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## Analysis of Russia's Foreign Policy in the Middle East

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### Abstract

The Middle East and various issues concerning it receive so much attention by Moscow. After passing through a transition period and overcoming economic difficulties and achieving internal order and stability, Russia considers itself a "restored power" and strives to regain its status as a powerful and influential power in the international system. Being based on an explanatory-analytical approach and a theoretical framework and using the library method, this paper aims to analyze Russian foreign policy in the Middle East. The main research question is: What is Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East? Finally, the response to the main question of the study would be: Russia is seeking to enhance its relations with the Middle East countries to achieve the goals and interests of Moscow within the framework of its foreign policy in the Middle East. That's why it turned itself into a key contributor in the crisis of Syria. Russia's measures in the Middle East and its involvement in the crisis of Syria increased ties and cooperation with Iran.

**Key words:** Middle East, Russia, International system, Syria, Iran.

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## **Introduction**

Russia's presence in the Middle East region is a topic that goes back neither to the Soviet Union, nor to Russia; but, dates back to the time of the tsar, when the most important issue (in the East) for Russia was the access to the Black Sea Straits and the conquest of Constantinople. Russia pursued economic, political and security interests in the Middle East. But with the start of the Arab revolutions in this region, the policy of the country has differed. Russia has taken different positions in each of the revolutionized countries of Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and now Syria is taking different positions according to its own interests. But what appears to be common among all of them is the use of the Soft Balance of Power theory against the opposition, i.e. using political and diplomatic methods, the use of international organizations and peaceful means (Sohrabi, 2013). With the beginning of the second term of Vladimir Putin's presidency in Russia, the role of the country increased in various areas of the international politics; a tendency that should be considered a historical orientation in the culture of Russian foreign policy. In the meantime, there are two important economic and political factors leading to this political orientation (Kyani, 2007: 3). After the collapse of the Soviet Union and during the Putin period, Russia focused its policy primarily on the political and diplomatic support of its key allies, as well as on the sales of energy and trade. Given the sensitive conditions of the Middle East, Russia could increase its influence while reducing the influence of the West in the region (Putin, 2015a: 1). Russia's approach in the Middle East, especially regarding Syria, is likely to lead to more aggressive Syrian problems and increased Western presence, which could be detrimental to Russia. (Algebra, Imam Jumazadeh, 2017). In this paper, the researchers seek to analyze Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East, and it is assumed that Putin, in line with his foreign policy in the Middle East, will continue to strengthen his relations with non-Western countries in the region to maintain his power, and that Russia can be an obstacle to peace and stability in the Middle East, and spread conflict and non-cooperation with the West in this regard.

### 1. Theoretical Framework

In the nineteenth century, Russia sought to prove its geostrategic, economic and cultural resources in the Middle East, and so, competed with the West. In order to establish diplomatic and cultural ties, particularly in Syria, Moscow has been struggling with the West, mainly the United States of America, on the Middle East (for 50 years), and supporting regional contributors in line with the anti-Western agenda (for example, Imam Jumazadeh, 2017). After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia followed a different plan. Russia was weak politically, militarily, economically, and in terms of internal order. As a result, Yeltsin focused on coping with the internal economic and political instability, the disrupted and weak state, and the war against Chechen separatists. In contrast, Russia's foreign policy focused mainly on relations with the United States, Europe and the newly independent states of the Soviet Union (Borshchevshaya, 2016: 1). During the Yeltsin period (1991 – 1999), Russia reduced its presence in the Middle East, with the exception of relations with Iran and Turkey. Yeltsin had little interest in the Middle East, and in general, he had an American program and pragmatic approach toward the region, and was opposed to the ideological views of the Soviet Union. However, domestic problems hindered the Kremlin for a clear Middle East policy. Despite these perspectives, and while Yeltsin guided the political and economic open space in the short term, he was politically weak and physically unsound (Kramer & Shevtsova 2012: 3-8).

In 2000, Vladimir Putin, succeeded Yeltsin in Russia, which was deeply affected by developments in the past decade. The Russians, dissatisfied with the democratic perspective of the early 1990s, called for internal stability, and this was what Putin promised to restore together with restoring Russia's status as a world power. Shortly after Putin's empowerment, he created a new foreign policy in Russia. Putin described the situation of the 1990s as a blame for the West because of domestic problems (Shevtsova & Kramer, 2012: 8-10). In the Middle East, Putin sought to restore Russia as a major power and begin a new game against the West. In addition to gaining political influence in the Middle East, Putin sought to compete with the United States and influence the countries of the region through the trade of weapons and energy

(oil and gas), as well as the sale of high-tech products, such as the nuclear reactor. In the first period of Putin's presidency, Russia's basic priorities in the Middle East were to restore Russia's position, especially in the economic field, and the importance of maintaining relations with Iran (Freedman, 2001: 2).

Russia's presence in the Middle East required cooperation with the USA friends and enemies in the region. This includes supporting Iran's nuclear program, forgiving Syria's nearly \$ 13 billion debt which implied elimination of the control over the export of biological and chemical technologies, as well as bilateral ties with Turkey, Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia (9: Cohen, 2012). In this regard, Moscow related the policy of selling weapons to the interests of its foreign policy, such that, on December 11, 2013, Dmitry Rogozin - the Deputy of Prime Minister – announced that Russia's arms sales are the most important element to maintain Russia's relations with other countries (Rogozin, 2013: 12).

Another Russian interest in the Middle East is related to its Muslim population, because on the one hand, it is considered to be the most populous European country to have 21 - 23 million Muslims, and on the other hand, Russia's relationship with its neighboring Muslim countries is still tense, so that, it can influence them to some extent (Hackett, 2015: 4-8).

Due to the importance of the issue, Benjamin Popov, the former Russian ambassador concerning Middle Eastern institutions, declared at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in May 2011, that Russia, as a global power with a large Muslim population, be more active in the Middle East, because it directly linked to the strategic interests of Russia. The growing Muslim population of Russia had an undeniable impact on its Middle East policy and the need for attention to security issues (Mirovalev, 2015: 10-14).

## **2. Russia's Strategy in the Middle East**

Due to its rich energy resources and geopolitical position, the Middle East is considered a non-negligible area of interest for great powers, including Russia. The history of the Middle East policy in Russia is not limited to the length of the life of the current Soviet Union and Russia, but to the tsarist Russian relations with the countries of the region. However, the changes in the Middle

Eastern policies of Russia at each stage of its history were affected by its particular historical period. (Kyani, Khanmohammadi, 2013). The Middle East was of strategic importance to the former Soviet Union, for the following reasons:

- The Middle East's proximity to the Soviet Union was one of the reasons for the country to find its security in the region and try to create a favorable security environment.
- The Middle East region is one of the most important areas of rivalry between Moscow and Washington for more influence in the Middle East. In this rivalry, the Russians often supported some Arabs (such as Syria, Yemen, etc.).
- Factors such as the emergence of anti-colonial movements, the existence of left-wing and socialist dictatorships, and finally the Arab-Israeli confrontation that brought about the Soviet presence in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, attracted the Soviet Union more toward the region (Moghaddam, 2005: 17).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union during the Yeltsin period, attention to the Middle East decreased, but later, in the term of Putin, the trend changed somewhat. The Middle East and the disrupted related issues were one of the important issues for Moscow, especially during Putin's second term (Kyani, Khanmohammadi, 2013). The high diplomatic communications of officials between the Middle East and Moscow clearly reflected the dynamics of Russia's Middle East policy and how it differed from past decades. Russia's Middle Eastern and Arab diplomacy after a Putin's rise, especially after the US-led war in Iraq, called for a new relationship in order to secure Russia and its economic interests. Meanwhile, while Russia sought to rebuild its presence in the Middle East, all Arab societies also demanded its stronger political role (Moghaddam, 2005: 368).

In general, regarding Russia's attitude toward the Middle East, there are three general approaches, including security, politics, and economics, and each of the above-mentioned reasons is included in one of the approaches. As a result of the unique geopolitical position of Russia, along with its diverse ethnic, racial and religious diversity, the security perspective played a decisive role in Russia's foreign policy. The primacy of the security approach in analyzing Russia's Middle East policy does not mean the negation of the other two

approaches, but it means that security drivers have a greater contribution in directing Russian politics in the Middle East (Kyani, Khan Mohammadi, 2013).

Regarding the motives and objectives of Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East, there are different analyses that can be categorized in terms of both security and political approaches, and on the other hand, taking into account internal similarities and the foreign approach, regional and international goals, and scrutiny, the causes of the more active Middle East policy can be summarized in four options: 1) Confronting US unilateralism; 2) Achieving an international role as a global power; 3) Expanding economic ties with the countries of the region and development of more context for Russia in the Middle East; and 4) more influences on Russian Muslims. In fact, the reasons for the more active Middle- East policy of Russia can be analyzed in three categories: global, regional and domestic (Ebadi, 2009). The analysis of domestic issues in Russia and the common ground of these discussions with the Middle East issues is the issue of the Muslims of this country. Undoubtedly, Russia's national and regional approach toward the Islamic world is a political-security approach. It can be argued that, having the experience of many years of civil war with Muslims and observing the results of the US-led approach toward political Islam in the Middle East, Russia concluded that Russia's security depends on the peace and stability in the Muslim regions of the world, especially the Middle East, and any disturbance in the security of these areas endangers Russia's security. On the one hand, Russia needs to have a good connection with Islamic countries to resolve its internal problems with its Muslims; on the other hand, in order to prevent the expansion of Islamic fundamentalism to Russia and the surrounding environment, it is necessary to avoid tension with the Islamic world. But from another perspective, Russia's politico-economic problems in the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union- which continued despite its internalization- seemed to have led Russian leaders to assume that Russian management in the foreign area would also solve domestic problems. Thus, with Putin's presidency, the new and continental period of Russia began, and the first inevitable consequence of this situation was the focus of Russia on the achievable priorities of power and real influence

according to practical and objective criteria such as economics (Ebadi, 2009).

Putin's most important decision, being the key to resolving domestic, regional and international problems, was to spend on Russia's energy and military industry. Putin acknowledged that by investing in these two areas, he could, at a lesser cost, not only solve economic problems and, consequently, the domestic political ones, but also again restore its economic status and subsequently, its global political status. Hence, Russia's perspective on its surrounding regions, i.e. Central Asia and the Middle East has a political security dimension, as well as an economic dimension. In particular, a general review of the Russian approach toward the Middle East, with the exception of the OPEC gas issue which is essentially an economic one, indicates the increase of bilateral ties of the country, and the limitation of such relations in these areas indicates the importance of the economic aspect of these relations (Ebadi, 2009).

Russia pursued many interests in the Middle East, including economic interests. Knowing Russia's economic weakness, Putin tried to economize Russia's foreign policy and pursue serious economic diplomacy (Kolaei and Nuri, 2010). This can be observed well during Putin's first and second visit to the Middle East in 2005 and 2007. Accompanying the managers of MIJ and Rosobron Sport companies with Putin during his visits to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar and Jordan indicates that Russia is paying particular attention to expanding economic ties with Middle Eastern countries to earn more foreign revenues. In fact, not only is Russia willing to develop the Middle East arms sales market, it also seeks to have a role in the energy sector of these countries (Kyani, 2007). According to statistics, by 2003, the Middle East was the third largest Russia's market for arms sales.

From a security standpoint, the Middle East region has a particular significance in foreign policy of Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, new countries formed on the southern borders of Russia, in which about twenty million Muslims live. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, what happened in some parts of the Russian Muslim region, including Russian wars with Chechnya, led to the spread of pessimism among Muslims, and Russia was considered an enemy of Islam. Such crises and disasters

caused the country's concern, so that it tried to prevent the spread of religious fundamentalism from the region to its land, through close proximity to Muslim and Arab countries in the Middle East. In fact, Russia is afraid of spreading religious extremism to its dominated areas, which is why it is seeking stability in the region and is trying to have a balanced relationship with the countries of the region. (Adami, Akharoddin, 2013). Russia seeks peace and tranquility in the Middle East, and therefore supports the road map in the Middle East, because it can strengthen its position in the region (Mousavi, 2006: 16). In fact, Russia is opposed to US interventionist policies in the region, because they would lead to instability in the region.

The Middle East is also politically important for Russia. From this perspective, Russia's relations with the United States must be considered. In fact, Russia's presence in the Middle East depends on the presence of the United States in the periphery and surrounding of Russia. (Adami, Akharoddin, 2013). Indeed, proximity of the United States to some of Russia's southern neighboring countries, including Georgia, strengthens Russia's relations with some countries in the Middle East region, including Syria and Iran, and even a new Palestinian state led by Hamas, in order to make the United States more negotiated; and thus limit its influence in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East (Kyani, 2007). According to what was mentioned so far, it can be implied that Russia has many interests in the Middle East region, especially after Putin's empowerment and improvement of the economic situation, and when the pursuit of these interests became more attractive to Russia.

### **3. Russian policy in the Middle East before and after the Arab revolutions**

The history of Middle Eastern policy of Russia goes to Tsarist Russia relations with the countries of the region. At that time, with the advancement in northern Iran, Russia confronted with the political-military influence of Britain in Iran. During this period, the most important issue for the East (for Russia) was control of the Black Sea Straits and the addition of Constantinople. Communist Russia considered the Muslim workers of the East to be allies who confronted the revolutionary colonial struggle of Western



secession, and had a more active political, military and economic role in the Middle East, after World War II when the Soviet Union became a superpower. It turned into a drama in the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States (Trenin, 2013: a). Due to the geographic neighborhood between the Middle East region and the borders of Russia, the country's security was dependent on the security of the Middle East.

Another concern of Russia in the Middle East region is the resurgence of the Taliban, which threatens Afghanistan's return to its role in the late 1990s as a major cause of instability in the region. This will further exacerbate Russia, as it can increase insecurity in the Central Asia countries supported by Moscow, and internal insurrections in these areas may emerge soon (Trenin, 2010: 4). Therefore, Russia seeks to establish a solid relationship with the Islamic communities and strives to improve its international image in these societies. It is important to note that during the bipolar system, the Soviet Union managed to establish a firm relationship with the Middle Eastern societies with anti-Western tendencies, to introduce itself as an advocate of Islam. This is while Russia didn't succeed in preserving this position (Avineri, 2000).

Anyway, the adoption of a policy of returning to the region by Russian leaders is a tribute to Russia's ability to establish good relations with Muslim countries in the region. Russia's membership at the Organization of the Islamic Conference, in 2005, as an observer indicates the dynamism of this policy. Furthermore, Russia tries to, on the one hand, reduce religious fundamentalism and the influence of political Islam by establishing good relations with countries such as Iran and Syria- which have a Shi'a majority- and guarantee its policies in relation to the North Caucasus and the population living there; and, on the other hand, limit the US supremacy in the region by establishing good relations with conservative and Sunni governments in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan. Since Russia's approach to stabilizing the Middle East is different from the United States's view on the issue of democratic reform, Russia has separated its route from the United States.

Another aspect of Russia's presence in the Middle East is its economic considerations. From this perspective, although pragmatism and attention to economic considerations are the most

important features of Russian foreign policy toward the Middle East, the Middle East is not the main focus of Russia economically. Accordingly, Russia, unlike the Soviet Union, has neither the ability to exert influence in the Middle East, nor the necessity to do so.

The long distances from the Russian border have made the country thesecond priority for its economic goals in the Middle East. In this sense, Russia has only tried to maintain its traditional role in the Middle East as one of the main suppliers of arms for the countries of the region, and at the same time to open new markets for Russian companies. In fact, the export of weapons to regional states shows that Russia has a special focus on expanding relations with the Middle Eastern countries to earn more foreign revenues (Kyani, 2009: 371).

In the beginning of the Arab revolutions, with the advent of the developments in Tunisia, Egypt, as well as its spread to Bahrain and Yemen, Russia acted as a passive observer; since, on the one hand, it knew the popular uprisings in these countries as the result of socioeconomic factors and disconnection of the rulers with people, on the other hand, it had no political and economic ties with the leaders of these countries. Since Moscow in Tunisia and Egypt was not influenced by Western-oriented liberals, it succeeded in transmitting the anger of the urban class to exiled governments. Meanwhile, the most important tool for influencing these countries was the use of the United Nations Security Council, although this council played a very minor role in these movements. By adopting a realistic approach to the new Tunisian and Egyptian governments to improve its relations with these countries, Moscow took measures, one of which was to reduce the official barriers against the "Muslim Association", which, due to its presence in the Chechen crisis in the past decade, was considered a terrorist. In spite of the occurrence of revolution and transformation in Egypt, it paved the way for Russian tourists and the reunification of energy companies (Trenin, 2013 a).

However, Russia's role in Libya was different and, indeed, it was confused by changing its role in this country. Russia had a lot of economic links in this country. As a result of the presence of Russian companies and the conclusion of profitable contracts

(before the beginning of the war, the value of these contracts reached \$ 10 billion), the country became one of the most beneficial markets in Russia. Through business in the oil sector and construction of railroads as well as arms sales to Libya, Moscow has occupied its markets. With the onset of the civil war in Libya, Moscow tried to portray itself as a responsible observer in international politics, and accordingly, approved the February 26th arms embargo- the Security Council's resolution against Libya in 1970. It happened while Russia had concluded large-scale arms contracts with Libya, and its realization would be a great danger for Russia and its weapons industry. Then, Russia's role in Libya changed suddenly; that is, when the United Nations Security Council adopted a unanimous vote on March 17, 2011. The 1973 National Security Council's decision on the announcement of a no-fly zone over Libya was to secure citizens. But Russia's vote, (neither a positive vote nor a veto), led to military operations by the Western governments since late March 2011 with the presence of NATO leaders in the country. However, Russia's policy in Libya changed completely with this defeat, because the new government forgot its international treaties, in which Russia was also a partner, and created serious gaps between the two countries (Sohrabi, 2013).

In general, Russia's approach to these transformations falls within the framework of Moscow's critique of the West's dualism on these transformations. Russia believes that the West intervenes on the pretext of humanitarian activities in countries. They didn't react to violations of human rights and values in Yemen and Bahrain, but they paid a special attention to Syria. Therefore, Russian authorities concluded that the West is trying to impose its values on the Middle East and, consequently, to manage the transformations in the region, which, if realized, would reduce Russia's presence in the Middle East. Accordingly, Russia seeks to pursue its interests only through political and diplomatic means, and has benefited from international organizations, bargaining tool and peaceful solutions.

#### **4. Russia and the International System**

According to Andrea Tsiganko, there are four schools of thought in Russian foreign policy:

1. The convergent who believes Russia is a Western country and must converge with the West. This group was destroyed in the second half of the 1990s.
2. Extremist nationalists who are anti-Western and who do not have much position in Russia's foreign policy system.
3. Balancing who believe that Russia is a different country, both culturally and geopolitically, but must be balanced in relation to the West and the East.
4. Normalists of the great powers who believe that Russia is one of the great powers and must have normal relations with other powers (Sari Al-Kalam, 2017).

The supporters of the two recent groups include the majority of the members of the Putin's foreign policy team (Lauruelle, 2015: 89). Meanwhile, the supporters of these two schools are interested in cooperating with the West, and in particular the United States, they have a security breach, especially on the European frontiers of Russia-as the largest nuclear-weapon state with natural resources and a significant weapons industry. The policy that Moscow has been interested in since the Cold War and expected small European neighbors to comply with is "Finnishization."

Under this policy, the country is not dependent on the West, the European Union and the United States in terms of security and politics, but maintains its normal economic routines. The West, and especially the United States, do not accept this policy and, as far as they can, seek to establish political, economic, and security treaties and even seek to encourage the countries of Eastern Europe to join the European Union. This approach reflects the fact that while cooperating with Europe and the United States, the Russians are not seeking political unity and want to maintain their political and security choices (Lauruelle, 2015: 9).

The culmination of a philosophical and political struggle between the world powers happened when the Obama administration called Russia a regional power. Americans, who measure the status of countries by the quality of tools and instruments, naturally find themselves in a much higher level than

Russia in terms of economics, science, technology, and even the quality of non-nuclear military power. In the last years of the Obama administration, US-Russian relations were the toughest, and the two sides confronted each other in Eastern Europe and then in Syria (Allison and Simes, 2017: 25). The American-Russian geopolitical game is far broader than Syria. The Russians have both logistical and financial constraints for expansion of their military activities in the Middle East. Moscow is mainly seeking leverage through which it can be accepted as a major global power, and prevent the military-political advance of the USA and the European Union to its western security. The entry of Moscow into the Middle East complicates the game matrix and forces the USA to play in a wider circle of Moscow. In 2017, the United States and Russia launched a new geopolitical test that had serious security and political consequences for Europe and the Middle East. Moscow planned to add 10% of its weapons production in 2017 and naturally sought new sales markets. (Allison and Simes, 2017: 33).

Russia considers military power and nuclear deterrence to be the most important points for political dominance in the world, and increased its political and military activity in areas where the United States did. Hence, Russia is the most important issue and a geopolitical challenge for the US foreign policy in shaping a Western-style global order. Regarding the ruling behavior of Russia, it can be said quite certainly that through an assessment of the EU and conflicts inside the USA, the Putin's team found ample opportunities for marketing of Russian nationalism, modernizing the military and regional presence in Europe and the Middle East. Furthermore, political stability in Russia and the continued dominance of the existing thought may be another sign of its policy stability. The economic downturn and the educated class and the bureaucrats' concerns of Russia staying away from technology and commodity production are among other factors modulating Moscow's policies. (Sari al- Qalam, 2017). A lack of American management to create a global order agreed by global powers, provides China and Russia with plenty of opportunities. Russia's sovereignty seems to prefer world power to the superiority of technology and economic capability, and this will automatically mobilize Moscow's capacities for showing its power and for American- Europe opposition. Russia will be impressed by the

USA international action, and the priorities and objectives of the USA government can have a significant impact on Russia's new orientations, both in Europe and in the Middle East.

### **6. Russia's approach to the crisis in Syria**

The current relationship between Syria and Russia is affected by three military, security and economic factors. From the military perspective, the Tartus<sup>1</sup> base can be described as a military co-operation between the two countries. In the years of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia lost all of its military equipment, except one that was outside the Soviet Union. It was the only remaining marine logistics base of Tartus in Syria. Given the strategic importance of this military base being located in the Mediterranean Sea, Russia preserved it. Under the terms of an agreement between the former Soviet Union and Syria, fighters, submarines and merchant ships were allowed to operate equipment of the country (Kyani, Khanmohammadi, 2013).

In fact, the base is not military by nature. There are only 50 flag-officers and two floating docks, a series of repair equipment and an arsenal, the main purpose of which is to repair Russian naval ships that cross the Mediterranean. Due to its defensive position, Tartus has a special significance for Russia, with which political goals are realized and a strategic partner in the Arab world would be preserved (Harmer, 2012). The economic factor entails the sale of arms and energy. Over several decades of the former Soviet and Russia relations with Syria, the country became a strategic market for Russian arms sales; so that, it realized one of Russia's main goals in the Middle East, i.e. finding strategic markets for arms sales. Russia concluded massive arms contracts with its customers (such as Iran, Syria, Algeria and Libya). Although the focus of Russian economic interests with Syria is based on the profitable weapons sales, these interests include other commercial ties such as the presence of Russian companies in Syria and energy cooperation. Energy, due to its economic and strategic importance, is one of the main areas of Russia's activity in the Middle East. Moscow is looking for cooperation with the countries of the region

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and putting more pressure on the European Union in this regard. The Middle East region is the third largest supplier of natural gas and the second largest oil producer, however, in recent years the economic importance of the region has been limited to be accessed by Russian energy companies to extract the resources (Kaczmariski, 2011).

Finally, the security dimension in the relationship between the two countries is addressed. Accordingly, Russia's security is affected by security transformations in the Middle East; implying that any disturbances in the peace and stability of the region may have an impact on Russian security, and regardless of the economic losses, bring this country into conflict. Therefore, Russia is adopting a steady policy in support of the Middle Eastern regimes that are facing a general upheaval, as it has suffered in recent years in supporting Assad's government against domestic opposition and international pressures (Kyani, Khanmohammadi, 2013). The distance of less than 1,000 miles from Damascus to Makhachkala in Dagestan has made Syria geographically sensitive to security in Russia. In addition, Russia tries to create a good relationship with the Muslim countries of the region (Iran, Syria, etc.) by adopting a "return" policy to the region. Doing so, Russian authorities managed to guarantee its policy towards the North Caucasus and its Muslims, and to prevent the spread of extremist Islam in the country. Despite the economic, military and security ties between Russia and Syria, many analysts believe that Syria's position in the new Middle East diplomacy in Moscow will require more time to rebuild, so that it can keep pace with the progress of the region and the world (Kyani, 2008: 376).

With the presidency of Putin in Russia, the discourse of great normal power in Russian foreign policy was mentioned. Accordingly, Russia's foreign policy was based on three principles of economic modernization, achievement of a good status in the processes of global rivalry and the restoration of Russia's status as a major global power. Russian military doctrines gradually expanded the literature of threat to Russia and ways of confronting it, and this was aggravated by the re-election of Putin in 2012. Since the beginning of crisis in Syria, Russia has attempted to support the Syrian regime. Indeed, for Russia that analyzes the international issues realistically, collapse of the Syrian regime implies the loss of

the last round of its main allies in the Middle East. It appears that Russia is in Syria to maintain the strategic interests of the ruling system, but at the macro level it is somewhat supportive of its own strategic goals (Rogers and Reeva, 2015: 1). In general, there are many reasons for Russia's intervention in the crisis of Syria, including:

First: Russia's opposition to the unipolar system. Moscow is committed to enhancing multilateralism in the international strategic literature, since in such a context Russia will have the opportunity to play a more active role. From the viewpoint of structural realism, the rise of more aggressive foreign policy in Russia is the result of the structural pressures by the international system (Bagheri Dolatabadi, 2014). At the international level, Russia's presence in Syria helps stabilize its status as a global power.

Secondly: to increase the influence of Russia in the Middle East. One of Russia's foreign policy approaches in the new era is to abandon the humiliation of the 1990s and restore Russia to a high position in the international affairs. Russia strives to expand, or at least, maintain its influence in the Middle East. This influence is mainly realized in Russia's relationship with Syria and Iran, and the loss of each of them can lead to elimination of the last effect remaining in this geopolitical region (Bagdonas, 2012: 67).

Third: Russia's measure to implement the National Security Doctrine. Protecting the surrounding environment from external threats is one of the principles of the Russian Security Doctrine document until 2012. Russia is trying to preserve Syria as an outsourcing actor that plays its regional role in line with the interests of Moscow. Collapse of the Syrian regime means NATO's entry into the privacy of Russia and the weakening of Russia's international status, credibility and position, and ultimately, failure to realize the foundations of Russia's national security doctrine.

Fourth: Russia's concern about the expansion of Salafī Islam into its area of influence. The proximity of the Middle East and the southern borders of Russia made the Middle East a vulnerable point for Russia's interests. Moscow is concerned about the operation of an extremist Islamic state in Syria, and for various reasons,



considers it a threat to the stability of its Muslim regions (Rostami, 2015: 109).

Fifth: maintaining the Russian naval base in Tartus located near the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and near the border of Syria with Lebanon. Based on structural realism, Russia considers the Tartus military base an important part of its material potentials. In Russia's Marine Doctrine 2020 a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean is proposed. The Tartus base is where the Russian weapons are received and is capable of connecting nuclear submarines (Allcock, 2016: 4). This base is of high strategic importance to Russia for achieving its political goals (Sadeghi and Lotfi, 2016: 112).

Sixth: Russia's economic interests in Syria. Russia's exchange with the countries of the region is 50 to 60 billion dollars, of which about \$ 1 billion is in arms exchanges, and \$ 1.5 billion is in trade exchanges. With the collapse of the Syrian regime, the Russians lose their economic interest in the region, since Russia is the main partner and the first arms dealer to Syria (Darayande & Ahmadi, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

Analyzing the role of the Middle East, Russia should pay attention to the priorities of the Eurasian discourse governing its foreign policy and the supposedly Kremlin's multilateralism. The Eurasians in Russia, with Vladimir Putin, being a prominent example, prioritize improving Moscow's international position, and in order to restore the Kremlin's position as the world's first power, they are trying to realize the supremacy of Russia in the Middle East and the "Near East", and neutralize or displace to other areas the West's challenges to Russia's roles in the region. Given the tensions between Kremlin and the West over Ukraine and the pessimism of Russia's relations with Europe and the United States, Moscow's incentive to keep the West away from its borders and prevent the passage of revolutionary trends and the transformation of the Middle East into its surroundings is more than ever. From this perspective, it may have achieved more tangible interests in counteracting the extremist or monotonous groups of the Middle East, many of whom are the enemies of Moscow in the North Caucasus and regions such as Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingush and

Tatarstan. Furthermore, Moscow's arguing framework for a more prominent presence in the Middle East crisis is based on the need to recognize collective and multilateral actions with a terrorist threat and the necessity of avoiding unilateralism in the Middle East, according to the USA experience of past years. Of course, Russia's pragmatism in foreign policy is preventing its full-fledged confrontation with Western powers in the Middle East (Rostami, 2015). The government of Russia led by Putin, especially in the second period, tried to isolate its policy from the United States by establishing balanced and sustainable relations with all states and the Middle East countries. In the viewpoint of the Kremlin authorities, the only way to secure the southern borders of Russia, as well as the Central Asia and the Caucasus region, from the Middle East developments in terms of terrorism, religious fundamentalism, weapons of mass destruction, and the use of various mechanisms and instruments is proximity to the countries of the region (Kyani, 2008). Looking at Vladimir Putin's foreign policy, as far as the Middle East is concerned, one can find out that Russia seeks its interests in the Middle East, including obtaining the political and economic resources of the region, reducing the influence of the West in the region, and achieving a status as an international power. From the view point of Russia, these goals can be realized by active participation in the region, relations with friends and enemies, playing an effective role in the Middle East wars, and trying to establish peace (as in the presence of the Syrian civil war). One of the reasons for Russia's active role in Syria is to marginalize the international views on Russia's measures in Ukraine.

Finally, in response to the main question of the research, it can be said that Russia is seeking to strengthen its relations with the Middle East countries and achieve the goals and interests of Moscow within the framework of its foreign policy. That's why it turned into a key contributor of the Syrian crisis. Russia's measures in the Middle East and the involvement in Syria's crisis increased ties and cooperation with Iran.

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