

“We are very much interested in our presence in this part of the world...” (c)

Belarus’s relations with the Arab World in 1992-2012 (case study)

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Summary

The relationship with the Arab World has always been one of the pillars of Belarus’s foreign policy and has showed a positive yet controversial development trend. Belarus has repeatedly shifted its priorities in the region, first away from Iraq and Egypt, and then from Syria, most recently, to the well-off states of the Persian Gulf. The economic results of cooperation are way too modest compared to those political, but Belarus can’t do without the globally acknowledged sources of investments and critical markets, such as the Arab countries. In the meantime, the main challenge that Belarus is facing in its efforts to promote these relations is the nature of its foreign relations — this country is not sufficiently prepared to work with foreign business; moreover, there are serious objective discrepancies in the priorities of the Belarusian state and its Arab partners.

Belarus has accumulated a wealth of experience in the engagement with the Arab World over these years and has minimized the area of cooperation, which can compromise the already tense relations with the West. In this context, the country is on its way to pursuing a neutral policy towards promoting economic contacts. At the same time, there is an obvious problem with offering the Arab side truly appealing projects, hence some shady deals and projects to meet narrow personal interests of the investor, such as the ‘Qatari Island’ in Belarus.

1. Introduction.

1.1. General characteristics and timeline.

This study centers on Belarus's relationship with the Asian Arab countries, i.e. the Mediterranean, the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf. The Arab states of Africa will be set aside. The Arab countries are analyzed in a single study for the reason of the typological similarity of Belarus's relations with those countries. Belarus has adopted the same package policy for the entire 'developing world,' with minor differences allowed for a few partners (China, Venezuela and Vietnam), while contacts with the rest of the developing nations are based on the general region-wise approach without any major efforts to adjust Belarus's proposals to the local environment. This enables us to address the Belarusian relations with the developing Arab countries in a single study, although there's definitely a need for thorough studies of bilateral relations isolated from the general framework. The leading foreign partners of Belarus in the Arab World are Syria and — followed by a substantial margin — the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The relations with Iraq essentially collapsed once the war of 2003 started. Also, Belarus has established solid contacts with Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Palestine. However, Syria accounted for the bulk of Belarus's relations with the Arab World, mostly because of the 'Soviet legacy', i.e. the traditionally positive Soviet-Syrian relations, when that country acted as a customer of the Soviet Union in the 1960s-1980s. Nearly all of Belarus's contacts were with the Arab nations that have showed at least some economic stability, whereas the relations with Yemen or Palestine were distinctly limited.

This choice of partners in the Arab World can be attributed to Belarus's foreign policy, which always aimed at gaining economic profits. The relationship with developing Arab countries gradually became a small yet conspicuous component of the country's external policy. Despite media allegations, Belarus in the 2000s pursued an increasingly responsible policy towards the Third World from the perspective of international law and global security, and there's no evidence proving otherwise. At the same time, this area of foreign policy has repeatedly been victimized by the rhetoric of both the state administration and opposition.

The following phases of the relations between Belarus and the Arab World can be distinguished:

- 1991-1995 — contacts are established, no special priorities are outlined yet;
- 1995-2003 — attempts to step up cooperation; Egypt and Iraq are the key priorities;
- 2003-2010 — existing ties are streamlined; priorities are shifted towards Syria;
- 2010-2012 — priorities are further shifted towards the rich conservative pro-Western Arab regimes of the Persian Gulf.

1.2. Previous studies.

Belarus's relations with the developing world have been quite poorly studied, even against the backdrop of the rather underdeveloped policies on the rest of the world and the country's overall external strategy. In the first study of this kind, Uladzimir Ulachovič's "Formation of the Fundamentals of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus (1991-2005)"¹, the cautiousness of the author further aggravates the already very general and unspecific description of the 'engagement' with the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, covering less than five pages. When it comes to separate areas of collaboration with the Third World, a positive example of research is the studies by Tacciana Jašsiejčyk on the relationship with the Arab World, which have been generalized in the first monograph of this kind (in association with Sviatlana Svilas)². The specialized course for the international relations department of Belarusian State University on the relations with the Arab countries, adopted in 2008, became the first example of the academic vision of the problem. The course program "Relations of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation with the Countries of the Near and Middle East" was compiled by M.V. Ševieliova³, and focuses on Russia's relations with the region, while Belarusian policies are secondary. The Belarusian component looks much weaker than that Russian and includes markedly fewer points in many engagement areas. Furthermore, there are some obviously irrelevant areas in the course program, including translations of fiction. It appears that the topic of Belarus's relationship with the Arab World requires additional thorough studies.

1 U.Je. Ulachovič. Formation of the Fundamentals of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus (1991-2005). Minsk: Harvest, 2010. – 352 p.

2 S.F. Svilas, T.V. Jašsiejčyk. Relations of the Republic of Belarus with the Countries of the Arab World in 1996-2006: A Textbook for Students of the Department of International Relations. Minsk: BSU, 2009. — 198 p.

3 M.V. Ševieliova. Relations of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation with the Countries of the Near and Middle East. A Course Program for Discipline 1-23 01 03 Linguistic and Cultural Studies // Academic Association of Liberal Arts Universities of the Republic of Belarus, Belarusian State University. Minsk: 2008.

2. Relations prior to 2002.

Belarus began establishing contacts with the Third World as soon as it gained sovereignty, before Viačeslaŭ Kiebič became prime minister. The relations with the Arab World became an important component of that process. Indeed, diplomatic relations with the largest Arab countries were established very soon: with Egypt on February 1, 1992; with Morocco on May 8, 1992; with Kuwait on May 25, 1992; with Oman on July 23, 1992; with the UAE on October 20, 1992; and with Syria on August 26, 1993. It took Belarus slightly longer to establish diplomatic relations with Yemen (August 7, 1995) and Algeria (October 24, 1995) for obvious reasons — the two countries were politically unstable at that time.

Important political contacts took place during that period, including the visit to Minsk of Nasser al-Rodhan, Kuwait's Finance Minister (February 17, 1992), premier Kiebič's visit to Kuwait (May 25, 1992) and to the UAE (May 10-11, 1993). In 1994, Belarus opened its consulate general in Abu Dhabi (UAE). Economic figures also attest to firm bilateral relations during the first few years of this country's independence. In 1992-1993, Belarus's export to Kuwait totaled USD1.1 million, to Morocco USD13.6 million, to Syria USD8.4 million, to Oman USD2.3 million and to Saudi Arabia USD4.7 million. Given the objectively significant place of the Third World in the global economic system and global politics, it would be natural for any new government to continue building up relations with those countries, the more so because the BSSR as part of the Soviet Union used to have certain economic relations with the developing world. Commenting on Belarusian-Arab relations, T. Jašsiejčyk notes: "Following the collapse of the USSR, Minsk's ties with the Arab World were never broken, although in 1991-1995, cooperation with Arab countries was not considered a priority area for the country's foreign policy."⁴ In other words, these relations never halted, but went on due to the momentum gained back in the Soviet times, rather than due to some targeted efforts of the country's policy-makers of that time, and Belarus's first foreign minister P. Kraučanka never mentioned any contacts with the Third World in his memoirs apart from his visit to China⁵.

Therefore, while acknowledging the essential role in this process of President Lukashenka, elected in 1994, we should assume that the trend towards the promotion of the relations with the developing world was only natural, and Lukashenka simply shaped it according to his vision of the country's policy in those regions. Meanwhile, the official version, which gives Lukashenka the credit for 'discovering' the Third World for Belarus is a widespread one among politicians, the media and even the academic community.

Curiously, some studies seem to deliberately avoid any mention of the incumbent as if implying the objective nature of the progress of the relations between Belarus and the Arab World in the 1990s — "By 1996, the understanding of the practicability of encouraging the relations with the Arab World had developed"⁶ — and its gradual character — "The preconditions for the establishment of the Arabian direction in the country's foreign policy as an independent vector had been formed as late as 1996-1997."⁷ Anyway, Lukashenka set the Foreign Ministry a task at an extended board meeting in 1995 to step up Belarus's relations with the Arab World; the same year, "Action Plan for the Promotion of the Bilateral Relations to 2000" was adopted. Efforts to intensify the ties between Belarus and the Arab World were therefore made before the relations with the West deteriorated. Some researchers, including U. Ulachovič, have a different version, though. "In the second half of the 1990s, Belarus saw an intensification of relations with the countries of Asia and eastern Arab nations. There is an opinion that the process became some sort of a substitution for the European vector. We can't but admit that the evolution of relations in

4 T.V. Jašsiejčyk. Relations between the Republic of Belarus and the Arab World in 1991-1995. // Belarus in the Contemporary World (Proceedings of the 8th international Research Conference on the Occasion of the 88th Anniversary of Belarusian State University). Minsk: Tesiej. – p. 36.

5 Piotr Kraučanka. Belarus on the Crossroads: Essays by a Diplomat and Politician. – Vilnius: Institute of Belarusian Studies, 2007. – 506 p. – (Naša Niva publishing house).

6 T.V. Jašsiejčyk. Relations between the Republic of Belarus and the Arab World in 1991-1995. // Belarus in the Contemporary World (Proceedings of the 8th international Research Conference on the Occasion of the 88th Anniversary of Belarusian State University). Minsk: Tesiej. – p. 37.

7 T.V. Jašsiejčyk. Relations between the Republic of Belarus and the Arab World in 1991-1995. // Belarus in the Contemporary World (Proceedings of the 8th international Research Conference on the Occasion of the 88th Anniversary of Belarusian State University). Minsk: Tesiej. – p. 37.

these regions brought positive results and strengthened the international socialization of Belarus as a young independent nation with an industrial economy.”⁸

When it comes to the personal factor in the promotion of Belarusian-Arab relations, it is important that along with the election of the first president, two more high-ranking officials capable of personally contributing to the promotion of Belarus’s foreign policy in non-Soviet East were appointed: Ivan Antanovič, the country’s foreign minister in 1997-1998, who was known for his critical attitude to the West, and Ural Latypaŭ, foreign minister in 1998-2000, state secretary of the Security Council in 2000-2001 and head of the Presidential Administration in 2001-2004. Whatever the reasons and factors behind the intensification of the Belarusian foreign policy in the developing world, Belarus indeed redoubled its efforts as soon as Lukashenka’s authority strengthened in 1995-1996. Belarus’s chief priority was naturally the Asian continent and North Africa, especially the Arab countries of North Africa. The Belarusian president paid visits to Syria in 1998, the UAE in 2000, Qatar in 2001, Kuwait and Bahrain in 2002, Egypt in 1998, and Libya in 2000. In 1997-2002, Lebanese prime minister and foreign ministers of Syria, Lebanon and Kuwait visited Belarus. In 1997-2002, the National Assembly of Belarus had excellent relations not only with the parliament of Israel, but also with those of Kuwait and Iran. The consistency of this country’s policy towards the developing world is to a large extent due to objective economic reasons: back in the 1990s and 2000s, Belarusian producers were faced with major problems when searching for new markets in developed economies. In 2011, then foreign minister Chvastoŭ admitted: “There will be no dramatic breakthrough of the Belarusian economy to the Western markets. In this context, it is evident that Belarus needs to frugally and cautiously redistribute its resources and external ties towards the developing world.”⁹

However, analysis shows that the penetration into the new markets of developing nations was not that unambiguous, because in many cases, the increase in trade turnover was caused by supplies of low-tech and unprocessed products (such as potash fertilizers).

In the autumn of 1998, Belarusian minister for foreign economic relations M. Marynič attributed the intensification of Belarus’s engagement with the developing world to the fact that Belarus emphasized the importance of fostering trade and economic relations and approaching the markets of Asia, Africa, the Near and Middle East, and Latin America because of the tight competition in western markets, which are saturated and have rigid price parameters¹⁰.

In early 1999, Lukashenka announced that the Arab World was among the key focus areas for Belarus’s foreign policy: “We are giving high priority to this direction. This holds for both economic contacts and political cooperation.” He also said that the Arab World would soon turn into a most powerful center of the multi-polar political system of the world¹¹.

Despite this quite logical reasoning, the results remained limited. In 2000, export to the Near East totaled only USD39.5 million; the figure expanded to USD117 million in 2006; however, it was even less impressive, given the change in the real value of the U.S. dollar during that period¹².

8 U.Je. Ulachovič. Formation of the Fundamentals of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Belarus (1991-2005). Minsk: Harvest, 2010. – p. 169-170.

9 Abstracts from the report by deputy prime minister and foreign minister of the Republic of Belarus M.M. Chvastoŭ “African Continent: Foreign Political and Foreign Economic Interests of Belarus” presented before the teaching staff and students of Belarusian State University, May 16, 2001, Minsk – p. 8.

10 Speech by minister for foreign economic relations Michail Marynič at a meeting with the students of the department for international relations of Belarusian State University, November 20, 1998. Quoted from Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta, November 26, 1998.

11 Lukashenka’s statement at a meeting with representatives of diplomatic missions of Arab countries on February 24, 1999. Quoted from Respublika, February 25, 1999.

12 Marta Astrejka. Arabian Vector: Step by Step. Herald of Foreign Economic Relations. 4/2007, p. 3.

3. Relations after 2002.

3.1. Methodology for quantitative analysis.

Author's own quantitative analysis method is employed to assess Belarus's relations with the Arab World after the year 2002. This method was not used for the period prior to 2002 because in order to collect relevant data and monitor official contacts long after the actual events is a complicated task that calls for considerable resources. Quantitative analysis is based on the detected contacts between representatives of the two countries and assessment of those contacts. The contacts in question were identified using reliable and trustworthy official and unofficial media (national media, news services, official statements, and official web-pages). Since early 2011, the author has monitored the situation on a regular basis in the framework of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies¹³. The methodology for quantitative analysis employed by this study was originally developed in 2010 by the Institute of Political Studies "Political Sphere" for a study of Belarus's relations with developing economies.

That project also developed the database of the contacts with developing nations and published the initial analysis of the relations in question encompassing the period up to July 2010 (which makes this study its logical continuation). The analysis is based on 'engagement indices', which reflect the degree of intensity of the contacts and Belarus's relations with a specific country or region. The index represents the total of quantified contacts (contact index) and total of quantified presence of representatives of relevant countries (presence index).

In order to calculate the contact index, each contact is assigned a numerical value on a scale one to five depending on the importance of the contact, which is identified based on the ranks of people involved. In case of visits, their significance is defined based on the top-ranking official in a visiting delegation. If Belarusian and foreign representatives meet in a third country, the level of contacts is defined based on the officials representing the Belarusian side; however, the value is halved, because such contacts are as a rule shorter and less connected with specific arrangements. The 'absorption principle' is applied to delegations: the numerical value of the top-ranking official 'absorbs' the values of the rest of the government members also included in the delegation.

Scale:

Contact level	Value
President	5
Prime minister, vice-president, presidential chief of staff, speaker of parliament, heirs of monarchs	3
Vice-premiers, key ministers (Foreign Ministry, Defense Ministry), secretary of the Security Council, presidential aide	2.5
Other ministers, chiefs of General Staffs, top-level party officials	2
Other important visits	1

The presence index is calculated based on how long the partner in question has been represented in the host country, depending on the level of representation; points are awarded per each year: embassy — 3 points; consulate — 2 points.

¹³ Belarus's Foreign Policy Index. BISS, http://www.belinstitute.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=41&layout=blog&Itemid=35&lang=ru. Content available as of 1.12.2012.

3.2. Index of engagement with the Arab World.

3.2.1. Foreign missions.

Syria, Iraq and Palestine have opened their embassies in Minsk. There are Belarusian embassies in Syria and the UAE.

The Belarusian Embassy in Iraq was closed as soon as the war broke out in 2003. The Iraqi Embassy in Belarus was opened in December 2000, suspended its operations when the war started, but reopened in February 2008. The Palestinian Embassy in Belarus has de facto operated since February 2003, although it was officially unveiled in October 2004¹⁴.

The Belarusian Embassy in the United Arab Emirates has a staff of seven diplomats, including a military attaché¹⁵. It was opened in December 1999. Ambassador of the UAE to Belarus General Mohammed Al Raisi has worked in Minsk since the autumn of 2008.

The Belarusian Embassy in Syria was set up in 1998 and comprises four diplomats¹⁶. The Syrian Embassy in Minsk appeared in mid-2007; the former foreign minister of Syria Dr. Farouk Taha became the first Syrian ambassador to Belarus (he was ambassador until January 2012 and then joined the Syrian armed opposition groups).

3.2.2. Contacts.

All in all, 160 contacts were identified between Belarusian and foreign representatives — 21 in 2002, 17 in 2003, 23 in 2004, 19 in 2005, four in 2006, 14 in 2007, 12 in 2008, 19 in 2009, 16 in 2010, nine in 2011 and eight in January-October 2012.

Table 1. Indices of engagement between Belarus and the Asian Arab states in 2002-2012.

Year	Contact index	Presence index	Engagement index
2002	44	12	56
2003	22.75	9	31.75
2004	43.5	9	52.5
2005	30	9	39
2006	6	9	15
2007	31	9	40
2008	22	15	37
2009	41.5	15	56.5
Total in 2002-2009	240.75	87	327.75
2010	32.5	15	47.5
2011	19	15	34
2002-2011	292.25	not applicable	409.25
On average in 2002-2011	29.23	not applicable	40.93
January-October 2012	11.5	15	26.5

¹⁴ Palestine will open its embassy in Minsk // Interfax. 11.10.2004 <http://afn.by/news/i/49384>. Content available as of 15.07.2010.

¹⁵ Staff of the Embassy on its official website. Embassy Staff. // Embassy in the UAE http://www.uae.belembassy.org/rus/diplomatic_staff/ Content available as of 15.07.2010.

¹⁶ Staff of the Embassy on its official website // Embassy in Syria <http://www.syria.belembassy.org/rus/membership/> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

Overall, Belarus's contacts with Arab countries during the period under review looked more like attempts to seek contacts than real cooperation, naturally, apart from the ties with Syria and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. As a result, there are quite many high-level visits — attempts to embark on cooperation via political will,— however, there are too few visits by low-ranking officials, who normally pave the way for specific projects.

The data we obtain enable us to compare the intensity of contacts only in 2002-2009¹⁷. The comparatively high engagement index— standing at 327.75 — can be attributed to the fact that a large group of countries is referred to, which we should always remember. To compare: the same engagement index for Belarus's relations with Iran amounted to 184.75 in the same period, and with communist China, to 216.75, i.e. not a single Arab country taken separately — possibly, with the only exception of Iraq, and on a quite limited scale — managed to attain the same level of relations with official Minsk as Iran, never mind India or China. The comparative stability of the engagement index for the Arab World — especially as against other focus areas for Belarus in the developing world — is just an outward appearance, covering the constant change of Minsk's country priorities, from Iraq and Egypt to Syria and ultimately to the conservative monarchies of the Persian Gulf. These fluctuations in Belarus's engagement with Syria can easily be observed from the relevant figures for that country (see below). The contacts with the Arab World peaked twice — in 2002-2004 and 2009-2010 — when Belarus attempted to impose its collaboration patterns on various groups of Arab countries. The first peak was due to extensive contacts with Iraq and, to a lesser degree, with Syria, whereas the second one is connected with Belarus's collaboration with well-off monarchies of the Persian Gulf.

Also conspicuous are the two slumps in the intensity of contacts. The first one was recorded in 2006 and was caused by the dynamics of Belarus's foreign policy, including the complicated election campaign and political standoff. Furthermore, some of the contacts might have remained unaccounted for because of inconsistencies in the work of the Foreign Ministry's press service that year. The second slump, logged in 2011 and perceptible throughout 2012, is connected with the upheaval in the Arab World, which caused internal political confrontation in the regimes that were Minsk's traditional partners (Syria, Libya and Egypt), whereas other regimes (Iraq) were prompted to shift their priority to the Arab World from contacts with the distant countries such as Belarus, which are quite insignificant for global politics.

17 Calculations for later years for most of the developing regions are not complete yet.

3.2.3. Military and technical components of the cooperation with Arab countries.

Table 2. Belarus's contacts with Arab countries in the military and technical sector in 2002-2012.

Year	Index of contacts in the military and technical sector
2002	2.5
2003	2.5
2004	0
2005	3
2006	0
2007	9
2008	8
2009	11
2010	5.5
Total in 2002-2009	41.5
2011	10
Total in 2002-2011	57
Proportion of contacts connected with military and technical cooperation in the total volume of contacts in 2002-2011	19.5
2012 (January-October)	5.5

Military and military and technical cooperation is therefore a measurable yet secondary element of the cooperation with the Arab World. Naturally, some of the contacts in this sector must have been confidential; specifically, many of the Foreign Ministry's reports covering this area or collaboration with Iraq mention the visit by vice-premier of Iraq Abdul Tawab el-Mulla Howeish, however, there are no indications whatsoever that the Iraqi official was also that country's military industrialization minister. Nevertheless, there were just a few instances of covert contacts, and there is indirect evidence that if there were some, they were quite limited. Contacts in this area started expanding in the second half of the 2000s, which is partially connected with the development of relations with the monarchies of the Persian Gulf, rather than the collaboration with the regimes that were in opposition to the West. The table above makes it obvious that following the decay of the cooperation with the Arab nations, which were once close to the Soviet Union (Iraq, Libya, Syria, etc.), Belarus was unable to establish contacts with new partners in 2004-2006 (the Persian Gulf monarchies); however, the table shows that starting 2007, a marked increase in the relations index has been recorded.

4. Specific features of relations.

4.1. Political aspects.

4.1.1. Strategy.

In his annual address to the nation and the parliament¹⁸ in April 2011, Lukashenka emphasized that Belarus didn't think that "two vectors of its foreign policy — conventionally speaking, those eastern and western — were enough for effective work. We must extend the number of 'footholds' in the international scene through enhancing the 'farther arc' of allies and partners." He spoke quite highly about the results that the country achieved. "We already enjoy serious dividends from our collaboration with such partners as China, Venezuela, India, the **United Arab Emirates**, Qatar, Vietnam, **Syria**, Iran, Brazil and others." We can't be speaking about the conceptual integrity and consistency of the official vision of Belarusian policy on the developing world. Unfortunately, it is hard to find official concepts on the country's relations with the developing world, if any such concepts are finalized in specific documents at all¹⁹. The official website of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry provides some insight into the concepts that Belarusian diplomacy and commerce use as guidelines in their relations with the regions under review. The Foreign Ministry refers to developing countries simply as 'South', distinguishing this area for foreign policy efforts as a separate vector and commenting that "Belarus is planning to strengthen and expand the far edge 'foreign policy arc' of allies and partners in Asia, Latin America, Near East and Africa and to take cooperation with its partners in these regions to the level of strategic partnership." Trade and economic cooperation are named the priority tasks of mutual cooperation²⁰.

The very list of areas for cooperation and the way the countries are arranged and ranked are rather surprising. "Intensification of political and economic engagement" is declared to be the main priority for the relations with the traditional partners, i.e. Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Vietnam, Egypt, India, Iran, China, Cuba, the **UAE**, **Syria**, Japan and South Africa. However, the relations with Argentina have been quite miserable for quite a long time now, and Japan can hardly be regarded as a country belonging to 'South' by any measure. The second major aspect of Belarusian policy in the developing world is the "promotion of dialogue and efforts to approach and secure a footing in the markets with which we have a substantial potential for mutually beneficial relations (Angola, Bolivia, Indonesia, **Qatar**, Cote d'Ivoire, Malaysia, Nigeria, Nicaragua, Pakistan, **Saudi Arabia**, Togo, the Philippines, Ecuador, Ethiopia and others)²¹". The list of the countries alone rules out any consistent and logical pattern because of the mere incomparability of the sizes of the target markets and the level of their engagement with Belarus.

Belarus's policy in the developing world is indeed quite free from ideology, which doesn't mean that the Belarusian administration stays away from the confrontation rhetoric. In July 2012, Lukashenka said in his speech delivered before graduates of military schools: "Belarus has no geopolitical ambitions, but it must assert its national interests and strengthen its military security." He said that the world lacked security and described the sources of instability in the following way: "Politicians representing the world superpowers still prefer using the language of violence when addressing unyielding nations. The events in Iraq, Egypt, Libya and situation around Iran and Syria are characteristic examples."²² When introducing the new foreign minister to his new staff, the head of state reiterated: "We are very far from having any geopolitical ambition and making political games and intrigues our trademark in the international arena" and added: "Foreign trade figures and size of investments attracted by the country should become the key indicators in order to assess every executive in the diplomatic corps."²³

These declarations are based on real actions. For example, back in 2006, Lukashenka was speaking about the war in Lebanon using a demonstratively neutral language, while avoiding

18 <http://www.president.gov.by/press116504.html#doc>. Content available as of 1.11.2012.

19 There must be some, though. Specifically, in 1995, the Foreign Ministry developed the Action Plan for the Promotion of Bilateral Relations with Arab Countries for the Period to 2000.

20 Countries and Regions. <http://www.mfa.gov.by/bilateral/> Content available as of 30 April 2011.

21 Countries and Regions. <http://www.mfa.gov.by/bilateral/> Content available as of 30 April 2011.

22 <http://www.president.gov.by/press138492.html#doc> Content available as of 2.11.2012.

23 Lukashenka: Belarus is far from geopolitical ambitions, political games and intrigues 22.08.2012 <http://news.tut.by/politics/306435.html> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

expressing his pro-Arab stance²⁴. Although the Syrian president once “expressed his gratitude to President Lukashenka for his country’s supporting stances to our just causes and for the firm and continued Belarusian stances on our causes, especially the occupied Syrian Golan and Palestinian cause and rights”²⁵; however, Belarusian officials have been making very vague statements on the matter, seeking to avoid confrontation with Israel. Specifically, during the same meeting, quoted by the Syrian Arab News Agency, “the Belarusian president underlined the need for building relations in the world in a fair manner, saying that Syria and Belarus are similar because they struggle for the sovereignty of their countries and work in the interest of both countries.”

At the same time, the projects of a tripartite union of Belarus, Syria and Venezuela, which were discussed in 2009-2011, had no result whatsoever. The Damascus summit of the three presidents never took place, while at the meeting of the foreign ministries of the three countries in 2010 Belarus was represented by the lowest-ranking official eligible for attendance (deputy minister Aliejnik) instead of the minister.

4.1.2. Impact of the Arab Revolutions.

The revolutions in the Arab World in 2011 became a very sensitive issue for the Belarusian regime, which never concealed its consistently negative attitude to the Arab Spring, although its criticism always remained at the level of rhetoric ‘for internal use’ and hardly ever took the form of official statements in the international arena. In late spring 2011, official Minsk discontinued its open support for Muammar Gaddafi; however, the issue of democratic movements continued to worry the Belarusian administration. “The entire Muslim world is boiling,” Lukashenko said²⁶. When commenting on the revolutions, the head of state called for other former Soviet Union countries to form Collective Fast Response Forces in order to prevent democratic revolutions domestically. The informal summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organization that was held in Astana in June 2011 addressed the advisability of the Collective Fast Response Forces in the context of the recent wave of democratization, whereas the “developments in North Africa and the Near East” were separate items on the agenda, according to official reports. “We have had many things to address in connection to the recent international developments, including those taking place in the Arab arc, the north of Africa. We have agreed that we will join efforts to work out concerted measures to respond to any challenge,” the Belarusian state leader said²⁷.

4.1.3. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

In October 2011, Lukashenka reiterated that a multi-vector policy remained the underlying principle of Belarus’s foreign policy, and that very positive trends were observed in this country’s relations with Asian and African countries, and added: “Belarus is observing the activities of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with genuine interest; we are also interested in the engagement with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.”²⁸ Back in June 2011, the secretary of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation announced that Belarus had applied for an observer status in the Organization. As of November 2012, Belarus had no such status.

24 Speech at a meeting with heads of Belarusian foreign missions 02.08.2006

<http://www.president.gov.by/press43744.html#doc> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

25 M.Nassr/ Mazen/ al-Ibrahim. Presidents al-Assad, Lukashenko: Syria-Belarus Relations Consolidated. SANA News Agency, Jul 26, 2010. <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2010/07/26/300337.htm> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

26 Lukashenka: “The entire Muslim world is boiling” 25.07.2011

http://news.tut.by/politics/243381.html?utm_source=news-right-block&utm_medium=relevant-news&utm_campaign=relevant-news Content available as of 25.07.2011.

27 Alexander Lukashenka takes part in an information CSTO summit in Astana, 12.08.2011

<http://www.president.gov.by/press125685.html#doc>. Content available as of 12.08.2011.

28 President of the Republic of Belarus Alexander Lukashenka completes his official visit to Tajikistan 29.10.2011

<http://www.president.gov.by/press131055.html#doc>. Content available as of 30.10.2011.

4.2. Economic aspects

4.2.1. The standard approach.

The relations with the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf have an increasing importance in the context of the instability in North Africa and unwillingness of the Belarusian administration to get involved in the international crises around Syria and Iran. The narrowing range of potential partners in the Near East prompts Minsk to center on the few safe ones. Interestingly, Belarus shows no bias when selecting partners in the developing world. Naturally, Belarus's foreign policy has priority target economies (such as China, Venezuela, Vietnam, Iran, Brazil, smaller Arab oil-producing monarchies of the Persian Gulf), but these focus areas are very much pragmatic and subject to changes (given the decay of Belarusian-Iranian relations of the past few years). When it comes to other countries, Belarus has a standard approach, when almost identical packages of proposals are made with a view to establishing contacts. This 'package approach' is obvious even at the level of officials engaged in such contacts. Belarusian delegations that occasionally visit new foreign policy and trade destinations are invariably led by Deputy Foreign Minister Siarhej Aliejnik (previously, Belarusian missions were led by Valer Varaniecki).

Apparently, Minsk has problems with making some really appealing offers to businesses from the Arab World. Symptomatically, immediately after Serbia signed an agreement with the UAE to help it revive its military aviation industry, Minsk's best offer to the Qatari administration was a land plot for residencies and to UAE business, a site for a development project that was previously proposed to Omani capital, which rejected it.

The shakiness of the foundation for Belarus's cooperation with some of the Arab nations of the Persian Gulf is amply demonstrated by some odd ideas that Belarusian government officials tend to voice from time to time. Then foreign minister Martynaŭ once said: "Travel and recreation became yet another area, in which Qatari business has become quite interested. Obviously, well-to-do families in the Near East, especially in the Persian Gulf, prefer moving to countries with a moderate climate during the hot summer months, given the difference in climate, and they seem to like Belarus a lot. We reached relevant agreements during our talks."²⁹ Another example of rainbow-chasing is the investment project of the 'Qatari Island in Europe' (see more in the section on Qatar below).

4.2.2. Investments.

Finding new sources of financing in developing economies — apart from China — is a virtually impossible task because of the specifics of the Belarusian legal system and state regulation practice. The absence of firm capital safety guarantees and clear prospects for gaining profits discourages, among others, Arab businesses. As a result, the Belarusian administration or persons belonging to the Belarusian establishment, are trying to raise finance offering some extraordinary and often half-legal projects, which envision substantial benefits and preferences for investors. Examples include Qatari and Omani projects (the 'Qatari island' in the vicinity of Brest, failed Omani project to build up downtown Minsk, development of hunting residencies for the ruling family of Qatar).

4.3. Military and military-and-technical cooperation.

Global experience shows that cooperation in security and military-industrial sector might prove an important instrument to foster international ties. The Arab countries of the Persian Gulf are among the leading buyers of weapons, especially those produced in the West. Nevertheless, they may as well procure Soviet and post-Soviet arms to supply to their allies in scenes of conflicts in

²⁹ Foreign Minister S. Martynaŭ's interview to the First National Television Channel summing up the results of the visit by the Emir of the State of Qatar, 19 April 2009 <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/c15363bcb972cf20.html> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

order to reduce costs (such as the detected transfers in October 2012 of Ukrainian munitions officially delivered to Saudi Arabia to Syrian anti-governmental forces).

Belarusian Ambassador to the UAE V. Sulimski admitted: "The most promising trade area for Belarus is to expand its export to the UAE, especially that of military and technical products."³⁰ The largest project with the UAE of this kind was the contract for the modernization of armor, which was executed by OAO Peleng in the first half of the 2000s. According to some sources, the contract covered the overhaul of the combat materiel and installation of Belarusian-made sights; the project took the form of two contracts worth a total of USD30 million. In 2007, Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant (MZKT) started executing a USD30 million contract for the delivery of 21 MZKT-74135 tank transporter tractors to the UAE. The contract had been prepared since 1999; however, despite the fact that MZKT was awarded the contract as the winner of a competitive tender (the MZKT-74135 was actually developed to meet the requirements of the buyer), the delivery was delayed, allegedly under pressure coming from the U.S., which sounds quite plausible, until President Lukashenka managed to resolve the situation during his visit to the United Arab Emirates in March 2007³¹. Some media also reported about the delivery of 220 MZKT-790986 Volat vehicles to that country by 2009³². A new contract with the UAE for the delivery of 120 MZKT-74135 was reported in 2012; however, the information has not been confirmed by any reliable source yet. As of early 2011, the only firm with Belarusian capital registered in the UAE was Beltech Export, in which at least some stake belongs to Belarus's ZAO Beltechexport, a well-known exporter of defense goods.

The geography of Belarus's international relations and geography of reported supplies of Belarusian arms is strikingly different, which may indicate certain isolation of the trade in arms from official government agencies, although the specific nature of products can also play its role, for it is mostly in demand in poorer countries or those focusing on the weapons produced in (post-)Soviet countries. Given the peculiarities of the Belarusian economy and foreign trade, which is under the close control of the state, one can assume that any activities to sell arms are conducted by insiders of the regime or firms and persons close to the regime. This status quo was established long ago, but the situation seems to have been growing even more pronounced.

In the second half of the 2000s, Belarus's military and military-industrial contacts with the monarchies of the Persian Gulf — the UAE, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain — became markedly more intense. Military supplies accounted for a sizeable part of quite modest streams of Belarusian export deliveries. At some stage, the Belarusian administration even expressed its discontent. The press service of the president reported: "The President noted that Belarus's chief exports to those countries are either military or dual-purpose products. 'Where are the results of our diplomats' efforts to promote our civil products in that region? The cooperation in the credit and investment sector also leaves a lot to be desired. This holds for the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development. Where are the rest of the investment projects that were promised to us?'"³³ However, Lukashenka's criticism doesn't really imply that the trade in military and military-industrial products was substantial in volume terms. More proof that the figures were indeed insignificant is provided by the analysis of contacts with the countries of the region and comparison of trade data, which rarely reached even ten million U.S. dollars.

30 Marta Astrejka. Belarusian Quay in the Persian Gulf. Herald of Foreign Economic Relations, 4/2007, p. 4.

31 MZKT commences deliveries of MZKT-74135 tank transporter tractors to the United Arab Emirates, ARMS-TASS, 18.04.2007.

http://vpk.name/news/4953_mzkt_nachal_postavki_obedinennyim_arabskim_emiratom_tankovyih_tyagachei_mzkt74135.html Content available as of 1.12.2012.

32 Sergey Ptichkin. Desert 'tigers'. Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 26.02.2009. <http://www.rg.ru/2009/02/26/oruzhie.html> Content available as of 1.12.2012.

33 Top-level visits must have specific results for the country. 27.03.2008

<http://www.president.gov.by/press58984.html#doc> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

5. Relations with separate Arab countries.

5.1. Syria.

Syria wasn't Belarus's first choice in the Arab World when this country started looking for new partners in the second half of the 1990s. Originally Minsk's top priority was Iraq, and even Egypt was way more important than Syria. However, Egypt wasn't willing to reciprocate Belarus's diplomatic efforts (for instance, the visits by Belarusian officials never resulted in any return visits, and there is still no Egyptian embassy in Belarus), while Iraq, which had a consistently hostile attitude to the Syrian administration, disappeared from the Belarusian diplomatic map as soon as the war started in 2003.

As a result, by the mid-2000s, Belarus had shifted the focus of its efforts in the Arab World towards Syria. By the year 2004, the relationship between Belarus and the Arab World was "marked by a shift towards a closer cooperation with the Syrian Arab Republic,"³⁴ Tacciana Jašsiejčyk writes.

During his visit to Syria in December 2003, Lukashenka announced: "We would like to use Syria as a springboard to pursue economic collaboration with the entire Arab World, the entire Near East."³⁵ This model used to work with Cuba, which helped Belarus reach out to the Venezuelan market; for its part, Venezuela has been helping Belarus to work in the market of Latin America for many years now. But this model hardly worked with Syria, which had to struggle within the Arab World against the conservative rich regimes. Syria could only be used to promote closer ties with Iran, but it's hard to say whether Damascus played a really important role here, because Teheran had already actively communicated with official Minsk since the mid-1990s.

5.1.1. Relations prior to 2002.

Diplomatic relations with Syria were established in August 1993.

Table 3. Belarusian-Syrian relations prior to 2002.

1997	Belarusian foreign minister pays a visit to Syria
19-20 October 1997	Syrian foreign minister Farouk al-Sharaa pays a visit to Belarus
9-11 March 1998	Belarusian president visits Syria
2002	Belarusian foreign minister pays a visit to Syria

³⁴ Tacciana Jašsiejčyk. On some aspects of the Near East policy of the Republic of Belarus. *Belarusian Journal of International Law and International Relations*, 2004 — No. 4, <http://evolutio.info/content/view/717/55/> Content available as of 1.11.2012.

³⁵ <http://www.president.gov.by/rus/president/news/archive/december2003/8-14/n1112-1.html> Content available as of 3.1.2005.

5.1.2. Economic relations.

Table 4. Belarusian-Syrian trade in 1999-2010.
Volume of trade³⁶.

Year	Trade, mln. U.S. dollars	Export	Import	Surplus (+)/deficit (-)
1999	2.1	1.8	0.3	+1.5
2000	13.1	13.0	0.1	+12.9
2001	15.41	15.38	0.03	+15.35
2002	14.7	14.6	0.1	+14.5
2003	15.55	15.4	0.15	+15.25
2004	38.1	37.57	0.53	+37.04
2005	31.5	31.2	0.3	+30.9
2006	45.34	44.1	1.24	+42.86
2007	46.78	42.83	3.95	+38.88
2008	85.528	66.271	19.257	+47.015
2009	57.7	55.4	2.2	+53.2
2010	47.6	39.5	8.1	+31.4

5.1.3. Contact and engagement indices with Syria.

Syria accounted for 24.34% of Belarus's contacts with the Arab countries of Asia in 2002-2010 and 27.32% of the engagement index with that region. Belarusian-Syrian relations showed stability, although they were not as active as Belarus's relationship with Iran or as diverse and deep as contacts with China.

Table 5. Index of interaction between Belarus and Syria in 2002-2012.
Index of engagement with Syria.

Year	Contact index	Presence index	Engagement index
2002	6.5	3	9.5
2003	6	3	9
2004	9	3	12
2005	6	3	9
2006	5	3	8
2007	3.5	3	6.5
2008	9.5	6	15.5
2009	5.5	6	11.5
2010	15.5	6	21.5
Total in 2002-2009	51	30	81
On average	6.38	not applicable	10.13
2011	0	6	6
2012	0	6	6

If we compare the engagement indices for Syria and the entire region, Syria appears to show steadier and more stable ties with Belarus, with no significant fluctuations typical of the rest of the region. Overall, Belarus had quite stable ties with Syria in 2002-2010 and aimed to establish contacts with other countries of the region (hence the fluctuations). Once the Syrian crisis unfolded, Belarus phased down official contacts: there were none between official representatives of the two countries in 2011 and 2012.

³⁶ Data covering trade in 1999-2008 quoted from Trade and Economic Cooperation // Embassy <http://www.syria.beembassy.org/rus/relation/trade/>; 2009 data quoted from President of Syria arrives in Belarus: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad arrives on an official visit to Belarus on July 26, 2010. http://www.syria.beembassy.org/rus/news/~page__m12=1~news__m12=158666; 2010 data quoted from Foreign Trade of the Republic of Belarus (Statistics Digest). National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, Minsk: 2011.

5.1.4. Military and technical component of Belarus's relationship with Syria.

Table 6. Contacts between Belarus and Syria in the military and military-and-technical sectors in 2002-2012.

Year	Index of contacts in the military and technical sector
2002	0
2003	0
2004	0
2005	0
2006	0
2007	1
2008	0
2009	2.5
2010	1
Total in 2002-2009	4.5
Proportion of contacts connected with military and technical cooperation in the total volume of contacts in 2002-2011	8.82%

It appears that just as in the case with Belarusian-Iranian relations, the role of the military and military-and-technical components of the relationship is overstated by many analysts and the media. Belarus's relationship with Syria in the military sector is quite limited, while the intention of Belarusian organizations operating in this market to approach the arms markets of better-off countries of the Persian Gulf is quite obvious. The visits of Belarusian Defense Ministry's representatives to the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain, presented in the table, are quite indicative; however, the specific nature of the local business doesn't allow Belarusian organizations to secure a footing in the markets of the Persian Gulf, one important reason being the absence of the Soviet legacy, which could have included the habitual use of Soviet and post-Soviet arms, personnel trained in Soviet and post-Soviet military schools and firm personal and institutional ties. The above factors benefited the Belarusians in such markets as Syria and Iraq, with their many-year contacts with the USSR, but the Arab nations of the Persian Gulf rather favor the western weaponry standards.

5.1.5. Sanctions.

Belarusian enterprises frequently become targets of U.S. sanctions for their operation in the Near East. The U.S. Treasury imposed sanctions on Belvneshpromservice for its contacts with Syria. The Belarusian company was allegedly planning to supply fuses for Syrian aerial bombs in 2011; however, the statement by the U.S. Treasury doesn't make it clear whether the materials were delivered to Syria or not. In December 2011, sanctions were slapped on the Belarusian company by the Department of State, whereas almost one year later, additional sanctions were imposed by the U.S. Treasury³⁷. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry called the U.S. sanctions 'ungrounded'. Indeed, Washington has been threatening with sanctions for alleged collaboration with Iran, Syria and some other countries of the region and even slaps sanctions on perfectly respectable European firms; for instance, in August 2012, the U.S. announced that a probe was underway into Deutsche Bank operations, which could lead to sanctions. This suggests that the very fact of the imposition of sanctions doesn't prove that there were indeed some dubious contacts between Belarus and Syria, let alone the violation of international law by official Minsk. Belvneshpromservice is one of the three companies entitled to export weapons and arms from Belarus³⁸. The U.S. imposed sanctions on Belvneshpromservice back in 2004 for alleged supplies of dual-purpose products to Iran. The sanctions were lifted in April 2006 and imposed again in December 2011 for alleged resumption of supplies of military materials to Iran.

37 Ivan Lebedev. The U.S. imposes harsher sanctions against Belarus's Belvneshpromservice for alleged arms supplies to Syria. ITAR-TASS, September 19, 2011.

http://vpk.name/news/75673_ssha_usillili_sankcii_protiv_belorusskogo_predpriyatiya_belvneshpromservis_po_podozreniyu_v_postavkah_vooruzhenii_v_siriyu.html Content available as of 2.11.2012.

38 Valer Kalinoŭski. Trade in Arms. Novy Čas, April 18, 2008, No.13 (97). Content available as of 15.07.2010.

5.2. Iraq.

5.2.1. Pre-war contacts.

Belarus's contacts with Iraq in the early 2000s showed remarkable dynamics. In 2001, trade with that country amounted to USD26.093 million (export supplies from Belarus accounted for the entire volume of mutual trade)³⁹. At the same time, there was a report on deliveries of USD165 million worth of Belarusian commodities to Iraq in 2001 alone as part of the Oil for Food program⁴⁰.

Belarusian officials were sharing their outlook for boosting the country's trade with Iraq to USD300 million a year, while Iraq mentioned a very ambitious figure of USD1 billion⁴¹.

The Belarusian president expressed his "extreme interest" in having all sanctions lifted from Iraq, because that would be "very profitable for Belarus."⁴² Contacts were especially intense in 2002 and early 2003. Specifically, there were reports that Belarus could offer Saddam Hussein political asylum. Lukashenka slammed the war in Iraq: "This is all about Hussein; he is bad; the regime is bad. It doesn't matter that people support him. They say there are weapons of mass destruction everywhere in Iraq, so let's destroy it. But we all understand what the real reason is. The entire world understands, and billions of people support Iraq's anti-war effort. They would have started bombing it long ago, but the delay doesn't mean that there will be no war. It looks like there will be, eventually. The main reason is oil; that's what I call a global-scale lie."⁴³ Lukashenka also spoke about his 'personal relations' with Saddam, which he appreciated⁴⁴.

Belarusian government officials were making extensive comments on the oil sector as a potential area for cooperation before the war, but made no specific moves, which can be attributed to the unfavorable environment for any oil deals caused by the UN sanctions against Iraq. In the meantime, the scheme to deliver North Iraqi crude to the European part of the USSR via the seaport of Odessa — and to Belarus — was considered back in the Soviet times. The possible implementation of this project (it called for the construction of additional pipelines) was taken into account by the Polish and Ukrainian governments when they were making decisions on sending their troops to Iraq in 2003. The Ukrainian government, under both Yushchenko and Yanukovich, attempted to raise this issue, but to no avail. The overall situation in Iraq and disputes between the central government and Kurdish authorities in the north of the country, especially over oil, rule out the chances that that the oil issue will be resolved in the foreseeable future. It should be noted, though, that Iraqi oil can only be delivered to Eastern Europe through joint efforts by a number of countries and must be approved by the EU, so Minsk alone won't cope with this task, as it has no resources and is faced with the opposition from Russia.

39 Excerpts from a media briefing by spokesman for the Foreign Ministry Paviel Latuška, March 14, 2002 On the session of the joint Belarusian-Iraqi commission on trade and economic cooperation. <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2002-03-14-2.html> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

40 A verbatim of answers to some of the questions asked at a press conference of Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus Aliaksandr Syčoŭ held for Belarusian and foreign media in the Foreign Ministry on April 25, 2002 (Part II) <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2002-04-25-3.html> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

41 Interview of the President of the Republic of Belarus A. Lukashenka to BBC, Minsk, September 23, 2002 <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2002-09-25-5.html> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

42 President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenka receives Iraqi Ambassador to Belarus Dheif Abdul Majid (report by the presidential press service) <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2002-12-10-2.html> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

43 Lecture "Historical Choice of the Republic of Belarus" in BSU, 14.03.2003 <http://www.president.gov.by/press29279.html#doc> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

44 Speech at the 3rd All-Belarusian People's Assembly 02.03.2006 <http://www.president.gov.by/press43747.html#doc> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

5.2.2. Restoration of relations.

After the war broke out, Belarus's relations with Iraq took a pause, and the embassies in Minsk and Baghdad were closed. Despite Lukashenka's meeting with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani in New York and moves made by the Iraqi side, the relationship between the two countries remains limited.

The Iraqi side has repeatedly sent its representatives to Minsk, even at the ministerial level. In June 2011, Undersecretary of the Iraqi Foreign Ministry Labid Majeed Abbawi led an Iraqi delegation on a working visit to Minsk, and consultations between the Foreign Ministries were held. According to official reports, the consultations centered on "the status and ways to dynamically expand Belarusian-Iraqi relations, both political and regarding the establishment of a favorable framework for the resumption of mutually beneficial trade and economic cooperation." The delegation met with then foreign minister Martynaŭ, chairman of the Permanent Commission of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly I. Karpienka and took part in the solemn opening of the Embassy of Iraq in Minsk⁴⁵. The Belarusian Embassy in Baghdad has remained closed since the war started in 2003. In June 2012, after a ten-year pause caused by the hostilities, Minsk played host to a session of the Belarusian-Iraqi commission for trade and economic cooperation. However, the two countries will have a long way to go before they manage to fully restore their partnership. According to some sources, the conflicts of interests in the Belarusian administration put barriers on the path towards a resumption of full-scale collaboration. The insignificance of the relations between Belarus and Iraq in their current state is obvious from the table below, which presents bilateral trade data.

Table 7. Trade between Belarus and Iraq in 2007-2010.

Year	Trade, mln. U.S. dollars	Export	Import	Surplus (+)/deficit (-)
2007	n/a ⁴⁶	0	n/a	n/a
2008	n/a	1.6	n/a	n/a
2009	n/a	8.3	n/a	n/a
2010	n/a	6.6	n/a	n/a

Despite the shortage of specific information on import from Iraq, we won't make a mistake if we say that there were hardly any supplies from Iraq to Belarus during the period in question.

⁴⁵ On consultations between the Foreign Ministries of Belarus and Iraq
http://www.mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/ee0a9f8297840205.html Content available as of 2.11.2012.

⁴⁶ No information is available at this time. It does look like, though, that Iraqi supplies are close to nil.

5.3. Shift of foreign policy priorities to Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf.

The government must be thinking that contacts with the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, including Oman, Qatar and the UAE have the best outlook. One reason for this must be the hopes of the Belarusian administration to draw investments from these rich countries and boost cooperation in the military sector (which has been developing at quite an impressive pace during the last three or four years). Also, it may be an attempt to remove operations from the niche deemed risky for the Belarusian defense sector, as partnership with the countries that are known for being vigorous opponents of the West always carries the risk of U.S. sanctions (which are sometimes imposed for real).

In the second half of the 2000s, Belarus had more frequent contacts with wealthy Arab monarchies of Bahrain and Qatar. The Belarusian side found it rather hard to find channels and areas for engagement, because the tested cooperation patterns of the Soviet times didn't work for these conservative Arab countries, which had no serious previous contacts with the USSR. As a result, the projects that Minsk discussed with these countries were often far from the real world. Following a visit by the Emir of Qatar, foreign minister Martynaŭ announced that the two countries "discussed engagement in the use of the strategic transit potential of Belarus," in order to switch freight flows between the Far East and Europe from the sea route via the Indian and Atlantic Oceans to the land route via Belarus.

It was planned that the Qataris would be involved in the development of the relevant transit infrastructure in Belarus. Other issues discussed during the visit included projects to raise Qatari investments in the Belarusian power grid and use of Belarus's research and technical potential, Martynaŭ said⁴⁷.

The attempts of Belarusian officials to take part in the execution of the aid programs that wealthy Arab monarchies design for poor countries became a new area for engagement. Qatar was the primary target. "We offer Qatar to involve Belarusian solutions and machinery in the programs, as they have a reputation for high reliability, excellent quality and prove to be better value for money than American, Japanese and European technologies. We also suggested that qualified Belarusian specialists be involved in these programs."⁴⁸

In other words, Minsk is looking for pathways to approach new markets in the Persian Gulf countries and third countries (via the rich monarchies of the region). According to official reports, the Belarusian side is interested in supplying commodities and services in the framework of the aid programs that Arab countries carry out in Africa. There have indeed been precedents of deliveries of Belarusian machinery to one country financed by a third party donor, Sudan being a characteristic example. Commenting on the status of Belarusian-Sudanese relations, the Foreign Ministry said: "Building on the financial potential of its traditional partners, primarily the Arab nations of the Persian Gulf, Sudan acquires some Belarusian machinery making use of re-export schemes. Most of the 180 MAZ trucks supplied to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2003 have been re-exported to Sudan."⁴⁹

Saudi Arabia remains a blank spot on the map of the Arab World for Belarus. Despite regular visits of Belarusian diplomats and the General Agreement on Cooperation with Saudi Arabia signed back in 2003, the relations with that country remain meager on all levels. Saudi Arabia must be too integrated with the West to be genuinely interested in exotic projects in the post-Soviet Belarus.

47 Interview of Foreign Minister Siarhej Martynaŭ to the First National Television Channel following the visit by the Emir of the State of Qatar to Belarus, April 19, 2009.

48 Interview of Foreign Minister Siarhej Martynaŭ to the First National Television Channel following the visit by the Emir of the State of Qatar to Belarus, April 19, 2009.

49 On Belarusian-Sudanese relations // Ministry of Foreign Affairs <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2004-07-26-4.html> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

5.4. The United Arab Emirates.

5.4.1. Political relationship with the UAE.

The relationship with the UAE and the operating Belarusian mission to that country are essential for building up contacts with the rest of the Persian Gulf economies. Despite what wasn't actually the most favorable soil for Belarusian diplomats to cultivate in the UAE (which was lacking the otherwise helpful Soviet legacy, etc.), the UAE remains the best springboard for Belarus in the region because of its central location, neutral position and more open political and economic system (compared to those of Oman or Saudi Arabia). Diplomatic relations with the UAE were established in October 1992. In 1999, Belarus's foreign minister and vice-premier and state secretary of the Security Council paid visits to the UAE. In March 2000, a state delegation led by President Lukashenka visited the UAE⁵⁰. Lukashenka made an unequivocal statement about the role of the UAE in Belarus's foreign policy. "We have identified our strategic ally and partner in the Persian Gulf region — it's the United Arab Emirates, and we are very much interested in our presence in this part of the world," Lukashenka said in 2007⁵¹. When on a visit to the UAE in March 2007, Lukashenka signed agreements on cooperation in oil and chemistry, energy, military and technical sector, construction, transport, space technologies, manufacturing, sports and tourism. There's no obvious asymmetry in the bilateral relations, and they clearly benefit from the comparatively open political and economic environments of the UAE. Therefore, the Belarusian side managed to move on in its relations with that Arab country further than with any other country of the Persian Gulf, which is confirmed by numerous and various contacts. At the same time, there's no saying that the two countries have achieved a stable cooperation model, because Belarus hasn't yet secured a footing in that country.

5.4.2. Economic aspects.

The Belarusian Foreign Ministry perceives the UAE as a "crucial trade partner of the Republic of Belarus in the Persian Gulf region." However, the economic relationship with the UAE somewhat lags behind that with other partners in the Near East. Bilateral trade relations had a slack period, and the volume of mutual trade even decreased. In 2002, trade between the two countries came to USD35.5 million, an increase by 51.8% from the previous year. Export supplies from Belarus totaled USD34.8 million⁵². In 2003, Belarusian export reached an all-time high of USD38 million⁵³, which made the UAE this country's 28th largest trade partner by the volume of mutual trade and the 19th largest partner by export. The UAE became the second-largest importer of Belarusian products in Asia and Africa after China⁵⁴. However, the impressive growth in mutual trade proved quite unstable and is a perfect illustration of the fundamental problem of Belarus's policy in the third world, which is characterized by the absence of stable and consistent results.

A slump in mutual trade was recorded after 2003, and in 2008, the volume of trade between the two countries exceeded USD20 million⁵⁵. Investment injections from the UAE also remain insignificant: of the total USD4 billion in FDI in the Belarusian economy in 2011, investments from the UAE amounted to mere USD6.3 million⁵⁶.

50 <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2004-11-29-2.html> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

51 The United Arab Emirates is ready to invest in the Republic of Belarus. 01.10.2007

<http://www.president.gov.by/press35429.html> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

52 On the arrival of the UAE ambassador to Minsk <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2003-08-28-1.html> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

53 The United Arab Emirates is ready to invest in the Republic of Belarus 01.10.2007

<http://www.president.gov.by/press35429.html> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

54 <http://www.mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/2004-11-29-2.html> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

55 Trade and economic cooperation <http://www.uae.belembassy.org/rus/bel-uae/ecsotr/> Content available as of 15.07.2010.

56 Foreign Minister of the Republic of Belarus Uladzimir Makiej gave an exclusive interview to the Emirates News Agency (WAM). News of the Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the United Arab Emirates. October 23, 2012

http://uae.mfa.gov.by/rus/news/~page__m12=1~news__m12=930934 Content available as of 3.11.2012.

Table 8. Trade between Belarus and the UAE in 2006-2010.

Year	Trade, mln. U.S. dollars	Export	Import	Surplus (+)/deficit (-)
2006	26.1	24.3	1.8	+22.5
2007			3.6	
2008	21.4	17.6	3.8	+13.8
2009	25.8	22.8	3	+19.8
2010			5.5	

The UAE is also an important platform for international activities in the region. The defense industry accounts for a substantial portion of the relationship between Belarus and the UAE. Even during the February 2012 visit of Prime Minister Miasnikovič to that country, he met with not only civic officials, but also the defense minister, head of the local police and some other representatives of security services. When commenting on the meeting, the press service of the Belarusian government said: "The sides confirmed the relevance and promising outlook for further consistent strengthening of military and technical cooperation between Belarus and the UAE." This sort of cooperation has been quite successful for many years now and Minsk must consider it a promising area that is worth exploring, especially as long as its contacts with the UAE don't complicate its relations with the West. When it comes to investments from the UAE, they can be raised if the Belarusian side comes up with some real proposals. However, the experience of the last few years shows that even large investors who enjoyed guarantees at the level of the Belarusian administration and favorable regulatory framework tended to delay their projects, preferring to put them into 'hibernation.' Some examples include the Minsk projects of Omani investors or Russian Itera. It appears that efforts to attract investments from the Near East stumble upon the same rock as this country's campaign to raise investments from elsewhere.

5.5. Qatar.

Besides its consistently active policy on the UAE, Belarus in the second half of the 2000s stepped up its efforts to engage another country of the region, Qatar, which is currently one of this country's chief partners in the Persian Gulf. The Belarusian president paid a visit to Qatar in February 2011, but that was just one of many on his tour of the region and never resulted in any fruitful contacts, which were established much later, in 2007.

His second visit to that country took place in August 2011⁵⁷ and wasn't a hasty one on the way to some other destination in the region, as it normally happens. During his meeting with the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the head of state made a standard speech about the intention to take the relations with Qatar to a whole new level of strategic partnership, both political and economic. According to the Belarusian state leader, the two countries can cooperate in energy, oil and chemistry, transport, telecoms, construction, food processing and building materials. When talking to reporters, Lukashenka noted that Belarus and Qatar had an enormous untapped potential. "Belarus has unique capabilities, and Qatar has vast financial resources. They are short of capabilities, and we are short of finance."⁵⁸ Minsk is naturally interested in Qatari investments. BelTA news service reported that a few large-scale projects with Qatar were negotiated, including a facility to produce compound fertilizers in Qatar worth around USD1.75 billion (Belarus Today called it the 'central' and 'most elaborated bilateral project to date'⁵⁹), the construction of a multiuse sports and hotel complex in Minsk's Pieramožcaŭ Avenue near the football hall, worth up to USD100 million, and the project to set up a joint production of potash in Belarus (according to other sources, Belarus offered to sell Qatar a shareholding in Belaruskali or a "title to access Belarusian potassium deposits" either as a joint venture or a concession to develop a new deposit), as well as the project to create trade and logistical centers in Belarus engaging the largest Qatari companies (near Orša and Brest).

The 'unique' investment project 'Qatari Island in Europe' envisioned the creation of a special zone in Belarus to host Qatari banks, business and cultural centers of the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, housing and social infrastructure facilities. The authors of the project thought that the piece of the Persian Gulf in Belarus would promote Qatari interests in Europe and encourage investors from the rest of the Gulf. The original plan was to place the 'island' near Brest, which is already quite odd. The sheer number of strange details suggests that the project was not realistic at all. Indicatively, another official report called the 'island' a 'strong industrial area.'⁶⁰

Lukashenka also said that the Qatari side suggested creating a powerful financial center in Belarus; however, it's not clear whether the project was part of the 'island' concept. The Emir of Qatar was also interested in property development projects in Belarus, Lukashenka said, adding that the emir was thinking about building a residence in Belarus. It appears that the 'island' was originally designed to incorporate some properties, especially the facilities for the recreation of the Qatari elite somewhere in a pristine forest, such as Bielavieža Forest (Belavezhskaya Pushcha).

In September 2012, Minsk Region Administration posted on its official website the order to lease to members of the Qatari ruling family plots of land for 99 years on a free of charge basis for the construction of a residence and hunting facilities⁶¹. The administration confirmed that the document was authentic. The order referred to a presidential ordinance issued 'for official use only'; the press service of the president declined to comment on the report, although the secrecy of the ruling is already quite symptomatic.

Although the Belarusian side believes Qatar to be a potential source of investments and an economic partner, so far the progress of trade relations has been insignificant. Even the Foreign Ministry had to admit: "Trade between Belarus and Qatar has been showing unstable dynamics."

57 Alexander Lukashenka meets with Emir of the State of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani 15.08.2011 <http://www.president.gov.by/press125853.html#doc> Content available as of 18.08.2012.

58 <http://www.president.gov.by/press125933.html#doc> Content available as of 26.11.2012.

59 Ihar Kolčanka. Treasure Half-Island. Published on: 18.08.2011 <http://www.sb.by/post/120173/> Content available as of 18.08.2012.

60 <http://www.president.gov.by/press125933.html#doc> Content available as of 26.11.2012.

61 Members of the Qatari ruling family will be given a land plot not far from Minsk free of charge. 17.09.2012. <http://news.tut.by/economics/311020.html> Content available as of 17.09.2012.

Indeed, the best year for mutual trade was 2011 with USD 2.5 million (including USD1.9 million of export from Belarus), which is a very modest figure⁶². Minsk has nothing else to offer the Qataris except for lands for hunting and recreation. The Qataris are known for their reluctance to invest in production projects.

Overall, the analysis of the contacts between Belarus and Qatar that we performed for this study shows that most of the official documents pertaining to bilateral cooperation have something to do with security agencies, mostly defense and national security. Lukashenka's son Viktor plays an important role in promoting these relations, for he often visits Qatar and other Arab countries.

62 On the session of the Belarusian part of the Joint Belarusian-Qatari Committee on Economic, Trade and Technical Cooperation. Excerpts from a media briefing by spokesman for the Foreign Ministry Andrej Savinych October 25, 2012. http://www.mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/e44034854218fe99.html Content available as of 01.11.2012.

5.6. Oman.

Belarus's contacts with Oman are much more limited than those with the UAE or Qatar. The relationship with Oman looks a lot like that with the Emirates or Qatar, i.e. economic achievements are unimpressive, whereas defense and military technologies are front and center. Viktor Lukashenka is again a major promoter of bilateral contacts.

In May 2011, Omani Minister Responsible for Defense Sayyid Badr bin Saud al Busaidi paid a visit to Belarus. According to Omani media, he was received by "vice-president of Belarus for national security and police" Viktor Lukashenka⁶³. It is not clear whether the visit was connected with a defense technology expo in Minsk or it was just a coincidence. Viktor Lukashenka visited Oman in October 2010⁶⁴, whereas in May 2010, Belarus's interior minister paid an official visit to that country. A relatively powerful economy, Oman has an enormous army of 120,000 men (for a country of 2.8 million) and spends 7.7% of its GDP on its Armed Forces (based on 2008 reports)⁶⁵, so Belarus should seek lucrative cooperation opportunities in defense and national security. Nevertheless, in late July 2012, it was reported that the State General Reserve Fund of Oman had eventually given up on the high-profile investment project in Minsk. Based on a ruling of the Belarusian president dated March 1, 2010, the Omani investor was granted ownership of a large land plot in downtown Minsk for a fee of USD10 million without having to bid in a standard auction in order to build a multiuse development (a residential district, a business center, and a five-star hotel). The project required some USD150 million in investments and was supposed to be completed by 2016.

Back in 2011, the Omani side complained that the "currency and economic crisis in the Republic of Belarus, with its aftermath still affecting the business environment, delayed the commencement of the project." In February, the Omanis asked to postpone the project for another six months⁶⁶.

63 <http://www.omantribune.com/index.php?page=news&id=92393&heading=Oman> Content available as of 26.08.2012.

64 <http://main.omanobserver.om/node/27252> Content available as of 26.08.2012.

65 <http://milexdata.sipri.org/> Content available as of 26.08.2012.

66 Aliaksandr Zajac. The Omani investor gives up on downtown Minsk project. TUT.BY. 25.07.2012
<http://news.tut.by/finance/301498.html> Content available as of 26.08.2012.

6. Bottom line.

Arab capital, especially that coming from the Persian Gulf, is little interested in the projects embracing production and technological advancement; therefore, it can't play a major role in the reform of the Belarusian manufacturing sector and modernization of the country. However, Belarus has nothing to offer even those Arab entrepreneurs that are ready to invest in production, apart from very narrow industrial segments. At the same time, Arab countries remain traditional markets for Belarusian industrial manufacturers, and the Belarusian government should consider them as such. This is especially true for the Arab economies that used to have close ties with the USSR. However, a different strategy is required to effectively collaborate with the conservative monarchies of the Arab World. Belarus centered on cooperation in the security sector and defense in order to embark on active cooperation with those wealthy economies. The tactic aimed at enlarging the circle of partners by engaging the independent pro-western Arab regimes proved to be warranted and efficient, because it was the only way to safeguard the country against the risks caused by the crises in Minsk's traditional allies. But it's hard to find new partners, because the political and business culture of those countries differs fundamentally from what the Belarusian side has traditionally dealt with and is characterized by a very high degree of closedness and corruption.

Military and technical cooperation with Arab states is nothing extraordinary. Western companies actually lead the way; however, it's hard for Belarus to effectively compete, because the sector calls for considerable flexibility and enormous 'kickback,' which, as experience shows, is a common practice even for most respectable western corporations and governments (see, for example, the major scandal related to the Al Yamamah arms deal, Britain's weapons export agreement with Saudi Arabia executed in the 1980s and 1990s). It is the only way to achieve a serious wholesale arms deal, while, figuratively speaking, Belarus operates in the retail sector. We should also add political aspects here that are invariably connected with the arms business and are rather complicated for Belarus as a smaller country. Sales of defense goods and services always have political implications. One way out could be to partner up with Russia in this sector (which would look like American-Israeli cooperation), but this option is highly improbable.

The increase in Belarus's cooperation in the military and military-and-technical sectors with the Arab World was mostly due to its approximation with the conservative pro-western monarchies of the Persian Gulf, rather than its relationship with Syria. Indeed, there used to be contacts in the defense sector between Minsk and Damascus; there was even a special commission supervising military cooperation; however, the bulk of contacts analyzed in this study shows that Belarus shifted its efforts towards Qatar, the UAE, Oman and Bahrain, especially after 2008. There is no serious political background for Belarus to select its partners, and the government easily changes from partnership relations with Iraq to cooperation with Syria, an old adversary of the Iraqi regime, and Iran. When it had another chance, Minsk combined its relationships with Iran and Syria and ties with Qatar, although the two camps obviously have diametrically opposite political orientations. Moreover, Qatar has certain problems with Russia. At the same time, Belarusian government instantly responded to the international political swirl around Syria, essentially phasing down all serious contacts with that country during the last two years.