

The Transformation of Russia's Middle East Policy (From Geopolitical Play to Geoeconomic Role)

Jahangir Karami* - Professor of Eurasian Studies Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

Received: 11/08/2025

Accepted: 30/09/2025

Abstract

Russia's policy in the Middle East has changed in the years following the Ukrainian war, and therefore the main purpose of this article is to analyze how this transformation and its consequences have occurred, and to answer the question of how Russia's policy has changed during this period? The author claims that during this period we are witnessing a gradual shift from a political and security strategy to a primarily economic strategy, and in fact, the game based on the geopolitical element has turned into a geoeconomic role-playing game. Although the context for such a situation began with the beginning of the Ukrainian war in 2022, the fall of the Assad regime has consolidated this situation. To discuss the hypothesis, the article uses the method of qualitative analysis of the hypothesis variables, by studying strategic documents on Russian national security and foreign policy, statements by government officials, the course of developments, and some economic statistics. Therefore, it first deals with the features of Russia's Middle East policy since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. The Ukrainian war and its consequences for Russia's Middle East policy will be discussed in the second section. Finally, it concludes by examining the major developments in the Middle East since the Ukrainian war. The main finding of this article is that Russia has not had a fundamental, long-term policy in the region and that, in general, the Kremlin's strategy has been reactive to events and conditioned on seizing opportunities and avoiding problems for its regional interests. Given the strategic turn in its Middle East policy, it will not seriously intervene in future developments in the region. Perhaps the most important manifestation of this new game can be seen in Russia's positions towards the Israel-Iran war.

Keywords: Russia, Middle East, Geopolitics, Geoeconomics, Crisis.

* E-Mail: jkarami@ut.ac.ir

1. Introduction

Until the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2012, Russia was on the sidelines of developments in the Middle East, and it was only after this crisis that a new Middle East policy was formed in Russia, which reached its peak in 2015 and, with the cooperation of Iran, was able to play an important role in stabilizing the regime of Bashar al-Assad. After this time, Russia emerged as an influential factor and key player in regional developments in the Middle East, and none of the regional and international players during this period could ignore the Kremlin's key role in the security games of the region. This situation continued more or less until the Ukrainian war in 2022, after which we have once again witnessed a change in the type of Russian game in the Middle East.

After the Ukrainian war, fundamental changes have also taken place in the Middle East. The developments in Gaza since October 7, 2023 have made the situation in the region more critical, and especially after the fall of the Syrian government on December 7, 2024, the previous arrangements have undergone fundamental and unexpected changes. There is still no stability regarding Syria and its future, and new equations and arrangements for an effective replacement have not been formed, and the situation in Gaza and its future remains uncertain. With Trump coming to power, US Middle East policy has become much more aggressive and unpredictable than ever. These new circumstances have exposed the region to further changes, and for the first time, Iran and Israel have entered into a direct and unprecedented confrontation. At the end of the Iran-P5+1 nuclear deal, the possibility of the return of UN Security Council sanctions resolutions against Iran has continued to keep the situation ambiguous.

But the main issue that the author tries to examine is the strategy of the Russian government in the new era, which did not react to the fall of Damascus to Ahrar al-Sham forces and silently passed by this important change. After that, Moscow tried to maintain its existing interests in Syria through negotiations. Although this new strategy had begun gradually since the war in Ukraine, it became more obvious with the fall of the Assad regime as Moscow's strategic ally. In such circumstances, the question that we seek to answer in this article is: How has Russian policy changed during this period? The author proposes a hypothesis that during this period we are witnessing a gradual shift from a political and security strategy to a predominantly economic strategy, and that in fact, the geopolitical element

of the game has become a geoeconomic role-playing game, making Russia a less involved actor in regional affairs. This shift began slowly with the beginning of the Ukrainian war, and this war became such a priority for the Russian government that it overshadowed other regions and issues. However, the fundamental turn must be seen in the light of the fall of the last remaining ally from the Soviet era and the destruction of the last remnants of Russia's intelligence, military, and political systems in the region.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

To discuss and examine the hypothesis I mentioned in the introduction, the author uses the method of qualitative analysis of the variables of the article's hypothesis, studying strategic documents on Russian national security and foreign policy, statements by government officials, trends, and some economic statistics. Therefore, he first examines the characteristics of Russia's Middle East policy since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. The Ukrainian war and its implications for Russia's Middle East policy will be discussed in the second section. Finally, he concludes by examining the major developments in the Middle East region since the Ukrainian war.

To discuss the logic of a country's regional policy evolution, the author attempts to use an analytical combination of the theories of the "school of foreign policy analysis", "discourse analysis of foreign policy" and "pragmatism of foreign policy" to provide a better understanding of how countries' foreign policy priorities change. Basically, the foreign policy priorities of countries are usually a function of the level of power, ideology and specific economic interests for the country. Naturally, as power decreases, ideological attitudes change and a region becomes less important for the country's economic interests, the region in question also falls out of priority. In the school of foreign policy analysis, issues are analyzed by referring to domestic factors and, in a later stage, regional and international factors. In the first generations of the school, this issue was generally pursued with an attitude towards the decision-making system, the psychological environment and comparative study with the aim of finding general rules in a behavioral manner (Yazdanfam,2008:250). However, in the second and third generations, more attention has been paid to case studies and attention to social, cultural, structural, multiple and multi-level factors.

Within the framework of the third generations theories of the school of foreign policy analysis, there is a major emphasis on "foreign policy discourse analysis" and the discourses governing a country's foreign policy are influenced by attitudinal, contextual, and environmental factors, which lead to the transformation of a discourse and its transformation into a more flexible and adapted discourse. Moshirzadeh does not necessarily see discourse analysis as post-structural and critical, and believes that in its light, preferences and interests can be understood and a set of actions can be accepted, and in foreign policy discourse analysis there are important possibilities for understanding stability and change (Moshirzadeh,2018:82-85). This issue mainly occurs easily in the foreign policy of non-ideological and pragmatic countries, and ideological countries are less flexible in this regard. Usually, pragmatism in foreign policy provides the grounds for using opportunities and avoiding limitations and challenges. The discourse of reactive pragmatism is of great importance in this regard.

But in the theory of pragmatism in foreign policy, what matters is the benefit, usefulness, and efficiency of a policy, and the effort is to establish a fundamental link between belief, meaning, and action, and any concept or idea that goes beyond the boundaries of practical experience is considered meaningless. According to Cochran, in a world of diverse states, each of which has its own interests and often competes with each other for survival, it is difficult to act in accordance with the moral principle and abandon the precautionary condition (Cochran,2012:3-4). The pragmatist theorist John Dewey emphasized the concern for survival as the most important human issue and considered the only way to overcome this concern to be the faculty of knowledge, and therefore, he considered the agent of knowledge to be involved in the game of life and always considered knowledge to be inherently connected with action. Therefore, the most important claims of pragmatism can be described as follows: reality is constructed and dealt with only based on the type of our performance in the world; Human knowledge about the world should be based on its practical utility; people understand social knowledge in terms of its practical utility; and to understand social actors, we must focus on their practical behavior (Reiters,2003:268-269).

However, pragmatism in foreign policy, despite such specific theoretical foundations, focuses on the possibilities and limits of achieving foreign policy goals, programs, and successes in difficult conditions of international

life and claims that the heavy burden of adapting national interests to possibilities, limitations, and result-based action in specific conditions is on the shoulders of the country's diplomacy. Although pragmatism does not fit well into any of the traditional theoretical frameworks in international relations and foreign policy, it is possible to achieve a better understanding of this category in understanding the foreign policy of countries by taking inspiration from the writings of John Dewey and Richard Rorty (Ralston, 2011:72). Therefore, in this category, each state has its own style of pragmatism. Naturally, no state is completely non-pragmatist; Rather, the issue here is the extent and extent of pragmatism in a country's foreign policy agenda. Therefore, it seems that by combining the two theories of foreign policy discourse analysis and foreign policy pragmatism, an analytical model can be used to better understand the evolution of Russia's foreign policy priorities in the Middle East. The following model depicts this situation:



Fig (1): Pragmatic Foreign Policy Discourse

3. Research Findings

3-1. Russia's Geopolitical Role in the Middle East

Throughout Russia's history, the Middle East has been, for various reasons, if not a priority, then a crucial direction of its foreign policy and military strategy. This includes enduring geopolitical, religious, cultural and civilizational factors. Both in imperial and Soviet times, Russian authorities had to focus political activity and significant military forces on its southern borders due to their great length and security threats, not only from neighboring states but also from Western powers. Moreover, this region has always been viewed as part of Central Asia, which is territorially and strategically connected to Russia. Spiritual ties with fellow believers in the Middle East, the large area of indigenous Muslim population in Russia itself and, of course, long-standing trade and economic interests have also played a significant role (Kortunov,2025:12). Therefore, Russia's Middle East

policy is a historical one. If the country's active presence in the region is linked to the developments of the Soviet era, this policy continued in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, despite many ups and downs.

Russia's Middle East policy in 2012-2021 generally had an important political and security aspect, which was unlike the years of the 1990s-2011. In fact, since the beginning of the Arab Spring on December 17, 2010, Russia was not very concerned about developments in the region due to positive and constructive interactions with the US government within the framework of the "Reset"¹ plan during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev and Barack Obama. Even in 2011, it voted in favor of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to establish a no-fly zone in Libya.² With the beginning of the crisis in Syria in March 2012, and then with Putin coming to power in 2012, Russia's interactions with the West also gradually changed. Russia and Iran tried to maintain the Syrian government in the face of its internal and external opponents during these years. During a joint military operation from September 2015 to 2019, the Bashar al-Assad regime was saved and the situation in Syria was relatively stabilized.

During this period, Russia's new Middle East policy was based on multiple foundations. The first foundation of this policy was to preserve the Syrian government and not confront any other country in the region. The Russian government pursued a comprehensive regional policy and tried to maintain its relations with all parties to the crisis. As part of its regional strategy in the Syrian crisis, Moscow attempted to develop dialogue and cooperation with various actors involved in the Syrian conflict, including Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar (Golmohammadi & Arm,2014:367). Therefore, despite the support of Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, Moscow tried to maintain its relations with these governments and even established relations with some domestic groups opposing the Assad regime. This was mainly due to a policy based on the regional balance of power in the Middle East (Stepanova,2016). From the Kremlin's

1.This plan was presented in 2009 by then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to bring past issues and problems, especially the consequences of the 2008 Georgian war, to zero in on the foreign relations of the two countries and to start a new era of engagement.

2.Based on this resolution, the possibility of military intervention by NATO to prevent the government from suppressing the people was provided, which eventually led to the fall of Muammar Gaddafi on October 21, 2011.

perspective, the Middle East should not be under the control of any particular regional power, and the best situation for the region would be a multilateral balance in which Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel would be the main powers (Noori,2019). Therefore, Russia's Middle East policy was clearly oriented towards maintaining the status quo in the region.

Other pillars of Russia's regional policy included maintaining the Tartus naval base and the Hmeimim Air Base on the Mediterranean coast of Syria, which are the only military bases of Russia outside Soviet territory (Truevtsev,2022). It is also necessary to mention factors such as opposition to American intervention, the continuation and expansion of Western measures in the region, and the containment of terrorism in the region due to the presence of thousands of people from Russia and Central Asia inside Syria. Russia preferred to deal with these terrorist groups inside Syria and was concerned about their return to Central Eurasia. Another important point was the geographical importance of ISIS's spread. It was about 600 miles from the city of Mosul in northern Iraq, which was the center of the ISIS caliphate, to the city of Grozny, the center of the Chechen Republic in the North Caucasus (Karami,2019). Therefore, Moscow has repeatedly stated that the main reason for its intervention in Syria is to prevent terrorists from returning to Russia and turning the country into a new Iraq (Golmohammadi & Arm,2014). The focus of a large part of the operations of Russian fighter jets on the deployment centers of Central Asian forces was for this reason.

Some analysts of Russian foreign policy have also pointed to the role and importance of improving Russia's image after the Conquest of Crimea in 2014. From this perspective, this military operation and military support for separatists in eastern Ukraine painted an image of Russia and president Putin as an occupier and warmonger in the global arena. However, the UN Security Council resolution in 2015 to combat ISIS provided an important opportunity for a military presence in Syria so that Moscow could restore its image as an anti-terrorist and stabilizing force. This operation, to some extent, weakened the psychological and propaganda conditions and Western narrative. According to Nikolai Kozhanov, a Russian foreign policy analyst, "Russia sees better relations with Middle Eastern countries as a means to prevent international isolation, offset the negative effects of international sanctions, and exert greater pressure on the West" (Kazhanov,2018).

Although the most important field of Russia's regional policy in the Middle East was the Syrian civil war, Russia's entire regional policy should not be reduced to a military presence and support for the government in Syria. During these years, Moscow expanded economic relations with Middle Eastern countries and, in particular, transferred weapons to countries in the region. Russia's military involvement in the Syrian civil war in 2015 led the country to reaffirm its status as an important player in the MENA region. Foremost, it presented an opportunity for Russia to test its military hardware in an armed conflict environment, as well as to develop its tactics and procedures for using its weapons. In terms of arms trade, the demonstration of Russian military technologies and capabilities during the Syrian civil war may have attracted interest from potential foreign buyers and provided possibilities for Russia to enter new markets (Kuimova,2019). In 2009-2018, Russia was the second largest supplier of weapons to the Middle East. It accounted for 18% of the total volume of weapons imports by the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (Kuimova,2019). According to available statistics, about 60% of the Russian arms market is in the Middle East. In this regard, Egypt, Algeria, Iran and Turkey are among Russia's main military partners. In 2017 alone, Russia sold about \$23 billion worth of weapons to the region. This figure has reached over \$24 billion in 2020.¹ The chart below shows Russia's arms trade in the region:

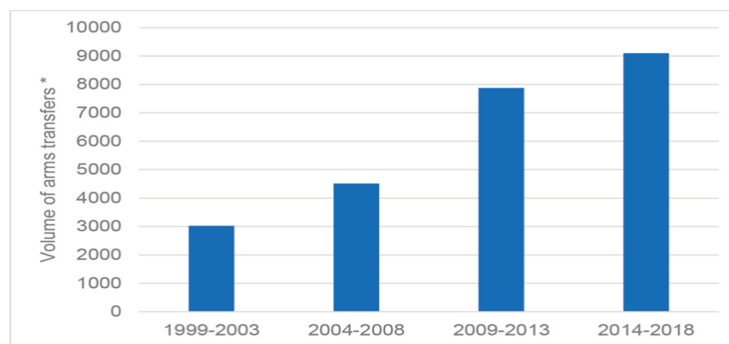


Fig (2): Russian Arms Exports to the Middle East
(Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database,2019)

1.SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, 2020

Given the arguments made in this section, it can be seen that Russia pursued a combined political, security, and economic strategy in the Middle East from 2012 to 2021, which increased the country's position in global equations due to the type of interaction with various parties to the crisis in the region and the success in maintaining the Syrian government. Therefore, for the first time after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia intervened in various world crises, from North Africa to Latin America, and for this purpose, it organized a special military force as a private security sector called the Wagner Forces¹. However, with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, this situation changed and gradually a new era for the Kremlin's foreign policy began, which is very different from the previous decade, and we will continue to examine its dimensions and characteristics.

3-2. New Challenges for Middle East politics

In 2020-2022, president Putin saw Russia in a more favorable position vis-à-vis the West, given the success in Syria, America's problems in Iraq and Afghanistan, and especially the difficult withdrawal of the army from Afghanistan. Since the late 1980s, the Soviet Union had been in an unequal position with its Western rivals, and with its collapse, the new Russia in the 1990s found itself exposed to pressure and humiliation from its Western rivals. Since 2000, Putin has tried to resolve some of the issues and problems arising from that era from an independent position and in interaction with Western countries. From the Kremlin's perspective, the West should not have considered Gorbachev's reforms and the voluntary withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact as the defeat of the rival, and following that, they were gradually narrowing the field for Russia through Western organizations and soft and hard interventions. This issue was pursued especially during Medvedev's presidency from 2008 to 2011 through closer interactions and under the "Reset" plan (Ulyanov,2015).

1.The Wagner Group is a paramilitary group or private military company indirectly affiliated with the Russian military that participates in proxy wars by recruiting volunteers. Its activities include participation in the Syrian Civil War, the War in Donbass, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The group has been on the United States sanctions list since June 2017. To read about Wagner forces, see: Hüseyin Özdemir, "The Rise of Wagner in Russian Politics", TRT World Research Center, Discussion Paper, February 2023, <https://DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.27481.94560>

However, for various reasons, these interactions did not reach a positive result, and since 2012, with Putin's return to the presidency, relations between Russia and the West have been tense again, and have intensified in the Ukraine crisis since late 2013. After the seizure of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine, Western countries adopted economic sanctions against Russia. The Minsk peace plan¹ also failed to end the problems and tensions, and thus the conditions for war were prepared. A significant event that occurred between 2014 and 2021 was Russia's gradual focus from the "Near Abroad"² region to the "Russian world"³. In fact, the "Greater Eurasia" plan was defined in 2016 within the framework of Russia's closer cooperation with the countries on the Eurasian periphery, such as China, India, Iran, and Turkey, and even the European Union.

In 2021, Russia's National Security Strategy document emphasized the protection of Russian-speaking people in other countries, as well as relations with Ukraine, from Western influence and its institutions.⁴ Since 2021, the Russian military has begun military exercises behind Ukraine's borders and has begun a declarative policy of pressure on the Ukrainian government with a large-scale deployment of military personnel. In the summer of 2021, Putin emphasized his claims about Ukraine in an article, writing: "We will never allow our historical lands and our close people living there to be used against Russia, and to those who make such an attempt, I want to say that they will destroy their own country. Russia is ready for dialogue with Ukraine, ready to discuss the most complex issues. In partnership with Russia, and I will say one thing: Russia has never been and will never be anti-Ukrainian, but what Ukraine will be like, it is up to its citizens to decide" (Putin,2021). This long article was considered a historical review of

1.The agreement was brokered by the leaders of France and Germany and written by Ukraine, the Russian Federation, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in 2014. After extensive talks in Minsk, the agreement was signed by the then leaders of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic, but it failed to end the crisis.

2.Since 1993, the Russian government has used the concept of "near abroad" for the countries that separated from the Soviet Union, based on its new foreign policy concept document.

3.The Russian world refers to countries with significant Russian-speaking populations, such as Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.

4.National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation, July 2, 2021, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66098/print>.

Ukraine's separation from Russia and an emphasis on their connection, and in fact, it was considered Russia's political and security doctrine for the future.

In the next step, Putin wrote a letter to NATO and US officials, in which he emphasized demands such as Ukrainian neutrality, NATO's return to its pre-1997 borders, and the redefinition of European and global security arrangements with Russia's participation. In response to the Russian letter, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said: "We will not jeopardize the key principles on which European security is built, including the right of all countries to decide their own future and foreign policy free from foreign interference." NATO diplomats also told Reuters that Russia could not have a veto on the expansion of the treaty and that NATO had the right to decide on its military posture (Tétrault-Farber & Tom Balmforth, 2025). It was under such circumstances that finally on February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukrainian territory, and a major war began on the borders of Russia and Europe, and Russia, despite initial victories, was caught in a war of attrition and high costs. Western countries also imposed extensive sanctions on Russia, which changed Russia's economic orientation towards the world. Some estimates show that economic relations between Russia and the West declined significantly from the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014 until the Ukrainian war in 2022, and this decline has continued thereafter.¹

But the reaction of the Middle East countries was very important. America's traditional partners in the Middle East did not join the United States and other Western governments in providing aid to Ukraine or even imposing economic sanctions on Russia. There seem to be several reasons for this, and each Middle East state has its own set of calculations and concerns regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. Putin's Middle East policy has also been one of supporting different sides simultaneously, thus giving all sides an incentive to cooperate with Moscow for fear of the consequences of not cooperating with it. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are particularly concerned about how joining the United States in helping Ukraine or sanctioning Russia could lead Moscow to abandon its previous policy and side with Iran against them. At the same time, most countries fear a return to a "unipolar world order" dominated by the United States (Katz, 2024). In

1. Angela Stent, "How the war in Ukraine changed Russia's global standing", April 2, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-the-war-in-ukraine-changed-russias-global-standing/>.

fact, many countries in the region have used the role of great powers such as China and Russia as a new opportunity to moderate American and regional pressures. In a significant case, after ten years of hostility and severance of political relations, Saudi Arabia and Iran reached an important agreement with Chinese mediation to reduce tensions and begin relations after a decade (Jash,2023).

Russia has also tried to expand relations with Eastern countries in response to Western economic sanctions. The Arab League's non-joining of Western economic sanctions against Russia has become an important issue for Russia in recent years, and economic relations between Russia and Middle Eastern countries have increased more than ever. The economic interests of Russian businesses in the Middle East became an important foreign policy element. Although trade volume remained small until the 2000s, it began to grow from 2008 onwards. By 2023, trade turnover with the Middle East and North Africa reached \$95 billion (Kortunov,2025:15). Therefore, especially economic relations with regional countries have increased the economic importance of the Middle East for Russia, and as a result, Russian trade with Middle Eastern countries has reached about \$100 billion in the last three years. In addition, the two parties in APEC Plus demonstrate the importance of the region, especially the Persian Gulf countries, for Russia. Therefore, in Irmak's words: "Middle Eastern countries, and even prominent allies of the United States and Europe among them, chose a position of strategic neutrality. Iran, Turkey, and Arab countries also refrained from imposing sanctions" (Irmak,2024). Therefore, the conditions in the Middle East are favorable for Russia, and it has welcomed this new situation as an important opportunity.

But this is not the whole story, and it is also important to mention the fact that Iran, Egypt and the UAE have been members of the BRICS since January 2024, and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait and Turkey are dialogue partners of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Therefore, Russia has tried to pay special attention to relations with Arab countries. More than 80% of Russian crude oil exports were transported by Greek tankers owned by the UAE in June 2024. Russia also sided with the UAE over the disputed islands with Iran in the Persian Gulf, which raised concerns in Tehran. This issue can only be explained by Russia's need for Arab countries and their policy of neutrality. Also, in a balancing policy, the Turkish government condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but refrained

from imposing economic sanctions on Russia. Ankara sent flagged drones to Ukraine, but at the same time, bought Russian oil and gas cheaper. Erdogan negotiated with Putin as part of the grain deal, but he closed the Turkish Straits to Russian warships under Article 19 of the Montreux Convention (Irmak,2024). Therefore, Moscow will pursue a “business as usual” approach in its policies in the Persian Gulf region and throughout the Arab world in an effort to maximize investment opportunities, promote trade, minimize the negative impact of Western sanctions, and stabilize global hydrocarbon prices (Kortunov,2024). Thus, there are multiple incentives among countries in the region to maintain and expand relations with Russia, which has led to a diversity of relations with Russia.

Therefore, since 2017, trade turnover between the UAE and Russia has gradually increased greatly, and in 2022, total trade increased by almost 68%, reaching \$9 billion. The UAE is Russia’s twelfth most important trading partner and ranks first among Middle Eastern countries. Although the UAE is a major oil producer, it imported about 3.2 million barrels of Russian oil for re-export to other countries in 2022 (Avdaliani,2023). The total trade volume between the two countries is expected to reach \$10 billion in 2024. In 2021, Russian-Saudi economic relations exceeded \$2.2 billion and are expected to increase by 2023. The Muslim republics of Russia, the North Caucasus, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan are actively cooperating with Saudi companies, inviting them for potential investments, and seeking export opportunities in the Kingdom’s food and technology sectors. Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates, are also looking forward to implementing the North-South International Transport Corridor¹ an issue that has also been prioritized in Iran and has been operationalized, albeit on a small scale (Avdaliani,2023).

Hence, we see that the policy of the countries of the Middle East region towards the Ukrainian crisis shows a range of activities that is unique in the history of international politics. In this regard, it is necessary to mention Saudi Arabia’s mediation in peace initiatives in two stages, which is still ongoing. Turkey, while being present on the political front against Russia, has not joined the Western economic sanctions and has pursued a mediation policy for the release of prisoners of war and the transfer of grain from Ukrainian ports. Russia has also encouraged the countries of the region to

1.INSTC

act more independently in a pluralistic international system. This issue has been raised in the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept Document under the title "The Islamic World" that "the countries of Islamic civilization, which have a positive perspective as an independent center in a polycentric world, are reliable partners in ensuring security, stability and solving economic problems at the global and regional levels, and Russia seeks to strengthen comprehensive, beneficial and reciprocal cooperation with them."¹ This shows that the international system has transformed into a more multipolar and multilateral system after three decades of American unilateralism.

But in this new period, the Kremlin's relations with Tel Aviv have become strained. This began gradually since the beginning of the Ukraine war and intensified during the Gaza crisis. During this period, Russia's attention to Muslim and world public opinion in the Gaza war has been greater than ever. Moscow condemned the Hamas operation, while also condemning Israel's harsh response. The Israeli ambassador to the United Nations criticized Russia for using the Hamas attack "to divert the world's attention from the attack on the issue" and called Russia "the last country" that can lecture on Israel's morality (Hedlund,2023). More broadly, throughout the Middle East and North Africa region, relations with Russia have remained largely stable and have taken on a more positive face compared to the United States. The anti-Western and anti-American sentiments that have intensified in the wake of the Gaza war have further strengthened Russia's image in Arab countries and have positioned Moscow as a symbolic alternative to Washington. These cases also partly reflect the decline in the priority of the trans-regional security game since the Ukraine war, and Russia has in fact lost the ability to enter security crises beyond the Eurasian territory. The gradual closure of Wagner's military forces also stems from this issue. Therefore, it can be understood that the war in Ukraine has led to a redefinition of Middle East policy based on the new conditions. But what changed this situation even more was the fall of Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria, which we will discuss below.

1.The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, 31 March 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586.

4. Analysis of Research Findings

4-1.Strategic Turn to the Geo-Economic Game

In previous discussions, we found that the Middle East is in a different situation than it was two years ago. October 7 Hamas-led attack on Israel and the Gaza War, the fall of the Assad government, and Trump's return to the US presidency have been among the important factors in changing the conditions and equations in the Middle East. This has had strategic consequences for all state and non-state actors, at the regional and global levels. However, as we have sought to examine in this article, Russia is also engaged in a strategic turn that, although it began during the Ukrainian war, has become tangible with the fall of the Assad Baath regime. In recent years, many Middle East analysts have believed that Russia would welcome an escalation of tensions in the Middle East, such as the Gaza crisis, because it would divert the attention of the United States, the West, and the world from Ukraine (Hedlund,2023). At the same time, Russia would be concerned about a large-scale war in the region, which could change the situation in a way that would end the last vestiges of Russian influence in the region. Despite all this, the fall of Damascus to Ahrar al-Sham was not what Moscow had hoped for. Even on the eve of the Syrian developments, Moscow refused to respond to Iran's request to transfer troops to Syria. In fact, the Kremlin is more careful that the new conditions do not create new threats to its security and interests and to keep itself out of the crosshairs of possible terrorist acts that it has experienced many times before (Ferris,2025), and therefore will not pay attention to its partners in the region. In any case, it goes without saying that these new developments have had a greater impact on Russian Middle East policy than the war in Ukraine. Among them, the fall of Assad has been more fundamental for Russia, and its consequences have led to a transformation of Russia's regional strategy, some of whose dimensions we will discuss here.

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, Russia tried to pursue a neutral policy in the Gaza war and, by condemning Hamas's actions against Israel, also expressed its disgust at Tel Aviv's actions in killing the people of Gaza so that this situation would not have a negative impact on the country's new regional relations with the governments of the region (Svetlova,2025). However, with Trump coming to power, the conditions for Russia will also change. Naturally, the United States' support for the Israelis will become even stronger than before and its positions towards Iran will also become

harder. Trump will also try to sell more weapons to the Persian Gulf countries, weaken the OPEC+ global oil price regulation mechanism, and advance the Middle East version of the NATO alliance to confront the security challenges of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its allies (Kortunov, 2024). However, this will not necessarily mean a larger US military presence in the region, and it may even mean that the US will withdraw existing forces from Syria and Iraq. But the main point is in the consequences of these policies for Moscow. Unconditional US support under Trump may reduce Israel's incentives to maintain strong ties with Moscow. Although many in Israel are calling for a "reassessment" of bilateral relations and accuse Moscow of openly supporting Hamas, both sides are likely to try to prevent further deterioration of their relations and limit potential mutual harm. In any case, Moscow would not be happy to see Israel and the United States embroil one of its few reliable international partners. However, the economic relations between the two countries are not irreparable, and the increase in oil revenues due to the crisis in the region could be of great benefit to Russia (Smagin, 2024). The more pressing issue seems to be a wider confrontation between Iran and Israel, which could create even more problems for Russia. It seems that this issue is further complicated by the Comprehensive Strategic Agreement between Iran and Russia in January 2025.¹ The document emphasizes cooperation between the two countries in countering third-party interference. However, given the fundamental pragmatism that has characterized Russian policy in recent decades, especially with its turn in regional policy, it is unlikely that it will become involved in the affairs of other countries. In fact, when the Israel-Iran war began on June 13, 2025, Putin tried to demonstrate her neutrality in practice in this war by saying, "We, on our part, are making efforts to help the Iranian people" (Faulconbridge and Dmitry Antonov, 2025). This suggests that Russia currently lacks the capacity to act as a stabilizing force in the post-Soviet sphere, let alone in regions as far afield as the Middle East (Grise, 2024). Of course, wider regional instability might push up global oil prices, but it would also have unpredictable political and economic

1. In January 2025, Russia and Iran signed a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation Agreement that regulates relations between the two countries for a period of 20 years. In this regard, see: "Full text of Iran-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty", Information website of the Presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran, <https://president.ir/en/156874>.

consequences that would likely be detrimental to Russia's long-term interests. Putin also doesn't want to get too involved in the Arab-Iranian problems, as such involvement would inevitably limit Moscow's freedom of action in the region.

But in the case of the fall of the last surviving ally of the Soviet era, which had also been rebuilding relations with Moscow in the new era, the dimensions of the impact have been much greater than the war in Ukraine, and the coming to power of Trump has increased its intensity and impact. Even contrary to Vladimir Putin's claim that the rapid fall of Damascus was not a "defeat for Russia," the collapse of the Assad regime is certainly a serious blow to the military and political situation of this country not only in the Middle East but also far beyond it (Nikiforov,2025). Moscow is trying to reduce the current uncertainty surrounding the Hmeimim air base in Latakia and the Tartus naval base, and is pretending that it is still considering what to do with its bases in Syria. Thus, Russia finds itself in a position where it can no longer use Syria as a bargaining chip in future negotiations with Trump, and its limited economic and military capabilities reinforce its distance from the main security and political trends in the Middle East (Nikiforov,2025). Therefore, after the fall of Assad, Russia has faced fundamental challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean, the first effects of which have placed Turkey in a more superior position in its common and conflicting regional environment, and this effect may also be extended to Russia's closer regional environment in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

It should not be overlooked in international politics that states without a broad and stable economic and technological foundation will not be able to play an effective and profound role in the strategic issues of international relations. Although Russia's policies since 2012 have significantly shaped the geostrategic realities in the region, it now appears that its political and economic presence has remained marginal compared to the United States. In addition, Russia has suffered significant setbacks in the region, as its main ally in the region has been eliminated and its other important regional partner has been weakened, limiting its ability to influence regional developments. Other states also have more economic cooperation with Russia, and this cannot but affect the strategic affairs of the region. In fact, the fall of Assad in December 2024 was a major blow to Moscow, which collapsed the last bricks of Russia's strategy in the region, and after that, there are limited possibilities for the Kremlin to play a strategic role, and the

regional situation is also on the verge of serious changes, and the strategic shift from a geopolitical game to a geo-economic game in this country's regional policy has become an undeniable reality.

5. Conclusion

As the main issue of this article was, Russia's policy in the Middle East has changed in the years following the Ukrainian war, and therefore the main purpose of this article was to analyze how this transformation occurred and its consequences and to answer the question of how Russian policy has changed during this period. Based on the research efforts carried out in the article, I discussed the gradual shift from a political and security strategy to a predominantly economic strategy. How and for what reasons the game based on the geopolitical element has turned into a geoeconomic role-playing game. In the text, we found that the background to such a situation began with the beginning of the Ukrainian war in 2022, but the fall of the Assad regime has consolidated this situation.

The war in Ukraine, Western economic sanctions, and the dramatic reduction in economic relations with the West and its allies have led to a shift in Russia's foreign policy and economic diplomacy toward the East and the global South. With a more serious shift in Russia's priorities, the Middle East has also become more distant from the orbit of Russia's security policies, and in the past three years, the economic aspect of this policy has become more colorful than ever. The increase in the value of economic interactions with countries in the region and the doubling of these economic relations clearly indicate a fundamental change in these interactions. This issue was exacerbated by the fall of the Assad government in Syria and led to a fundamental shift in Moscow's regional policy. As a result, the possibility of a possible military and security role has also faded for years, and therefore the Kremlin sees the most logical strategy in strengthening and continuing economic relations to protect the country from the harm of sanctions at a time of increasing economic pressures.

Although there is a possibility of Russia reaching an agreement with the United States and concluding peace talks in Ukraine. It seems that if even Russia can exit the Ukrainian war, it is unlikely that it will soon overcome the economic conditions and technical damage caused by a decade of extensive sanctions and will be involved in sensitive international issues outside the immediate Eurasian environment for a long time. Therefore, it does not seem that Russia will be involved in the Middle East security

games for at least ten years, and Russia's economic relations with the countries of the region will continue more than ever. In the situation of worsening relations between Iran, the West and Israel over the nuclear issue and the war that took place between Israel and the US with Iran and the war that took place with Israel or the US, Russia did not react other than issuing a statement, condemning and antagonizing Iran's enemies. In the era of escalating security conditions in the Middle East, it seems that Russia has become the missing link in this great game and such a strategy has been removed from the Kremlin's agenda, whether in the conditions of peace in Ukraine or even in the conditions of continuing war.

In fact, Russia's extensive role in the Middle East was mainly provided in light of the Obama-era "pivot to the East" policy and the role of regional countries. However, Russia's strategic issues have remained mainly domestic, Eurasian and related to the West during the four decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Therefore, acting in the Middle East and other regions has remained on the margins of Russia's main and strategic issue. Therefore, Russia has not had a fundamental and long-term policy in the region and, in general, the Kremlin's strategy has been a reaction to events and conditioned by the use of opportunities and the avoidance of problems for its regional interests. Given the strategic turn in its Middle East policy, it will not seriously interfere in the future developments of the region. Perhaps the most important manifestation of this new game can be seen in Russia's positions regarding the twelve-day war between Israel and Iran, and we should expect similar events in the coming months and years.

6. Acknowledgement

The author considers it necessary to thank his professors at the Faculty of Law and Political Science, University of Tehran, who provided the basis for his first understanding of international politics and geopolitics. Among them, Professor Dr. Qasem Eftekhari holds a special place.

7. Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest and that all ethical principles in research have been fully observed, including avoidance of plagiarism, duplicate publication or multiple submission of the manuscript, unauthorized replication of others' research, data fabrication or falsification, citation manipulation and reference fabrication, conducting research without informed consent of participants, research misconduct, and other unethical practices.

References

1. Avdaliani, (2023). Saudi Arabia and Russia: The 2023 –24 Trade and Investment Dynamics. August 29, Middle East Briefing. <https://www.middleeastbriefing.com/news/saudi-arabia-and-russia-the-2023-24-trade-and-investment-dynamics>. (Accessed on: 2/9/2024).
2. Avdaliani, E (2023). UAE – Russia: 2023-24 Trade and Investment Dynamics, Middle East Briefing, August 28. <https://www.middleeastbriefing.com/news/uae-russia-2023-24-trade-and-investment-dynamics>. Accessed on: (12/8/ 2024).
3. Faulconbridge, G; Dmitry A (2025). “Putin said US strikes on Iran are pushing world to very dangerous line”, June 23, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/irans-supreme-leader-asks-putin-do-more-after-us-strikes-2025-06-23>. (Accessed on: 7/9/2025).
4. Ferris, E (2025). Beyond Ukraine: Russia’s Foreign Policy Challenges in 2025, RUSI, 4 February, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/beyond-ukraine-russias-foreign-policy-challenges-2025>. (Accessed on: 24/3/2025).
5. Golmohammadi, V; Arm, A (2014). Regionalization of Great Power Intervention and Russian Middle Eastern Policy, Iranian Journal of International Politics, Volume 22, Issue 2. **[In Persian]**
6. Grise, M (2024). Why Russia Doesn't Want War between Israel and Iran, Apr 12, RAND, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/04/why-russia-doesnt-want-war-between-israel-and-iran.html>. (Accessed on: 2/11/2024).
7. Hedlund, S (2024). How Russia is losing out in the Middle East, GIS Report Online, December 11, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/russia-israel-syria-iran-military>. (Accessed on: 16/9/2024).
8. Irmak, H (2024). Oil Trade and Evolving Russia-Middle East Ties during the War in Ukraine, MANARA Magazine, <https://manaramagazine.org/2024/07/oil-trade-and-evolving-russia-middle-east-ties-during-the-war-in-ukraine>. (Accessed on: 2/4/2025).
9. Jash, A (2023). “Saudi-Iran Deal: A Test Case of China’s Role as an International Mediator”, Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, June 23, 2023, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/06/23/saudi-iran-deal-a-test-case-of-chinas-role-as-an-international-mediator>. (Accessed on: 2/9/2024).
10. Karami, J (2017). America and Russia; Is a Grand Agreement Possible? Iranian Diplomacy, (<http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1968010>) (Accessed on: 19/2/2025). **[In Persian]**
11. Katz, M (2024). Middle Eastern Responses to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, Slavic Review, May 09, <https://aseees.org/letter/middle-eastern-responses-to-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine>. (Accessed on: 12/8/2024).
12. Kortunov, A (2024). Middle East in the New Trump Era: Russia’s Foreign Policy Dilemmas, RIAC, November 19, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics->

- and-comments/analytics/middle-east-in-the-new-trump-era-russia-s-foreign-policy-dilemmas. (Accessed on: 2/1/2025).
13. Kortunov, A; and others (2025), Extra-Regional Actors in the Middle East, Russian International Affairs Council, Report no 99, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/extra-regional-actors-in-the-middle-east> (Accessed on: 15/9/2025).
 14. Kuimova, A (2019). Russia's Arms Exports to the MENA Region: Trends and Drivers, IEMed, European Institute of Mediterranean, <https://www.iemed.org/publication/russias-arms-exports-to-the-mena-region-trends-and-drivers>. (Accessed on: 11/2/2025).
 15. Nikiforov, P (2025). The Trap of Complacency: Russia and the Middle East in 2025, Riddle, 15 January, Available at: <https://ridl.io/the-trap-of-complacency-russia-and-the-middle-east-in-2025>, (Accessed on: 23/9/2024).
 16. Noori, Alireza (2019). Two-Level Balance and Stability in Russia's Middle East Policy; Implications for Iran's Security and Interests, *Strategic Studies Quarterly, Volume 22, Issue 1* (Accessed on: 22/11/2024). **[In Persian]**
 17. Putin, Vladimir (2021). On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>, (Accessed on: 17/4/2025).
 18. Smagin, Nikita (), Iran Shouldn't Expect Russia to Come Riding to Its Rescue, *Carnegie Politika*, October 14, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/10/iran-russia-military-aid?lang=en>, (Accessed on: 20/12/2024).
 19. Svetlova, Ksenia (2025). Israel's complicated but strategic relationship with Russia could strengthen with Trump in the White House, Chatham House, 21 March, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/israels-complicated-strategic-relationship-russia-could-strengthen-trump-white-house>. (Accessed on: 2/12/2024).
 20. Tétrault-Farber, Gabrielle; Tom Balmforth (2021). Russia demands NATO roll back from East Europe and stay out of Ukraine, Reuters, December 17, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-unveils-security-guarantees-says-western-response-not-encouraging-2021-12-17>. (Accessed on: 14/2/2025).

COPYRIGHTS

©2023 by the authors. Published by the Iranian Association of Geopolitics. This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

