

RUSSIA'S RECENT MIDDLE EAST ENGAGEMENTS: HITTING MULTIPLE BIRDS WITH A SINGLE STONE

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ABSTRACT

During the early post-Cold War period, the global order witnessed a significant shift, with Western liberal democracy emerging as the predominant force. However, this ascent of the United States in pursuit of global dominance gave rise to a Security Dilemma, fostering the emergence of alternative powers in various regions worldwide. Among these, Russia has played a prominent role, notably in the Middle East. This study seeks to examine Russia's historical and contemporary objectives in the Middle East, analyzing its political, economic, and security pursuits. Through the lens of the "Security Dilemma," the article underscores Russia's transformation into a potent regional counterbalance to Western influence in various respects. The article concludes that the sustainability of Russia's gains depends on the fluid Middle East landscape, the continuation of Putin's leadership, and the influence of potential Western sanctions.

Keywords: Security Dilemma, Russian Middle Eastern Policy, Arab Spring, Western Security System, Energy Equation, Russian Arms Industry.

JEL Codes: F50, F52, F54.

1. INTRODUCTION

After the end of the Cold War, some social scientists declared that liberal democracy had achieved a definite victory over the ideological competition that had lasted for more than half a century between the East and the West. Liberal thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama, attributing unique importance to the ideological triumph of liberal democracy, described it as the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1989: 3). The victory of Western liberal democracy presented this ideology as a value to be achieved in many regions of the world and reflected it as an “uncontested” value. In parallel, during this period, with silent approval, the mission of shaping world politics was given to the United States of America (USA), the hegemonic power that claimed to represent liberal democracy. Within the framework of this approval, the USA began to pursue policies that prioritized its interests and neoliberal values in areas from the Far East to Europe, from Eurasia to the Pacific, and from the Middle East to the Caucasus, without encountering a global challenge at first.

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Makale Geçmişi/Article History

Başvuru Tarihi / Date of Application : 7 Kasım / November 2023

138

Düzelme Tarihi / Revision Date : 5 Mart / March 2024

Kabul Tarihi / Acceptance Date : 11 Mart / March 2024

Araştırma Makalesi/Research Article

Maximizing its hegemonic power and controlling world politics, the USA prompted several supranational or transnational players to partially contest and counterbalance it in specific regions. The emergence of China in the Pacific and the Far East, the European Union in Europe, and Russia in the Caucasus, Eurasia, and the Middle East as competing actors challenging the US policies in these regions, led the USA to revise its policies. In other words, this new situation forced the USA to take regional and "new" global actors into account while formulating policies for these regions.

In the Middle East, the US strong military involvement and invasion strategies, which are often driven by its confidence as the world's top power, tended to be one-sided and excluded local players. This led some Middle Eastern countries to see Russia as an alternative power to the USA, viewing it as a successor to the Soviet Union. As a result, countries in the Middle East that felt threatened by US political, economic, and military actions or had trust issues with the USA started to consider Russia as a global counterbalance to the United States. This perception has elevated Russia's role as a major player in the Middle East, allowing it to expand its influence in the region over the past decade.

This study focuses on the gains of Russia, an important international actor in the recent dramatic developments in the Middle East. Through analyzing Russia's historical and conjectural political, economic, and security objectives, the study seeks to evaluate the extent to which Russia has achieved its goals, particularly through its recent engagements in the region within the framework of "Security Dilemma" conceptualization, in response to the power maximization of the United States. The USA began to maximize its power as an unrivaled hegemonic force in various regions of the world, particularly after the end of the Cold War. Putin's Russia emerged as a strong anti-American force in the Middle East subsystem, which can be considered a response to the US power-focused policies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The studies regarding Russia's recent policies in the Middle East provide valuable insights to a significant extent. They seek to explain the fundamental motivations behind these policies by examining them from various perspectives and analyzing Russian behavior within the context of various theories. Ultimately, while these studies emphasize different aspects, they converge on the idea that Russia is rising or, at the very least, is making deliberate efforts to compete with the USA in the Middle East.

In his 2020 research, Babak analyzes Russia's actions in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, since the end of the Cold War. He argues that Russia's involvement in the region is mainly driven by geopolitical concerns due to perceived threats, like instability and terrorism. He draws from two theories, (neo-) realism and constructivism to provide a comprehensive understanding of Russia's role in the Middle East (Babak, 2020).

Bahgat analyzes the historical and evolving dynamics of Russian influence and presence in the Middle East, with a focus on economic and political drivers. He seeks to examine why Russia and

Middle Eastern countries want strong connections and how they view each other. He also analyzes how energy deals and arms sales help them achieve their goals. Lastly, He discusses how Russia's increased presence in the Middle East might affect the United States' interests in the region (Bahgat, 2021).

Wilhelmson's analysis explores the transformation of Russian foreign policy within the Syrian context. He argues that Russia firstly adopted a more pragmatic and cooperative approach towards the West. However, as a result of negative portrayals in Western media, Russia shifted its stance, positioning itself as an alternative to the USA in the region. This change in policy was further motivated by Russia's pursuit of recognition as a significant global player, with a particular emphasis on gaining acknowledgment from the USA (Wilhelmson, 2019).

Tekir explores several motivations behind Russia's engagement in Libya. In addition to countering the influence of the USA in the region and becoming a significant global power, he suggests that Russia's involvement in Libya, primarily through a private military company known as Wagner, is driven by the desire to protect its standing and partly compensating for the economic losses it suffered following Gaddafi's downfall. To realize these goals, he argues that Russia backs General Haftar to bolster its stance at the negotiation table (Tekir, 2020).

Finally, Issaev stresses the transformation of Russia from ideological positions to a pragmatic position in the post-Cold War era. He argues that Russia gradually became a conflict resolver in the region, and starting from early 2010s, Russia was challenged by the USA in many respects (Issaev, 2023).

3. NEOREALISM AND SECURITY DILEMMA

Neorealist International Relations theory emerged in the 20th century and was pioneered by Kenneth Waltz. The theory posits that state behavior, even after the Cold War, is largely linked to the anarchic structure of the international system (Waltz, 2000: 5). The theory argues that states prioritize their own security within self-help system. To achieve this goal, states must rely on their own capacities. The required power to reach this capacity must be sufficiently deterrent for enemies. However, accumulating too much power can lead to negative consequences.

One of the significant consequences within the realm of neorealist perspective of international relations is known as "Security Dilemma". This concept, which was coined by John Herz, argues that states, driven by mutual distrust, engage in a constant arms race and seek to maximize their power to address security concerns. This behavior sets in a vicious circle over time (Herz, 1950: 5). In a similar vein, Jervis (1978: 169) argues that "Security Dilemma" comes to the forefront when a state accumulates an excessive amount of power, thus jeopardizing the security of other states within the anarchic framework of international system. Consequently, a critical perspective emerges concerning both the scarcity and excessive pursuit of power. In other words, it is essential for states to possess an

acceptable amount of power for security purposes (Waltz, 1988: 616). While inadequate power leaves them susceptible to potential attacks by other states, excessive power accumulation can trigger a counter-response from other states, which may result in conflicts, instability, and overall atmosphere of insecurity.

Ultimately, an excessive buildup power to secure interests in the anarchic international system can provoke fear and insecurity among other states, which can result in a destructive cycle of arms races, threatening global security. In this regard, neorealist theory not only provides a conceptual framework for comprehending why states act in particular ways and how they react to changes in the global order, but it also emphasizes the significance of power as a factor in this situation, particularly in the setting of an anarchic international system.

In this regard, the US rapid rise to power in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War left Russia feeling increasingly insecure, leading to a security dilemma. Concerned about the expanding influence of the USA and its sole hegemony, Russia began to challenge the USA in various parts of the world, one of which was the Middle East, particularly after the Arab Spring. This region was well-suited for such a challenge because it still had traditional Russian allies who identified themselves as anti-US. Additionally, some regional states sought an alternative "major power" in the region to help balance the policies of the USA to some extent.

4. A GENERAL VIEW OF PUTIN'S RUSSIA'S POLICY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST

In the post-Cold War era, Russia faced many challenges as it struggled to find its place in the world after the collapse of the Soviet Union. One of the key concerns was to maintain its status as a global power, particularly in the face of the rise of the USA as the sole superpower. During Putin's initial presidency, Russia adopted a foreign policy which was focused on replacing the Soviet Union in the neighboring states and other parts of the world, including the Middle East. However, concrete policies in this regard were not executed until later in Putin's tenure, after he had consolidated his power.

No sooner had Putin started to consolidate the power inside Russia than Russia began to emerge as the primary representative of the anti-Western bloc in the Middle East, despite significant odds. The favorable reception of local actors to an alternative to the United States in the region played an important role in this endorsement. Prior to Arab Spring, Russia's growing influence in the region had significant consequences, such as countering US influence, generating revenue from selling military equipment to the region, and achieving dominance in global energy market by incorporating the region's energy market by incorporating the region's energy resources into its foreign policy objectives (Kemaloğlu, 2012: 7).

Russia's policies and its success in achieving some of the above-mentioned objectives were greatly aided by the dramatic changes that occurred in the region before and after the Arab Spring. These

developments, which led to Russia's greater engagement in the region, prompted a great focus on attaining political focus in line with its existing objectives. The risks and instability generated in the region by the Arab Spring and its aftermath offered unique opportunities for Russia to achieve some longstanding political objectives dating back to the Tsarist era, to establish political influence, become a global challenger to US policies in the region.

Having a significant opportunity to involve in the Middle East in this period, Russia asserted its power and influence in the region. Russia's emergence as a rising power in the region was not only the result of its political objectives, but also the outcome of some regional countries' interest-driven policies to position Russia as an alternative to the United States. During this period, certain monarchies and governments in the region, traditionally backed by the USA, began to approach Russia as a potential alternative, albeit not entirely integrated. This tendency stemmed from concerns that they might not get the desired level of US support in the event of internal uprisings or rebellions.

Regarding Russia's relations with states other than Syria and Libya, its relationship with Saudi Arabia is of significant importance, as it demonstrates Saudi Arabia's move towards diversifying from its longstanding alliance with the USA to some extent. In this context, during the Arab Spring, the Saudi leadership did not hesitate to express its disappointment with the actions of the Obama administration in the Middle East. Similarly, Riyadh actively pursued close relations with Russia in an effort to seek a resolution for the crisis in Yemen (Issaev, 2021, p. 433).

Taking into account the traditionally pro-Russian countries in the region, all of these dynamics have created a wide range of maneuverability for Russia in response to the security dilemma caused by the US power maximization in the region. Ultimately, Russia has consolidated its power and demonstrated that it was a serious alternative to Western values and bloc in the Middle East through a series of new political, and military engagements that capitalize on the regional dynamics and global engagement towards the region.

5. RUSSIA'S GAINS IN THE MIDDLE EAST THROUGH RECENT ENGAGEMENTS

After the Soviet Union collapsed, there were debates about whether Russia still held a major global role. In response to these discussions, Boris Yeltsin, the then-Russian leader, stated that "Russia is a great power due to its history, geographical location, and material and spiritual potential" (Adomeit, 1995: 67). Yeltsin's use of this rhetoric was distinct from labeling Russia as a great power based on its sphere of influence or as the primary challenger to the Western liberal world, especially during Russia's most difficult periods. This could be seen as an acknowledgment that Russia had lost its ability to maintain the unity of the Eastern bloc and was no longer a credible alternative to the Western bloc.

However, during Putin's presidency, especially in his later terms, the term "Great Power" that Yeltsin had used began to more accurately describe Russia. It can be argued that Russia's engagement

in the Middle East following the Arab Spring played a pivotal role in solidifying Russia's power and influence on the global stage. Russia's actions in the Middle East had positive consequences for the country, going beyond the establishment of a lasting presence in the region.

It is obvious that Russian involvement in the region is largely motivated by Putin's vision for Russia. However, the security dilemma created by the US power maximization, which made Russia feel vulnerable and insecure, prompted Russia to emerge as an alternative power as well. Additionally, some regional states or actors sought a different major power to balance the USA and improve relations, further motivating Russia to challenge the USA in the Middle East. As a result, these Russian policies have produced significant results.

In this context, apart from Syria and Khalifa Haftar in Libya, the Houthis in Yemen have also shown interest in Russia (Issaev, 2021:431). Furthermore, Riyadh's efforts to strengthen its relations with Russia in order to address certain regional conflicts (Issaev,2021: 433) can be seen as an expression of the desire of some regional states to maintain Russia's involvement in the region. Another reason for considering Russia as an alternative in the region may be the concern that these states' monarchs or administrations could be left without support from the USA.

5.1. Russia as an Anti-Western Power in the Middle East

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the US engagement in the Middle East as the sole alternative upon which some monarchies and undemocratic governments relied in order to maintain their power was significantly challenged during the Arab Spring. The US policy of openly supporting uprisings against anti-Western regimes in the region, while adopting a wait-and-see approach towards revolts against autocratic allies, has created a crisis of confidence with some of its regional partners. In this context, while the USA initially refrained from supporting the protests against the longtime ally of Egypt, the Mubarak regime, it began to support the protests when it became apparent that they were succeeding. This once again confirmed that the USA would always take into account the cost-benefit calculations while shaping policies and would not fully support its Middle Eastern allies, if the administrations face a lot of internal opposition.

Such policies, to some extent, raised questions about the credibility of the United States with certain regional allies. For example, it was understandable that the USA did not support the protests in Bahrain due to its close alliance with Saudi Arabia and Iranian threat in this country, and the decision to support the uprisings in Libya and Syria was consistent with traditional US policies in the region. However, supporting the uprising in Egypt, where it was evident that Mubarak would be overthrown by Pro-Morsi factions, raised concerns that the USA might abandon its allies. This tendency led some regional states, where protests had not yet erupted but there was a potential for the emergence of revolts, to consider Russia as an alternative to the USA.

In the face of some regional countries' tendency to keep Russia in the game, Russia's approach to the developments in the region was initially in line with its traditional foreign policy, characterized by a distant and wait-and-see stance during the first years of the Arab Spring (Erenler, 2012: 187). However, the new role that some regional countries attributed to Russia in the region, particularly after protests and interventions began to spread towards Syria and this country officially invited Russia to the region, became more significant. Russia's positive response to this invitation and its active role in Syria by establishing new bases in addition to its existing ones significantly hindered direct and indirect interventions by the USA and Western countries.

As part of these proactive engagements, Russia has been a significant player in Libya, driven by a desire to assert its global power and counterbalance the USA after losing influence and contracts following Gaddafi's ouster. While mainly supporting General Haftar and maintaining official distance, Russia also engaged with other Libyan groups. These Russian actions also posed a threat to Turkey's Mediterranean interests (Tekir, 2020: 209-210).

Regarding Russian relations with Iran in this context, Russia strongly supported Iran in its disagreement with the United States, particularly regarding the nuclear deal and missile activities on several platforms including the United Nations. Russian officials defended Iran against accusations of violating UN resolutions, they worked on oil transactions with Iran, and they tried to bypass U.S. sanctions by buying Iranian oil and reselling it to other countries (Einhorn and Nephew, 2019: 17-18)

The security dilemma which triggered such Russian engagements presented Russia with an opportunity to become an alternative "Great Power" to the USA in the region, albeit with a partial deviation from its traditional policy. In addition, as a result of this proactive Russian policy in the region, the United States started to take Russia more seriously while making policies towards the Middle East. This new situation has not only made Russia an important alternative in the Middle East region but also had significant domestic policy consequences for Russia.

5.2. Power Consolidation in Russia's Domestic Politics

In the early 2010s, internal protests in Russia against Putin's second term and the "colorful revolutions" against Russian expansionism in neighboring countries led Russia to portray the US neoliberal policies as the driving force behind the protests in Russia and its surroundings. Additionally, Russia blamed the USA and Western states for inciting protests and uprisings during the Arab Spring in the Middle East. Such discourses paved the way for internal support for Putin, allowing him not only to initiate direct engagements with the immediate vicinity but also to make direct and indirect interventions in certain states in the Middle East region against the "change demands". These policies empowered Putin to safeguard allies and position himself as a more powerful figure on the political stage by breaking the influence of internal protests in Russia.

Despite all the protests, Putin's successful election in 2012 and his efforts to consolidate power in domestic politics bore fruit in the 2018 elections. During this period, Russia's foreign policy towards the Middle East, which can be considered as a deviation from traditional Russian foreign policy, played an important role in the consolidation of power around Putin. In the special context of the Syrian crisis in the early 2010s, Russian decision-makers who went beyond traditional Russian foreign policy patterns contributed to the consolidation of power in Russian domestic politics by becoming more engaged in the region. These engagements not only gave Putin the opportunity to realize Russian "lebensraum" in the close vicinity in the Ukraine and Crimea events, but also led Russia to emerge as a global power that challenges Western security systems, arms industry, and energy policies in the Middle East.

5.3. A Breach in the Western Security System

After the Soviet Union collapsed, NATO's new mission in the post-Cold War era aimed to ensure the sustainability of a Western security system by expanding its influence to different regions, particularly by integrating former Eastern bloc countries. Incorporating these new areas into the NATO structure enabled the organization to play a role as a conflict resolution mechanism in intra-state conflicts and to become an effective power in traditional Russian spheres of influence. This new mission and function of the NATO led Russia to take various measures which included military-based deterrent policies as well.

In this regard, Russia's aggressive attitude in Eastern Europe, destabilizing Ukraine and Georgia by occupying certain regions, its activities against Western allies in some Baltic countries, cyberattacks and social media campaigns against Western democracies and elections can be evaluated as challenging and deterrent Russian policies (Burns and Lute, 2019). The most effective aspect of the deterrent policies, primarily presented in a military framework and openly displayed is the strategic alliance that Russia has formed with Turkey, a NATO country, in the context of shared interests through soft power policies for many years, which can also be considered a breach in the Western security system.

Turkey argued that its deal with Russia for the S-400 air defense system was a response to the US administrations' decision not to provide Turkey with the Patriot air defense system under terms similar to what other allies like the Netherlands and Spain received (Kibaroğlu, 2019: 169). This has created a unique relationship with Russia, not only preventing NATO from acting cohesively, especially in security matters involving Turkey, but also presenting a robust alternative to the Western security system. In this collaboration, Turkey's insistence on acquiring S-400 missiles, which are not compatible with NATO's existing defense systems, as a means to enhance its security and diversify its arms industry, and its joint military operations and patrols with Russia in Syria can be seen as a challenge to the Western security system.

5.4. Russia as a Peace Broker in the Middle East

The policies of the former US president Trump constituted another significant factor contributing to Russian influence in the Middle East. Aligned with the “America First” discourse, the policies of Trump administration resulted in the reduction or complete withdrawal of American military forces from various regions, creating significant gaps in the Middle East. This policy provided Russia with an opportunity to fill the power vacuum created by the USA. In response, Russia increased its military capabilities and deployed effective military equipment to the region to establish strategic bases and ultimately became an alternative power to the USA.

Leveraging the outcomes of Trump policies. Russia not only occupied the vacuum left by the USA but also initiated direct interventions in the region on political, diplomatic, economic, and military fronts. This multifaceted approach positioned Russia as a mediator in various regional conflicts and disputes, with the role of solidifying its role as a significant power in the Middle East. These policies can be perceived as an attempt to establish a “Pax Russia” as a credible alternative to the “Pax Americana” vision.

Aligned with “Pax Russia” initiative, Russia supported the Assad regime in Syria, with the help of Iran and Hezbollah, to contribute to the government's control of strategic areas (Narbone, 2017). Additionally, Russia led the Astana Conference, which brought Turkey, Iran, and warring factions in Syria together to negotiate peace talks. Furthermore, Russia's efforts to bring together some factions and the Assad regime and reconcile Turkey and the Assad regime are some other initiatives in this regard. These policies and efforts extended beyond Syria were also undertaken in some other conflict zones throughout the region.

Libya emerged as another focal point of Russia's political and military involvement, aligning with its “Peace Broker” role. In this regard, Russia offered substantial military support to Khalifa Haftar, a key player in the Libyan conflict, as he resisted the UN-backed government. Russia also deployed the Wagner paramilitary forces to bolster Haftar's efforts and sent military aircraft and a diverse range of equipment for various operations in the region (Bermudez and Katz, 2020). Remarkably, despite the ongoing Ukraine conflict, Russia has maintained its active presence in the Middle East (Cafiero and Milliken, 2022). Its increased presence and influence in the Middle East have challenged the US traditional role as a mediator in the region, which has significant implications for regional and global stability.

5.5. The Efficiency of Russian Arms Industry in the Middle East

Russia has maintained its status as a major player in the global arms export industry, consistently ranking second worldwide, just behind the USA. Nevertheless, the evolving landscape of the Middle East has brought both challenges and opportunities to Russia's arms trade. Despite some setbacks caused

mainly by the Ukrainian war, Russia still holds the second position, although its share of global arms exports dropped from 22% between 2013 and 2017 to 16% between 2018 and 2022 (Wezeman P, Gadon and Wezeman S., 2023: 2). Several factors have contributed to this decline, including restrictions on arms exports, multilateral sanctions, trade limitations, and pressure from the United States, urging countries not to acquire Russian weaponry (Wezeman et al, 2023: 5).

However, the changing dynamics in the Middle East, particularly during and after the Arab Spring, and the ongoing Syrian crisis have produced two significant results regarding the presence of Russian arms in the region. First of all, even though some regional states refrained from purchasing particular Russian armaments, particularly advanced air defense systems, due to the pressure from the USA and its allies, they started to demonstrate an interest in these sophisticated Russian weaponry systems. Secondly, Russia was able to position advanced missiles in the Middle East, potentially posing a threat to a broad geographical area, including Europe.

As a result, Russia positioned itself as the primary alternative arms supplier in direct competition with the USA in the region, especially in the domain of advanced air defense system. This positioning has made Russia an attractive option for regional states to diversify their sources of armaments. In addition, recent Russian engagements in the context of armaments have facilitated the strategic deployment of highly effective long-range missiles in Syria, and these missiles have the capability to monitor facilities not only in their immediate vicinity but also in the Mediterranean region and beyond. These all have opened up unique opportunities for Putin's Russia within the region, solidifying its role as a key player in the Middle Eastern arms market.

5.6. Realizing the Russian Dream in the Mediterranean to Some Extent

The security dilemma caused by the USA following the Cold War and afterwards, coupled with the isolationist policies adopted during the Trump administration played a significant role in enabling Russia to become a major player in global politics and establish itself as an important alternative power in the Middle East. These US policies together with Putin's vision not only allowed Russia to thrive but also gave it the opportunity to partially achieve its historical ambitions in the Mediterranean region.

Efforts to reach the Mediterranean by some Russian scholars can be traced back to the 7th century, (Kurylev and Parkhitko, 2021: 614) but it primarily began with Catherine II's transportation of some of the Russian navy from the Baltic to the Mediterranean during the 1768 Ottoman-Russian war (Kurylev and Parkhitko, 2021: 614-615). After this date, Russian engagements in the region continued for reasons such as war and alliances, and after World War II, close relations were established with some states in the region as a result of bloc policies, leading to the establishment of various Russian warships, submarines, and small military bases in the Mediterranean.

Russia, particularly during Putin's time in office, not only developed its bases in the Mediterranean basin with the unique opportunities presented by the Arab Spring, but also positioned significant weapon systems and war machines in the region. In this context, the Tartus base in Syria, which was commissioned to the Soviet Union in 1971, was leased again for 49 years and converted into an effective base with 11 warships stationed there. Additionally, the Khmeimim airbase and the Latakia listening station were made available for Russian use. All three military facilities have been protected by Russian S-300 and S-400 air defense systems (Mercouris, 2017). The last but not the least, considering the its long range, the deployment of Kinzhal hypersonic cruise missiles in Syria for naval drills (Isachenkov, 2023) was a real challenge to the West in the region. As a result, developing, functionalizing and arming strategic bases in the Mediterranean not only provided Russia with the opportunity to protect its allies and achieve its historical goals regarding the Mediterranean, but also to directly intervene in energy competition in this region.

5.7. Russian Engagements in the Middle East in the Context of Energy

The primary sector of trade between Russia and the Middle Eastern states has been energy. Russian attempts in recent years within the energy sector have been diverse, including the acquisition of a stake by the Qatari Sovereign Fund, Aramco's venture into investing in a Russian gas project, and the construction of nuclear power plants in Egypt and Turkey (Issaev, 2021: 428-429).

In addition to such interactions, Russia, which heavily depends on oil and gas revenues, has always been careful to maintain close contacts with OPEC (The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) members in the Middle East and North Africa in order to protect its economy from the negative effects of falling oil prices. In the context of minimizing the vulnerability created by its dependence on hydrocarbon revenues, Russia's diplomatic success in recent years in approaching OPEC and influencing its decisions has led to an increase in its revenues, despite the negative effects of all Western sanctions.

During the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, Russia sought to minimize the impact of Western sanctions on the financial, energy, and arms sectors, as well as to decrease the negative impact of falling oil prices in the mid-2014. To achieve these goals, Russia's relations with OPEC member countries in the Middle East, which it had developed during this period, produced positive results for Russia. In this regard, in 2016, Russia and several other countries formed an organization called OPEC+ with the help of OPEC, and they intervened in the production of oil to prevent a decline in oil prices (Nakhle, 2018: 32). As a result, Russia was able to avoid being significantly affected by the potential negative impact of Western sanctions on its economy.

In this regard, In May 2022, despite lower export volumes due to sanctions reported by the International Energy Agency, Russia's income rose as crude oil and fuel prices increased. The sanctions, aimed at penalizing Russia for its actions in Ukraine, have led to supply shortages and higher prices.

Although crude oil exports remained stable at 5.4 million barrels per day, refined product shipments dropped by 155,000 barrels per day compared to April, reaching 2.4 million barrels per day (Browning, 2022).

Another energy-related activity of Russia, which maintains close diplomatic ties with Middle Eastern countries to prevent negative effects of oil and gas prices on its economy is its efforts to participate in the energy equation in new fields in the Eastern Mediterranean. In this context, a roadmap for energy partnership was drawn up with Syria in January 2018 (Kurylev and Parkhitko, 2021: 620). Similarly, a consortium consisting of the Russian company Novatek, the French company Total, and the Italian company Eni undertook Lebanon's exploration activities in the region (Kurylev and Parkhitko, 2021: 621). These Russian initiatives concerning energy policies show that Russia is an important part of the energy equations centered on the Middle East, which also significantly affects global economies, and has the capacity to influence Western economies and global decision-making mechanisms through energy. By actively participating in the extraction of hydrocarbons from newly discovered fields in the region, Russia aims to strengthen its position in the Middle East.

6. CONCLUSION

Following the conclusion of the Cold War, Western liberal democracy emerged as the dominant force in the global order. Nevertheless, the US pursuit of worldwide dominance and the maximization of power led to a Security Dilemma. This, in turn, prompted the emergence of alternative powers to the US in different regions of the world. Russia, in particular, has deepened its involvement in the Middle East during and after the Arab Spring, primarily due to state and interstate conflicts in the region. These engagements have led to the formation of a new policy bloc under Russia's leadership, which oppose the USA since the 2010s in some respects.

The conflicts between the factions supported by the USA and Western nations and the opposing groups have provided Russia with a chance to establish itself as a significant alternative to the USA in the Middle East. This has had a significant impact on reshaping the power dynamics in the region. As an alternative power, Russia has directed its foreign policy goals in the Middle East towards replacing the Soviet Union's former role in the area, breaking the US influence to a certain extent, and positioning itself as a key player in the global energy market by incorporating the region's energy dynamics into its objectives.

Russia's achievement of these objectives can be attributed to significant shifts in the region, both prior to and following the Arab Spring, as well as the positive reception of certain local players toward an alternative to the USA. Additionally, the interests of some regional nations in positioning Russia as an alternative to the USA have played a key role. As a result, Russia's influence has been solidified, demonstrating its substantial potential as a regional alternative to Western values and alliances.

Russia's long-standing status as the world's second-largest arms exporter has faced challenges, especially in the evolving Middle East scenario. While its share of global arms exports has diminished due to various constraints, Russia's involvement in the Middle East, especially during and after the Arab Spring and the Syrian crisis, has raised the interest of some regional states in acquiring specific Russian weaponry and the deploying advanced missiles within the region. This transformation has established Russia as a prominent alternative arms supplier, following the USA, particularly in the domain of advanced air defense systems.

It's important to highlight that Russia's pragmatic interactions with certain Middle Eastern countries and factions have evolved as a result of mutual interests. Under Putin's leadership, Russia has been depicted by pro-Russian states, entities and communities as a representative of the "anti-Western bloc", and a counterbalance to the "US superpower", contributing to Russia's growing influence in the region. However, the sustainability of Russia's increasing gains in the region over the past decade depends on developments in the Middle East, Putin's continued leadership, and the persons and parties that assume power in the USA.

Though the economic and commercial sanctions put on Russia as a result of the Ukrainian War by several Western nations, particularly the US, have not yet made Putin less powerful, they have the potential to make Putin's position in power less secure and reverse Russian gains in the region. In addition, the long-term sustainability of Russia's gains in the Middle East and the balance of power in the region may also be severely impacted by the foreign policy of post-Putin Russian administrations. Regardless of the extent to which Western sanctions and post-Putin administrations may impact the outcome of Russia's current policies in the future, Russia has already challenged Western dominance, influenced regional conflicts, and raised concerns about stability and security to a certain extent through its recent interventions in the region. As Russia further solidifies its presence and continues to pursue its objectives, it is likely that the Middle East will remain a complex and contested arena, shaped by the interplay of multiple actors, influencing its future.

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Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız.

Çıkar Çatışması: Yazar çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.

Finansal Destek: Yazar bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

Teşekkür: -

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

Grant Support: The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Acknowledgement: -
