PATTERNS OF CONTEMPORARY RUSSO-SYRIAN RELATIONS:

A REALIST INTERPRETATION

FROM THE MOSCOW PERSPECTIVE

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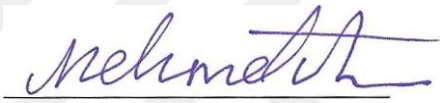
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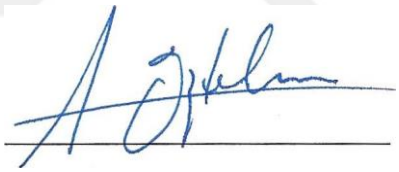
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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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……....

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ABSTRACT

Patterns of Contemporary Russo-Syrian Relations:

A Realist Interpretation from the Moscow Perspectıve

The primary aim of this thesis is to shed light on the past, present, and near future of Russian-Syrian relations from a broadly realist perspective, the particular variants of which had been labeled as “old-fashioned” and therefore swept aside without a second thought until recently for their perceived inability to offer a reliable account of contemporary international relations. While trying to reveal the persistent trends, practical necessities, mutual interests, and shared threats underlying the historical evolution of this key bilateral relationship from 1945 till date; the following chapters further explore major fluctuations in the larger international context and the complex interplay between the geopolitical variables of each successive phase under scrutiny. Within this framework, particular attention is paid to the lasting – and apparently, still highly determinative – influence of certain considerations in shaping Russian strategies towards the Greater Middle East. The main reason for this is to bring a convincing answer to widespread questions as to the dynamics behind the transformation of the ongoing Syrian crisis into a geopolitical black hole with utterly destructive repercussions for all parties involved, particularly Syria itself and those countries that lie in its immediate neighborhood. Such an academic inquiry is deemed essential at this stage in time, for the Syrian imbroglio is yet to be resolved. Whereas one needs to diagnose the disease accurately, in as rational a manner as possible, before searching for practical ways to cure it.

ÖZET

Rusya-Suriye İlişkilerinin Döngüsel Evrimi:
Moskova Perspektifinden Gerçekçi Bir Yorum

Bu tezin esas amacı, Rusya-Suriye ilişkilerinin geçmişten günümüze evrimine ve yakın geleceğine realizmin (gerçekçilik) sunduğu kuramsal pencereden ışık tutmaktır. Bu çerçevede, bilhassa uluslararası ilişkiler camiası nazarında modası geçtiği kabul edilerek ekseriyetle bir kenara itilen gerçekçi yaklaşımın ilke ve öğretilerinden ana hatlarıyla faydalanılmaktadır. Bir yandan İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nın bitiminden günümüze değin Rusya-Suriye ilişkilerinin gelişimine yön veren hâkim eğilimler, pratik gereklilikler, müşterek çıkarlar ve paylaşılan tehdit algıları saptanırken; diğer yandan da ikili ilişkilerin tezahür ettiği bölgesel ve küresel konjonktürdeki dönemsel dalgalanmalara, incelenen her bir dönemin jeopolitik değişkenleri arasındaki karmaşık etkileşim de hesaba katılarak tatmin edici ve tutarlı bir açıklama getirilmeye çalışılmaktadır. Bunu yaparken Moskova'nın Genişletilmiş Orta Doğu coğrafyasına yönelik uzun dönemli stratejilerini tayin eden birtakım etmen ve kanaatlere özel önem atfedilmektedir. Zira Suriye içerisinde ve çevresinde cereyan eden amansız vekalet savaşının zaman içerisinde jeopolitik bir girdaba dönüşerek başta Esad rejiminin kendisi olmak üzere ortaya çıkan keşmekeşte dahli olan tüm aktörler açısından yarattığı had safhada yıkıcı akıbet; gelinen aşama itibarıyla süratli ve kalıcı bir çözüme duyulan ihtiyacı hiç olmadığı kadar şiddetli hale getirmiştir. Ne var ki pratikte uygulanabilir bir çarede karar kılınabilmesi için, öncelikle karşı karşıya bulunulan soruna soğukkanlı ve akılcı bir teşhis konulması icap etmektedir.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABM Treaty	Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty
CAST	Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
CFR	Council on Foreign Relations
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
DEFCON	Defense readiness condition
EEZ	Exclusive economic zone
EU	European Union
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross domestic product
GFC	Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2008
GNP	Gross national product
HNC	High Negotiating Committee
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency

IMEMO	Natsional'nyy issledovatel'skiy institut mirovoy ekonomiki i mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniy imeni Yu. M. Primakova (Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISSG	International Syria Support Group
ISW	Institute for the Study of War
JN	Jabhat al-Nusra
KGB	Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti (Committee for State Security)
MGIMO	Moskovskiy gosudarstvennyy institut mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniy (Moscow State Institute of International Relations)
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NPT	Non-Proliferation Treaty
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
OPCW	Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
P5+1	Five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany

PIR Center	Tsentr politicheskikh issledovaniy Rossii (The Russian Center for Policy Studies)
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
PYD	Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party)
RAS	Russian Academy of Sciences
RIAC	Russian International Affairs Council
RISS	Russian Institute of Strategic Studies
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic
SAIS	School of Advanced International Studies
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SNC	Syrian National Council
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies
STRATFOR	Strategic Forecasting, Inc.
SVOP	Sovet po vneshney i oboronnoy politike (The Russian Council of Foreign and Defense Policy)
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAR	United Arab Republic

UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USAK	Uluslararası Stratejik Araştırmalar Kurumu (International Strategic Research Organization)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WMD	Weapons of mass destruction
WWII	Second World War

NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION AND TERMINOLOGY

The Latinized form of every proper name, phrase, and term in Russian language has been retained exactly as it is found in the respective English-language resource. When transliterating Russian proper names, titles, and terminology exclusively represented in Cyrillic script – i.e. in the case of those found in the few Russian-language resources that are cited throughout this thesis – one of the most widely-recommended online tools for conversion (Google Translate) and another one for spelling-check (Translit.cc) have been utilized.

Although there exist a number of more advanced schemes applicable for transliteration between the corresponding characters of Latin and Cyrillic alphabets, the chosen method of transliteration reflects a preference on the author's part in favor of relative speed (thanks to real-time conversion), overall accuracy, ease of use, and charge-free availability over precision. Besides, even qualified linguists and professional translators, some of whom the author has had the privilege of consulting with in the past, tend to consider these online tools rather convenient for academic work in fields other than their own, such as political science and international relations. This is essentially because Russian language, although not genuinely phonetic, is morphophonemic, which means the Russian writing system can be easily and rather accurately transferred to alternative alphabetical contexts without much need for transcription.

No Arabic names or terms have been transliterated. Instead, these have been used in the exact Latinized form they are found in the original English-language resource. Wherever two or more Anglicized variants have been detected to correspond to the same Arabic proper name, the more common one was preferred for

purposes of consistency and style. Proper names of individuals were left without any translation; whereas translations provided for the most common Arabic names for various terrorist organizations belong to the author.

Throughout the text, the term ‘Greater Middle East’ has been used to refer the entire geographic area straddling from Pakistan in the east all the way to Morocco in the west, and from Turkey’s Black Sea coast and Transcaucasia in the north to the southern edge of the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa in the south. In this respect, it roughly overlaps with the continental heartland of what may otherwise be termed as the ‘Islamic world’. What is meant by ‘the Levant’ or ‘Grater Syria’, which are historical terms used interchangeably and somewhat anachronistically, is the combined territories of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan.

In a similar fashion, the Western bloc of the Cold War era, as opposed to the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact, is broadly termed as ‘the West’, ‘Western countries’, or ‘the Western world’. The same terminology is used to denote the core cluster of European and North American countries that were involved in the Iraqi, Afghan, Kosovar, Libyan, and Syrian conflicts; for the geopolitical coalition in question has remained intact – indeed even grown larger – in the aftermath of the Cold War. Nevertheless, such liberal use of the term is deemed convenient by the author essentially because the geographic, historical, and civilizational realm that has been commonly referred – by its own elite as well as those of its rivals and neighbors alike – as ‘the West’ since antiquity is today organized under a plethora of interpenetrating multilateral organizations, NATO and the EU being the first and foremost among such formal intergovernmental structures.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century . . . Many thought or seemed to think at the time that our young democracy was not a continuation of Russian statehood, but its ultimate collapse, the prolonged agony of the Soviet system. But they were mistaken. (Putin, 2005, para. 6)

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War; intellectuals, top bureaucrats, and politicians alike found themselves confronted with a pressing obligation to reconfigure or even completely overhaul their long-held assumptions pertaining to the international system and its functioning principles. For they had to give meaning to the newly emerging global context while simultaneously embarking on a tedious quest to reformulate the foreign policies of their respective nations in accordance with their ideological predispositions. After all, the binary-scheme of world order as they knew – i.e. a presumably ideologically-driven one that was identified by persistent antagonism between two gigantic spheres of influence led by the two omnipotent superpowers – suddenly became a thing of the past. The unprecedented rise in the popularity of highly romantic ideals as those promoted by liberal internationalism, which envisages sustained peace, the uninterrupted spread of democracy, and limitless prosperity on a global scale – along with the appeal of other universalist ideologies like Islamism – largely coincided with this critical juncture in modern history.

As the influence of internationalist and idealistic perspectives among the academia as well as policy-makers had peaked; the so-called “unipolar moment” in history gave birth to messianic and extremely interventionist tendencies on the part

of the United States and its allies, particularly following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Convinced in the necessity and feasibility of shaping the new world order after its own image (Krauthammer, 2002, pp. 5-17); Washington fervently pushed for further NATO expansion to incorporate former Soviet republics, embarking on one military adventure after another, and encouraging regime changes throughout Eurasia. Eventually, though, such blind enthusiasm fueled by the euphoria of its unexpected victory against Moscow as well as the shock of Islamic extremism hitting Americans at their once-safe homes came to an abrupt end in the second decade of the twenty-first century with the complete failure of US policies first in Afghanistan, then in the rest of Central Asia, Georgia, Iraq, Libya, and Egypt.

But further strategic fiascos were in the pipeline, as have been manifested by the outbreak of a civil war in Ukraine and the catastrophic situation in Syria. The latter is of particular importance for having dealt the final blow to an era marked by uncertainty, confusion, and the courage of ignorance on the part of the US and its regional allies. As the curtain of illusion which had eclipsed deeply-rooted geopolitical realities for over two decades in the aftermath of the sudden demise of the Soviet Union is being lifted, pieces of the puzzle are finally falling into place. Russia has entered the scene again as a determinative force to be reckoned with after years of crippling weakness and domestic turmoil that had been paralyzing it. Whether we like it or not, inherent power relations that are essentially rooted in geography, history, and the structure of the international system are once again rearing their ugly head, with all their harshness and horror. And the immense suffering of Syrian people due to a pseudo-revolution that has rapidly mutated into a proxy war between multiple foreign states lies at the very core of this

groundbreaking shift in global power balances as well as the disappointing epiphany on the part of the larger Western world.

At a time when failed states, civil conflicts, political turmoil, social unrest, unconventional warfare, and terrorism is spreading like an epidemic throughout the Greater Middle East; theoretical tools of the past and conventional realist conceptions that largely miss novel phenomena as such may well lack the ability to explain every particular event that occurs in the field in a crystal-clear manner. Still; the fundamental precepts and assumptions of mainstream realist thought continue to maintain their primacy and shine out for their usefulness in explaining international affairs within a larger spatial and temporal context as long as states remain the primary actors with no alternative (or higher) authority there to constrain their primordial thirst for power; even amid an extreme degree of disinformation like the one that currently haunts the academic community as well as the top echelons of political power.

As unnerving and inhumane as it may seem at first glance, it is still only a vaguely realistic and geopolitically-sensitive approach that can generate a genuinely reliable roadmap out of the intellectual, political, and humanitarian quagmire that is embodied by the ongoing tragedy in Syria. And the special case of the relationship between Damascus and its staunch ally Moscow should be regarded as the key to understanding the underlying dynamics of power vacuums, sensitive strategic balances, and the narrow list of options that are available to all the actors concerned under emerging circumstances; if chaos and war on a global scale is to be avoided. Balance of power politics may not be the perfect tool to maintain order and peace, but it still remains the only one that has stood the test of history. Unless all relevant actors in the field face and come to terms with the reality of Russian ascendancy in

the region soon; the multi-faceted conflict will continue to grow at an even more alarming pace. It should be obvious by now that the real danger on the part of policy-makers emanates not from the acknowledgement of the forbidding challenge awaiting them and the need for immediate policy recalibration – no matter how expansive or heartbreaking such may sound – but rather from an insistence on their fatal mistakes in a short-sighted, even delusional manner.

Another question that will be addressed in the following pages is whether Russia, with its firm support of and weighty military deployment in Syria, is there to stay or its involvement merely indicates a temporary and tactical maneuver. The same analytical tools – i.e. realist conceptions and classical geopolitical theories – will be employed in order to offer an in-depth understanding of the continuities and disruptions in the modern history of this bilateral relationship. Thus, the complex interaction between diverse forces that continue to compel the two nations to maintain their intimate ties will be identified and located in their appropriate place within the larger scheme of events. A key assumption concerning the historical pace of this bilateral relationship will be the existence of a strong tendency towards path dependency in the foreign policies of Moscow and Damascus despite various changes in their leadership and even alterations in their political regimes; which, in turn, confirms the accuracy of the realist perspective in terms of accounting for the historical evolution of Russo-Syrian relations.

In an effort to give substance and structure to the body of political, economic, and military relations between Moscow and Damascus; the following chapters are designed to reflect either an exploratory or an explanatory character each, depending on their respective purpose; even as the entire study is designed to make a qualitative assessment of the subject matter. An historical account of the ups and downs in the

bilateral relations between Moscow and Damascus after World War II is offered first; while the subsequent era that has begun with the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) is covered in the next chapter. At the turn of the twenty-first century; both Russia and Syria have undergone processes of domestic transformation with the inauguration of Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad as the top leaders of these two nations respectively. Therefore, the transitory period between 2000 and the breakout of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 is examined under a distinct chapter.

Whereas the final chapter before the conclusion mainly concentrates on the strategic imperatives and geopolitical instincts that have altogether induced Russia to act the way it did throughout the consecutive stages of the Syrian conflict. Prevailing attitudes among Russian foreign policy circles and Moscow's strategic thinking are at the core of the discussion here; because it was the Russian administration which has ultimately emerged as the Assad regime's foremost ally and the game-changing actor on the scene. Another reason for having Russian perspectives at the center of the questions and assumptions pointed out throughout these two chapters is the presumed validity of the realist tendencies underlying Kremlin's worldview that are reinforced by the firm continuity of rigid geopolitical thinking in Russian intellectual tradition.

Because Syria was a French mandate and relatively passive actor in the international arena due to a highly consuming preoccupation with the exhaustive tasks of establishing new state institutions and maintaining social harmony within its own newly-drawn borders until gaining formal independence in 1945; the history of relations between Russians and Syrians preceding WWII have not been included within the scope of this study. Although Russian missionary activity and influence

among the Orthodox community of Greater Syria under Ottoman rule had been substantial since the latter half of the 18th century (Eileen, 2006, p. 179); concrete ties between Russia and Syria were largely cut with the October Revolution of 1917 – only to be reestablished even more strongly after 1945 as Western colonial powers began to withdraw from the region. The pre-WWII traces of this key bilateral relationship are omitted also due to practical reasons as it would have been far less feasible to cover that vast an historical span in a sufficient manner via the limited methods and within the relatively narrow focus of this study. As to the special emphasis laid on the evolution of bilateral relations post-2000; it can be justified by the escalation in Western/NATO encroachment into the former Soviet sphere of influence including Syria after 9/11 amid the resurgence of Russia as a great power under President Putin, which also coincided with the consolidation of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria following the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, in 2000. As a result, the advent of the twenty-first century brought about a reactivation of the major geopolitical fault lines that had remained dormant since the collapse of the USSR.

Not only are heatedly-debated questions like how the Syrian crisis will evolve hereafter, what does it entail for the future of the Middle East and Europe, and whether Russia's political clout over its extended geographic periphery will endure if not grow further are at the top of the global agenda today, but the answers to these questions will also determine the fate of our nation. As regional balances of power are deeply upset; a new structure – or the opposite of anything resembling it – is surely taking shape as we, the ordinary citizens of Turkey, can do nothing but watch closely with great concern the events occurring right at our doorstep while experiencing the dire consequences of the multi-faceted and prolonged plight of our

neighbor at first hand. As a student of international politics with an academic interest in Russia and a native of Adana – a major Turkish town in close proximity to Syria – I believe such questions have gained further real-life significance, particularly with the influx of nearly 3 million Syrian refugees into Turkey, and the steep rise of Syria-bound terrorism all over our country particularly in the latter half of 2016. Against such backdrop, a historically-sensitive examination of relevant developments and debates through a systematic study at this point can hopefully offer a timely academic endeavor that bears the potential of adding fresh insights to the existing literature. Above all, I tend to regard the task of putting together this research to the best of my ability as an ethical obligation, which is motivated by a heart-felt desire to make even the slightest contribution to the ending of this nightmare that looms large over the entire human race, us nations of the Middle East first and foremost.

CHAPTER 2

MAKING SENSE OF THE CONTINUITIES AND RUPTURES IN THE COURSE OF RELATIONS

> Realism is consciously amoral, focused as it is on interests rather than on values in a debased world. But realism never dies, because it accurately reflects how states behave, behind the façade of their value-based rhetoric. (Tellis, as cited in Kaplan, 2013, p. 27)

> The time when Russia could be kept out of the world's oceans has gone forever. We shall sail all the world's seas; no force on earth can prevent us. (Admiral Zakharov, as cited in Klieman, 1970, p. 46)

There is a vast academic literature offering valuable, yet highly diffused insights into the different historical stages of, and diverse geopolitical impulses behind the enduring strategic ties between Moscow and Damascus. As to the recent years of relations marked by increased Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict; the amount of media reports, policy briefs, and up-to-date commentaries with a rather short-sighted focus on what is on the surface is so large that it is more of a necessity – and indeed a way more difficult endeavor – to refine and analyze these in a systematic manner. Such an effort should be conducive to the formulation of a consistent and meaningful narrative that fits within a larger theoretical and historical context; as the confusing data pool on the subject matter lacks shape and spine. Therefore, the main objective of the discussion throughout the chapters that cover the history of relations between Moscow and Damascus before early 2000s is to merge together the specific research on different periods and aspects of Russo-Syrian solidarity. Whereas the subsequent chapter covering the international background and strategic impulses behind Russia's multi-dimensional involvement in the Syrian

conflict is structured in a manner that fits a realist assessment of the latest data into the larger historical trends that continue to steer the course of the bilateral relationship in question.

On the other hand, this thesis is not intended to offer a separate, preliminary elaboration of the main assumptions set forth by the realist tradition as far as the discipline of international relations is concerned. Nor does it dig deep into the classical geopolitical school of thought, or the various intellectual streams thereof. Instead, the historical course and particularities of the bilateral relationship in question are presented in a "pre-processed" form. That is, the various sources which are utilized in order to bridge the temporal and thematic gaps in the literature concerning the diverse drivers and periods of Russo-Syrian relations until early 2000s are exclusively chosen from among those that readily apply basic realist precepts onto the actual history of Russo-Syrian relations. Primary sources and Russian reports on the most recent epoch in the bilateral relationship are subsequently interpreted through the lens of such an all-encompassing and vaguely-defined mindset, which is nevertheless self-coherent. Thus, the theoretical framework is drawn in a straightforward and eclectic manner, leaving no space for a comparative and detailed analysis of competing intellectual approaches.

Such a choice on my part conforms with the essential task of this thesis – i.e. to formulate a rather simplistic but reliable blueprint that is able to offer valuable insights into the larger and extremely complex phenomenon we are currently confronted with. My choice for a broad temporal and thematic scope over theoretical depth emanates from an inevitable tradeoff; in which case the latter option would have been neither feasible nor satisfactory considering the modest purposes of this study. Another reason for sacrificing theoretical richness for the most part is that this

thesis is designed not as a case study to test the validity of any specific theory, but vice versa: theoretical concepts are occasionally utilized to test various assumptions which concern the particularities and real-life dynamics of Russo-Syrian relations.

Constituting the backbone of this research are in-depth studies by leading Anglo-American academics who are interested in the historical evolution of Russian policies towards the Middle East. Most of these sources date back to the Cold War era; and plenty of them reflect the prevailing realist and geopolitical attitudes of the time regardless of their ideological cover. Therefore, no need was seen to use any additional primary sources or research methods other than directly tapping into the accumulated knowledge on this period; as an immense number of such sources and countless statistical findings pertaining to the diverse facets of Soviet-Middle Eastern interaction had already been exhausted by the leading scholars in this field. As to the subsequent chapters that cover the continuities and ruptures in Russo-Syrian relations in the aftermath of the Cold War, mostly secondary sources but also some primary sources are employed to shed light on that period. It is particularly the latest epoch in the mutual relationship (i.e. the one marked by increased Russian pro-activism and the breakout of the Syrian Crisis) that is scrutinized through the lens of Russian sources for the most part.

Within this framework; discourse analyses of related reports, policy briefs, working papers, commentaries, and seminar transcripts that have been published by pro-government media outlets and research institutions in Russia are given full play in the chapter elaborating on the Kremlin's approach to the Syrian crisis during the most recent – if not the most critical – period in the relationship, before we move on to an overall discussion of the key findings of the study. The main reason for this is that the Russian administration has ultimately emerged as the Assad regime's

foremost ally and the game-changing actor on the scene. The second reason for having Russian perspectives at the core of the discussion here is the presumed validity of the realist tendencies underlying the Kremlin's worldview. Nevertheless, this should not be deemed equal to a non-critical acceptance of the Russian point of view as it is. Luckily in that regard, the relative ease of separating propaganda from factual data when scrutinizing Russian resources – even those produced by the most internationally well-connected research institutes – in contrast to the case with their Western equivalents have admittedly been more than helpful.

2.1 The development of Cold War literature

The oldest source that is consulted for the purpose of giving form and substance to the background chapters of this thesis is *Realities of World Power*. Written by John E. Kieffer in 1952, the book sheds light on the fundamental precepts of geopolitics for a largely alien American public as well as political administration. It elaborates on which areas in the world bear significance from the lens of US-Soviet rivalry in an attempt to manifest how geopolitical teachings retain their validity in defiance of a "seemingly" altered international environment, thus enlighten and guide foreign policy-makers. Throughout successive chapters, the author criticizes Washington and advocates a fiercely realist approach to the global 'chessboard'.

Starting from Rudolf Kjellen's definition of geopolitics as "the theory of the state as a geographic organism or phenomenon in space"; the author concurs that "geopolitics is the name applied to the study of the social, political, economic, strategic, and geographic elements of a state, indicating the methods which may be used in formulating and achieving its foreign policy and objectives" (Kieffer, 1952, p. 10). After providing this conceptual framework, he goes on to apply the various

key terms raised by the fathers of German geopolitics like Karl Ritter, Friedrich Ratzel, and Heinrich von Treitschke to US-Soviet interactions during the early stages of the Cold War.

Reflecting the context of the Korean War that coincided with its date of publication, the book is marked by an overwhelming fear of Soviet intentions and might. It is mostly worded like a banal piece of propaganda, including only a few academic references. Underlying the book's assumptions and suggestions is a highly-masculine tone, which is blatantly illustrated in the author's labeling of Soviet Russia as the "seat of aggression" and his frequent references to the "destructive" ideology and methods of Russia (Kieffer, 1952, pp. 195-210). Furthermore, communism is referred as "perverted thinking" that victimizes the naïve people of the US The entire narrative revolves around an "argument" that the evil geopolitical program of the Soviet Union struck a well-intentioned US in the midst of a post-War effort to rebuild civilization as demonstrated during the Korean War. That is, the US was caught unprepared for such covertly-held hostility and grievance against its core values and very existence (Kieffer, 1952, pp. 110-23).

Basing his arguments on the rather aggressive brand of geopolitical theory – reminiscent to that promoted by those German thinkers whose offensive realism had also served as a source of inspiration for Nazi Germany during WWII – the author disqualifies the concept of 'balance of power' as a pseudo-realistic way to preserve order and peace on the global stage. Other – and equally extreme – conclusions he reaches are likewise underscored by an aggressive and highly-distorted variant of realist thinking. Within this framework, he disregards diplomacy as a useful tool in foreign policy making and opposes the way in which the Truman Doctrine, together with the Marshall plan, are conducted. He rests a case for the pursuit of a stricter

policy towards allies and neutral states alike, ruling out efforts to appease the USSR in fronts other than Europe due to a fear of confrontation. The author's war-mongering goes to the extent of calling for yet another world war, this time against Soviet Russia, before it is too late for the US, as he believes such an ultimate confrontation will inevitably occur in any case.

Despite its annoyingly biased wording and hyperbolic conclusions, the study nevertheless gives crucial hints at the uncontrollable pace of events between the West and the USSR in the immediate aftermath of WWII and the way this relates to the Middle Eastern region. In this respect, the author's detailed account of Moscow's relentless quest for world hegemony by way of uprooting its Western rivals' influence from the entire Eurasian landmass – the origins of which appear to precede the end of WWII – reveals the tacit geopolitical concerns in mind and realist measures at the Kremlin's disposal that are firmly anchored in a centuries-old tradition of statecraft. In a rather novel manner when compared with his contemporaries, the author identifies communism as merely a "tool" to mobilize masses in order to realize centuries-old Russian dreams in the post-WWII era. According to the author, while the primary objective of Moscow has always been warm-water outlets; its modern-day rivalry with the West over several fronts including the Middle East reflects "just the old imperialist drive all over again, [only] with a new face" (Kieffer, 1952, p. 195). In this vein, he claims that the search for permanent access to major maritime routes lies also at the heart of the war in Korea.

As for the Eastern European and Middle Eastern "fronts", the author points at Russia's asymmetrical capabilities for defense at home. Soviet Russia, just like its Tsarist predecessor, is protected by an inner fortress stretching from the Urals in the west and the Caucasus in the South, all the way through the vast Asian hinterland to

the Pacific coast. Such geographical features endow modern-day Russia with the capacity of "defense in depth" (Kieffer, 1952, pp. 97-109). To maintain its advantage in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, it needs a belt of satellite states as a forward defense area – or a buffer zone so to speak. Also within this framework, the author counts political and social organization as well as domestic stability among the key determinants of power in the geopolitical game of chess. From this point forth, the author goes on to pose fierce arguments against the validity of legalism, international law, and liberal internationalism that are well-justified in most cases. All in all, he calls for a Machiavellian and realistic approach in post-War Western foreign policy, like the one held consistently in high esteem by the Kremlin.

Like *Realities of World Power, Soviet American Rivalry in the Middle East* by J. C. Hurewitz is marked by an explicitly anti-Russian tone, yet its observations and assumptions are not overwhelmed by banal propaganda. Hurewitz's is an edited work published in 1969 – two years after the Six Day War of June 1967 which resulted in diminished US influence over Arab nations and the rise of pro-Soviet tendencies among foreign policy circles in various regional states including those not run by "progressive" military dictatorships, such as Jordan. The book claims to take no subjective position on US-Soviet rivalry over the Middle East, but rather come up with an impartial description of the problems faced by the USSR and the US in their respective Middle East policies. In that regard, it tries to offer clinical policy guidelines that address the tangible deficits and shortcomings underlying US foreign policy towards regional countries.

Some of the articles that are included within the volume were originally presented during a conference at Columbia University in December 1968, which was funded by Ford Foundation. The editor, who was the director of the conference in

question, compiled these articles. Among the distinguished research institutions, academies, and universities supporting the work are the United States Military Academy, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The institutions mentioned here have apparently pioneered Soviet studies throughout the rest of the Cold War era. The directors of various sessions and writers of articles are affiliated with some leading higher education institutions in the Anglo-American world such as Harvard University, Yale University, Columbia University, MIT, University of Chicago, King's College, and the London School of Economics. Furthermore, many of these people have formerly served in top bureaucratic positions, particularly within the body of the state department – the foreign service in the case of the United Kingdom – and the navy.

The study provides a realist apprehension of Soviet and American interests in the region. It qualifies as the first of its kind that is professionally drafted and academically guided. It offers valuable insight into the geopolitical motives which led the USSR to pursue a delicate strategy of controlled tensions and polarization between Israel and Arab states during this period. Some of the key facets of the geopolitical competition between the US and the USSR in this period as exposed by the study are the two superpowers' bid to attract allies, establish military supremacy over each other, transfer arms to regional partners, become the number one provider of foreign economic aid and technical assistance to their regional clients, penetrate regional socio-cultural life, and lead efforts aimed at maintaining regional security and stability. Within this framework, the narrative underlines the crucial role played by Soviet propaganda in deepening the rift between Israel and Syria; thus gaining the political and strategic upper hand *vis-à-vis* the US in the region while obtaining matchless economic benefits. It convincingly explains the reasons behind the

formation of the Baghdad Pact in 1955 and the reaction it created on the part of Egypt, Syria, and Afghanistan that eventually led the latter three to seek Soviet military assistance. Against such a backdrop, the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 and America's intervention in Lebanon which came a year after were both partially targeted at the newly-formed Syrian-Soviet alliance (Campbell, 1969, pp. 198-215).

In addition, the study points at Moscow's naval build-up from the early 1960s forward and investigates how it shifted the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean, thus paving the way for the eventual breakout of the Six Day War in June 1967. It elaborates on the intricate chain of causality that led to consecutive moves by the US and the Soviet Union in the Middle Eastern arena in this period. To make sense of the overall picture, it traces the roots of increased Soviet naval build-up in the Eastern Mediterranean in the latter half of the 1960s. According to the study's findings, the Soviet push into the Eastern Mediterranean scene came as a strategic response to America's newly assumed role as the primary guardian of the Western-led security system in the region in the immediate aftermath of the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 (Martin, 1969, pp. 61-74).

As one may expect, the study reflects a highly skeptical view of Russian motives in overall. From this point forth, it underlines the importance of preventing Russian penetration along the north-south axis into a region harboring the largest oil and natural gas reservoirs in the world; mainly by means of a pro-Western regional alliance along the east-west axis that would connect the Arabian and Mediterranean Seas. Yet, while far from calling for a withdrawal of Western presence from the region, the study nevertheless acknowledges the impracticality of trying to root Russia out of the Eastern Mediterranean. That is essentially because "for Russia . . . the Middle East must take on increasing interest as a way to break out finally from its

long encirclement" (Martin, 1969, p. 61). As a matter of fact, "geography alone would lead to the appearance of Russian naval power in an area at once contiguous to their [Russians'] homeland and convenient, at least in peacetime, as a route to more distant places [i.e. the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean]" (Martin, 1969, p. 63).

It should be noted here that in contrast to earlier studies marked by a much more offensive undertone, this study was published at a time when "the spirit of detente" was about to take hold of global public opinion, thus bringing along notions of 'coexistence' and 'balance of power'. In this respect, it sheds light on how the original superpower competition between Moscow and Washington on a global scale was gradually hijacked and manipulated on the regional level by small client states in accordance with their interwoven – and largely intractable – strategic disputes and interests, as exemplified most vividly in the case of the Syrian-Israeli conflict. Most importantly, the study shows "that the United States and the Soviet Union are most likely to reach accommodations where spheres of influence are already clearly delineated and based on stable local political systems and local arrangements" (Kerr, 1969, p. 241). Hence, it calls for a similarly clear definition of Soviet and American interests on the Middle Eastern stage to prevent the escalation of minor conflicts in a way that threatens world peace.

In his 1969 book *The Struggle for the Middle East: The Soviet Union and the Middle East 1958-68*, Walter Laqueur finally puts flesh on the gradually-shaping realist approach to the Middle Eastern "battleground" between the West and the Soviet Union, adding vitality and depth to the literature on the subject matter which had hitherto been narrowly-focused and rather shallow in its obsession with ideology. In his groundbreaking work, Laqueur argues that doctrinal discussions on communism, Nasserism, or Ba'athism which used to be fashionable among the

academia during the 1950s and early 1960s are actually of little – if any – practical use as far as their ability to offer a coherent and meaningful picture that encapsulates Soviet motives or reflects the fundamental dynamics behind the curtain of ideology is concerned. As clearly manifested in the case of Soviet-Syrian and Soviet-Egyptian relations, ideology should not be regarded as the centerpiece of Moscow's policies towards the region since the discrepancy between doctrinal requisites and real world practices has been steadily growing since the death of Lenin in the heat of the October Revolution. Instead; power politics and geopolitical urges, although insufficient to account for all the intricacies of international relations alone, nevertheless managed to assert themselves as the main driver of national policy, particularly during critical junctures and crises like the Six Day War of June 1967.

Written by a leading academic working for the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), which is a prominent US think tank under Georgetown University; the book came at a time when the Soviet Union was about to reach strategic parity with the West and had a growing naval presence across world oceans. Moscow was then at the height of its power but had apparently lost revolutionary fervor with the advent of détente, which inevitably replaced ideological considerations with the enduring necessities of *realpolitik*. In this light, the author rightfully claims that time is ripe for an in-depth study of Soviet involvement in the Greater Middle East as the 1950s offered too little material, and indeed no proof at all, indicating any substantial Soviet presence or interest in the vast region that lies to the south of Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan.

Here as well is Soviet presence in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean region regarded as an inevitable consequence of regional geopolitics and the emerging balance of power between Moscow and Washington. According to

the author, “in view of the delicate balance of global power, the Soviet Union attributes great importance to the Middle East, and its presence there may have far-reaching political effects in Europe as well as Africa and Asia” (Laqueur, 1969, p. 4). Elaborating on this view, the author goes on to investigate how Soviet technical, military, economic, and diplomatic assistance as exemplified by Moscow’s enthusiastic supervision and financing of the Euphrates Dam project in Syria was instrumentalized within a strictly realist foreign policy framework; with the primary objective of extracting economic and strategic concessions from Damascus in the form of access rights to Syria’s domestic markets, natural resources, and naval facilities.

From the lens of decision-makers in Kremlin; the Sino-Soviet split and Moscow’s subsequent loss of access to Albanian naval bases, compounded by increasing Egyptian objections to Soviet naval presence near Port Said and Alexandria after Nasser’s death, left Syria as the sole remaining candidate to host a formidable naval squadron on a sustained basis. Besides, Syria was seen as the most suitable candidate to serve as a showcase of the remarkable extent to which communism and alliance with Moscow could fuel material development and contribute to the socio-political advancement of a Third World, Arab, or Islamic nation into an ‘independent’ power base of its own due to its reigning over a smaller population, territorial span, and economy than Egypt. Added to these was the fragility of the Syrian economy alongside the lack of political stability within its borders, which provided a greater space for manipulation by Moscow (Laqueur, 1969, pp. 84-94).

Against this backdrop, the deployment of the Soviet Mediterranean fleet in Syria came as “part of an overall policy aimed at strengthening the capability of the

Soviet Union for military action in various parts of the world" (Laqueur, 1969, p. 145). The strategic value of this new presence was most vividly demonstrated by "Brezhnev's call for the withdrawal of the American Sixth Fleet in April 1967," during the Six Day War between Syria and Israel (Laqueur, 1969, p. 151). As the Soviet Mediterranean squadron (alternatively referred as the "Eskadra"), which consisted of submarines, cruisers, frigates, helicopter carriers, destroyers, and reconnaissance ships attained ocean-going capacity; it was reinforced with vessels carrying state-of-the-art guided-missiles and nuclear warheads (Laqueur, 1969, pp. 151-54).

Even though the Soviet Mediterranean squadron based in Syria lacked aircraft carriers, American experts at the time thought greatly of its asymmetrical capacity with about half the size of the US Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean by 1967 and growing rapidly thereafter. In fact, the *Eskadra*'s permanent deployment as a deterrent against nuclear-armed Polaris submarines as well as future attempts by Israel to close the Suez Canal in times of contingency was of strategic significance. That is, the overall balance of power was now upset – a situation which was further aggravated with the withdrawal of the British navy from the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean in 1971. In this respect, the Soviet Mediterranean fleet's presence served Moscow's hand as a political leverage for gains elsewhere, whereas its combat capacity and qualitative prowess did not really suffice to defeat even Israel alone as Syria was probably deceived into believing (Laqueur, 1969, pp. 153-54).

By the time these deductions were made, a realist attitude towards US-Soviet relations had almost reached maturity among the Western academia. That ultimately brought along a right-minded assessment of the overall situation and a quest to find working solutions to the dilemma at hand, particularly in the Middle Eastern arena,

which essentially originated from a persistent misapprehension of the underlying power dynamics by a jubilant West post-WWII. Since there were no strict lines dividing American and Russian spheres of influence over the Middle East – in marked contrast to the enduring status-quo in Europe and Asia – and regional allegiances were in a state of constant flux; the entangled web of volatile relations between Arab Middle East countries like Syria, Israel, Egypt, and Iraq was reminiscent of a strategic powder keg despite the region's relative lack of strategic importance in comparison to Eastern Europe, Vietnam, or even Cuba. Thus, an ultimate, practicable understanding between the two superpowers had to be reached in the Middle East with an eye to the geopolitical and historical realities on the ground, because the occasional fueling of tensions by reckless local clients continued to pose an ever-existing danger to the interests of both the two superpowers and regional states themselves as long as the Middle East remained a "no-man's-land between Russia and America" (Laqueur, 1969, p. 161).

The USSR and the Arabs: The Ideological Dimension by Jaan Pennar (1973) is yet another book that came up with similar findings only a few years after the publication of Laqueur's groundbreaking work in 1969. What essentially distinguishes this one from *The Struggle for the Middle East: The Soviet Union and the Middle East 1958-68* is its core purpose of demonstrating how fundamental a logical fallacy that the realist school's tendency of completely ignoring the role of ideological themes in international relations until then attested to. Nevertheless, the author scrutinizes heated debates and political splits over theoretical intricacies concerning diverse ideological currents and factional competition with the main objective of exposing the lasting set of hardcore security concerns at a much deeper level. In that regard, the study fits into the larger group of realist accounts of Soviet-

Middle Eastern relations that were generated by Western academics during this period. Another key contribution to the literature that was made by this study pertains to its overwhelming focus on the prevalence of *realpolitik* over ideology as far as Soviet foreign policy towards the Middle East is concerned. It is indeed such an exclusive focus on *realpolitik* concerns that allows the reader to get a fuller grasp of the particular dynamics beneath Soviet-Syrian relations.

Sponsored and edited by the Research Institute on Communist Affairs under Columbia University, the Director of which is world-renown Cold War strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski, Pennar's work presents a realist examination of the ideological dimension of Soviet-Arab relations. The book aims to shed light on the enduring intellectual impulses behind Soviet policies towards the region that are publicly shared with the outside world under various guises depending on the prevailing ideological climate of the time. Digging into the vast theoretical literature of the Soviet Union, the author argues that the struggle for power as embodied in the relentless pursuit of tangible national interests by Moscow in the Middle Eastern arena is a derivative of underlying geopolitical realities, as are ideological contests of a purely idealistic nature on the surface.

According to the author, the so-called "non-capitalist path" and the term "anti-imperialism" as coined out by Lenin had been aptly employed by Moscow as a fancy disguise to conceal deeply-engrained geopolitical urges, particularly in the case of Soviet-Syrian relations (Pennar, 1973, pp. 2-6). Although Brezhnev was quoted as tracing the origins of the Arab-Israeli conflict and all other regional crises stemming from it to "the antagonism between the forces of imperialism and the forces of national independence, democracy, and social progress" after the Six Day War of June 1967 (Pennar, 1973, p. 77), such was far from reflecting the actual mindset that

motivated decision-makers in neither Moscow nor Damascus. Within this framework, the Kremlin's rhetorical manipulation of the theoretical incompatibility of the ideal of "Arab unity" with the fundamental stipulations of Marxism-Leninism is analyzed by the author.

By singling out the similarities and differences between the Soviet school of socialism as formulated by Lenin and the unorthodox interpretations of socialism as in the case of diverse Arab-socialist parties including the Syrian branch of the Ba'ath Party; the author lays bare the huge gap between ideological rhetoric on the one hand and the real-life implications of the Soviet support for "national liberation movements" on the other. As a matter of fact, Moscow's preferred brand of socialism is diametrically opposed to the indigenous "variations" (indeed highly deviate forms) of socialism that conform with the inherently pro-Islamic and nationalistic attitudes of the sprawling bureaucratic establishment in Arab capitals. Hence, there existed a persistent incompatibility between Moscow's stated objectives and those held by its regional clients in the Middle East. It was exactly this kind of a mismatch that accounted for Arab communists' failed bid for power in Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Palestine, Sudan, and Egypt post-WWII (Pennar, 1973, pp. 35-58).

Furthermore, the author sheds light on the correlation between the lasting primacy of Syria in Moscow's Middle East vision and the establishment of a communist party in that country as early as 1924 – when none other Arab country harbored one. The emergence of the Syrian Communist Party as the strongest of its kind across the entire region post-WWII attests to the fact that ideology always follows practical necessities as some sort of "rationalization" at the state level. One should also view the election of a communist MP for the first time in the Arab world

in Syria in 1954 under the light of such an overall reasoning in order to make sense of the complex picture confronting us in the Middle East (Pennar, 1973, pp. 35-37).

Likewise, various ups and downs in the relationship between the USSR and Syria throughout the 1950s and 1960s are examined from this viewpoint. According to the author, the foundation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958 as well as the fluctuating nature of the uneasy three-way relationship between Moscow, the Ba'athists (Syrian subdivision), and the Soviet-sponsored communist movement in Syria can be explained in relation to the shifts in the regional geopolitical landscape. Such shifts are often manifested in the form of widespread purges or coups as occasionally occurred in Syria after every single move by the US and the Soviet Union on the Middle Eastern chessboard by means of their proxies. As a matter of fact, even government ministries were repeatedly redistributed among the pro-Soviet left wing and the non-communist right wing of the Ba'ath Party before and during the reign of Hafez al-Assad in accordance with minor readjustments of inter-state balances. In this vein, rivalry over political influence between Moscow and Beijing was also an important factor in determining which ideological fraction would prevail within Syria from time to time. Based on these findings, the author draws the core conclusion that when "stripped of Marxist rhetoric," Moscow apparently regards its relations with Middle Eastern actors – Damascus first and foremost – as part of a greater game "of power and influence over a vital area of the world which could tip the scales in the delicate international balance of power" (Pennar, 1973, p. 170).

A broader scope on the same theme is offered by R. D. McLaurin in *The Middle East in Soviet Policy*, which was published in 1975. The research that culminated in McLaurin's work had been supported by veteran academics and field experts, as well as officials working for the Central Intelligence Agency and the US

Department of Defense. Oil industry executives from Middle Eastern backgrounds also contributed to the research. The book steps forth as the most comprehensive and systematic survey of the mutually intertwined dynamics behind Soviet-Middle Eastern relations between 1945 and early 1970s that was brought together until then. In this respect, it takes a comparative look at the economic, military, political, and cultural components of Soviet foreign policy towards individual Middle Eastern countries. On the other hand, it does not focus on Soviet-Syrian relations but rather tries to deduce general conclusions pertaining to the wider regional and global geopolitical context.

Throughout the work; the trends, fluctuations, and watersheds in the development of post-Tsarist Russian perceptions and behavior towards Middle Eastern nations are identified in a way that supports the relevance of common realist assumptions for making sense of the intense historical account that is offered. While definitely not disregarding the internal political and ideological determinants of Moscow's perceptions and actions towards the region; the author nevertheless assumes that within the context of an anarchic international system, all states ultimately converge to a certain extent in their patterns of behavior under similar conditions due to being essentially interest-driven actors despite the inherent irrationality of top decision-makers as human beings – and not robots.

Despite its extensive range and amount of detail, the study is built around a coherent, scientifically well-grounded narrative. Arguments that are raised throughout the study are all supported with rich statistical data which is brought together with utmost delicacy and precision. In that regard, the author's claim to have embarked on a sober minded and rational analysis of Soviet foreign policy towards the Middle East, which he believes is much more complex than first meets the eye,

seems well-justified. Through his adept use of quantitative methods, the author reveals the well-calculated basis of Soviet foreign policy towards Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iran, and Turkey; which is completely stripped of sentimentalism and driven by the practical necessities of state survival.

As the argument goes, such a realistic outlook shaped Moscow's dealings with regional actors even under Lenin who saw no harm in tightening Moscow's grip over not only pro-communist but also traditionalist anti-colonial movements around the world that fought against the British in line with the geopolitical necessities of his time. Indeed, communist parties all around the world were established and supported by the Comintern, which itself was centered in Moscow. As the self-proclaimed vanguard of Marxism, the Kremlin formulized a "mainstream" (or "orthodox") communist discourse that was manipulated as an ideological tool subordinate to Moscow's strategic interests (McLaurin, 1975, pp. 4-13).

State interests and long-term strategic objectives of the USSR are at the core of the discussion that follows in the latter part of the book. Throughout the subsequent chapters, the author focuses rather on a macro-analysis of Soviet foreign policy, interests, and objectives as far as the Middle Eastern theater is concerned. In the 1950s, the Baghdad Pact (later to be known as the Central Treaty Organization or CENTO) formed a key link in the chain of pro-Western alliances that has since been spearheaded by NATO in order to prevent Moscow from maintaining a foothold in the Middle East. Against the backdrop of a proliferation in US-induced regional alliances as part of the policy of containment, the ascendancy in Soviet pro-activism throughout the Eastern Mediterranean from the mid-1960s on should have been anticipated – indeed tolerated to a certain extent considering Russian losses in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis. Still, the author argues that the Soviet Union

should never be allowed to disrupt the flow of oil and gas supplies from the region into industrialized nations to weaken the pro-Western alliance network (McLaurin, 1975, pp. 143-51).

In overall, the study concludes that "the most obvious reason for Soviet interest in the Middle East is geographical," despite the West's persistent and rather delusionary denial to acknowledge this "fact of geography." At the end of the day, "the Soviet Union is a Middle East power in a way that the United States is not" (McLaurin, 1975, p. 15). From this point forth, Soviet moves in the region are evaluated as a defensive reaction to improvements in US strategic missile technology and the deployment of advanced missiles in an increasing number of Western allies in the region. If allowed to exercise full control of the region, NATO could easily penetrate the Russian-dominated 'heartland' via the Turkish Straits thanks to its superior naval and missile capabilities. Hence, denying Western powers hegemony over this key region was a matter of life or death from Moscow's standpoint, unlike the case with the US, which was only pushing its hegemonic agenda further.

Most importantly, the author concurs with his realist colleagues from the same era that the "exclusion of the USSR from the Middle East had been successful" until the 1960s "only because the 1945 to 1955 period was transitional" in terms of global scale power-readjustments and muscle-flexing post-WWII. As a matter of fact, a maritime containment policy in this key region "had no long-term possibility of success" in the first place from a geopolitically-valid perspective. Russia, as a superpower, "cannot be totally excluded from so large a region when that region is [so] proximate" (McLaurin, 1975, p. 144). And an insistence to do so on the part of NATO despite the dictates of geography would surely backfire; leading to strategic failure, a waste of resources, and the risk of an all-out confrontation between nuclear

powers. An additional point made by the author concerns the way close alignment between the US and Israel inevitably played at the hand of the Soviet Union as it allowed Moscow to monopolize the sympathies of Arab capitals, Damascus first and foremost.

Soviet Russia and The Middle East (1970) by Aaron S. Klieman largely dwells on this latter theme, trying to answer the question of how the Soviet Union managed to secure and maintain a firm foothold in the Arab Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean in the latter half of the 1960s from a realist perspective. Sponsored by the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) under the prestigious John Hopkins University, Klieman's is yet another thought-provoking and analytical piece of work with little or no traces of Soviet-bashing marked by a propaganda-like tone. Yet, the study gives limited coverage to the peculiarities of Soviet-Syrian relations, largely disregarding the primary role of Syria in Soviet Middle East policy. Such neglect is possibly due to the fact that the book's publication predates the Soviet-Egyptian split after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which led Moscow to replace Damascus with Cairo as the lynchpin of its policies towards the Greater Middle East. On the other hand, the book offers precious insights into the pivotal role of geography and enduring state interests in determining the trajectory of Soviet-Middle Eastern relations. It was against such a geopolitical backdrop that Syria had ultimately come to overshadow all other Soviet clients in terms of its earned primacy in the Kremlin's regional strategy from the 1970s onwards.

Like McLaurin, Klieman offers a systemic analysis of international relations in the Middle Eastern arena, taking cognizance of the shifts in the larger, global balance of power. Within this framework, he elaborates on how the Soviets capably manipulated Syria's, Egypt's, and Iraq's entrenched distrust of the West in the name

of denying the US a widespread regional alliance, unlimited access to the region's entire resource base, domination over strategic maritime passages, and a monopoly of influence across the region. According to the author, politically and economically-rooted intra-regional frustrations which were constantly exacerbated by endemic border conflicts, along with the ever-present specter of repeated aggression on the part of Israel whose geopolitical interests are held sacrosanct by Western capitals, allowed the USSR to exploit the power vacuum which emerged as a consequence of the British navy's withdrawal from the larger region post-WWII (Klieman, 1970, pp. 64-68).

In this respect, the uptrend in Russian naval activism – in the Eastern Mediterranean in particular – is also attributed to another readjustment in power balances following the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, for that very event provoked over a decade of maritime competition in the "backyard" of the Soviet Union in the form of a geopolitical reprisal. This maritime region essentially comprises the Russian equivalent of what the Caribbean means for the security and outward expansion of the United States (Klieman, 1970, pp. 43-47). As a matter of fact, the Eastern Mediterranean region has been consistently regarded since the Tsarist era as a strategic gateway of geopolitical significance that straddles the southern European, North African, and West Asian coastline. It is adjacent to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which together comprise the main route of access to the lucrative sea lanes crisscrossing the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Therefore, it is ascribed the potential to reconfigure power balances on a global scale (Klieman, 1970, pp. 31-37).

The region's inherent geopolitical significance was only amplified in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Largely excluded from world oceans and threatened by mounting naval and missile deployment on the part of Washington in

the Eastern Mediterranean "front", Moscow embarked on a policy of "circumnavigating" the Black Sea and the Turkish Straits, as manifested by its deployment of a permanent naval squadron in the Eastern Mediterranean. By using its naval build-up off the Syrian and Lebanese coasts as leverage, Moscow could "frustrate an attempted coup against one of its *protégés* [the pro-Russian Syrian government], intervene in a civil war on behalf of one faction [in Syria or Lebanon], offer tactical assistance to an insurgency movement [particularly in Palestine], or ensure the success of a revolution against any pro-Western government in the Middle East and North Africa [e.g. Jordan]." Moreover, it would be able to "preclude any unilateral intervention by Washington in Arab affairs, such as occurred in 1958 when [US] marines were landed in Lebanon." But maybe most importantly, it would be able to weaken the coherence between the individual states that are part of the US-led alliance network by way of interfering at will in the flow of oil and goods between the region and West European as well as East Asian centers of industrialized production, which are almost completely dependent upon imports from the Gulf area (Klieman, 1970, p. 88).

In his analysis of the Soviet Union's diverse interactions with the Arab Middle East in the 1960s, the author makes frequent, mutually-reinforcing references to the geopolitical precepts and assumptions of the famous British geographer of late 19th and early 20th centuries, Halford Mackinder, along with those of Alfred Thayer Mahan.[1] As highlighted throughout the narrative; Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, which were bundled together to form the 'Northern Tier' by the then US Secretary of

[1] Mahan was a world-renown American navy admiral, strategist, and historian from the same era; who emphasized the supremacy of sea power and the matchless strategic value of direct control over coastal areas surrounding the 'heartland'.

State John Foster Dulles, constituted the main battlefront against the Russian-dominated 'heartland' long before the Cold War or even the October Revolution of 1917 (Klieman, 1970, p. 1). Historically, in stark contrast to the countries of the Arab Middle East, these 'Northern Tier' countries have been antagonistic towards an expansionist Russia, whereas the Arab world experienced persistent Western incursions and direct colonial exploitation. No wonder it was this sort of an historical background that motivated the establishment of a geo-strategic "firewall" in order to contain Russian expansion post-WWII.

However, this "barrier" was effectively traversed, or surmounted so to speak, by Moscow after 1955 thanks to a subtle diplomatic effort in line with Russia's historically-rooted geopolitical interests in the region. In that regard, no doubt "geographic proximity makes Russia susceptible to those forces which attract imperial nations to the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea basin" (Klieman, 1970, p. 27). That the Eastern Mediterranean and the Arab Middle East were of secondary importance in comparison to, say, the Turkish Straits or the Eastern European "front" in geo-strategic terms only complicated the picture further:

> Precisely because of an approximate strategic balance between the United States and the Soviet Union, greater premium is given to probing for comparative advantage in peripheral areas as yet unincorporated into delineated spheres [of influence] . . . [Superpower] competition in the peripheral areas of the Middle East . . . therefore becomes more attractive, whether in quest of an elusive security or in order to negotiate from a position of strength. (Klieman, 1970, pp. 17-18)

One of the main conclusions drawn by the author is that "the pursuit of cooperation requires of the US that it view recent Soviet penetration of Middle Eastern lands and waters from a Russian historical perspective: as compensatory rather than unbalancing" (Klieman, 1970, p. 99). According to the author, substantial naval

presence on the part of Moscow in the Eastern Mediterranean – despite acknowledging its quality as a lasting geostrategic objective for any landlocked power based at the heart of Eurasia – would not prove feasible in the long term anyway. Unless provoked to do so, such an undertaking would comprise a luxury rather than necessity for Russia. In this respect, the author wisely predicts at a much earlier time the dynamics that eventually motivated Gorbachev's reformist policies in late 1980s, invoking the theory of 'imperial overstretch' in reference to the British Empire's inglorious ejection from the region in the aftermath of WWII: "By establishing ties with the Arab countries and enlarging the Soviet commitment, the architects of [Russian] foreign policy have raised the possibility of extending themselves beyond their earlier intentions and of living beyond their economic means" (Klieman, 1970, p. 69).

Still, the author warns decision-makers in Washington about a similar fate. The US may be compelled to follow the same pattern with the British Empire should it insist on trying to monopolize regional influence *vis-à-vis* the Soviets at a tremendous political and economic cost. That an inability on the part of Washington and Moscow to reach a final strategic settlement – as may result from sentimentalism and shortsightedness on either side – will certainly benefit adventurous clients while putting the entire region at an even greater risk of all-out conflict stands out as the most crucial conclusion drawn by the author. Western preeminence in the Middle East is effectively over, which means that the US, while doing anything in its power to balance the Soviet push for further gains, should also seek ways to accommodate with the new reality to safeguard its long-term national interests. A vain persistence in the opposite direction may seem to bear fruit in the short term but would surely prove fatal in the long term (Klieman, 1970, pp. 97-101).

Following fifteen years of targeted geopolitical maneuvering to outflank NATO forces across the 'blue waters' to its south, the (im)balance of power in the Middle East continued to shift in favor of Moscow through the 1970s. The economic, military, and strategic significance of the Soviet Union's naval ascendancy at the time and its reinforced clout over Syria with the rise of Hafez al-Assad to power in 1970 induced the publication of *The USSR and the Middle East* (1973) by Michael Confino and Shimon Shamir. As explicitly repeated throughout the various chapters of the book, the political atmosphere of the immediate period that preceded the Yom Kippur War (1969-1973) was characterized by newly-established Soviet presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and the initialization of the *détente* process in Soviet-American relations. In that regard, the study reflects a certain degree of moderation also thanks to Soviet efforts to cooperate with Western powers in order to avoid an all-out confrontation during the Yom Kippur War.

Published by Israel Universities Press in Jerusalem in 1973, the study is the culmination of years of research conducted by the Russian and East European Research Center in cooperation with the Shiloah Center for Middle Eastern Studies, both under the umbrella of Tel Aviv University. As an edited work with multiple authors, *The USSR and the Middle East* is a coherent compilation of several academic articles – in their summarized form – that were presented at a wide-scale conference carried out within the span of four days in late December, 1971. A total of 36 American, European, and Israeli specialists and academics studying the Soviet Union, the Middle East, and the international relations discipline participated at the seven-session conference in question that produced this study. Among the writers of different chapters in the book are world-renowned scholars such as Prof. Bernard Lewis from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London; Hans

Morgenthau, who is regarded as the intellectual father of neo-realist thought in international relations and one of the three masterminds behind the US-led geopolitical scheme of containment;[2] as well as Richard Pipes – an anti-communist Polish-American Harvard historian. A majority of the remaining contributors to the research that is brought together by the authors are Israeli politicians, bureaucrats, or former intelligence personnel.

The USSR and the Middle East is an eclectically prepared work that scrutinizes various inter-related aspects of Moscow's foreign policy towards Middle Eastern countries, including a diverse set of domestic social and economic dynamics that characterized the Soviet Union. Throughout the book, Soviet involvement in Middle Eastern affairs is examined at the level of both region-specific affairs and superpower competition in the global arena. In the second part of the book, relations between the USSR and the Middle East are assessed from the standpoint of regional capitals with reference to the intricacies of political and strategic hostilities within and among Middle Eastern nations.

The essential question that is explored by the study is whether Russia had a 'grand strategy' that stood in stark contrast with Western and Israeli interests, or instead cooperation with Russia is a plausible policy alternative that can ensure lasting stability on the Eastern Mediterranean stage. Although acknowledging the various differences between Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union as far as their foreign policy outlook is concerned, the study concurs that "one is nevertheless justified in attributing the same geographical pattern, as well as the same physical presence, as the determining factors holding together the pre- and post-1917

[2] Along with the then US Secretary of State Dean Acheson under President Harry Truman, and the outstanding American diplomat George F. Kennan.

empires" (Pinchuk, 1973, pp. 61-62). When read in this light, Soviet strategy towards the region is interpreted as being inherently aimed at the neutralization of the historical 'Northern Tier' countries (i.e. Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan) while balancing against the leading Western proxy in the region (i.e. Israel) (Morgenthau, 1973, pp. 72-73).

Considering Moscow's rightminded attempts to soothe the conflict between Syria and Egypt on the one hand and Israel on the other in 1973 through multilateral efforts, the authors agree that Soviet presence in the region represents a rather stabilizing element to a certain extent. In that regard, the "instrumental and utilitarian" character of the Soviet strategy towards its rather reckless Middle Eastern clients, Syria and Egypt first and foremost, is emphasized (Kolkowicz, 1973, p. 87). Nevertheless, the study is marked by a relatively more assertive tone than that of its contemporaries which are introduced in above paragraphs. This it probably owes to the overwhelming majority of figures with staunchly anti-communist credentials and Israeli citizenship among the contributors. In overall, it calls for a rather defensive-minded push to hedge against increasing Russian influence over the region to maintain a balance of power: "if the Middle East became an exclusive Soviet sphere of influence this would have far-reaching repercussions on the situation in Europe as well as in Africa and Asia. It would constitute, in fact, a radical change in the global balance of power" (Laqueur, 1973, p. 90).

A rather more moderate Western source that assesses Soviet-Middle Eastern and Soviet-Syrian relations in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War from a realist perspective, paying particular attention to the strategic repercussions of increased Soviet pro-activism in the Arab Middle East, is *The Soviet Union and the Middle East: The Post-WWII Era*. Edited by Lederer and Vucinich, the book was published

by the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace under Stanford University in 1974. This truly enlightening, thought-provoking piece of literature is again a compilation of the revised versions of eight papers that were submitted during a major conference along with an additional paper on the academic tradition of Middle Eastern studies under the Soviet Union. The gathering in question was convened by the Center for Russian and European Studies under Stanford University in 1969, and hosted leading experts on the subject from all around the world. Among the authors of the papers included in the study are a senior research fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), former officials from the US Department of State, former US diplomats and top Foreign Service officers, as well as prominent American and British professors from Middle Eastern backgrounds. Despite the overwhelming majority of American and British academics (as well as statesmen) among its contributors, the study nevertheless presents a balanced and highly reliable reading of the US-Soviet rivalry in the Middle Eastern arena, which was essentially concentrated on the Eastern Mediterranean (i.e. Egypt, Israel, and Syria) at the time it went to publication.

The authors mostly agree with the previous studies on the subject as well as their contemporaries that prior to the 1960s, the main objects of Soviet interest in the larger region were Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan – adjacent states located along the Soviet Union's 'southern flank' (Howard, 1974, pp. 134-35). Thus, the US was working hard to secure the loyalties of these nations as part of the Truman Doctrine and containment strategy. Whereas Soviet attention towards the Arab world saw a steep rise in the 1950s, mainly in response to the formation of the anti-communist Baghdad Pact. The tit-for-tat game gained heat with the coming into play of the Eisenhower doctrine in 1957 in order to justify US military installations and

intervention in the region, particularly in Lebanon, to back Israel (Safran, 1974, p. 167). Thus, the narrative offers a simplified yet meaningful chain of causality to make sense of the clash of geopolitical interests between Syria and the USSR on the one hand and Turkey, Jordan, Israel, and the US on the other.

With the advent of the 1960s, the Soviet navy had begun to challenge Western naval monopoly in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, "[the Soviet Union's Mediterranean fleet] thus gave Soviet power a visible presence affecting both the military and the political balance in the region." The US Sixth Fleet, as the "successor" to the British Navy, was no more in an all-commanding position over the seas surrounding the Middle East. Through its Mediterranean fleet, Moscow was now able to retaliate against Washington by lending strategic assistance to its "friends and *protégés* such as Egypt, Syria, and Algeria." Moreover, its sustained presence could well be leveraged to "affect the decisions of Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, Lebanon, Tunisia, Yugoslavia, Albania, and conceivably of Italy" (Campbell, 1974, p. 14).

At a global level, Russians obviously regarded "the Mediterranean not merely as a good place to back up their local diplomacy with naval power but also as a highway to somewhere else, notably the South Atlantic and the Indian Ocean" (Campbell, 1974, p. 15). As even a brief glance at the world map would testify, the Middle East sits at the crossroads of main waterways connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa – that is, the Turkish Straits, the Suez Canal, the Gulf of Aden, and the Strait of Hormuz. Hence, no wonder establishing a permanent presence in the region was key to preventing the global hegemony of its Western adversary in the eyes of Moscow.

It was essentially for this enduring character of Middle Eastern geopolitics that the dream of obtaining a foothold, strategically located in close proximity to the Eastern Mediterranean, has consistently enticed Russian rulers throughout successive centuries. In that regard, Russia's interests are deeply-entrenched in the region's history and geography. The Soviet Union's relentless struggle to become the preeminent game-maker in the Middle East during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s deeply resembled the rivalry for regional dominance between Imperial Russia and the British Empire in the previous century. For that matter, the United States has gradually replaced Britain in the post-WWII period as the Western flag-bearer in this geopolitical competition. The fact that the Middle East is endowed with vast deposits of fossil fuels – which is particularly arresting in the case of the Arab Middle East – only added a further dimension to the "time-old race" within the 20th century context (Lederer, 1974, pp. 1-10).

Still, the authors concur that the Middle East was not seen by Moscow as the primary theater for imperial power struggle during the Cold War era. On the other hand, the Kremlin rather sought to use increasing Russian influence over the region as an effective leverage for strategic gains in other, more significant fronts such as Eastern Europe and Northeast Asia. Therefore, all that occurred on the Middle Eastern stage were more of a "sideshow" that complemented a broader strategy on the global stage (Campbell, 1974, p. 14). Within this framework, Moscow's push to consolidate its grip over Syria in the 1970s should be regarded as part of a global strategy that is shaped jointly by elements of power politics and time-old imperialist reflexes.

The authors further offer an overall account of how the Bolshevik regime's initial claim of putting away with geopolitics and realism in foreign policy faded

away within a short span of time after the October Revolution of 1917, yielding to old patterns of power politics. In that regard, the conventional urge to consolidate the Russian sphere of influence soon prevailed over idealism despite the regime change, although thinly disguised under a self-contradictory rhetoric that conformed with the new state doctrine. Considerations of an essentially geopolitical nature even led the Kremlin to completely cast aside ideological consistency in various occasions as far as its foreign policy towards the Greater Middle East through the 1960s and 1970s is concerned. Examples of policies that remained largely intact even after the Soviet Union denounced all "imperial designs" include those towards the Turkish Straits, Transcaucasia, the Levant, Egypt, and Northern Iran. Obviously, the new rulers of the 'heartland' lost no time in realizing that "the Bolshevik Revolution did not alter the geography of southern Russia," not at all (Howard, 1974, p. 134).

Apart from the main discussion on Soviet Middle Eastern relations, the study contains frequent references to Russia's time-old struggle against Pan-Islamism, and the resurgence of this struggle under Soviet rule in a way that puts the country's domestic security and stability at stake due to the presence of a substantial Muslim population within its borders. This aspect of Soviet geopolitics is introduced to support the overall argument that the relentless pursuit of enduring state interests has always been the driving force behind the Middle Eastern as well as domestic policies of Russian decision-makers.

Based on these findings, the study concludes that the USSR is an inherently rational actor in international relations. Such is vividly demonstrated by its sincere efforts to refrain from any direct confrontation with NATO or Israel, while strictly avoiding over-involvement in the form of adding fuel to already-escalated tensions at times of war by means of deploying combat troops. Considering the coincidence of

the book's publication with the *détente* period which brought forth an overall environment of tolerance between the two superpowers, such a conclusion is not that surprising. True, Moscow hugely benefitted from continued volatility in the Middle East and a lack of final resolution in the Arab-Israeli conflict, for it enabled a larger radius of action for the USSR to radicalize like-minded Arab nationalist regimes and render them dependent upon Soviet support as fellow archenemies of the West. Nevertheless, Moscow exhibited an assuring profile before and during the Yom Kippur War, favoring negotiation and compromise over prolonged warfare, which once again reinforces the argument that ideology is far from being the main determinant in Russian foreign policy – at least in practice.

In order to avoid escalation by regional client states (like Syria and Israel) which have proven to be highly opportunistic and risk-prone in their foreign policy outlook – thus difficult to restrain; the US is urged to reach a mutually-agreeable consensus with the Soviet Union in the Middle East like those reached in the cases of Eastern Europe and Northeast Asia. For that matter, the authors elaborate on the unequalled promise of balance of power politics and the competitive coexistence of American and Russian influence over the region for every single regional country as well. That is because these countries would then be able to maintain their independence and stability in a constructive way; as a superpower consensus should prevent miscalculated attempts at raw military coercion. As for the two superpowers, the only practical way to secure their core national interests is also through "balance and equilibrium, a system capable of absorbing and containing a variety of shifting forces . . . in the absence of an established world order" (Campbell, 1974, p. 22). In all, "common interests and agreed limits to rivalry" must be based on the essential

principal of "denying the status of primacy" to any of these two superpowers on the regional chessboard (Campbell, 1974, p. 24).

2.2 The late Cold War era: Whither Soviet-Syrian relations?

One of the last major works on Soviet foreign policy that is written from a broadly realist perspective is *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War II to Gorbachev* (1990) by Galia Golan. On the basis of a comprehensive analysis of both the structural dynamics of international relations and the interplay of various domestic actors with a considerable degree of influence over Moscow's decision-making mechanisms; the study offers an illuminating interpretation of the fundamental dynamics driving Soviet-Syrian relations.

An esteemed Jewish scholar from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Golan exhibits a far more right-minded and academically well-grounded approach in comparison to the prominent Israeli scholars and statesmen whose works are introduced in the above paragraphs. Such may be partly credited to the study having been published under the auspices of the Cambridge University; though Golan herself is apparently one step ahead of most other scholars in the field as testified by the frequent references to her research and findings in almost all major works on the subject matter that came afterwards.

Apparently on the same page with McLaurin, Klieman, Lederer and Vucinich; Golan as well clearly manifests how pressing strategic necessities, the urge for state survival, and time-old geopolitical interests inevitably obliged Soviet decision-makers to fabricate new theoretical (i.e. Marxist-Leninist) precepts or selectively choose them out of a vast and diverse literature to legitimize their actual policies depending on the real-life circumstances of each period under scrutiny.

Thus, ideology is offered not as a root cause or motivator of foreign policy, but as an intellectual tool of legitimization that, by definition, rather ensues real life action to comply with underlying material needs. Another important conclusion of the study that the author repeatedly underlines is the uncontrollable nature of a defiant regional ally like Syria in stark contrast to the relative responsiveness and prudence of the Soviet Union.

The book's narrative follows a chronological timeline, spanning the entire period from the end of WWII to the 'new thinking' current under Gorbachev. The post-Brezhnev period, on which the study concentrates for the most part, is assessed through case studies of Soviet alliances with individual Middle Eastern nations. Within this framework, the three-way interaction between Soviet policies towards the Greater Middle East, the Third World, and the sole other superpower (i.e. the US) within a bipolar world system is analyzed with an eye to its relevance to Moscow's relations with the regimes in Damascus, Baghdad, Tehran, and Aden (the capital of South Yemen). The following discussion revolves around the defining role of power politics and the global-scale strategic rivalry between Washington and Moscow. Moreover, the author devotes a separate chapter to the assessment of the short yet crucial episode in Soviet-Middle Eastern relations that was heralded by the Gorbachev administration, for it embarked on a novel foreign policy course representing a dramatic deviation from the norm (i.e. realist and geopolitically-oriented thinking on the part of Moscow). As a matter of fact, it was under Gorbachev's rule that the traditional course of Soviet-American competition in the Third World, especially in the Arab Middle East, was fundamentally altered (Golan, 1990, pp. 258-90).

According to the author; the advent of the age of nuclear deterrence, decolonization in the Third World, and subsequent shifts in relative power balances had been the main drivers of policy recalibration and ideological reformulation on the part of Moscow, at least until Mikhail Gorbachev took power in 1985. In this light, she discerns the cyclical fluctuations and intricacies of Soviet-Middle Eastern relations, tracking the various crises and milestone events in the latter's recent past. In the same vein with those leading realist scholars who preceded her, she crucially concurs that the Middle East, particularly its 'Northern Tier', has always been viewed by Moscow as a security belt or buffer zone to keep hostile forces such as NATO troops or Islamic movements at arm's length. The fortification of the Black Sea against any encroachments by foreign navies right into the political-economic heart of European Russia was always a central concern for Moscow, and the Eastern Mediterranean – together with the Dardanelles and the Bosporus – constituted the key line of defense in that regard (Golan, 1990, pp. 58-59). Nevertheless, the Middle East mostly assumed an auxiliary role as a region contiguous to the Soviet Union's southwestern borders and thus contended for its quality rather as a 'wild card' by the two superpowers whose strategic priorities essentially rested in Eastern Europe and East Asia.

Likewise, Golan (1990) also ascribes the emerging urge for the Soviet navy's forward deployment as embodied in the formal introduction of the Soviet Mediterranean squadron in 1964 to the proliferation in US sea-borne nuclear missile launchers (i.e. Polaris submarines and later Poseidon submarines) in the Mediterranean (pp. 68-70) and the revelation of Soviet naval weakness during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 (pp. 12-13). Because it didn't have aircraft carriers or long-range blue-water technology that matched US capabilities; Moscow was in dire

need of permanent naval and air bases along its southern maritime periphery for logistical purposes. Against the backdrop of Russian military advisors having been expelled from Egypt in 1972, Syria remained the last strategic foothold of the Soviet Union in the maritime gateway that is the Eastern Mediterranean (Golan, 1990, p. 146).

Tracking the origins and development of Soviet-Syrian relations; Golan sheds light on the key role of the military-security dimension in cementing a long-term geo-strategic companionship between Moscow and Damascus. It was as early as 1954 when Moscow signed its first arms deal in the Middle East with Syria. In 1957, the Soviet Union under Khrushchev moved two combat ships to the naval facilities at Latakia for the first time, with the primary aim of intimidating Turkey and Israel. It was a time when Turkey, a NATO member backed by the US, was relocating its troops along its common border with Syria in response to the rise of communists in Damascus. In the same vein, the USSR came to the rescue of an ally with an overt promise of direct military intervention on its side for the first time in the case of Syria in 1957 (Golan, 1990, pp. 140-41). The bilateral relationship flourished in the latter half of the 1960s through the 1970s when Hafez al-Assad reigned over Damascus with an iron fist.

However, economic factors began to overshadow military-security concerns following the oil crisis of the 1970s, which provoked a renewed quest on the part of Western economies to discover new oilfields. With the subsequent oil glut in the 1980s; Soviet hard currency earnings were dealt a huge blow. The Soviet Union's geographic focus in the Middle East shifted afterwards from the Eastern Mediterranean to the oil-rich Gulf region and the Arabian Sea; bringing along the loosening of strategic ties with Syria in favor of Iraq. This process was further

catalyzed by the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. The Gulf states, which were rich in petro-dollars, were better able to create demand for a transforming Soviet economy at a time of austerity in contrast to an ally with dim economic prospects like Syria (Golan, 1990, pp. 278-82). On the other hand, the "repayment of Syria's roughly $15 billion debt to the Soviet Union, or at least the interest due, was destined to be the source of some problems" in this period (Golan, 1990, p. 279).

Against such a backdrop, "actual arms deliveries [to Syria] fell from the previous average of $2.3 billion per year to no more than $1 billion per year in the period 1985-9" under Gorbachev (Golan, 1990, p. 279). That client states like Syria were borrowing from the Gulf states to purchase Soviet arms, the exports of which comprised a significant portion of Soviet revenues, did not help either. With harder terms of trade, a limited amount of loans available, and higher interest rates; Soviet military or technical assistance was no longer deemed as attractive as it used to by Syria (Golan, 1990, pp. 278-82). The practical necessity of attracting Western economic assistance and investment further entailed some moderation on the part of Moscow with regard to its approach towards "radical regimes" and anti-Israeli tendencies in the Middle East. Considering that Damascus shined out as the epitome of "radicalism" in the region, the downward trend in Soviet-Syrian military relations was coupled by a deterioration in political ties in the following years.

Maybe the most detailed account of the developments in the Middle East and the trajectory of Soviet-Syrian relations in the last decade of the Cold War is offered in *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy since the Invasion of Afghanistan* (1991). The author, Robert O. Freedman, is a prominent scholar of the Soviet Union's relations with Middle Eastern nations at the Baltimore Hebrew University. Himself of Jewish background like Golan, Freedman's works and articles are cited in

some of the other books mentioned here. Also like Golan, he has enlightening articles on the specific topics that are elaborated in detail in the book. Moreover, he contributed with book chapters to several other works on the subject, some of which are included in this literature review.

Freedman's work is based on numerous interviews with top level diplomats, bureaucrats, as well as politicians from several Middle Eastern countries including Israel. On top of that, the author was also able to feature in interviews with Soviet academics and foreign policy-makers in a professional manner, thus the work serves as an invaluable compilation of different points of view. High ranking officials from the US State Department, experts from leading American think tanks like the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the Brookings Institution, and prominent figures from the Central Intelligence Agency, along with top-notch academics from the reputable universities of Israel like the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University, also contributed to the comprehensive research that was conducted by the author for the preparation of the book. Galia Golan as well is cited by the author for her invaluable insights and enthusiastic personal support to the preliminary research.

Difficult as it may be for any academic with an Israeli citizenship to cast aside emotional or political prejudice towards the subject matter; Freedman nevertheless manages to stick to a well-balanced and realistic attitude. To his credit, the author seems completely untroubled in carrying out this understandably challenging endeavor. In that regard, he stands at the mid-point between the overly optimistic/idealistic approach as assumed by many Western scholars in the wake of the proclamation of 'new thinking' under Gorbachev on the one end, and the usual Moscow-bashing tendency of the offensive/ideological school of thought which had

widespread appeal among conservative circles in America throughout the Cold War on the opposite end of the spectrum.

After an introductory chapter on the background of Soviet-Middle Eastern relations between the end of WWII and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the author embarks on a chronological survey of the more recent developments in the field in a highly systematic manner from a realist standpoint. Throughout successive chapters, Freedman examines Soviet foreign policy towards individual Middle Eastern nations, Syria first and foremost, under succeeding Russian administrations led by Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov, Konstantin Chernenko, and Mikhail Gorbachev who held the reins of power in Moscow between 1979 and 1989. The narrative revolves around the political, economic, and strategic relevance of every incident on the regional stage for Moscow between 1979 and 1989. Emphasis is laid on the pull and push factors that have drawn various Middle Eastern states and Russia together during this period.

As Freedman agrees with the realist scholars of Russian-Middle Eastern relations whose studies are reviewed in the above paragraphs; 'Southern Tier' Arab nations had no traumatic experience of direct Russian interference or imperialist "overlordship" in contrast to the 'Northern Tier' countries of Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan. Instead, they are historically aggrieved due to persistent Western incursions targeting their sovereignty. Greater Syria, as a historical, cultural, and geopolitical entity clustered around a core axis along the Damascus-Aleppo line, got a particularly raw deal as the French carved out the province of Antioch (Hatay) and Lebanon from the newly-founded mandate's borderlands right after the British decided to drive a wedge between Syria on the one hand and its Palestinian mandate and the Kingdom of Jordan on the other through the delineation of artificial borders

post-WWI (Freedman, 1991, pp. 15-16). The last straw that broke the camel's back was the foundation of the staunchly pro-Western Israel right after the end of WWII and its continued claims on Syrian territory. Thus, Damascus was inevitably pulled into Moscow's orbit.

As for the factors that pushed the USSR to single out Syria as the centerpiece of its Middle East strategy; they are attributable to the relentless pursuit of ultimate victory in the geopolitical game of tic-tac-toe that had been continually played out between Moscow and Washington on a global scale since the immediate aftermath of WWII. The historically and geographically induced task of maintaining the freedom of passage through the strategic waterways surrounding the Middle East, from the Turkish Straits to the Gulf of Aden, is presented as the second most important parameter in the Soviet Union's overall strategy in the Middle East. In this regard, the author further argues that stability across the entire region that lies right next to the Soviet Union's southern flank and straddles the whole route from the Indian Ocean to the Sea of Azov is of utmost strategic value for the 'defense of the motherland'. And Syria holds the key to region-wide stability, on land and sea alike, thanks to its geographic location that puts it at the intersection point of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Kurdish imbroglio, Iran-Iraq frictions, and the strategic competition between Turkey and Russia.

Within this framework, the author emphasizes the key role played by Syria as far as Soviet foreign policy calculations towards its 'southern flank' are concerned, especially after the "loss" of Egypt. When Gamal Abdel Nasser, the so-called "linchpin" of Soviet Middle East strategy, died in 1970; Russia's right of access to the airbases in northern Egypt was endangered. Another reason for the Soviet loss of influence over Egypt was the reluctance on the former's part to throw the necessary

diplomatic or military weight behind the latter during and after the Six Day War of June 1967 which resulted in the Israeli seizure of the entire Sinai Peninsula. As a result, Russia began to seek an airbase in Syria in order to protect its naval deployment on the country's Mediterranean coast; because the USSR had to compensate for its lack of aircraft carriers by way of acquiring coastal airbases (Freedman, 1991, pp. 48-49). Thanks to Syria's consent, "Moscow was assured of a formal presence in the very heart of the Arab world" (Freedman, 1991, p. 93).

Notwithstanding such an increasing degree of strategic intimacy between Moscow and Damascus though, the former has never given up sober-mindedness and realism in its foreign policy practices during the Cold War. As the author rightfully puts it; "since 1983, while continuing to supply Syria with sophisticated arms, Moscow has not enabled it to have the parity with Israel that Assad has long wanted" (Freedman, 1991, p. 321). Likewise, despite their recently formalized alliance with Syria; neither Brezhnev nor Andropov interfered in Lebanon to support Syrian troops fighting Israelis and Americans in 1982 and 1983 respectively (Freedman, 1991, p. 324). In that regard, Moscow's repeated plots to solidify a joint "anti-imperialist front" among Arab nations against Israel were outbalanced in every single instance by a covert yet stronger desire for a continued stalemate in practice, in the form of frozen conflicts. Moscow's main rationale here was to keep on exploiting this essential dispute in Middle Eastern politics, thus retain its strategic vitality while also fueling anti-American sentiment.

On the contrary, the US and Israel have developed a counter strategy of fanning the flames of conflict between individual Arab states in order to divert their attention away from Israel and complicate Soviet policies towards promoting convergence among its diverse client states in the region. But the resulting political

chaos served neither America nor Russia, as exemplified clearly in the reckless foreign policies of Afghanistan after the Saur Revolution of 1978, Saddam's Iraq, Gadhafi's Libya, fundamentalist Iran, and of course, Hafez al-Assad's Syria; where opportunist dictators or hawkish factions have managed to pit the two superpowers against each other at a regional level thanks to the strategic elbowroom they were offered by a global-scale Cold War. Moreover, the more heated frictions between Moscow and Washington became, the greater the chances for independent regional actors to embroil the two superpowers in direct and unwarranted conflict for the sake of their narrowly-defined interests.

Rather than offering a chronological survey of the political, military, and incidental details pertaining to the trajectory of bilateral relations between Moscow and individual Middle Eastern nations like Golan and Freedman did in their respective works; *Soviet Strategy in the Middle East* (1990) by George W. Breslauer aims to reformat the cumulative academic knowledge in a way that fits into an analytical scheme and makes sense from the lens of international relations theory. For that purpose, the study gives wide coverage to Russia's strategic thinking as concerns Syria; as the latter is deemed to lie at the intersection point of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Lebanese Civil War, and the Iran-Iraq War. By dwelling exclusively on these three issues, Breaslauer seeks to identify the essential *realpolitik* impulses that withhold Moscow from pursuing expansionist, assertive, or extremely competitive policies towards Middle Eastern nations on a constant basis. In the same vein with Golan and Freedman, Breslauer assumes a relatively impartial and scientific attitude when assessing Moscow's mixed ambitions towards the Middle East. Likewise, he concludes that the key to sustainable collaboration between the two superpowers lies in the accurate assessment of the various geopolitical dynamics

that can be manipulated in a way to yield some sort of a balance of power; which would in turn help avoid any potential conflict.

The book is an edited work by George W. Breslauer, who is a leading American political science professor specialized in Russian foreign policy. The editor himself also wrote six of the eleven chapters included in the book, which was jointly published by the University of Berkeley and Stanford University in 1990 as a compilation of articles submitted to an academic conference held by the former – plus additional material and subsequent updates. Again, many participants to the conference in question were from Israeli universities. While preliminary research and the conference were sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation; several top-notch Jewish scholars like Yaacov Ro'I and Galia Golan; whose names would any student or researcher inevitably encounter repeatedly when scanning almost any major work assessing the Soviet Union's relations with Middle Eastern nations, are also included among the contributors.

Breslauer's is yet another study, the findings of which confirm the conviction that the Middle Eastern sub-region has essentially been of secondary importance when compared with Eastern Europe and Northeast Asia in the eyes of Russian decision-makers. Nevertheless, it outstripped all the other Cold War arenas across the Third World as far as its strategic value is concerned. Above all, the study reveals a unique quality characterizing this specific theater of the Cold War: Curiously, it was only the geopolitical rows that occasionally emerged over incessant disputes in the Middle East, particularly those involving countries along the Eastern Mediterranean, that brought Washington and Moscow to the brink of all-out confrontation in the past. As a matter of fact, two of the three Cold War occasions when Moscow mobilized its own combat troops to confront American-backed forces concerned the

protection of Syria (in 1973 and 1983). The USSR also warned the US twice (in 1957 and 1967) through the "hot line" that it would directly intervene against American-backed forces (Turkish and Israeli respectively) in protection of Syria (Miller, 1990, pp. 250-51).

From this point forth, the author concludes that Cold War-style competition between two global superpowers tended to evolve rapidly into a zero-sum game at each specific instance of escalation between Middle Eastern clients because of the very nature of inter-state rivalry in an "undefined" regional sub-system. Based on the fundamental assumption that the international system has an "inherently anarchic and conflictual nature;" most states, according to the 'balance of power' theory, would be "willing to suffer more to defend what they already have [i.e. the status quo] than to gain something new" in case "an equilibrium exists in the capabilities of major centers of power in the system" (Miller, 1990, p. 248). Against such a backdrop; "the implication for crises is that a patron defending the survival of its client will have the edge in the 'balance of resolve' over the protector of a client trying to challenge the status quo and thereby disrupting the great power balance" (Miller, 1990, p. 255).

Such continued to be the case concerning Moscow's strategic hold over Damascus within the framework of the Middle East subsystem, where the US had constantly been on the offensive whereas the USSR mostly embraced a defensive position. The Kremlin's initial involvement in the region following the death of Stalin came in response to the establishment of the anti-Soviet Central Treaty Organization (also known as the Baghdad Pact) between pro-Western regional states in 1955 and the joint British-French-Israeli intervention in Egypt during the Suez Crisis of 1956. Also, it was prospective Soviet clients, Egypt and Syria first and foremost, that initially invited Moscow to interfere, and not vice versa. As a matter of

fact, the very imperative behind the acquisition of access rights to naval bases and port facilities by way of outflanking Turkey on the part of the USSR was motivated by a fear of maritime containment by the US particularly after the emplacement of nuclear Polaris submarines in the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis. On top of that, the fact that the USSR's client states, Syria and Egypt first and foremost, "have typically lost the wars [against American allies] . . . has created a conspicuous embarrassment that has deepened Soviet determination not to be driven from the region" (Breslauer, 1990, p. 10). As a result, every single Middle Eastern conflict was consistently elevated to the status of a matter of prestige and *pacta sunt servanda* in the eyes of Russian decision-makers.

Yet, even in the strictly bipolar world of the Cold War era was Moscow compelled to rule out ideologically-driven considerations of global or even regional hegemony due to the real-life constraints, trade-offs, and obstructions it has repeatedly encountered (Breslauer, 1990, p. 12). In the case of the Middle Eastern theater, Moscow "could afford neither to abandon the competitive struggle in the region nor to ignore the requirement of explicitly coordinating with the United States on a sustained basis." Such a realist outlook had Moscow seek "mutually agreeable terms that would reduce the escalatory potential of the Arab-Israeli conflict" (Breslauer, 1990, pp. 5-6). However, this quest on the part of Moscow was in direct clash with the ambitious objectives of its regional clients like Syria for the most part, as they "have stakes in the outcome of local conflicts that are greater than those of the external powers" except when such conflicts lead to direct military confrontation between their patrons due to prior strategic entanglements (Miller, 1990, p. 263).

A similar clash of interest was also valid in the case of American-Israeli relations. Therefore, the only viable way to preserve their interests on the part of the

two superpowers was through "mutual restraint and caution" if they wanted "to prevent their clients or allies in the region from unleashing wars" and "to temper the most radical demands of their clients" in an effective way (Miller, 1990, p. 263). However, the author argues that US unilateralism, as exemplified in the persistent efforts to exclude the USSR from the Arab-Israeli peace process or repeated threats against the Syrian regime, inevitably instigated the Kremlin to strike back in order to compensate for the strategic setbacks it had suffered as a result. Neither did the constant deprival of Moscow from any appreciation of its essentially flexible bargaining posture help resolve persisting regional crises, the prolongation of which continues to endanger Washington's interests and reputation equally. Thus, only when the diametrical urges of competition and collaboration are reconciled will the two superpowers be able to exert a convincing degree of pressure upon their unpredictable regional allies.

The Superpowers and the Middle East (1991) by Alan R. Taylor is another American academic publication that was written at the heyday of optimism towards a permanent understanding between Gorbachev's USSR and the US Again, the author essentially argues that Russian-American rivalry on a global scale, which is an inevitable consequence of the anarchic nature of the international system, should nevertheless prevent Moscow and Washington from allowing themselves to be dragged into a vicious cycle of counterproductive frictions over risk-prone steps by their extremely fragmented regional partners. Instead, the two should coordinate their efforts on the slippery slope that is the Middle Eastern strategic arena in order to advance their common geopolitical objectives; which are often inherently incompatible with those promoted by the obsessively antagonistic affiliates of both superpowers.

Furthermore, the author even argues that such a recognition of a long-term collusion of superpower interests within a highly-contested and central geographic space like the Middle East would also serve the best interests of major regional powers like Turkey and Iran. So long as Moscow and Washington operate within a formal framework based on a defined code of conduct, and to the extent each power is cognizant of its strategic limitations, will Middle Eastern nations will have the upper hand in convincing outside powers in the necessity of respecting their national sovereignty. That would in turn allow regional clients, both small and large, a broader strategic elbowroom during peacetime, and contribute to their political stability. Hence, preserving a regional balance of power will profit all the competing actors involved in the region's troubled affairs alike, as long as the two extreme scenarios, i.e. that of a Cold War on the one hand and a formal "cartel" between "imperialist" intruders on the other, are both avoided.

For that matter, the author perceives incessant tensions in the region as deriving from the fundamental difficulty of reaching a final agreement upon clearly-demarcated national borders and zones of influence in the particular case of the Middle Eastern subsystem within the larger Cold War context. Such an inherently volatile political situation is aggravated even further with occasional power vacuums resulting from constant shifts in the regional (im)balance of power. In light of an overview of the various flashpoints from where such power vacuums tend to originate, the author concludes that an ultimate consensus between the two superpowers should give utmost recognition to the solid geopolitical link between developments in countries like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan as well as the situation of the 40-50 million-strong Islamic population living under Soviet rule in Central Asia

and the Caucasus; i.e. traditional extensions of the Greater Middle Eastern realm (Taylor, 1991, pp. 175-76).

In an optimistic leap of faith, the author predicts that ideology and emotion that had occasionally misguided American policies on this extremely volatile stage – particularly in the case of those targeted at Washington's main regional client in Tel Aviv – would inevitably yield to realist thinking that takes cognizance of geopolitical realities. After all, such was exactly what happened in the case of Russian foreign policy towards its primary client in the region, i.e. Syria. In the years following the abrupt abrogation of Cairo's alliance treaty with Moscow in 1976; "Syria was persistently courted by the Kremlin as the potential leader of a new Soviet-sponsored front that would operate without Egypt" (Taylor, 1991, p. 144). Yet, with Gorbachev's assumption of office, Russian foreign policy was swiftly readjusted to reflect a more pragmatic and cautious attitude towards Syria, as required by the 'new thinking' concept. Moscow's rising aversion to active involvement in Middle Eastern affairs essentially emanated from the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan and its consequent loss of power in the international arena in the latter half of the 1980s. Thus, the once-assertive rhetoric promoted by the Kremlin outside its borders was incrementally toned down in accordance with the exigencies of the emerging strategic setting. Long-term strategies dressed up as Moscow's benevolent 'grand vision' faded into the background in direct proportion to the country's declining power-projection capacity abroad. In the author's view, all this attested to the secondary importance of ideology, due to its essentially reactive character *vis-à-vis* primordial and realistic concerns.

2.3 Interregnum: 1991-2011

Published as an edited work, L. Carl Brown's *Diplomacy in the Middle East: The International Relations of Regional and Outside Powers* (2001) is the outcome of a research project that was sponsored by Princeton University and consists of a comparative collection of single-state surveys. Again a product of Western (Anglo-American) academic inquiry, Brown's work looks at the foreign policies of major state actors in the Middle East, while also shedding light on the approaches of external powers towards the region. Within this framework, the study explores Russian and American strategies in the Middle East with an eye to how they interact with the intrinsic socio-political dynamics and geographic parameters of the region.

Above all, the study reflects an ambitious attempt to identify enduring, consistent, and cyclical patterns that impel the foreign policy behavior and geopolitical reflexes of regional clusters of population, economic activity, and political power over the span of centuries. Throughout the ensuing chapters that are penned down by different authors, one can observe an overall emphasis on the determinative impact of the Middle East's time-old historical and geographical characteristics on its modern-day political outlook. On the basis of the fundamental precepts as put forth by the competing geopolitical theories of the famous American naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan and the leading British geographer of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Sir Halford Mackinder; the study downgrades the role of unifying ideologies like Arabism, Islamism, socialism, liberalism, or Ba'athism throughout the Arab world *vis-à-vis* the persistence of state borders and interests. From this viewpoint, it spares two separate chapters for a realistic assessment of Russian and Syrian foreign policy in the Middle East.

In the same manner with the leading realist scholars of Soviet-Middle Eastern relations whose research had certainly cast a spell on him, L. Carl Brown, in his elaborate work, regards Cold War rivalries over the Middle Eastern theater as a direct continuation of the 'Great Game' of the colonial era. According to the corresponding conclusions of the various contributors to the study, with the advent of decolonization, Nikita Khrushchev acted fast to impose an updated version of Moscow's centuries-old strategic design upon its extended southern periphery, i.e. a "newly-available" geographical space where retreating colonial powers were now being replaced by a plethora of weak states. That he achieved by way of "penetration, influence building, and strategic maneuver in the vast noncontiguous regions of the Arab world" (Rubinstein, 2001, p. 82). From the 1950s onwards, conflict was widespread in the newly-available diplomatic arena of the Third World, particularly across the Arab world, which allowed the USSR to feature in.

In the case of the Arab Middle East, one should also figure in the intrinsic dynamics of an extremely unstable subsystem of international relations. With borders and alignments in a state of constant flux, Moscow saw an opportunity to pit its regional client states against those of the US as part of a greater geopolitical struggle between the two superpowers. As demonstrated with utmost clarity in its dealings with Hafez al-Assad's Syria, Moscow's *modus vivendi* during and after Khrushchev "reflected a keen appreciation of local and regional power realities, and a sharp eye for strategic opportunity" with an ultimate objective to "fashion a regional environment conducive to the advancement of its geopolitical and military aims in the context of the rivalry with the United States" (Rubinstein, 2001, p. 85). Yet, this dangerous game for influence later turned to the advantage of reckless regimes in the region, thus further aggravating the inherent volatility of the Middle Eastern arena.

Against such a backdrop came the ultimate demise of the Soviet Union in December 1991. Under the new President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, the country "was shorn of about 24 percent of its imperial domain and almost 40 percent of its population." For that matter, "the relinquishment of territory in Transcaucasia and Central Asia ended three hundred years of imperial expansion, and left Russia [artificially] removed from the Middle Eastern arena" (Rubinstein, 2001, p. 75). On the other hand, Western powers have lost no time to embark on an aggressive campaign with the purpose of expanding their clout over the former Soviet realm in the immediate post-Cold War period.

Reflecting on Russia's deep resentment of this emergent phenomenon; Alvin S. Rubinstein (2001), who wrote one of the most intriguing chapters of Brown's book, quotes the former Russian foreign minister and prominent scholar of Middle Eastern politics, Yevgeny Primakov, referring to ravenous NATO encroachments into former Soviet territories as "possibly the biggest mistake made since the end of the Cold War" (p. 91). According to the account of post-Cold War geopolitical context as the author attributes to Primakov and likeminded Russian figures, the renewed NATO push to completely eradicate any remnants of Russian influence in the historical periphery of the geographic 'heartland', i.e. across the 'rimland', will surely backfire. As a rule of thumb, action creates reaction, and power vacuums are filled by those who can sustain their presence because geopolitical space cannot be left empty for long. Basing his main conclusion on the theory of 'imperial overstretch' as applied to the current global behavior of the United States, the author predicts the coming end of the unipolar era in the international system and argues that US hegemony will no longer be sufficient to account for how things work in Middle Eastern diplomacy as the region becomes increasingly self-contained.

Another major study on the subject matter from the post-Cold War period was produced by Yevgeny Primakov himself. Published in 2009, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present* is an eye-opening and highly detailed memoir by this esteemed Russian scholar, diplomat, and statesman. Throughout the book; the world-renowned Russian Arabist who also served in the past as the Speaker of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR (1989-90), as well as the Foreign Intelligence Chief (1991-96), Foreign Minister (1996-8), and Prime Minister (1999) of the Russian Federation respectively, offers a highly personal account of the political processes and critical junctures that more-or-less continue to characterize post-colonial *al-Mashreq* ("the Arab East"). In doing that, he shares the practical expertise of a top level "insider" with fist-hand insights into the various topics concerning the last half century of Middle Eastern politics with a larger Russian and international audience.

In this respect, the book should be seen as a rather casual account of years of hands-on experience on the part of a veteran diplomat who apparently devoted his entire youth to field studies throughout the region in his capacity as a journalist and academic before entering politics. Successive chapters are full with direct quotations from the author's numerous intimate meetings and references to his personal communications with the most prominent leaders in the region's modern history, including Gamal Abdel Nasser, Yasser Arafat, Hafez al-Assad, Rafiq Hariri, and Muammar Gadhafi. Therefore, the book offers a matchless guide to understanding how Russia's historical attitude and strategy towards the multiplicity of regional actors have been gradually shaped over a span of decades.

The author's outspokenly realistic approach to Russia's multi-faceted interests in the Middle East reflects an in-depth understanding of the major

geopolitical variables that continue to loom large over the Kremlin's foreign policy calculations. Within this framework, emphasis is laid on the real-life repercussions of Russia's multi-confessional nature, and how these shape Russian strategies towards individual Middle Eastern nations, Syria first and foremost. Primakov traces Russian fears concerning its own Muslim minority back to the early post-WWII era. As evidenced by the advice of the then US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1953 that Egypt should assist US efforts to instigate an Islamic uprising within Russia and China, Western powers have always been well aware of this strategic "achilles heel" on the part of Russia. Exploiting this facet of Russian geopolitics was indeed the main rationale behind covert Western support to radical Islamists in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979, which had precedents in US foreign policy towards the USSR under both Truman and Eisenhower (Primakov, 2009, pp. 126-28).

As for Soviet-Syrian relations, Primakov gives wide coverage to the bilateral frictions that were caused by Syria's unwarranted invasion of Lebanon in 1976. Thereby, he takes the lid off the extremely complex and highly volatile web of strategic calculations, diplomacy, and political affiliations as vividly demonstrated in his account of the civil war that ravaged the Middle Eastern microcosm of Lebanon (Primakov, 2009, pp. 227-33). Primakov further manages to lay bare the persistent attempts by small regional affiliates and partners of the US and the USSR – especially Israel in the case of the former and Syria the latter – to manipulate their superpower patrons in order to force their hand into direct involvement on their side in regional conflicts through *fait accompli* maneuvers. According to the author, it is particularly due to the resulting empowerment of unrestrained regional clients that the pseudo-unipolar world system post-1991 has proven catastrophic for both Middle

Eastern stability and US interests at large. Therefore, he favors increased Russian involvement in joint international efforts at building a stable regional order; which he believes has been the common objective of both superpowers during the Cold War despite all their differences.

A rather more theoretical and systematic account of how changes in Russian geopolitics and the international system in the post-Cold War era were reflected on the Middle Eastern chessboard through the 1990s is offered by Talal Nizameddin's *Russia and the Middle East: Toward a New Foreign Policy* (1999). Organized in the form of a case study, Nizameddin's work compares and contrasts this period in Russia's relations with the Middle East with the post-WWII period that lasted until the rise of Gorbachev to power in order to demonstrate that at the end of the day, "primitive" and "traditional" state interests were not superseded by idealist internationalism in international relations as popularly expected among liberal circles in the West from the latter half of the 1980s onwards.

Nizameddin's discussions mostly dwell on Russia's changing outlook and perspective towards the West post-1991. To shed light on this phenomenon, he explores the geopolitical dynamics behind the "re-orientation" of Russian foreign policy from its previous obsession with hegemonic rivalry to a pragmatic pursuit of narrow national interest. Throughout successive chapters, the author makes use of relevant historical documents such as summit meeting transcripts, newly unclassified government reports, and diplomatic papers. Also testified by the number and depth of the interviews he carried out with key political and diplomatic figures (including the former President of the Palestinian National Authority Yasser Arafat himself) is the author's vast personal network comprising prominent politicians, top-notch academics, and experienced journalists which he owes to repeated field trips. Further

included in the book are occasional references to the various works of leading academics in this field such as Efrain Karsh, Alex Pravda, Roy Allison, George W. Breslauer, and Robert O. Freedman who are counted among the "moderate" and "realist" interpreters of Soviet foreign policy behavior. In this respect, Nizameddin's work qualifies as one of most useful guides into the post-1991 period in Soviet-Middle Eastern relations and Russian foreign policy for the purposes of this thesis, thanks to its factual and even-handed presentation of relevant theoretical discussions in Russia as well as among the Western academia.

Defining his work largely within the theoretical framework of neo-realism, Nizameddin scrutinizes the systemic dynamics of international relations in relation to the particular case of Russo-Middle Eastern relations. For that purpose, he sheds light on the scholarly debates concerning the nature of Russia's post-1991 foreign policy. The narrative follows a chronological timeline revealing how the "Atlanticist" current as spearheaded by Boris Yeltsin, Mikhail Gorbachev, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Andrei Kozyrev who were enthusiasts for a new liberal world order governed by international law and human rights has gradually yielded to an overwhelmingly "Eurasianist" approach to foreign policy which emphasizes realism and competitive strategy. A comparative analysis of the views put forth by liberal internationalist Francis Fukuyama and Sergei Stankevich – a Russian proponent of realism – is offered to point out the fundamental dynamics of power relations and the enduring nature of geopolitical parameters in the case of Russian-Syrian relations post-1991 despite the overall theoretical confusion that loomed large over the entire period in question.

After the initial shock stemming from the sudden dissolution of the USSR was overcome; an overall consensus began to emerge among foreign policy circles

and the higher echelons of political power in Moscow that Gorbachev's argument for prioritizing interdependence and multilateral cooperation was ultimately discredited by the lasting relevance of "high politics." That meant the inevitable prioritization of territorial disputes and security concerns over "fancy talk" in foreign policy-making. The breakout of the Chechen crisis was the essential factor that pointed at the urgency of revived assertiveness on the part of Moscow to avoid the spread of chaos and uncertainty along its southern periphery in the early 1990s (Nizameddin, 1999, pp. 77-84, p. 90, pp. 97-98). Partly in reaction to the Western support for Chechen independence in this period, the balance between pro-Westernists and neo-imperialists was shifting to the latter's favor, with idealists rapidly losing ground. There were even those arguing for a much more aggressive policy than what was being called for by the likes of pragmatic nationalist Gennady Zyuganov. Such a misguided approach was being declaimed by the infamous Vladimir Zhirinovsky – a populist Russian politician who is widely regarded as the flag-bearer of extreme nationalism, pseudo-imperialism, and neo-communism (Nizameddin, 1999, p. 83, p. 86, p. 263). Nevertheless, a sensible brand of realism has ultimately prevailed over both pro-Western idealism and the offensive discourse of the overly-ambitious far-right.

As the author concurs with the moderately realist current within Russia as represented by the likes of Primakov, Russia cannot be expected to turn inward and limit itself, as no country with such vast potential and expansive borders could. Nevertheless, there emerged a pressing need to replace the expansionist policies of the old with a relatively narrow definition of national interests as the defining framework for legitimate action abroad, which had essentially been the case (Nizameddin, 1999, p. 254). This sort of a "pragmatic 'national' perspective" was by

no means contradictory to the "past [Soviet] prejudices and accepted [ideological] norms," but rather corresponded to an updated version of the old tradition in line with the emerging geopolitical context that was largely unfavorable for Russia (Nizameddin, 1999, p. 9). As indicated by the author, it was observed by the pro-Western Foreign Minister Kozyrev himself later on that none else than Russia could secure stability and order in the ex-Soviet republics as demonstrated by the successive territorial and ethnic crises in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Moldova, and the Baltic States, which have become chronic over time.

Within this framework, the author shows how the realities of international relations and the strategic rivalry with the West even compelled Yeltsin and some other leading pro-Atlanticists (radical idealists) like his Foreign Minister Kozyrev to admit the limitations of abstract internationalist notions in the face of the inherent dynamics of power relations between sovereign states on the international stage. Such a sudden realization was particularly definitive in the case of Russia's relations with its immediate neighborhood, i.e. the ex-Soviet realm and the Greater Middle East (Nizameddin, 1999, p. 261). As a matter of fact, NATO's ceaseless push for further penetration into Eastern Europe and the Caucasus can be traced back to this period. Likewise, despite the fact that no obstacles to regional cooperation with Russia existed in the early years of the Cold War era, the US was more than eager to fill the power vacuum left behind by the now-defunct Soviet Union across the Middle East. That is, Washington's actions in this period "became ever-more intransigent against Russian interests as well as Arab interests and increasingly supportive of Israeli policies" (Nizameddin, 1999, p. 266).

In response, it was again Kozyrev himself who reinstated his country's key national interests on the Middle Eastern stage as early as 1994. The author argues

that the Middle East continued to serve as the most active battlefield for great power rivalry after Kozyrev's term in office. Yevgeny Primakov, who succeeded him as Russia's Foreign Minister, once again pushed his country back to the stage during the Gulf War. Primakov was particularly successful at reviving Russian pro-activism following his Middle East tour of October 1997, at a critical juncture which coincided with the end of the Israeli offensive campaign against Lebanon – a.k.a. "Operation Grapes of Wrath" (Nizameddin, 1999, p. 176). Moreover, Primakov's term also saw Syria's reemergence as a key strategic ally of Russia from the lens of the latter's long-term geopolitical interests after more than a decade of neglect. Maintaining Syria as a counterweight against US client states (Turkey and Israel above all) in the region had once again taken primacy as the main objective of Russian foreign policy towards the entire region (Nizameddin, 1999, p. 167). For that matter, Moscow wanted a leading role in the Syrian-Israeli track of the Middle Eastern peace process that was being brokered by the US (Nizameddin, 1999, p. 164) as a co-sponsor that would assist joint efforts concerning peace-building in the Lebanese front as well (Nizameddin, 1999, p. 173). And Golan Heights negotiations that concerned Israeli-Syrian relations were central to this vision (Nizameddin, 1999, p. 165).

In conclusion, Nizameddin agrees with Primakov's forecast of an emerging multipolar world order, which he thinks would surely succeed the transient stage of US unipolarity that identified the first decade of the post-Cold War era. Nevertheless, he assumes a rather constructive and optimistic attitude regarding the prospects for international collaboration by way of maintaining an overall balance of power. Likewise, the author sees sustained stability in the Middle East as a probability should a "responsible and rational" approach as promoted by the centrist brand of

realism take precedence over ideological reflexes in Washington as well. According to the author, competition and cooperation went hand in hand between Moscow and Washington through the Cold War era, which testified to the viability of striking a pragmatic balance between the diverse interests of former Russian and American allies in the Middle East in the forthcoming period.

A similar endeavor to introduce a valid theoretical background that accounts for the cyclical fluctuations in Russian foreign policy within a post-Cold War context is *Geopolitics, Geography, and Strategy* (1999) by Colin S. Gray and Geoffrey Sloan. In this edited work, which is a rather all-inclusive compilation of theoretical analyses by multiple authors, one can observe a consistent attempt to clarify the uncertainty that surrounds the term 'geopolitics', which can be taken to mean a lot of things at once. With a stated purpose to maintain the link between theory and historical reality on the ground against the backdrop of the emerging strategic environment of the early twenty-first century, the study adapts theoretical insights from the previous century to the evolving circumstances surrounding Russian-American and Russian-Middle Eastern relations from a sensibly realistic perspective.

Published as a special issue of the Journal of Strategic Studies; *Geopolitics, Geography, and Strategy* brings together the updated views of leading contemporary authorities on the subject. The various articles included in the volume converge around an overall argument that geopolitical urges had remained the driving force behind international relations as well as the main point of reference by academic inquiries into global politics throughout the Cold War era, although relevant assumptions and findings used to be thinly disguised under an ideological cover in most accounts. Still, explicit and vocal mentioning of geopolitical precepts had been a taboo, which resulted in the formulation of "realist" accounts of international

relations as an "appropriate" substitute. For that matter, the degradation of the discipline of geopolitics to the status of an "intellectual pariah" was essentially rooted in the widespread popular reaction to the immense tragedies of WWII, as the offensive school of geopolitical thought – pioneered by German ideologues like Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), Rudolf Kjellen (1864-1922), and Karl Haushofer (1869-1946) – was what fueled the inhumane ideology of Nazism (Herwig, 1999, pp. 236-38).

Such remained the case at least until Kissinger both rejuvenated and popularized the term 'geopolitics' in his 1979 book *The White House Years* to combat liberal idealism as well as conservative anti-communism (Sloan & Gray, 1999, p. 1). Today, the need to update the core assumptions of geopolitical thinking is more urgent than ever with the ascendancy of globalization which is accompanied by an increasingly multipolar world order. Whereas post-modernism and critical theory began to erode the already-fragile reputation of geopolitics in the late 1990s (Tuathail, 1999, p. 109). To counter this confusing intellectual trend and draw practical lessons pertaining to the twenty-first century context; the authors apply British and American geopolitical theses to the critical junctures throughout 20th century politics, particularly the Soviet Union's sudden implosion.

As a matter of fact, Sir Halford Mackinder, who can be regarded as the mastermind behind the idea of encircling the 'heartland' with buffer states along the 'rimland' – which, in turn, formed the basis for the containment policies of the 20th century – was also the very person who remarked for the first time in history the importance of balance of power politics for maintaining some sort of a democratic stability for all mankind to enjoy (Sloan, 1999, p. 24). Therefore, the book's quest to adapt geopolitical concepts to the early twenty-first century should be read as a

timely effort in the name of finding a realistic solution to today's persistent conflicts rather than an attempt to revert back to "fascism", which seems to be the case for the war-mongering proponents of aggressive "realism" like the ultra-nationalist followers of Zhirinovsky in Russia.

Against the backdrop of Russia's unpredicted withdrawal "from Prague to Smolensk" with the end of the Cold War, the global geopolitical picture in the late 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century was extremely blurry. After having to retreat to where it was three centuries ago in geo-strategic terms, the newly-independent Russian Federation was confronted by a cocktail of novel security concerns and a severe identity crisis (Erickson, 1999, pp. 243-46, p. 259). The latter emanated out of the ideological vacuum of the post-communist era, and compelled Russia to revert to geopolitical thinking as all other "alternative" mindsets were exhausted by the very exigencies of Russia's survivalist struggle. Indeed, the Geopolitics and Security Department under the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences was founded by the Russian General Staff itself as early as 1991 (Sloan & Gray, 1999, p. 10). All this attest to the historical and institutional roots of geopolitical thinking deep down in the Russian psyche, only to be maintained under the ideological blanket of communism by the USSR that seemed to detest it but nevertheless followed a strictly realist line of action in its foreign policy. In stark contrast to the situation in Russia though, the Western world was haunted by the euphoria of its victory, which it widely believed ushered in the "ultimate glory" of liberal democracy as argued in Francis Fukuyama's ill-fated "masterpiece", *The End of History and the Last Man*.

How Russian statesmen and academia elaborated the emerging strategic landscape through the first decade following the dissolution of the Soviet Union

constitutes the main focus of the last chapter by John Erickson. In that regard, the author identifies the most determinative elements of national security and geopolitics in the post-Cold War era in reference to the competing points raised by major Russian thinkers in this period. The corresponding ideas and emphases of Russian thinkers are systematically introduced in this chapter, demonstrating how ethnic and religious frontiers, concerns about domestic stability, the role of strategic reserves, and energy security – as well as their interplay with diverse economic variables which have gained further significance in the era of globalization – have begun to play an increasingly greater role in Moscow's understanding of its strategic environment in parallel with mounting geopolitical challenges like the Chechen crisis or the civil war in Tajikistan in the 1990s.

For that matter, the author also sheds light on the evolution of Russia's 'near abroad' concept in reference to the newly-independent members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); while offering key insights into the revival of Russian geopolitical thought by reputable figures like Gennady Zyuganov, Dr. Alexei Arbatov, Admiral V. S. Pirumov, and Yuri Afanasyev. Another important contribution to the literature by this volume is its meticulous analysis of successive National Security Concept papers issued under the foreign ministries of Andrei Kozyrev, Yevgeny Primakov, and Igor Ivanov through a comprehensive survey which puts the secondary role of ideological "rationales" *vis-à-vis* real life exigencies in a crystal-clear manner.

In contrast to *Geopolitics, Geography, and Strategy*, Aleksandr Dugin's *Osnovy geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii* (The Foundations of Geopolitics: Russia's Geopolitical Future), which was published in 1997, can be located at the far-right end of the abovementioned intellectual spectrum. It is widely

– and rightfully – deemed the epitome of offensive realist thought in post-Cold War Russia (Shekhovtsov, 2009). Though relatively more moderate than the Zhirinovsky-led discourse that coincided with their rise into prominence, Dugin's ideas are diametrically opposed to the rightminded and academically-credible points that are raised by Primakov, Nizameddin, or the rest of their realist contemporaries for the most part.

In his strongly-worded work which strikes the eye with its highly assertive claims, Dugin promotes what he terms as "New Eurasianism." It was especially in recent years that his extravagant nationalism as encapsulated by this term has elevated him to the status of a highly influential figure among the political elite in Moscow. Today, Dugin is known to be closely affiliated with the Kremlin and Russian security establishment, with his precepts allegedly taught at top-ranking military schools and colleges across the country (Bendle, 2014; Dunlop, 2004). As the former chief advisor to the Speaker of the Duma, Dugin continues to provide theoretical feedback to key individuals from the Russian Geographical Society as well as the ruling United Russia Party. Russian media further depicts him as a close friend of President Putin ("Alexander Dugan," n.d.).

From an overall perspective, *Osnovy geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii* reflects an ambitious attempt to reassess all history since antiquity on the basis of a strictly Cold War-oriented mindset. In this vein, Dugin handles the 'Great Game' with the British Empire, the Crimean War, Russo-Turkish wars, and Russo-Persian wars of the 19th century just like he does the final Russian offensive against Afghanistan that started in 1979 in an apparently anachronistic manner. While making scholarly references to the traditional geopolitical theories of Anglo-American thinkers from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Dugin nevertheless

believes they are highly insufficient to offer a comprehensive account of international politics due to their extremely limited scope. For that matter, he argues for including a wide array of "seemingly" irrelevant disciplines from history to theology, public administration, economy, organizational behavior, cultural studies, and even the study of "racial characteristics" alongside geography within the scope of geopolitics. In that regard, Dugin's assessments are rather in tune with those of the proponents of the German "Lebensraum" ecole.

Still, he argues against taking ethnic nationalism and racism as a basis in foreign policy-making, even if only becasue such would mean Russia's withdrawal to its shell and reduction into a narrowly-defined "region", thus leaving aside its imperial heritage and ignoring the geopolitical impulses thereof. In this light, he asserts that Russia has to make an either/or decision between imperial expansion or collapse, as one is the other's sole alternative. A self-declared hardliner who favors warfare alongside other measures for recapturing Russia's 'near abroad', Dugin calls for the reinstitution of Moscow's continental hegemony from Central Europe to the easternmost territory in East Asia. He assumes an extremely anti-American, anti-liberal, and anti-Atlanticist tone; considering it necessary to eradicate American / NATO presence from the "World Island", i.e. the combination of Asia, Europe, and (North) Africa.

Such an ultimate objective he justifies by Russia's *sui generis* political, cultural, social, and geostrategic character that renders it distinct from (and superior to) both the West and the East. According to Dugin, "Russian statehood" is the epitome of the term 'heartland', which geopoliticians from the time of Rudolf Kjellen and Halford Mackinder have been referring to. From this point forth, the author makes highly sentimental deductions as to Russia's "unique destiny",

"historical role for the humankind", or "exalted national character." In effect, the book can be said to distort classical geopolitical theories in the name of promoting pseudo-scientific theses that support the author's ultra-nationalist convictions.

That said, Dugin's work should also be credited for singling out various emerging trends in international relations before any of its contemporaries as far as Russian literature on the subject matter is concerned. For that matter, he suspects the US of first pushing to destabilize the former Soviet realm and the Middle East, and then instituting pro-NATO governments as part of a strategic "domino" game. He further identifies the Caucasus (particularly Chechnya and Dagestan) as a place where the interests of the Islamic and Eurasian realms are in direct clash, and coins the term Russia's "domestic geopolitics" for the first time (Dugin, 1997, pp. 125-28). Another interesting point raised by Dugin is the feasibility of a future alliance between Russia, Iran, Armenia, Syria, and even Kurds (or Iraq) due to the emerging context in the region to Russia's south. He believes Russia should build a chain of allies stretching from the Caucasus to the Mediterranean, as access to "warm seas" has emerged as the most crucial prerequisite for Russia to reclaim its great power status in the post-Cold War era (Dugin, 1997, pp. 180-81).

In terms of exploring the prevailing intellectual climate of the first two decades of the post-Cold War period in relation to the shifting of sands across Eurasia and the Middle East, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Faith* (2013) by Robert D. Kaplan shines out as the leading work by a Western author. Within a context marked by liberal and other (like Islamist and neo-conservative) illusions of a universalist character, Kaplan stands out as the first visionary to point at the futility of trying to eradicate Russia out of the Eurasian and Middle Eastern playing-fields. In the same

vein with Dugin, he believes US triumphalism would further exacerbate the regional geopolitical picture before such an ultimate realization comes. Another intriguing theme that marks Kaplan's work revolves around the numerous parallels he draws between the past and present of Russia's multi-faceted interaction with the Islamic world that lies to the south of the Caucasus, and the Muslim peoples residing in close proximity to the Caucasus mountain range (particularly the Chechens). In that regard, his conclusions reveal the intrinsic geopolitical volatility along this inter-civilizational fault line (Kaplan, 2013, p. 168).

A veteran journalist and political consultant to American military, special forces, and intelligence agencies; Kaplan apparently leans towards the political right, with his wording reflecting a nationalistic attitude. For that matter, he employs a highly biased rhetoric that deems America "well-intentioned" in each case there is a reference to Washington's policies, even in the case of those behind the 2003 intervention in Iraq – the complete failure and catastrophic results of which the author nevertheless admits (Kaplan, 2013, pp. 16-21). That said, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us about Coming Conflicts and the Battle against Faith* represents a well-grounded comparative survey of leading works on the key geopolitical parameters underlying modern-day inter-state interactions over a vast territorial span. Far from doom-mongering the way Dugin does, he explicitly renounces determinism and fatalism as propagated by the preeminent representatives of the aggressive school of geopolitics while opposing the manipulation of this discipline as a conceptual tool to support a violent political agenda.

Owing to the personal and professional insights of the author as gained through numerous journeys, contacts, and decades of first-hand experience in his capacity as a journalist; the book is designed in the manner of a travel memoir or

field study, just like *Russia and the Middle East* by Yevgeny Primakov. Before giving shape and spine to his groundbreaking ideas; Kaplan had been travelling on land throughout Eastern Europe, Iraq, and the Caucasus. He personally crossed seemingly-enduring borders dividing Yemen, Israel-Palestine, and Germany – where he witnessed the abrupt unraveling of the Berlin Wall at first hand. Based on his observations, he convincingly demonstrates how minefields and barbwire borders – like those that currently tear apart the former Soviet realm – are nothing but temporary, human-made artefacts unlike natural boundaries between peoples, cultural / demographic clusters, and larger political realms with their roots firmly anchored in geography, economy, and historical experience.

Kaplan rests his criticism of liberal idealism, particularly in the case of its wishful reading of the recent developments in the former Soviet realm and the Middle East, on its "detachment" from the "physical reality" which owes to the immense progress in transportation and communication technologies that has been achieved in the last 20 years or so. New gadgets and cheaper access to technology allow the political and academic elite to circumvent organic geographic continuums and trespass historically formidable frontiers in the blink of an eye without a second notice. Whereas in the age of drones, cyberspace, satellites, and electronic finance; he argues that the radius of action of states and militaries is still bound by the conventional constraints imposed by geography and history. In that regard; he also objects the media's preoccupation with transient variables like daily events, debates, or individual political figures (Kaplan, 2013, p. 124).

Beginning the book with an elaborate introduction to the theories of the founding fathers of classical geopolitics (like Halford Mackinder, James Fairgrieve, Alfred Thayer Mahan, and Saul B. Cohen) and realism (from Thucydides in ancient

Greece to 20th century academics like William H. McNeill, G. S. Hodgson, Hans J. Morgenthau, and Nicholas J. Spykman – the so-called "godfather of containment"), the author then goes on to apply relevant precepts to modern-day politics and international relations in the second half of his work. One of the book's chapters is spared for an exclusive examination of the former Ottoman territories, under which Syria is considered separately; while a subsequent one scrutinizes the geopolitics of "Russia and the independent 'heartland'" alone.

All in all, the author argues that the "legacies of geography, history, and culture" continue to form the basis of international relations (Kaplan, 2013, p. 23). Hence, geopolitics and state borders matter more than any other factor in the shaping of a nation's fate; and Russia and Syria are no exception to this rule of thumb. It is from such a standpoint that Kaplan manages to identify the vibrant interplay between basic patterns of state behavior in the Middle East while also unfolding the persistent drives motivating various forms of socio-political interaction among groups of people both within and bordering the Russian state at different stages of history. Accordingly, he concludes with the insightful remark, that "geography and history demonstrate that we can never discount Russia," for "Russia's partial resurgence in our own age following the dissolution of the Soviet Union is [only] part of an old story" (Kaplan, 2013, p. 160).

Finally, Andrej Kreutz's *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* (2007) shows how readjustments in global power balances continue to shape Russian foreign policy behavior, with reference to an in-depth examination of the tides in Russia's deeply-entrenched relations with the Arab East countries through the early 2000s. Based on his intense knowledge of the Arab world and its determinative historical-geopolitical parameters, Kreutz seeks to bring a convincing answer to the

question of what core objectives motivate Russia's consistent pursuit of influence throughout the Middle East under Putin's iron fist. From this point forth, the deeply-intertwined nature of Russian geopolitics and history with those of the Middle East, particularly Syria, is laid bare. Hence, the author concludes that preserving its hold over the Eurasian "fortress" as well as socio-political ties to the region, Russia is here to stay.

According to the author, the contentious environment in the Middle East in the early 2000s is a direct outcome of the power vacuum that has been generated by the abrupt withdrawal of Soviet power from the region. The Soviet Union's implosion led to a temporary and confusing halt to Western-Russian rivalry over the Middle East in the early 1990s, only to embolden NATO to seize the moment and declare its ultimate glory in the following decade. However, NATO's eastward expansion, coupled with Russia's deprivation of long-promised Western economic aid in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, instigated decision-makers in Moscow to solidify their remaining positions abroad while seeking new inroads into the Middle East with a defensive mindset (Kreutz, 2007, p. 4). Within such a context, the all-out US offensive towards the region and its chaotic ramifications for all actors involved following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 vividly illustrated the unsustainability of a unipolar world order that excludes Russia, particularly in the case of the conflict-ridden crossroads of Eurasia that is the Middle East.

It was against such a backdrop that Moscow and Damascus felt obliged to step up their bilateral relationship, thus the former's strategically-induced role as Damascus' "patron and protector" was eventually restored, notwithstanding the 1991-2005 hiatus. In that regard, the author offers an elaborate and realistic background to the rapid development of Russo-Syrian relations on the eve of the

Syrian crisis. He gives wide coverage to insightful deductions pertaining to the shared destiny of Moscow and Damascus by Gorbachev's Middle Eastern envoy Yevgeny Primakov, the well-known Russian orientalist and statesman who had close personal ties to Hafez al-Assad. Based on the observations of influential Russian diplomats like Victor Posuvalyuk and Alexei Tchistiakov, the author predicts lasting Russian presence in Syria, although with varying intensity depending on the trajectory of relations between Moscow and Western capitals (Kreutz, 2007, pp. 150-52).

Although concentrating on Russian foreign policy in the early 2000s for the most part, the author nevertheless presents a systematic overview of the historical and geopolitical background of Russo-Middle Eastern relations from the Tsarist era up until today. Within this framework, he evaluates successive regime changes in Russia since the beginning of the 20th century and the socio-economic evolution of the Russian society in relation to the fluctuations in the course and character of Russo-Middle Eastern relations. His discussion of the subject asserts why the switch from "messianism" pre-1980s to pragmatism in the subsequent decades on the part of the Kremlin should essentially be interpreted as a factor of the varying degree of (relative) power that Russia enjoyed through the two respective periods under scrutiny. Such a shift demonstrates the secondary role of ideological rhetoric as an alluring façade used to hide the diverse exigencies deriving from national self-interest that hardly depend on prevailing value systems. For that matter, how the fate of Russian-Middle Eastern relations has always been decided by cold-blooded considerations of concrete national interests even under the most pro-Western foreign ministers (Eduard Shevardnadze and Andrei Kozyrev) in Russia's recent history is ingeniously demonstrated by the author.

Interspersed throughout successive chapters – the amount of detail offered by each of which imbues the reader with a sense of fascination as to the historical consistency in Russia's relations with the various sub-regions of the Middle East – are the author's stimulating reflections on the correlation between the trajectory of Russo-Middle Eastern relations and key developments across the geopolitical continuum straddling the Caucasus and the Middle East. According to Kreutz (2007), Tatarstan and North Caucasus constitute a physical link connecting Russia and Transcaucasia on the one hand to the larger Muslim world, or the Greater Middle East on the other, which lies right at Russia's doorstep in terms of territory, faith, and blood. From this point forth, he repeatedly draws attention at the delicate situation arising from the fact that Muslims, with a rapidly growing population of 20-25 million, represent over 15 percent of the Russian population and constitute an organic, indigenous minority in the country. As a matter of fact, the Islamic population in Russia is even larger than the entire population of various Muslim nations (Kreutz, 2007, pp. 150-52). Moreover, the North Caucasus region, although densely populated, has a mountainous topography and is geographically as well as culturally distant from the capital – thus extremely difficult to penetrate. After the dissolution of the USSR, the region served as a hotbed of terrorism as the Russian state apparatus was at its weakest. For that matter, the pro-independence autonomous republic of Chechnya has emerged as the most suitable place for tensions to escalate in the form of increased calls for disintegration.

Against the backdrop of persistent conflict between Russia and the West over the fate of the Islamic world, the main objective of the work is to single out practicable ways for the harmonious coexistence of the two as well as their most problematic clients (i.e. Israel and Syria) in the Middle East. Like many of his Cold

War era predecessors, the major works of whom are reviewed throughout previous pages, Kreutz's study as well, although a product of Anglo-American academic tradition, calls for sweeping aside covert fears and overdue reflexes in order to reassess the emerging situation in a rational and accurate manner. In the author's view, the West needs to mull over a workable solution based on new geopolitical realities with an eye to the complex historical drives that continue to reinforce deep-seated ties between Russia and *al-Mashreq*.

Shedding light on the other side of the picture as well, Kreutz suggests that every single Arab country views Russian involvement in regional affairs favorably, for such serves as an effective counterweight against the US – thus allowing a larger radius of action for Arab leaders to pursue independent policies. Enlightening quotes by prominent Arab leaders that are frequently employed throughout the study reveal how the disintegration of the USSR is regarded as a strategic catastrophe by each and every Arab capital, including even staunchly pro-Western ones like Amman and Cairo. Considering the persistent relevance of the *realpolitik* notion of 'balance of power', the two leading external powers in the region (i.e. the United States and Russia) are invited to come to terms with this reality in a sober-minded manner as soon as possible, for such is regarded as the only practicable way to maintain peace and stability. Against the backdrop of inherently conflictual interests between adventurous regional clients, the future of Russo-Syrian relations should also be read in this light.

2.4 Russian perspectives towards the Syrian conflict

In exploring the evolution of Moscow's approach to the escalation of geopolitical tensions over Syria like wildfire post-2011, this thesis capitalizes on numerous

commentaries, analyses, reports, columns, seminar transcripts, news pieces, and statements provided by some of the most prominent Russian sources on the subject in the past couple of years. While official government websites (specifically those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, the President's Office of Russia, and the Kremlin) as well as leading Russian media outlets play a complementary role here, the main body of resources utilized for covering this novel epoch in Russo-Syrian relations is comprised of those offered by leading academic research institutes in Russia. It is particularly Russian think tanks whose publications have been systematically reviewed for the purposes of this thesis.

There are multiple reasons behind such a choice on my part, and the main one is of a practical quality. That is, in my capacity as a research assistant working for a major think tank in Turkey, namely the International Strategic Research Organization (USAK), which boasts an academic network on an international scale, I had the opportunity to familiarize myself with how think tanks in various countries, including Russia, run their day-to-day business. Furthermore, thanks to the personal contacts of my colleagues, I was able to meet in person with a number of meritorious experts on Russian foreign policy from the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and the Carnegie Moscow Center, both of which are involved in institutional cooperation with USAK on a formal basis.

As to my preference in favor of only a handful of think tanks which are hand-picked from among almost two dozen in Russia, this largely owes to two main reasons. The first one pertains to the relative scarcity of available resources. As a matter of fact, most of the research institutes I encountered with either do not concentrate on Russian foreign policy towards Syria, or produce only a negligible amount of rather sporadic publications on the subject at hand. Besides, the number of

resources I was able to access online was further limited by subscription requirements, institutional opacity, or the lack of online versions of publications in many cases. Whereas the second reason pertains to quality, for concerns about scientific competence are usually overshadowed by an obsession with blind loyalty to the regime along with a set of other political concerns under a restrictive and relatively-insulated academic environment like that in Russia. In this respect; reliable sources in terms of factual accuracy, professional decency, and elegance in wording seem to be rare – even when one's goal is merely to reflect the Russian point of view anyway.

CHAPTER 3

THE ORIGINS AND GRADUAL IMPROVEMENT OF SOVIET-SYRIAN MUTUAL TIES

3.1 Introduction

After World War II, the Soviet Union was widely accepted as one of the world's superpowers. Yet, the domestic conditions in the Soviet Union reflected a country that had recently fought in an all-consuming war (Karsh, 1988, pp. 3-11). Therefore the Soviet Union initially felt the urge to seek political and financial support from its relatively prosperous WWII allies in the West. Despite Moscow's initial hopes that the former Allied powers would help in the reconstruction and redevelopment process through carrying into effect a different version of the Marshall Plan that is adapted to its own needs; the United States and other Western countries were not making an adequate effort to help rebuild the war-torn Soviet Union (Sharnoff, 2009, pp. 21-29). As a result, Moscow began focusing on developing close diplomatic ties with the Middle East, a region in close proximity where the new source of industrial wealth, i.e. oil, was plenty and daily life uninhibited by the recent war.

In the entire region, Syria emerged as the only major country that seemed enthusiastic about advancing bilateral ties with the Soviet Union, with other regional countries largely refraining from alienating their former colonial patrons in the West. Although this bilateral relationship was initially built upon mutually beneficial grounds, in time the Soviet Union was able to manipulate successive Syrian regimes and use its relationship with Syria as a strategic leverage against the West (Sharnoff, 2009, pp. 21-29). The tactics the Soviet Union used to manipulate Syria and shape international relations from the immediate aftermath of World War II to its ultimate

demise in 1991 will be addressed in this chapter. The immense gains that the Soviet Union made *vis-à-vis* Western allies and proxies in the Middle East through such tactics will be further explored in order to demonstrate how Moscow's bilateral ties with Damascus were utilized within a larger geopolitical context as a way of fulfilling its own strategic agenda.

3.2 Post-World War II relations between the Soviet Union and Syria

The Soviet Union played a crucial role in helping the Allied powers defeat the Axis powers during World War II. On the other hand, Syria, like many other Arab countries, remained neutral during the conflict (Ginat, 2010, pp. 2-3). The conclusion of World War II helped to change the way Middle Eastern countries perceived both the United States and the Soviet Union. Sharnoff concurs in arguing that countries throughout the world began aligning themselves with either the United States or the Soviet Union in the post-WWII period, as the two were now considered to be the world's sole remaining superpowers (Sharnoff, 2009, pp. 21-29). It was also during this period that Syria managed to establish itself as a unified country, free from French control (Ginat, 2010, pp. 36-38). Despite Syria's recently-attained independence though, there emerged a pressing need for the country to align itself with a powerful economic and political entity. Sharnoff (2009) further concurs in arguing that the imminent conflict in the Middle East and the consequent move away from neutrality on the part of independent Arab states during this period directly influenced Syria's motivation to form a political relationship with the Soviet Union (pp. 21-29). Ginat (2010) provides a similar assessment in arguing that Syria's decision to move beyond Arab neutralism was in part attributed to strategic concerns on its part as a weak and newly-independent state struggling to find itself a safe place

in the midst of an unfamiliar geopolitical landscape characterized by heated geopolitical frictions between two emerging blocs of relatively more powerful states (pp. 45-48). The need to ensure that the people of Syria were protected from Western intervention, and the relatively prosperous economy Syria enjoyed during this period was sustained should be regarded as the two critical factors in pushing Syria's political leadership into the arms of the Soviet Union in the immediate aftermath of WWII (Allison, 2013).

Likewise, similarly utilitarian factors also played a key role in shaping the Soviet Union's decision to forge close ties with Syria as well as other regional countries (Sharnoff, 2009, pp. 21-29). Even though the Soviet Union played a critical role in defeating the Axis powers during World War II, the country's participation in the war adversely affected domestic conditions. Skallerup (1991) further concurs in arguing, "roughly a quarter of the country's capital resources had been destroyed, and industrialization and agricultural output in 1945 fell far short of prewar levels" (p. 77). The Soviet Union sought to form political relations with its World War II Allies, however, the country's hopes for economic aid fell short of it expectations. In response, Lesch (1998) argues that the Soviet Union began looking for new political relationships that would allow it to rebuild itself. He further argues that American mistrust towards the Soviet Union peaked during this period as demonstrated by tensions around Germany and the Korean Peninsula between the former allies, in turn leading to disappointment on the part of Kremlin (pp. 92-107). The inability of the United States and other western countries to trust the communist Soviet Union, and provide Russians with what they believed was a well-deserved, indeed necessary bounty to rebuild their country after World War II, led the Kremlin to divert its

attention to the south instead, i.e. the Greater Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean region, and Syria (Lesch, 1998, pp. 92-107).

Thus, the inability on the part of the Soviet Union to receive help from Western countries directly aided in the Soviet Union's decision to create political relationships in the Middle East (Skallerup, 1991, p. 77). During this period, the Soviet Union also began to use the threat of war against Western countries in order to extract economic and political concessions. The geostrategic and potential economic power ascribed to the Soviet Union after World War II by leading political circles in the West further aided in the validity of this threat (Sharnoff, 2009, pp. 21-29). The post-WWII political reconfiguration in the Middle East also played a decisive role in convincing Syria to pursue close cooperation with the Soviet Union. As addressed by Ginat (2010), many Arab countries, including Syria, blamed Western powers for the creation of Israel following the end of WWII. However, Lesch (1998) argues that many Syrians still had a great deal of admiration for the United States during this period (pp. 92-207). Despite such positive prospects for cooperation between Syria and the West, the United States' foreign policy was heavily oriented towards containing the Soviet Union by reducing the spread of communism. The close relationship between the Soviet Union and Syria was a particular source of concern for the United States and other Western countries during this period (Lesch, 1998, pp. 92-107). Ironically, the Soviet Union was able to harness fears of Western aggression in order to strengthen its relationship with Syria. This is further evident in the escalation of mutual distrust between Arab and Western capitals in this period, which directly influenced Syria's individual decision to align itself with the Soviet Union (Ginat, 2010, pp. 43-59). Krowowska (2011) provides a similar assessment in arguing that although Syria and the Soviet Union had adopted different ideologies in

managing their internal economic and political affairs, the growing resentment the Syrian people felt for the United States and their former colonizers in Europe led Damascus to enter an alliance with Moscow instead of an untrustworthy Washington (pp. 81-98).

The Soviet Union itself was not threatened by the prospect of being attacked by Israel. In contrast, Syria had grown fearful that Israel would attack to expand its territories in order to bolster its newly-established presence along the Eastern Mediterranean littoral, thus becoming the primary regional power in the Levant region. This fear was rooted in the fact that Israel had recently attacked other countries in the Middle East during this period. The emerging hostilities between Syria and Israel left officials in Syria believing that an Israeli attack was inevitable should they fail to secure solid bilateral relations with a powerful entity like the USSR that can provide a defensive umbrella against the pro-Western Jewish state (Allison, 2013). Although Syria initially looked for support from Western countries during this period, the inability to receive what Syria believed was an adequate level of protection from Israel led Damascus to form close diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union (Lesch, 1998, pp. 92-107). However, Krowowska (2011) further acknowledges that the close relationship between the Soviet Union and Syria developed in a rather gradual and hesitant fashion (pp. 81-98).

3.3 The Baghdad Pact

The need for the Soviet Union to expand its presence across the Middle East was amplified in the early 1950s. During this period, the Soviet Union was concerned about the increasing power of the United States and its widening elbowroom in the Middle East (Ginat, 2010, pp. 48-53). However, it should further be noted that the

United States itself did almost everything in its power to provoke fear on the part of the Soviet Union during this period. Such a threat perception was first invoked by the declaration of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plans to contain Soviet influence, and continued to amplify as the Soviet Union gained strength in the Middle East (Reich & Gotowicki, 1994, p. 216). The United States and the Soviet Union had apparently clashing interests in the Middle East, which further aided in this tension (Sharnoff, 2009, pp. 21-29). Although the Soviet Union and the United States may had complementary interests as far as their shared concerns such as maintaining some degree of stability in this region and preventing regional countries from disturbing international balances were concerned, the ideologically incompatible nature of their domestic policies led to indirect conflicts between the two superpowers that continued into the next decade (Ginat, 2010, p. 73). Besides, the United States was making rapid gains in the name of securing regional resources and boosting its power-projection capacity over the Middle East. Added the geographic proximity of the new US allies to the Soviet Union, the emerging network of pro-Western entities along the southwestern 'soft underbelly' of the USSR became a growing source of concern for the Kremlin.[3] In response, the Soviet Union became focused on minimizing the influence of the US-led Baghdad Pact, and increasing its military presence in the Middle East to counter Western moves in the region (Karsh, 1988, pp. 2-3).

The Baghdad Pact that involved Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan was essentially intended to hinder the Soviet Union's economic and political access to warm water ports and oil fields close to the Indian Ocean. In response to the

[3] The term "Russia's 'soft underbelly'" was first coined by Yevgeny Primakov. For more information about the origin and evolution of the term, see Kreutz (2007), p. 149.

establishment of this Western-induced geopolitical "barrier", there emerged an immediate need on the part of Moscow to increase its military presence in the Middle East. For decision-makers in Moscow, this was a matter of national security and regime survival. According to Karsh (1988), the Baghdad Pact transformed "what had been an effective buffer zone in the prewar period into an important link in the worldwide chain of Western containment strategy, but also meant the extension of NATO's military power to the USSR's backyard" (p. 3). Sanjian (1997) provides a similar assessment in arguing that the Baghdad Pact was meant to prevent the Soviet Union from entering the Middle East. Specifically, he argues that the United States was attempting to create a 'Northern Tier' alliance that would prevent the Soviet Union from gaining supporters in the Middle East (pp. 248-261).

Yet, despite the Western intention to isolate Moscow by consolidating the Baghdad Pact, the pact soon proved incapable of preventing Soviet penetration into the region. The pact's ultimate failure essentially resulted from the affirmative response received from Cairo and Damascus when Moscow "invited Syria, along with Egypt, to join a pro-Soviet pact" which would be designed to function as a counterbalance against the West's expanding clout over the Middle East (Reich & Gotowicki, 1994, pp. 247-261). In response to the Soviet Union's growing power in the region, the United States deployed troops in Turkey, near its NATO ally's long border with Syria, in an attempt to intimidate Damascus and dissuade it from forging close relations with Moscow. However, the United States' deployment of troops in Adana, that is, a major city in close proximity to the Turkish-Syrian border, was unsuccessful in preventing Syria from pledging allegiance to the Soviet Union (Sanjian, 1997, pp. 247-261).

Although the Soviet Union was able to minimize the influence of the Baghdad Pact, the tactics Moscow employed to penetrate the Middle East even further were not universally successful. During this period, the Soviet Union also tried to establish close ties with Turkey. However, as its attempt failed to secure Turkey's allegiance, the Soviet Union focused rather on intimidating Turkey as a way of ensuring that Ankara did not join the Baghdad Pact (Walt, 1985, pp. 31-36). Despite this intention, the Soviet Union was unsuccessful in using intimidation tactics in expanding its presence in the Middle East and lessening the influence of the Baghdad Pact (Walt, 1985, pp. 13-19). Instead, it had to rely on a reactive policy by harnessing fears of Western incursion on the part of the Arab Middle East.

3.4 Soviet-Syrian arms deal of 1955

The Soviet-Syrian arms deal of 1955 was influenced by multiple factors. As addressed by Ginat (2010), the Soviet Union was still struggling to recover from the devastation brought about by WWII, and stimulate its stagnant economy (pp. 3-5). In addition to economic concerns, the Soviet Union wanted to maintain a close relationship with Syria also due to strategic reasons. The primary urge for Moscow in that regard was to hedge against growing US presence across its southern and southwestern neighborhood before too late. During this period, Syria was essentially concerned about further Israeli expansion into neighboring Arab countries, hence came its decision to reject the Baghdad Pact which it saw as a fatal compromise, and form an alliance with the Soviet Union instead. Damascus was also concerned about the close relationship between Syria's two powerful and potentially-threatening neighbors, namely Iraq and Turkey, that had been established under the Baghdad Pact. In response, Syria and the Soviet Union sealed an arms deal that would allow

the Soviet Union to "aid in any form whatsoever for the purpose of safeguarding Syria's independence and sovereignty" (Karsh, 1988, p. 3).

The creation of an arms pact had a dramatic impact over the Soviet Union's relationship with Syria. As addressed Kreutz (2007), the arms deal between the two countries led to full-fledged diplomatic relations between Moscow and Damascus. This was further evident as this deal led the Soviet Union to establish a full embassy in Syria (Ginat, 2010, p. 198). However, Syria initially denied the existence of such a deal, and had refrained from publicly announcing its close diplomatic ties and military relationship with the Soviet Union until December 1956 (Carol, 2015, pp. 31-39). In line with the comprehensive deal in question, the Soviet Union provided Syria with "100 T-34 tanks, 100 MiG-15 jet fighters, as well as machine guns, rifles, and other equipment" (Carol, 2015, p. 37).

The arms deal between the two countries also envisaged an unprecedented amount of financial assistance by Moscow to Damascus. As addressed by Kreutz (2007), shortly after signing the arms deal, the Soviet Union offered Syria $363 million in aid (p. 13). Soviet aid and assistance towards Syria continued to increase in scope and gain depth in the following years. Between 1956-1958, the Soviet Union provided Syria approximately $294 million of financial aid. The Soviet Union was also making substantial profits from its financial relationship with Syria. Prior this this deal, Syria used to export 0.5% of all goods imported in the Soviet Union. Yet only one year after the deal was signed, Syria began exporting 7.8% of all goods being imported in the Soviet Union (Kreutz, 2007, pp. 13-18). As pointed out by Krowowska (2011), "national defense went up in the Syrian budget and the number of military forces increased from 25,000 in 1949 to 60,000 in 1963" (pp. 81-98). According to Krowowska (2011), the immense financial prosperity that the arms deal

brought to the Soviet Union was in part attributed to Syria's international humiliation as its military vulnerabilities were exposed during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

From a different perspective, the Soviet Union wanted to exploit the desperate conditions surrounding Syria in order to sustain its presence in the region. As a result of its decision not to join the Baghdad Pact, Syria was confronted with a rising level of hostility on the part of the US and Turkey which was translated into a build-up of well-equipped troops along its northern border. Yet, Syria's border with Israel was also problematic during this period. Thus, Syria was effectively compelled to align itself with either a European country or the Soviet Union against its more powerful neighbors. However, as anti-Western sentiment began to rise throughout the entire region after the withdrawal of colonial powers and the formation of an all-encompassing Western alliance in the form of NATO, Syria had no choice but to welcome a relationship with the Soviet Union (Krowowska, 2011, pp. 81-98).

Furthermore, the arms deal that was reached between the Soviet Union and Syria created a mutually prosperous relationship for both the Moscow and Damascus (Kreutz, 2007, pp. 13-14). Immediately after the successful completion of the arms deal, the Soviet Union began to focus on Syria's domestic development. Prior to this period, Syria's fragile industrial infrastructure and limited productive capacity were heavily based on extracting and transporting crude oil. Against such a backdrop, the Soviet Union played a critical role in helping Syria develop its agricultural industry as well as oil extraction and transportation capacity (Ginat, 2010, p. 159). In exchange for Moscow's help, Damascus paid the Soviet Union in crude oil (Carol, 2015, pp. 13-18).

Syrian oil itself played a vital role in instigating the two parties to reach a comprehensive economic deal. Yet its strategic need to draw a line against further

gains by Western powers in the Middle East was another primary reason that led Moscow to come up with this deal. Thus, Moscow was able to secure its economic and political interests in the larger region. Furthermore, this relationship helped to show the world that the Soviet Union was a benevolent great power, capable of developing lucrative and constructive international ties. This was an important prospect, as the United States' initial venture into forming an unrivaled and comprehensive alliance – akin to NATO – across the Middle East through the Baghdad Pact had largely failed. In contrast, the Soviet Union's ability to ensure that Syria did not become part of the Baghdad Pact, and maintain a prosperous relationship in the Middle East, demonstrated the rest of the Third World that the Soviet Union could indeed serve as a better alternative than the US when it comes to economic and military cooperation (Carol, 2015, pp. 13-18).

3.5 The role of Soviet propaganda and manipulation

Between 1958 and 1961, the Soviet Union used various forms of propaganda in order to develop a cohesive relationship with Syria. Right after the arms deal of 1955, the Soviet Union openly accused the United States of planning to attack Syria (Kreutz, 2007, pp. 14-16). Although the United States instantly denied this accusation, the Soviet Union used the publicity surrounding this event to openly demonstrate the support that it was willing to provide to Syria in case of an emergency.

From one perspective, voicing non-conditional support for Syria before a global audience allowed the Soviet Union to exercise power beyond its immediate neighborhood. From another perspective, Moscow's vocal backing of Damascus by inventing a fictious threat, thus deceiving its ally, led Syria to regard Soviet assistance as an exclusive undertaking. Through this move, Moscow convinced

Damascus to rule out all other political and economic alternatives, rendering Syria overly reliant on Russian goodwill (Kreutz, 2007, pp. 14-16). Slater (2002) acknowledges that Syria was ready to be deceived into the Soviet plot because of the strained nature of the relationship between the US allies in the region and Syria. As many Syrians believed that the United States and its NATO allies were supporting Zionism, Damascus placed ever-stronger faith in Moscow as its guardian against potentially expansionist schemes on the part of Tel Aviv, which could be expected to receive at least covert support from Washington and Ankara alike (pp. 88-100).

In early 1960, the Soviet Union again led Syria to believe that it was about to be attacked by Western-backed forces. However, this time, the perpetrator would be Israel and not Turkey. In January 1960, tensions between Syria and Israel escalated with frequent exchanges of fire across the mutual border (Ginat, 2010, pp. 13-18). These events, and the misconstrued threat level propagated by the Soviet intelligence played a critical role in influencing Syria's decision to invade northern Israel in March 1960. Syria believed that Israel was planning to capture large swathes of territory on the Syrian side of their mutual border, and decided to act first to preempt such a scenario. Having secured the support of one of the world's superpowers further encouraged Syria to take such a daring step. Despite this belief on the part of Damascus though, Moscow did not provide Syria with an accurate interpretation of the alleged tensions in the region. In contrast, Carol (2015) argues that the Soviet Union had "fed both Egypt and Syria false information" (pp. 17-18).

It was on February 1, 1960, that Israel launched Operation Grasshopper against Syrian forces (Kipnis, 2013, pp. 28-35). Even though the Soviet Union may have initially misrepresented Israel's intentions in attacking Syria, the fact that Israel actually launched an offensive against the country aided in the belief among Syrian

officials that the Soviet Union's initial interpretation of the situation was credible (Kipnis, 2013, pp. 5-8). Through this strategy; the Soviet Union was able to harness Syria's insecurity, fuel Syria's mistrust in Western countries, and alter the pace of mutual relations between Syria and other regional countries in line with the broader geopolitical interests of the Kremlin (Yarrow, 2009, pp. 13-15).

Although Syria believed that the Soviet Union was a reliable ally, many countries in the Middle East had already begun to question the credibility of this alliance even before war has erupted between Syria and Israel. In 1958, the newly-formed United Arab Republic (UAR) between Egypt and Syria, which had an Arab nationalist agenda and kept the USSR at arm's length, publicly opposed the Soviet Union's infiltration of Syria (Kreutz, 2007, p. 14). Despite this initial opposition, Syria remained a member of the UAR until 1961, when the country formally resigned after being questioned intensely about its inextricable links with the Soviet Union. Kipnis (2013) further concurs in arguing that many Arab countries began believing that the Soviet Union was using propaganda as a way of controlling Syria's actions. In response, many Arab countries believed that this relationship was detrimental not only for Syria, but for the entire Middle East (pp. 5-8). In contrast, Kreutz (2007) disagrees with this assessment, and argues that Syria's decision to resign from the UAR should be attributed to the country's radicalization. As addressed by Kreutz (2007), the power the Soviet Union was able to exercise over Syria ended up in the foundation of the Syrian Communist Party as an alternative to the existing regime (pp. 14-15).

Although scholars disagree as to why Syria resigned from the UAR, it is widely accepted that the history the Soviet Union had with Syria, and the belief that the Soviet Union was protecting Syria, led Damascus to distance itself from the

strictly pro-independence UAR. The people of Syria were utterly accepting of this decision. Immediately after Syria's resignation from the UAR, newspapers throughout the country declared the decision "as a historic victory won by the Syrian people" (Kreutz, 2007, pp. 14-15). However, this decision was widely seen as a surprise, as it represented a move away from Arab nationalism that was the prevailing political trend across the Arab Middle East back then (Krowowska, 2011, pp. 81-98).

In a similar fashion, the Soviet Union played a critical role in the breakout of the Six Day War. As addressed by Golan (2006), tensions between Israel and Syria escalated dramatically in the years preceding the Six Day War (pp. 3-19). And the Soviet Union's role in heightening the tensions has been widely acknowledged. This is further exemplified in the Soviet Union's use of propaganda to make Syria believe that Israel was planning on invading the country in 1960 (Kreutz, 2007, pp. 14-15). However, the Soviet Union's tactics in influencing the Six Day War differed from the tactics pursued in the Israeli-Syrian crisis of 1960.

As addressed by Roland (2006), Syria's interpretation of Israeli intentions was influenced by a variety of factors. Among these factors was Egypt's involvement in the crisis. Similar to the case with Syria, the Soviet Union had exercised considerable influence over Egypt during this period. According to Roland (2006), Cairo's misinterpretation of Tel Aviv's intentions led the Egyptian leadership to dispatch troops beyond the Sinai Peninsula. The "escalating situation on the Syrian-Israeli border, militant speeches by Israeli officials, and an ill-informed Soviet intelligence report" all played a crucial role in influencing Syria's interpretation of the crisis as one essentially threatening not only Egypt but also itself (p. 285).

Although Roland (2006) emphasizes Egypt's role in provoking the Six Day War, Golan (2006) argues that the Soviet Union provided Egypt with false information as a way of pushing it into direct military conflict with Israel (pp. 3-19). However, Golan (2006) further acknowledges that for years the Soviet Union denied providing such information to the Egyptian government. Despite its persistent denial of information to Egypt, Golan (2006) concludes that Moscow's policy of keeping Cairo misinformed became less plausible as the years passed (pp. 3-19). In this vein, Roland (2006) cites an anonymous intelligence official as stating that the immediate aftermath of the Six Day War suggests "there is no indication that Soviet intelligence was bad but that it is evident that what they passed to the Arabs was not accurate and was probably not a reliable gauge of what they must have known" (p. 289). Even though the validity of the information passed on by the Soviet Union to Egyptian and Syrian authorities on the eve of the Six Day War had been doubted, few scholars will argue against the prospect that the manipulation of this conflict benefited the Soviet Union.

In exploring how the Six Day War helped safeguard Soviet interests against increasing Western pro-activism in the Middle East, Golan (2006) asserts that manipulating conditions to allow the Soviet Union to demonstrate its control over the situation served a dualistic purpose. From one perspective, the Soviet Union's ability to manipulate inherent tensions between regional countries demonstrated how reliant both Egypt and Syria had become on the intelligence provided by the Soviet Union. From a different perspective, Moscow's ability to postpone, catalyze, or steer a distant war based on fictious intelligence reports demonstrates the power the Soviet Union possessed within the international political system despite relentless pressure by the West on its few footholds in the Middle East (pp. 3-19). Yet from an

economic perspective, creating insecurities in both Syria and Egypt would allow the Soviet Union to sell more arms to both countries, further serving its economic interests (Kreutz, 2007, pp. 14-17).

Although the Six Day War positively influenced the Soviet Union's foreign policy, the long-term effects of this short war would generate a novel and unexpected degree of animosity between Western and Soviet clients the Middle East. During the Six Day War, Israel was able to seize the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights (Golan, 2006, pp. 3-19). Although Tel Aviv offered to return these areas to their former owners should the Arab world acknowledge Israel as a sovereign entity, and guaranteed no further conflicts would arise, neither Egypt nor Syria intended to provide Israel with this acknowledgement. This denial of recognition inevitably set the stage for the Yom Kippur War (Kreutz, 2007, pp. 14-18). Furthermore, the fact that it had made vast territorial gains within a short span of time, coupled with a perception of having suffered relatively few casualties through an all-out war against multiple Arab states, convinced Israel in its destiny to become the most powerful state in the Eastern Mediterranean region and the Arab Middle East (Rabinovich, 2007, pp. 3-4).

3.6 Hafez al-Assad and the Soviet naval base at Tartus

In 1970, Hafez al-Assad's Ba'ath Party came to power in Damascus through a military coup. Hafez al-Assad paid his first state visit to Moscow in early February, 1971, where the two parties signed a comprehensive treaty with the aim of deepening bilateral political cooperation as well as boosting already-solid military exchanges. In the years following Hafez al-Assad's initial foreign visit, Damascus came to be known as one of the primary recipients of Soviet economic and military assistance, a

staunch ally of Kremlin, and the main stronghold of Moscow in the Middle East. Therefore, the initial years under Hafez al-Assad correspond to the pinnacle of Soviet-Syrian friendship (Aghayev & Katman, 2012, pp. 2066-70). The 1971 agreement signed between the two parties further laid the groundwork for permanent Soviet presence in the Mediterranean port city of Tartus. It foresaw the installation and gradual enlargement of a naval facility in the city as a site of logistic supply and maintenance for the USSR's Mediterranean squadron (Allison, 2013; Kozhanov, 2013, pp. 25-31).

From the perspective of Syrian decision-makers, their country was to benefit immensely from the establishment of a Soviet naval base along its narrow Mediterranean coast; i.e. Syria's sole gateway to the high seas through which arms shipments and military advisers dispatched from Moscow arrived at their ultimate point of destination (Delman, 2015). Soviet warships and submarines were to escort these shipments and prevent any Western powers from blockading the port of Tartus with the aim of imposing sanctions on the pro-Russian Ba'athist regime (Allison, 2013). Besides its practical utility, the naval facility that was established at Tartus could be regarded as an organic and even inevitable extension of Soviet military presence in the country, considering the huge extent to which Syria's military and economy were structured after the Soviet model through long years of political intimacy between the two parties (Aghayev & Katman, 2012, pp. 2066-70).

Russian naval installations at Tartus were designed to serve the Soviet Mediterranean squadron, mainly for the purpose of accommodating and refueling naval vessels in case of extended naval operations in the Mediterranean Sea (Bagdonas, 2012). Except for those along the Black Sea, the USSR had only four warm-water ports (at Arkhangelsk, St. Petersburg, Murmansk, and Vladivostok),

with only the latter two (those at Murmansk and Vladivostok) ice-free throughout the whole year. Besides, all were remotely located on the frozen northern fringes of Eurasia, and in the case of Vladivostok, it was facing the Pacific rather than the Euro-Atlantic region. Considering that major Soviet naval ports along the Black Sea (that in Sevastopol, Crimea, first and foremost) had no easy access to the Mediterranean, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Indian Ocean due to the fact that Turkish Straits were under NATO's control, a year-round deep-water port on the Eastern Mediterranean was considered a necessity for the Kremlin to obtain a sustainable foothold on high seas (Delman, 2015).

The highly symbolic nature and tactical use of the naval facility at Tartus for the USSR was evident ever since its inception. According to Bagdonas (2012), the base's potential future value largely exceeded its usefulness at the time of its construction and initial operation. The Kremlin could make use of the base for political purposes such as deterring, instigating, or manipulating both Western powers as well as regional countries. It could use Soviet naval presence in the key maritime region concerned as a leverage in negotiations over future disputes with Western rivals in other parts of the world, bolstering its diplomatic maneuverability. And the Kremlin could even convert the base into a more comprehensive one that would allow it to sustain naval presence throughout the warm waters of the Eastern Mediterranean for decades (pp. 55-77).

Other than sustaining the long-term deployment of Russian naval vessels on high seas, the naval facility at Tartus was planned to serve as a listening station and submarine base located right in the middle of the two main regional allies of the US, namely Turkey and Israel, which were known to harbor similar facilities targeted against the USSR (Aghayev & Katman, 2012, pp. 2066-70). It would also contribute

Soviet efforts to hedge against US submarines carrying nuclear warheads, thus "maintaining the nuclear balance" in the Mediterranean (Aghayev & Katman, 2012, p. 2067). Furthermore, Soviet warships would be able to patrol the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean which was considered by Kremlin as a maritime crossroads bearing geopolitical importance mainly due to its proximity to the Suez Canal, the Gulf of Aden, and the Persian Gulf in the southeast (Bagdonas, 2012, pp. 55-77). The port would also be helpful in case of a regional crisis in which Soviet citizens in Russia may need to be evacuated (Allison, 2013).

Still, from the perspective of Soviet decision-makers, the practical use of establishing a permanent naval presence off the Syrian coast was rather less significant than it was for their Syrian counterparts. Indeed, according to Kozhanov (2013), the naval facility at Tartus did not qualify as a full-fledged military base in the first place, due to its limited scale and operational capacity. Bagdonas (2012) agrees with Kozhanov (2013) in his assessment that Russian naval deployment at Tartus was essentially far from being a prominent military asset as far as the Soviet grand strategy and overall capabilities on high seas were concerned, even at its heyday. He believes the station's military significance was overly exaggerated by the Soviet military establishment before the global public, considering the negligible material cost of losing the whole base or moving it part by part to somewhere else. Allison (2013) further concurs that with only three floating docks, a floating repair workshop on loan from the Black Sea fleet, a couple of storage facilities, and a small barracks housing around 50 Soviet servicemen, the naval facility at Tartus allowed for only temporary mooring, replenishment, and repair. Delman (2015) reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that the base lacked sufficient repair capacity and could

not act as a center for commanding and controlling even the relatively-small Soviet Mediterranean fleet, let alone those operating in the Indian or Atlantic Oceans.

All in all, the Tartus base was more of an intangible than functional value in the eyes of Moscow. It allowed the Kremlin to flex its muscles *vis-à-vis* its Western rivals within a larger Cold War context, manifest its great power status on the geopolitical chessboard, and force itself into the Middle East peace process as a proactive diplomatic stakeholder (Allison, 2013), while diverting public opinion in Syria and elsewhere in the region (Bagdonas, 2012).

3.7 The advent of the Yom Kippur War (1973)

The Yom Kippur War was widely influenced by Syria's and Egypt's shared desire to restore their lost territories amid growing Soviet presence in the Middle East. Yet, unlike the Six Day War, the Soviet Union played a lesser role in fanning the flames of military conflict in this case. Golan (1999) further concurs in acknowledging that "The Yom Kippur War was a war that the Soviet Union did not want" (p. 131). During this period, tensions remained high between the United States and the Soviet Union. The prospect of creating a new conflict that would involve the United States had the potential to create a global nuclear war, involving both of the world's superpowers (Golan, 1999, pp. 127-136). However, the relationship the Soviet Union had with both Egypt and Syria made it unlikely that the Soviet Union could simply back down in the event that the two entities joined forces to retrieve their lost territories. From this perspective, the Soviet Union was left with few other options than to support its allies in the event that a conflict erupted. This prospect is further supported by the fact that the Soviet Union had already stationed 2,000 soldiers in Egypt (Rabinovich, 2007, pp. 3-4). Although the Soviet Union's decision to place

troops in Egypt had nothing to do with the Yum Kippur War, the placement of these soldiers ensured that the Soviet Union would be involved in any widespread Middle Eastern conflict.

Although the Soviet Union may not have initially known about Egypt's and Syria's plans on invading Israel, the initial invasion of the Yom Kippur War demonstrates that this was a heavily planned event that was largely kept secret from Soviet intelligence. According to Rabinovich (2007), with more than 100,000 Egyptian troops, thousands of Syrian troops, and the fact that this invasion happened on the Jewish day of Atonement; it is evident that both Syria and Egypt engaged in a detailed planning process (pp. 3-4). Yet, after the onset of the attack, the Soviet Union needed to determine how it would preserve the sensitive balance between its two conflicting goals. The first goal was to maintain its strategic ties and fruitful relations with both Egypt and Syria. However, the second goal focused on avoiding any direct confrontation with the United States, and instead limiting military frictions to controlled tensions (Golan, 1999, pp. 127-136).

As a way of achieving such two contradictory objectives at once, the Soviet Union began negotiating a ceasefire agreement between Egypt, Syria, and Israel (Golan, 1999, pp. 127-136). The initial resolution proposal brought to the United Nations was drafted by the Soviet Union, and it predated Israel's counter-attack in order to ensure that Syria and Egypt preserved some of the territorial gains they had already made during the first few days of the war (Quandt, 1976, pp. 23-25). However, Egypt did not want to be involved in a ceasefire, and called upon the rest of the Arab world to assist its troops in the increasingly-bloody conflict. The Soviet Union then tried to distance itself from the ongoing war, and embarked on a quest to

find a lasting regional settlement with the US that secured great power interests before anything else.

Such an ambivalence on Moscow's part was further evidenced by its statement on October 15, 1973, that "the Arab countries should be worrying about solidarity with Egypt and Syria rather than lecturing the Russians on how to help them" (Golan, 2010, p. 101). This statement signified a major shift in Soviet foreign policy as regards both Egypt and Syria, as the emphasis was no longer on harnessing or prolonging local conflicts in the Middle East. Instead, Moscow was now convinced that it had to step in to soothe tensions lest they engulf the entire region in a spiral of violence. It seemed the former manipulator of Middle Eastern tensions had found itself increasingly dragged into a global-scale confrontation contrary to its will and core interests. Such an unintended outcome on the part of Moscow could be attributed to shrewd political maneuvering of its warlike regional allies, which had traditionally ruled out any permanent settlement that fell short of Israel's total annihilation.

Despite having made repeated calls for a ceasefire and distanced itself publicly from the bloodbath on the ground, the Kremlin continued to provide a certain degree of military aid to those Syrian troops that were engaged in the conflict. However, the aid in question was brokered through a third party (i.e. Iraq) in order to make it less detectable by the international community (Golan, 1999). The Soviet Union's painstaking effort to achieve its two conflicting objectives remained evident throughout the month-long war. As addressed by Quant (1976), the Soviet Union continued to change its tone and strategies with each new stage in the conflict (pp. 35-39). Golan (1999) concurs with Quant (1976), further arguing that the Soviet state-run media approached the conflict very carefully, and acknowledged the

constructive role played by the United States during the war. However, Sharnoff (2009) argues that the Soviet Union positioned nuclear weapons in an undisclosed location in the Middle East, and the United States "increased the national security warning to DEFCON 3 and placed the US Navy's Sixth Fleet on high alert in the Mediterranean Sea" (pp. 23-24). Yet the need to prevent the conflict from amplifying was evident, as the Soviet Union worked together with Western countries to broker a resolution (Kreutz, 2007, pp. 15-21).

To an extent, the Soviet Union was able to achieve both of its goals during the Yom Kippur War. It had successfully managed to avoid a military conflict with the United States, and worked with Washington to draft a UN resolution (Quandt, 1976, pp. 11-18). However, from a different perspective, Syria and Egypt were disappointed due to the inadequate support provided and the ambiguous tactics employed by the Soviet Union throughout the conflict (Quandt, 1976, p. 26). In response, the Soviet Union provided both Egypt and Syria with reparations, "replacing destroyed armor and weapons with long-ranged missiles and high tech aircrafts" (Sharnoff, 2009, p. 24). Although this strategy was somewhat successful in ensuring that Syria would not turn to the United States for aid, Egyptian leaders felt a growing distrust in their Soviet ally. The disappointment of Cairo with Moscow's wartime attitude surely played a crucial role in its decision to retract the 1971 Friendship Treaty between the USSR and Egypt, thus dealing a huge blow to the strategic relationship between Egypt and the Soviet Union (Drysdale & Hinnebusch, 1991, p. 151).

3.8 Towards the 1980 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation

Prior to the onset of the Lebanese Civil War, Syria made successive attempts to avoid extreme polarization between different religious and sectarian communities in Lebanon. During this period, Syria consulted heavily with the Soviet Union, and both agreed "that the strife in Lebanon was the result of a US-supported Zionist plot to divide the Arabs and provide cover for a separate Egyptian-Israeli deal" (Drysdale & Hinnebusch, 1991, p. 156). Despite initially trying to avoid the conflict, a civil war broke out in Lebanon, leaving the Soviet Union and Syria with different perspectives on how to resolve the crisis.

Although both the Soviet Union and Syria initially agreed that the conflict in Lebanon was triggered by the United States, Syria's eventual intervention in the conflict directly pitted Damascus against Moscow (Allison, 2013). Specifically, Drysdale and Hinnebusch (1991) argue that Syria's military intervention in June 1976 was focused on preventing "the PLO-Muslim leftist alliance from defeating the Christian rightists" (p. 156). In response, the Soviet Union demanded Syria to retreat from Lebanon, imposed sanctions on its longtime strategic partner, and temporarily halted arms transfers to the Syrian military. Yet Damascus did not believe that Moscow had a right to sanction it for engaging in what was a conflict concerning Syria's national security and perceived interests. In response to these sanctions, Syria began expelling Soviet diplomats from the country, and told the Soviet Union to relocate its submarines away from the Tartus naval base (Allison, 2013). Although in time, the Soviet Union came to terms with Syria's stance on the nature of the Lebanese conflict, and acknowledged the legitimacy of military intervention by Syrian troops. Still, the relationship between Syria and the Soviet Union remained tense until 1980.

Allison (2013) argues that the subsequent acceptance of Syria's legitimate right to intervene in Lebanon on the part of Moscow can be largely attributed to the fact that the Soviet Union had planted listening devices in the homes of Syrian leaders. By wiretapping even the top echelons of power in Damascus, Moscow was able to have a true grasp of how Syrian leaders thought, and determine the limits of what they deemed non-negotiable. Thanks to the all-out penetration of its intelligence agencies into Syria, the Kremlin was able to manipulate its relationship with Damascus to the fullest extent possible, while occasionally sacrificing secondary priorities in the name of maintaining its main bastion in the region (pp. 795-822).

An urge on the part of Moscow and Damascus to soothe recent tensions between them, which had been further exacerbated due to Syria's persistence on violent methods and continued warfare in Lebanon, led the two countries to sign a friendship treaty in 1980. However, Drysdale and Hinnebusch (1991) argue that this treaty should be viewed rather as a formality than a comprehensive agreement (p. 157). This argument is based on the fact that both countries had very different interpretations as to what the treaty actually stood for. Damascus believed that the treaty was a manifestation of Moscow's irrevocable stakes in backing the Syrian war machine, and a renewed desire on the part of Moscow to keep Damascus safe in the face of repeated Western and Israeli incursions. In contrast, the Soviet Union downplayed the treaty's stipulations that might concern a future conflict in the Middle East. Drysdale and Hinnebusch (1991) further argue that the Soviet Union perceived the 1980 Friendship Treaty as more of "a vehicle for crisis management" than a strategic guideline for mutual defense (p. 157). Although each party dwelled on a different interpretation concerning the stipulations put forth by the treaty, the

huge discrepancy between their individual interpretations by itself serves as a sufficient explanation as to why the Soviet Union felt it necessary to keep Syria at arm's length after the mid-1980s.

Yet, Syria still sought additional support from the Soviet Union through most of the 1980s. This is further exemplified in Syria's request in 1981 to enter a military pact with the Soviet Union, which would ensure that Syria was protected from any future military invasion by US allies Israel and Turkey (Drysdale & Hinnebusch, 1991, p. 158). However, the Soviet Union did not want to bind itself with such an agreement that could potentially be manipulated by its insecure client. The lack of interest displayed by the Soviet Union in a military pact with Syria is widely attributed to the fact that the United States had just signed such a pact with Israel. Again, the Soviet Union did not want to create a conflict with the United States. Besides, the Soviet Union was also worried about the frequency of military action that would be required of it in case such a pact with Syria was concluded. Against a backdrop of prolonged conflicts in Syria's recent history and an ongoing war in Afghanistan, the Kremlin had every reason to refrain from such a binding and risky agreement. Furthermore, the Soviet Union was hesitant about intervention in conflicts that would place it in opposition to NATO countries other than the US, such as Turkey and France. As a result, the Soviet Union refused to provide Syria the full military support it desired during this period (Drysdale & Hinnebusch, 1991, p. 158).

3.9 Moscow's drift away from Damascus under Gorbachev

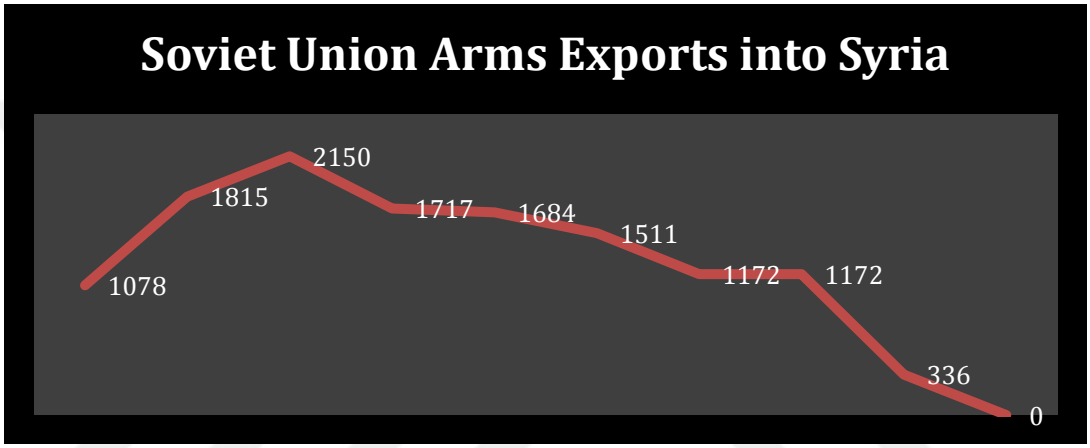
Prior to the 1980s, the Soviet Union enjoyed close political relations with Syria. However, in 1985, the newly appointed Gorbachev administration took a different stance towards Syria as well as other flashpoints across the Greater Middle East.

Gorbachev differed from his predecessors as he openly denounced the Assad regime for its “adventurism in Lebanon”, while calling for a significant reduction in economic and military aid to Damascus. He also perceived Syria’s obsession with fighting Israel as a “liability” (Sharnoff, 2009, pp. 21-29). And in contrast with Moscow’s confusing habit of paying lip service to international calls for restraint during military conflicts while avoiding the costs associated with concerted action to impose peace on the region; Gorbachev’s proposed solution to this dilemma envisaged a sincere effort to cooperate with the West for a lasting settlement of various Middle Eastern conflicts (Drysdale & Hinnebusch, 1991, p. 161).

Because the Soviet Union was not directly involved in the various wars between Syria and Israel in the past decades, Moscow had made little effort to resolve this persistent conflict prior to the Gorbachev administration (Drysdale & Hinnebusch, 1991, p. 161). In the past, the Soviet Union believed that perpetuating a limited conflict would translate into economic and political gains for Moscow within the broader Cold War context (Drysdale & Hinnebusch, 1991, p. 161). However, the uncontrollable nature of local tensions and vendettas as demonstrated in the Yom Kippur War and the Lebanese Civil War, when coupled with the drastic change that the mid to late 1980s brought upon the global economy, played a decisive role in altering the traditional Soviet policy towards its clients the Middle East, Syria first and foremost.

It was a period when “Syria's economic boom collapsed as a result of the rapid fall of world oil prices, lower export revenues, drought affecting agricultural production, and falling worker remittances” (Collelo, 1987, Introducion section, para. 4). From this perspective, the move away from Soviet-Syrian solidarity may be partly attributed to the fear that Syria would not be able to repay its cumulative debt

to the Soviet Union. According to Hazo (1986), by 1985, Syria had $10 billion dollars in debt to the Soviet Union (p. 4). This debt had been incurred through the excessive amount of weapons that were exported to Syria by the Soviet Union over the past few decades. Although the Soviet Union agreed to continue providing weapons to Syria, the amount of loans and arms that the Soviet Union was willing to provide drastically declined in this period (as shown in Figure 1).



Year	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
Syria	$1078	$1815	2150	1717	1684	1511	1172	1172	336	0

Fig. 1 Changes in the value of Soviet arms exports to Syria between 1981 and 1990 (million US dollars)[4] Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 1991

From a different perspective, the Soviet Union's intention of remaining one of the world's two superpowers through sustained increases in military expenditure was severely undermining the country's finances (Noren, 2007). According to a World Bank document, "Soviet growth over 1960-1989 was the worst in the world . . . [in

[4] As demonstrated here, one can observe a drastic decline in the annual amount of arms that the Soviet Union exported to Syria after Gorbachev's rise to power in Moscow. For a more detailed overview of the steep decline in the volume of Soviet-Syrian arms trade in this period, see Wulf (1991), p. 173.

terms of] investment and capital; the relative performance means over time. There is some evidence that the burden of defense spending modestly contributed to the Soviet debacle" (Easterly & Fischer, 1994, p. 341). Although the Soviet Union was spending nearly as much as the United States on defense, Noren's study (2007) explores how the miniscule growth of the Soviet economy rendered the task of funding these expenditures extremely difficult in the long-run (as clearly illustrated by Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4). As a result, the United States' defense strategy was quickly overtaking the Soviet Union's. Even though the Soviet Union benefited economically from exporting arms to its Middle Eastern affiliates like the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Syria, the global economic conditions present in the 1980s left the Soviet Union questioning whether or not these Third World entities were economically strong enough to repay their debt (Hazo, 1986, p. 4).

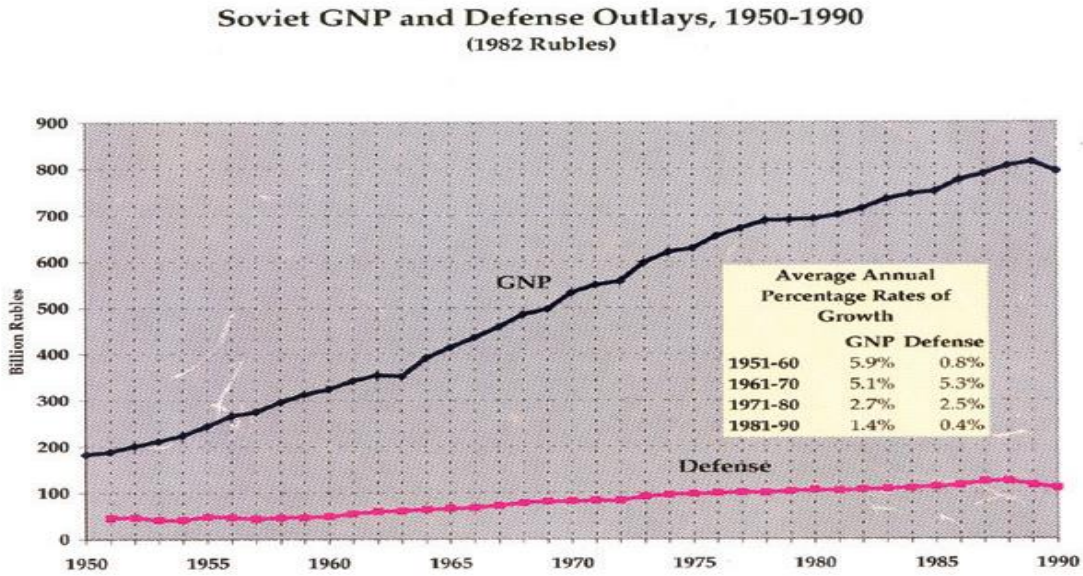


Fig. 2 A comparison of the annual rates of growth in the Soviet Union's gross national production (GNP) and military expenditures between 1950 and 1990 (billion Soviet rubles)[5] Source: Central Intelligence Agency, 2007

[5] As one may deduce from the chart, although Soviet economy had been steadily growing through this period, Moscow's spending on defense was effectively pushing down economic growth. Furthermore, the economic instability of the Soviet Union's trade partners during the 1980s threatened the Soviet economy's prospects. For more information on the source and subject, see Noren (2007).

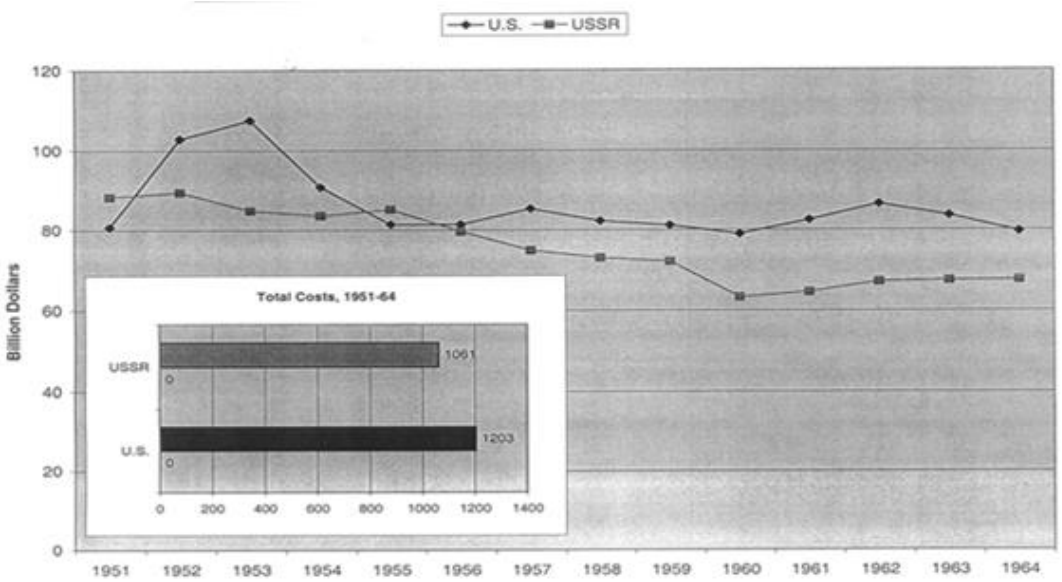


Fig. 3 A comparison of the annual and cumulative cost of military programs carried out by the United States and the Soviet Union from 1951 to 1964 (billion US dollars)[6] Source: Central Intelligence Agency, 2007

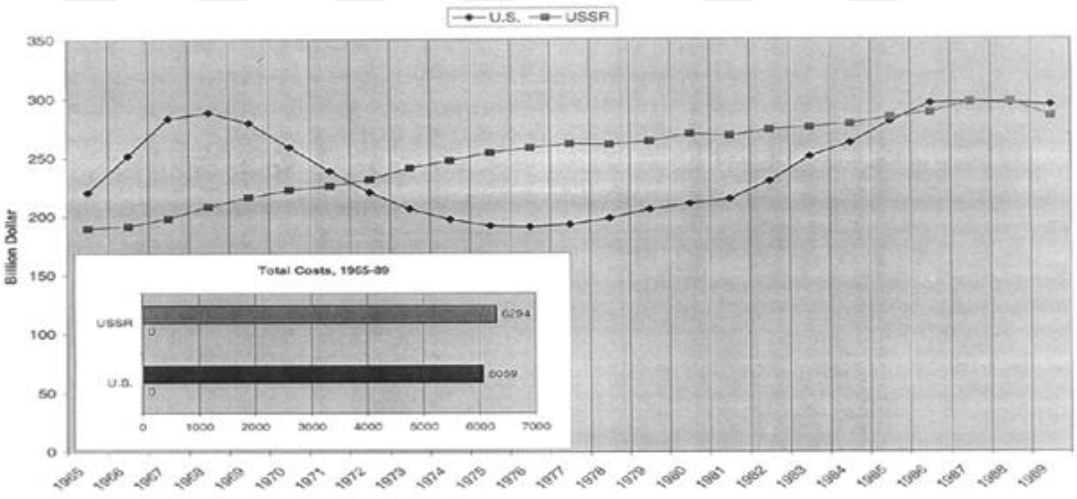


Fig. 4 A comparison of the annual and cumulative cost of military programs carried out by the United States and the Soviet Union from 1965 to 1989 (billion US dollars) Source: Central Intelligence Agency, 2007

[6] Further data is available in Noren (2007).

The decision to move away from providing Third World countries such as Syria with arms immensely benefited the Soviet Union's trade relationships with Western countries (Noren, 2007). It could be argued that this move was further motivated by the arriving age of globalization, which compelled the Soviet Union to form close commercial relations with developed Western countries in order to rejuvenate its flagging economy (Noren, 2007). Syria had been the primary recipient of Soviet military, economic, and political aid towards the Middle East since the early 1950s. But according to Sharnoff (2009), "by the late 1980s, that relationship was effectively finished" as the Soviet Union became focused on forging new trade relations that would provide the country with the necessary sources of economic growth (p. 25).

The Soviet Union's policies towards Syria and the West changed immensely during this period. Some politicians and academics still argue that it was this very policy shift that had resulted in the fall of the Soviet Union. The Kremlin's drift away from centrally-planned heavy industries and arms exports led to an increasing focus on attaining Western technologies and building a consumer-based economy domestically; which coincided with declarations of independence by multiple socialist republics under its umbrella. According to this view; although the reforms made by Gorbachev as embodied in his 'new thinking' initiative, policies to increase *glasnost* (government transparency), and *perestroika* (economic restructuring) brought relative financial prosperity to the peoples of the Soviet Union, these policies "ultimately brought about its collapse" as well ("Gorbachev and new thinking," 2009).

3.10 Conclusion

The Soviet Union's strategic handling of Syria after World War II was rooted in its desire for political, military, and economic gains *vis-à-vis* the Western. After World War II, the Soviet Union failed to gain the financial and political support of the West that it aspired in order to maintain its security and prosperity. As a result, much of the Soviet Union's foreign policy and early interests in Syria focused on obtaining power in the key strategic ground that was the Middle East *vis-à-vis* the West, which was in turn to be used as a geopolitical bargaining chip elsewhere. While the United States enacted the failed Baghdad Pact, the Soviet Union began looking for ways to develop its own political network in the Middle East (Karsh, 1988, pp. 2-3). Although the Soviet Union and Syria held different ideological perspectives towards domestic and international matters, for more than three decades, the broader and systemic currents of international politics pushed the two countries together in the face of shared threat perceptions (Golan, 1999).

Yet, through the 1970s and early 1980s; Moscow's decision not to support Syrian aggression against Israel, Jordan, or Lebanon, its reluctance to extend further loans to a bankrupt administration in Damascus, and its denial of advanced arms shipments to its traditional Middle Eastern ally caused frictions between the two countries (Golan, 1999, pp. 127-136). Furthermore, the economic decline of the 1980s left an increasingly exhausted Soviet Union questioning whether or not Third World allies (such as Syria) would be able to repay their debts to Moscow. In response, the Soviet Union focused on rebuilding its own economic infrastructure, and forging commercial ties with Western entities in order to avoid conflict on multiple fronts at a time when it was already losing ground on the global stage ("Gorbachev and new thinking," 2009). Although the stance the Soviet Union took

on Syria tended to differ through successive phases in the bilateral relationship and in accordance with the fluctuations in the larger international context; the Soviet Union had benefited immensely from its close ties with Syria until the latter half of 1980s, when Gorbachev's reforms further detracted Moscow from new adventures in the ever-troubled Middle East.

CHAPTER 4

MUTUAL TIES ON THE VERGE OF RUPTURE

> Experience teaches that the most critical moment for bad governments is the one which witnesses their first steps toward reform. (Tocqueville, 1856/2010, p. 214)

The dissolution of the USSR officially took place on December 26, 1991. Yet, the Russian Republic's political and economic structures were crumbling years before the Soviet Union was officially dissolved. After the rapid succession of power by Yuri Andropov (1982-1984) and Konstantin Chernenko (1984-1985), the Communist Party selected Mikhail Gorbachev to be the next General Secretary of the USSR. Coming from a younger generation than the Soviet Union's top leaders before him, Gorbachev was charged with introducing reforms that would stabilize and strengthen the Soviet Union. However, the tide of global events was against the Soviets and Gorbachev's hasty steps ultimately led to the dissolution of the USSR; which meant a steep downturn in Moscow's power-projection capacity, hence an unprecedented level of deterioration in mutual relations with its Syrian ally amid increasing Western and Israeli pressures.

4.1 The Gorbachev era

To address the many issues plaguing the state, Gorbachev introduced a series of reforms known as *perestroika* and *glasnost*. The *perestroika* initiative rapidly altered the economic organization of the Soviet Union by breaking the monopoly of the centrally-planned public sector, thus paving the way for the emergence of a market-oriented socialist economy instead (Boettke, 1993, p. 107). However, it did little to

change the fundamentals of corporate governance or the structure of production in core industries (Boettke, 1993). As a result, the damage that was already inflicted by a plunge in world oil prices and a nine-year war of attrition in Afghanistan that had no end in sight was compounded by widespread corruption and an ineffective planned economy (McCauley, 2001, p. 86). Meanwhile, *glasnost* allowed the public to access information that had been censored by the government for decades; thus opening the pandora's box. Social problems within the Soviet Union gained widespread public attention and severely undermined the Communist Party's authority, both within the country and in the Soviet satellite states. Further aggravating the public was the lack of access to even the most basic of goods and services. Experiments with easing price controls distorted the cost and availability of staples, forcing ordinary citizens to wait in queues for hours in order to receive household essentials (Hofheinz & Jung, 1991).

In addition to reforms at home, Gorbachev enacted changes to the USSR's policies abroad. With ideological concerns dwindling in importance, the foreign policy of Moscow no longer focused on "finding allies but significant economic partners" (Aghayev & Katman, 2012, p. 2068). Sensing a change in the winds, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad visited Moscow shortly after Gorbachev came to power. Twice during 1985, in May and in June, Hafez al-Assad met with Gorbachev and "restated Syria's plea for a stronger Soviet military commitment" (Mason, 1988, p. 228). Yet, recent clashes of opinion over policy decisions in Palestine and Iraq had strained the relationship between the Soviets and Syria. Gorbachev did not hesitate to remind Hafez al-Assad "that Syria was no more the only ally of the USSR in the Middle East" (Aghayev & Katman, 2012, p. 2068). Shortly after Hafez al-Assad returned to Syria, Soviet military advisors and experts began to be withdrawn from

Damascus, with their numbers going down from a previous 4,000 to just 1,800 by the end of 1986 (Sharnoff, 2009, p. 25).

It is not entirely known what took place during the meetings between Gorbachev and Hafez al-Assad. What is known for sure is that Syria was extremely uncomfortable with the repercussions of Gorbachev's reforms for Soviet foreign policy. And Gorbachev, "unlike his predecessors, appeared prepared to pressure Syria for concessions in return for Soviet military aid" (Mason, 1988, p. 228). Each year from 1980 to 1984, Syria received $2.4 billion worth of arms and other military equipment without making any concessions or payments. But as the Soviet Union was struggling to avoid total economic collapse, "the Soviets began demanding that Syria pay for arms with cash" (Sharnoff, 2009, p. 25).

Another source of tension was over Israel. Gorbachev wanted Hafez al-Assad to support his efforts to organize a Middle East peace conference, one that would be attended by all relevant parties including Israel and the United States. The conference was to be a lasting mark of Soviet influence in the region, demonstrating the Communist Party's ability to usher in peace and prosperity where American capitalism had failed. However, Israel was the sworn enemy of Syria. Efforts to foster peace that included a continued existence for Israel, as well as the Soviet Union's swift decision to ally with the US against Iraq on the eve of the First Gulf War, infuriated Syria and led to a chilling of relations between Moscow and Damascus (Sharnoff, 2009, pp. 28-29).

The end of the 1980s saw a wave of revolutions as Eastern European states sought greater autonomy from Moscow. This culminated in the election of Boris Yeltsin as the new president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) in 1990. After forming a totally new Congress, Yeltsin declared that, within

the Russian Republic, Russian laws had greater authority than the laws issued by the Communist Party. Pressure mounted as other republics within the Soviet Union made similar moves to lessen the Communist Party's authority. Finally, in 1991, the highest administrative body of the Soviet Union, the Supreme Soviet, agreed to vote itself out of existence.

4.2 The Yeltsin era

The dissolution of the USSR did not bring a resolution to the newly-independent Russian Republic's myriad problems. Indeed, the Russian Federation that emerged in 1991 was weaker politically and militarily than ever before. The USSR had a presence in every part of the world, but now its successor had few, if any, allies or clients: "Russia has lost all of its former Soviet military bases, including those in Cuba and Vietnam" (Al-Marhoun, 2014). In particular, the fall of the Soviet Union saw a dramatic reduction of Russian presence across the Greater Middle East. Where once the Kremlin successfully blocked Western geopolitical encroachments by encircling the Eastern Mediterranean, now the sole ally of the Soviet successor state in the entire region was the isolated and bankrupt regime in Damascus. There was a palpable sense of anger and disillusion as Russian citizens began to question the special place in history they had always presumed for their country. The rise to global superpower status had allowed Russia to realize its long-held perception of its exceptionality. Therefore, the traumatic demotion of the USSR in 1991 to a middling, insignificant player on the world stage was difficult to bear both psychologically and politically (Mueller, 1991, p. 270).

Russia's recurrent tragedy, which seems to emanate from the stark contrast between altering periods of glory and pride on the one hand, as opposed to those

marked by anguish and shame on the other, can be seen played out most vividly in the country's relentless efforts to obtain and maintain warm water ports along its extended southern periphery. Russian presence on the Mediterranean Sea reflects a long-held obsession with gaining direct access to open seas through a permanent naval outlet – a desire that goes back centuries on the part of the successive rulers of an almost-landlocked, yet continent-sized and inherently powerful country (Delman, 2015). By establishing a naval base at the Syrian port of Tartus, the Soviet Union had actually realized the time-old Russian dream.

More than obtaining the prestige associated with access to nearly every major waterway, "there are also large stakes associated with Syria's regional geopolitical position," notably its proximity to Israel and other strategic Western outposts like those in Turkey (Al-Marhoun, 2014). The Soviet Navy's radar could see for thousands of miles in all directions, which was why Israel had repeatedly lodged complaints about its military presence there. Besides, "Tartus' potential to carry out a military operation remains possible when a decision is made to do so" even after the Soviet collapse (Al-Marhoun, 2014). For that matter, the Tartus military base would be retained through the transition from the USSR to the Russian Federation. However, little else of the Soviet-Syrian alliance would. Although the 1980 Friendship Treaty between the USSR and Syria remained in force under the new Russian state (and continues to do so up until date), now the two countries were allies in little more than name. Under Boris Yeltsin, Russia was afraid to alienate the all-powerful Western Bloc; and thus, it was "largely absent from the Middle East and thus did not provide much support for Syria" (Katz, 2012). In that regard, Yeltsin chose not to transfer the military and economic aid agreements made between the USSR and Syria to the new Russian state. The new president allowed Russian

military advisors and consultants to stay in Damascus to help train the Syrian Army; however, relations "were now only a matter of formality" (Aghayev & Katman, 2012, p. 2069).

Throughout the 1990s, "the Yeltsin administration lurched from crisis to crisis" (Lo, 2002, p. 2). The process of transforming the centrally-led Soviet economy into a modern liberal one was a daunting challenge. Following the advice of his deputy Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, Yeltsin introduced three policies as part of a 'shock therapy' plan: liberalization, stabilization, and privatization. Restructuring was never going to be easy but the reform process was made far worse when, as hyperinflation began to cripple the Russian ruble, the Central Bank of Russia decided to print more money. The result was nearly an entire collapse of the Russian economy (Boettke, 1993, p. 107).

By then end of the century, the Russian economy was in shambles. Real GDP had fallen by more than 40 percent, hyperinflation had eviscerated personal savings, crime and corruption had become the norm, and destitution was spreading (Adomeit, 2016, p. 168). Russia had grown dependent on short-term borrowing to make up for its deficits, taking out loans from the IMF worth over $20 billion between 1991 and 1998 ("Business: The economy," 1999). The Yeltsin administration was unable to handle the many needs of the new liberal economy and eventually the economy did collapse in the 1998 Russian Financial Crisis. As one might expect, Russia back then was in no position to provide aid – financial or military – to any of its remaining allies. Indeed, having been degraded into the status of a foreign aid recipient, the young Russian Federation found itself heavily indebted to its Western patrons which saw no harm in using their partner's position of weakness as a leverage for diplomatic and geopolitical gains in its immediate neighborhood and elsewhere, as

exemplified in the case of NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and its eastward enlargement to include some former members of the once-mighty Warsaw Pact (Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary) the same year without paying any regard to Russia's vocal opposition ("The politics of European enlargement," 2002, pp. 179-181).

Against the backdrop of Western political and economic encirclement, Russian foreign policy under Yeltsin did not fare much better either. Despite "near universal support for the principle of a foreign policy consensus", there was a "resounding failure to achieve it in practice" under the Yeltsin administration (Lo, 2002, p. 4). The Russian Federation was deeply divided over what its policy priorities should be and how it should go about achieving them. In the absence of any clearly held values and concepts due to the shock of such significant loss of power, Russian foreign policy foundered. The former superpower's global strategy stumbled forward "with little unifying logic, consistency or even continuity" (Lo, 2002, p. 6). Having lost its identity and place in the world, "foreign policy became something of a sideshow" next to the pressing demands of the domestic sphere (Lo, 2002, p. 6). Even the precious port of Tartus fell by the wayside. During much of the 1990s, the Syrian port languished as little more than a dock to be used by oil traders (Lo, 2002).

4.3 The Chechen quagmire and Putin's rise to power

Along with Russia's economic and identity crises, trouble was brewing in the Caucasus. The First Chechen War started in 1994 when Yeltsin ordered Russian troops to suppress the rise of what had already begun to evolve into an Islamist uprising in the southern regions of the country (Lo, 2002, p. 112). Yet, even then, there was much hand wringing about what course of action would be best for

Russia's self-interests. Many in Yeltsin's administration argued against military intervention "on the grounds that this would only increase the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, exacerbate the conditions of the local Russian population, and could 'turn out to be a catastrophe for the young Russian democracy and market reforms'" (Lo, 2002, p. 112). Throughout the 1990s, most officials maintained that the best course of action for Russia would be to avoid becoming involved in any regional conflicts, even those within its national borders.

The Russian people have a long history of playing a crucial role in global affairs, however, "that role declined after the collapse of the Soviet Union left Russia broke and in chaos" (Tsevetkova, Lowe, & Dzyubenko, 2015). Amid all the political and economic turmoil Russia was domestically embroiled in, it became popular among Western policy circles to openly mock the once great empire, portraying it as the new "sick man of Europe", an image purposefully chosen to call to mind the dramatic dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. Throughout the West, it "became fashionable … to denigrate Russia's place in the world, to argue that its [Russia's] obvious fall from grace translated into an ever greater and lasting irrelevance in international affairs" (Lo, 2002, p. 112). Even within Russia, people had a negative view of the country. Polls from that period show that only 36 percent of Russians were proud of their country; while a mere 40 percent of the population were proud of the Russian military ("Russia's wars," 2016).

Ultimately, the event that pushed Yeltsin out of office was the 1999 bombings of an apartment building in Moscow in which hundreds of people lost their lives (Van Herpen, 2014, p. 530). The attacks were attributed to Islamic extremists within the Chechen rebel movement. The Russian army quickly moved to enter Chechnya and, in September 1999, the Second Chechen War began (Van Herpen,

2014, p. 533). A prominent soldier during the combat was the then obscure Vladimir Putin. In August 1999, Boris Yeltsin suddenly dismissed the entire Russian Congress and designated Putin to be the head of a newly formed government (Van Herpen, 2014, p. 539). Then, on December 31, 1999, following Putin's well-publicized demonstration of bravery and patriotism in Chechnya, Yeltsin resigned from his post as Russian president with six months still left in his term. In effect, this made Putin the acting president until the March 2000 presidential elections – which he won.

CHAPTER 5

TOWARDS A REJUVENATION IN RELATIONS

Born in St. Petersburg (then known as Leningrad) in 1952, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin served as a KGB officer for 16 years, reaching the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, before "retiring" to enter St. Petersburg politics in 1990. By 1996, he had moved to Moscow to join President Boris Yeltsin's administration; by 1999 he was the Acting President of the Russian Federation ("Biografiya Vladimir Putina," 2016). Putin has led the Russian state, alternatively as President and as Prime Minister, ever since. Under his rule, "Russia has enjoyed something of a resurgence as a regional and global actor" (Lo, 2002, p. 9). In particular, the new president has worked to reassert Russian power and influence in the Middle East. President Putin has "now restored what, in the Kremlin's eyes, is business as usual in the region" (Tsevetkova et al., 2015). This did not automatically mean a rapprochement with Syria, however.

In June 2000, Hafez al-Assad died after 30 years in power. He was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad (hereafter referred as either Bashar or simply Assad), who ran unopposed in a constitutional referendum in July 2000 (Reutov, 2000). Syrian and international observers were hopeful about the change in leadership, dubbing the transition a "Damascus Spring" (Mardasov, 2016). It was a time when the whole country debated social and political issues. Born in 1965, Bashar studied medicine at Damascus University before working as a military doctor from 1988 to 1992. After serving in the army for four years, Bashar moved to the United Kingdom in order to obtain his postgraduate degree in ophthalmology. He was suddenly recalled to Damascus in 1994 when his older brother Bassel was killed in a car

accident. It had been Bassel who the elder Hafez had groomed for succession. Now, that duty fell to Bashar (Reutov, 2000).

The two new leaders, Assad and Putin, did not begin relations on good terms. They both agreed to respect the 1980 Friendship Treaty and allow its automatic 5-year renewal to take place but there was deep-rooted distrust between the two presidents ("Syria, USSR Treaty," 2015). Putin was angry that Syria refused to repay its debt to Moscow, accumulated during the Soviet era, which by 2000 amounted to $12-13 billion (Katz, 2012). For his part, Assad was suspicious of Russia's refusal to sell advanced weaponry to Syria. Rather than considering this as a natural response for not paying of one's debts, Assad blamed Russia's reluctance on increased cordiality between Russia and Israel, as Israel vehemently opposed Syria obtaining advanced weapons systems. Russian-Syrian relations would not improve until 2005.

5.1 Putin's *realpolitik* push amid leadership change in Damascus

When Vladimir Putin was elected President in 2000, the Russian people gave him a political mandate to restore the country to the glorious, powerful position once held by the Soviet Union. Indeed, polls taken around the time of the election showed that Russian people "cared about this considerably more than they cared about the recovery of savings lost in the early 1990s, social justice or the fight against corruption" ("Russia's wars," 2016). During the lost decade of the 1990s, the Russian public grew angry with the accommodating foreign policy of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, particularly resenting the friendly way with which the Soviet and Russian leader, respectively, dealt with the US and Israel. The abrupt end to the First Gulf War and Yeltsin's willingness to let Washington take over the cherished Arab-Israeli peace process led many Russians to cry out against the "abandonment" of former

Soviet allies in the Middle East, including Iraq, Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) (Hadar, 1994, p. 9). In particular, the ex-Soviet bureaucratic elite, still a powerful faction within modern-day Russian politics, became increasingly vocal about what they viewed as a humiliating exclusion from world politics and adamantly "endorsed the pressing domestic pressures for a greater role in foreign affairs" (Khashan, 1998, p. 85).

In short, the public demanded an assertive solution to their country's sudden reduction to irrelevance as far as great power politics was concerned. Fortunately for President Putin, the Middle East at the start of the twenty-first century provided the perfect opportunity. Vladimir Zhirinovsky, a prominent nationalist leader who advocated a renewed Russian imperialism, put such popular ambitions in a nutshell: The new millennium would see the world once again carved into disparate spheres of influence with the US controlling the Western Hampshire, Japan and China divvying up control of Asia, and "Russia will extend its control past Greater Russia, including the territories of the former Soviet Union, to the entire Middle East (including Iran and Turkey)" (Hadar, 1994, p. 9).

In contrast to Zhirinovsky's high-handed remarks though, Russian foreign policy under Putin is "a far cry from the . . . Cold War zero-sum thinking which guided the Kremlin for many years" (Bourtman, 2006, p. 1). Rather, Putin's global strategy reflects a shrewd calculation of protecting and promoting Russian's core national interests. While Putin's American contemporary, President George W. Bush, assumed the Soviet mantel of ideologue in the Middle East; Putin worked to emulate America's ability to maintain Arab and Israeli allies without antagonizing one or the other (Bourtman, 2006, p. 1). In his efforts to reclaim ground lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Putin developed a 'two-track policy' of balancing relations in

the Middle East, allowing Russia to enter the new millennium with an increasingly strong presence in the region. The wily Russian President managed to avoid "choosing sides" in the myriad Middle Eastern conflicts, establishing relations with both Arab states and Israel, as well as with international pariahs like Iran and Hamas. As the Russian Foreign Minister at the time of this writing, Sergey Lavrov, explained in the Kremlin's official mouthpiece *Pravda*, "Russia's policy is neither pro-Arab, nor pro-Israel. It is aimed at securing Russian national interests. Maintaining close and friendly ties with Arab states and Israel is among them" (Borisov & Lavrov, 2004). As such, the foreign policy for the region can be characterized by pragmatic realism and economic calculations.

Yet, despite the reemergence of Russia at the dawn of the twenty-first century, it is painfully obvious that the Russian Federation cannot possibly exert the same degree of influence in the region that the Soviet Union used to (Bourtman, 2006, pp. 7-8). Recognizing Russia's limited capabilities, Putin has made the wise decision of refraining from ideologically-driven interventions in the internal affairs of regional countries, and rather focused on the traditional Russian role as an arms dealer and power broker. The first trip Putin took to the Middle East was in 2005 and his "fellow travelers included the chief executives from the MiG Corporation and *Rosoboroneksport* (Russian Defense Exports)" (Bourtman, 2006, pp. 7-8). While there, the Russian President entered into trade negotiations with Israel over a lucrative energy agreement (Bourtman, 2006, p. 2). Putin has done much to improve relations between Russia and Israel but he has not gone so far as to denounce Hamas or stop his anti-American mischief; which attests to the assertive yet equally realistic nature of the rebalancing strategy that has been pursued by successive Putin administrations.

5.2 Rapprochement with Syria

In 2005, Syria was compelled to pull its forces out of Lebanon, where thousands of its troops had been present since 1976. The decision came in response to the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, for which Syria was publicly blamed by the West, leading to a popular uprising in Lebanon that ignited widespread "fear of American intervention if it [Syria] did not withdraw" (Katz, 2012). Shortly thereafter, Putin extended an invitation to Assad to meet with him in Moscow, "the first such overture by a Russian leader in over a dozen years" (Bourtman, 2006, p. 5). While there, Putin approved a debt renegotiation that forgave "73 percent of the $13.4 billion debt owed by Damascus, a significant sum for Russia" (Bourtman, 2006, p. 5). More significantly, Putin and Assad agreed on a new military deal, one that included the sale of Strelets surface-to-air missiles and a doubling of the number of Syrian officers eligible to come to Russia to receive training in the country's prestigious military academies. In return, Assad permitted the revitalization of the Soviet naval facilities in Tartus, which were at the time only being used by the Russian oil firm, Tatneft, to export and import petroleum (Katz, 2006).

Israel, and to a lesser degree the United States, was furious that such advanced weapons were to be sold to Syria where they could very easily fall into the hands of terrorist groups such as Hezbollah. However, after carefully considering the benefits each Middle Eastern party could offer Russia, it would appear that Putin chose Syria. In response to a question that was asked by an Israeli news station on whether he thought the transfer of Strelets missiles to Syria should be perceived as a threat against Israel, Putin "won himself few friends in Israel by laughing at the

question and stating that ‘sure, Israeli aircraft will no longer be able to fly over Bashar Assad’s palace’” (Grishina & Suponina, 2006, p. 1).

The sale of missiles was actually rather small (approximately $100 million worth) and in private, Putin did much to assuage Israel’s fears. Yet it should be noted that, shortly before the new weapons agreement was signed, rumors circulated that Israeli sources had poured huge amounts of money into the Ukrainian presidential race, supporting the campaign of Viktor Yushchenko, a pro-Western opposition leader detested by the Kremlin (Bourtman, 2006, pp. 8-9). Whether these rumors are true or not may never be known for certain. However, Putin’s message to Israel was unmistakable: Bad things can happen to those who threaten Russia’s interests in Ukraine, i.e. right at the former’s ‘soft underbelly’.

5.3 The 2008 Russo-Georgian War and its relevance to Syria

In the years following the end of the Cold War, the United States and its Western allies embarked on large cuts of their naval presence in the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean. Having secured its control over the port of Tartus, it was not difficult for Putin to step in and fill the power vacuum the Western navies had left behind. During Putin’s second term in office (2004-2008), Russia began to refocus its attention on the area and “has gradually improved its [Russia’s] fleet size and stepped up patrols in the East Mediterranean” (Inbar, 2014, p. 7). The country’s renewed presence in the region has been highlighted by successive naval drills that had been carried out since (Inbar, 2014, p. 16).

In the midst of Putin's successes at promoting Russian power on its "vulnerable southern flank"[7](Trenin, 2002, p. 94), the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2008 (GFC) "seriously undermined the Putin/Medvedev regime's performance, its bedrock source of legitimacy" (Herd, 2011, p. 117). As Putin's heroic efforts to reinvigorate the Russian economy after years of stagnation seemed to falter (as illustrated in Figure 5); his popularity alongside Russia's power-projection capacity abroad plunged. "[The] brunt of the crisis of 2008-09 was borne by business; the public was sheltered by spending," and within a few months, the Russian GDP growth quickly recovered ("Russia's wars," 2016). However, the incident revealed to Putin the fragility of Russia's recent strategic gains as well as the country's inherent instability – a legacy of the implosion of the multi-ethnic Soviet Union less than two decades ago. In order to intimidate the West as well as those restive groups inside Russian North Caucasus, Putin invaded Georgia in 2008 (Freedman, 2014, pp. 15-16). A similar strategy would play a large role a few years later in Russia's involvement in Ukraine and in Syria (Lyne, 2015, p. 11), which will be considered in detail in the next chapter.

[7] For an elaborate analysis of the interwoven dynamics behind the geopolitical chessboard that is Russia's south-westwern 'near abroad', see Marshall (2015).

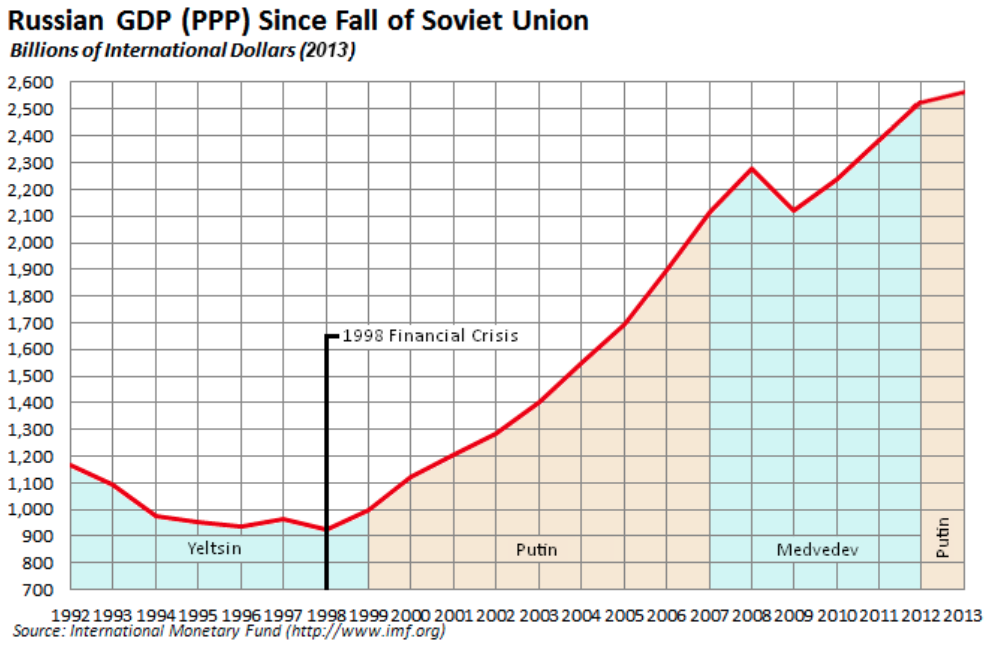


Fig. 5 Trends in Russia's annual gross domestic product (GDP) in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) from the dissolution of the Soviet Union until the end of 2013 (billion US dollars)[8] Source: Wikimedia Commons, 2013

Almost immediately following the onset of the Georgian crisis, Syrian President Assad went to Moscow in what has been described as an "almost classic case of political opportunism" (Freedman, 2010, p. 59). Assad came to offer Putin the opportunity to install "Russian missile systems on Syrian territory as a strategic response to the events in Georgia and to the prospective installation of US missile defenses in Eastern Europe" (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 555). As Assad pointed out to the sympathetic *Kommersant*, a Russian newspaper, the weapons being used by the Georgian troops, as well as their military training, had been provided by Israel and to some extent by the United States and its NATO ally Turkey (Zygar & Al-Assad,

[8] As may be deduced from the graph, economic growth in Russia gained significant momentum with Putin's rise to power that came right after the collapse of the ruble in 1998, contributing dearly to Russia's "resurgence" on the global stage. Also see the short-lived downward slope in the growth rates following the GFC.

2008). Although Bashar al-Assad did not come right out and mention Putin's 2005 decision to limit the sales of arms to Syria, his comments definitely called into question Putin's former support of Israel: "I think that in Russia and in the world, everyone is now aware of Israel's role and its military consultants in the Georgia crisis. And if before in Russia there were people who thought these [Israeli] forces can be friendly, now I think no one thinks that way" (as cited in Freedman, 2010, p. 59).

It was quite clear that Assad was trying to take advantage of the Georgian crisis in order to further Syria's particular geopolitical ambitions by threatening its sworn enemy, Israel. Yet despite its obvious pragmatism, Syria nevertheless emerged as one of the few countries in the world to take the immense political risk of standing by Russia's decision to intervene in Georgia, an act that mirrored the "policy of his father, Hafez, whose regime was one of the few in the world to support the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979" (Freedman, 2010, p. 59). The visit did not move Putin enough for him to approve of the immediate sale of *Iskandar* missiles (short-range, ground-to-ground missiles that, if installed in Syria, could reach any target in Israel). Yet it did suffice to remind the ex-KGB Russian President that Syria had long been Moscow's most reliable friend (Fel'gengauer, 2013).

The global recession also led to a series of events that allowed Moscow to gain full access to a port in Southern Cyprus. For some time prior to the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-08, Russia had been keeping a close eye on Southern Cyprus, which had recently discovered vast reserves of offshore natural gas. Russia jealously guards its 34 percent share of the European market because the sale of natural gas to Europe "provides Moscow with major foreign currency earnings as well as enhanced geopolitical clout" (Paraschos, 2013, p. 53). Sensing a chance to

further Russia's strategic self-interests, Putin provided the beleaguered Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus with €2.5 billion in loans as the country struggled to avoid bankruptcy during the height of the European Debt Crisis (Panayiotides, 2013, p. 156). Beholden to Moscow, Nicosia has allowed Putin to install a naval base as well as an air base on the island state. Such bases complement Russia's geopolitical clout over the Eastern Mediterranean gas fields and nearby maritime chokepoints as well as the rest of the Middle East *vis-à-vis* the EU and NATO; while at the same time making Putin less dependent on his Syrian ally (see Figure 6).

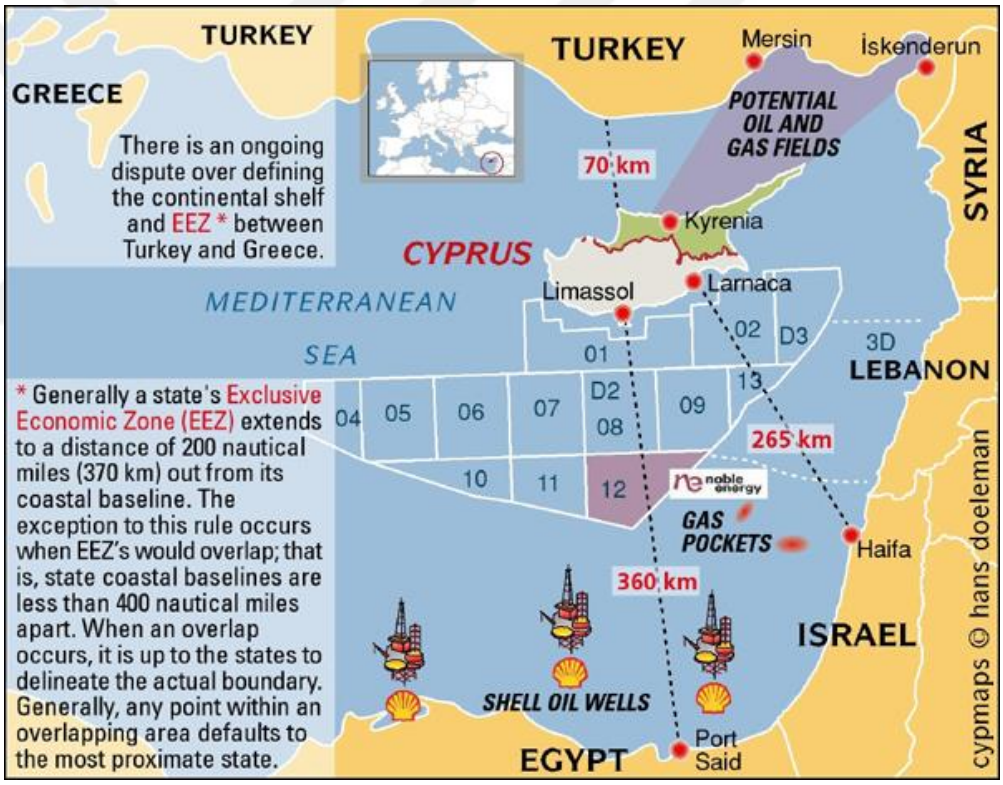


Fig. 6 The energy landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean region[9]

Source: The Global Warming Policy Forum, 2011

[9] Notice the close proximity of the maritime oil and gas fields to the Syrian coast and Southern Cyprus, as well as the Suez Canal (Port Said), Turkey, and Israel.

5.4 Energy security vs. domestic stability

Along with selling weapons, Putin has been working to expand the role of Russian energy companies in the Greater Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean region. As a matter of fact, "Russian firms have [for years] been buying oil from Iraq and then reselling it to Europe and the United States," however only since early 2000s has Russia begun to negotiate energy tenders with other regional countries such as "Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, Jordan, and even Israel" (Bourtman, 2006, pp. 1-2). Putin had managed to secure Russia's preeminence in the oil market, however, at the same time "Russian economy's structural dependence on hydrocarbons was reinforced" (Herd, 2011, p. 117). In 2010, oil prices were soaring and there appeared to be nothing wrong with using oil rents to placate the public or funneling energy revenues into military adventures abroad. But in the coming years, as Russia's military commitments outside its borders reached new heights, the price of oil would fall dramatically and severely endanger Putin's control of the country as well as geopolitical ambitions.

In the eyes of many Western academics, due to its status as a major exporter of fossil fuels, "Russia is more than willing to tolerate instability and economic weakness in the neighboring countries, assuming they are accompanied by an increase in Russian influence" (Stewart, 2014, p. 16). Going even further, the British historian Niall Ferguson has made the claim that "Russia, thanks to its own extensive energy reserves, is the only power that has no vested interest in stability in the Middle East" (as cited in Blank, 2014, p. 16). Such is the point of view of many Western think tanks and policy leaders. Yet, the presumption of Russian apathy in the region is dangerously misguided. Putin, in fact, has a deeply vested interest in the stability of the Middle East, a fact that many Western observers seem to neglect or

overlook. Deeply intertwined with economic and geopolitical concerns is the task of maintaining domestic stability. Putin must ensure at least a modicum of stability in the Middle East in order to "overcome the threat of secessionism and instability in the North Caucasus and to reduce radicalizing influences on the Muslim population within Russia" (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 558).

Much of the West's failure to understand the guiding principles of the Kremlin's foreign policy stems from the former's continual conflation of the Russian Federation with the USSR. To admit, just like the situation under communist rule, Russian policymakers of today have a realist outlook on global affairs and President Putin certainly views the Middle East as a key strategic arena where it can work to limit America's influence. However, unlike the USSR, the Russian administration today prioritizes domestic interests and demands, for such have been observed to get directly translated into geopolitical gains or losses in its recent past.

In a vast, multi-ethnic state with geo-cultural links to the Greater Middle East, the Kremlin must work hard to ensure its own Muslim population's contentment or at least complacency so that it may pursue its global agenda. In particular, Putin must counter the broader threat of Islamic extremism and the secessionist inclinations of places like Chechnya. One of the best means to do so is to preserve the political status quo in the nearby Islamic Middle East. As a matter of fact, the Western intervention in energy-rich Libya in 2011 "strongly influenced Russian behavior" in conducting its Middle Eastern policy by "providing Moscow with a negative reference point" as NATO's overthrow of secular-minded Muammar Gadhafi vividly demonstrated the violence and chaos that could erupt when foreigners overthrow an entrenched regime, especially in that a volatile region like the Middle East (Menkiszak, 2013, p. 2).

5.5 Relations with the larger Islamic world

Russian foreign policy is far more nuanced than many Western observers imagine. In addition to vying for power and influence with the United States, President Putin has spent a great deal of his rule working to foster friendly relations with the larger Muslim community. It must be remembered that the definitive feature of Putin's leadership has been the suppression of secessionist movements in the North Caucasus – "this is a prism that he's brought to looking at most conflicts like the conflicts in Syria that threatened the sanctity of his state" (Conan & Hill, 2013). At the time Putin assumed presidency in 2000, Chechnya was the biggest threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Russian state. In response to that threat, Putin led a no-holds-barred assault on the autonomous region, as demonstrated in the massacre and displacement of hundreds of thousands of Muslim residents there, with "the [Chechen] capital city of Grozny … reduced completely to rubble" (Conan & Hill, 2013). Even though such extravagant resort to military force against civilian settlements within the country's own borders was deemed unpleasant among the Russian public as well as at the apex of power in Moscow, armed coercion was nevertheless seen as the sole practical means to maintain the unity of the Russian state at that critical juncture (Ispa-Landa, 2003, p. 308).

Unlike the USSR, the Russian Federation was (and continues to be) a state with a weak territorial integrity and fragile internal stability. Thus, the all-too-close Middle East "emerges as a potentially dangerous source for internal destabilization, a threat to the internal stability of Russia itself, most notably through the transnational dynamics of Muslim solidarity" (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 544). During the Chechen wars, Sunni extremists, including those belonging to dispersed Caucasian-exile communities throughout the Middle East, secretly entered the North Caucasus in

order to exploit the already-heated secessionist movement there (Inal-Ipa, 2012, p. 35; Vasil'yev et al., 2013, p. 25; Kasayev, 2013, p. 62). They began a campaign of terrorist violence that had ultimately turned the public against the Chechens and enabled the Russian government to use extreme military force to put down the insurrection (Conan & Hill, 2013). The foreign fighters there, as well as a great deal of the material support for the Chechen rebels, came primarily from Islamic countries in close geographical proximity such as Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Syria (Inal-Ipa, 2012, p. 35). To many Muslim communities throughout the Greater Middle East, Russia's suppression of Chechnya rendered the country one of the few "sites of a legitimate defensive jihad against a broad-based Western or Judeo-Christian attack on innocent Muslims" (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 547).

In reaction to such foreign infiltration, Russia became extremely anti-Islamic. All the while it was pursuing its renewed Middle Eastern engagement, it was creating a hostile environment for foreign Muslims at home. That included the expulsion of foreign state-sponsored Muslim organizations, charities, and schools; the creation of a list of prohibited books; the designation of several prominent Islamic groups as terrorists (for example, the Muslim Brotherhood); and an expansion of the state surveillance apparatus (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 546). After September 11, Russia even openly supported and coordinated with the United States and Israel in their "war on terror" (Rumer, 2007, p. 28).

For a semi-autocratic state like Russia, suppressing internal dissidents, whether religious or otherwise, is relatively easy. However, convincing the global Islamic community that Russia should not to be hated has proven far more difficult. Much of the Muslim public viewed "the Chechen resistance as a heroic self-determination movement, and Russia's military response as disproportionate and

evidence of Russia's endemic anti-Muslim chauvinism" (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 547). Fearing further terrorist reprisals, Putin soon backtracked on Russia's anti-Islamic policies. Fortunately, he was presented with the ideal opportunity to shift Islamic perceptions of Russia when the United States invaded Iraq in 2003.

President Putin condemned the US invasion as a mistake, yet he happily watched as his political rival's blunders allowed Muslim concerns about Russian actions in Chechnya to recede into the background. Seizing the chance to accomplish two goals at once, Russian leaders officially sanctioned an anti-American stance, allowing Putin to put down its rival while also endearing his country to the global Islamic community as a key balancer that provides regional countries with much-needed elbowroom after an overwhelming period of unrivaled American hegemony over the entire region (Badeau, 1958, p. 237).

In addition to criticizing the US, Russian commentators began to emphasize the closeness of the Russian-Islamic relationship. They pointed out Russia's historical multi-ethnic composition, a natural mix of European and Asian traditions (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 548). More importantly, the country had a large Muslim minority that was indigenous to the region. While Western Christians have traditionally been antagonistic towards Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church "had a long experience of living alongside significant Muslim populations and thus understood the necessity of inter-religious dialogue and tolerance" (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 548). This signature blend meant that Russia could serve as mediator between the East and the West, the Muslims and the Christians – a role the Kremlin was eager to assume for itself. Political and financial largesse was showered upon the Russian Muslim communities that supported this new party line (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 554). The masterstroke in Putin's plan to woo the Muslim community was that he

had Russia admitted as an observer state in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (renamed as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation – OIC – after 2011), whose permanent delegation to the United Nations represents the interests of large Muslim populations in a variety of countries (Kosach, 2015a).

Russia's hard work to win the favor of Islamic capitals eventually paid off: "The Muslim world and the Middle East became increasingly supportive of Russian policies, particularly as they were seen to challenge and contradict US and Western policy" (Dannreuther, 2012, p. 555). This is not to say that Russia no longer had any domestic difficulties with its indigenous Muslim populations. Rather, these problems were overshadowed by the *realpolitik* concerns of regional countries (Blank, 2015, p. 76), and swept aside by the help of media blackouts so that criticism about Russia's actions towards Muslims would not be generated abroad. After working to put Chechnya behind it for over ten years, the Kremlin was not going to allow another Middle Eastern conflict to tarnish its record of support for Islam.

5.6 Conclusion

When the so-called 'Arab Spring' broke out in January 2011, Russia was deeply worried. Not only could the insurrections reverse Moscow's carefully cultivated Muslim favor, but they also had the potential to destabilize Russia itself. As the Arab revolutions broke out, their course coincided with a "very delicate moment in Russian politics about a year before the parliamentary (December 2011) and presidential (March 2012) elections" (Menkiszak, 2013, p. 8). Subsequent statements made by top officials of the Kremlin "clearly indicated that Russia was concerned about the mounting instability in the region," particularly because of the increasing appeal of Islamism (Menkiszak, 2013, p. 6). Foreign policy circles, government

ministers, and most probably President Putin himself also viewed the chain of revolutions, including the attempts to overthrow President Assad in Syria, as an American-led conspiracy. As the head of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Duma, Alexei Pushkov, explained:

> US foreign policy is aimed at neutralizing all factors which create obstacles to the American global strategy. As a result, in the last twelve years the United States has conducted four wars in various regions. In Yugoslavia it was Milosevic who was an obstacle. In Iraq, it was Saddam Hussein. In Libya, Gaddafi [sic]. Now Assad in Syria poses an obstacle for them. Today, yet another war is being prepared – against Iran, which is also an obstacle for the US. And we [Russia] are also an obstacle for them. (as cited in Menkiszak, 2013, p. 9)

Taking into account the cyclical patterns in Russian foreign policy behavior which largely remains fine-tuned to even minor shifts in delicate power balances around the country's geographical periphery; it is no surprise that Russia continues to throw its weight behind Syrian President Assad's regime in the face of all revolutionary or destabilizing forces, that way or another. The overwhelming sense of encirclement that the Kremlin feels due to continuous American interventionism and NATO expansion in what was once considered to be its very "backyard" (Lyne, 2015, p. 8) – when combined with the anxious desire to appease its domestic Muslim populations as well as those living right next to its recently-redrawn borders – is more than enough to render any sort of upheaval in the Greater Middle East particularly worrisome in the eyes of Russian decision-makers (Nixey, 2015, p. 35).

Above all else, Russia enjoys maintaining the political status quo as it lays the necessary groundwork for balance of power politics *vis-à-vis* an increasing degree of Western revisionism aimed at eradicating all the remaining pro-Russian regimes and anti-Israeli groups from the Middle Eastern map at the cost of creating geopolitical "black holes" (Taştekin, 2015, pp. 212-23). The Arab Spring revolutions and the

civil war in Syria both threaten to alter the present state of affairs and possibly replace it with a much worse, Libya-esque scenario, in which Russians are completely denied any strategic access to key facilities or any form of geopolitically-sensitive presence in post-revolutionary states (Fermor, 2012, pp. 342-48). When all these variables are added to the equation, it comes as little surprise that Russia has decided to militarily support its beleaguered ally in Damascus.

CHAPTER 6

RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVES

TOWARDS THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

> Asad [sic] has been turned into a bogeyman. But, in reality all of these groundless charges—that he is to blame for everything—are a cover for a big geopolitical game. The geopolitical map of the Middle East is once again being reformatted as different players seek to secure their own geopolitical positions. Many are concerned more about Iran than Syria. They are saying bluntly that Iran should be deprived of its closest ally, which they consider Assad to be. (Vorobyov & Lavrov, 2012, p. 4)

In order to offer a full picture of Russia's calculations and tactics through the successive phases of the Syrian cataclysm; one needs first to dig into the international political background behind the ultimate outbreak of violent demonstrations in Syria in March 2011. In this vein, this chapter analyzes the regional and global context within which the utterly horrific spectacle in and around Syria has been played out in cold blood since then, with an eye to Moscow's inherent concerns and interests pertaining to the Middle East and the reshaping of the post-Cold War World order. What follows this introduction to the strategic landscape surrounding Syria and the larger belt of countries straddling Russia's southern periphery on the eve of the second decade of the twenty-first century is a chronological account of the major turning points over the course of the Syrian conflict from Moscow's perspective. As such, the mind-blowing web of diplomatic and tactical intricacies underlying the escalation of the Syrian crisis into a full-scale proxy war between multiple foreign actors with knotted interests and intersecting strategic schemes in mind is explored by way of a simplified – yet hopefully coherent – storyline.

Based on the patterns by which Russian authorities tend to conceive of and had chosen to react to those milestone developments that marked the last five years of the Syrian crisis, this chapter aims to plumb the depths of the Kremlin's psyche as hinted by a select collection of Russian media reports, official statements, and expert opinions pertaining to the subject matter. Throughout this quasi-psychoanalytical journey; the reader can find herself treading along bleak memories of past losses as constantly invoked by an overwhelming sense of humiliation, a reinforced aversion to "betrayal", and an obsession with proper acknowledgement among one's "peers." In the Syrian theatre, such mutually-feeding and deep-rooted sentiments have apparently intermingled with existential fears and time-old reflexes to give a new lease of life to an otherwise highly conservative tradition of statecraft on the part of Moscow.

6.1 Background to the Syrian crisis

After the occupation of Iraq by an international coalition led by the hawkish George W. Bush administration in the US in 2003, pieces of the geopolitical puzzle that has since continued to characterize the Middle East had begun to fall into place in a rapid sequence of events. As the Saddam regime which relied on the Sunni minority in Iraq was toppled, the Shia majority in the country had gradually monopolized all political power in their hands. In the face of what seemed an endless power vacuum resulting from the destruction of the entire administrative and socio-economic infrastructure in Iraq by the US intervention, the new and fragile government in Baghdad has found itself increasingly dragged into Tehran's orbit (Lukyanov, 2012). Meanwhile, Iran was gaining additional weight in the regional balance of power, owing particularly to the significant progress it had already made in its controversial nuclear program

since the early 2000s (Trenin, 2012c). Given the mullah regime's reputation as the primary sponsor of radical Shia movements and groups across the entire Islamic realm from Tajikistan and Afghanistan to Yemen to North Africa, Tehran has also been using the influential militant group Hezbollah as a proxy against Israel and Sunni groups in Lebanon.

Most importantly, the decade prior to the Syrian conflict saw Damascus and Tehran reinforcing their long-time alliance, the roots of which can be traced back to the two capitals' shared distaste of Saddam's Iraq, the collusion of their strategic stakes in Lebanon, and their common enmity against Israel. On the surface, what cemented the reconfiguration of allegiances between states and non-state actors across the Middle East following the massive US intervention that overthrew Saddam Hussein in Baghdad seemed to be sectarian identities. That said, it would be a mistake to take the regionwide Shia-Sunni divide as the main driving force behind the enduring alliance between Syria and Iran given all the *realpolitik* concerns shared by the two. True, the Assad family, as well as the close governing circle around it belong to the Alawite minority in the country, which in turn is widely regarded as an offshoot of the Shia sect – however heterodox it may be. Nevertheless, neither the ceaseless hostilities between father Assad and the Saddam regime nor the affiliation between the former and Hezbollah in Lebanon had hitherto have much to do with religion – at least until confessional identities have become a highly-contested object of political propaganda and proven to be an extremely useful tool of mass mobilization throughout the region in the early twenty-first century (Barfi, 2016).

Whether driven by sectarian or other calculations; the emerging alliance between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Hezbollah set off an apparently unwarranted – yet tectonic-scale – shift in the regional balance of power that had heretofore remained

more-or-less steady since the First Gulf War. The resulting shockwaves had swept across the entire region in this period. Iran was now at the brink of securing a contiguous zone of influence stretching all the way from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean Sea. Such a readjustment of the regional balance of power at a fundamental level has further crystallized with the Western-induced isolation of Syria after 2005 and the Israeli and Western rebuff of Iran's aggressive push for its nuclear program despite international sanctions. The apparent collusion of Western, Israeli, Saudi, Kuwaiti, and Qatari interests in the face of Iran's expanding clout over a variety of countries from Iraq to Lebanon, to Yemen, and to Afghanistan, when coupled with growing international pressure on Damascus to detach itself from Tehran, generated a new dynamic that has since consolidated the so-called "Shia nexus" (Trenin, 2013b).

The energy factor also played a crucial role in steering the geopolitical evolution of Iran-Syria relations through the last few years prior to the breakout of the Syrian conflict. Against a backdrop of international sanctions on Iranian oil and gas exports as well as repeated threats by Tehran to close the Strait of Hormuz from where Gulf monarchies extract and ship energy deposits to Western markets, overland pipeline projects have begun to gain prominence in the geopolitical calculus of pro-Western regimes across the region from the early 2010s on (Aidrous, 2014). Within this framework, three rival natural gas pipeline projects have been competing for the larger chunk of future profits to be made through sales to Europe. The first is the Arab Gas Pipeline that was completed for the most part by 2008 and used to carry Egyptian gas to Syrian and Lebanese ports via Jordan (Husari, 2013). The other two, which are yet to be brought into life, are the proposed Qatar-Turkey pipeline and the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline. While the former was planned to be connected with

the now-defunct Nabucco pipeline running from Azerbaijan to Southern Europe through Turkey, the latter was expected to culminate in Syrian and Lebanese terminals (Aidrous, 2014).

Thanks to its geographic location at the crossroads of international transmission schemes which envisage the delivery of the vast hydrocarbon resources underneath the region to energy-hungry Western markets, Syria has traditionally enjoyed substantial leverage in its political dealings with oil-exporting countries in the neighborhood as a potential energy hub. In this respect, the Syrian regime has also managed to retain a privileged position in Lebanon even after the eventual ejection of its forces out of the country post-2005 in compliance with UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. Exercising control over the main Lebanese ports of Beirut, Saida, and Tripoli through its residual influence over Hezbollah and intelligence network still penetrating all facets of Lebanese political and economic life, Syria held the keys for any overland transit project in the region, energy-related or otherwise. Persistent instability in parts of Iraq after the Second Gulf War further contributed to Syria's inherent strategic advantage, for now its territories provided the only reliable northerly route to the Western markets (including Turkey) from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar that are known to harbor tremendous amounts of oil and natural gas reserves respectively (Kulkova, 2013).

Yet, instead of yielding to American and European calls that it distance itself from Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia in favor of the Gulf monarchies and Israel; Assad opted for doing just the opposite in the run up to the Syrian conflict in 2011. Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus had already announced their endorsement of relevant plans favoring the projected pipeline initiative between them as early as 2012 (Kulkova,

2013). For Western observers, things have begun to go off the rails when Syria and Iran concluded a contract in June 2011 that allegedly granted the latter the right to establish an air base near the oil storage facilities in the Syrian port town of Baniyas (Coughlin, 2011), right next to the terminals used for shipping gas from Kirkuk in Northern Iraq to Europe that satisfied around 15 percent of European demand for natural gas by the time (Kulkova, 2013).

Coming to Russia's stance *vis-à-vis* competing pipeline schemes in the Middle East, none of the proposed projects stirred enthusiasm on its part – not least because Moscow enjoys a near-monopoly over European gas markets and wouldn't wish to see such a unique position challenged. Nevertheless, Russia tended to regard the Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline project as the lesser evil, thus support its realization (Aidrous, 2014). The rationale behind Russia's attitude here was probably based on several calculations. Firstly, the Kremlin had vocally opposed the Nabucco pipeline project from the beginning as it would bypass both the northern route dominated by Russia and free Azerbaijan from Russia's firm grip, while curtailing Turkey's dependence on Russian gas and strengthening the hand of this NATO member state against a friendly regime in Iran. Whereas the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline would not only pass through the territory of friendly regimes, but also sidestep American allies like Jordan and Turkey. Moreover, Syria was already supplying for a considerable share of European gas demand at the time, and the addition of Iranian gas could be considered far more preferable than easing Qatar's and Saudi Arabia's hand against an already-besieged Iran.

6.2 The advent of the Arab Spring and Russia's reaction

The way the Russian leadership conceives of the background to the Syrian cataclysm in terms of international politics is comparable to how a master chess player who is about to lose the game would regard her opponent's last move before an ultimate "check-mate." Indeed, the global and long-term perspective held by the Kremlin has clearly overshadowed any other strategically-valid considerations in the case of Syria within the context of the so-called 'Arab Spring' phenomenon (Trenin, 2012b). The all-encompassing nature of this perspective is reminiscent of the Cold War era mindset that fueled ceaseless competition with the United States and NATO, although it is much less ambitious in its outlook. Moreover, Russia's reappraisal of its global stature as a resurgent great power with vested interests beyond its immediate neighborhood is fine-tuned to neo-realist precepts rather than ideologically-charged calls for imperial expansionism (Fetisova, 2012), taking cognizance of the primacy of international platforms and multilateral cooperation on security matters – first and foremost under the auspices of the UN Security Council (Trenin, 2012d).

Had Moscow not been firmly and vocally anchored at the conservative end of the emerging global equilibrium by rallying for the preservation of the status-quo, one could have never suspected the dramatic reversal of roles between the Western camp and its new adversary – now represented by a coalition comprising Russia, Iran, and Syria – in the contemporary round of strategic competition over the fates of Middle Eastern nations. As evidenced by their attitude toward the Arab Spring, it is now those democratic countries in the West which are eagerly fueling revolutionary fever in a way that deeply upsets the status-quo (Trenin, 2013b). Against this backdrop, the renewed push on the part of Moscow into the global strategic playing-

field in the 2010s has been mainly induced by a defensive reaction to preserve what little has remained from Russia's Soviet era influence over its immediate neighborhood, or former "sphere of influence" (Mirzayan, 2015).

As if the enlargement of NATO and the EU to incorporate former Warsaw Pact countries through the 1990s and early 2000s was not enough, the circle around Russia was being further narrowed down with former Soviet republics like Georgia (in 2003), Ukraine (in 2004), and Kyrgyzstan (in 2005) "falling victim" to what was later going to be termed 'color revolutions', i.e. popular uprisings that ousted – or failed in their attempt to do so like in Uzbekistan in 2005 – authoritarian governments in favor of pro-Western and democratic regimes. The color revolutions had already swept across Russia's entire geographic periphery by the time of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, when Moscow directly stepped in with boots on the ground to thwart this wave of public upheaval and uproot the Western-friendly political sentiments it fed on. The Kremlin apparently regarded pre-emptive strike as a necessity, even if in the last resort, were it to prevent the penetration of Western institutions, norms, and influence into its own territory as the *coup de grace* of liberal triumphalism (Trenin, 2013b).

From Russia's perspective, the sudden eruption of massive riots and demonstrations against the secular authoritarian regime in Tunisia, and their subsequent spill over into Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Iran, and ultimately Syria had only carried this implicit strategic struggle to a new front. The term 'Arab Spring' was initially coined to refer to this unexpected phenomenon, which had been framed by intellectual circles as a democratic outcry akin to Eastern Europe's liberation from communist dictatorships in the twilight of the previous century. The new wave, according to many Western spectators, would inevitably grow into a global-scale

flood, ushering in a new age of universal democratic ideals. Yet, for Moscow, behind the curtain of democratic demands lied the precursor of an Islamist apocalypse to arrive soon (Trenin, 2012d). Hence, the situation required utmost caution. The spread of popular rallies to Iran, which reignited the opposition's outrage against the rigging of presidential polls in June 2009, the ensuing crackdown on peaceful demonstrators by the mullah regime, as well as the swift suppression of peaceful protests in Bahrain where the pro-Iranian Shia minority found a rare chance to voice similar demands against an autocratic regime raised further questions in the minds of decision-makers in Moscow as to how to respond to this apparently paradoxical and highly sensitive phenomenon (Sergeev, 2012).

Finally, the course of events that ensued through 2011 in Libya has resulted in Moscow's complete disillusionment as to the prospect of accommodating Western demands pertaining to the Arab Spring in a way that does not contradict its core strategic interests. The crisis in Libya as had initially unfolded, from the outbreak of a widespread revolt in February 2011 that was inspired by the Tunisian precedent to brutal clashes between the rebels and the main body of troops loyal to Colonel Gadhafi's regime, led Russia to abstain during the vote on a UN Security Council resolution authorizing limited military intervention by an international coalition (Trenin, 2012b). However, the UN Security Council mandate, which was originally envisaged to serve as a warranty for the establishment of a no-fly zone and safe havens to protect the civilian population in the eastern town of Benghazi where a humanitarian operation was deemed necessary, rapidly morphed into an aerial bombing campaign by NATO jets flying over the presidential palace in Tripoli and culminated in the public execution of Gadhafi in Sirte in October the same year (Shumilin, 2013).

What that meant for Russia was twofold. Firstly, the Libyan scenario revoked disturbing memories of the NATO operation in Kosovo in 1999 and the execution of Saddam Hussein by US forces in December 2006. In Moscow's view, both were cases in which its expressed willingness to cooperate and contribute to a new and peaceful international order had been exploited by Western countries dishonoring their initial words. In the case of former Yugoslavia, the NATO operation in Kosovo in 1999 took place four years after the Dayton Accords that had already put an end to the humanitarian crisis in Bosnia. As such, renewed clashes between the government in Belgrade and Kosovar Albanian separatists were shown as a pretext for disintegrating Serbia (Seipel & Lavrov, 2013). Likewise, Gorbachev gave a green light to the First Gulf War in 1990-91 that had the limited objectives of stopping the invasion of Kuwait and the massacre of Kurds by the tyrannical regime in Baghdad, even at the cost of sacrificing an old ally. Yet, the US once again intervened in Iraq in 2003, this time to wage a full-scale war and topple the regime without a UN Security Council mandate on the highly-disputed grounds that Iraq held weapons of mass destruction.

Secondly, according to the Kremlin's thinking, a boundary had to be set before the battlefront was eventually carried onto Russia itself. Moscow feared that the military operations which ousted regimes in former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya in the post-Cold War era as well as the accompanying wave of democratic revolts that had swept through Russia's extended southern periphery from Ukraine to Kyrgyzstan would eventually reach its own borders. Even if that sounded like an exaggerated scenario for the time being, one could nevertheless imagine NATO jets bombing Tashkent or Minsk under the guise of an international humanitarian mission, which is a logistical and political possibility (Rojansky, 2012).

Given the unilateral abrogation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2001 by the US, coupled with NATO's recently revealed plans to install sophisticated missile defense systems in territories as close to Russia as Romania and Poland; it wouldn't be unrealistic to predict the deployment of parallel systems in Georgia or Ukraine soon, when their bids to join the EU and the US-led military alliance are finally approved (Trenin, 2013a).

Against such a backdrop, the Libyan spectacle was perceived as a final warning on the part of Russia that unless it immediately begins to assume a more assertive stance in the UN Security Council against permanent members from the West (France, the UK, and the US), tomorrow may be too late for that. And the tipping point was the spread of mass demonstrations to Syria – the sole remaining bastion of not only Russia but also Iran in the Greater Middle East (Zviagelskaya, 2015).

6.3 Syria: When "democracy" knocks the door

It all began with local rallies in March 2011, which were inspired by their precedents elsewhere in the Arab world. Initial demonstrations came in response to the alleged torture of a group of schoolchildren at the hands of security forces in the southern city of Daraa. The children had been arrested for spraying anti-government graffities on the walls of their school, and their aggrieved families took to the streets in protest. Despite government efforts to placate the protestors afterwards, they spread across the country like wildfire in a matter of weeks. The first cities that saw similar upheaval were Homs, Deir ez-Zor, Damascus, Baniyas, and Hama. Government forces replied with gunfire after peaceful demonstrators began to call for outright regime change through the ouster of President Assad himself in April. In May,

military troops, artillery, and tanks were being deployed in major city centers to crash what has already evolved into a nation-wide revolt (Riedy, 2012).

Amid mounting pressure from both within and outside his country, Syrian President Assad dismissed the government and launched a "national dialogue" process to incorporate some opposition elements into a new power structure. He allowed for the gradual release of political prisoners and accepted to lift the state of emergency that had been in place for the past 48 years. Moreover, he promised a new constitution that would allow for a multi-party system after half-a-century of single-party rule (Sergeev, 2012). Yet, he fiercely rejected calls for him to step down from power and seek political refuge in some Western country or Russia with his family. As regime forces continued to brutally suppress mass demonstrations, armed groups that regarded previous as well as promised reforms by Assad as nothing but "cosmetic" changes to retain dictatorial authority have begun to pop up one after another, confronting military troops across the country. The United Nations, Arab states, and Western powers swiftly condemned the Syrian government for its blatant human rights abuses, claiming that the Assad regime has lost its legitimacy. What followed were a series of sanctions, embargoes, asset freezes, and travel bans by the Western powers against the Assad regime (Sayigh, 2014a).

Meanwhile, senior defectors from the military and paramilitary components within the armed opposition announced their establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), initially led by a former colonel from the Syrian Arab Army, as early as July 2011. Several Gulf monarchies withdrew their ambassadors from Syria and expelled Syrian ambassadors in their countries in the ensuing months. Turkey later followed suit. Opposition groups operating both within Syria and abroad have united to form the Syrian National Council (SNC) in Istanbul on August 24, in view of the pressing

need to converge around a unified agenda as well as to present their case in a systematic and legitimate manner before influential international actors. In early November, the Arab League came with a peace plan which Damascus officially agreed to comply with (Sayigh, 2014a).

However, the Gulf monarchies, which traditionally play a leading role within the Arab League thanks to their financial prowess and diplomatic leverage as Western clients, were opposed to this plan from the beginning, arguing that regime-inflicted violence could not be stopped by means of seeking common grounds with Assad, whom they saw as the very source of the problem. Instead, their expressed conviction was that the longer it took to take decisive action to remove Assad, the stronger would Damascus emerge out of prolonged turmoil – hence one could talk of no practicable solution so long as Assad remained at the helm of the country. Not surprisingly, the Arab League plan ended in failure within the course of two months. With the further escalation of violence in Syria despite all multilateral efforts, the Arab League not only recalled its observers from the country but also suspended Syria's membership and imposed sanctions on Damascus between late November 2011 and January 2012 (Sayigh, 2012, 2014a). In effect, the Syrian crisis had soon evolved into a full-fledged civil war.

According to Russia's assessment of the situation on the ground; the Arab League, Turkey, the US, and the EU were jointly working to block all channels for peaceful political compromise with Damascus in order to pave the way for a repetition of the Libyan scenario. While doing that, they were turning a blind eye to the terrorist activities of suicide bombers and radical Islamist militants among the armed opposition (Trenin, 2013b). On the other hand, Russia and China jointly blocked down two draft resolutions on Syria in the UN Security Council in October

2011 and February 2012. Moscow's main rationale here was to deny Western powers a UN Security Council mandate to intervene in Syria with their military forces. Moreover, it further opposed the inclusion of sanctions or a call for Assad's resignation in any UN Security Council resolution on Syria. For Russia, the endorsement of such a document would correspond to an outright violation of Syria's inherent rights as a sovereign state and the principal of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states which constituted a founding stone of not only the concept of balance of power within a neo-realist institutional framework but also the post-WWII international order as embodied in the UN Charter (Riedy, 2012; Trenin, 2013b). After all, Syria was not involved in aggression against any other state in the first place.

With the added risk of Syria's disintegration in the immediate aftermath of a UN-mandated intervention; Moscow could not remain a by-stander as its last stronghold in the Greater Middle East, indeed the entire globe barring the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), faced the prospect of extinction at the hands of NATO states. The Kremlin has bitterly watched as no-fly zones and humanitarian corridors were easily manipulated to drag states into complete chaos in a matter of months, most vividly in the recent case of Libya (Trenin, 2013b). For Moscow, foreign intervention could only exacerbate the situation, let alone soothing it. Moreover, the conflict over Syria had the potential to engulf in the entire region from Algeria to Afghanistan, thus igniting additional wars and offering a pretext for even further military penetration by Western states. On top of that, Syria could easily be converted into a potential springboard for international terrorism by extremist networks like *al-Qaeda* (the Base) as they are known to seize upon the fertile grounds provided by conflict zones over which central state authority lacks (Trenin,

2013b). Such would not only imply the complete elimination of all that is left of Russian influence over the Islamic world, but also pose a great risk to stability within Russia's own borders which host a substantial Muslim population of more than 20 million people (Kortunov, 2016b; Malashenko, 2014c).

Although the most crucial aspect of Russia's overall approach toward the Syrian conflict concerns the global balance of power amid the constant expansion of NATO and the EU in the post-Cold War era, there are also other important strategic considerations that have been in full play since the spill over of the Arab Spring into Syria. Firstly, Syria's geographic proximity to the Northern Caucasus (the distance between them being less than 1000 kilometers), and the rise of pro-Islamic forces once again in Russia's "backyard" under direct or indirect Western sponsorship has revoked ghosts of the past (Malashenko, 2014c; Trenin, 2013b). In this respect, one may recall Russia's exhausting struggle against religious extremism and separatism in Chechnya through the 1990s (Baklanov, Syukiyaynen, & Kurbanov, 2013; Trenin, 2013c).

As a matter of fact, the rise of radical Islamist movements like Wahhabism and Salafism within Russia has been a widely-acknowledged phenomenon for the last two decades. The so-called Islamic "awakening" in these places has instigated demands for disintegration and all sorts of anti-government action including a series of violent terrorist attacks across the country in this period. Today, even the Volga-Ural region which lies deeper into European Russia and hosts well-integrated republics like Bashkortostan and Tatarstan face the threat of identity politics fueling ethnic conflict. The last thing Moscow wants to see after years of domestic conflict involving its Muslim minority is a disruption of the volatile equilibrium it has since managed to broker on the slippery slope of personal and tribal patronage networks

spanning inherently restive regions like Chechnya, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Ingushetia, and Northern Ossetia which are heavily populated by Muslim ethnicities (Malashenko, 2014c; Ponarin, 2013).

To Russia's concern, the overthrow of secular authoritarian regimes from Muammar Gadhafi's Libya to Hosni Mubarak's Egypt has already generated a political wave of destabilization and violence across the entire Islamic world led by the likes of *al-Qaeda* and the Muslim Brotherhood. Russian policy-makers and public tend to see this new trend as nothing more than an old and extremely dangerous geopolitical trick being played out all over again. In this respect, what had been happening across the Arab world from late 2010 onwards was, in the eyes of Moscow, reminiscent of the Cold War era containment policy that sustained a belt of anti-Soviet regimes along its southern periphery from Turkey to Afghanistan. Through the 1970s and early 1980s, Islamist currents were supported by Western powers in Iran, Afghanistan, and Syria to counter groups or governments perceived as leaning towards the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, the same scenario was played out in Chechnya. In both cases, it was the Gulf states that backed Islamist groups against Russian interests both ideologically and financially (Ponarin, 2013; Trenin, 2016a). And now, Syria has emerged as the final battlefront in this decades-old struggle against Islamic resurgence (Baklanov et al., 2013; Trenin, 2013c).

Apart from these, Russia has vested interests that are exclusively limited to Syria itself. At the time the civil war in Syria started, the cumulative value of Russian investments in Syria amounted to $19.4 billion (Amos, 2011). Besides, Moscow and Damascus had already signed arms sales contracts foreseeing the supply of anti-ship cruise missiles named *Yakhont* as part of the K-300P *Bastion* mobile defense system for $550 million with a range of 300 km off the Syrian coast (signed in 2009)

(Rojansky, 2012; Sarabyev, 2011) as well as that of the *Iskandar* missile shield (Sarabyev, 2011), along with a deal to procure four batteries of S-300 surface-to-air missile defense systems (allegedly sealed in 2010) (Kulkova, 2013). Russian investors also had important stakes in the exploration, development, processing, and transit of Syrian oil and gas as well as the country's electricity grid and transportation infrastructure (Rojansky, 2012). These should be considered in view of Russia's continued access to an electronic surveillance station near the large oil terminal station in Latakia and a logistical naval facility in Tartus. In the latter case, the seaport of Tartus was left with an extremely limited capacity that allowed only technical maintenance and replenishment after the dissolution of the Soviet Mediterranean squadron in 1991. But plans to modernize this facility once again into a full-fledged naval base that can host super ships were already on the table by 2006 as Russia was considering an expansion of its Black Sea Fleet to include a Mediterranean squadron. Repairs and upgrades were made one after another through the years to come (Sarabyev, 2011).

By the time the Syrian crisis took the form of a full-fledged civil war, Russia had thousands of military personnel (advisors and technicians) stationed in Syria, many of whom were engaged in crucial tasks like operating the defensive systems imported from Russia. Besides, tens of thousands of Russians lived in Syria, and the Syrian military had many top rank officers trained in Russian academies and colleges (Shumilin, 2013). That said, inter-personal ties between Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad were far from being solid. Indeed, Putin did not even call Assad by phone until November 2013 (Trenin, 2014). In the initial stages of the Syrian crisis, Moscow neither insisted on the continuation of Assad's rule nor condemned the opposition for its demands. Russian analysts and officials thought that a moderate

opposition which would replace Assad in government had every reason to maintain amicable relations with Moscow. Such entailed the signing of a contract to prolong Russia's hold over the naval facility in Tartus, as well as the predominance of Russian firms in the Syrian arms market. Besides, Moscow regarded the opposition's demands as well-justified while publicly criticizing Assad for turning a deaf ear to popular calls for socio-economic development and justice (Sarabyev, 2011).

In this respect, Russia agreed with the Western and Arab world in their anticipation that Assad would ultimately and inevitably be forced to step down. The opposition was gaining strength with each day in the conflict, and the regime in Damascus was losing ground (Sayigh, 2014a; Trenin, 2013b). What separated Russia from the rest of the world was its longer-term vision. According to the Kremlin, Assad's immediate ouster would not put an end to the conflict, but only mean a change of roles between the opposition and the current regime as the latter was most likely to withdraw to its strongholds along the Mediterranean coast of the country under such a scenario. Besides, as violence escalated each day and the conflict have begun to assume a sectarian character, a subsequent campaign of retribution targeting minorities and regime supporters could entail an even greater humanitarian crisis when Assad is overthrown. Chaos and terrorism would ensue, as neither the regime nor the opposition could eliminate each other in the course of the war. In the end, the dissolution of state institutions and administrative mechanisms through a revolution should be expected to create a failed state out of Syria, much like post-war Iraq and Libya (Krylov, 2014; Trenin, 2012a, 2012d).

As a political solution that would secure peace and stability in Syria could not be reached through previous multilateral efforts, the UN Security Council appointed former Secretary General Kofi Annan as the UN-Arab League Joint Special Envoy to

Syria in February 2012. Russia endorsed the six-point plan as sketched out by Annan in March, and convinced Syria to comply with it. The non-binding plan in question, as agreed upon by Russia and some opposition groups, foresaw a general ceasefire, which would ensure that military troops withdraw from urban centers and humanitarian aid is safely delivered to civilians living in besieged towns. In the months that followed, Moscow had been involved in direct contacts with several opposition groups inside Syria, while pressuring a recalcitrant administration led by Assad to sit at the negotiating table with moderate groups under international supervision (Seipel & Lavrov, 2013; Trenin, 2013b).

The UN observer mission dispatched by Annan to assist and monitor the process had seemed successful until May 2012, when 82 civilians were massacred and 200 severely injured in the village of Houla near the city of Homs. The atrocities were blamed on Assad by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) as well as Western powers which subsequently withdrew their ambassadors from the country, while Damascus and Moscow accused the opposition of staging this massacre as a means to sabotage the UN-led ceasefire. Meanwhile, parliamentary elections were held in government-controlled areas in early June, with a coalition led by Bashar al-Assad emerging victorious out of the polls which the opposition first boycotted and then denounced as a sham. Against a backdrop of increasing tensions and violence between government and opposition forces, the UN observer mission felt compelled to retreat and the Annan plan was practically doomed (Seipel & Lavrov, 2013).

In a last attempt to end the escalating civil war through an international compromise, the so-called Action Group on Syria that comprised nine parties including Russia and the US gathered in Geneva on June 30 under Annan's mediation. Although neither the warring parties in Syria (as represented by the

government and the SNC) nor Iran (which emerged as a major external actor in the conflict) participated in this initial meeting (later to be referred as Geneva I); a window of opportunity was nevertheless opened for a political solution through future rounds. The resulting document, or the so-called Geneva Communique, called for the formation of a transitional government through national reconciliation. The interim government to be formed among mutually-agreeable figures from the regime and the opposition was expected to draft a new constitution and go to polls afterwards. All these would take place within a firm time schedule. Most importantly, the final document did not include a call for Assad's resignation, despite repeated statements by top Western officials before and after the meeting in Geneva that they would like to see Assad out of office before any meaningful settlement is achieved (Seipel & Lavrov, 2013; Trenin, 2013b).

In the run-up to Geneva I, the Friends of Syria Group held two meetings in Tunisia (in February) and Turkey (in April) respectively. This international diplomatic gathering of Western powers, the Gulf monarchies, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and the Syrian National Council has been staunchly arguing for Assad's resignation and regime change in Syria by the time of the Houla event. Since then, it has served as a conduit for Western and Arab financing and assistance to the larger Syrian opposition and the FSA. From Russia's point of view, the Friends of Syria Group was highly reminiscent of the International Contact Group on Libya that was established in March 2011. As one may recall, within less than two weeks of the renaming of the collective in question as the "Friends of Libya" came Muammar Gadhafi's public execution (Suponina, 2012a). What followed was violent chaos and an ineffective central government which Russia regarded as a Western puppet. This was essentially because of the new government's canceling of all previous deals with

Moscow in the energy and defense industries (Shumilin, 2013), which were worth over $8 billion by the time (Trenin, 2013b).

To Russia's utmost disappointment, the Geneva process soon came to a halt due to the Western-backed opposition's unwillingness to reach a compromise with Assad. Annan resigned from the post of UN-Arab League Joint Special Envoy to Syria in August 2012, yielding his position to former Algerian Foreign Minister Lakhdar Brahimi ("UN appoints new Syria envoy," 2012). Increasing attacks on government positions like the car blast in Damascus that killed the Syrian defense minister along with Assad's brother-in-law in June ("Syria's top security ministers," 2012), when coupled with the US and the Gulf monarchies stepping up their assistance to the FSA in the same period, should have been perceived by Moscow as a sign that it needs to protect the Assad regime no matter how ruthless or uncompromising it may have proven to be, provided the West's insistence on aggressively supporting the rebels. Given the growing enmity between the opposition and the regime as an outcome of continued bloodshed, a new government to replace Assad's rule could no longer be relied on as a potential partner.

Meanwhile, the SNC, which failed to unify the inchoate and fragmented opposition under a single roof, has been absorbed by a new body named the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. The SNC was deeply troubled by divisions and disconnection between its representatives and political leadership abroad on the one hand, and the armed groups fighting on the ground as well as the opposition movement within Syria on the other (Seipel & Lavrov, 2013). Most importantly, its secular, Western-educated leaders were apparently unable to control various hardcore factions of the unofficial opposition within Syria. The National Coalition was initially formed in November 2012 in Doha, Qatar, in order

to address such organizational, structural, and political deficits within the body of the SNC. Some Islamist groups, like the *Jabhat al-Nusra* (the "Divine Assistance" Front), hitherto an important component of the FSA, refused to join the new coalition. In December, the Friends of Syria Group gathered for the fourth time since its inception in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh, extending official recognition to the National Coalition as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people. The US also recognized the group on the eve of the event, while declaring the *Jabhat al-Nusra* to be a terrorist organization affiliated with the *al-Qaeda* franchise (Suponina, 2012a).

In the months ensuing the international recognition of the National Coalition; the US, Britain, and France have already pledged over a hundred million US dollars-worth of non-lethal aid to the Syrian rebels on top of their previous shipments. Two batteries of Patriot missile defense system were installed by NATO in Turkey by the beginning of 2013 in response to the downing of a Turkish F-4 reconnaissance jet in June the previous year by Syria, allegedly within international airspace (Suponina, 2012b; Trenin, 2012a). On the opposite side of the conflict, Russia was accusing Saudi Arabia and Qatar of complicity in arming the opposition in contravention of international law, even as American and British intelligence and military instructors trained them in Turkey and Jordan (Sayigh, 2014a; Seipel & Lavrov, 2013). The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and Hezbollah, both of which regarded the missile defense system deployed in Turkey as a threat against themselves, were increasingly being reported as fighting alongside Assad forces against the rebels. Meanwhile, Israel has reportedly shelled Hezbollah targets around the Golan Heights in Syria to prevent the provision of advanced anti-aircraft weaponry to the Shia militia by Iran (Sayigh, 2014a; Zviagelskaya, 2015). All in all, the overall picture

was getting even blurrier than before with the interference of numerous external actors at once, in pursuit of their strategic interests which were often mutually incompatible.

Through the early weeks of 2013, the rebels seemed to be on a winning strike on the ground. Then came the involvement of Hezbollah and Iranian forces, invoking Israeli retribution by way of aerial bombings of Syrian military facilities (Pearson, 2013). But what really altered the course of the war, in favor of the regime, was the delivery of advanced Russian arms to Syria. Answering Western criticism for tipping the balance in the war, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed that the likes of S-300 air defense systems and the advanced coastal anti-ship missile system *Bastion* were being delivered to Syria as stipulated by earlier contracts signed between the two governments. Besides, these were outmoded, defensive military equipment being sold to a legitimate government recognized by the UN (Seipel & Lavrov, 2013). Whatever the reality, Russia had apparently been carrying out weapons shipments to Syria in secret since the breakout of the civil war in late 2011 (Kulkova, 2013).

Another factor that strengthened the regime's hand was its relative resilience in the face of a violent civil war. Contrary to widespread expectations in the West, few cracks have been observed along its higher ranks since the beginning of the war despite immense foreign pressure and sanctions. Almost no artillery or tank units have defected, and public opinion seemed to favor Bashar al-Assad's government all the way through 2013. That may be because the intelligentsia and merchant classes, including the majority of the Sunni population, saw Assad as the lesser evil *vis-à-vis* growing violence by extremists and looming anarchy. In this respect, Syria has proven to be a "real" state unlike Libya, with its post-WWII borders reinforced by

decades of successful nation-building despite the inherent arbitrariness of regional political boundaries (Sayigh, 2012; Sergeev, 2012).

Against this backdrop, the reaction of the U.S, the UK, France, and the Gulf states has been two-fold. Initially, they opted for buttressing their support for the opposition. While Britain and France cited UN reports on the use of chemical weapons in Syria on various occasions to justify their demand that the EU lifted its arms embargo (which it finally did in May 2013) on the FSA (Kulkova, 2013; Trenin, 2013a), Gulf states stepped up their supply of arms and funds to hardcore Islamist groups like *Ahrar al-Sham* (Free People of the Levant) and *Jaysh al-Islam* (the Army of Islam) (The Russian International Affairs Council [RIAC], n.d.). The second track was diplomacy aimed at reaching a compromise with Russia. Initial meetings on a 2+2 basis between the defense and foreign secretaries of the UK and Russia took place in March, 2013. Moscow's insistence that Washington engaged it on its own terms, as an equal, rather than trying to secure its obedience as a junior partner of the Western bloc, has finally bore its fruit in US Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Moscow on May 7-8 and David Cameron's visit to Sochi that took place a few days later (Kulkova, 2013).

The most important outcome of the bilateral meeting between Kerry and Lavrov was the decision to convene a second peace conference in Geneva on the basis of the June 2012 Communique as soon as possible. This essentially meant three things. Firstly, the Western bloc has come to realize that a military solution through proxies could no longer be deemed cost-effective and risk-free, with the situation on the ground arriving at an obvious stalemate. Under these circumstances, the prolongation of the proxy war would favor neither moderate rebels nor the Assad regime (Trenin, 2013d). Secondly, Russia has now obtained recognition as a great

power on par with the US, and as one of the two leading external actors in the Middle Eastern stage that can boast a sufficient degree of legitimacy and influence to toss the dice in Syria (Malashenko, 2013; Trenin, 2013c). And thirdly, NATO plans involving a full-scale military operation were shelved, at least for the time being (Trenin, 2013d).

As a matter of fact, the Gulf states' move to boost funding for Islamists to break the Assad regime's resolve has backfired. Radical factions had begun to feature in disproportionately on the battlefield in recent months, raising eyebrows among Western policy-making circles as to the growing risks associated with the provision of advanced military-related equipment to the rebels. Meanwhile, the Islamist government in Cairo that had been elected to office in the aftermath of Arab Spring protests was toppled with a *coup d'état* on July 3, 2013. The Muslim Brotherhood which was behind the deposed Morsi government has since been declared illegal by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, while still backed by Qatar. Considering that the Muslim Brotherhood used to occupy a considerable share of seats in the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces at the time, the opposition has begun to crack from within. Interim Prime Minister of the National Coalition Ghassan Hitto resigned after his failure to stitch together the patchwork of dissident groups ranging from feminists to outright Salafists (Naumkin, 2014a, 2014c).

6.4 Chemical weapons: The last resort

As early as August 2012, US President Barack Obama has declared his country's red line in Syria to be the use of chemical weapons by Assad forces. France also threatened that it would interfere in Syria with military force without seeking UN

Security Council approval should the regime in Damascus appeal to chemical warfare against the opposition ("From Arab spring," 2016). Multiple reports that had since been issued by international NGOs operating in Syria accused either the opposition or the regime of using chemical weapons against civilians. Meanwhile, Moscow has announced receiving official guarantees from Damascus that the latter renounces the use of chemical weapons under any circumstances against its own people ("From Arab spring," 2016).

The first instance of chemical weapons use that received international public attention took place on March 19, 2013, in the outskirts of Aleppo. The regime and the opposition blamed each other for the attack, while a Russian chemical weapons investigation team suggested that it found concrete evidence supporting Assad's argument against the rebels (Anderson, 2015; "From Arab spring," 2016). In a second instance, which has immediately stolen the spotlight, an alleged chemical assault on August 21 resulted in over 1,000 fatalities in Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus. International observers promptly accused the Assad regime of using chemical weapons against its own people, while a UN fact-finding team has concluded in September that "clear and convincing evidence" was found as to the use of poisonous sarin gas, a nerve agent, in the latter case (Lavrov, 2013). However, Russia regarded the relevant UN report as ambiguous about whether it was the rebels or the government that committed this crime against humanity (Orlov, 2013a; "Russia calls UN report," 2013).

Blaming Assad for the Ghouta massacre, British Prime Minister David Cameron and US President Barack Obama both stepped in to fulfill their promise of waging a humanitarian war on Syria. Nevertheless, Cameron's bid was turned down by the parliament; while Obama had sought Congressional support to no avail before

taking any steps in this direction, despite the US Constitution allowing him to declare war at will in his capacity as "the commander in chief." Such an unwillingness on the part of Western powers to launch a military operation against Syria owed much to Russia's adept response in the form of diplomatic maneuvering here. It was right at this crucial moment that Russia came up with an alternative plan to the rescue of Obama (Naumkin, 2013).

To Moscow, the Obama administration seemed to be stuck in a dilemma between honoring past promises to avert public criticism for complacency by his political opponents on the one hand, and the highly undesirable prospect of loading yet another burden on the shoulders of the American taxpayer who had already been suffering from war fatigue amid prolonged and unsuccessful operations in Afghanistan and Iraq on the other (Arbatov, 2013). Therefore, the Kremlin offered in a last-minute salvo not only to allow international control of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal, but also to help dismantle all the stockpiles, munitions, and production facilities inside the country. According to the plan, Syria was first to sign the Chemical Weapons Convention, and then disclose the entire chemical weapons arsenal inside the country to an Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) inspection team for its subsequent removal and destruction (Orlov, 2013b; Trenin, 2013e).

Things have gone as expected, and a deal on the dismantlement of Syrian chemical weapons under international supervision was struck between Russia and Western countries in late September 2013. The entire process was planned to be carried out within the span of a mere 9 months, and concluded by June 2014 ("One year since chemical attacks," 2014). For Moscow, the agreement signified the fulfillment of some of its key political objectives. First of all, it has now emerged as

a playmaker on the multilateral stage, effectively discrediting the shared tendency of many Western observers to label it as a passive by-stander or compulsive spoiler. Russia's newly-assumed role was that of a protagonist who dares to take the initiative when appropriate, and is perfectly capable of inducing positive change in international relations. Russia's degrading treatment in the post-Cold War era at the hands of its "self-righteous" Western "rivals" was about to become a thing of the past (Trenin, 2013f).

Secondly, the international community was indirectly extending recognition to the Assad regime as the legitimate authority in Syria through this deal. Damascus was being called to sign an international convention and join a respected multilateral platform. Moreover, the deal was assuming that Assad would remain in power, at least for a while until June 2014. Hence it corresponded to a confirmation on the part of Western powers that the military option was off the table, at least for the time being (Arbatov, 2013). Where the chemical attack in Ghouta had initially been regarded as an ultimate blow to international efforts aimed at finding a political solution to the Syrian conflict as exemplified by the Geneva process; it has now become a basis for US-Russian reengagement to avert a full-scale war over the Middle East. Contrary to the expectations of various Western clients in the Middle East from Qatar to Saudi Arabia, the Ghouta incident instigated the creation of a concert of great powers rather than a war amongst them (Baklanov, 2013).

As to the FSA, its disappointment with the perceived collusion of Western and Russian interests over the fate of Assad was further aggravated after the announcement of a decision by the US and British governments to curb the supply of military-related equipment to rebel forces in December due to a fear that these could then fall into the hands of extremist factions as recently happened in Idlib province,

which had witnessed the seizure of a key rebel warehouse by Islamist factions (Naumkin, 2013; "US, UK suspend non-lethal aid," 2013). The suspension of Western aid came partly in response to the declaration by several leading Islamist groups – heretofore fighting side by side under the umbrella of the loosely-organized FSA – that they part company with their former patrons and disavow democratic government, in response to the chemical weapons deal reached with Russia (Fursov, 2013).

But a larger portion of the Syrian opposition was deeply annoyed not so much by the West's indecisive attitude as with the prospect of sitting at the negotiating table face-to-face with top representatives from the Assad regime when the Geneva peace conference convened. The second international peace conference after Geneva I in June 2012, scheduled for January 2014, was to bring together delegations representing Damascus and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces for the first time since the start of the civil war. Given their distaste of the regime and determination to topple Assad before entering political negotiations with anyone, many groups within the opposition ranks either split from the National Coalition or denied recognition to the results of the upcoming event. Among these uncompromising factions were radical Islamists like *Ahrar al-Sham* and the Islamic Front which were backed by the Gulf monarchies ("Hassan Abboud," 2014; "Islamist rebels," 2014). What essentially made the difference on the opposition front was the refusal of the moderate Syrian National Council (SNC) to attend the talks ("Main bloc quits," 2014) and increasing demands by militant Kurdish groups to take part in the meetings ("Syrian Kurds," 2013).

Against such a backdrop, the first round of Geneva II convened in the Swiss resort of Montreux on January 22 with the participation of over forty nations and

international organizations. The meeting was jointly brokered by the United States and Russia, while moderated by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. The second round of the talks were held in the weeks that followed in Geneva. The main purpose was to reach an ultimate understanding as to the implementation of the Geneva Communique of June 2012, particularly concerning the composition and functioning of the executive body (transitional government) to be formed. On the other hand, Ban Ki-moon had initially extended an invitation to Iran days before the event, but was compelled to withdraw it within 24 hours of the first round due to objections raised by the National Coalition (Ryabkov, 2014). At the end of the day, both Syrian parties went home with no agreement on the date of a future meeting or shared understanding as to the nature of a political solution, let alone reaching a consensus on executive and judicial practicalities.

Given the inability of the conference to bear any tangible outcome whatsoever, the UN-Arab League Joint Special Envoy to Syria Lakhdar Brahimi resigned from his post in May (Malashenko, 2014a). The timing of Geneva II's overall failure and Brahimi's subsequent resignation also coincided with Russia's formal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula on the Black Sea coast of Ukraine in defiance of widespread international condemnation on March 18, 2014, in addition to its initial involvement in the civil war that has since ravaged Ukraine's Donbass region which is contested between Kiev and ethnic-Russian insurgents (Naumkin, 2014a). It was also in this period that international observers have begun to suspect the use of chlorine gas by Syrian forces as a component of the so-called "barrel bombs."[10] As tensions between the EU and the US on the one hand and Russia and

[10] For a typical example of such news reports that were circulating among international observers at the time, see Holmes (2014).

Iran on the other continued to escalate, the Syrian conflict has reached a bloody deadlock. No sooner than the Kremlin stepped up the plate to facilitate continued dialogue between various opposition factions inside Syria and the Assad regime in Moscow did a hellish and formidable adversary sprang all of a sudden out of the ashes of Saddam's Iraq to elevate the entire strategic "gameboard" onto a new and explosive stage.

6.5 The rise of ISIS

Since the Syrian conflict has been kindled in 2011, Russian analysts usually regarded many of the groups fighting within opposition ranks against Damascus as "extremists", "gangs", "outlaws", or "mercenaries." As to the Russian media, it has long maintained a hardline perspective, depicting the entire spectrum of Syrian rebels as "Islamic terrorists", "foreign puppets", or "Western spies" without making much distinction among them – hence reproducing the Assad regime's habitual rhetoric with some minor amendments all the way from the start of the conflict. Neither did the Russian public see any of the Western-backed parties to the Syrian crisis under a different light (Shumilin, 2013). But it would not be an overestimation to claim that the advent of ISIS has marked a complete new epoch in religious-inspired terrorism in the eyes of both Russian observers and the larger international community.

Originally founded in 2006 by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi as the Iraqi branch of *al-Qaeda*, the group was later rebranded as "the Islamic State in Iraq" after its founder was killed by US airstrikes. Since 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has assumed the group's leadership. Under al-Baghdadi's leadership, this *al-Qaeda* affiliate initially reigned over large spans of Iraqi territory including Sunni-dominated cities in Western Iraq like Diyala and Salahideen. In the years that followed, the so-called

Islamic State in Iraq had apparently seized upon a rare chance to expand its capacity and area of operation at an unprecedented rate owing to the chaotic environment that has since loomed like a nightmare over Iraq and Syria (Krylov, 2014).

Moreover, the terrorist group was now able to reap the aggrievances of the Sunni minority in Iraq against the new government of Prime Minister Maliki, who was infamous for his staunchly pro-Shia and pro-Iran orientation. In this vein, former officers from Saddam's army began to join the group one after another, bringing with them much needed military expertise and combat experience (Aksenenok, 2014; Naumkin, 2014b). In April 2011, the terrorist group declared a merger with the Syrian branch of *al-Qaeda*, which is commonly referred as *Jabhat al-Nusra*. However, the latter refused to join the ranks of the Islamic State in Iraq, which has nevertheless changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (or ISIS) by the time (Mamedov, 2015). Since then, ISIS has been involved in an on-and-off war against various other Islamist factions fighting for domination in Syria, including *Jabhat al-Nusra* and *Ahrar al-Sham* (Sayigh, 2014b).

Ever since its initial attempts to penetrate Syria, ISIS has begun to capture an increasing share of global attention as a fierce splinter group that is formally disowned by *al-Qaeda*. Through January and February 2014, it captured Falluja in Iraq as well as vast portions of the province of Raqqa in eastern Syria, which has subsequently been converted into a headquarters from where the group's extensive operations are still coordinated (Krylov, 2014). Finally, it took over Mosul and Tikrit in Iraq on June 10-11, declaring the establishment of an Islamic Emirate over these newly-conquered territories. Within the span of weeks, ISIS has extended its reach even farther to encompass almost one third of the combined territories of Iraq and

Syria (Malashenko, 2014b; Primakov, 2014). Against this backdrop, it proclaimed the establishment of a global caliphate on June 29, 2014 (Aksenenok, 2014).

Meanwhile, the central government in Baghdad called Iran and the United States for assistance against the uncontrollable spread of ISIS. On a highly humiliating occasion, the Shia-led Iraqi army has proven completely ineffective in its short-lived bid to resist the ISIS offensive on Mosul. As the American-trained Iraqi forces were chased out of the city by the terrorist group, they left behind heavy arms including tanks and artillery. Furthermore, al-Baghdadi has laid his hands on a large booty of gold and foreign reserves which were stocked in Mosul (Aksenenok, 2014; Primakov, 2014). On the 17th of the following month, the most important oilfield as well as a key gas field in the Syrian province of Homs fell into the hands of ISIS militants who have subsequently massacred 250-300 Syrian operatives there (Sayigh, 2014b). Taken together, ISIS now controlled large energy deposits across Iraq and Syria, the main border crossings between the two countries, and vast funds that could be utilized to finance its future operations.[11] Within this framework; the smuggling of oil and narcotics, the selling of valuable artefacts, ransoms received in exchange of kidnapped individuals, slavery, looting, usurpation, and taxes on conquered populations ensured a steady flow of revenues for the once cash-strapped terrorist group (Aksenenok, 2014; Krylov, 2014).

Wherever it occupied, ISIS had the habit of swiftly organizing massive prison breaks. Reports suggest that the former inmates were either murdered – in case they were "suspected of" being of an Alawite / Shia background – or recruited as militants. That, combined with the group's effective use of modern technological

[11] The maximum territorial span of ISIS across Iraq and Syria by mid-2015 is illustrated in Appendix A.

tools like social media for violent propaganda and its immense wealth being paid in the form of wages to the recruits drawn from all around the region, allowed the group to grow tremendously in a short period of time. It already had between 12,000 and 30,000 recruits at its disposal by the end of 2014 (Malashenko, 2014b). In August, ISIS has even managed to take hold of the Taqba airbase which used to be held dear by the Syrian military for its strategic value (Sayigh, 2014b).

As Washington stepped in to meet Baghdad's emergency call by launching an airborne operation over Iraq to drive back ISIS from major urban centers, Western aid workers and journalists were turned into an easy target for retribution and ransom by the group. Public decapitation, crucifixion, and other forms of violent execution (including at the hands of child recruits) have become the signature methods of the group, while anyone could watch these killings at the comfort of their homes through videos posted online. When the US brought together a coalition in Paris with several Gulf countries and Jordan to strike ISIS, the terrorist group was about to embark on a genocide against non-Muslim minority communities in northern Syria. Another alarming trend was the absorption and disbanding of the majority of older Islamist groups in Syria with the advance of ISIS. These groups were confronted with a choice between swearing allegiance to ISIS or complete annihilation. Moreover, many of their experienced members who were utterly impressed by the unprecedented success and snowballing wealth of ISIS have already departed to join the ranks of the latter (Sayigh, 2014b; Yevseyev, 2015b). In November, ISIS has allegedly assisted *Jabhat al-Nusra* militants in defeating *Harakat Hazm* (the Steadfast Movement) – a Western-sponsored moderate rebel faction in Syria. *Harakat Hazm*'s massive arms stockpile, which was supplied by Western countries

and Arab donors, has been subsequently seized by extremist militants ("Al-Qaeda reportedly seizes US anti-tank rockets," 2014).

In the face of such unspeakable human rights abuses and blatant crimes against humanity as committed by ISIS in the territories it has captured, the US-led coalition began to target the group's strongholds in Syria by late September. This step was taken without seeking formal consent from Damascus. As for Moscow, its covert support for regular sorties by US aircraft within Syrian airspace owed to various calculations. Admittedly, Russian decision-makers were not fond of the idea at the beginning. Their preferred course of action would be formal cooperation with the Assad regime on the part of coalition powers. After all, Baghdad has formally invited the US into its territory to counter ISIS, but Damascus hasn't yet done so (Naumkin, 2014d).

Most importantly, Moscow had various misgivings about the sudden outburst of ISIS, seemingly out of nowhere. The once-remote terrorist group was now at the brink of establishing a full-fledged state with its own system of taxation, courts of justice, and even central bank (Kosach, 2015b). The Russian leadership apparently had no clue as to why al-Baghdadi, the group's current leader, was released from a US prison in southern Iraq in 2004 after spending a few weeks under custody. And the fact that ISIS was able to capture a huge sum of Western arms and Iraqi gold also aroused suspicion in Moscow. Conspiracy theories were circulating among Russian analysts by the time that ISIS had been covertly and indirectly pumped for some time by Western powers to emerge as a game-changer in the Syrian conflict, the course of which has otherwise favored the consolidation of Russian interests and regime survival (Krylov, 2014; Malashenko, 2015b).

At first, Russia believed actions of ISIS served the hand of Western powers on the larger Middle Eastern chessboard and even beyond. On the one hand, ISIS has provided Western powers an ideal pretext for boosting military support for the FSA, this time against the threat of extremism rather than the Assad regime which was complying with international norms and decisions as demonstrated in Damascus' voluntary elimination of much of its chemical weapons production capacity under OPCW supervision as of June 2014. Western public opinion held no grudges against Assad, whereas ISIS seemed to be the very incarnation of devil itself. In Iraq and Syria, the US was able to kill two birds with one stone. Not only did it entail prolonged US military presence and influence over the country, but it also helped drive Damascus into the corner. ISIS has proven to be a challenge way more difficult to overcome when compared with Western-sponsored moderate rebel factions and even Saudi and Qatari backed Islamists. It was anti-Shia, thus reducing Iran's influence and capacity to fight in Iraq and Syria. Moreover, its attacks on predominantly Kurdish areas in northern Iraq and northern Syria facilitated the arming of Kurds (led by the so-called Democratic Union Party, a.k.a. the PYD) against their rivals in Baghdad, Ankara, and Tehran. Washington was now able to exert additional pressure over regional powers by resorting to the Kurdish card in the fight against ISIS (Baklanov, Ignatenko, & Fenenko, 2014).

What worried Moscow the most was the possible repercussions of the steep rise of ISIS as far as its own territorial integrity and stability were concerned. Many of the high-ranking ISIS fighters were foreigners attracted to the religious zeal, glory, and fame associated with ISIS across parts of the Islamic world. And some of these foreign fighters had links to Russia, this way or another. According to Russian estimates, the number of ISIS fighters from Caucasian or Central Asian backgrounds

varied within a range from several hundreds to over 2000 in total (Malashenko, 2014b). Highly warlike Chechen militants, most of whom have not directly arrived Syria from Northern Caucasus but were already given political asylum in Western capitals after years of combat experience in Chechnya in the late 1990s and early 2000s, constituted a substantial portion of this foreign "mujahedeen" force (Naumkin, 2014b). Added into the calculation was the growing clout of Salafist muftis and currents among Russia's multi-ethnic Muslim community, as well as the presence of over a million immigrant workers from Central Asia across Russia. In this respect, it was not only Chechens, Circassians, or Dagestanis whose connections with the Middle East worried Russia, but also that of radicalized Tajiks and Uzbeks who may serve the destabilization of Russia itself along with its geopolitical "backyard", i.e. the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries of Central Asia (Malashenko, 2014c, 2015b).

That said, every cloud has a silver lining. Although the spread of ISIS like wildfire has precipitated train-and-equip programs for the FSA by its allies, the Syrian opposition now seemed weaker than ever. It was far from capable of countering ISIS, let alone fighting on two fronts at once (Sayigh, 2014b). And even if Damascus was formally excluded from the anti-terrorist coalition led by the US, multiple reports were leaked that the Assad government and Western intelligence officers have been engaged in close cooperation behind closed doors to coordinate their response against ISIS. In Moscow's view, a golden ticket was being offered to the Syrian President if he wanted to reestablish himself as a legitimate interlocuter *vis-à-vis* any foreign partner willing to join the fight against extremists and terrorists across the Middle East (Naumkin, 2014f; Sayigh, 2014b).

For the Kremlin, the rise of ISIS out of the power vortex in Syria and Iraq to later spill over into Libya and Egypt as well had provided a further "opportunity" on par with the September 2012 murder of US Ambassador to Libya, Cristopher Stevens, at the hands of the same Islamist militants who were previously assisted in toppling Gadhafi (Suponina, 2012a; Trenin, 2013b). That is, Russia could once again draw the attention of the international community to the need of joining forces against the rising threat of Islamic radicalism as have resulted from Western interventionism; while presenting itself as the most suitable partner in this humanitarian endeavor. Thus, Russia had found a rare chance to divert the world's attention away from its military involvement in Ukraine and boost its role as a credible stakeholder in maintaining global stability in the midst of a region-wide crisis that posed a threat to the Western world as well (Torkunov, 2014). This narrative also confirmed the chaotic "side effects" of regime change induced by external powers, which Moscow claimed to be the case in Ukraine when President Viktor Yanukovych was forced to leave office amid widespread pro-EU demonstrations in February 2014 (Malashenko, 2014b).

Within this context, Moscow stood by as the UN Security Council endorsed a resolution foreseeing the delivery of medicine and food to opposition-held settlements in Syria without asking the government in Damascus ("Russia backs UN Security Council," 2014). By November 2014, coalition airstrikes, FSA forces, as well as Kurdish Peshmerga troops from Northern Iraq have been fighting side by side in Kobane (a.k.a. Ayn al-Arab) to prevent further advances by ISIS. As the year 2014 was coming close to an end; Kurdish militia were about to replace FSA as the only effective force on the ground that was capable of countering ISIS (Naumkin, 2014e). Meanwhile, the death toll in Syria was steadily approaching the 200,000 threshold by

the end of the year which has proven to be the deadliest since the outbreak of the crisis. Nearly 6.5 million people were either internally displaced, whereas more than 3 million Syrians have fled to other countries, mainly Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, seeking refugee status (Sayigh, 2014b). The huge strain on the social fabric and economies of host countries resulting from the refugee influx, as well as the anticipated flood of further waves of refugees into Europe after the ascent of ISIS, now loomed like a nightmare over the fate of humanity at large.

6.6 An unexpected boost to Moscow's stature

Russian Foreign Ministry held two rounds of "Moscow platform" meetings on January 26-29 and April 6-9, 2015, on the basis of the Geneva Protocol of June 30, 2012. Invitation was extended to both the Assad government and numerous individual representatives from unarmed opposition groups within Syria. Moscow vocally refrained from setting any preconditions for the parties to engage in dialogue and pledged not to intervene in the subsequent debates. Many of the leading opposition figures who attended the meetings had been directly contacted by Russian officials in advance, for the first time since the start of the civil war. The consultations and deliberations between various Syrian parties were arranged in a way to function as a complementary track to the recently stalled Geneva process. In that regard, the Moscow platform shined out as a rather inclusive endeavor to reinvigorate constructive dialogue between the semi-official Syrian opposition and the Assad government. More importantly, it effectively set the stage for Geneva III (Naumkin, 2015a, 2015b).

On its part, Washington overtly acknowledged the effort, which signaled a dramatic change in its stance. Moscow tended to interpret this shift in Washington's

long-held position as the latter's delayed realization of the fact that Western and Russian considerations pertaining to Syria's future are not inherently irreconcilable. Indeed, their respective concerns and interests converged in many instances (Naumkin, 2015a). Within this framework, US Secretary of State John Kerry paid an historic visit to Sochi to meet his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov on May 29, 2015. The meeting underlined the coincidence of great power interests over not only Syria but also other conflict zones like Yemen, Afghanistan, and Libya (Naumkin, 2015b). While Lavrov reinstated Moscow's position that keeping Bashar al-Assad in power is neither a priority nor a strategic objective by itself; Kerry lowered down his tone to the extent of renouncing his government's earlier insistence on Assad's immediate resignation as a precondition for – or a short-term objective of – Syrian peace talks. Both parties agreed that deciding the fate of Assad as well as his legitimacy as a ruler should be up to Syrian people alone. The only remaining point of contention was whether a fixed timetable should be set by outside powers for the transfer of power within Syria as demanded by Washington (Barmin, 2015d).

From the Kremlin's standpoint, Kerry's acknowledgement corresponded to a diplomatic victory. As a matter of fact, no alternatives to Assad appeared on the horizon. Due to the Assad regime's deeply-entrenched presence, no replacement seemed promising as to its capability to preserve Syria's statehood while fighting Islamists and terrorists at the same time in an effective way. Existing state institutions and administrative mechanisms had to be kept intact to avoid a repetition of the Iraqi or Libyan scenarios (Kozhanov, 2015e; Nocetti, 2015). In that sense, the imposition of a new form of government or a change of leadership by external powers was destined to backfire. Besides, there was no way for Russia to maintain its long-term stakes in Syria if Assad was overthrown by force. Regime change would

entail at best a fragile pro-Western government and at worst the usurpation of power by outlaws and international criminal networks who have taken an oath to convert Syria into a hotbed of terrorism (Baklanov, 2015).

For a while, it seemed Moscow's calls to put aside the persistent mistrust between NATO and Russia, which was further aggravated in 2014 with the events in Ukraine, have been well received in Western capitals. One could say that the otherwise conflicted parties were now seeing eye to eye at least in relation to the specific challenge embodied by ISIS. Leading EU countries like Germany and France were particularly keen as to the prospect of collaborating with Russia against terrorism. For that matter, they were even willing to tacitly engage the Syrian President himself (Kozhanov, 2015e). On the other hand, Europe's enthusiasm to bring Assad to the negotiation table provoked repeated objections by GCC capitals, which have been the arch-enemies of Damascus since the start of the civil war. Another objection came from Ankara, which Moscow was accusing of complicity in the transfer of Gadhafi's weaponry and *al-Qaeda* fighters from Libya to Syria through its porous southern borders (Naumkin, 2015a).

In contrast to the situation with the West's regional allies in the Middle East, the EU's main objective was to tackle the export of radicalism from Syria into its own borders, which closely resonated with Russian concerns. The Charlie Hebdo attacks of January 2015, which were performed by ISIS-affiliated individuals, have deeply appalled France, while demonstrating the urgency of joining forces against this common enemy (Zviagelskaya, 2015). The grave threat posed by terrorists operating from their Syrian bases was further evidenced by ISIS propaganda that was now being broadcast and published in 23 languages (Koshkin & Malashenko, 2015). Apparently, this new menace has metamorphosed into an umbrella for all extremist

elements throughout the globe, from California to China to Sub-Saharan Africa (Popov, 2015a). Transforming itself into a quasi-state, neither did ISIS make secret its pursuit of obtaining WMDs. Moreover, Syria's plunge into complete disarray would engender further waves of refugees into Europe. Hence the priority in Syria has eventually shifted from ousting Assad to the eradication of ISIS (Koshkin & Malashenko, 2015; Orlov, 2015).

6.7 Russian military intervention: The ultimate game-changer

Meanwhile, Islamist factions like *Jabhat al-Nusra* that received tacit support from ISIS had made significant gains *vis-à-vis* regime forces between May and September, 2015. By August, the situation on the ground became so dire for the Assad regime that it was thought to be on the brink of collapse. The Syrian Arab Army was extremely exhausted after almost five years of protracted civil war, and the advent of ISIS had only aggravated the situation. For now, it was able to maintain control over Syria littoral and the capital, but its losses meant the regime's hold over these regions could not be taken for granted (Barmin, 2015c; Kashin, 2015). The government-controlled portion of the country was restricted to a vertical belt running across Hama, Homs, and Damascus, with the highway along this north-south route functioning as the main economic and logistic artery of Syria. Although corresponding to less than a quarter of the country's entire surface area, this axis was home to 80-85 percent of the population (Yevseyev, 2015b). However, several Islamist groups, along with those hardline factions within the Western-sponsored opposition, were advancing from Idlib onto Latakia, while government forces have already suffered heavy losses (Barmin, 2015b).

Added to the troubles of Damascus was an economy in shatters. The civil war inflicted massive damage on the country's infrastructure, and key oil wells as well as power plants and refineries had been seized by either ISIS or the insurgents (Aidrous, 2013; Naumkin, 2014f; Sayigh, 2014b). Farmlands were so devastated that they could not feed the population anymore, let alone allowing profitable harvests. People from opposition-held areas were fleeing in waves into the Damascus-Hama line, exacerbating the economic burden on the government's shoulders (Yevseyev, 2015a). All this was occurring amidst widespread rumors of a joint US-Turkey operation to introduce a no-fly zone and safe havens in northern Syria, which meant a foreign invasion of Syria in the eyes of Russian decision-makers. The specter of Western military intervention once again loomed large on the horizon (Pukhov, 2015; Yevseyev, 2015a). As a matter of fact, the anti-ISIS coalition that was recently expanded to include European air forces has joined forces with the rebels not only against ISIS but also the Syrian Arab Army of Bashar al-Assad. In Moscow's opinion, the US and its regional allies were either unable or unwilling to fight ISIS in an effective manner. The fact that they had no ground forces played into the hand of Islamist factions which were more interested in terrorizing regime strongholds than countering ISIS (Dolgov & Mahmood, 2015; Yevseyev, 2015b).

What this implied for Russia was a potential surge in the number of homecoming jihadists – seasoned fighters with war experience and a sense of glory (Trenin, 2015a). It was as early as 2014 that ISIS has announced its intention to spread the war against "infidels" into the Northern Caucasus. The Caucasus Emirate, which is a remnant of the Second Chechen War (1999-2009), has forged formal links with ISIS in Summer 2015 (Malashenko, 2015b). Russian sources indicate that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan swiftly followed suit. The predominantly-Uzbek

Katibat al-Tawhid al-Jihad (the Battalion of Unity and Holy War) and the Chechen-led *Jaysh al-Muhajereen al-Ansar* (the Army of Emigrants and Supporters) were also fighting side by side with Islamist groups like *Jabhat al-Nusra* and *Ahrar al-Sham* against the Assad regime (Barmin, 2015b). According to some estimates, over 2000 of the foreigners fighting within ISIS ranks were thought to be from Northern Caucasian background (Malashenko, 2015a), in addition to over 4000 from Central Asia, by June 2015 (Mirzayan, 2015; Naumkin, 2015b).

What is worse, an increasing number of terror attacks were being carried out around Grozny and Makhachkala in the Northern Caucasus by perpetrators associated with those terrorists who have previously departed from Syria (Malashenko, 2015a; Naumkin, 2014f). Given the reported deterioration of the situation in both Tajikistan and Afghanistan through Spring and Summer 2015; the Russian administration was determined to confront this threat away from the country's own borderlands. As a pre-emptive strategy, it had already bolstered military and political positions in Tajikistan – a strategically-located Central Asian nation which functions as Moscow's furthest outpost in the fight against radical terrorist groups. Moscow could not allow extremists to infiltrate Central Asia where there are no natural barriers which can stop their flooding into Russia proper (Kashin, 2015; Trenin, 2015a).

At the risk of disturbing the volatile consensus between Moscow and Washington, the former has opted for ramping up its military support to Damascus. As confirmed by Russian authorities, they have propped weapons deliveries, while providing high-quality equipment as well – a move which was heretofore out of question (Kozhanov, 2015c). The intensification in cargo traffic between Moscow and Damascus was accompanied by the dispatching of Russian pilots and motorized

units – mainly consisting of marine troops – along with special corps (Spetsnaz) near the Hmeimim airbase in Latakia (Trenin, 2015a). The number of specialists, technicians, and advisors deployed in the naval resupply facility in Tartus has seen a twenty-fold increase, from 50 to 2000 (Kashin, 2015; Sarabyev, 2011). The acceleration of large-scale engineering and construction work near the airbase in Latakia, in addition to two other airbases, has aroused further international excitement (Kozhanov, 2015b). It was also reported that Russia had recently ramped up its naval build-up in the Eastern Mediterranean and been seeking access to a naval base in the island of Cyprus (Meyssan & Artamanov, 2015).

In parallel with its military-related moves, Moscow also embarked on a campaign of shuttle diplomacy, with an eye to improving long-neglected ties with various regional parties to the conflict – Saudi Arabia and Qatar first and foremost. Arms trade and investment pledges in nuclear power plants were the main incentives employed by Moscow as part of this carrots-and-sticks policy (Dolgov & Mahmood, 2015; Kozhanov, 2015e). On top of that, Russian officials were now declaring their readiness to engage in dialogue with even those moderate rebel factions that have been involved in armed conflict with the government (Kozhanov, 2015c). In this vein, semi-formal recognition was extended to the FSA, which was now regarded by Moscow as a promising partner in the anti-ISIS coalition and the larger peace process (Barmin, 2016a; Sushentsov, 2015). Diplomatic traffic between Washington and Moscow has subsequently gained momentum, with Kerry and Lavrov meeting almost on a weekly basis now. In their bilateral talks, the Russian side reiterated their conviction that without the coordinated company of ground forces, the US-led coalition would never be able to uproot ISIS. For that matter, Russia had been calling for a way broader anti-terror coalition that would include the Assad regime, Iran,

various Kurdish militant groups, and non-extremist components of the armed opposition within Syria (Kosach, 2015b; Popov, 2015b).

Apparently, the primary target of Putin's diplomatic offensive was to legitimize the Assad regime and put an end to its status as an international pariah by incorporating it into the anti-terror coalition as a key partner. Yet, diplomatic maneuvering in this period further allowed the Kremlin to exploit the cracks within the expansive and inchoate Western alliance as well as those between Arab and Muslim states which have distinct interests in mind and struggle to broaden their own radius of action independent from other actors (Kuznetsov, 2015a). For that matter, Russia's talks with Israel were focused on containing Hezbollah and Iran; those with Turkey on the post-Assad status of the Kurdish enclaves in northern Syria; those with Saudi Arabia on Iraq's and Yemen's future; and those with Egypt on addressing its economic dependence on the Gulf (Kuznetsov, 2015a). Putin's military support for the Syrian regime, and the accompanying diplomatic offensive on the part of his government, were accelerated to create a *de facto* situation on the ground before the Russian President's upcoming speech on the UN General Assembly in September 28, when Putin was expected to discuss Syria's future with his American counterpart Obama on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in the first personal meeting between the two leaders after two years (Barmin, 2015c, 2015d).

Meanwhile, Moscow was gearing down its assault on Ukraine's Donbass region as signaled by the cessation of shelling on government targets and arms support to pro-Russian insurgents. It is important to note here that Putin was scheduled to meet Germany's Merkel, France's Hollande, and Ukraine's Poroshenko in Paris two days after the UN event in New York. When read in this light, Moscow was apparently trying to distract the West's attention away from its complicity in the

Ukrainian conflict, thus seeking ways to ease EU sanctions and break its international isolation (Kozhanov, 2015f; Trenin, 2015c). The refugee issue, common concerns about the spread of Middle Eastern terrorism, and the positive role that Russia had played in concluding the recent nuclear deal with Iran were Putin's trump cards in this strategic "poker game" (Gabuev, 2015; Ivanov, 2015).

Against the backdrop of government forces still losing ground to the opposition despite mounting military assistance to Damascus by Moscow, the latter virtually felt obliged to raise the stakes with a final move. In the strategic equation of Syria, the survival of the Assad regime for at least for a while to ensure continued Russian influence over this country was seen as the key variable. Faced with the prospect of its main proxy losing the war on the ground, Russia decided to back its diplomatic assault with a *fait accompli* that would boost its position *vis-à-vis* the Americans and other regional actors on the negotiating table (Kozhanov, 2015f).

On September 30, 2015, came the Russian military intervention in Syria. It was only two days after Putin's UN General Assembly speech which gave no hints as to the upcoming move (Barmin, 2015b; Kozhanov, 2015d). Official statements suggested that Moscow was acting on its defense agreement with Damascus and the latter's call for help, which was similar to the case with the recent American airstrikes over Iraqi territory (Yermakov, 2015). In a way, Putin was demanding an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Despite helping Moscow outmaneuver the West on the diplomatic front though, the military intervention in Syria was neither meant to sabotage the anti-ISIS campaign by the US-led coalition nor to undermine entrenched Western interests in the region. The Russian administration only wanted to raise the stakes from a defensive point of view and compel the West to cooperate

with Russia as an equal partner, on the latter's own terms, rather than vice versa (Kozhanov, 2015f; Nocetti, 2015).

When the operations began, the main body of the Russian air force contingent in Syria consisted of 34 airplanes (fighters, bombers, and others) and 18 combat helicopters (Pukhov, 2015). Russian fighter jets that had previously been deployed in the country started to perform several sorties a day thanks to the proximity of the Latakia airfield to the conflict zone (between 100 to 300 kilometers depending on the exact location of the target). Artillery and air defense systems were assisted by naval firepower to protect the military bases in Tartus and Latakia against assaults by Islamist rebels (Yermakov, 2015). A high-tech electronic surveillance system was installed in Latakia to support the work of a joint international headquarters in Baghdad, which was established between Russia, Iraq, Iran, and Syria to coordinate their forces and facilitate information-sharing (Kuznetsov, 2015b; Soukhov, 2015).

In practical terms, the operation had the limited objective of fixing the frontline against the expansion of Islamist groups and ideology in the Middle East before too late. As a matter of fact, Islamist groups like *Jabhat al-Nusra*, along with *Jaysh al-Islam*, *Jaysh al-Fath* (the Army of Conquest) and *Ahrar al-Sham*, had recently emerged as the most formidable challenge against the Assad regime on the ground. Against this backdrop, the priority of the Russian military intervention has proven to be the elimination of rebel pockets around Hama, Homs, Idlib, Latakia, and Damascus rather than striking ISIS (Barmin, 2015b; Kozhanov, 2015b; Mamedov, 2015; Pukhov, 2015).[12]

[12] For the geographic distribution of Russian airstrikes in Syria between December 2015 and January 2016, see Appendix B.

According to the plan, Moscow was pledging to provide air cover for the ground forces of Damascus, Baghdad, and Tehran in their counter-offensive against rebel targets. Whereas the option of deploying its own artillery or infantry units on the frontline was strictly ruled out by Moscow, as it repeatedly stated that any scenario involving Russian boots on the ground was permanently off the table (Kashin, 2015). In the eyes of decision-makers in Moscow, limiting the scope of the military intervention to airstrikes was imperative if they were to avoid a catastrophe akin to the Soviet trauma in Afghanistan (1979-1989) where Russian troops were swamped in years of fruitless guerilla warfare (Soukhov, 2015). Besides, the possible number of casualties as implied by such a ground operation would be politically unbearable. Given the drain on Russia's economic resources resulting from a combination of low oil prices – which Russian observers attributed to a perceived oil war waged by Saudi Arabia and the US (Naumkin, 2014e) – and Western sanctions over the annexation of Crimea; neither was Moscow in a position to afford huge military expenditures. Therefore, Moscow's exit plan stipulated a quick victory within a span of four-five months (Kolesnikov, 2015; Kuznetsov, 2015b).

6.8 The outcome of Russia's limited operation

Russia's military intervention has generated groundbreaking outcomes as well as irreversible trends in the international relations of the Middle East. The resulting shockwaves have since affected all parties involved in the conflict, although to varying degrees. Firstly, the operation has cemented the alliance comprising Russia, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon – a geopolitical alignment which had hitherto been regarded as no more than an *ad hoc* coalition. In this respect, Russia's pledge to provide S-300 missile defense systems to Iran served a symbolic purpose

(Kozhanov, 2015c). After this military operation, no serious observer could deny Moscow's restored status as an equal founder and guarantor of a new security system encompassing the Greater Middle East from Libya to Afghanistan. In this respect, Russia's determined pursuit of obtaining parity with the Western bloc on the regional political stage has finally bore its fruit. As a key component of a regional system marked by multipolarity, Russia was here to stay, and every single actor – however grudgingly – had to live with this reality (Baunov, 2016; Mirzayan, 2015; Suchkov, 2015).

As one may recall, all communication between Western and Russian militaries as well as intelligence services was cut in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014 (Suslov, 2016). With the operation in Syria, the restoration of formal communication channels as such has become imperative to preclude any direct confrontation between forces from the two alliances operating simultaneously within Syria. In effect, it was no longer feasible to carry out military operations without informing Russia about it. Neither could any regional or external actor dare attacking Assad's strongholds where Russian troops have recently been deployed (Barmin, 2015d; Soukhov, 2015). Moreover, the rest of the world was now confronted with a tough choice between radical Islamists led by ISIS and Bashar al-Assad, as Russia's subtle strategic maneuvering has pushed moderate rebels almost completely out of picture (Dolgov & Mahmood, 2015).

On the downside, the joint Russian-Iranian-Syrian counter-offensive against rebel groups yielded limited results as both the Saudis and the Americans have boosted their military support for Islamist groups in response (Pukhov, 2015; Yevseyev, 2015b). While no one doubted that the Assad regime was saved, chances for restoring Syria's territorial integrity were now dimmer than ever (Kuznetsov,

2015b; .Mamedov, 2015). On the diplomatic front, Russia has lost its credibility as a relatively neutral intermediary between the government and the opposition. The Moscow talks, or anything resembling them, were now completely defunct (Kozhanov, 2015b). To make matters worse, the Kremlin now faced the risk of being dragged into a relentless sectarian feud to no avail. Moscow's joint military operation with Tehran, Damascus, and Baghdad has resulted in the alienation of Sunni powers that are engaged in a cutthroat strategic competition with Iran. Russian President Putin himself did everything in his power to avoid this scenario, and has stepped up diplomatic dialogue with Gulf States and Turkey even as the campaign in Syria against their proxies continued. However, amid an ongoing war in Yemen between Saudi Arabia and Iranian proxies, the prospect of reviving cooperative relations with these countries looked dim (Lukyanov, 2015; Trenin, 2015a).

Russia's relations with Sunni powers in the region hit rock bottom with the shooting down of a Russian Su-24 bomber by a Turkish F-16 on November 24, 2015, after the former's repeated violation of Turkey's airspace. The event brought NATO and Russia to the brink of direct confrontation. Luckily for the world, NATO issued a low-profile response and took a step back. But the incident had lasting repercussions for the ongoing war in Syria. When considered together with the shooting down of a Russian passenger airbus flying over the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt on October 31 by ISIS militants, it seemed necessary to buttress Russia's command over Eastern Mediterranean airspace. Hence, the number of Russian jets in Syria were increased to 44. Moreover, another battery of S-300 missile defense system was installed on one of Russia's cruisers docked near Tartus, while an advanced version of the same system (S-400) was deployed in Latakia. Both of these are reportedly endowed with radar systems that can detect any major activity within the entire

Eastern Mediterranean airspace, meaning bad news for Russia's relations with Turkey and Israel (Barmin, 2015a).

For Moscow, its direct interference in the Syrian civil war marked the first comprehensive campaign on the part of its armed forces away from Russia's immediate neighborhood after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989. The whole world stood by and watched as Russia once again projected power outside the traditional CIS realm (Lukyanov, 2015; Pukhov, 2015). What rendered the drama even more striking from the standpoint of Western and regional observers were several showcases of Russia's resurgence as a great power that harbors capabilities on par with those thought to be exclusive to NATO. The most noteworthy instance of such muscle-flexing on the part of Moscow was the launch of long-range precision missiles that hit 11 rebel targets within Syria. The missiles were fired from warships belonging to Russia's Caspian Sea flotilla, which is as distant from the battlefield as 1,000 kilometers (Buzhinsky, 2015; Yermakov, 2015). Such blatant display of great power capacity further signified the consolidation of Russia's working alliance with Iran and post-Saddam Iraq, as it would be impossible to carry out this kind of a missile strike in the first place without their cooperation (Trenin, 2015a).

Russia's revival as a key regional actor and one of the independent poles of a newly-shaping power equilibrium on the global strategic scenery has culminated in the UN-sponsored Vienna talks on Syria, the first round of which was held on October 30, 2015. Significantly, Iran was finally given a seat at the table along with Western powers as well as its Saudi Arabian adversary. After mulling over the specifics of the peace process and how relevant power-sharing arrangements will be made in a post-Assad Syria, the participants came up with a nine-point declaration

reflecting their consensus on Russia's terms for a final settlement. The document also endorsed Moscow's long-held position that Syria's territorial integrity, governmental institutions, and secular nature must be preserved. For that matter, ISIS and its extremist affiliates were identified as the primary challenge confronting the international community. Moreover, the document foresaw a gradual process as to Assad's removal from office and left the final decision on the Syrian dictator's fate to popular elections. In effect, the Kremlin was now officially assured a central place in the new regional order, with its stakes in Syria recognized by all parties involved (Kozhanov, 2015a; Suchkov, 2015).

Apart from its legal assurances, the platform served the practical purpose of compelling regional players to exercise some degree of self-restraint. Driven by an aggressive and overly ambitious pursuit of geopolitical influence, local actors like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel have been fanning the flames of an all-out conflict around Syria. External powers, the US and Russia first and foremost, have long been complaining from their lack of control over the risk-prone actions of their key regional allies which seemed unbound by any obligation to contain the crisis. Such complaints accurately reflected the fact that these countries, with their narrowly-defined interests in mind, did not bear any responsibility what-so-ever as to the larger, global repercussions of their reckless escalation of inter-state, inter-ethnic, or sectarian tensions. But the equation in Syria was obviously being altered in a way that favors the preservation of status-quo and stability (Aksenenok, 2016a; Suchkov, 2015).

6.9 Towards a Russia-US rapprochement

By the end of 2015, estimates put the total number of casualties resulting from the ongoing war in Syria at approximately 300,000; not to mention millions of civilians who have received severe injuries, been struggling to subsist under extreme conditions of deprivation abroad, were lost in the sea on their way to European refugee camps, or had their family members fall victim to the prolonged conflict. The situation on the ground has now evolved into a tacit world war, with the militaries of a dozen countries already deployed in Syria along with foreign "mercenaries" coming from over 80 countries (Dolgov & Mahmood, 2015). Moreover, Russia's indiscriminate airstrikes allowed ISIS to gain ground against some moderate rebel forces. The new 'Great Game' around Syria involved an intricate web of relations, interwoven interests, complex and subtle balances, and a wide variety of inherently conflicted groups (Dolgov & Mahmood, 2015). Seizing upon all this chaos, ISIS was making further advances in Syria and Iraq in addition to a range of other countries from Egypt and Libya to Afghanistan and Pakistan (Naumkin, 2014f).

A famous Russian proverb says hope is the last thing to die. In this respect, Moscow saw the light at the end of the tunnel in the second round of Vienna talks on November 14, 2015. The meeting has allowed the unanimous legislation of a UN Security Council resolution on Syria on December 18th after several failed attempts to do so in the last five years (Popov, 2015a). According to the diplomatic schedule, the Vienna process that catalyzed the December 2015 resolution on Syria was to be complemented by inter-Syrian talks in the Geneva format, or a Geneva III. That is, of course, if things stayed on the right track.

The inter-Syrian track of peace talks were restarted for a third time on February 1, 2016. Initially, two opposition delegations were invited, with one of

them officially recognized by the Assad regime and Russia. However, the talks were postponed only two days after they started. Although the interruption was declared to be no more than a temporary halt, with the talks scheduled to resume by February 25, there remained various fundamental problems that lowered any chances for meaningful progress (Barmin, 2016b). As a matter of fact, both the Assad regime and the Saudi-sponsored opposition – the Higher Negotiating Committee (HNC) – still believed they could achieve a military solution through a war of attrition. Determined to fight to the last drop of blood, regional clients as well as proxy groups fighting inside Syria were resisting all calls for a rational settlement. In this respect, the HNC insisted on preconditions and even threatened to boycott the talks altogether (Aksenenok, 2016a; Barmin, 2016b), whereas the Assad regime pretended to be willing to talk under Russia's pressure.

Apparently, neither side of the inter-Syrian track sincerely wanted a swift settlement or cared much about addressing the humanitarian tragedy that had already spilled over into the entire region as well as Europe. The blatantly cynical attitudes of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Syria further emboldened an opposition which was already extremely fragmented in terms of the interests and objectives of its various components. Even the Saudi-backed HNC was far from being a cohesive and monolithic body in itself (Aksenenok, 2016a). Besides, a number of regional powers with partly overlapping interests had invested too much in their proxies that they were no longer able to exercise control over them. Differences of opinion could easily translate into armed clashes between even those Qatari, Saudi, or Turkish proxies that were supposed to back each other; not to mention the broadening gap between these and some Western-backed rebel groups. It seemed no one but the great

powers – that is the US, the EU, and Russia – could settle for less than total victory at this stage in the conflict (Dolgov & Mahmood, 2015).

On the bright side, the US, the EU, and Russia were now on the same page. Indeed, their approaches tended to converge more with each other than those of their nominal clients in the field. While this contradiction made it impossible to achieve decisive success in negotiations in the short term, it surely helped exert additional pressure on regional powers as well as factions fighting in Syria (Aksenenok, Alterman, & Tlili, 2016; Suchkov, 2016a). As to Russia, the pause in the diplomatic process helped strengthen its negotiating position amid Assad's successful assault on the main lifelines of rebel factions that operated in northern Aleppo. The Syrian Arab Army was now given a free hand to break the siege on several Shia enclaves, while capturing key logistical facilities for the delivery of military supplies as well as hard currency to the rebels. Assad's latest victories would surely have left Russia in the lurch if peace talks were not previously interrupted. Now that the rebels were being strangled to death, the blockade obliged the HNC to sit at the negotiating table as soon as possible (Barmin, 2016d; Naumkin, 2016a).

However, latest advances by Assad forces further exacerbated Turkey-Russia tensions which had already reached a dangerous level since the Russian military operation on rebels began in September 2015 and a Russian bomber was downed by a Turkish F-16 two months later. Ankara had hitherto been supporting several rebel factions in northern Syria through overland channels connecting Turkey's borders with rebel strongholds. But this connection was now cut by Assad forces and the so-called Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) (Barmin, 2016d; Naumkin, 2016a). As to the PYD, it was about to lay hold of the larger chunk of Syria's 911 km-long border with Turkey along the "Jarablus corridor" – i.e. a direct link between the

Afrin and Qamishli enclaves located on the two ends of the Turkish-Syrian border (Aksenenok, 2016b; Khlebnikov, 2016a; Naumkin, 2016a).[13] On the other hand, both the White House and the Kremlin intended to include this group in the peace talks and cooperate with it in the fight against ISIS (Barmin, 2016b).

An offshoot of the PKK terrorist organization operating within Turkey, the PYD has subsequently begun to dominate the Syrian stage as far as its capabilities and territorial span is concerned. To appease its NATO ally though, the US has now facilitated the regrouping of Syrian Kurdish militia under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) together with some Arab rebel factions (Khlebnikov, 2016a; Naumkin, 2016a). Nevertheless, some degree of decentralization in Syria seemed inevitable at this point (Kuznetsov, 2015a). Coupled with rumors of a convergence between Assad and the Kurds – thus their respective patrons Moscow and Washington – on this issue, the emerging equilibrium deeply troubled Ankara's strategic calculus in Syria. Amid widespread speculation of a forthcoming Turkish military intervention against the Syrian affiliate of the PKK terrorist group, Russia even felt obliged to deploy new fighter jets in Latakia and upgrade Syria's military hardware including fighter jets (Naumkin, 2016a).

Meanwhile, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) that was formed in Vienna last October met once again in Munich on February 11, 2016, to resolve several issues on the eve of Geneva III (Barmin, 2016b). To demonstrate its enthusiasm for inclusive dialogue between a diverse set of conflicted Syrian parties, Russia assented to the exclusion of the Kurds from the Geneva III talks due to Turkey's reservation. In this vein, Russia even accepted to invite individuals from

[13] An elaborate map depicting the geographic breakdown of the Kurds, Turkish troops, the Syrian government, and various rebel factions within Syria by late 2015 is also available in Appendix C.

Jaysh al-Islam and *Ahrar al-Sham* to the upcoming peace talks in Geneva (Surkov, 2016). These two groups, while forming the backbone of the Saudi-sponsored HNC, were deemed extremist by Moscow for having fought together with the local *al-Qaeda* branch *Jabhat al-Nusra* on numerous occasions (Barmin, 2016b). The US also reciprocated with various diplomatic concessions on its part, which further strengthened Russia's case for a political settlement brokered by a concert of great powers (Mirzayan, 2016; Naumkin, 2016b).

Finally meeting in Geneva on February 25, the US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov agreed on a cessation of hostilities on a nation-wide scale within the framework of previous legal documents. The truce, as enshrined in yet another UN Security Council resolution unanimously legislated by the great powers, entered into force by February 27, 2016 (Suslov, 2016). De-escalation on the ground subsequently catalyzed mutual gestures between Moscow and Washington with an eye to reaching a political solution as soon as possible. Thus, the two stepped up their efforts to broker a final settlement while most of the remaining ISSG countries had to comply with the truce rather grudgingly (Zviagelskaya, 2016).

6.10 Russia's pullout of its air force contingent

The most striking gesture that has breathed new life into the peace process was Russia's pulling back of the bulk of its air force contingent from Syria, which was finally declared on March 14, 2016. After five-and-a-half months, Russia has achieved its main objectives for the most part, while paying a relatively small price in terms of both casualties and military expenditure (Baunov, 2016). Through the operation, 2,000 terrorists were reportedly killed after 9,000 sorties (Pertsev, 2016).

That number included 17 terrorists from the command echelon of ISIS (Khlebnikov, 2016b). In contrast, the death toll within the Russian contingent until October 2016 was recorded at 20, while three helicopters were lost, in addition to the Su-24 bomber grounded by Turkey. In total, the military drill came at a cost of approximately $500 million according to Putin (Khlebnikov, 2016b), while Western estimates put the same figure at $660 million. In any case, the material cost did not exceed much beyond one percent of Russia's official military spending for the year (Mirzayan, 2016).

Still, Moscow's withdrawal was only partial. At the end of the day, Russia now had two operational bases in Syria, one for its navy in Tartus and the other for its military aircraft in Latakia. Its jets continued to perform regular sorties over enemy targets in Syria through the following months (Baunov, 2016). While the entire Syrian landmass was not reclaimed at the end, neither had Russia such a stated aim in the first place. As a matter of fact, ISIS was now contained and rapidly fading into the background with a severely-weakened economic and popular base. Yet, Moscow was unable to completely achieve its goal of ejecting all Islamists (*Jabhat al-Nusra* in particular) out of the Idlib-Aleppo area (Barmin, 2016c). Nevertheless, Assad's position was now secure and the fall of Damascus as well as other major urban centers was permanently averted as planned (Aksenenok, 2016a; Mirsky, 2015). On the other hand, the move obliged Assad to comply with the ceasefire and demonstrated Russia's loyalty to its word and commitment to the peace process. The announcement on March 14 left no excuse for any local parties to breach the ceasefire or undermine the next round of Geneva talks scheduled to be launched the same day (Barmin, 2016c).

Apart from its apparently conciliatory message, Moscow's non-offensive "gesture" can also be regarded as a subtle move to corner Western capitals on the diplomatic front. Moscow's official excuse for not eradicating ISIS was the huge expense entailed by such an endeavor. Besides, such an attempt harbored the real risk of forcing the extremist group to relocate somewhere else – most probably closer to Russia. For that matter, some sort of a "quarantine" was probably seen fit. That said, Russia may also have acted upon a covert intention of compelling Western powers to combat ISIS themselves while cutting the terrorist group off from Assad's territorial holdings. The strategic timing of Russia's scaling down of its forces in Syria further signified an attempt to catch both the US and its regional allies off-guard (Mirzayan, 2016). In this respect, Putin's single-handed manipulation of international balances overnight has apparently wrongfooted Obama, who was later quoted in April as comparing Russia's involvement in Syria with the doomed Soviet adventure in Afghanistan in an interview with a highly reputable American magazine.[14]

Meanwhile, Assad and the rebels continued to accuse each other of violating the fragile truce. Despite Russian pressure and in contravention of the international legal consensus, Damascus continued to resist any reforms in the direction of inclusiveness and accountability in a stubborn manner. To make matters worse, some rebels have launched an anti-Assad offensive soon after the April 2016 parliamentary elections in Syria. Foreign negotiators were circumvented as the HNC abruptly left the Geneva talks (Barmin, 2016b). As a result, Washington and Moscow were unable to accelerate Assad's orderly departure from power and ensure continued inter-Syrian dialogue on a sustainable basis.

[14] For more details, see Goldberg (2016).

After the breakdown of the previous one, a renewed ceasefire agreement was reached in Geneva on September 10, 2016. Again, Kerry and Lavrov were at the forefront of international efforts at sealing a final deal on Syria (Suchkov, 2016b). This latter compromise catalyzed closer exchanges between the military-intelligence establishments of Moscow and Washington, indeed to the extent of foreseeing the establishment of a joint implementation center had the ceasefire been extended for a week. Its scope was more comprehensive than that envisioned by any preceding attempt, and foresaw the delineation of clear boundaries between rebel, government, and terrorist holdings on the ground. For Moscow, such would correspond to a milestone achievement *en route* to a concert of great powers on the basis of a lasting security system encompassing the entire region. On top of it all, the truce aimed to facilitate the uninterrupted flow of humanitarian aid through demilitarized zones around Aleppo – thus reaching out to hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of people struggling to survive in their war-torn dwellings under the gravest conditions imaginable (Aksenenok, 2016b).

Yet, this second attempt at a comprehensive ceasefire was destined to fail within days after its coming into force. The most feasible initiative that had been reached since the beginning of the war ultimately ended in bloodshed when a UN convoy carrying humanitarian relief was allegedly targeted by forces loyal to the regime near Aleppo. What followed were American airstrikes on a regime airbase near Deir ez-Zor that killed more than 60 Syrian soldiers (Yevseyev, 2016). While Russia denied responsibility for the inhumane attack on the UN aid convoy, the US said the shelling of the Syrian Arab Army base was not deliberate. After all, the regime airbase in question was located in close proximity to the ISIS-held area (Trenin, 2015b). On its part, Russia suspected elements within the US administration,

most likely the hawkish and liberal-interventionist circles within the Pentagon and the Congress, for being behind the airstrike. Moscow believed they would benefit from an escalation in Syria in the run up to the upcoming presidential elections in the US in November 2016 (Aksenenok, 2016c). Whether such allegations are accurate or far from reality, the ceasefire ended abruptly, causing widespread disappointment in Moscow and Washington.

A major problem that muddied the water was the difficulty of distinguishing the rebel factions that pledged adherence to the ceasefire from those terrorist groups that remained out of the deal's scope (Barmin, 2016d). Seizing upon the rare "opportunity" offered by an exchange of accusations between Washington and Moscow; Damascus and Tehran, along with some of the proxies backed by Riyadh and Ankara, swiftly went on to exploit the distrust and lack of closer coordination between the great powers. In turn, they have effectively dealt a major blow to the materialization of institutional cooperation between Moscow and Washington, which would have substantially mitigated the conflict. As diplomatic channels between the two great powers were once again clogged, local actors have gained a chance to further aggravate the situation in order to embroil their patrons in a direct confrontation on their side (Khlebnikov, 2016c; Suchkov, 2016b; Sushentsov, 2016).

6.11 Conclusion

As of this writing, Russia has successfully positioned itself as *the* indispensable actor – or 'pivot country' – in the Syrian conflict as well as the larger Middle Eastern arena. Moscow now boasts its first permanent airbase in the Middle East while work is already underway to convert the naval resupply facility at the Syrian port of Tartus into a full-fledged military base (Bodner, 2015; "Russia plans permanent naval

base," 2016). Moreover, the involvement in Syria of various Western powers along with regional air forces obliged at least a certain degree of military-military cooperation on a multilateral scale, thus laying the groundwork for an operative anti-terror coalition as long promoted by Moscow, even against a backdrop of a failed ceasefire attempt in September 2016. Despite US reservation; Jordan, Germany, Israel, and Turkey have already entered into close coordination with Russia in this endeavor (Khlebnikov, 2016b).

With its consistent moves in Syria over the course of the civil war, Moscow has not only exposed the hopeless inability of American negotiators to exercise a sufficient degree of control over their reckless proxies or to streamline the positions of regional allies like Turkey and Saudi Arabia; but also stepped in to fill the holes in the West's ambiguous and defective – if not completely counter-productive – strategy towards the entire region (Ivanov, 2015; Trenin, 2014). As a matter of fact, various rebel groups in Syria as well as the regime in Damascus and Hezbollah have long been fixed on Assad's personal future as opposed to the shared priorities of Moscow and Washington (Khlebnikov, 2016b). The situation does not seem much different in the case of regional countries which, having put all their eggs in one basket, continue to back their defiant proxies at all costs like notorious gamblers. While the great powers concentrate on a long-term strategic settlement, regional powers and their proxies look ever more incapable of transcending debates on individuals or day-to-day developments. In this sense, Putin thinks of himself as offering a way out for the US as well as its allies of what is otherwise a mutually-undesirable deadlock (Mirzayan, 2015).

From a global perspective, the post-Cold War order has now been torn to pieces as a result of the developments in and around Syria. In this respect, the

Russian military intervention has effectively put an end to perceived US hegemony over the Middle East. The Kremlin has managed to translate its 5-month aerial operation into a major political victory at the cost of an overseas military exercise, in stark contrast to the situation with the massive – yet apparently fruitless – involvement of the US military in a variety of countries from Afghanistan to Iraq to Libya to Yemen since 2003 (Trenin, 2016a). In this vein, Moscow has further demonstrated a capacity to coordinate its Black Sea, Mediterranean, and Caspian warships with air forces deployed in Iran (in the Hamadan airbase) and Syria, as well as carrying out precision strikes against distant targets via portable long-range ballistic missiles (Khlebnikov, 2016a, 2016b).

Most importantly, Russia has manifested its inherent capacity to act as a proactive force that can tackle global challenges like terrorism and refugee crises for the sake of humanity at large. Since the end of the Cold War, Moscow had been snubbed for sticking to a reactive and subversive foreign policy (Baunov, 2016), characterized by its fixation on the narrow objective of ejecting Washington out of the former Soviet domain in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. But now, the Kremlin is once again going global to offer a vision beyond narrowly-defined interests as may be associated with smaller and regional actors.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

> US singularity in [the Middle East] will not endure forever . . . Russian power will return, inevitably, to an area so close to its southern frontiers – whatever they end up being. (Garfinkle, as cited in Kreutz, 2007, Preface section)

The ruthless spectacle that has been played out around Syria since late 2011 is perceived by Moscow as nothing but a full-fledged proxy war. In the eyes of Russian decision-makers and intelligentsia, the prolonged conflict that now involves a kaleidoscope of warring groups on the ground is essentially driven by a clash of hardcore state interests between Turkey, Israel, the GCC countries, and the Western bloc on the one side and Russia, China, Iran, and Syria on the other at a fundamental level. For this reason, the ongoing war between those groups that Russia tends to see as "mercenaries" hired by external powers and Syrian, Hezbollah, and Iranian forces is far from what a genuine rebellion along sectarian or ideological lines against an anti-democratic regime would have normally entailed.

Within this mental framework, Moscow sees itself as struggling to preserve its core national interests, some of which are deeply-rooted in the survival of its long-time strategic ally in Damascus. As rigid as this kind of an approach to the multi-faceted picture at hand may be, underlying it are certain working principles that have stood the test of history and seem capable of accounting for much of the drama that continues to surround Russo-Syrian relations. Firstly, like in the Cold War era, Moscow needs to maintain a counter-balance against Israel and the pro-Western alliance in the region which is represented by countries like Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. As a matter of fact, Syria is located in the midst of Iran, Iraq, Turkey,

the Kurds, Israel, and Egypt – hence that of a highly-contested and dynamic geopolitical realm stretching all the way from the Black Sea to the Persian Gulf to the Suez Canal. Therefore, it serves as a valuable strategic asset and a military springboard in the heart of the Greater Middle East (Trenin, 2016a).

Secondly, the Russian Federation of today is completely deprived of anything resembling the strategic perimeter, or buffer zone, that its predecessor once enjoyed via the Warsaw Pact and the socialist republics surrounding the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Therefore, there are no natural boundaries or strategic counterweights at its disposal to prevent the deployment of advanced military equipment of a highly deterrent character – such as missile shields and electronic surveillance systems – by NATO in places as close to the south-western edge of Russia proper as the Caucasus or the Caspian Basin (Kreutz, 2007, pp. 149-150); which were together referred by Yevgeny Primakov himself as "Russia's 'soft underbelly'" (Kreutz, 2007, p. 149). Against such a backdrop, Syria qualifies as one of Russia's last remaining bastions for direct power projection throughout its extended southern periphery, obliging Russia to consider its military presence in that country as an integral part of a long-term strategic vision.

Neither has the constant threat of maritime containment at the hands of NATO allies done any good to alleviate Russian concerns about the prospect of being encircled by a hostile coalition. It is no secret that Anglo-American geopolitical schemes pertaining to Russia have traditionally been centered around the idea of depriving the almost-landlocked 'heartland' from any blue-water outlets. The fact that the Russian Federation has restricted access to warm seas renders its rights to the strategically-located naval base at the Syrian port city of Tartus indispensable. As the Baltic provinces and Ukraine were lost with the disintegration of the Soviet

Union, Russia was largely deprived of access to open seas and oceans, which would have otherwise allowed it to exercise a greater degree of political, military, and economic influence across the entire Eurasian landmass. That is why Russia's southern opening through Syria has gained even further significance in the post-Cold War era.

Thirdly, Moscow has no better alternatives than playing the Syrian card if it wants to reclaim great power status. For that matter, Moscow needs to honor its promises to a long-time ally like Damascus, for it also sets a clear precedent as regards Moscow's lasting prospects for offering a sufficient degree of patronage to other friendly regimes that are ostracized from the Western-led international system just as during the Cold War era. Russian primacy in Syria has to be retained at all costs if a multipolar world order is to be established at the end of the day. Otherwise, the advantage in the strategic rivalry on the larger global chessboard may irreversibly tilt towards the West. In this vein, Russia can also leverage its maneuvers in and around Syria to extort political concessions from the West or balance perceived "intrusions" on the latter's part in other "fronts" like Ukraine and the Caucasus. In the past few years, the Syrian leverage has helped boost Russia's negotiating position when countered with the specter of further NATO installations in the Baltic region or even heavier economic sanctions on various occasions.

Fourthly, a potentially fatal combination of geographic proximity and historical links between Russia and the Greater Middle East leaves the former no choice but to fight Western attempts to eradicate even the last few remnants of Russian presence in this region. There are over 16 million Russian citizens of Muslim background, while Russia hosts millions of migrant workers from the Muslim countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Malashenko, 2014c). Many of

these people have familial, cultural, ethnic, or ideological links with the Arab world that date back to earlier centuries (Alikberov, 2013; Baklanov et al., 2013). Today, Russia's stability within its borders is at stake due to the widespread turmoil right next to its southwestern frontier and waves of extremism that it engenders. Islamist factions that have been sprawling in Syria are suspected of posing the gravest danger here. The Kremlin fears of the infiltration of jihadists and radical preachers into the Northern Caucasus and Central Asia from the Middle East, in which case a repetition of the violent Chechnian episode of the 1990s and early 2000s may be inevitable (Trenin, 2016b).

Last but not least, the ramifications of Middle Eastern developments on its economy and energy security also matter for Russia. Defense industry is by far the most advanced field of manufacturing and a major source of hard currency earnings for the Russian state. And in 2015, as much as 36 percent of Russian arms sales involved Middle Eastern partners. The region ranked second only after Asia – the cumulative demand of which accounted for 42 percent of Russian arms sales for the year (Trenin, 2016a). As far as energy security is concerned; natural gas and oil exports continue to constitute the main source of government revenue for Moscow. However, these fossil fuels are bought and sold in dollars across the world, and they are priced on the global market. Therefore, Russia feels obliged to interfere in the political, diplomatic, and economic processes by which hydrocarbon prices are indirectly determined, while checking closely the fluctuations in supply and demand. And the Middle East hosts some of the largest producers of oil (like Saudi Arabia) and natural gas (like Iran and Qatar) in the world. On top of that; Russian energy corporations like Rosatom, Lukoil, and Gazprom have substantial investments in a variety of regional countries from Algeria to Iraq (Trenin, 2016a).

All in all, Moscow's assessment of its stakes in Syria confirms the realist conviction that the course of Russo-Syrian relations has been determined by a consistent set of geopolitical parameters since the early stages of the Cold War. In fact, the origin of some of these parameters can probably be traced as far back as to the Tsarist era. Unlike the case for Washington or other Western capitals, any deterioration in the Middle Eastern situation continues to be regarded as of existential value in the eyes of Moscow. Confronted by the specter of perceived Western encroachments on its already-curtailed presence across the Greater Middle East, Russia has reasserted itself as a key actor in regional affairs through a series of consistent strategic maneuvers in Syria.

7.1 History repeating itself?

At first glance, the course of events as have unfolded in Syria look as if some version of the Cold War pattern is repeating itself on the larger Middle Eastern stage. Back in the 1960s and early 1970s,

> the Soviet Union became a leading Middle East power because it was militarily strong and geographically close . . . With the West in retreat, the Middle East became a power vacuum, bound to be filled by the most powerful neighbor. (Laqueur, 1969, p. 186)

It should be clear by now that Russia is not destined to collapse or fade into geopolitical obscurity as liberal circles in the West had confidently and persistently predicted for the better part of the two decades following the demise of the Soviet Union. Taken altogether, the years between 1991 and early 2010s seem to correspond to an exceptional and temporary episode in the life of 'Russian statehood' as well as the natural flow of history. Russia will remain a game-maker in the region and beyond, due to its extremely favorable geopolitical standing and resource

endowment. Now with three military bases in Syria, it will retain its influence over the region, and "the Middle East will be a lasting feature of Moscow's foreign policy" (Kreutz, 2007, p. 152).

That said, Russia will most probably refrain from an all-out confrontation with NATO over Syria or any other Middle Eastern dispute, just like it did throughout the Cold War era – i.e. at the height of its power. Even then, "the USSR's presence in the Middle East" did not pose more than "a marginal threat to US interests there" (McLaurin, 1975, p. 149) and was marked by "a great deal of self-restraint in all respects." Despite its overt backing of "the Arabs' and to a lesser extent the Palestinian resistance's short-run political aims," the Kremlin "has never espoused elimination of Israel or the use of terrorism" (McLaurin, 1975, p. 148). That is essentially because of the limited scope and secondary importance of Russian objectives pertaining to the Middle East, which, for the most part, continues to lag behind Central Asia, the Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and probably East Asia in Moscow's strategic calculations. Russia has traditionally harbored no colonial ambitions over any portion of the Arab world. As for Syria, there has never emerged a chance or willingness on the part of Russian decision-makers to convert it into a satellite state as exemplified in the case of the Eastern Bloc countries throughout the Cold War. Syrian territories are neither contiguous to historical Russian holdings nor ascribed inherent value for lying on the outer edge of the geopolitical 'heartland' (the way the Turkish Straits or Transcaucasia do). In that sense, Syria is neither Ukraine, nor Georgia, nor part of the 'Northern Tier' of Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan.

On top of it all, the Cold War and the confrontational circumstances it has engendered within a bipolar power structure are history by now. Today, Russia has neither the will nor the means to challenge deeply-entrenched Western and Israeli

positions in the region. For that matter, Syria's allegiance to Russia is a key strategic asset for both; but by no means of an offensive nature. Indeed, the alliance in question looks as one motivated by genuinely defensive urges, a "marriage of convenience" so to speak, in the face of Western policies of containment targeting Russia's 'near abroad'. For that matter, "were it not for the civil war and foreign interference in Syria, Russian policy towards this country would have not become as activist" (Zviagelskaya, 2015). Moscow is far from willing to undertake all the responsibility of being a regional hegemon (Kortunov, 2016b), or anything that exceeds beyond the scope of maintaining its strategic relevance and political leverage *vis-à-vis* the West or any other powerful actors operating on the regional scene (Kortunov, 2016a). Russia lacks the resources to sustain long-term military operations as demonstrated in its latest military operation in Syria, and its fragile economy cannot afford being embroiled in a chronic regional conflict anyway. Russian forces are thinly stretched along a chain of diverse countries spanning all the way between the Baltic region and Tajikistan, where Syria constitutes the weakest link.

Counter-intuitively, one can even suspect a coincidence of strategic interests at a fundamental level between Russia and the US under current circumstances. The two leading extra-regional powers in the Syrian conflict may have no one but each other to engage in the absence of any capable or reliable partner to fill the void created by the US withdrawal from the region. As Washington retires into its shell and the best part of American troops are pulled back from Iraq and Afghanistan, the resulting power vacuum can be expected to bring about even further disintegration and destruction to the region. After years of all-out involvement across the Middle East, America leaves behind a mess that it assumes no responsibility of cleaning up.

The equilibrium of authoritarian regimes that had hitherto managed to sustain a certain degree of stability is shattered into pieces, leaving its place to a plethora of dysfunctional states, fundamentalist groups, criminal networks, and other destructive forces feeding on chaos (Kortunov, 2016a). Although the implications of the current turmoil in the region for US national security seem less proximate and serious today, Washington may not be able to avoid being engulfed in yet additional military adventures and pay even greater costs in the future in order to maintain its global alliances and security at home.

On the other hand, none of the regional players, which are plenty in number and now include states along with numerous non-state actors, seem capable of maintaining order and mediating conflicts in the absence of a long-time hegemon like the US The foreign policy orientations and actions of even established powers like Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia are mostly out of sync. Nascent balances between regional states that used to exist have yielded their place to an extremely volatile web of *ad hoc* coalitions that are randomly formed and broken on the slippery slope of intra-national hostilities and civil wars. While major states in the region are mostly distracted – if not entirely incapacitated – by persistent domestic instability, the central administrations in countries like Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon are artificially kept on their feet through external support, thus unable to create their own working institutions.

To make matters worse, the spiral of violence that has swamped in almost all regional actors to varying degrees will continue to get worse so long as the destabilizing stalemate in Syria persists. As clearly illustrated by the non-compromising attitudes of Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran, Iraq, and others towards the Syrian Civil War; even major states in the region tend to benefit – if only in the

short-run – from the prolongation of conflict as the mounting antagonisms between them have already turned the Syrian imbroglio into a zero-sum game that none can afford to leave without total victory. Above all, the cutthroat archrivals in Riyadh and Tehran have every tactical incentive to derail ceasefire negotiations or any peace process what-so-ever, in turn depleting the political and diplomatic capital of Moscow and Washington.

In order to avoid being taken hostage by the actions of their shrewd and warlike partners on the ground – which, apparently, cannot see the forest from the trees – the US and Russia need to convince and exert pressure on their own clients to make mutual concessions. For Russia, this would help curb extremism by stabilizing the situation in Syria, while both great powers have an interest in balancing Saudi Arabia and Iran. Such a great power consensus will allow the US to discipline Israel's reckless behavior that continues to put the former in an awkward position in its dealings with any Muslim state. And as indicated by the potential strategic repercussions of alarming incidents like the shooting down of a Russian military jet along Syria's long border with Turkey in November 2015, prolonged deadlock in Syria renders frictions between Russia and NATO even riskier than the Cold War situation (Kortunov, 2016a), when both the constellation of regional players and their specific radius of action were strictly supervised by Moscow and Washington.

Time is ticking away, therefore major actors on both sides of the conflict in Syria need to agree at least on the fundamentals of a lasting Middle Eastern equilibrium before it is too late for us all. To find the least common denominator in the Middle East, Washington and Moscow, i.e. the leaders of the two warring "camps" in Syria, should first ensure undisrupted communication between their top political leadership and then agree on the principles of closer engagement between

their foreign policy and military establishments (Timofeev, 2016). Such an agreement should rest on an overall consensus on the regional balance of power and respect for the core national interests of both the great powers and major regional actors involved. The two extra-regional powers in Moscow and Washington can start with taking parallel steps in certain fields which will be limited to cooperation on a tactical basis. Such an endeavor is essential for the gradual narrowing-down of the grey area in international relations on the Middle Eastern stage, both geographically and in terms of the rules of the game (Suslov, 2016). It is the only way to add much-needed predictability to the trajectory of the multitude of inter-locking regional conflicts at hand (Timofeev, 2016).

To sum up, international crises in the Middle East need to be addressed collectively. And despite the differences in their strategic objectives and priorities, Washington and Moscow have overlapping interests, particularly in the resolution of the Syrian and the Arab-Israeli conflicts. No doubt quarrels and disputes will continue to trouble inter-state relations to a certain degree, as one cannot expect great powers to dovetail on all major geopolitical issues. However, unlike the case with the competition between regional powers, Middle Eastern disputes do not entail a zero-sum game between extra-regional powers like the US, the EU, and Russia; which have a major stake in maintaining stability in this part of the world. Competition and cooperation can go hand-in-hand as in the Cold War era, with even better chances of success due to Russia's significantly reduced power and the absence of overt ideological confrontation between the two antagonistic coalitions fighting over Syria's future shape.

In this respect, balance of power politics is for the best interest of all actors involved in the current Syrian crisis, and the only viable way to assure sustained

regional peace that has stood the test of history. As American hegemony is effectively over; Washington needs to come to terms with Moscow's redeemed capacity as a great power that has an equal say in Middle Eastern affairs. No sooner than the great powers agree on the nature of the reality of power relations can a system based on the balance of power be established – and occasionally adjusted – in accordance with this underlying reality. And while the world is no longer bipolar, neither is it unipolar. Moscow's insistence that Washington renounces unilateralism cannot be put aside as mere propaganda but indeed signifies a willingness on the former's part to work together on equitable terms in pursuit of mutual gains against shared enemies. While the US will continue to enjoy a unique position as *primus inter pares* due to its matchless military might and exceptional legacy as the sole world hegemon that had yet to emerge in history, it can no longer afford turning a deaf ear to Russian demands in Syria – or anywhere else across the Eurasian landmass for that matter.

One does not have to seek Cold War precedents – as this study did in a painstaking effort to shed light upon the greater picture – to find examples of fruitful cooperation in the Middle Eastern arena between Washington and Moscow. Indeed, the two capitals are familiar with each other's contemporary interests and ways of behavior. They have proven to be perfectly capable of mutual accommodation, and experienced for themselves the practical viability of collaboration on vital issues of global concern in recent years. Moscow has emerged as a reliable partner in the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons in 2013-2014, brokering ceasefires in Syria twice in 2016, and it had been successfully engaged in constructive dialogue with the other P5+1 countries (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council in addition to Germany) on containing Iran's nuclear ambitions. A final deal on the

Iranian nuclear program was sealed in July 2015, resulting in the gradual lifting of extensive economic sanctions on this *de facto* Russian ally. Likewise, Russia has repeatedly demonstrated its good faith by pushing for inter-Syrian reconciliation at each stage in the conflict – even when Assad's forces had the upper hand. All these instances attest to the strategic potential of great power cooperation in the post-Cold War era (Ivanov, 2015).

Taking cognizance of Russia's enthusiasm for reaching compromises with the West under the roof of the UN Security Council in various instances from the military intervention in Libya to the imposition of sanctions on Iran, there is reason to be optimistic about the prospect of multilateral collaboration among the great powers of the world along the same lines. The current Russian leadership can be accused of many "vices" like widespread corruption, human rights violations, or habitual anti-democratic practices. But no objective observer can blame it of provoking international conflicts in the first place, or ideological adventurism outside its borders – at least in the Greater Middle East. Having refined centuries of experience in global geopolitics and diplomacy, the foreign policy as pursued by successive administrations under Vladimir Putin shines out for its strictly realist predisposition, conservative and cold-minded dealing with multiple crises, overall consistency, and pragmatic outlook (Trenin, 2016a). These attributes stand in stark contrast to the tendencies and actions of all the other actors that are currently operating in the Middle Eastern arena. Unlike the latter group of actors – which include the US – Russia does not have a taste for exaggerated ambitions or flying into the face of danger with ideological fervor.

7.2 Time for a wake-up call

Notwithstanding its tremendous accuracy in accounting for the various dynamics of Russo-Syrian relations and the imbalance of power that fuels inter-state conflicts on the Greater Middle Eastern arena, the realist mind frame suffers from some fatal shortcomings. Such an inability to bring satisfying explanations to certain phenomena that have begun to occupy a growing portion of the international agenda in recent years is particularly the case when it comes to making sense of the current situation in various parts of the Greater Middle East, where the fundamental unit of analysis of the realist paradigm – i.e. states in the conventional manner of the term – are almost completely out of the picture. The most salient example of such novel phenomena are *al-Qaeda* and ISIS, which pose a way greater challenge to global peace and security than did any other terrorist organization that the world had to grapple with until early twenty-first century. With radical Islamist ideology thought to be embraced by approximately 63 million sympathizers across the Muslim world today and such terrorist groups still in control of various parts of not only Syria and Iraq but also Afghanistan, Egypt, and Libya (Suchkov, 2016a); it is not only the West but also Russia that is faced with the task of upgrading its conventional worldview.

As the likes of ISIS gain ground and fill the vortex left behind by failing states, the entire state system in the Middle East is about to degenerate into chaos. National borders are beginning to lose their meaning due to prolonged turmoil across the region that involve intra-national blood feuds and recurrent stalemates between numerous warring groups on both sides of these borders. The danger here does not only concern the people of the Middle East, as horribly demonstrated by the increasing frequency and unspeakable violence of terrorist attacks targeted at civilians across Europe and the US The demise of the nation-state, or any form of

central government for that matter, can spread like an epidemic to create its own momentum, threatening the US as well as Europe and Russia. Chaos itself, by definition, is unmanageable and its progression in the Middle East harbors a real risk of triggering a worldwide systemic crisis (Ivanov, 2015). As Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of State of the US and legendary statesman, reportedly remarked on February 4 in the Yevgeny Primakov Foreign Policy Cooperation Center in Moscow; the deterioration of the Middle Eastern situation has the potential to engender dire repercussions for the structure of international relations and world (dis)order at large (Naumkin, 2016a) – thus jeopardizing the validity of fundamental concepts we take for granted like the modern state, law and order, and even civilization itself (Zviagelskaya, 2015).

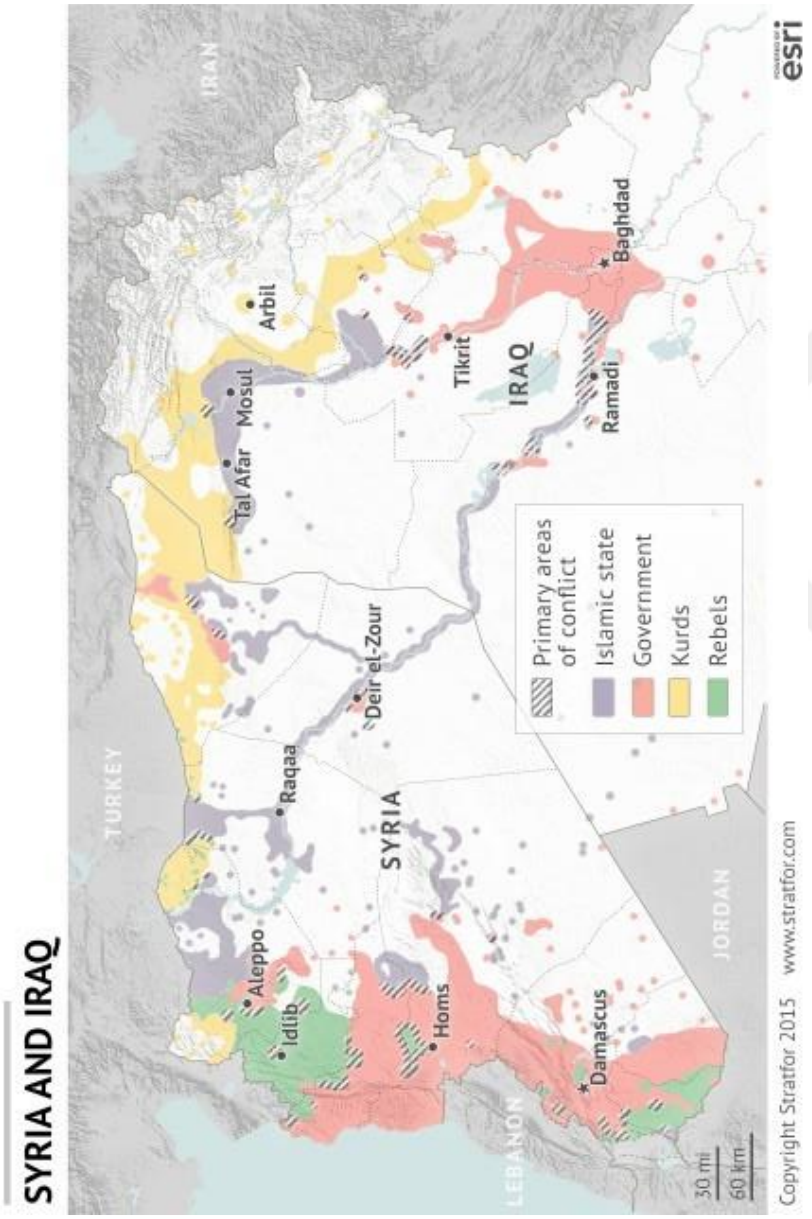
Against such a backdrop, the West needs to recover from its myopic obsession with Russia, which is a haunting legacy of the Cold War era, in favor of an unbiased and realistic conception of the emerging global situation. What such a refreshed mindset entails, before anything else, is a focus on the imminent and existential threats that not only confront NATO allies but endanger the very pillars of the larger international system. This thesis has attempted to offer a cross-section of the multi-dimensional and deeply-interwoven crises across the former Soviet realm and the Greater Middle East, particularly that of the ongoing war in Syria, as seen from the historically-grounded angle of the Kremlin. As such, it is the sincere wish of the author to draw attention on the blatant fact that Russia is far from being the main challenge here – indeed it comprises a key component of any feasible solution that one can possibly conceive of at this point in time. The dangerously-disoriented proponents of liberal interventionism must at last awaken to the discomforting reality surrounding us. Further insistence on wishful thinking that we are marching towards

a uniformly democratic and Western-centric world order, into which Russia can barely fit as a subjugated old-time enemy, can have fatal consequences for humanity at large.

At the time of this writing, there is a good chance that the Kremlin and the White House will eventually converge on an ideologically-discharged *modus vivendi* as signaled by the personal chemistry between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, who is to be inaugurated as the new US President in January 2017. The US Presidential Elections of November 2016 have brought the controversial Republican candidate to power instead of his rival, the notoriously-hawkish Hillary Clinton, who is extremely unpopular in Moscow due to her perceived role as the main architect of the anti-Russian and interventionist foreign policy that marked the first term of President Barack Obama. As a matter of fact, it was Clinton's misguided approach to the crises in Libya and Syria, in her capacity as the former Secretary of State, that Russia detests the most (Suslov, 2016). However, after a quarter of a century since the end of the Cold War, Washington's shifting attitude toward the events in Syria and the larger region does not only offer a ticket for the Western world out of the geopolitical mess that high-handed policies on its part had resulted in; but also holds the promise of a realistic, inclusive, and lasting Middle Eastern order based, before anything else, on the balance of power between Russia and the US at a global level. Ruin this opportunity, and the world may not be lucky enough to be offered yet another.

APPENDIX A

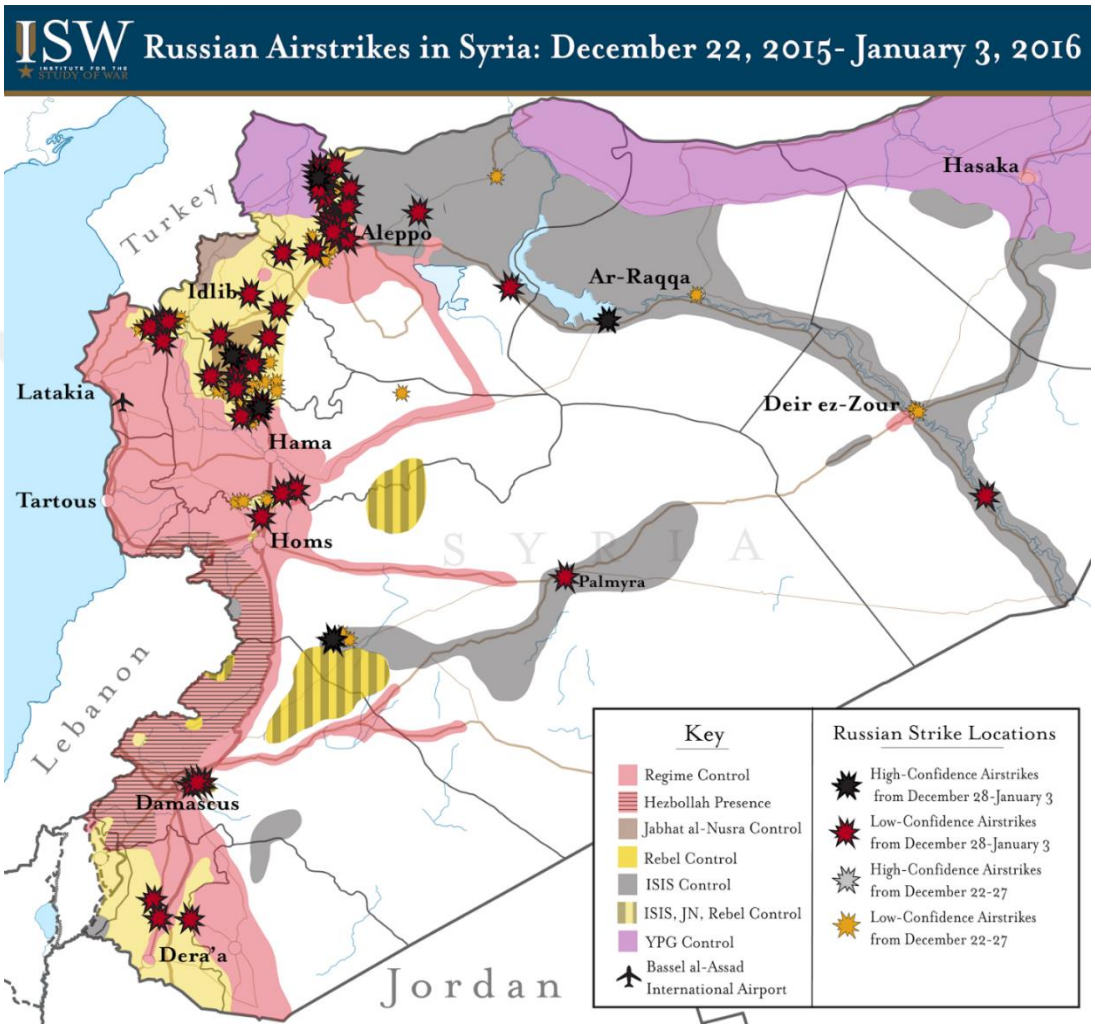
THE EXTENT OF ISIS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA BY 2015



Source: STRATFOR, 2015

APPENDIX B

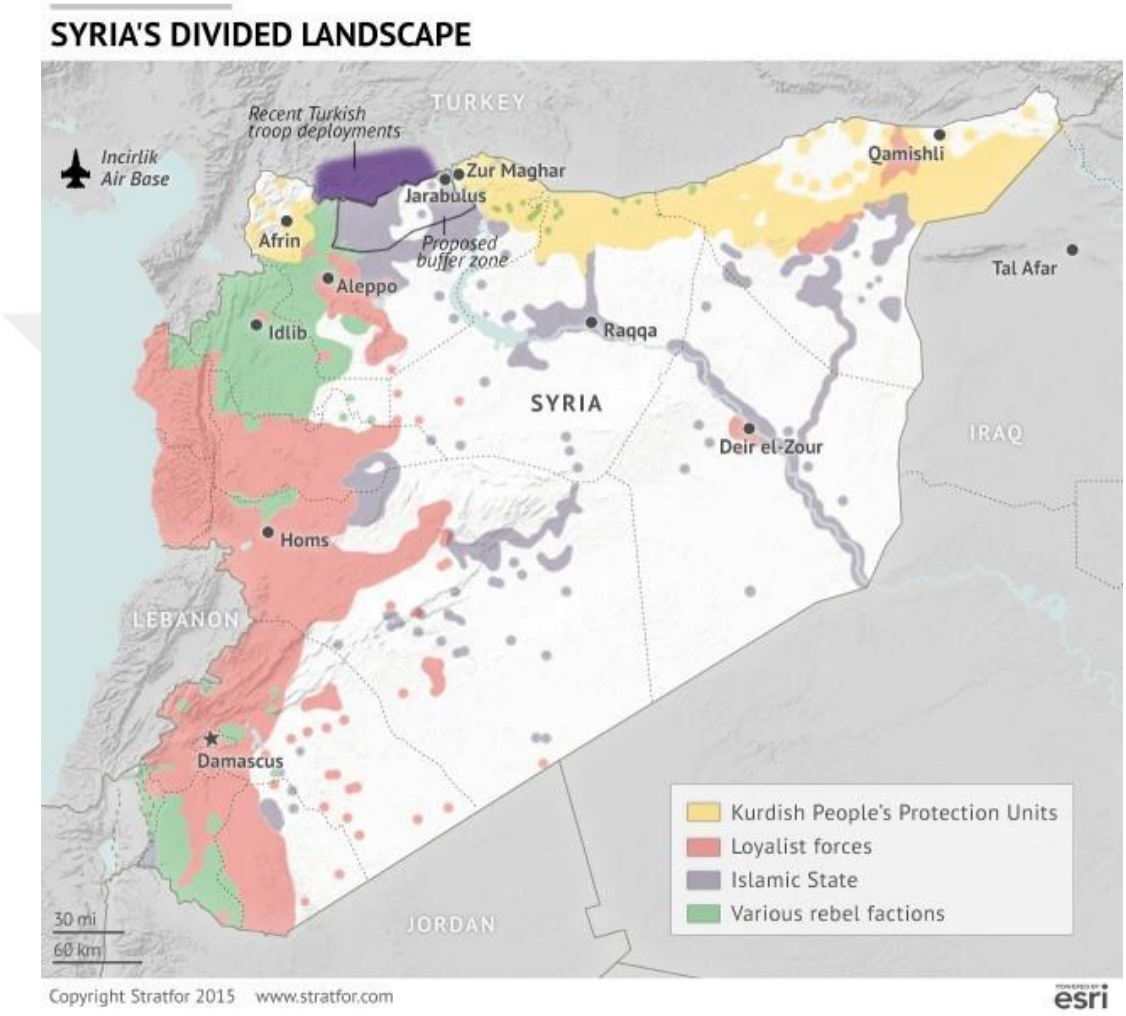
THE GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF RUSSIAN AIRSTRIKES IN SYRIA



Source: Institute for the Study of War, 2016

APPENDIX C

TERRITORIAL HOLDINGS OF WARRING PARTIES INSIDE SYRIA



Source: STRATFOR, 2015

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