

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE GCC*

Körfez İşbirliği Konseyi'ne Yönelik Rus Dış Politikası

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Abstract

This article discusses the Russian foreign policy towards the GCC, by addressing the basics of Russian policy during the era of President Vladimir Putin, in order to restore Russia's role and active position in the international environment. This article also discusses the Russian foreign policy towards the GCC and then focuses on the most important Russian determinants towards the GCC, specifically the economic and military. The study reached a main conclusion, which is that the Russian policy towards the GCC comes in the context of the strategic goals towards the Middle East, which comes within the Russian vision of a multipolar international system through a network of alliances and relations with countries of the world and participation in them.

Keywords: Russia, Foreign policy, GCC, Economy, Military.

Öz

Makalemizde, Rusya'nın uluslararası ortamdaki rolünü ve aktif konumunu yeniden canlandırmak için Başkan Vladimir Putin döneminde Rus politikasının temellerini ele alarak Körfez İşbirliği Konseyi ülkelerine yönelik Rus dış politikasını tartışmaktadır. Bu makale ayrıca Rusya'nın Körfez İşbirliği Konseyi ülkelerine yönelik dış politikasını tartışmakta ve daha sonra Körfez İşbirliği Konseyi ülkelerine yönelik Rusya'nın en önemli belirleyicilerine, özellikle ekonomik ve askeriye odaklanmaktadır. Çalışmamızda, Rusya'nın Körfez İşbirliği Konseyi ülkelerine yönelik politikasının, Rusya'nın bir ittifaklar ve ilişkiler ağı aracılığıyla çok kutuplu bir uluslararası sistem vizyonu içinde yer alan Orta Doğu'ya yönelik stratejik hedefler bağlamında geldiği ana sonuca ulaştı.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya, Dış politika, GCC, Ekonomi, Askeri.

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INTRODUCTION

The Middle East region, and specifically the Arab Gulf region, has received great attention from the international and regional major powers since ancient times, due to its geopolitical and strategic importance. The Arab Gulf region formed an environment of competition and conflict between the major powers to impose control over it and control all political, economic, geographic and security aspects, with the aim of protecting and promoting its strategic interests, in light of the shifts in the international environment in terms of balances of power.

Recently, we note a Russian return to the Arab Gulf region through the development of relations with the GCC of the region, in line with the Russian trends aimed at ensuring the achievement and maximization of its interests, and contribute to restoring its role and status in the region and influencing the current international system, by taking advantage of the developments in the East The Middle East since September 11, 2001, and the successive developments during the Arab Spring revolutions, which resulted in the formation of international and regional alliances, as well as the emergence of new players from states and non-states, and the growing threat of terrorism. Not to mention the economic issues specifically related to energy sources (Oil and Natural Gas).

The article aims to try to understand the trends of Russian foreign policy during the era of President Putin, and its policy towards the Arab Gulf region, in light of the Russian-American competition for strategic areas of influence. The article also aims to identify the areas that Russia attaches importance toward the GCC.

The problem that the article stems from is that there is a new trend on the part of the Russian decision-maker in increasing influence and interest in toward the GCC, based on the Russian geopolitical vision, in line with its revisionist policy of the structure of the international system.

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Russia during Putin's era has increased its interference in the Middle East, and doing a more active role in the region's issues and crises (political, economic, security, etc.), as it sees that the capabilities and elements of power that it has become, making it an international power and have an advanced role in international politics and the balance of power.

The main question that the article seeks to answer is: Does Russia have a foreign policy specific toward the GCC, or is this policy part of the Russian national security concept and the new foreign policy concept? To answer this question, the article adopts the descriptive analytical method.

The research study is divided into two sections: First: Russian foreign policy under Putin, second: Russian Policy towards GCC, and third: Russian determinants with GCC.

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY UNDER PUTIN

Russian in the international community has stepped up both domestic and foreign policy, where President Vladimir Putin has succeeded in carrying out a political and economic restructuring, and this situation has taken root, especially with the arrival of Prime Minister Démetri Medvedev, who has developed the five principles known as the "Medvedev Principle":¹ Russia recognizes the primacy of the basic principles of international law, the world must be multipolar, Russia does not want to confront any other country, protecting the lives and dignity of our citizens wherever they are, there are areas where Russia enjoys privileged interests. This means developing ties and relationships and building friendly relations with countries and friends.²

¹ Maryam Yaqoub, "The Impact of the Russian Rise on Russian-American Relations During the "Putin and Obama" Era", *Democratic Arab Center for Strategic, Political and Economic Studies*, <https://democraticac.de/?p=35126>, (Date of Accession: 29.10.2021).

² "The Medvedev Doctrine and American Strategy", *Startfor World View*, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/medvedev-doctrine-and-american-strategy>, (Date of Accession: 29.10.2021).

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Russia tried to follow a new policy based on the trend towards the West through partnership and cooperation in order to get out of the economic hardship that was the result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. This came through a set of steps taken by Russia, represented in joining Western political and economic institutions and agreeing with the West on issues of common interest. Also Russia realized its inability to continue to produce weapons, due to the high costs of production in light of the low economic situation. In addition, it began to implement a policy of political and diplomatic openness, in line with international changes, which suggests that Russia has begun to follow a more realistic policy.

Russia's return to the international arena has led to an important development and change in the system of international politics and the balance of power at the international level, the first of which is the return of realistic Russian politics without relying on the ideological dimension, to play an active role in the international arena. The second is the domination of geopolitical conflicts over geographic and economic conflicts in determining the future of international balance and relations between the major powers in the international system.³

Therefore, Russia has begun a reform process related to the changes in the international arena and the structure of the international system led by the U.S., as Russia was not willing to move away from international politics and its interactions, nor to withdraw into itself. Russia has begun a comprehensive reform process to restore its position, prestige and role on the international arena, to be able to deal with the complexities of the scene on the international scene. Therefore, it began defining the features of its foreign policy and national security strategy, on realistic bases away from ideological ones.

³ Waseem Kalajia, *Eurasian Russia under President Vladimir Putin*, Arab House of Science Publishers, Beirut 2016, p. 15.

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Russian foreign policy reflects most of the classic realist theses, by focusing on the central role of the state in international relations, the importance of power and the balance of power in politics and international affairs, as well as attention to national interests.⁴ On the other hand, one of the classic realist assumptions of an anarchic international system is a special concern for state power and military capabilities. Thus, the effectiveness of a state's foreign policy depends on its power, especially its military. This, in turn, means that the state is interested in increasing its military power and capabilities. From the point of view of classical realism, power is a vital goal in itself. For Russia, the military side has played an active and important role in shaping foreign policy and in facing challenges that may affect Russian national security.⁵

On the other hand, the neo-realism theory focuses on two basic assumptions: the chaos of the international system, which means that there is no hierarchical organization of power that would regulate relations between states. The second assumption is the rationality of states, which see that relations between states are based on strength and continuous struggle to achieve security, and to confront any internal or external aggression.

Therefore, given that the international system is chaotic, which means that there is no global central power capable of imposing its rules on the community of sovereign states, which makes the state focus on securing and preserving its national interests, which remain the primary criterion for the effectiveness of the state's foreign policy. In the case of Russia, the priority of national interests is in fact absolute, as this can be clearly seen in all official state documents, including the concept of foreign policy, as well as the state's military doctrine.

⁴ Jacek Wieclawski, "Contemporary Realism and the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", *Center for Promoting*, 2(1), 2011, p 171.

⁵ *Ibid.*

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The new realism in international relations faces a problem in the ability to understand and explain the dynamics of Russian foreign policy, especially since Russia opposes the structure of the international system led by America, in addition to Russia's rejection of its position within the system, considering that it is no longer a marginal power, but rather Among the major active powers, Russia has tendencies and aspirations to play an advanced role in international politics. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transition from a bipolar system to a unipolar system, Russia opposed the policies of the U.S., and began to demand a new multipolar international order that reflects the new role and status of Russia.⁶

Most of the readings and analyses of Russian external conduct suggest that the parameters that characterize Russian foreign policy have receded towards realism. Accordingly, the real Russian elite has adopted several proposals and directions, the most important of which are :The need to reposition Russia on the international scene in order to ensure that its priority interests are respected in a world now seen as a multipolar world and that it is no longer unipolar or bipolar. For its representatives, the international arena is "competitive", and everyone within nations must seek to ensure its independence and defence by its own means. Given the competitive and expansionist ambitions of the West, the Russian elite had to think realistically, as it was necessary to re-establish ties with the major regional powers of western countries, to ensure new opportunities for the Russian economy when needed in order to lift western pressure and permanent bargaining on Russia. ⁷

⁶ Wieclawski, *op.cit.*, p. 174.

⁷ Alsseyd Lusifi, "Geopolitics of Russian Foreign Policy towards the Arab Region: A Reading of the Explanatory Power of Realist Theory", *Algerian Journal of Security and Development*, 13, 2018, p. 160-161.

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Today, Russia is seen as a great power due to its large geographical area, abundant energy resources and nuclear capabilities, not to mention its permanent seat on the Security Council. All of this gave Russia an advantage and a way to increase its geopolitical influence in many different strategic regions including the Middle East.⁸ After Putin came to power, Russia's foreign policy seemed more ambitious and resolute, and this is due to the increasing economic strength and the concentration of political power, especially in light of the changes in the international environment, which served as an opportunity that Russia has begun to exploit and benefit from in order to reposition itself in the international system.⁹

Russia began to develop its foreign policy according to several considerations, the most important of which are: the surrounding challenges and national goals, which are affected by a number of factors, most notably: geopolitical, economic, ideological, ethnic and religious. Today, Russia considers itself one of the major powers on the international scene, therefore Russia has developed the view that reaching the status of a superpower is extremely important to its continued political, economic, and security presence, within a complex international environment. In accordance with its strategic goals, Russia considers the international system to be a network of alliances and relations that seeks to adapt it according to its view and ambitions. Therefore, Russian foreign policy is designed to advance this goal by influencing the international environment and working to offer solutions to changing conditions.¹⁰

⁸ Emel Parlar Dal-Emre Erşen, "Russia and the Changing International System: An Introduction", Emel Parlar Dal-Emre Erşen, eds., *Russia in the Changing International System*, Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland 2020, p. 3–4.

⁹ Ingmar Oldberg, "Russia's Great Power Strategy under Putin and Medvedev", *Swedish Institute of International Affairs*, 1, 2010, p. 2.

¹⁰ Zvi Magen, "Russia and the Middle East: Policy Challenges", *The Institute for National Security Studies*, 127, 2013, p. 13.

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Therefore, in recent years, Russia has adopted positions in foreign policy that have revived aspirations to restore balance to the top of the international system in order to preserve its interests. Many developments on the international scene played a major role in redrawing the map of influence in the Middle East, as Russia found itself in front of many golden opportunities that would return it to its previous role in international politics, especially after the events of the Arab revolutions. Along the same lines, Russia has worked to strengthen its relations with the countries of the region and update the list of its allies, including those countries that are in an alliance with the U.S.. As a result, Russian foreign policy has become based on providing all forms of support to countries with which it has established mutual relations, such as: political, diplomatic, economic and military support. The main impetus for the new directions of Russia is driven by two dimensions: the first is internal gains in the Russian economy and internal stability. Second, support traditional allies, search for new allies, and map relationships that serve Russian interests within the region.¹¹

The objectives of Russian foreign policy can be summarized at this stage in the following points: Nationalize Russian foreign policy, emphasize the need for Russia to regain the status it has lacked since its inception, and ending the American uniqueness of the international system. Seeking privileged relations and strategic cooperation with former friends of the Soviet Union. Agree with regional neighbors on how to establish peace and stability in the region. Realism in thinking, increasing cooperation and strengthening relations with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Preventing the spread of political and military conflicts leading to instability in Central Asia. Promoting democracy in Russia.¹²

¹¹ Mustafa Saleh, "Consolidating Influence: The Russian Role in the Middle East", *The Arab Center for Research and Studies*, <https://www.acrseg.org/40960>, (Date of Accession: 29.10.2021).

¹² Ahmed Al-Tahlawi, "Reclaiming the Role: Internal and International Determinants of Russian Policy", *Arab Center for Research and Studies*, <http://www.acrseg.org/16360>, (Date of Accession: 10.29.2021).

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In the same context: strengthening Russian capabilities and maintaining Russian national security and Russian territorial integrity. Securing the right conditions for economic development. Reject the rules of the zero game and abide by the balance of interest formula. Establishing a multipolar international order by emphasizing the independence and balance of Russian foreign policy, while taking into account the interests of other countries, while firmly rejecting a world ruled by a single pole. Establishing world peace, by avoiding military conflicts and emphasizing the principle of cooperation and friendship with the peoples of the countries of the world, a fundamental requirement for Russia's economic growth.

Combating terrorism, this goal stems from Russian security interests, as it feels the growing wave of chaos on its southern borders in the Caucasus and Central Asia.¹³

On the other hand, the rapid recovery of the Russian economy during the first term of Vladimir Putin's presidency played a role in reducing Russia's dependence on foreign economic aid, enabling Russia's leaders to demonstrate resistance to Western policies that failed to meet Russia's expectations. The sense of disregard for Russia's interests has motivated Russia's more assertive behavior on the international stage. As a result of Putin's assertion that Russia is a great power, it became the mainstay of Russia's foreign policy, while pragmatism and the pursuit of national interest became the mainstay of Russian foreign policy principles and orientations.¹⁴

On the other hand, the "Russia Foreign Policy Conception" represents a system of views on the content and principal areas of the Russia foreign policy activities. The "Concept" was adopted in the Russian National Security

¹³ Hassan Al-Awadi, "Russian Foreign Policy During of President Vladimir Putin Era", *Democratic Arabic Center for Strategic, Political and Economic Studies*, 2017, p. 1-2.

¹⁴ "Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", *International Yearbook CIDOB 2010, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs*, Barcelona 2010, p. 224-225.

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Document by Decree No. 24 of the Russian President on January 10, 2000.¹⁵ As the two most important concepts of Russian foreign policy, according to Putin: Realism and Pragmatism.¹⁶ The “Concept” focused on “attempts to create a structure of international relations based on the hegemony of advanced Western countries in the international community, under the leadership of the U.S., designed for unilateral solutions (mainly by the use of military force) of major issues in world politics in circumvention of the foundational rules of international law”. The document says, “a number of countries are intensifying their efforts to weaken Russia politically, economically, militarily and in other ways” and identifies NATO expansion as one of the main threats “in the international sphere”.¹⁷

Also, the “foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation”, adopted by President Vladimir Putin in November 2016, noted that the main objective of the state’s foreign policy activities is the need to “consolidate the status of the Russian Federation as a center of influence in the current world.” Russia wants to regain its status as a superpower and have a presence in all regions of the world. As the Russian President declared, “Russia’s borders never end.” This presence, in accordance with this concept, is a tool for maintaining “national security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity”, as well as a way to assert Russia’s “position in global economic relations to prevent any discrimination against Russian goods, services and investments”.¹⁸

¹⁵ Andrei Melville-Tatiana Shakleina, *Russian Foreign Policy in Transition: Concepts and Realities*, Center European University Press, Hungary 2005, p. 89.

¹⁶ Elnur Hasan Mikail-Muhsin Yilmazchoban, “Vladimir Putin Era Russian Foreign Policy”, *Open Journal of Political Sciences*, 8(4), 2018, p. 341.

¹⁷ Anna Borshchevskaya, “Russia in the Middle East: Motives, Consequences, Prospects”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 2016, p. 4.

¹⁸ Grigory Kosach-Elena Melcomian, “Moscow’s Strategy under Putin: The Russian Federation is the Center of New World Influence”, *Opinion on the Gulf Journal*, 134, 2019, p. 14.

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From the above it is clear that the Russian foreign policy is based on restoring its position and role in international politics, playing an active and influential role in international interactions, and enhancing its position among the major international powers, in order to reposition it again in the international system, based on the “concept of foreign policy” that it adopted Russia, by adopting a policy of review. It is based on breaking the American hegemony and exclusivity in the leadership of the international system, by expanding its network and strategic influence in vital regions, such as the Middle East, in line with its vision of the international system. to convert it into a multipolar system. Within the same geopolitical scope that Russia attaches importance to in its foreign policy, Russia’s orientations towards the GCC come within the same context, as it is one of the geopolitical areas of strategic importance in Russian policy. This is what will be discussed in the second section of this article.

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The orientations of Russian foreign policy for the post-Cold War period are among the most important dilemmas that it faced in light of the international and regional developments represented by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the formation of the new unipolar international system under its leadership. from the U.S. As a result, the Russian foreign policy-making circle was divided over the nature of the foreign policy that should be pursued and that is supposed to achieve Russian goals, especially since the goals of Russian foreign policy have been identified as part of an attempt to restore the status and role, as well as make some basic changes in line with the international situation. Russia relied on multiple circles to ensure the possibility of achieving its political and economic stability. Therefore, the Arabian Gulf region was of interest to the Russian policy maker.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ammar Hamid Yassin, “Russian Foreign Policy towards the Persian Gulf for the Post-2001 Period”, *Journal of Political Science*, 51, 2016, p. 183.

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The Arab world has always been a region geographically close almost immediately to Russia, and of strategic and geopolitical importance throughout the ages; Despite the stretch of the Russian coast, its ports were not navigable for most of the year due to freezing. Hence, access to the warm waters of the Arabian Gulf and the Mediterranean via the Black Sea was of great strategic importance for Russia. The region did not lose its importance with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Rather, it increased in light of the pragmatic vision from which Moscow launched its foreign policy and its international and regional relations. Russian-Arab relations have witnessed a remarkable recovery since the beginning of the millennium, Moscow was able to restore its relations with its traditional allies in the region on new grounds.

But the most obvious thing is the unprecedented development in Russia's relations with the Arab Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, in the context of Russia's pursuit of a strategic partnership in the energy field,²⁰ with the GCC countries.

The tendencies of Russia towards warm waters are known historically, and it itself was the main driving factor in its policy towards the Arabian Gulf, which it wanted to reach through the Arabian Gulf lands in particular.²¹ The return of Putin to the presidency in 2012 resulted in a much higher level of Russian engagement in issues relevant to the GCC.²² The relations between Russia and the GCC took on a new character, in line with President Putin's proposal, on the importance of bringing about a change in foreign policy.²³

²⁰ Nourhan Al-Sheikh, "Russia and the Geostrategic Changes in the Arab World", Ahmed Saeed Nofal, ed., *The Geostrategic Repercussions of the Arab Revolutions*, The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Beirut 2014, p. 289-290.

²¹ Al-Seikh, *op.cit.*, p. 187.

²² Li-Chen Sim, "Russia's return to the Gulf", Fulton Jonathan-Sim Li-Chen, ed., *External Powers and the Gulf Monarchies*, Routledge, London 2018, p. 37.

²³ Elena Melkumyan, "A Political History of Relations between Russia and the Gulf States", *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, Doha 2015, p. 11.

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However, Russia's foreign policy toward the Arabian Gulf region, especially toward the GCC is described as inconsistent. This is due to a combination of factors such as: Russia's relentless attempts to reassert its position and global influence. A large part of Russia's participation in the Arab Gulf region, in particular, and the Middle East in general, depends on its confrontation with other world powers, specifically with the U.S.. Thus, this reflects the difficulty of determining whether Russia's participation in the Arab Gulf region is aimed at establishing long-term mutual relations and strategic alliances, or is primarily driven by short-term considerations, in the context of Russian efforts to confront the U.S.. Russia's inconsistent foreign policy is a source of frustration for the GCC, but it is an important opportunity for them, both collectively and individually, to guide the nature and determinants of Russian participation in the region.²⁴

Relations between Russia and the countries of the GCC, after the Russian military campaign in the North Caucasus, were characterized by a kind of controversy. Whereas, Russia had accused the GCC of financing Islamic terrorism in the North Caucasus region. However, after Russia regained control over the situation in Chechnya, and after the economic recovery in the mid-2000s, relations between Russia and the GCC began to improve. Despite this, the relations took on the nature of common concerns, both with regard to terrorism, and even in the framework of economic cooperation in global energy markets.²⁵ Also, the Arab Spring revolutions posed challenge to relations between Russia and the GCC. The Kremlin considered that the Arab Spring revolutions that began in 2011 and the subsequent changes in some political regimes (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen), and the Syrian crisis, undermine its long-standing alliances and partnerships in the region and threaten its geopolitical influence.²⁶

²⁴ Ahmed Al-Hamli, "Introduction: Russia's Foreign Policy and the GCC", Ahmed Al-Hamli, ed., *Russia Foreign Policy and the GCC*, TRENDS Research and Advisory Institution, Abu Dhabi 2016, p. 1.

²⁵ Dmitriy Frolovskiy, "Understanding Russia-GCC Relations", Nicu Popescu-Stanislav Secieru, ed., *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 146, 2018, p. 83.

²⁶ Frolovskiy, *op.cit.*, p. 84.

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During the last years, Russian relations with the GCC have witnessed a remarkable development. Those relations were based on a complex and intertwined set of factors such as: the increasing Russian presence in the Middle East, especially in Syria; the changing dynamics in U.S. relations with Russia and the GCC; developments and challenges facing energy markets globally; Ongoing tensions in the Middle East, along with ongoing shifts in the foreign policy of the GCC.²⁷

On the other hand, The events of recent years have shown that the Middle East occupies a central place in the directions of the new Russian foreign policy. It is widely believed that the Kremlin seeks to fill the void created by Washington's strategy of de-emphasizing regional issues and moving toward Southeast Asia to deter China, as well as an apparent cooling of relations between the GCC and Washington. Moscow took advantage of the situation in the; and it managed to become an effective international force in the region. As a result, and with its abandonment of ideological orientations, Russia began years ago to establish relations with the GCC.²⁸ According to the concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian, Russian policy would be independent and constructive, and the economic interests of the country have the priority. To implement this mission, Russia planned to strengthen its economic relations with the GCC.²⁹

Through this, Russia aimed to demonstrate its strength and interaction with international policy developments, especially in the Middle East, in addition to its continuous pursuit of economic profits and benefits, while ensuring the stability of the home front in light of the challenges in its regional

²⁷ Nikolay Kozhanov, "Diversifying Relationships: Russian Policy in the Middle East and its Impact on the GCC", *Bussola Institute*, 9, 2020, p. 6.

²⁸ Samer Elias, "Russia... Will It Fill the American Void in the Gulf?", *Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Studies*, <https://rawabetcenter.com/archives/29479>, (Date of Accession: 31.10.2021).

²⁹ Elena Melcomian, "Russian-Gulf Relations: Building on a Problematic Past", *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, Doha 2016, p. 9.

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neighborhood. Therefore, we can be said that the Russian foreign policy towards the GCC is governed by several determinants, the most important of which are: economic, and security-military.

There are two pillars adopted by the Russian strategy for expansion in the Middle East. The first is solid alliances: that is, building a kind of continuous alliances with a number of regional actors. And the second, the compatibility of necessity: which is to put aside historical differences and achieve a high degree of rapprochement that but did not reach the level of alliance, just to consistent with the merits of the stage, in addition to the stability of the Middle East free of conflicts guarantees its Russia the stability of its southern regional borders.³⁰

Russia seek through the relationships with the GCC, to find a new foreign policy principle that focuses on pursuing the policy of budget and political, strategic, economic and commercial benefit, and attracting investments through compromise and long self. This means that Russia is working on a geo-political level to find a balance for its position in the Arab Gulf with that of the U.S. and its western allies. Accordingly, the movement of Russian foreign policy towards the GCC proceeds according to the following points:

First: The movement or nature of Russian foreign political behavior on the political-security level: After Putin came to, Russia sought to strengthen its military presence in the Arab Gulf region and participate in security arrangements, and Russia does not exclude the possibility of a military presence in the Arab Gulf region. Second: Russian foreign political behavior on the economic - military level: President Putin declared in 2001 that the fields of energy, trade and finance are among the fields Russia pays most attention in in its foreign policy towards the countries of the GCC to benefit from coordination between global energy parties, as well as benefit of Gulf

³⁰ "The Russian-Gulf Rapprochement... Reflections and Implications", *Gulf News*, <http://akhbar-alkhaleej.com/news/article/1103264>, (Date of Accession: 03.11.2021).

capital and its investment in Russia in order to improve the performance of the Russian economy, given the advantages of these countries in the high revenues of their oil exports and their GDP.³¹

The Russian interest in the GCC aims to achieving several goals, including: First: the attempt to break the international isolation and weaken the sanctions imposed on it in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. Second: to oblige the West to deal with it as a major player in the Middle East by presenting its credentials as a capable superpower on possessing the keys to the solution to the most complex crises in the region, which is the Syrian crisis. Third: to reduce the perception of the U.S. by some Middle Eastern countries as the only guarantor of national security. Fourth: its assurance that it will not abandon its allies, especially that it has been working lately to enter the eastern Mediterranean and approach the GCC, this makes it capable of influencing international military and commercial navigation.³²

On the other hand, a more integrated Russian foreign policy model supports two primary goals; The first is the Russian national security, internally and externally. The second is to strengthen Russia's capabilities (economic and military). With these two goals in mind, the Arabian Gulf region became a major player in the Russian foreign policy industry for several reasons: The Arabian Gulf region is the largest source of energy resources in the world; Cooperation between the GCC and Russia on the Syrian issue could help meet the Gulf's desire to limit Iranian influence in the region and reduce the Iranian threat; The GCC is one of the largest importers of Russian weapons; The GCC has become a sub-regional partner for international and regional politics, and its importance has increased with regard to the Syrian crisis in the Middle East. This could be

³¹ Yassin, *op.cit*, p. 198-202.

³² "The Russian-Gulf ...", *loc.cit*.

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another avenue for cooperation between Russia and the GCC; Russia can cooperate with the countries of the GCC to enhance their national security and the national security of the GCC and to combat extremism and any terrorist attacks.³³

However, Russia does not have a special policy towards the GCC. The main determinant of this policy is the strategic interest and the pragmatic approach. In addition, Russia's relations with the Gulf have always been linked to a determinant or a party outside this relationship, whether it is one of the regional parties (Iraq, Iran, Turkey) or an international determinant represented in the U.S., Russia deals with the GCC from the perspective of the location of this relationship as a subordinate of the relationship key with another regional party, and within the scope of a comprehensive assessment of the relative position of these countries in American politics. Russia does not aspire to have influence in the Gulf region, which is considered a wide area of influence of the U.S., but it seeks to limit this influence and stop any projects to extend it towards the frontiers of Russian influence in the region. Russia views the countries of the GCC within the scope of the Middle East as a whole and not as an independent bloc, nor does it deal with it as a single bloc made up of six countries, but rather with each of them separately.³⁴

Relations between Russia and the GCC witnessed what could be described as a crisis in 2011, against the backdrop of the Arab Spring revolutions. At the beginning of the revolutions, Russia was initially keen to remain on the side of neutrality, describing them as "internal problems" of countries. But this neutrality soon began to move to a practical

³³ Maria Al-Mukhaleh, "Three Axes of Russian-Gulf Relations: Oil, Nuclear, Military Cooperation and Armament", *Opinions on the Gulf Journal*, 134, 2019, p. 38-39.

³⁴ "The Arab Center Conference: Evaluating Russian Policy towards the Arab World", *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, <https://bit.ly/392lvMD>, (Date of Accession: 03.11.2021).

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intervention, when the Bashar al-Assad regime began to lose control of many areas in favor of the armed opposition forces. At this time, Russia accused the GCC of providing support to the Syrian opposition.³⁵

The second decade of the 21st century witnessed a new change in Russia's ability to manage its relations with the GCC, as it moved from the clearly expanded and positive phase of the previous decade to a state of relative stagnation due to Russia's support for the al-Assad regime and the Russian-Iranian alliance.³⁶ As the GCC consider Iran a source of threat to the Gulf national security. As a result, it became clear that there is a degree of sensitivity and caution in the relations between the two parties.

In another context, in April 2006, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov praised intensive dialogue with Saudi Arabia and indicated Moscow's interest in the "development and deepening of mutually beneficial cooperation in various spheres, especially the economy".³⁷ Whereas Russia has expanded its network of political and economic relations with the Gulf states in general, as well as energy-producing countries (oil and gas) specifically with Qatar and Saudi Arabia. President Putin's visit to the Gulf in February 2007 was the first of its kind after the collapse of the Soviet Union. That visit reflected part of Russia's tendencies towards increasing its role and activity in the Middle East, to become one of the main actors in any arrangements for any new regional system.³⁸

Therefore, it is clear that the Russian foreign policy towards the GCC states stems from a determinant of interest, and the expansion of the circle of external influence in areas considered of vital importance to its interests,

³⁵ Nicola Pedde, "Russia's Strategy Toward Iran and the Gulf", Karim Mezran-Arturo Varvelli, ed., *The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition*, Atlantic Council, Milano 2019, p. 137.

³⁶ Pedde, *loc.cit.*

³⁷ Steve A. Yetiv-Katerina Oskarsson, *Challenged Hegemony: The United States, China, and Russia in the Persian Gulf*, Stanford University Press, California 2018, p. 110.

³⁸ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The GCC States and the Shifting Balance of Global Power", *Center for International and Regional Studies*, 6, 2010, p. 3.

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which contributes to strengthening Russia's position, role and effectiveness at the international level, by taking advantage of the decline in American interest in the affairs of the region. The determinants of Russian policy towards the GCC are based on multiple political, economic, security and military dimensions. Accordingly, Russia's foreign policy has been known as pragmatic and utilitarian, meaning that its relationship with the Arab Gulf states is based on interest.

RUSSIAN DETERMINANTS WITH GCC

Accordingly, Russian determinants in the GCC can be identified in three directions, there are: economic, security and military interests.

THE ECONOMIC DETERMINANT

The Arabian Gulf region are of economic importance as well as geographical importance, which has made them important to major countries, particularly Russia, which seeks to sustain the stability of oil prices by establishing a regular dialogue on energy issues with the Gulf states, in which Russia also finds a market for its industrial and military products, as well as attracting investment.³⁹

The push factor behind Russia's growing economic ties to the GCC is diversification. Russia has been obliged to seek out new markets because of the weakness of long-standing Soviet-era partners due to internal turmoil (Libya), international sanctions (Iraq and Iran), and because of sanctions imposed on it since July 2014 by the EU and the U.S. for its incursions into Ukraine. Another aspect of diversification relates to the desire in Russia to build a modern, high-technology economy befitting a world power and to move away from serving as a raw materials appendage of the world economy much like a third-

39 Abdul Razzaq Khalaf Al-Tai, "The Arabian Gulf in Contemporary Russian Strategy", *Center for Regional Studies*, 9, 2008, p. 251.

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world country.⁴⁰ Whereas the pull factor for Russia's interest in enhancing economic interactions concerns the receptivity of the GCC to Russia's outreach. Specifically, the perception among the GCC that the U.S. will be less engaged in the region has resulted in the former forging ties with non-traditional extra-regional powers such as Russia and China.⁴¹

Energy cooperation and coordination are at the forefront of Russian policy priorities in the Arab region, around which Russian diplomacy and Russian rapprochement with Arab countries, particularly the GCC, revolve around it. The energy sector is one of the key areas where Arab and Russian interests converge, and is the essence of the future Arab – Russian partnership and its main pillar. Russia views the GCC, particularly Saudi Arabia, as their allies in the global energy market.⁴² Russia also interacts with the GCC in energy markets. Russia and Saudi Arabia are the largest producers and exporters of oil globally, and their competition for customers and different break-even oil price positions have strained relations.⁴³

Russia shares with the GCC that they are among the world's largest oil and gas producers, and that they have large reserves that could extend their production for much longer years than some studies had expected, particularly on the prospects for oil access in five or six decades. If oil and gas are the two main export commodities in the GCC so far and possibly also for the foreseeable future, they are one of Russia's most important export commodities, particularly as the world's largest producer and exporter of LNG. Despite the apparent rivalry between Russia and the GCC in this area, there is ample room for cooperation and coordination between them to maintain balance in the global oil and gas markets, which does not lead to a significant drop in prices. Russia is seeking more oil and gas cooperation with the GCC to counter shale oil competition with America.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Sim, *op.cit.*, p. 45.

⁴¹ Sim, *op.cit.*, p. 46.

⁴² Al-Sheikh, *op.cit.*, p. 303.

⁴³ Sim, *loc.cit.*

⁴⁴ Rakha Ahmed Hassan, "3 Scenarios That Control the Interests of the GCC States with Russia", *Opinions on the Gulf Journal*, 134, 2019, p. 64-65.

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The oil wealth of the GCC and Russia is a major weight in the world's oil markets, whether for the size of reserves, production or exports. In terms of global crude oil production, GCC and Russian production accounts for nearly 36 percent of production, with (23% for the GCC and Russia at 13%). With regard to the world's crude oil reserves, Russia and the GCC contribute more than two-thirds of the world's proven reserves of (25.8% to Russia and 54.4% to the GCC), confirming that the two sides will remain major poles in the world oil markets over the next two decades under the small relative weight of the U.S. oil reserves, which do not exceed 10% of the world's reserves. As for the volume of exports of crude oil and its products, GCC and Russian exports account for more than a third of the world's oil exports, accounting for (25% of GCC and 12.7% for Russia).⁴⁵

In this context, Russia has significant economic and commercial interests in the energy sector (oil and gas) in the Middle East. The volatility of global energy markets, coupled with Russia's increasing reliance on oil revenues to support its economy, whether due to slowing economic growth or the imposition of western sanctions on it; that led to increased pressure on Russia to make gains in the energy markets in the Middle East. Russia's pragmatic approach to the GCC, especially Saudi Arabia, is based on a desire to increase global oil prices. Russia seeks to stabilize and then increase the price of oil in order to maintain state expenditures. To this end, Russia has attempted to coordinate efforts to set production levels and prices with the Organization of the (OPEC).⁴⁶ Russia aims through rapprochement with the GCC to strengthen economic and trade exchanges and increase investment with the GCC.⁴⁷ Russia's dialogue with Saudi Arabia on the (OPEC +) for example is often considered within the

⁴⁵ Nawzad Abd Al-Rahman Al-Hiti, "Oil and Investments are Tools for Russian-Gulf Rapprochement", *Opinions on the Gulf Journal*, 134, 2019, p. 84-85.

⁴⁶ James Sladden, et al., "Russian Strategy in the Middle East", *RAND Corporation*, California 2017, p. 7-8.

⁴⁷ Frolovskiy, *op.cit.*, p. 86.

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framework of Moscow's vision of the global energy markets rather than from the point of its meaning for the Russian dialogue with the region itself.⁴⁸

In this context, in 2019, Russia and the GCC signed the cooperation charter within (OPEC +), which provided for the "launch of a broad oil partnership with the aim of linking production strategies to achieving common economic objectives". Reaching such an agreement and signing the cooperation charter between the two parties was not an easy matter, as this has been punctuated by a series of long and complex negotiations, since the visit of Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz in September 2017 to Russia.⁴⁹

On the other hand, Russia considers the GCC as one of the most important sources of investment in the Russian economy. The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) is among the main promoters of GCC investments, by facilitating deals and establishing joint funds and financial investments with GCC.⁵⁰ Russia's sovereign wealth fund the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), has entered into co-investment deals with the sovereign wealth funds of GCC to make equity investments in the Russian economy. These investments stretch across a variety of commercial enterprises, agriculture, and infrastructure.⁵¹

Bilateral trade is just one of the elements of Russia's economic cooperation with the GCC. Russia's economic goals in the region are broader. Where are the list of its partners includes the UAE's Mubadala, DP World, the Saudi Public Investment Fund, Saudi Aramco, Ayar International Investment Company, Qatar Investment Authority, Kuwait Investment Authority and Bahrain's Mumtalakat Holding Company. As of 2018, the share of the GCC countries in the RDIF investment funds (including

⁴⁸ Leonid Issaev-Nikolay Kozhanov, "Diversifying Relationships: Russia Policy Toward GCC", *International Politics*, London 2021.

⁴⁹ Pedde, *op.cit.*, p. 138.

⁵⁰ Issaev- Kozhanov, *loc.cit.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

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potential projects) was estimated at 52% (Saudi Arabia accounted for 22%, the UAE for 18%, Qatar 8% and Kuwait 2%). For the last seven years, the volume of Saudi Arabia's investments in Russia reached \$2.5 billion while the UAE and Kuwait stood at less than \$1 billion each. Meanwhile, in terms of value, Qatar remains a leader with \$13 billion of investments.⁵²

Russia's prevailing belief at the official level besides businessmen, that active economic cooperation and joint ventures, for example, with the countries of the GCC, can provide Russia with a vital opportunity to access technologies and equipment in the fields of oil, gas, petrochemicals, and hi-tech due to western sanctions.⁵³ Besides that, in the first decade of the 21st century saw a steady increase in the intensity and breadth of relations between Russia and the GCC, with whom Moscow has signed numerous cooperation agreements initiating a profitable series of both bilateral and multilateral commercial actions through the GCC.⁵⁴

Russia's interest in the GCC market is largely explained by the Gulf's growing demand for natural gas, backed by Gulf economic diversification programs that are moving toward reliance on gas rather than oil for domestic energy consumption. For example, in April 2017, Russia intensified its contacts with the Kingdom of Bahrain, which led to the invitation of Gazprom to join a number of oil and gas projects. In 2016,

Gazprom and the National Oil and Gas Authority of the Kingdom of Bahrain agreed to strengthen their cooperation in the production and distribution of liquefied natural gas.⁵⁵

On the other hand, the largest trading partner of Russia in the region is the UAE: according to data for 2020, the turnover with this country amounted to \$3.27 billion. It rose last year by up to 78%, making it the

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russian Policy Across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods", *Chatham House The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, London 2018, p. 15.

⁵⁴ Pedde, *op.cit.*, p. 137.

⁵⁵ Kozhanov, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

second largest trading partner of Russia (after Egypt and before Israel) in the entire Middle East region. The value of trade with Saudi Arabia last year was \$1.7 billion (after 2014 sales began to decline - to about \$700 million in 2016). But for Moscow, investment cooperation is more important. For many years, it has been trying to attract money from the GCC.⁵⁶

Accordingly, the Russian approach towards the GCC stems from an economic determinant in order to strengthen Russia's position in the global economy through the energy market, which has large reserves, and it wants to strengthen its relationship with the GCC on the economic side, as it is a fundamental pillar. In adding more power to Russian policy. In the economic field, cooperation between Russia and the states of the GCC contributes to determining oil prices at the global level, and to break the severity of the shale oil influence that America has come to possess. More importantly, Russian economic cooperation with the GCC comes in the context of breaking the economic sanctions imposed by America and Western countries on them.

THE SECURITY AND MILITARY DETERMINANT

The Russian view of the Middle East, as a neighboring region on the southern border, has increased relations with it due to the escalating security and military developments, especially during the war on Iraq and the interventions in Afghanistan and Georgia. President Putin used the cards owned by Russia to revive its role in the Middle East, especially in various fields and the arms market.⁵⁷ This fact is confirmed by the Russian orientalist Victor Bosvalak, who said: "The strengthening of Russia's role in maintaining security and stability in the Arabian Gulf region is evidence

⁵⁶ Witold Rodkiewicz, "Russia Activates its Policy in the Persian Gulf Region", *OSW Venter for Eastern Studies*, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2021-03-23/russia-activates-its-policy-persian-gulf-region>, (Date of Accession: 04.11 2021).

⁵⁷ Nasser Zeidan, *The Role of Russia in the Middle East and North Africa from Peter the Great to Vladimir Putin*, Arab House of Science Publishers, Beirut 2013, p. 205.

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of the positive role that Russia intends to play in the region. It is true that the Cold War has ended, but the competition it still exists and the old anti-Western rhetoric fits the new Russian diplomacy".⁵⁸

In this context, after Putin came to power, Russia sought to strengthen its military presence in the Arabian Gulf region and participate in security arrangements, as announced by Valbri Malinov, stressing the importance of the Arabian Gulf in Russia's new military doctrine, and that Russia does not rule out the possibility of a military presence in the Arabian Gulf region. The starting point of Russian interest in the GCC was after the events of September 11, 2001, and relations between the United States and the Muslim world soured due to accusations made by America to the GCC, including Saudi Arabia, regarding terrorism. Russia and the GCC had shared visions after the events of September 11, 2001. The two sides realized that they have common interests and positions towards some of the ongoing international and regional developments and changes in the Middle East and the world. Both Russia and the GCC attach special importance to the issue of international terrorism.⁵⁹

Gulf security is no longer limited to the GCC, but Russia has also become interested in it. Russia views the GCC as a strategic necessity, as it is concerned with reducing U.S. influence in the region, especially since Iran is on its banks and is addressing the defense of Iran, and at the same time concerned about Iran's nuclear program. So Russia see tightening sanctions on Iran directly harms its economic interests in Iran and around the world. Therefore Russia has a role in the balance of power and regional security in the Gulf region, and by virtue of its strong relations with Iran and at the same time its continuously evolving relations with the GCC can play a key role in supporting regional

⁵⁸ Abdul Aziz Al-Rawi, "The Orientations of Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era", *Journal of International Studies*, 35, 2008, p. 175.

⁵⁹ Yassin, *op.cit.*, p. 198-199.

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security, peace and stability in the region.⁶⁰

In this context, Russia is the second largest exporter of major arms in the world. In 2009-2018, Russia was the second largest arms supplier to the MENA region. The country accounted for 18% of the total volume of arms imports by MENA states, following the U.S. (44%), the world's leading exporter of arms. In recent years, Russia has further expanded its arms transfers to MENA seeking to reestablish its influence in the region. To MENA countries, acquiring arms from Russia is advantageous. It allows them to diversify their sources of arms supply and thereby become less dependent on Western suppliers. Consequently, this has enabled Russia to compete with other established arms suppliers such as the U.S. and France.⁶¹

Russia has a sophisticated arms industry in the field of conventional weapons, anti-aircraft missiles and various military equipment. Military industries are one of Russia's most important economic and strategic pillars. Although Russia exports arms to many countries of the world, it has so far failed to enter the GCC market properly. It is a market of great importance to the world's arms exporters.⁶²

In the same context, weapons are the most important components of GCC imports over the past two decades. The U.S. and European countries have been the main source of GCC arms imports, on which the Gulf states are almost entirely dependent to strengthen their defense capabilities. Such a Gulf reliance on Western arms sources is very problematic, not least the political dependency and conditions imposed by Western

60 Abdel Hafeez Mahboub, "Is It Possible to Formulate a Strategic Approach to Gulf Security That Reduces Foreign Influence?", *Opinions on the Gulf Journal*, 63, 2009, p. 34.

61 Alexandra Kuimova, "Russia's Arms Exports to the MENA Region: Trends and Drivers", *Euromesco Policy Brief*, 95, 2019, p. 1.

62 Nasser bin Ghaith, "The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf and Russia: Problems of History, Economy and Politics", *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, Doha 2017, p. 22.

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governments on arms sales to gulf states. In these circumstances, Russia is a good alternative to Western arms sources, especially since Russian technology in some types of weapons is as advanced. Russia often imposes no restrictions on the technology or weapons it exports, any restrictions on the use of these weapons or any other restrictions on the domestic or foreign policies of countries importing Russian weapons.⁶³

Russia is making unremitting efforts to enter the arms market in the Middle East and supply it to the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Currently, the UAE is the main customer, and remains a marginal supplier even to them (according to SIPRI, only about 5 percent of the UAE's arms imports in 2016-20 came from Russia). Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia remains a potential partner in developing cooperation in defense industries and arms supplies. On February 20, 2017, as a result of negotiations, an agreement was signed for the joint production of automatic rifles (AK-103) and small arms ammunition. In addition, talks are still underway regarding the possible sale of Russian weapons to Saudi Arabia such as S-400E missile systems, Kornet anti-tank guided missiles, and TOS1-A thermal launchers.⁶⁴

Thus, it can be said that the Russian military and security determinant towards the GCC comes in the context of the Russian desire to export military technology to the Gulf market, within the context of the broader Russian vision of increasing its network of interests and relations in the geopolitical sphere of interest, allowing it to strengthen its position in the region. In addition, the export of arms to the GCC provides a wide scope for enhancing cooperation and common visions towards security arrangements in the Middle East, and combating terrorism.

⁶³ Ghaith, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

⁶⁴ Rodkiewicz, *loc.cit.*

CONCLUSION

The Russian foreign policy towards the GCC falls within the Russian endeavor to restore its previous position in the international system, within a chaotic international system, by relying on a set of means and tools to achieve its foreign policy objectives, by employing economic and military. The orientations of the Russian foreign policy towards the GCC have taken on several dimensions, the most important of which are the economic, the security and military dimensions.

Where Russia attaches great importance to energy resources with the aim of improving the Russian economy and maintaining oil prices. It also looks forward to participating in the security requirements of the GCC, due to the challenges that threaten its national security against the backdrop of Iranian ambitions and the developments of the Syrian. In addition, the Russian desire to cooperate with the GCC contributes to strengthening Russian internal security through mutual cooperation to combat terrorism.

On the other hand, Russia believes that the GCC have become an important actor and partner in many regional and international issues, and thus it is looking forward to developing cooperation with the GCC. The Russian behavior towards the GCC is cautious and not open, and the reason for this is that the Russian-GCC relations are a relationship of mutual interests. There is no special policy that Russia has towards the GCC, but it depends on interests with the it, to consolidate its place in the Middle East, in the context of competition with the U.S.

Russia's foreign policy towards the GCC is a utilitarian policy. The changes that the Middle East is witnessing due to the decline in the U.S. role in the region; Russia is exploiting it to fill the void, by expanding in the region and by re-establishing relations and partnerships with the countries of the Middle East. Russia's policy towards the GCC comes from this premise, which contributes to changing the balance of power and competition, and restructuring the international system into a multipolar.

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