

The Arab Spring and Russia's Middle East Policy

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Abstract

Russia's Middle East policy has undergone a significant change following the occurrence of the Arab Spring. The main reason for this change was the new strategic realities created by the Arab Spring in the region. Russia first considered the Arab Spring as a regional domestic issue, but this perspective changed as outside influences became involved in the events. The Western powers viewing the Arab Spring as a new regional political configuration influenced the overall framework of this change. The development that had the greatest impact on Russia's approach to the Arab Spring was the events in Libya. NATO's military intervention in Libya has led to the disruption of Russia's gains in the region. In this context, the Libyan issue has provided an opportunity for Russia to radically reconsider its Middle East policy. Unlike the reluctant and cautious attitude in Libya, Russia's regional policy on Syria has taken a more concrete form. Russia's military operation in Syria can be considered in this context. It is impossible to consider the military operation in 2015 in isolation from the developments that emerged after the annexation of Crimea, which led to Russia's relative international isolation. The paradigm shifts and differences in approach in Russian foreign policy after 2014 should not be ignored within this context.

Keywords: *Arab Spring, Libya, Middle East, Russia, Syria.*



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1. INTRODUCTION

There are important strategic factors that guide Russia's Middle East policies. These factors demonstrate a consistent presence in both historical and mental contexts. During the Tsarist Russian period, the region became an important part of Mediterranean policies. Moreover, it is possible to say that Russia positioned itself as the protector of Christianity in the region. During the period of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the mechanisms that guided Middle East policies took on a more ideological framework. In this context, the USSR implemented a strategy of evaluating the ideological attitude in the countries that were the traditional sphere of influence of the West in its favor. Thus, the USSR built effective relations mechanisms in the region and had the opportunity to consolidate its presence. In the new conditions that emerged after 1991, Russia tried to follow a regional policy by taking advantage of both the Tsarist and Soviet experience. Russia has adapted to new conditions through various mechanisms since the early 2000s, when regionalization began to increase its determinism in international politics.

The Arab Spring process has significantly altered the operation of these mechanisms and set the stage for the emergence of new realities. Russia's initial reactions to the Arab Spring actually reflected a more neutral perspective. There was a tendency to evaluate this process in terms of the internal dynamics of the region. This perspective has undergone a major transformation with the intervention of the Western powers in Libya. The West's attempts to direct the process have been the decisive factor in this transformation.

The article seeks an answer to the question of which factors determine Russia's view of the Arab Spring. In order to answer this question, the historical, security, strategic, and economic reasons that shape Russia's view of the region have been examined in detail. It constitutes the hypothesis of the article that there has been a fundamental and radical change in Russia's Middle East policy after the Arab Spring. To test this hypothesis, Russia's stance on Libya and Syria was compared.

This article offers a comprehensive comparative historical analysis to examine the transformations in Russia's Middle East policy following the Arab Spring. By investigating historical, security, strategic, and economic factors that shape Russia's perspective on the region, the research adopts a qualitative approach. This includes a detailed historical analysis and a case study comparison of Russia's stance and actions in Libya and Syria, aiming to identify shifts and continuities in its policy post-Arab Spring. This methodology allows the paper to systematically explore the determinants and consequences of Russia's policy changes in response to the Arab Spring.

The article consists of three parts. In the first part, the factors that determine Russia's view of the Arab Spring are examined in a historical perspective. In the second part, the Libyan issue, which is a “warning” in Russia's post-Arab Spring policies, is analyzed in detail. In the third part, the regional

and global effects of the military operation in Syria are examined. In the conclusion part, a general evaluation is made on the subject.

2. FACTORS DETERMINING RUSSIA'S VIEW OF THE ARAB SPRING

The Arab Spring is a common term used to describe the popular uprisings that began in the Middle East in 2010. The inequalities brought about by globalization and the efforts of the political administrations in the Arab world to maintain their existence with old methods are among the main reasons that trigger the popular revolt. The Arab Spring had external as well as internal causes. The geopolitical importance of the region and its strategic natural resources determined the framework of external factors. In this context, it was inevitable that the process referred to as the Arab Spring would turn into a tool of hegemony by non-regional actors. The United States of America (USA) under Barack Obama initially tried to deal with the Arab Spring within the framework of human rights and democracy. However, soon the realpolitik approach became more dominant and the US chose to evaluate the process in its favor. Thus, the United States decided to fully support regime changes in the Middle East. In the meantime, it is worth emphasizing that these regimes have deep-rooted and deep relations with the US.

The Arab Spring was also a process that contained many question marks in terms of Russian foreign policy. Therefore, it would be beneficial to examine the strategic importance and background of the Arab world and the Middle East region in general in Russian foreign policy. In 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that *“the Arab Spring has brought nothing but tragedy to the region. According to Putin, external actors wanted to use this process in accordance with their objective interests”* (Tass, 2021).

To what extent did the Arab Spring process threaten the Soviet strategy, especially during the Cold War? On the other hand, what were the opportunities that this process provided for Russian strategy? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to examine the content, parameters and dimensions of Russia's historical relations with the region.

Historically, Russia's relationship with the Arab world has consisted of different stages. Pre-Soviet Russia did not have any great goals and ambitions in the Arab Middle East, except to protect the interests of the Orthodox Church in Palestine. Imperial Russia prioritized its strategic presence in the Mediterranean, Iran, the Caucasus, Central Asia and China (Malashenko, 2013, p. 3). The formation of the USSR led to an increased Russian presence in the Arab Middle East. The region became one of the priority areas of Soviet foreign policy, especially after the Second World War. *“The USSR, with the aim of breaking the containment policy implemented by the USA after the World War II, recognized the anti-imperialist potential in the Middle East, the contradictions in the region and the US foreign policy very well and made good use of the opportunity to enter this geography. The change in the foreign policy philosophy of the Soviet administration after Stalin also played a major role in this.”* (Erdem, 2017, p. 95). *“Soviet Russia, which became involved in the Middle East by supporting Egypt during the 1956*

Suez crisis, later increased its influence in the region by openly backing the Arabs in the Arab-Israeli wars and advocating for a resolution to the Palestinian issue” (Purtaş, 2008, p. 47). The main focus of Soviet policy towards the Middle East and the Arab world was the struggle against the West. In this context, the USSR's approach to the region conformed to the paradigm of the conflict between the bipolar system that characterized the Cold War period (Malashenko, 2013, p. 4).

The most important motivation of Soviet foreign policy in the bipolar international system was ideology. In this respect, the USSR administrations provided open support to the regimes that were close to them politically and ideologically in the Middle East. During this period, the main allies of the USSR in the Middle East were Egypt, Iraq, Algeria and Libya (Malashenko, 2013). During this period, U.S. interests in the Middle East were associated with the solution of three main tasks. The most important of these tasks was to contain communism and Soviet influence in the region. Other tasks were to protect Israel's security and to ensure access to Arab oil (Tsikaidze & Koybayev, 2017, p. 53). However, the process of decolonization of Arab countries and the rising Arab nationalism accordingly put the USA in difficulty. In addition, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had a framework that challenged American policies. According to the United States, the increasing Soviet influence in the region had the potential to disrupt the implementation of the American strategy during this period (Vorobyeva, 2013, p. 64). During this period, Egypt under the leadership of Nasser, who aspired to lead the Arab world, turned into the main ally of the USSR in the region, mostly for realpolitik reasons. *“The policy of ensuring Egypt's leadership in the Arab world, which was combined with the personal charisma of Nasser over time and gained a doctrinaire aspect with a nationalist and anti-imperialist “pan-Arabist” ideological discourse and then an anti-capitalist “socialist” ideological discourse with the great influence of the rapprochement with the USSR, was an important phenomenon affecting the development of relations with the USSR.”* (Erdem, 2017, p. 78). The USSR was ready to spend huge amounts of time, money and effort on Egypt in order to find regional allies against the United States. Therefore, the relationship between the USSR and Egypt was beneficial for both sides. Although the intensity of relations allowed Egypt to develop, it also facilitated the USSR's gains in the international arena (Zubko, 2017, p. 28).

The Baathist regimes that came to power in Syria and Iraq in the 1960s became the most important allies of the USSR. The Arab Socialist Renaissance Party (Ba'ath), founded in Syria in 1947, advocated a regional unity on the basis of pan-Arabism. The main slogan of the party was “unity, freedom, socialism”. The Baath Party began its activities in 1954 as an underground organization in Iraq. The Ba'ath Party came to power in Syria in 1963. In Iraq, it was in power from 1968 until the 2003 American invasion (Allahkuliye, 2013, p. 106). It was no coincidence that the Ba'ath Party became the main ally of the USSR in the Arab world. Syria, with its secular regime, was becoming a showcase for Soviet aid and support. In this process, Syria was even more important than Egypt in terms of the USSR's foreign policy. Because even when Egypt was at the peak of its cooperation with the USSR, it was

seeking opportunities to diversify its external ties, which distanced it from the USSR (Zvyagelyskaya, 2015).

“The negotiation process that started with Camp David in 1979 under the patronage of the USA for the peaceful solution of the Palestinian problem led to a gradual decrease in the influence of the USSR in the Arab Middle East” (Purtaş, 2008, p. 47). *“The death of Nasser in 1970 and the normalization of relations with the United States by Anwar Sadat, who came to power in Egypt, dealt a major blow to Soviet influence in the Middle East. As a result of the developing Egyptian-US dialogue, the Camp David Accords were signed between Egypt and Israel in 1979”* (Purtaş, 2008, p. 51). During this period, the regional strategic importance of Syria became even more important for the USSR. As a result of Egypt's U.S.-oriented policies, the USSR's aid to Syria continued exponentially. During this period, Syria became a key country in the region in terms of the Soviet military industry (Kreyts, 2010, p. 7). In 1971, an intergovernmental agreement was concluded between the USSR and Syria on the creation of a Soviet military naval base in the port of Tartus (Tass, 2016). The Tartus base is of great strategic importance in terms of the presence of Russian naval power in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, both historically and in the current context.

However, in the Middle East, the multidimensional model of relations established by the United States with Israel could not be fully applied to USSR-Syria relations. The main reason for this was that the alliances of both the USSR and, in the later process, the Russian Federation in the Middle East were built in the context of the principle of contingency and conditionality. The Russian strategy was motivated by regional interests or the achievement of the goals of the international order (Trenin, 2016, p. 4). An example of this is the implementation of perestroika policies during the era of Mikhail Gorbachev, which led to a significant decrease in military aid to Syria (Kreyts, 2010, p. 7). This has also significantly affected the confidence in the Russian strategy in the Arab World.

Following the dissolution of the USSR, there was a pause in relations with the Arab world and the broader Middle East. In fact, it is impossible to analyze this interruption without taking into account the radical changes in the USSR's foreign policy priorities that occurred during the years of perestroika. The region has lost its importance in the foreign policy strategy of post-Soviet Russia. The reason for this was directly related to the transformation of Russia after the USSR. Furthermore, the change in the priorities of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy played a decisive role during this period. Relations with the West were a priority area in Russian foreign policy during Andrey Kozyrev's time as Minister of Foreign Affairs (1991-1996).

Post-Soviet Russia's efforts to build cooperation mechanisms with Western institutions and the clear character of US hegemony in the international system have guided the basic parameters of this priority. However, since the mid-90s, the Middle East has started to be one of the main agenda items of Russian foreign policy again. The appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as Minister of Foreign Affairs in

1996 was undoubtedly important at this point. With Primakov's foreign policy doctrine, “he declared the opening of the Islamic World and envisaged the initiation of policies that revived historical ties with this geography” (Kolosov & Turovskiy, 2000, p. 7). The doctrine has begun to put forward an alternative understanding of a “multipolar and alternative international system” to the unipolar international system led by the USA. Therefore, the new Russian foreign policy prioritized bringing together the restoration of relations with the Islamic World and the Middle East in general with the discourse of a multipolar system.

With the election of Vladimir Putin as President of Russia, Primakov's foreign policy strategy has gained a sustainable framework. Putin's strategy included emphasizing Russia's special position as a power that could act as a bridge between the West and the Muslim World (Malashenko, 2013, p. 1). The Middle East region was considered within the framework of two parameters (security and economy) in the new Russian foreign policy concept adopted in 2000. The main aspect of Russia's interest in the region during this period was the security factor. The focus was on the potential of the situation in the region to impact the entire world. The objective was to bring stability to the region, and Russia had the potential to play a significant role in the peace process (Konovalov, 2016, p. 94). During this period, Russia's policy towards Middle East peace was shaped within the framework of three main tendencies (Yusupov, 2019, p. 259):

- 1) Russia was trying to play a more proactive role in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict
- 2) In order to achieve this goal, it was necessary to create a difficult balance between Israel, which has friendly relations, and Syria and Iran, which are important countries for Russian strategy
- 3) Russia adopted a pragmatic, flexible and national interest-oriented approach to the region.

After the security factor, there was the need to protect Russian economic interests in the region. *“Special attention was given to the importance of the “Greater Mediterranean” region as a connecting hub for various regions, including the Middle East, the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and the Caspian Sea basin, in relation to Russia's economic interests”* (Konovalov, 2016, p. 94-95).

Putin's overall goal in the Middle East was to determine Russia's status and role as a major foreign power in one of the world's most unstable regions (Trenin, 2016, p. 1). This goal has started to become more concrete, especially with the new geopolitical atmosphere that emerged in the region after the US invasion of Iraq. This period was motivated by attempts to support Russian influence in the Middle East, nostalgia for Soviet influence, a desire to show that events unfolding in the Islamic world were important to Russia, and strategic national interests, including Russia's military presence in the region (Malashenko, 2013, p. 1).

Relations with Saudi Arabia, where bilateral relations were almost nonexistent due to the Chechen problem, also improved during this period. After the events of September 11, 2001, Saudi Arabia started prioritizing its relations with Russia as its relations with the United States became

complicated and it felt the need to diversify its foreign policy. In 2002, the Saudis declared their readiness to cooperate with Russia in blocking the channels that feed international terrorism and blocking the financial foundations of international terrorism. In 2002-2003, Russian foreign policy became increasingly interested in the Arabian Peninsula, which is strategically rich in oil and one of the most important bridges to the Muslim border. This interest of Russia coincided with the desire of the Gulf countries, as these countries wished to diversify their foreign policies in the face of increasing instability. In 2004, the Lukoil company received a tender for the exploration and development of gas and gas condensate fields in Saudi Arabia. Thus, for the first time, a Russian company began to operate in a region traditionally dominated by Anglo-American companies (Sapronova, 2014, p. 31-32).

Between 2001 and 2008, Russia exploited the rising anti-Americanism in the region to gain a number of opportunities in both security and economic terms. In fact, the dimensions of the relations developed with the Gulf monarchies, which were outside the sphere of influence of the USSR, demonstrated that Russia was adapting to new international conditions.

It can be argued that before the Arab Spring, Russia achieved a series of foreign policy successes, both strategic and tactical, in the Arab Middle East. Strategically, Russia has returned to cooperation mechanisms with countries with which it has traditionally had good relations, such as Syria and Egypt. Russia was one of the mediating countries in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and this mediation provided it with important strategic gains. On the other hand, there was strong communication with actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas in the region. *“Russia had a special position in the Middle East Quartet, which included the United States, the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN) and Russia, regarding the solution of the Palestinian problem. Its relations with Hamas revealed that Russia had different views than the other members of the ‘Quartet’”* (Purtaş, 2008, p. 67).

In tactical terms, Russia began to establish economic-oriented cooperation mechanisms with the Gulf monarchies. Historically, the Gulf was an area where the United States and Great Britain were active. In this context, the Russian strategy considered its presence in the Gulf as an achievement.

During the Arab Spring, Russia's main concern was the dimensions of the US military intervention in the region. For this reason, it had an attitude against foreign intervention (Zinin, 2012, p. 297). Russia was not fundamentally opposed to the Arab Spring but considered this period as an internal affair of the Arab peoples. Russia's view of the Arab Spring was shaped by two main concerns. During the Arab Spring, Russia's primary concern was the dimensions of the US military intervention in the region. For this reason, there was an attitude against foreign intervention (Zinin, 2012, p. 297). The second primary concern was the fear that popular uprisings might extend to the Post-Soviet region, particularly Central Asia (Nikitina, 2014, p. 101). In this context, Russia began to draw parallels between the developments in the Arab World and the color revolutions that had previously manifested themselves

in the post-Soviet geography. This parallel constituted the main framework of Russian foreign policy's cautious approach to the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring period was also considered as part of the global competition between Russia and the USA. The emphasis was on the US's tactic of excluding Russia from the region during the Arab Spring in this context. (Malashenko, 2013, p. 9). It was widely believed that the United States was directing events in the region through the method of “controlled chaos” and ensuring its own interests. Three main approaches to the role and place of the United States in the events of the Arab Spring were distinguished among Russian expert (Kosov, 2016, pp. 477-478).

- 1) In the first approach, many pundits and politicians considered the Arab Spring as the practical realization of the wave of “color revolutions” and the theory of “controlled chaos.” They stated that the main organizer of these events was the United States. Proponents of this view were committed to the ideology of anti-Americanism, which rose significantly in Russia in the context of increasing Russian-American contradictions after 2008
- 2) The second approach rejected the U.S. involvement in the preparation of anti-regime protests in Arab countries. This approach highlighted the fact that the US was caught unprepared for the Arab uprisings, emphasized that regional actors used the US in line with their own interests
- 3) The third approach drew attention to the role of both external factors and internal political reasons in the events of the Arab Spring. Proponents of this approach argued that domestic political reasons were more decisive.

Think tanks such as Valdai and the Russian International Affairs Council – *Rossiyskiy Sovet po Mejdunarodnym Delam* (RSMD), which played an important role in the formation of Kremlin policies, emphasized the positive aspects of the Arab Spring results in terms of Russian foreign policy. In this context, they highlight that the outcomes of the Arab Spring are generally positive for Russia and suggest that the damage caused by the diplomatic defeat in Ukraine in 2014 can be compensated to some extent (Bordachev, 2021). These positive outcomes have enabled Russia to approach the crisis in Belarus in 2020 with increased confidence, particularly following its achievements in Syria. Combining diplomatic and military success in Syria and adopting a result-oriented approach has been beneficial in the medium and long term (Bordachev, 2021).

Although Russia's annexation of Crimea is a strategic success, it did not fully use the dynamics that emerged in 2014, especially in Donbas, to its advantage because in 2014, it was a less costly process for Russia to take full control of the region. The Minsk process, which emerged later, greatly prevented Russia's military gains from achieving a diplomatic success. By not repeating the same mistake in the Middle East, Russia has consolidated its military gains through diplomatic methods. It is worth mentioning that the Astana platform and similar mechanisms established with Turkey and Iran played an active role during that period.

Another important issue affecting Russia's view of the Arab Spring was the strategic levels and dimensions of its relations with the countries of the region. In this context, there were three types of reactions of Russia against the developments in different Arab countries (Klyayn, 2012):

- In Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and other countries where opposition protests took place, Russia played the role of a “spectator”
- Regarding the events in Libya, where the conflicts intensified and foreign states were involved, Russia was trying to take a neutral stance by expressing its sympathy for Muammar Gaddafi
- Russia, on the other hand, has taken a very different stance in the conflicts in Syria and abandoned its spectator and neutral position. In this context, it has intervened in the Syrian civil war by confronting the West and some Arab countries.

In summary, it was possible to observe that Russia followed a more cautious and wait-and-see policy at the beginning of the Arab Spring event. Focusing on the political causes of the process, Russia chose to adapt to the new realities that would emerge after the riots. However, due to the growing involvement of Western powers in the region and the evolving geopolitical landscape, particularly in Libya, Russia's stance has undergone a significant change. In light of these changes, Russia has become more actively engaged in order to safeguard the progress it has made in the past. The events in Libya have demonstrated that the Arab Spring was shaped not just by internal factors, but also by external influences.

3. RUSSIAN POSITION IN LIBYA

Historically, it is impossible to consider Russia's interest in Libya separately from the Mediterranean maritime geopolitics. In terms of Russia's presence in the Mediterranean, the partnership with Libya built during the Cold War was quite decisive.

The USSR was the first country to recognize Gaddafi, who came to power as a result of a coup d'état in 1969. The Libyan policy of the USSR was basically a set of relations covering military-technical cooperation. In this regard, the USSR was not the main economic partner of Libya. Moreover, Libyan leader Gaddafi emphasized that they did not have the same ideological framework as the USSR (Al-Ammari & Nikolayeva, 2020, pp. 56-57). Gaddafi had his own “socialist path” that was an alternative to “capitalist materialism” and “communist atheism” (Al-Ammari & Nikolayeva, 2020, p. 58, Egorin, 1999, p. 42). Despite these methodological differences, Libya's closeness to the “anti-imperialist” paradigm made it easier for the USSR to act with an ideological perspective in its policies towards this country. However, Gaddafi was looking for a balance between the United States and the USSR. It is worth underlining that this balance was successfully carried out until Sadat came to power in Egypt (Barmin, 2017). The pro-US and pro-Israel policies of Egypt under the leadership of Sadat were among the main factors that brought Gaddafi closer to the USSR. The rapid increase in US influence in Egypt

prompted Libya to strengthen its defense capabilities, primarily with the help of the USSR. This greatly increased the strategic importance of Libya for the USSR and turned it into one of its main partners in the Arab World. The change in Egypt also increased the ideological consolidation between Libya and the USSR. Relations between the two countries have improved due to their similar views on anti-Americanism, anti-colonialism and the Arab-Israeli conflict (Vysotsina, 2016, p. 115). At this point, the main element in the Libyan policy of the USSR was the construction of military cooperation mechanisms. These mechanisms played a significant role in facilitating the expansion of the Soviet arms industry into the Middle East.

The first significant arms deal between the USSR and Libya was signed in 1974. During the 20 years from 1973 to 1992, about 11,000 Soviet military personnel were on Libyan territory advising the Gaddafi government (Barmin, 2017). In some cases, these soldiers took part in fighting on the side of the Libyan army. In addition, many Libyan military personnel were trained in the military institutions of the USSR. After the dissolution of the USSR, this cooperation continued to a large extent. From 2004 until the 2011 revolution, Russia continued to be the main training center of the Libyan army (Birman, 2017). Thus, military cooperation and coordination starting from 1974 made Libya an important ally for Russian strategy.

The events in Libya, which started in 2011 and continues to be effective today, has deeply affected national and regional dynamics. With the assassination of Gaddafi, the dimensions of the chaos in the country increased and Libya turned into one of the main centers of the global struggle. When the civil war began, Russia was torn between supporting its ally Gaddafi and the West's push for international assistance to the rebels. Russia, using its veto right in the UN Security Council, blocked a number of resolutions that allowed European or NATO intervention in the internal conflict in Libya. In the end, however, Moscow was forced to bow to increasing international pressure to support forces opposing Gaddafi.

On February 26, 2011, Russia joined the embargo on arms exports to Libya. In March 2011, Russia abstained from the UN Security Council vote to declare a no-fly zone over Libya and to allow other countries to take measures to protect the civilian population. This allowed NATO to carry out a military operation in Libya at the end of March (Malashenko, 2013, p. 11). The experience of intervention in Libya under the guise of humanitarian goals has revived the debate about the concept of the “responsibility to protect”, due to which NATO discredits its opinion in this country (Koposova, 2017, p. 7). It was possible to say that a “division of labor” was formed in the intervention of NATO and the EU in the Libyan crisis. In this context, NATO acted militarily and the EU acted as a “peacemaker”, thus implementing a division of labor mechanism. Since the unstable situation in Libya affects European interests rather than the United States, the American administration has refrained from intervening on its own. This situation has pushed European countries to accept their regional responsibilities and to take the lead in resolving the Libyan crisis (Lekarenko, 2021, p. 356). This also

showed that without the military coordination of the USA, the EU had no chance to intervene in the geopolitical crises in the nearby geography. *“In June 2011, the Russian government tried to persuade Gaddafi to resign, but it was too late. Because Gaddafi's opponents did not need any reconciliation with the Libyan leader or his voluntary resignation. The Libyan opposition, with the support of the United States and Europe, was advancing towards victory by force of arms. Thus, Russia, having lost to the West in diplomatic intrigues over Libya, became the 73rd country to recognize the National Transitional Council, which had the upper hand in the fight against Gaddafi. According to Malashenko, such recognition of the new government inevitably affected Russia's relations with Libya.”* (Malashenko, 2013, p. 11)

The superiority gained by the opposition after NATO's military intervention clearly revealed the geopolitical dimensions of the Libyan rebellion. The new Libyan regime quickly began to show signs of dissatisfaction with Moscow. In 2012, the Tripoli Military Court sentenced Russian citizen Aleksandr Shadrov to life imprisonment for “abetting” Gaddafi. There was no longer a power in Libya that expected support from its traditional ally, Russia. Libya is no longer grateful to Moscow for the relief of its \$4.5 billion debt to Russia in April 2008 (Malashenko, 2013, pp. 11-12). The new Libyan administration was convinced that the debt relief action in question was not directed directly against Libya, but specifically against Gaddafi. Russia, which pursued a neutral policy during the events in Egypt, preferred to abstain from the vote at the UN on Libya, losing billion-dollar projects carried out with this country in many areas and completely excluded from the Libyan market (Sotnichenko, 2012). The new Libyan government also did not want to fulfill contracts worth 10 billion USD because Russia had made these agreements with Gaddafi and the new government stated that the agreements could be revised. In this context, Tatneft and Gazprom, Russia's two largest energy companies, had to give up their contracts in Libya. American and European companies have taken the place of Russian companies (Malashenko, 2013, p. 12). The losses of Russian oil companies from the frozen projects were estimated at 100 million USD. At this point, the biggest loss was in terms of Russia's arms sales. Billions of dollars of deals made during the Gaddafi era have lost their validity (Barmin, 2017). Meanwhile, the progress of Russia's infrastructure projects in the country has been disrupted, and as a result, the completion of the Sirte-Benghazi railway section by the Russian Railways Company, spanning 556 km, has been hindered (Zinin, 2016, p. 96).

The passing of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 on March 18, 2011, which allowed for international involvement in Libya and ultimately led to the “regime change” in Libya, compelled Russia to reevaluate its foreign policy in the Middle East. In this regard, the “Libyan scenario” has become the main slogan used by Russia to justify its decision to allocate 700 billion USD for the modernization of the army (Barmin, 2017).

Russia, which is seeking to benefit from the advancements in Libya, has been reminded by this situation that Syria holds an even more special position. Russia has had quite good relations with Syria

for a long time. Its largest diplomatic representation in the Middle East was in Damascus. The naval base, which consolidated Russia's presence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, was located in Syria. In addition, Syria was an important source of income for Russia in terms of arms trade. "The main concern was that the American army would enter Syria in an intervention similar to the one in Libya. In this case, it would mean that its rival, the United States, would be positioned even closer to Russia" (Sotnichenko, 2012). Russia has taken an unprecedented step in Libya and has not prevented the use of force against a sovereign state in connection with the internal conflict. In this context, the rhetoric of the then Russian President Medvedev did not differ much from the statements of Western leaders (Trenin, 2013, p. 9). Then-Prime Minister Putin, on the other hand, had a more skeptical point of view than other Russian politicians. However, Putin did not object to Russia's refusal to vote in the UN Security Council, and therefore to the adoption of relevant resolutions. However, shortly after this vote, he stated that "the decision allows everything and resembles a medieval crusade" and shared his concerns in this context (Trenin, 2013, p. 10).

All these factors determined Russia's view of the events in Syria. Russia has returned to a strategy that takes into account the political configuration created by the new regional reality brought about by the Arab Spring on a global scale. This strategy has materialized and matured in Russia's policy towards Syria. Russia's operation in Syria was also important in the context of changing the direction, priorities and rational framework of the Arab Spring. In addition, this operation was important in terms of creating a new level of regional security.

4. RUSSIA'S RETURN TO THE MIDDLE EAST: SYRIAN OPERATION AND ITS REGIONAL CONSEQUENCES

There were two important factors that guided the general framework of Russia's involvement in the Syrian crisis. The main of these factors was undoubtedly the new regional conditions brought about by the Arab Spring. The second factor was directly related to Russia's focus on Asian policies due to the Ukraine problem after 2014. After the annexation of Crimea, the main priority of Russian foreign policy was to develop military, economic and political relations with the non-Western world. In this direction, it was aimed to address relations with Eurasia, Asia-Pacific and the Middle East in a new strategic dimension.

The Syrian crisis had a framework that most affected the regional and international balance of power during the Arab Spring events. After the overthrow of Gaddafi and the dissatisfaction of the new Libyan government with the Kremlin, Syria remained Russia's only friend in the Middle East (Malashenko, 2013, p. 12). In this context, Syria had become Russia's main strategic target in the region. In line with this strategic goal, Russia has taken a clear position on Syria from the very beginning. The main indicator of this clear position has been that it does not hesitate from sharp disagreements with the United States and Europe (Trenin, 2013, p. 5).

It can be argued that the air operation launched by Russia on September 30, 2015 covers many goals and objectives. Matsuzato formulates these goals and objectives as follows (Matsuzato, 2022, p. 112):

- Preventing the spread of ISIS and similar fundamentalist radicalism from Syria to Russia's borders
- Offering an alternative to the U.S.-led war on terror in the Middle East, thereby challenging unipolarity
- Laying the groundwork for domestic populist rhetoric that Russian President Putin can use in domestic politics
- Breaking Russia's international isolation after the annexation of Crimea
- Saving the government of Bashar al-Assad, Russia's ally in the Middle East.

Syria had a different position compared to other Arab countries. This difference determined the boundaries and framework of the events that began in Syria in 2011. Undoubtedly, Russia's military operation was key to the preservation of the Assad regime. However, unlike Iraq and Libya in particular, al-Qaeda-linked structures were not active in Syria. Therefore, attempts to divide Syrian society along ethno-sectarian lines ended in failure. In the case of Iraq, the ethno-sectarian divide was much more pronounced. Another important factor was the attitude of the structures in the Assad regime. “During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the U.S. managed to buy off the generals in the army altogether, so that the Iraqi army could not put up any serious resistance except individually and subordinately. In Syria, this did not happen. Although there were those who acted contrary in the upper echelons of the military-political administration in Syria, this situation was not as important and decisive in terms of numbers as in Iraq” (Koshkina, 2015, p.10).

One of the primary reasons for Russia's involvement in Syria was the presence of ISIS in the region. Long before Russia's military operation in Syria, ISIS militants began posting videos accusing Moscow of supporting the Assad regime by supplying it with weapons. “*One of the videos showed a Russian-made Syrian military plane captured by militants. In addition, the militants were executing Russian ‘spies’ in Syria in front of the cameras. ISIS claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack on a Russian airliner in the skies over Egypt that killed 224 people, prompting further discussion of the issue of ISIS in Russia*” (Tsurkan, 2016, p. 103).

Another important parameter that guided Russia's involvement was the fact that the crisis in Syria significantly affected the balance of power in the Middle East. Before the events of the Arab Spring, Iraq and Afghanistan, only the United States stood out as the main external actor in the region. The strengthening of the regional position of the United States took place after the events of September 11, as part of the beginning of the “global war on terror” and interference in the internal affairs of Iraq and Afghanistan (Vakhsiteh, 2018, p. 36). In this context, the US was turning the “war on terror” into a

tool to establish regional hegemony. The discourse of the “war on terror”, which was a continuation of the unipolar international system formed after the Cold War, basically had a content that reinforced the regional and global interests of the USA. In this context, Russia has started to emphasize a mechanism of struggle against ISIS and other similar organizations as a way to provide an alternative to the discourse that the USA uses as an effective tool. The Syrian field had a suitable ground for the use of this discourse. The active role of ISIS and similar radical elements in Syria in 2014 allowed Russia to produce an alternative to the American-oriented “war on terror” discourse. Moreover, this alternative discourse was a reaction against US-centered unipolarity.

The Syrian crisis has helped Russia to get out of the geopolitical isolation formed after the annexation of Crimea and to increase its influence on the processes in the Middle East region. The operation in Syria was the first military mission carried out by Russia outside the post-Soviet space after Afghanistan, in which the potential of the Aerospace Forces, Navy, Special Forces and military police was used simultaneously (Vakhsiteh, 2018, p. 41) In this regard, it was of particular importance from the point of view of modern Russian military history.

It can be argued that the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the military operation in Syria in 2015 contributed greatly to the consolidation of the strategic character of Russian foreign policy. It is impossible to consider these two strategic events separately from each other. Therefore, the annexation of Crimea and the military operation in Syria appear as an example of complementarity and mental continuity. These two important strategic facts are among the most striking examples of the change in Russian foreign policy priorities (Myasnikov, 2020, p. 14). Another important point is that the actions in Syria were carried out without the approval of the UN Security Council, of which Russia is a permanent member (Myasnikov, 2020).

In the short term, Russia's air operation in Syria has become a means of achieving a number of important “instrumental” goals that are not directly related to Syria and go beyond the Middle East region. First of all, the military operation in Syria has brought Russia back to the forefront of world politics. Despite the deep crisis between Russia and the United States after the annexation of Crimea, especially the opposition to ISIS has provided cooperation opportunities as a common concern of these two countries (Stepanova, 2016, p. 1).

From time to time, the two countries have cooperated in the field of Syria, either tacitly or to a limited extent. This cooperation is not limited to cooperation in the fight against the terrorist organization ISIS. For example, support for terrorist organizations such as the PYD and YPG can be considered in the same context. Undoubtedly, it is worth underlining that the support given by the USA to these two terrorist organizations is more comprehensive and decisive. Another important issue is that, unlike the USA, Russia has established mechanisms with regional actors. The Astana platform, which prioritizes the political solution of the Syrian issue, is particularly important among these mechanisms. Russia,

together with Turkey and Iran, has prioritized the functionality of the platform in question and its transformation into a regional mechanism. Because, unlike the USA, which controlled the region for a long time, it is a reality that Russia needs new cooperation and partners more in the eyes of states. In the following period, Russia aimed to create Syria-based cooperation mechanisms with China strategically and with the Gulf countries in a tactical context. In particular, the development of relations with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates has prioritized the elimination of the differences of opinion and essentially strategic differences that emerged during the Arab Spring events.

Another dimension of Russia's strategy to protect the regime in Syria was to prevent the erosion of the secular regimes that existed in its immediate vicinity, especially in Muslim Central Asia. Especially since the mid-1990s, Russia has considered the protection of secular regimes in Central Asia as a priority for its regional policies. In this context, it certainly did not want the change in Syria to become a wave and extend to Central Asia.

The large-scale changes in the domestic and foreign political structure in the Middle East, called the Arab Spring, coincided with Russia's return to the great world politics. In this context, the Syrian operation has played a much bigger role in strengthening Russia's global position than the reaction to the events in Ukraine or Georgia in 2008. According to Bordachev, Russia responded to the hostile actions of Western countries in Ukraine and Georgia and, in fact, waged a defensive struggle against its immediate surroundings. In Syria and, later, in Libya, Russia has demonstrated its ability to project its national interests and values far beyond the modest sphere of influence it has left since the Cold War (Bordachev, 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

The Arab Spring events has basically emerged as a result of intra-regional dynamics that have accumulated over the years. However, it should be emphasized that the event has a dimension of external factors. With the beginning of the events, the US and European powers, which have interests in the region, have attempted to intervene in the events in some way. These initiatives significantly affected the general course of the internal dynamics that emerged in the Arab Spring and even guided the shaping of the process. In a region such as the Middle East, which has been the geopolitical area of interest of great powers throughout history, the determinism of external factors is a very natural process. This decisiveness has caused the development direction and agenda of the Arab Spring to evolve into an external process.

Although Russia initially considered the Arab Spring as a regional and internal issue, it started to act with great power concerns in the following periods and handled the events from the perspective of national interest. It is possible to formulate the basic framework of Russia's view of the Arab Spring and the strategic consequences of this framework as follows:

- Russia has seen the developments in the Middle East in the context of global competition as part of the existing geopolitical and geo-economic struggle with the United States
- It has observed that the regional relations that Russia has built during the Soviet period are under threat, and it has become necessary to create a policy in response to this
- Russia has considered the spread of various groups, which started to gain strength in the region with the Arab Spring, to its own lands and nearby countries as a security problem
- It determined that the stance in Libya harmed Russia's regional strategy and tried not to repeat the same mistake in Syria
- The military operation in Syria contained elements that were a response to Russia's encirclement and isolation by the West due to the annexation of Crimea
- The Syrian involvement has prepared a suitable ground for Russia to consolidate its strategies in the Mediterranean, Africa and the Black Sea

In the post-2011 foreign policy debates in Russia, the view prevailed that the attitude and abstention exhibited in Libya destroyed regional national interests. In this context, it would not be wrong to say that the military operation in Syria eliminated the “passive” and “cautious” situation displayed towards NATO's intervention in Libya and thus allowed Russia to return to the Middle East.

The study does not necessitate Ethics Committee permission.

The study has been crafted in adherence to the principles of research and publication ethics.

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