

## **SYRIAN CRISIS IN SCOPE OF THE US-RUSSIAN COMPETITION IN MIDDLE EAST**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study addresses the issue of the competition between the United States and Russia in the Middle East. The study examines the most important aspects which the two powers are competing for in the Middle East. These aspects include: geopolitical field, energy field and arms race. To better understand the US-Russia competition in the Middle East, the current Syrian crisis is taken as a case study. The investigation shows that the attitudes of the United States and Russia have been contradictory and disagreeable in Syria. The strategic interests and objectives that one party seeks to achieve are contrary to the interests and objectives of the competing party. As a final result, the study proved that what is happening in Syria represents the sharp competition between the United States and Russia which can be considered as an extension of their broader competition in the Middle East region. Also, since Syria holds a significant position in the region in strategic, economic, and energy terms, the possibility of reaching a complete solution depends on the compatibility of visions and attitudes between the two major powers and this is unexpected to be accomplished in the near future.

**Key Words** : Middle East, Competition, Syria, US, Russia.

**JEL Codes** : Y800- Related Disciplines (International Relations).

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**ORTA DOĐU'DA ABD-RUSYA REKABETİ KAPSAMINDA SURİYE KRİZİ****ÖZET**

Bu çalışma, ABD ve Rusya arasındaki Orta DoĐu'daki rekabet konusunu ele almaktadır. Çalışma, iki gücün Orta DoĐu için rekabetindeki önemli yönleri incelemektedir. Bu yönler şunlardır: jeopolitik alan, enerji alanı ve silahlanma yarışı. OrtadoĐu'daki ABD-Rusya rekabetini daha iyi anlamak için mevcut Suriye krizi örnek olay olarak ele alınmıştır. İnceleme, ABD ve Rusya'nın tutumlarının Suriye'de çelişkili ve anlaşmazlık içinde olduğunu göstermektedir. Bir tarafın başarmayı amaçladığı stratejik çıkarlar ve hedefler, rakip tarafın çıkarlarına ve hedeflerine aykırıdır. Sonuç olarak, çalışma Suriye'de olup bitenlerin, Orta DoĐu bölgesinde daha geniş bir rekabetin uzantısı olarak kabul edilebilecek ABD ile Rusya arasındaki keskin rekabeti temsil ettiğini kanıtlamaktadır. Ayrıca, Suriye'nin stratejik, ekonomik ve enerji açısından bölgede önemli bir konumu olduğu için, tam bir çözüme ulaşma olasılığı, iki büyük güç arasındaki vizyon ve tutumların uyumluluĐuna baĐlıdır ve bu, yakın bir gelecekte gerçekleştirilmesi beklenmeyen bir durumdur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Orta DoĐu, Rekabet, Suriye, ABD, Rusya.

**JEL Kodları** : Y800-İlgili Disiplinler (Uluslararası İlişkiler).

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Middle East region is gaining a significant importance in the international system in the geopolitical, economical, and strategical aspects. It is considered as one of the most important keys to control the world system. The importance of this region has made it a focus of attention to the major powers in the world to achieve their international political goals.

This study deals with a very important issue in the international relations which is the competition between the US and Russia. This competition is dominating the relation between the two nations particularly in the way they deal with the Middle East issues under the current circumstances of the Arab Spring events. Both sides try to regain or gain more influence in the region because of its geopolitical, economical, and strategical superiority. Syria is considered one of the most important areas where the US-Russian competition has raged. The competition level has reached a critical limit and that has encouraged researchers to investigate the causes of this competition and the objectives of each party.

The study aims to identify the aspects of the US-Russian competition in the Middle East. In addition, the study is aiming to demonstrate the different conducts that the US and Russia are following to deal with the Middle East nations according to their strategic interests. Moreover, the study is targeting to find answers to the enquiries that have been raised about the US-Russian competition in the Middle East during the current Syrian crisis and why each party has taken different attitude and measures towards the situation in Syria.

In this study, the descriptive method is used to describe the aspects of the US-Russian competition in the Middle East and how each party deals with the countries in the region and particularly with Syria. Finally, The Syrian crisis is taken as a case-study to analyze and understand the US-Russian competition in the region.

### **1. ASPECTS OF THE US - RUSSIAN COMPETITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

In order to determine the most important aspects of this competition, three main fields are considered namely the geopolitical field, energy field, and arms race field.

#### **1.1. US - Russian Geopolitical Competition in the Middle East**

The US foreign policy towards the Middle East has targeted the Arab countries in particular during the previous stages. The purpose was to of maintain the international strategic balance in the region in a situation that favors them, and to prevent any tendency to favor another force. It has been working to achieve this objective through (Little, 2008: 193-213):

- Redrawing the political features and characteristics of the countries of the region to become more democratic, considering that this constitutes an important American guarantee for the non-repetition of the events of September 11th, as well as preventing the emergence of any competing political forces.

- A complete support to the US military presence in the region and preventing the Russian influence and expansion.
- Attract the countries of the region towards the US in order to support American influence and reduce the influence of other countries by supporting political systems with close relationship with Washington.

On the other hand, the Arab countries in the Middle East are considered as prominent aspect in the Russian strategy because of several factors, most notably the geopolitical factor. The Arab region acquires geopolitical importance from several advantages to Russia (Khrestin & Elliott, 2007: 51-77):

- It is separated only by the Mediterranean Sea;
- The fact that the Arab region is one of the constants of English politics in the past and the present time;
- The Arab world is rich in oil;
- The presence of the strategic waterways in the Arab region: Suez Canal, strait of Hormuz, strait of Bab el Mandeb.

### **1.2. US-Russian Energy Competition in the Middle East**

Oil and gas are still a vital source of energy despite the development of alternative energy resources. The pursuit of energy needs by societies and countries is not new, and the attempts to control energy resources have been the main driver of many conflicts between major powers (Bilgin, 2009: 4491).

Middle East oil has many advantages that drive many world powers to attempt to control it, including: (i) The low cost of oil production in the Middle East due to the high production rates, the shallowness of the oil wells, the high rate of success in the discovery of oil, and the low of investigation expenses, (ii) Lower prices for Middle East oil compared to other regions in the world, and (iii) The advantage of quality as the Middle East produces light, medium and heavy oil types and these types are suitable for different markets (Mansour, 1995: 57).

There are three main factors that make the Middle East a very significant economic base on the US economy (Wahbi, 2010: 62):

- Protecting the US economy from any shocks it may suffer as a result of the interruption of the flow of oil or even unexpected raise oil prices.
- Maintaining the standard of living in the US, which basically include energy-intensive consumption, and not exposing this level and pattern to any threat whatever the cost.
- Control the prices of oil and its distribution, and then control the nerve of the economies of industrial and competing countries such as Russia and China, in other words resolve the American impasse of the decline of its economy position globally.

With its new strategy, Russia has become a challenge to the US, which is no longer the dominant economy of the 21st century. It has been facing competitors in energy management in the Middle East, especially Russia and China. With the collapse of the USSR, Russian policy in the Middle East entered a new phase, which did not rise to the stage of competition during the reign of President Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), but the change in Russian policy towards the Middle East came after the arrival of Vladimir Putin, who took over the presidency from 1999-2004, 2004-2009 and 2014 to present. Through many visits and meetings with regional leaders, Putin sought to re-enter the Middle East in an attempt to compete with the US (Lo, 2008: 24-78). The Russian approach seeks to establish an economic partnership and a real development role with the countries of the Middle East to provide a direct economic return to Russia (Gafarli, 2012: 142-143).

### **1.3. The US - Russian Arms Race in the Middle East**

Arms trade in the world is a thorny issue in which political and military conflicts, strategic imperatives and national security concepts are intertwined with economic considerations of trade and manufacturing. Far from providing a large national income and raising the level of exports of the industrial countries, it provides many jobs for their people and reduces the level of unemployment. Latest data reported by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) on global weapons sales shows that there may be an arm race in the Middle East and Asia. As SIPRI stated in a report about movements in international transfers of major arms, weapons sales have reached their highest since end of the Cold War. The latest report compares arms imports between 2007-2011 and 2012-2016. Weapons imports by Middle Eastern nations increased 86% between the two periods, with the region accounting for 29% of all global arms purchases. Saudi Arabia raised its weapons imports by 212% between the two periods and by 2016 became the world's second largest importer; Qatar amplified its weapons imports by 245%. Almost all the weapons imported by these Arab states came from the US and Europe (Fleurant, Perlo-Freeman, Wezeman, 2017: 2, 6, 10).

## **2. SYRIAN CRISIS AS A CASE STUDY TO THE US-RUSSIAN COMPETITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

The objective of this step is to bring the picture of this competition closer to the readers through this case-study. There has been a lot of talk recently about the Syrian crisis and how it represents the return of competition between the US and Russia, after their relationship has experienced kind of cooperation on many issues at the global level, such as combating terrorism. Therefore, the procedures that have been taken by the US and Russia toward the Syrian crisis and how their foreign policies have been dealing with it, the aspects of the US-Russian competition under the ongoing situation, and possible future scenarios for the Syrian crisis under the US-Russian competition will be highlighted in following sections.

## **2.1. The US Attitude on the Current Syrian Crisis**

With the beginning of the events in Syria in 2011, the American attitude toward what was happening was betting on the Syrian regime to carry out reforms that met the demands of the protesters. Therefore, the American statements remained limited to calling for stopping the violence, meeting the demands of the protesters, working to find a political solution, and the threat of severe sanctions unless the Syrian regime is embarking on genuine political reforms. Then, Obama's administration moved on to exert pressure on the Syrian regime, imposing a package of financial and economic sanctions on May 18, 2011, including President Bashar al-Assad and a number of political and security officials in his regime. This came immediately after the military operations of the regime forces against the rebellious cities and villages. Although the US president stated on 12 July 2011 that Bashar al-Assad had lost his legitimacy due to his inability to complete the democratic transition, he did not invite him to step down until August 18, 2011 (Sharp & Blanchard, 2012: 13-15).

By the end of 2011, the armed component of the Syrian opposition grew rapidly, and calls for international protection for the Syrian people, no-fly areas, and humanitarian corridors were expanded. The US attitude was conservative at the time toward these proposals. It selected not to send lethal weapons to Syria and the assistance was in humanitarian forms including food and medical supplies (Sharp & Blanchard, 2012: 19-22).

Since the spread of reports of the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons, the US had been threatening to take deterrent and cruel measures against the Syrian regime in case of use chemical weapons. President Obama said in his famous statement that the use of chemical weapons was a red line and that Syria regime would have serious consequences if it used chemical weapons against the people and the Syrian opposition. Shortly, new reports reached the White House confirming the use of sarin gas by the Syrian forces in the Eastern Ghouta which made the US to move its naval forces stationed in the Mediterranean and put it in preparation for a military strike on Syria. However, all the diplomatic efforts, by Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry, to build an international coalition to help carry out a military strike on Syria on charges of using chemical weapons failed. The solo impulsive decision that made by Obama administration to initiate a military attack on Syria caused a confusion in the international situations represented by different attitudes between America and Russia, a sharp split in the EU and in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and created confusion within the American society. In the midst of these complex situations, Russia proposed to the US that Syria hand over its chemical arsenal to the international community, in exchange for avoiding any military strike. This initiative was approved by the US and Syria and the Syrian regime began delivering its chemical shipments through stages (Blake & Mahmud, 2013: 246-253).

On October 3, 2016, the US issued a decision to suspend its political talks with Russia on Syria. US Secretary of State John Kerry called Russian support for Bashar al-Assad an irresponsible decision.

Kerry accused Russia and the Syrian regime of rejecting diplomatic options and continuing the military operations with hospitals being shelled, children are being horrified, and people being suffering (Humud, Blanchard & Nikitin, 2017: 1-13).

The American attitude towards what is happening in Syria is aiming to apply the theory of constructive chaos, with the intention of redrawing the geopolitical and political map not only in Syria but also in the Middle East as a whole. The theory of constructive chaos, according to the American perspective, is to dismantle the situation in a country, even if it leads to temporary chaos, in order to re-establish the country on new bases more appropriate to the interests of the US and its plans in the region. Moving the situation from the deadlock to the stage of elasticity, allows the US to intervene and apply ready-made scenarios, such as motivating the internal forces to make changes from within in the political systems (Nazemroaya, 2006: 1). This is evident in the Syrian case where the US supports the Syrian opposition, enabling them to overthrow the Syrian regime and at the same time working to mobilize international support for the intervention and the overthrow of the Syrian regime and support the arrival of another ally system.

The second objective the US is seeking to achieve in Syria is to prevent the arrival of weapons to Hezbollah and Hamas. The weapons that are brought from Iran through Damascus to Lebanon to support Hezbollah, and weapons smuggled across Syrian territory to Iraq will be disrupted when the Syrian regime is busy with the boiling situation happening in the country. Currently, an opposite round of arms smuggling is taking place where instead of smuggling arms through Syria to Iraq and Lebanon, arms are smuggled into Syria to support the Syrian fighting parties across borders from different directions (Mohns & Bank, 2012: 7-33).

The third objective that the US is seeking to achieve in Syria is a geopolitical goal, which falls within the context of the realistic direction that dominates American foreign policy in the context of its interactions with the major powers competing in the Syrian arena. According to the US strategy, Syria is a sensitive part of the edge of the earth to block Russia from the south-west and prevent it from having access to warm waters. The establishment of allied regimes in such sensitive areas is an urgent US demand since Syria is considered a central state within the context of the conflict between the US-led naval supremacy and the Russian-led land supremacy. US seeks to overthrow Russia's allies in the Middle East, including the Syrian regime, which is an important ally of Russia and its presence in the Mediterranean region (Fawcett, 2016: 144-148)

The fourth goal that the US is seeking to achieve through its attitude on the Syrian crisis is related to the issue of the energy struggle, especially for natural gas. The US is working hard to break the Russian monopoly on the European gas market and drive Europe out of the growing Russian influence by finding alternatives to gas sources that can the needs of Europeans. Within this goal, the

US is doing what it can to block any force that seeks to change the basis of the energy equation in the world which based on American superiority (Shueibi, 2012: 1-8).

## **2.2. The Russian Attitude on the Current Syrian Crisis**

Syria is an important ally of Russia in the Middle East. The relationship with Damascus has been a key building block of the Russian strategy in the Middle East since before the era of President Hafez al-Assad, and it was deepened his reign. He focused on developing a strategic relationship with Russia as one of the most strategic permanent partnerships in the Middle East. On the other hand, Russia has since 2000 focused on restoring Russia's status as a "superpower", embodying its policy against the US in order to put Russia as a counterweight to the West in the Middle East. Syria is one of the most important foothold in the region for Russia, and it is of key importance in Putin's calculations because of its strategic location (Borshchevskaya, 2013: 1-7). Russia has been working since the beginning of the current Syrian crisis to confirm its position in preventing any military intervention in Syria or impose more sanctions on it. Russia is fearing that this would be a cover for further US hegemony in the region. Russia is taking a more intensive position against any intervention in Syria because it believes that will allow an American foothold in the heart of Syria after the overthrow of the regime as what happened in Iraq. Therefore, Russia quickly disrupted the Arab regional and international initiatives to issue resolutions supporting the implementation of these initiatives in UNSC through the use of veto (Berryman, 2012: 530-536).

Many observers point out that there are many factors associated with the Russian interests in Syria. These factors are of a political, strategic, and economic nature and control the position of Russia towards the Syrian crisis and can be identified in the following points (Sladden, Wasser, Connable, & Grand-Clement, 2017: 2-13):

- The economic interests: The Middle East is the second largest market for Russian arms exports. Prior to the Arab Spring, Algeria, Syria, and Libya regularly appeared on the lists of senior clients of Russian military equipment. Russia considers the battle in Syria as its battle because it sees the situation as a conspiracy by the Western countries, led by the US, to keep it away from the energy areas emerging in the Mediterranean. Russia realizes that the oil power and rising global prices that have helped the current Russia to restore its international role through its financial and economic capabilities. Russia's increasing interest in Syria is due to the discovery of its new wealth in several oil fields on the Syrian coast and near the Lebanese border. In addition, Russia is aware of America's desire to pass Qatari gas pipeline through Syria to Europe in an attempt to end the dependence of European countries on Russian gas.

- The political interests: Russian leaders believe that Assad's departure will either make Syria an American ally or slip into long-term chaos and civil war. In either case, Russia will lose a reliable ally. Since becoming president, Vladimir Putin has worked to rebuild relations between Russia and its allies in the Middle East. Syria, Libya, Iraq and Iran were at the center of this axis, through which Russia sought to balance American hegemony in the region.
- Strategic interests: Russian intentions to support Bashar Assad's regime are based on strategic readings and calculations. Moscow sees the overthrow of the Assad regime as a prelude to overthrowing the Iranian regime. It will inevitably affect the role that Russia aspires to play again as a major power in the new international balance, especially under the decline in the level of the US military presence after the withdrawal from Iraq and with the approaching withdrawal from Afghanistan.

### **3. THE ASPECTS OF THE US-RUSSIAN COMPETITION IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS**

The Syrian arena is witnessing a complicated and complex struggle at the national and international levels, in which the US and Russia play the most prominent role in the conduct of the events of this Syrian crisis. There are several aspects of the US-Russian competition in Syria. The competition between the two poles can be defined in three levels: Official discourse, international level, and logistic support level for the conflicting parties.

#### **3.1. The US-Russian Competition in Syria at Official Discourse Level**

The official discourse and political statements of both the US and Russia on Syria has been tremendously contradictory. This creates a gap in the international situation which includes not only these two countries, but also alliances belong either to this part or to the other (Wilhelmsen & Haugevik, 2016: 3-4).

Pluralism in the Syrian arena have cast different dimensions in terms of dealing with the dangers and threats generated by the conflict. At the international level, American statements issued in succession by the White House were gradually increasing in condemning the conflict. Initially, the statements deplored what Assad is doing and requested the Syrian regime to make rapid political reforms. Eventually, these requests were progressively evolved in an open letter calling for Assad departure and insisting that the new Syria would not be with Assad in authority. The statements intensified to the point of threatening by military strike against the Syrian regime in case of using chemical weapons (Humud, et.al., 2017: 7-12). On the other hand, the Russian discourse called for restraint, accusing the armed opposition of undermining the regime, killing civilians, and describing them as terrorist groups. Russia has been always waving the veto whenever any calling for an UNSC resolution to remove the regime in Syria is issued (Valenta & Valenta, 2016: 7-8).

Since the end of Obama's second administration period and Donald Trump become the 45th US president on January 2017, the relation between the US and Russia regarding Syria has become more complex and complicated. In April 4, 2017, The US has accused the Syrian regime of carrying out a chemical air attack on the town of Khan Shaykhun. Trump announced from the White House that Bashar al-Assad's regime had crossed all red lines and that his position on Syria had changed after the attack (Mason & Perry, 2017: 1-10).

After few days and exactly the next Friday US President Donald Trump stressed his position on the Syrian crisis, even surpassing his predecessor, Barack Obama. Trump issued orders to attack the Shayrat Airbase east of Homs, which is under the control of Syria's government forces with Tomahawk missiles. The new policy of Trump may dictate any hope of cooperation between Washington and Moscow in Syria, especially since the White House did not inform the Kremlin of these attacks before its implementation (Holland & Cooney, 2017: 1-3).

### **3.2. The US-Russian Competition in Syria at International Level**

The American efforts to issue an international resolution condemning the regime of Bashar al-Assad has been faced with a Russian refusal by using the veto ten times in different occasions since 2011. This highlights the seriousness of the international conflict on Syria and division between the major countries that differ in their vision of what is happening in Syria (Nichols, 2017: 1).

What can be understood from using veto power many times in the UNSC that Russia seeks to thwart any international resolution against the Assad regime to assert that it is an important international actor whose interests must be taken into account if the Syrian crisis is needed to be resolved. Thus, Russia has put both the US and Western countries in a difficult position. Either the US is committed to a common solution to the crisis that takes into account Russia's interests, which will be a major political victory for Russia, or work outside the framework of the UN and the international legitimacy, which raises the cost of intervention to the maximum degree and deprives it of legitimacy. The inability of the UN to take decisive international decisions at the level of the UNSC with the aim of overthrowing the Syrian regime, led to the US to impose sanctions on the Syrian regime individually, and motivated its partners within NATO and the Arab League States to impose similar sanctions. Not only did the US impose sanctions on Syria but urged the EU governments to do so. The US was able to reach a bilateral agreement with EU governments to impose sanctions that would ban imports of Syrian oil and new investments in the Syrian oil industry, and this was one of the most severe sanctions applied on Syria. Through these sanctions, it has become obvious that the inability of the international community to unify its position in the adoption of UN resolutions on Syria based on the American desire. This has pushed the US and many of its Western allies and some Arab countries to impose sanctions aiming to tighten the situation on the Syrian regime and weaken it internally. Consequently, the opposition that is directly or indirectly supported by the US would be able to overthrow the Syrian regime without the need for

external military intervention (Sharp & Blanchard, 2012: 13-15). However, these American efforts has been met by Russian steps in support of the Syrian regime. Russia has strengthened its trade ties with Syria through several deals and contracts, especially in the field of oil and gas, so that Russia and its ally China support the Syrian regime in the face of US and European sanctions imposed on it (The Voice of Russia, 2012: 1-7).

### **3.3. The US-Russian Competition in Syria at Logistic Support Level**

Russia has played an important role in supporting the Syrian regime in confronting the armed opposition. The Russian support has not been only in the UNSC through the lifting of the veto, and not only through the political discourse of the Russian leaders, but rather to provide Syria with military experts, advanced military techniques and devices, internet and direct military deals, and spare parts. The services were further extended through financial support and direct Russian flights to support and transport the wounded and serious injuries from the Syrian troops to Russia (Eker, 2013: 3).

Continued support for the two sides of the war in Syria indicates that both the US and Russia are trying to improve their position in the battle before entering into negotiations to ensure significant gains at the expense of the opposing party. While Russia continues to support the Syrian regime at all levels, including military support, the United States and its allies support the Syrian armed opposition to topple the Syrian regime (Dannreuther, 2015: 82).

## **4. POSSIBLE FUTURE SCENARIOS OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS UNDER THE US-RUSSIAN COMPETITION**

With Syria turning into a battleground of international contradictions, particularly the contradiction between US and Russian interests, speculation about the future situation in Syria has grown. The failure of all efforts to find a diplomatic solution that satisfies the parties to the conflict and committing the regime and the opposition to further armed violence with increasing foreign support by all means have made the expectations for the future situation in Syria more complex and complicated. Three scenarios will be now presented in this section in order to explore possible future scenarios of the Syrian crisis under the US-Russian competition and based on the preceding analysis of this study as follows:

### **4.1. Scenario I: Continuation of the Syrian Crisis**

When reading the current scene in Syria, which is the continuation of Russian and US support to the parties to the conflict politically, militarily and financially, it seems difficult to reach an internal or international solution in the near future. The regime is likely to continue with the security solution, with the Russians still supporting him and betting on his ability to stay in power. On the other hand, the US supports the Syrian oppositions and increase their armament in order to weaken the regime until it

gradually disintegrates from within. Then, diminishing its ability to control the situation and then it can intervene to achieve its objectives.

The hit-and-run game between the Syrian army and opposition fighters are the most prominent phase among the conflict forms. This has been represented by the regime's entry into some areas and its retreat from other regions, and likewise by opposition. This situation will further blur the vision in the coming period, complicate the scene militarily and politically, and increase the likelihood of military escalation on the battlefield from the parties in order to find new negotiating key.

The lack of agreement between the US and Russia on the features of a new political system, that is consistent with their interests, is an indicator of the continuation of the crisis situation in Syria for a longer period. It may be in the interests of the US and Russia to continue arming both the regime and opposition forces so that the conflict will continue in a balanced manner to avoid a new political regime that opposes their interests in the region.

The persistence of Russian and the American positions on the Syrian crisis will lead to Syria sinking into a long war, in which neither side will succeed in achieving a "break-through" point. In this case, the status quo is likely to remain the same where the war between the regime and the opposition continues, and each party keeps controlling certain areas without any significant progress.

#### **4.2. Scenario II: The Syrian Regime Stays in Power**

According to this scenario, the Syrian regime will continue to be headed by Bashar al-Assad and Syria will return to the pre-revolutionary era. This will only be achieved through the elimination of the political and military opposition through intensive Russian support. As a result, the survival of Assad in power will be a major blow to Washington's interests in the region, in turn will strengthen Russia's position at the regional and international levels.

The Syrian regime's chances of survival are heavily supported by the strong relations with Russia which have been established for many years. Although these relations were briefly stagnated after the collapse of the USSR, they were shortly recovered after settling the debt issue that had been in Syria since the Soviet era. The relations between Russia and Syria have grown significantly in recent years through the conclusion of several agreements between the two countries, especially in the field of the modernization of the Syrian armed forces. Most of the purchases of arms supplied by the Syrian forces come from Russian Federation. In the context of the Syrian crisis, Russia and Syria signed many deals in which Russia will supply the Syrian army with various types of weapons for many years. Thus, the continuation of the flow of Russian weapons on Syria will enable the Syrian regime to withstand the armed opposition and re-establish its control over Syria.

#### **4.3. Scenario III: The Fall of the Syrian Regime**

This scenario includes the end of the era of the Syrian regime represented by President Bashar al-Assad. This may occur by (i) him to step down or, (ii) leave by negotiation or force binding as a result

of a military victory of the opposition or, (iii) entering into an international conflict leading to the same fate of the leaders of the Arab countries whose regimes fell in the events of the Arab Spring, or (iv) by coup against him internally.

Increasing American support, politically, logistically, and militarily, for the Syrian opposition with new sanctions imposed on the Syrian regime and working to isolate it internationally, will lead to an end to the Assad regime. The Russians will then bargain for change to preserve some of their interests. Russian diplomacy may open up to the Syrian opposition and agree to preserve its interests in Syria. It seems that securing such guarantees is not difficult or impossible in exchange for Russia changing its positions in support of the regime, particularly renouncing the use of the veto in UNSC. This will allow Russia to return as an influential party in the arrangements for the arrival of the new regime.

Based on current situation in Syria, the closest scenario to verify among the three choices is most likely the first scenario of the conflict continuation. The Assad's regime is likely to continue with the military solution, with the Russians still supporting him and believing that he is still able to remain in power and for the difficulty of obtaining an alternative regime that would safeguard their interests in Syria and the Middle East in general. In return, the US and its regional and international allies will continue to support the Syrian opposition in order to prevent the Syrian regime from eliminating the opposition. At the same time, working to weaken the regime until it gradually disintegrates from within, diminishing its ability to hold onto the state leading to change the Russian position without any preconditions.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study focused on the analysis of competition between the US and Russia in the Middle East region in general and in Syria in particular. In other words, this study aims to understanding what has been happening in Syria from the beginning of the current crisis in 2011 from the perspective of the US-Russian competition and the following results are reached:

- The aspects of the US-Russian competition in the Middle East cannot be confined to one area only that is access to the energy resources of the region. There are other aspects that are as important as energy and play an important role in increasing the frequency of competition. These aspects include the geopolitical importance of the region and the arms trade.
- The US and Russia's attitudes toward regional issues reflects a clear divergence in their respective strategies resulted from conflicting interests in the Middle East. These different strategies toward the region can be summarized in the following point:
  - The Russian strategy considers the Middle East as an important area close to its southern border and any instability in it will negatively affect many of its states, and that will threaten its national security. In addition, Russia sees the region as an

important outlet for access to warm water, as well as an important market for arms promotion for financial returns that contribute to the recovery of its economy.

- The American strategy focuses on the need for permanent presence in the Middle East through different methods, whether direct military presence or through the establishment of political and economic alliances with the countries of the region. Therefore, it will be able to encircle Russia and prevent it from penetrating into what America considers its vital field. In other words, the US recently became concerned about the new Russian return as a world superpower, which threaten its presence in the Middle East, especially under the strategic rapprochement between Russia and China. The United States has adopted the strategy of expanding the competition with Russia and transfer it to areas of Russian influence, such as Syria. This will keep Russia busy solving its problems and crises, so it would not have the opportunity to reorganize its internal and external interests and return as a strong and competitive party threatening the American interests in the Middle East.
- The new Russian return to compete with the US on the international scene is primarily related to the arrival of an ambitious leadership, which has begun to seek Russia's return to its Soviet glory. However, this was not the only factor. It was also helped by the rise in energy prices, which contributed to the recovery of its economic and financial potential. Thus, Russia has the ability to present itself as a new alternative to the countries of the Middle East instead of the US.
- The Syria's armed conflict between the Syrian regime and its opponents has raised the contradictory of the American and the Russian attitudes towards the Syrian crisis. The crisis has shown a clash of interests and strategic objectives between the two parties in the Middle East. Their competition has been clearly demonstrated by their respective positions in supporting different sides the Syrian war.
- The US considers Syria as the heart of the Middle East and this heart must be controlled in order to establish a world system that will keep it in the lead and not allow any competing power to rise. It also knows that who controls Syria can tighten the grip on surrounding countries and who controls this geopolitical range can control the Middle East, and who succeeds in controlling the Middle East has the chance to control the world.
- Russia sees the Syrian crisis and this American position as a threat to its strategic interests in the Middle East. It is aware that the overthrow of the Syrian political regime and the establishment of another political system will pave the way to redraw the geopolitics of the Middle East according to the interests of the US and will lead to the removal of Russia from

the region. It, therefore, rushed to provide all forms of support to the Syrian regime to the extent that it has used its veto power ten times against the UNSC resolutions condemning this regime. Russia, through this position, has expressed its unwillingness to stop supporting the Syrian regime due the significant importance of Syria in the Russia's Middle East and international strategies.

- The competition between the US and Russia in Syria is in fact only an extension of their broader competition in the Middle East. Syria possess a significant importance in many fields not only geopolitically but even economically. Recent excavations have revealed that Syria has considerable energy potential in the region, which is a major source of interest for US and Russian energy companies. All these aspects have greatly affected the events in Syria.
- The possibility of reaching a final solution to the Syrian crisis depends on the compatibility of the American and Russian visions and the convergence of their interests. Both sides recognize that the victory of one of the internal parties of the Syrian crisis will lead to resolving the competition in the Middle East as a whole. This makes the scenario of the continuation of the Syrian crisis the expected scenario in the near future.

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