Jeddah deserves serious attention. Support should also be extended to the Arabian programs of the School of Arts, a joint venture between the State Hermitage Museum and the European University in St. Petersburg. Another example of a mutually interesting initiative is the project by the globally renowned Egyptian artist Wael Shawky at the Hermitage: the history of Egypt during the Urabi Revolt will be presented in a cutting-edge multimedia style, showcasing a chapter of Egyptian history that Egyptians have long sought to establish as an important part of global historical memory.

**A truly important initiative for strengthening our cultural diplomacy could be a regular large-scale Middle Eastern festival featuring historical and ethnological discussions about the unity of a diverse world.** Representatives from all countries in the region, including Israel, should participate, as it is essential to maintain cultural ties with them. In addition to political will, funding, and so on, securing the support of strong partners within the region would be crucial for organizing such a festival.

Of course, the wide opportunities for developing cultural diplomacy inevitably come along with some obstacles. These include deliberate obstructive actions by Western powers, sanctions policies, accusations of colonialism, and a lack of understanding from authorities about the importance of cultural events at a time when culture is becoming the foundation for reshaping the world. Finally, a high degree of commercialization has persisted in our cultural institutions in the Middle East since past times, which also hinders the proper perception of our cultural policy, traditionally viewed as noble and idealistic. This image is one we can and must preserve, as it remains a fundamental value for us.

Ultimately, regardless of the challenges and obstacles we are facing today, all of them can be addressed through persistent effort and effective demonstration of that effort. The countries of the Middle East are eager to diversify their cultural context, and Russia offers them that opportunity.

**Russia's mission in cultural and scientific diplomacy  
in the Middle East  
Report**

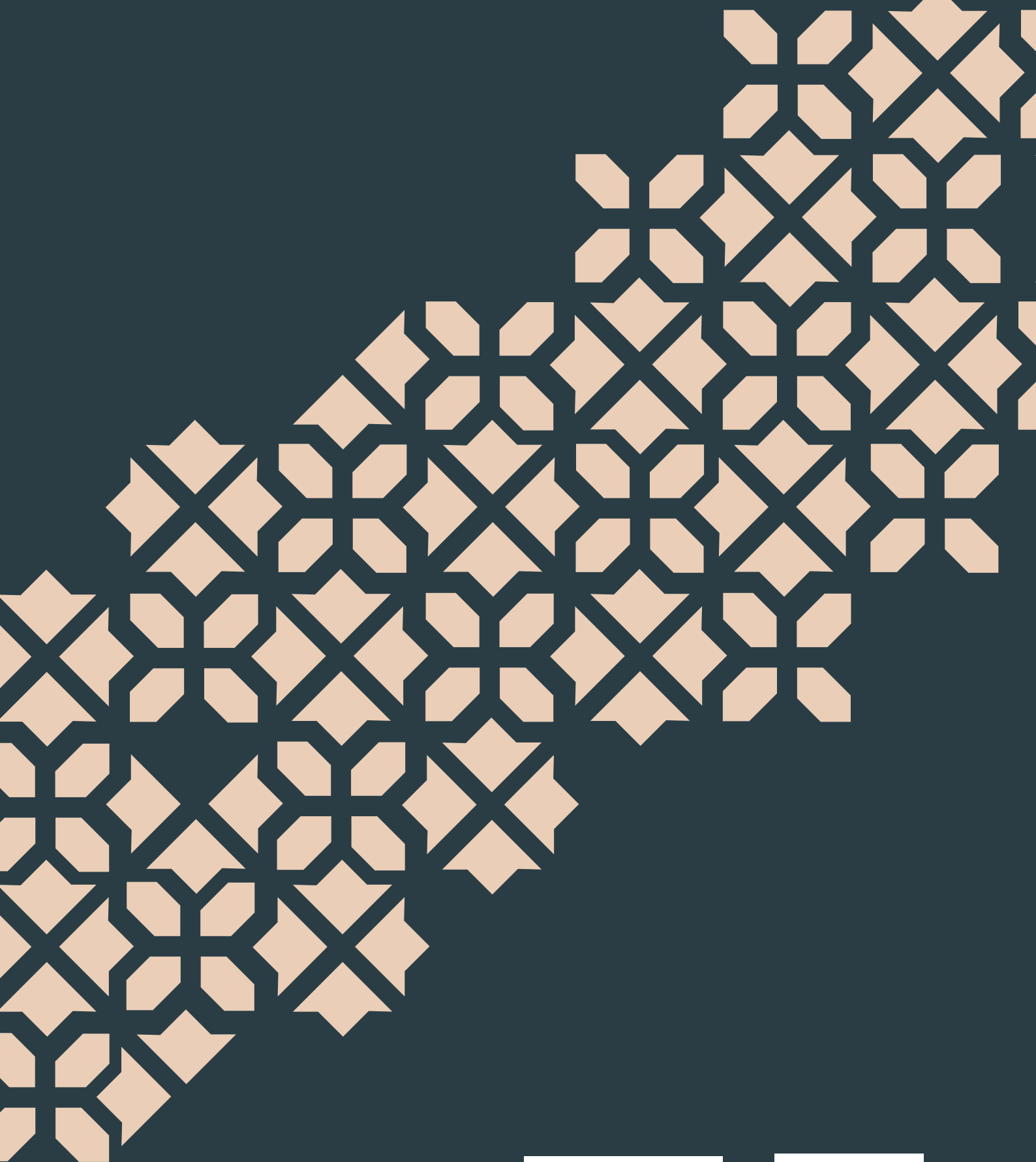
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